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Potential Synergy: Rural School Districts and International Student Programs

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Many rural school districts face declining enrollments. A few districts have taken the unusual path of recruiting international students in order to boost their enrollments. This study examines a community using this strategy and the resulting financial, academic, and social situations for the school, community, and students, both local and international. The program has two goals: to increase both enrollment and diversity in the school. The benefits and challenges are discussed in light of the social and academic spheres of the school experience. The future of the program is considered, especially in connection to community fears of school closure or consolidation. Issues of professional development for teachers and programming for students are described. Recommendations for districts considering an international student program are included. This work contributes to a better understanding of the potential synergy between schools and communities.

Key Words: Rural education; Rural schools; Rural administration; Rural education policy; School community connections; International students.

Picture a small rural school within its community. Did you envision a school deeply connected to its community? While schools in all geographic locations are connected to their communities, in rural areas schools are the center, even the heart of their community (Lyson 2002; Peshkin, 1978; Sher, 1977; Theobald, 1997, 2009). Isolation, declining enrollments, and fiscal stress, paired with increasing pressure for higher levels of student achievement, can leave rural school districts feeling like there are few options to remain viable (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Strang, 1987; Strange, 2011; Warner & Lindle, 2009). Nonetheless, a handful of rural districts across the country have found an interesting option: International student programs (Canfield, 2011; Collins, 2001; Winerip, 2011). Reasons why such programs are established differ among the communities as to whether they are initiated to meet fiscal, cultural, or academic needs.

This study examines a community using this strategy and the resulting financial, academic, and social situations for the school, community, and students, both local and international. This work contributes to a better understanding of the potential synergy between schools and communities. This study is centered on the following research questions:

1. Who was involved in the decision-making and implementation process of the international student program in Lakeside?

2. What were the motivating forces and what were the goals of the program?
3. What have been the effects and results (expected and unexpected) on the financial, academic, and cultural experiences of the school, community, and students (local and international)?

Literature Review

The relevant educational research to this project comes from two bodies of literature. First, we briefly review the state of rural schools in light of declining enrollments and the historical and current school and district consolidation efforts. Second, we review the literature on international students in higher education due to the lack of research on international student programs in secondary schools. This literature is relevant to the current study due to the similarity of stated goals behind the recruitment of international students to educational institutions in the United States.

Declining Enrollment and Consolidation in Rural Areas

Over the course of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st century, many small and especially rural schools and school districts have faced decisions about closure and consolidation (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006; Theobald &

Rochon, 2006; Tyack, 1974; Warner & Lindle, 2009). Many decisions to close and consolidate schools have rested in financial arguments concerned with economies of scale thought to be found in districts and schools serving greater numbers of students (Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002; Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011). Other arguments have focused on the necessity of a particular size of school in order to offer the broad range of educational opportunities children deserve, for example Conant's mid-20th century pronouncement that schools should have classes with no fewer than 100 children per grade (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011; Theobald & Curtiss, 2000). Regardless of the arguments used, for a community the loss of a school can be socially and economically troublesome (Lyson, 2002). In particular, Lyson finds that in the smallest communities with schools (population fewer than 500) property values are higher, fewer families are on public assistance, and a greater percentage of people work within their village and therefore have reduced commute times, than in the smallest communities without schools. Decisions about closure and consolidation have not faded into history, with contemporary small schools and districts continuing to consider these paths due to fiscal constraints, as well as legislated incentives and even state mandates of minimum district size (e.g., Maine). In light of historical and current pressures that may result in the loss of schools for small communities, it is necessary to reconsider the role of a school in its community and the ways that schools and communities can work together for mutual benefit.

International Students and the U.S. Educational System

As mentioned in the introduction, the stated rationale behind bringing international students into failing rural schools may be to meet fiscal, academic or cultural needs. While little research on this phenomenon exists at the secondary school level because there are so few international student programs, work in higher education, a surprisingly comparable situation, can help shed light on this issue. Colleges and universities recruit international undergraduate and graduate students for similar reasons. The higher education literature on international students focuses on their role to bring money to educational institutions and fill positions as teaching and research assistants, as well as the perceived benefit of diversity that international students contribute to schools.

