

School boards turning to foreign students to fill classrooms as enrolments decline

Big bucks brought in with tuition fees, but practice criticized by some educators as being unfair to rural areas

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Canadian school boards are increasingly turning to foreign students to fill classrooms and boost budgets through hefty tuition fees.

Thousands of children - who pay up to \$14,000 to attend public schools - arrive in Canada each year with dreams of becoming fluent in English and, for some, plans to stay long enough to earn a high-school diploma.

Even small-town school districts have international programs, complete with recruitment budgets, multilingual websites and English-as-a-second-language teachers. At least one has a dormitory for children as young as 10.

"There's a winning formula there to educate the world on a ... certainly full-cost recovery basis because institutions are charging high fees and the demand will continue," said Jim Fox, president of the Canadian Bureau for International Education.

In recent years, as school boards began to experience declining enrolment, more have looked to foreign markets for youngsters to supplement their numbers while adding a welcome global perspective to classrooms. In many countries, especially in Asia, parents who can afford it prefer to send their children away to learn English and obtain credentials that ease entry to top North American universities.

International students have become an increasing reality in the complex arithmetic of keeping Canadian schools open and well-equipped in an environment of fewer students and government dollars. Many districts charge tuitions of \$9,000 to \$14,000 a year, plus other fees, which are used for items ranging from teachers and music programs to sports equipment and desks.

In 2006, study permits were issued to 17,235 foreign children to attend kindergarten to Grade 12, according to figures from Citizenship and Immigration Canada - a 44-per-cent increase over 1997 levels. The actual number of international students - the top five source countries are South Korea, China, Mexico, Germany and Japan - is even higher because stays of less than six months do not require a visa. Add the tens of thousands who come here for university, and international education becomes a billion-dollar industry.

School boards attract foreign students through various means, including sending employees to international education fairs and entering into partnerships with private agents paid to refer students. The practice has become so established that districts have formed an organization, the Canadian Association of Public Schools - International, which has a membership of 43 boards from every province except Prince Edward Island. The group met in Ottawa last month to discuss common issues, including liability concerns and home-stay practices.

The Toronto District School Board, which has been accepting foreign students for more than 20 years, has 1,250 students this year who paid \$13.8-million in tuition alone, figures that have doubled in the past five years. One-third of the youngsters come for a year or two at the elementary level - some as young as 5, usually accompanied by their mothers - and the rest attend high school, often staying for several years.

"It's better for them to be trained at earlier ages because they will follow the same path as a local Canadian student," said Polly Chao, the board's manager of international liaison and programs.

In British Columbia, which has the highest concentration of international programs, school boards collected \$123-million from 8,800 foreign students in the 2006-07 school year, revenue that more than doubled over five years.

The Coquitlam district, which has the largest system in B.C., took in nearly \$18-million from its international services, representing about 8 per cent of the board's total provincial funding. It enrolled 1,159 youngsters in the past academic year. (In addition to full-year or semester-long courses of study, many boards offer shorter courses.)

Due to declining enrolment, the district began losing an average of 250 students a year in the early 2000s, causing it to close schools. However, the effects have been partly mitigated by the influx of foreign students, for whom 90 extra teachers are hired annually.

"It's really given us a lot more flexibility," said Patricia Gartland, director of international programs at School District No. 43 (Coquitlam). "There's really no limit to what would enhance [schools] if you could have the funds to do so."

However, the B.C. Teachers' Federation has concerns about boards' growing reliance on money from foreign students, saying it is deeply inequitable because rural districts attract far fewer children than urban areas.

"I don't think, in a democratic system, that's tolerable. I think that's outrageous, in fact. I think what we expect in Canada is equal access to quality public education no matter where you live in the province or in the country," said Susan Lambert, the union's first vice-president.

Ms. Lambert also questioned whether international students - whose tuition fees far exceed per-student government education grants - receive adequate levels of services, especially ESL instruction. "It's just another burden at the school level," she said.

The rural experience

Before starting an international program five years ago, the only ESL education offered by the Golden Hills School Division northeast of Calgary was for local Hutterite children, who speak a German dialect. Now, however, the board has 12 ESL teachers and educational assistants for its 200 international students, who come from 20 countries.

Officials began the program largely because of one high school's long-neglected residential building. Thinking it would help attract foreign youngsters and keep classrooms full, the district created an 88-bed dormitory for children aged 10 and up, complete with a cafeteria that serves vegetarian meals and a steady supply of kimchi.

However, recruiting foreign students to rural areas is difficult. Greg Murphy, the board's manager of international services, courts parents by talking up the friendly local residents, the small-town experience and the proximity to Calgary. He also highlights Alberta students' strong performance on international tests.

"It certainly gets their attention," he said. "In many cultures, rankings are very important."

New Brunswick - largely rural and with few immigrants - also seems an unlikely hub for international student education. But the government has embraced the concept, even partnering with two Chinese private schools that use provincial textbooks and Canadian teachers for English instruction. Many of the students - who graduate with dual Chinese-New Brunswick diplomas - come to the province for a semester to refine their English.

In all, more than 400 children from around the world attend New Brunswick schools. In addition to the short-term benefits, the government believes spreading the word about the province will reap later rewards in the form of increased international trade.

In Dalhousie, a town of 5,000 near the Quebec border, 11 students - nine Chinese and two Mexicans - are learning English at Dalhousie Regional High School.

Paula Echeveste Petrone, a 16-year-old Mexican, has gone to a maple sugar camp, as well as snowboarding, skating and to hockey games. "I live in the rink," she said with a giggle.

Ma Yuhan, who uses the "Canadian" name of Candace Ma, likes the area's friendly people and clean air. "The air is more fresh than China because there is a lot of pollution in China and a lot of cars," said the 16-year-old, who attends a New Brunswick partner school in Beijing.

Principal Janet Cooper uses funds from foreign students - who have attended the school for the past five years - for a breakfast program, smart board technology, volleyball nets, van rentals and new desks and chairs.

"Our school has done very well," she said. "Certainly it was not the reason we initially got involved, but it's been really nice to have that extra money."

Study permits

Number of study permits issued to students in kindergarten to Grade 12:

1997: 11,946

1998: 11,333

1999: 12,295

2000: 15,554

2001: 16,689

2002: 15,142

2003: 14,279

2004: 14,225

2005: 15,043

2006: 17,235

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada

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