

*2023 ESSAY AWARD WINNER: Chen, Jade - Chinese International School*

It is early morning and a chime filters into the hallways of our school. It is a familiar sound that, over time, has been incorporated seamlessly into our school life.

The origin of this melody is just a few steps away: it comes from a state school that has faced my international school since 1994. Our schools are separated by a narrow cul-de-sac, and many invisible walls: different systems, different student mixes, and a lack of common interest (or so it seems). Every school day we walk up the same road: half turn left, half turn right, and we separate, remaining strangers.

What remains is an aura of mystery: peering out from classroom windows, we often wonder what the students at the other school are up to, and what the gentle chime really means.

So, I decided to venture to the other side of the road.

I spoke to my school Principal about establishing a relationship between the two schools. He was very enthusiastic and immediately offered his support. Two days later, I made my way through the gates of our neighboring school.

Crossing the road, my view and perspective changed completely and I became a discreet observer of my own school community. Through the railing that encircled their school yard, I felt uncomfortably suspended between two different worlds.

At their Principal's office, I introduced my idea of interschool collaboration, particularly on sustainability initiatives. At first, I was flustered, worrying that cultural disparities would prevent us from forming a connection. Yet, I sensed a similar desire to learn about each other and a shared responsibility to improve our environment. The invisible walls began breaking down.

Soon, a team of my fellow students and I went across the road and sat in a classroom with a group of curious students from the state school. That day marked the first-ever student meeting between our schools in 30 years!

I attempted to initiate a conversation. Favorite foods? Colors? Sports? But pummeling them with mundane questions seemed ineffective; a wall of silence threatened to engulf the room. So I reversed course by encouraging them to ask questions instead. Perhaps this gentle nudge would change the dynamic? Through the spirited banter that followed, the room began to hum with conversation as questions spilled out: "What is your school like?" Students wondered out loud about our classes and activities. I learned that one of their girls always waved, but stopped when her friendly gesture went unreciprocated. Our conversation jumped from school to K-pop, to the many initiatives we could work on together. We were finally reaching beyond invisible walls and talking like friends.

Suddenly, a familiar chime filled our ears. It signaled the end of class, and the beginning of our interschool connectivity.

We all belong to a larger community with so much in common. Fostering a closer community is like running a thread through different groups, connecting everyone by sparking conversation. Sometimes, you just need to take the first step forward and cross the road.