We know from higher education news that in terms of finances, at the undergraduate level more colleges and universities are enrolling more and more

international students, and even paying agents to recruit these students (Redden, 2010; Reisberg, 2012). Reisberg (2012) argues that this may be a simply a revenue issue; universities are making money on these students, and they are paying for external agents rather than devoting funds to services for international students on campus. At the graduate level, many departments and programs would be unable to sustain themselves without international students. Universities depend on these students to fill important teaching and research positions, especially as the number of American doctoral students declines (Committee on Science Engineering and Public Policy, 2005; Ehrenberg, 1992). Particularly in the hard sciences and engineering, international students are responsible for many of the successes and innovations in the departments. As a report from the Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy (COSEPUP) (2005) highlights, "if the flow of these students and scholars were sharply reduced, research and academic work would suffer" (p. 5).

With regard to diversity issues, universities often boast about their global communities and statistics that show how many international students they have. Despite the numbers, the stereotype of the lonely international student is nothing new (Andrade, 2006-2007). It is clear that meaningful interaction does not always occur, as reported in a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Fisher, 2012). In the study, one in three international students reported having no American friends. Another recent article reports on the tensions between American and international students and discrimination against international students (Redden, 2012). The separateness that is reported here has been observed anecdotally at institutions across the country.

The same argument is present in the literature. Zhao, Kuh and Carini (2005) state "a campus cannot simply recruit a critical mass of international students; it must also intentionally arrange its resources so that international and American students benefit in desired ways from one another's presence" (p. 225). Similarly, Galloway and Jenkins (2005) conclude with a quote from Pfaffenroth (1997): "If Americans wish to maintain a global presence and global influence, it is time our institutions of higher education think seriously and systematically about what they want to do with their international students" (p. 186). In conjunction with the recruitment of international students comes the question of what educational institutions can and should do to develop an inclusive atmosphere for domestic and international students and staff.

Such concerns extend to the idea of how students and educational staff interact with international students. As Arthur (2004) states, "It is highly

presumptuous to expect faculty, staff and other students to effectively interact with international students without adequate resources and training” (p. 6). Reports of discrimination and concern about how to handle international students reflect a persistent problem; despite the awareness that meaningful and productive interaction among international and domestic students, faculty, and staff can be challenging, universities struggle to create programming to address these concerns (e.g., Fisher, 2012; Redden, 2012). At the same time, these perspectives on international students indicate a tone of using or dealing with international students, for financial, employment or diversity gains, rather than thinking about how best to serve them as students. This research on higher education is applicable to secondary schools where attention has turned to the recruitment of international students for enrollment (financial) and cultural (diversity) purposes, beyond the scope of more traditional international exchange programs.

Data and Methods

This research was conducted using a mixed methods case study approach of a purposively selected (Patton, 2002) K-12 district, Lakeside School District. Lakeside is a pseudonym assigned to ensure the confidentiality of the district in this case study. This study was conducted as part of a faculty-student summer research project. We worked together through an independent study class in the spring to design the study and in the summer we collected and analyzed the data.

We conducted interviews (n=14) and administered surveys (n=2). All interviews were semi-structured based on interview guides specific to the respondent’s position, for example as a student or teacher. All administrators and all teachers working with high school students were included in the sample, and an open call went out to parents via letter inviting them and their students to be interviewed. We interviewed local students (n=2), an international student (n=1), teachers (n=4), staff and administration (n=4), a school board member (n=1), and parents (n=2). Interview questions asked respondents to report on the history, goals, effects, challenges and future of the international program. Interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes, and were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Data analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti. We analyzed the interview data using both pre-existing and emergent codes. The codes related to the international program as a response to potential consolidation as well as to the

goals, effects, reactions, and challenges of the program as a whole. This analysis helped answer our research questions regarding this program initiated as a creative response to declining enrollment and the consequences of implementing such a program.

