

Black River student travels to Middle East



Contributed

Kurtis Cunningham shakes hands with a United Arab Emirates official. Cunningham, who has Williams syndrome, recently traveled to the Middle East to tell conference attendees about how he's included in regular ninth-grade classes at Black River Public School.

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By **STEPHEN KLOOSTERMAN**
The Holland Sentinel

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Holland, MI — Kurtis Cunningham, a ninth-grader with a genetic disability, may seem like an unlikely candidate to serve as an ambassador to the Middle East.

But that's almost exactly what he did last month as he was invited to the United Arab Emirates to tell conference attendees about how he's included into regular classes at Black River Public School. The conference on education is by a former Black River School consultant now working for the UAE.

Cunningham, 18, has Williams Syndrome, a genetic condition that gives him a distinctive appearance and various medical problems. Although the condition comes with a few benefits — including very sensitive hearing — it also makes math very difficult for him and keeps him behind his peers in other school subjects.

Cunningham was invited to the United Arab Emirates conference and met with UAE officials such as Interior

Minister Lt. General H.H. Sheikh Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

Williams Syndrome doesn't affect Cunningham's social abilities, so he had a great time meeting new people and letting them take pictures with him.

"I was like, 'you want to take my picture? That's cool,'" he said. "They were very kind, and nice and stuff. Everybody was very happy."

Cunningham told attendees about how teachers at Black River accommodate him by giving him special assignments.

"Kurtis is a great student for us, and is taking all the ninth-grade classes, and he does get some support, but is included in the regular classes," said Black River Head of School Shannon Brunink.

Although he won't receive a diploma at graduation, Cunningham is learning life skills and computer skills — he does all of his assignments on a laptop and e-mails them to his teachers. He is proficient with Microsoft PowerPoint and can download audio books of whatever is being read in class.

His mother, Erin Cunningham, said that women were crying at the end of Kurtis' speech.

"All of these are these are things that they don't even see in the UAE," she said. "They have the funds to capitalize on

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