

THE BUFFALO NEWS

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Second-grade students listen intently in English as Second Language class at Buffalo's International School 45.

Bill Wippert / Buffalo News

Local education goes global

Ranks of foreign students add diversity but tax capacity of public schools

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Updated: November 29, 2009, 9:41 AM /

Students from around the world are coming in dramatically increasing numbers to the Buffalo area to study at local schools.

Many are refugees from war-torn countries who arrive with few possessions, but with the hope that the United States is the land of opportunity.

Others spend tens of thousands of dollars a year to attend local high schools and colleges in order to advance their studies and careers.

In the Buffalo Public Schools, students whose first language is something other than English now represent nearly 10 percent of the district's total enrollment. Those 3,277 students speak 65 different languages.

The University at Buffalo has 4,539 international students, or 16.7 percent of campus enrollment. They come from more than 100 countries, and outnumber U.S. students from outside New York State.

Private and religious high schools are also relying more heavily on students from other countries. The Gow School, a boarding school for dyslexic boys, has 33 international students, or 24 percent of its total enrollment. The South Wales school recruits extensively in Asia, the Caribbean and Canada.

These students are adding diversity to local schools and communities, filling what might otherwise be empty seats at area high schools and colleges and enriching the local economy.

At the same time, they are taxing the capacity of public school systems, and prompting private and religious high schools to ask themselves tricky questions about how much international presence is too much.

The Buffalo experience reflects a national trend. It is fueled by an increasing need for professional skills in developing countries, more intense recruitment efforts in the U.S. and a perception that schools here represent the gold standard of education.

For example, the number of international students at U.S. colleges and universities jumped 7 percent in the 2007-08 school year to a record high of 623,805, according to the Institute of International Education.

International students cover a broad range. Many are from refugee families fleeing oppression or warfare.

Others are from comfortable backgrounds, and go to considerable expense to study here. At UB, international students pay more than twice the tuition of New York residents. At The Gow School, they pay \$49,000 a year.

Passionate and committed

But whether they are rich or poor, in kindergarten or graduate school, or from Korea or Somalia, the students' goals are much the same.

"Education in the United States is the best in the world," said M. Bradley Rogers, headmaster of The Gow School. "People from all over the globe come to the U.S. for that education."

And, by all accounts, they come with passion and commitment.

"Many of them never had the opportunity to have an education," said Colleen L. Carota, principal of Buffalo's International School 45, where 58 percent of the students study English as a second language. "They are so eager to learn and so grateful for all the opportunities. They're absolutely joyful to be in school."

In fact, international students who test out of English as a Second Language classes after honing their language skills actually graduate from public high schools in higher percentages than classmates who grew up speaking English.

The internationalization of local education is deep and widespread. For example:

- An influx of refugee and immigrant students is keeping the decline in Buffalo's overall enrollment from being even sharper than it otherwise would be. While total enrollment in city schools has fallen 6.7 percent since 2004, the number of students speaking languages other than English has grown by 29 percent.
- Nationally, UB ranks 17th among U.S. colleges and universities in enrollment of international students, with the greatest concentration coming from India, Korea and China.
- Private and religious high schools, seeking to boost both enrollment and diversity, are also increasing efforts to attract international students. Buffalo Seminary, a girls' high school, recently established student dormitories and is sending a representative to conferences in Dubai and Jamaica. Park School in Snyder has 15 international students and hopes to add as many as five more.
- There are also 831 international students in Erie County suburban schools, and another 110 in local charter schools, said Denise Gonez-Santos, director of school support services for the Erie 1 Board of Cooperative Education Services.

Williamsville has 223 students with limited English skills. Amherst, Cheektowaga, Kenmore- Tonawanda, Lackawanna and Sweet Home school districts also have concentrations of 50 or more.

Many of the non-English-speaking students in suburban schools are the children of professional families who move here for job advancement or to attend or work at UB and other local colleges.

In the spotlight

The spotlight was focused on international students when Buffalo School Superintendent James A. Williams and a top aide recently visited China in hopes of setting up a "Chinese immersion school" here that would enroll an equal number of local and Chinese students.

In addition, Grover Cleveland High School's soccer team — which consists entirely of foreign-born players — won plaudits for advancing to the state semifinals.

In the Buffalo Public Schools, the growth in international students is sparked largely by turmoil across the world, and by the capacity of local agencies to resettle refugees here.

Since 2004, the number of Burmese students in the Buffalo schools soared from 3 to 56, and enrollment of Somali students jumped from 107 to 350.

There were no students speaking Nepali in 2004. Now there are 74.

"We've always had refugees come in, but not in such large numbers and not from so many different places," said Tamara O. Alsace, Buffalo's director of multilingual education.

Unlike those refugees, most of Buffalo's 1,580 Spanish-speaking students are from Puerto Rico, a U.S. commonwealth where residents are free to move at will between the island and the mainland.

Many of those students are in bilingual education classes where they learn much of their subject matter in Spanish until they can function in English-speaking classes.

Lack of adequate support

But the majority of international students — both in Buffalo and the suburbs — learn their subject matter in English-speaking classes. They also spend from one to three periods in English as Second Language classes to work on literacy skills.

Buffalo Teachers Federation President Philip Rumore last week distributed a questionnaire to district teachers to determine if those services are adequate.

"We continue to hear concerns from teachers relating to the lack of sufficient support for students who speak little or no English," the questionnaire said.

At Buffalo's School 45, eighth-grader Eh Taw said he has benefited greatly from English as Second Language classes since coming here from Thailand more than two years ago.

"I made a lot of friends," he said. "All the teachers were nice. No more worries about English."

A recent second-grade class at School 45 included students from Yemen, Vietnam, Somalia, Nepal and Bangladesh. Finune Shaibi, the teacher, used a picture book, sign language and constant conversation in a fast-moving lesson that emphasized both reading and speaking.

Shaibi, whose parents came here from Yemen, is a former English as Second Language student at School 45, and considers herself a model of what refugee and immigrant children can accomplish.

"This school allowed me to bridge the gap between my culture and language and those of the country we came to," she said. "I thought I could relate to the students and be an example for them."

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