Quantitative data were collected using surveys administered to international students (n=6), local students (n=18), and teachers (n=18). Surveys were provided to students during study hall in the library. All high school students attending school on the day of our visit had access to the survey, though not all students elected to complete the survey. All teachers present at a staff meeting were issued a survey and given time to complete it. Each survey consisted of thirteen to fifteen questions that respondents answered using a Likert-scale from one to five, with one being disagree and five agree. In addition, three short-answer questions were included on the survey asking the respondent to further explain any of their answers on the questionnaire, as well as to list the most beneficial aspect and the most problematic aspect of the international program.

Context

Lakeside School District is located in a rural (population fewer than 1,000) and isolated community with a very small school-aged population. As we drove through on the main road, we saw one restaurant, one gas pump, the post office, a community beach, a fitness trail through the woods, and the school.

The entirety of the district (pre-K-12) is housed in one building with a pre-K-12 school enrollment of fewer than 100 students and fewer than twenty teachers. Not only is this one location the center of the district but also it is often described as the center of the community. Nearly everyone we spoke with shared this sentiment. One teacher described the school as defining the community: *The community is really centered around the school with all the activities and this is what brings people together here.* When asked to describe the community, most participants used the word, “family” in their response, for example, *it’s like a big family pretty much. Everybody knows each other. You’ll be driving down the road and everybody we’ll be waving at you in the car so everybody knows who you are. It’s great* (Student). In an effort to emphasize the communal nature of Lakeside, one teacher went as far as to say in jest that the community is a *socialist republic*. Very similar responses were shared when we asked the participants to describe the school. Besides being the social hub, the school is also the largest employer in the town.

Less than a decade ago the district found itself with an extremely small K-12 enrollment and, with a new superintendent, came the idea of bringing international students to the high school. The school has worked with multiple agencies to recruit 9th- 12th grade students from around the world. To the present day, the program has included fewer than ten students per year but each year has brought additional international students to the school. The international students pay tuition to the school, which has been maintained at a relatively low rate compared to private school tuitions in the U.S. The school district has calculated per pupil expenditures limited to teacher and staff salaries, instructional materials, extracurricular expenses, and food. The tuition rate for international students is a total of this per pupil expense and a stipend for the host families. The international students live in homes throughout the community. International students have lived with families who have children of their own in the school, other community members without school-age children, as well as school staff. The host families receive funds to support food and transportation costs of the international students. The community as a whole seems eager to house the international students, as they believe without this program their school may be closed. However, as the program continues and expands it has become increasingly challenging to find host families because of the small local population.

The international students, restricted by their visas, stay for only one year. Students come on either F-1 or J-1 visas. In the first years of the program, students generally came to ¹Lakeside holding F-1 visas - visas that are specifically geared towards cultural exchange. The students coming to the U.S. holding such visas come for the cultural immersion experience, not necessarily for an academic purpose. Without the academic drive it was difficult to keep these students motivated so Lakeside began accepting students holding J-1 visas, which are designed for an educational experience (The basics on U.S. visas, 2009). However, regardless if international students hold the F-1 or J-1 visa, they can only stay at a public school like Lakeside for one year.

The community has a large seasonal population with many of the houses being second homes. This, along with a unique revenue source from the state, makes Lakeside more financially stable than surrounding districts, especially in light of recent

¹ Lakeside is a pseudonym assigned to ensure the confidentiality of the district in this case study.

fiscal challenges in most regions. (Please note we have chosen to allude to this unique financial situation of Lakeside because it creates an unusual context for a small rural district; however, we cannot further explain the revenue source without the risk of exposing the identity of the district.) This additional funding source allows the school to provide unique experiences for the students. For example, every year the students take a trek funded by the school, and the destination alternates year to year between a city and a remote wilderness location. These trips exemplify how the school is committed to providing the students diverse experiences in communities different than their own, which is parallel to a goal of the international program.

Findings

The findings of our study are presented in this section under several headings. We begin by responding to our research questions by illustrating the goals of the program, as described by our respondents. Additionally, we describe the effects of the program on the school, including both the benefits and obstacles that the international student program brings to the classrooms, as well as to the students' social lives. Next, we describe the hopes and concerns about the future of the program. This section details the local sense of the inevitability of growth, which is countered by a strong belief that the international student population should never outnumber the local student enrollment. With the small numbers of local students, this is very real possibility as the program grows. Following these three sections, we address several themes that emerged in our work beyond our research questions. We describe the strong fear of closure and consolidation that we heard about from administrators, teachers, parents and students. This fear, we found, in many ways is a motivation for the continuation of the program. We also heard a degree of resentment from students described by adults who had observed examples of resentment from their students. Finally, we comment on the absence of related professional development for teachers in the final part of the findings section.

