



International Students in Our Schools: Why? How?

By Erin R. Wilcox

Our campuses are shared by students from a variety of cultures and communities, and one group that seems to increase constantly is that of international exchange students. But we must consider an important question: are we serving them because of our calling to provide a Christian education to more students, or are we looking at them as a financial benefit to “our school” and “our students”? Are we providing them with an excellent education?

To answer this question, it helps to start with the Word of God and a Kingdom perspective. From Matthew 28 and Revelation 7, we see God’s desire that His family be multicultural. In Acts 15, we see the believers encouraged to include Gentiles and those from other nations. We see the Church and the definition of the family of God expanding to include people from “every nation, tribe, people and language” as the passage in Revelation describes. In most North American cities, we cannot provide that type of multicultural school experience for our students, and we can’t afford to send all our students overseas. We can, however, welcome students of other nationalities and religious beliefs into our homes and schools. It gives us a chance to learn about their culture, be Christ to them, and grow together with those not like us.

Once we have welcomed these students into our midst, we are committed to teaching them in a way that does not compromise their education. Since language is a barrier when they first arrive, how can we serve them best?

It may seem fairly basic, but schools should admit only those students whose educational needs they can meet. Even if many international students can speak English, they will not necessarily be proficient in subjects such as high school chemistry and U.S. history in their third or fourth language. The school must provide a level of support which matches the level of student they accept. Some schools only admit highly competent English speakers, in which case they can provide support primarily through the classroom teacher. Other schools accept students with lower English scores and, consequently, should commit to providing resources and even special English classes. Because overseas English instruction likely focused on speaking and reading, these students will need extra help with writing and understanding class lectures.

What types of help do the international students need from the classroom teacher? Below are a few suggestions; many more resources are available on the Internet. ACSI also has a group on ConNexus that provides a forum to ask questions, share resources, and learn from others working with students from other cultures.

Tips for Classroom Teachers

1. Supply a vocabulary list ahead of time. Consider offering extra credit if they define words in English and their own language.
2. Arrange group work, making sure international students mix with students who will work well with them.
3. Repeat concepts in a lecture or student questions, restating or defining words that might give an

international student trouble. Write difficult words on the whiteboard.

4. Prevent cheating, which students may see as sharing or working together, as much as possible by using multiple forms of a test. Monitor cell phones where they are visible.
5. During tests, allow students to bring definitions in with them. Translators on cell phones are usually not allowed because they tempt students to cheat. Some dedicated translators are acceptable, but slow students down.

(Further resources listed at the end of this article.)

Another area to consider is the spiritual development of the international student. Many schools admit upper level students and expect them to fit into their required Bible courses, such as Apologetics. This is difficult for students who have never touched the Bible before and only heard of Jesus Christ in a derogatory way. They are so lost in these courses that it does little good for them to be there, and it ends up frustrating their peers. Schools that take international non-Christian students must seriously consider their spiritual development, much as they do their language and academic levels. If possible, offer an introductory Bible course for at least the first year so they can find out who Jesus is, learn the vocabulary, ask questions, and have someone share the simplest message of the gospel with them. It will make a tremendous difference—possibly an eternal one.

Meeting the needs of our international students is arduous, but deeply rewarding. The financial impact is often felt first, as they usually pay more than the average North American student. However, they also bring an expanded worldview into the school that cannot be gained any other way. North American students begin to see languages, world events, and people through eyes other than their own. They become friends with the international students and seem to become more globally- and missions-minded, a little less “me-focused.” However, modeling a positive attitude toward international students starts with the administration and faculty.

Teaching for Cultural Impact

1. Demonstrate a true openness and love (verbally and nonverbally) toward students of other cultural backgrounds.

2. Facilitate respect in the classroom, hallways, and broader school context. Never let a racial/ethnic slur or belittling action go unchallenged.
3. Promote discussion that leads to understanding of all cultures. Not all actions should be viewed as equal, but all races/ethnicities should be.
4. Make it obvious that the teacher believes an individual’s worth comes from being made in God’s image. Nationality is not the source of our worth.
5. Seek out cultural education so as to understand students from Korea, China, and other sending countries.



Read more suggestions here.

Inviting international students to our schools and educating them well is a sign of a school’s maturity, and has a variety of benefits as well. First and foremost, bringing international students onto a Christian school campus allows them to meet Jesus. Not all will accept Christ; some will. Second, we will be encouraging students to be culturally sensitive and culturally competent, regardless of where they come from. We hope our graduates will be leaders who make a positive impact in their communities, workplaces, and churches because of the perspectives they gained in our schools.

Further Resources

- http://www.marietta.edu/Faculty_Staff/international_advisory_group/forms.html or <http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/support/feed.htm> (in the words of ELL students)
- ConNexus Group—International Student Programs (free)
- ConNexus Premium—International Student Channel (available benefit for additional cost)
- How to Use Students’ Diverse Cultural Backgrounds to Enhance Academic Achievement (PD in Focus)

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