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Chinese students a new funding source for U.S. high schools

Tuition-paying Chinese students escaping intense competition back home are providing much-needed money and cultural exposure to U.S. high schools.

By Cindy Chang

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Yosemite High School once offered six wood shop classes. Now there are three.

advertisement

Things got worse when a new high school opened in a neighboring district and many students transferred. Campus enrollment is down from 1,100 five years ago to about 700 today.

School officials are now looking to a faraway place for salvation. As soon as next fall, Yosemite High could welcome 25 students from China who would pay \$10,000 or more in tuition to enjoy an American public education amid mountain scenery. They would boost revenue and inject an international flavor into a school with few immigrant families.

FOR THE RECORD:

Students from China: A caption in the Oct. 27 Section A that accompanied an article about U.S. high schools getting a boost from tuition-paying Chinese students misspelled the first name of Renate Jefferson, an official with the private recruiting company Tower Bridge, as Rinate. —

Two tuition-paying Chinese students are at Yosemite High this year. Xiao "Travis" Ma of Inner Mongolia plays clarinet in the marching band, and Chengyu "Johnny" Zhang of Shanghai runs on the cross-country team. Though the local Chinese cuisine is not to their satisfaction, they appreciate the clean air and the elbow room.

"Having students who pay tuition helps keep some of our programs more full," said Stephanie Samuels, a guidance counselor and international coordinator at Yosemite High. "We don't have a lot of exposure to other cultures. Our students benefit not only from the academic challenge but from meeting people from other parts of the world."

In looking abroad to fill seats, Yosemite is following the lead of underpopulated high schools in Maine and upstate New York, among other places. The number of tuition-paying foreign students in American public high schools has jumped from a few hundred nationwide in 2007 to nearly 3,000 last year, according to federal statistics obtained by the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel.

With newly prosperous families eager to educate their children in the West, China has become the latest frontier in public school financing.

Minarets High, the new school near Yosemite, will soon cash in too, with 20 Chinese students set to enroll in January for \$10,000 each. The Chico Unified School District has 25 foreign students this year, mostly from China, each paying \$14,500 in tuition. Chino Valley, Hacienda La Puente, Murrieta Valley and Walnut Valley are among the Southern California districts hosting 20 or so foreign students this school year.

"When the state budget crisis was building toward its peak, it was seen as a possible revenue-generating way of increasing our enrollment, with the added benefit of exposing our own students to different cultures as well," said Julie Gobin, Chino Valley's communications director.

The rapid, largely unregulated growth in high school students studying on F-1 visas has raised concerns about the role of private recruiting companies and the safety of teenagers in the country without their parents. The companies, which typically collect thousands of dollars in fees from each student, are knocking on school districts' doors, looking to form partnerships.

Federal law requires public schools to charge F-1 students the full cost of their educations but does not specify how that cost should be calculated. Schools usually take their per-pupil state allotment and add supplemental grants to come up with the tuition figure.

"Because there's so much money that can be made, and because there's a lack of regulation, you're just going to see a lot of people rushing into this field driven by profit rather than the desire to provide students and schools with a quality experience," said Jay Chen, president of the Hacienda La Puente Unified school board.

The vast majority of tuition-paying international students still study at private high schools — 62,000 last year, up from about 6,000 five years ago. Most are from China or South Korea and plan to stay in the United States for college, bypassing a brutally competitive educational system back home.

Because foreign students are limited to one year of study at U.S. public schools, some then transfer to private schools, where there is no time limit, and where they are often charged steeper tuition than their American classmates.

A bill in the House of Representatives would lift the one-year restriction for public schools. Gloria Negrete-McLeod (D-Montclair), whose district includes Chino Valley, is among the sponsors.

"In many of our communities, the enrollment is down, and the facility and the staff could accommodate more students," said Reggie Felton, assistant executive director for congressional relations at the National School Boards Assn., which supports the bill.

Some experts say more oversight is needed to manage the boom.

Traditional exchange students, who use J-1 visas and must be sponsored by a State Department-approved nonprofit, do not pay tuition and return to their home countries within a year. In the past, F-1 visas were used primarily for college and graduate study. Now, they appeal to Chinese high school students whose primary aim is not cultural exchange but admission to an Ivy League university.

The Council on Standards for International Educational Travel offers a voluntary certification process, which includes background checks for host families and middlemen. So far, few F-1 companies have signed up, said Christopher Page, CSIET's executive director.

In addition to recruiting students, the companies serve as a liaison between parents and schools and set up the students' living arrangements. In California, the companies must register with the state attorney general.

Some companies are missing from the registry, among them Summit International, which works with Yosemite High; Bela Education Group, which works with Hacienda La Puente; and Tower Bridge International, which works with Murrieta Valley.

Steven Dorsey, who manages the international student program at Walnut Valley, has been barraged by companies looking to enroll Chinese students. But he refuses to work with them or expand beyond the 20 or so students, mostly from China and Taiwan, who find the district by word of mouth.

"I have people saying, 'I can get you 100 students right now.' No, I don't want 100 students," Dorsey said. "I want to see that this is a great place to study and a good experience for kids when they come over."

In nearby Hacienda La Puente, school board member Joseph Chang was censured by his colleagues over allegations that he used his influence to benefit Bela. An investigative report commissioned by the district found that students were sometimes staying in homes without adult supervision, even lacking adequate food and heat in some instances.

Junbo Chen, a recruiter for Bela, said the company is equipping both Chinese and American students for a globalized economy.

"So now the students, the Chinese students who come to us, their age is lower and lower," Chen said. "Now, they want to come to us for high school because they don't want to waste grade 12 just preparing for the *gaokao*, the university entrance exam."

But Page, of CSJET, worries that with a large influx of students, some will end up in substandard living conditions. Families are often paid to host F-1 students, whereas J-1 host families receive only a tax credit.

In the Riverside County city of Murrieta, 20 students from China are studying at public high schools and living with host families. The Murrieta Valley Unified School District will allow up to 105 tuition-paying international students, and a dormitory is in the early planning stages. City officials see the students as part of a larger economic development plan with Chinese investment at its core.

Demand from China is so strong that enrollment should approach the cap next year, and Tower Bridge may eventually expand into other school districts, said Merlyn Neilson, a company official.

The Chinese families pay \$10,500 in tuition to the school district and an additional \$25,000 to \$35,000 to Tower Bridge for housing, tutoring and other costs.

"We're looking forward to having the students graduate from a highly rated high school in order to be able to get to UCs and, of course, to do the Ivy League," Neilson said.

At Murrieta Valley High School, Jixian "Johnny" Wang said he enjoys more free time and extracurriculars than he did in Chongqing, where the school day lasted from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

"School here is more independent. We can choose our classes," said Wang, 15, a 10th-grader who hopes to attend Georgetown University. "The teachers let students express their own opinions. The teachers are more like

friends."

Qianhui "Lilith" Zhou, a 17-year-old senior, started studying for the SAT and preparing her college applications as soon as she arrived in Murrieta. She misses her family and friends in Shanghai and yearns for authentic Chinese food. But those hardships pale next to preparing for China's nationwide college entrance exam.

"The tough competition in China," she said, "that's why I came to the U.S."

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