Goals of the International Student Program

The goal of the Lakeside international student program is two-fold: to increase the population of the school (directly and indirectly) and to diversify the student body. Rural areas of the United States have less diverse populations than their suburban and urban counterparts with an average of 78% white students in public K-12 schools.

(http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/ruraled/chapter1_3.asp) This percentage grows as isolation and distance from centers of population increase with 74% white students in rural fringe and 83% in distant rural areas. Rural communities vary broadly with many having extremely fast growing minority populations, due in part to an influx of workers for farms and industry. Nonetheless, on average isolated rural communities are not as diverse as other regions, and classrooms lacking diversity may affect students in a variety of ways. The descriptions of the origins of the program stem from a motivation to increase the enrollment of the school, as well as to expose the student body to cultures they would not otherwise have access to in their home community. As mentioned previously, the treks each year are another way that the administration and teachers strive to expose the students to new experiences. The marriage of these two goals (enrollment and diversity) is a significant part of the reason the program draws the support of the administration, teachers, students, parents, and community members.

Most respondents mentioned each of these goals but many struggled to name one as the primary goal. For example a student said: *I am not really sure what the actual goal is...it is to keep the school from being shut down.* A staff member shared: *number one to help with our declining numbers.* A teacher avoided naming a single goal for the program by listing a series of potential goals from her perspective: *I don't know if the one goal is to increase enrollment and to keep the school open....[Or] if the one goal is to create such a unique small little school that nobody would shut it down.* And another teacher said simply: *The real goal of the program is to increase enrollment.* The fear of school closure and consolidation are evident in these passages, but importantly, each respondent followed these comments with additional descriptions of the program as a way to increase the diversity of experiences, socially and academically.

Students noted that the goal of the international student program is to expose them to other cultures. According to one the goal is to *teach each culture about the different cultures.* And another noted: *I think [the program] makes the local students, since [the school] is so small, makes [the students] have more variety and have people to talk to. And to be more open-minded to the world because [we're] so isolated.* A staff member echoed these ideas of cultural exchange and exposure as the second main goal of the program: *Number two, to help with diversity so that our kids, so when they get out into college or wherever they're going, don't come across a student for the first time that speaks a different language and they don't know how to relate to them.*

And a Board of Education member added that the community also benefits from the diversity: *There is essentially no diversity in this town at all. It would be good for our students. It would be good for the community to have different people from different walks of life and different countries visiting us and living with us.* The students and the community feel the benefits of increasing the enrollment and bringing students from different cultures to the school.

We note that academic achievement was never mentioned as a goal of the program, although teachers and staff mentioned it as an unintended consequence. For example, a teacher mentioned that the diversity the program brings affects the educational goals of the school: *I think we enjoy the cultural exchange. We like it a lot. So I guess that adds to the enrichment, to the whole educational process here.* A member of the Board of Education emphasized the academic benefit as well: *I mentioned the cultural diversity but also, getting our own students in town here to strive and move forward academically in their own classrooms. Most of them from grades pre-K all the way through, they were the same students every year and some of them were not being motivated and we thought by bringing these other students in we could help motivate our own students and help to strive academically.* Although academic enrichment is not mentioned as a primary goal of the international student program at Lakeside, it appears to be noted as an effect by some respondents.

