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Can International Students Save U.S. Public Schools?

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On a frigid Thursday evening in February, more than two hundred and fifty residents of Valparaiso, Indiana, gathered for a school-board meeting in the cafeteria of Benjamin Franklin Middle School. The meeting was supposed to be about the search for a new superintendent, but many of the attendees had another purpose: to protest the school board's preliminary approval of a proposal by a private company, Lumenus USA, to enroll up to thirty tuition-paying foreign students at the public high school. A few days later, Lumenus withdrew its proposal. Erik Froelich, the C.E.O. of

Lumenus, told me that he thought the conversation about the program had become “politicized.” He felt that Lumenus, by withdrawing its request, was preserving the possibility of future success, through a process that would include input from teachers and parents.

I graduated from Valparaiso High School in 2002. Had the deal gone forward, my alma mater might have joined a small but growing number of public high schools that enroll foreign students on what are known as F-1 visas. Unlike students who come to the U.S. through traditional exchange programs, students with F-1 visas must pay tuition, and can earn a diploma. International students polish their English skills and adjust culturally before matriculating at U.S. universities; local students get to study with a more diverse group of peers; schools collect tuition revenue—in theory, a good deal for everyone. But, in practice, the programs can present challenges.

Between 2007 and 2012, the number of F-1 students at U.S. high schools increased tenfold, to about sixty-five thousand, according to the Council on Standards for International Education Travel, a nonprofit that evaluates the safety and quality of cultural-exchange programs. China produces the largest number of F-1 students, followed by South Korea. While most F-1 students attend private schools, a growing number are choosing public schools, which typically charge lower tuition. F-1 students have to pay for the full cost of their education, per federal law, but schools generally have discretion to set their own rates. (There’s a catch: a student can only spend one year at a public high school on an F-1 visa. No such limit exists for private schools.) There were about three thousand F-1 students at public high schools in 2012.

Many of the schools that have established F-1 programs are small, rural, and struggling. In February, *USA Today* profiled Newcomb Central School in Newcomb, New York, which has avoided closure in part by enrolling eighty students from twenty-eight countries since 2007. The superintendent of schools in Millinocket, Maine, began a similar program in 2010, and, while Millinocket hasn’t seen the enrollment some hoped for, the program has provided needed revenue. In 2012, nearly a fifth of the high-schoolers at Grant-Deuel School, in tiny Revillo, South Dakota, came from abroad.

As F-1 programs spread and grow, public high schools might look to the experience of state universities, where international enrollment, particularly of students who are coming directly from China, has already risen substantially. Last fall, Paul Stephens reported for *Washington Monthly* on complaints about local students being displaced, accounts of unscrupulous recruiting agents, and difficulties experienced by some non-native English speakers in classes that lean heavily on language skills. International students sometimes feel exploited by universities that seem primarily interested in their ability to pay full tuition. After Purdue increased international-student fees in 2012, Stephens wrote, “the Chinese Students and Scholars Association organized a protest on campus, unfurling banners that read, ‘We are not cash cows!’ ‘Education is not a business!’ and ‘Increase our voice, not our fee.’ ”

Many of the new F-1 students are under eighteen, which makes the question of whether schools can meet their educational and emotional needs particularly pressing. There is little oversight of how students traveling on F-1 visas are housed and supervised. An investigation ordered last year by the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District, in Los Angeles County, determined that some students who may have been enrolled in a local public high school by Bela Education Group, a private recruiter, stayed in residences where “housing conditions, supervision, and safety” were sometimes lacking, according to a report summarizing the findings. In some instances, students were provided inadequate food. One student complained of an adult who made “personal threats” and later kicked her out of the house; the student ultimately went home to China.

Song Li, who oversees Bela’s 2+1 program, in which students study with American teachers for two years in China before transferring to U.S. high schools, told me, via e-mail, that Bela had not recruited any students for Hacienda La Puente, and described the investigation as politically motivated.

The Council on Standards for International Education Travel has received some complaints about the treatment of students in F-1 programs, but Christopher Page, its executive director, said that he didn’t have enough data to determine whether they were less safe, on average, than traditional cultural-exchange programs. (Those programs

operate under the more strictly regulated J-1 visa, which requires, for example, criminal-background checks for host-family members over eighteen.) But, Page said, “F-1, at the high-school level, is in need of an organized set of standards.”

In addition to appealing to cash-strapped schools, the F-1 enrollment boom has attracted the interest of private businesses: consultants, recruiters, and companies that arrange housing. The money at stake may create the potential for conflicts of interest. In the Hacienda La Puente school district, for example, Joseph Chang, a school-board member, was censured following allegations he took trips to China paid for either by Bela, the recruiting company, or by a former school-board member now affiliated with Bela, and that he became inappropriately involved in admissions decisions, including by pressuring schools to accept students with inadequate English-language abilities. (Chang denied the charges.)

The involvement of a for-profit company was at the heart of the controversy in Valparaiso, my home town. Lumenus manages a “transition” program for students planning to enroll in U.S. universities—English classes, life-skills training, mentoring, and, had the deal with the district gone forward, high-school enrollment and tuition. The program currently charges students about forty-four thousand dollars a year, covering tuition, room and board, books, and fees. Had the partnership with the high school been implemented, the cost would have risen by one thousand to two thousand dollars; from that total, Lumenus would have paid the high school about five thousand dollars per student, a rate determined by a state formula. Lumenus also offered to fund an additional guidance counselor at the high school. Mike Berta, the interim superintendent of Valparaiso Community Schools, told me that he saw both “educational value” and “financial value” in the proposal.

Some community members thought that the school board’s approval of the project reflected inappropriate deference to local business interests; the mayor, Jon Costas, holds an eleven per cent stake in Lumenus. (Froelich, the Lumenus C.E.O., along with Berta and the school-board president, were adamant that the mayor had not been involved in the proposed partnership, and that the school board and the superintendent had acted in good faith. In an e-mail, Costas denied the possibility of a conflict, pointing out that he had not appointed the school-board members. Still, he wrote, “I can appreciate, in retrospect, why my involvement bothered some parents and believe it best to personally avoid such a situation in the future.”)

If the goal is to provide students a cultural-exchange experience, “do we go about that via a politically connected, for-profit business?” Christopher Pino Pupillo, a parent, asked me. “And I would argue no, that is crossing a line that we should not be crossing.” Pupillo also suggested that if the school district were dependent on revenue generated through a private partnership, the partner could inappropriately influence future decisions about school policy.

Pupillo points to a fundamental question, relevant even in cases where F-1 programs are initiated by eager schools: What happens when public schools come to rely on private sources of revenue? Most states spend less per student now than they did before the recession, and fifteen states made further cuts this school year. “I don’t foresee us ever returning to what many of us were accustomed to in terms of traditional revenue to public schools,” Berta told me. In his view, “creative” alternatives, like the scuttled partnership with Lumenus, are inevitable.

Thoughtfully planned F-1 programs might make sense for some schools with empty seats to fill. But should a school’s revenue depend on a superintendent’s skill as a dealmaker, or on a principal’s ability to market to well-heeled students from overseas? If Berta is right and adequate public funding for education is a thing of the past, that marks not just a change in how schools will pay their bills but an erosion of our basic commitment to the project of public education.

Photograph by Jim Young/Reuters.

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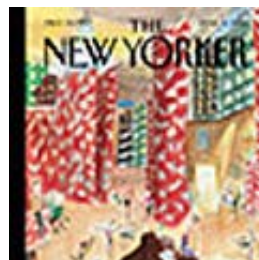
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