Effects of the International Program on the School: Benefits and Challenges

The effects of this program range widely from social to academic benefits and from enrollment increases to staffing and classroom challenges. The social benefits of this program stem from the cultural exchange it allows, as well as from the increased enrollment in a small school where students are used to having the same students in their classes from pre-K to 12th grade. A staff member described the social benefits: *It gives more kids more social opportunities...They have to step out of the box and say, 'Oh, ok, this is how I need to relate to this person to be able to be their friend.'* The program has also created a dating scene among the students who often have reported feeling too much like brothers and sisters to want to date one another by the time they are in high school. One staff member explained: *[For] some kids, like the boys who got girlfriends this year, [the program] is awesome.* And for one student in particular who will be traveling to his girlfriend's home country over the summer, a teacher commented: *For him, he's bloomed. He's going to*

France in a couple of weeks and at the beginning of the year that wasn't anywhere in his view of what he might be doing with his summer, you know, nowhere in the realm of the possible or imagined. It's wonderful in that regard, it's really wonderful, that kind of transformation. Overall, on the survey local students report being friends with international students (94%) and that the program has improved their view of people from different cultures (78%). Teachers and students noted the social benefits of cultural exchange and challenges of welcoming new students to the school.

There are also academic benefits of the program. Students enjoy what the cultural exchange can bring to the classroom experience. *I think it's really cool, like in social studies class we are talking about different cultures and different countries and stuff and sometimes we're talking about [a place from] where we have a foreign exchange student. It's cool because they can be there and tell us all these things.* Another student reported a similar experience: *For example, in history class and social studies, you have different views on what happened. For examples, if we study the Vietnam War or World War II [we see] the way we study it and the way they study it.* Teachers also see academic benefits to the program. For one teacher the international program has altered his teaching: *I've taught in a more in-depth, more challenging, more demanding [way] and I believe it's really paid off. The kids have really stepped up this year.*

In addition, teachers and staff report an overall increase in expectations and the academic culture in the school due to the international students, or at least they hope to see this effect on the local students. A staff member noted: *This year we have some brilliant international students, that I don't know, it doesn't seem to really raise the bar for everyone, but I think eventually.* Another staff member echoed this hope that the academic environment will be improved by the presence of other students: *There is also the academic side of it, competitiveness that we don't have at [Lakeside] because when you are in a class of four or five nobody really cares, to be valedictorian or salutatorian, they don't really care. But when you have a little competition and someone is really working hard to get really good grades...I think that's healthy.*

The cultural benefits to the program are numerous and were reported by students, teachers, and parents in the form of stories. For example, a student described a trip to the ice cream parlor with an international friend: *On the way back we hit a turtle with the car, it was fine, but we were talking about it in the hallway this morning and one of the students from Vietnam goes, 'In our country we eat*

turtles.' And we just kind of stood there and stared for a second and were like, 'What? Why do you eat turtles'. This exposure to cultural difference and the realization that things we may find unusual in the U.S. may be normal elsewhere is a powerful education for both the children and adults in Lakeside. A staff member reported shock and a deeper understanding of the role of religion in the students' lives after watching international students practice the fasting associated with Ramadan. These are examples of the cultural exchange made possible by this international student program.

Most teachers and students mentioned the academic challenge of having English-language learners (ELL) in their classroom. For example, a student reported: *In the classroom environment, I don't really feel they add that much. In fact, a lot of the time they slow things down with the language barrier between everybody and the teachers, especially. So a lot of the time they have to explain things slowly or have another student explain something to them, which I think takes away from the class time.* Another teacher told us that she will have to alter her assignments or grading methods due to the ELL students' writing abilities. In survey responses, 39% of students answered agree or strongly agree that international students improve their learning in class and 33% feel that students speaking other languages positively affected their classroom learning. None of the teachers strongly agreed with either statement. Thirty-nine percent of teachers agreed, though not strongly, that international students improve classroom learning and 22% agreed that students speaking other languages positively affect classroom learning. We note that while part-time staff was hired to assist the international students struggling with language, there was no professional development for the high school teachers related to this program.

The community has also been affected by the program. On the survey, 72% of local students and teachers felt that international students positively affect the community as a whole. One student described the impact of having the international students in the community: *I think they add a lot to the community. It really opens people's eyes to other cultures and that America isn't the only country on earth.* A teacher mentioned the welcoming reception the community has offered the international students: *I think the community almost sees these new students as their new children, as well. They are just so welcoming. Everybody wants to meet them.*

An unexpected effect of this program has been an increase in enrollment at Lakeside by students from surrounding districts. A few respondents noted that drawing students away from other districts has

left Lakeside as the only district with an increasing enrollment in the area. A teacher noted that while surrounding districts are not entirely happy with the program at Lakeside, they are interested in learning more about it. *Surrounding districts are losing students to Lakeside, so I am not sure how positive they see this. But they certainly see what's happening here. A lot of them have inquired with our superintendent and had him visit their schools.* Another teacher described the appeal that Lakeside has for parents in other districts: *If you're a parent and you're 20, 30 miles away, and you go out of your way to get your kid up here, especially in the wintertime, there's got to be something good happening. Word is getting out, students that aren't doing that well in some of the [surrounding] schools, they're coming here so they don't fall through the cracks, so there aren't those discipline issues.* And one respondent noted the difficult balance between a narrow approach to increase the Lakeside enrollment and the need for a broader approach where multiple communities work together to maintain the viability of the entire region.

Future of the Program in Lakeside

The future of the program is described in various ways by respondents, with many emphasizing the need for growth and the benefits of diversity. Others tempered their enthusiasm for growth with concerns about challenges in the classroom, potential loss of a family-like atmosphere, and the ramifications of a larger population of international than local students.

Some people predict that a large increase of enrollment will have a huge positive economic and social impact on the town. One staff member explained the potential effects of continuing to expand the enrollment of the school on the progress of the community: *I had this fantasy that [Lakeside] is going to be ... this Mecca of a cool little college town maybe we'll have cafes and a store or something. Um, you know I hope. That's kind of like best-case scenario. People like really coming here and having a college mentality and having the [Lakeside] kids really be notched up and, I mean, that would be awesome. And who knows?* Others are nervous about the implications of perhaps diluting the family-feel that is so vital to the identity of Lakeside. When talking about this potential one teacher stated, *How many kids do we have to recruit to avoid the threat [of closure]? The other question is how big we can get before we lose that sense of being close and related. Scary thought that we'd get so big that we wouldn't be that small [Lakeside] any more.* Some community members think that it is too large already, *I think it's a little bit big now, because right now the*

international students are about one third of our high school. Which is a lot. There are more international students graduating in the class this year than there are local students. Which I think is a problem.

Based on survey responses only 44% of teachers along with 61% of local students want the program to grow. Despite these numbers, through our interviews, we learned that most of the people who we interviewed expect expansion in the program's future.

Two issues directly related to the potential of expanding the international student program in Lakeside are housing and visas. Currently the international students are housed by local families and while most report having good experiences, there are also challenges as one teacher described: *The only thing that has become a problem is finding homes for the students. We're a very limited community, you know, there are not a lot of homes here. So a lot of the people, like we've hosted three. My family has hosted three students. And you know it's not an easy thing...It's like having a new child, more attention to preparing meals and making sure they get where they need to. That's the difficult [part], the sacrifices you make. Finding families that are willing to make that sacrifice is becoming more and more difficult.* The community struggles to accommodate the current number of international students and with the same families hosting year after year the housing situation is not sustainable and cannot support the expansion of the program. There is a discussion within the school and community about the possibility of building a dormitory. In this vision, the dormitory could be home to approximately fifty students, both international and out-of-district students. The dormitory may also be beneficial by creating jobs for community members, as the students would need dormitory parents and security; additionally, a dormitory would increase the food service and janitorial needs of the school. However, some members of the community are nervous about having such a large number of students from outside of Lakeside.

Another aspect that could have a large impact on the program is a potential change in visa regulations. Currently an international student attending a public school in the U.S. can only hold a J-1 or F-1 visa for one year; however, a bill has been introduced to the U.S. Congress to alter that parameter so that international students could stay for longer. A Lakeside teacher saw this as directly related to the international student program: *Looping is the next step. It is hard with the international students being new every year.* By looping, this teacher was referring to the opportunity to teach the same

students, international students in particular, over multiple years.

Currently, despite only attending for one year, the international students come to Lakeside with the intention of graduating. This is concerning as the local students have been in the public high school for four years to earn their degree. A teacher described to us some resentment that the local students have: *They're going to graduate? Walk down the aisle? They've only been here for one year!*

Fear of Closure and Consolidation

We found interesting that the perceived threat of closure or consolidation was a motivating force to this program. Staff, teachers, parents, and students each mentioned enrollment as a goal for the program and the need for the program to continue and expand in the future in order to keep the school open and the community viable.

A teacher who is also a local resident succinctly summarized his support of the program: *I'm kind of biased here because this is where I live, this is where I work, and it all kind of depends on enrollment, so you know, I'm 100% in favor [of the international student program].* A parent continued in this vein: *The greater community should be very appreciative [of the program] due to the fact that their kids still have a school to go to.* And a Board of Education member remarked: *If we can keep our international program bring students in, I think we'll prosper by keeping the program going.*

An underlying theme in our conversations and in our own understanding of consolidations in Lakeside's state, leads us to question how likely a consolidation or closure is for the school and community. A consolidation feasibility study was conducted for the area in the last twenty years and since then no closures or consolidations have occurred. The distance between communities, the challenging road conditions, the long and difficult winters, as well as the local communities' allegiance to their schools are a few of the reasons mentioned by our respondents as to why the school has not had to close. Nonetheless, we observe a sense of devotion to the international student program that comes from a strong feeling of need and reliance on the program to maintain the viability of the school, and in turn the community. This reliance on this program could serve to silence discussion of the challenges faced by teachers and students. Although we did not currently see a struggling or ineffective program, we have a concern with the potential complacency that could develop allowing even an ineffective program to continue as long as it continued to increase the enrollment.

Resentment

Along with the social benefits of the cultural exchange, Lakeside also experienced some social challenges. Firstly, there have been difficulties when more than two students from the same country attend Lakeside simultaneously. One staff member noted that, *this year it's been weird because we've had three Russian students and three French students and you know they've kind of clumped together and they haven't really been forced to make other friends.* One student explained to us *some of the groups of international students just stick to themselves and don't necessarily socialize with anybody. They're very closed.* The student balanced this statement by also saying, *some students make friends with everyone right away, which is very nice.* As seen in recent reports in higher education contexts, tensions around issues of making friends and interacting across groups are commonplace.

Other social challenges arise when local students are resentful of the international student program. The community believes the program is necessary for the survival of the school, and consequently the town as a whole, and so there is a lot of importance placed on the international students. One student complained: *No, I'm not saying that the international students are like more important... but, nobody ever talks about us. So we're just kind of here, like hosts, I guess. Like to make them feel welcome.* And one parent told us, *they have really been told that these other kids are really, really important. And they are here to save our poor unworthy group of kids.* This serious concern is not shared by all parents and students, but worth noting. The administration noted that they have learned how to shape events like a fall potluck dinner that was once a celebration of the international students and is now a welcome back event for all students and families. The attention that they initially placed on the international students was better received when it was a shared event for all the students, including those from the community, surrounding communities, and other countries.

Due to this unique program, a lot of newspaper reporters have come to visit the school and to study the international students. This has left the local students feeling like second-class citizens in their own town. One staff member told us, in response to all the school visitors, *some kids I heard them say, 'it's like being in a zoo, we are on display' and then most of the time they just talk to the international kids anyway and don't talk to the kids who are here, who live here.* Some staff members predict this resentment will be short-lived. They envision that when the younger students, who grow up in the district and are

always used to having international students in the school, become high school students they will see the program and its effects as the norm and will not have feelings of resentment.

Programming and Professional Development

The international program at Lakeside is supported by the current teachers and staff, but we note that there have been few changes in the school structure and practices based on the program, including limited hiring of staff associated with the program, professional development for teachers, and programming for students. Teachers reported few professional development opportunities related to working with international and cultural diverse students. A staff member said in regard to professional development: *[There] does not really appear to be much support in that area.* When asked about professional development one teacher reported: *Nothing specific. We have hired a few staff members that do English as a Second Language and to deal with any problems that we encounter in the classroom.* Another teacher after having described the need for programming for the students responded to a question about professional development with these words: *I don't think so but that's an interesting question. It never even occurred to me that as staff we could benefit from professional development, even if it's not necessary language related, but how to broker with the divides that tend to happen in a situation like this. How do we broker with those, and how do we grow ourselves?* As mentioned in the literature review, higher education administrators also grapple with these issues.

We were told that one or two years of the program included a diversity course for students, but currently there is no programming for students, international or local, to consciously or academically approach issues of cultural difference or other aspects of diversity. One staff member hesitated when asked about programming for students by wondering why it would be necessary when they *have the real thing*, meaning the presence of students different from the local students. In regard to programming of the students, a teacher stated: *I think that's the greatest difficulty and the thing we've neglected...I don't think we've figured out how to structure within this program opportunities for intentional learning about one another.* A description of a social scene begs some awareness of cultural differences for one teacher: *I walk in the library and I see the Asian kids and the Middle Eastern kids sitting over here, quiet, studying, studious, and the European descended and the European kids sitting here chatting and connecting and I say 'ugh'...At some level, yes, kids*

are going to fall where their comfort zone is. But as educators and as people who are pursuing this unique educational model, I feel that we have a challenge and a responsibility. The power of cultural experiences for students and teachers alike may be magnified through intentional educational practices such as professional development for teachers and programming for students. Such issues reflect what has been reported in the literature on international students in higher education; tensions exist, and thoughtful and deliberate programming would be useful.

Recommendations for Other Communities

There were a number of areas that the respondents in Lakeside mentioned when asked what they could recommend to other communities considering an international student program. Most often they spoke about the ratio of local students to international students, the language ability of the international students, the housing for international students, and the support of the community for the program.

In regard to the number of students, very few respondents would give a precise number or percentage of the student body that the international student would ideally comprise. Many teachers and staff felt the current ratio is good (approximately 1 international student to 3 local students) and allowed for cultural exchange but did not make the local students feel out numbered in their own school. In addition, the classrooms currently are set up for very small classes and the teachers' loads include 7-12th grade teaching assignments. With additional students, local or international, the classroom layouts and teaching assignments would have to change. Finally, the small size leads to descriptions of the school as a family and to comments about the safety of a place where students do not fall through the cracks. It is a tough balance to strike between the small size that allows these strengths with a growth rate through international and out-of-district recruitment that maintains the viability of the school.

Teachers, staff, and administration strongly emphasize the importance of considering international students' language abilities in connection with the development and implementation of an international student program. The success of the program is dependent on their language abilities to allow for positive social and academic experiences. Lakeside found greater success in this area when it welcomed students with J-1 instead of F-1 visas. In addition, the program administrators found it necessary to work only with agencies that would share English language ability test scores or that had

strict score minimums to guarantee Lakeside would enroll students with the necessary English fluency to allow for social and academic success. Finally, students, teachers, and staff reported positive experiences with fewer students from each individual country. There are fewer opportunities for students to speak their home languages if there are fewer students from the same country and the emphasis on communication in English seems to improve classroom and social experiences for both local and international students.

The housing and community support are connected because the program cannot exist without broad local support and the international students cannot find homes unless local families are willing to open their doors. As an administrator noted, *You'll never grow a school through the methods we have without community approval.* This community approval has grown through the implementation of events that bring the school and the community together with an emphasis on all the children, not just those who hail from various countries around the world.

Conclusion

This study of Lakeside provides a window through which to view the implementation of an international student program in a public high school setting. It is evident that there are a range of benefits and challenges associated with the program for the school and community. The benefits include increased social opportunities for students who otherwise progress through school with a very small peer group. In addition, the exposure to different cultural backgrounds benefits both international and domestic students. This increased cultural awareness occurs in both social and academic settings. Students and teachers alike commented on the benefit of international student perspectives in history classes, for example. In addition, students and teachers spoke about the social challenges associated with international students who befriended one another

more than the domestic students, especially in cases where multiple international students shared a home country. Academic challenges described by teachers, students, and staff are related to the English language ability of the international students. This range of benefits may be enhanced and the challenges minimized by a number of suggestions described by the participants. Screening of international students' language abilities could alleviate the English language challenges in classrooms. In addition, professional development for teachers and focused academic or social programming for students may improve the social and cultural interactions. In regard to the community, the program appears to ease the fears of school closure and consolidation that are prevalent among community members. The future of the program is often framed from this perspective of a strong belief that the community's well being is dependent on the school's presence.

The dual goals of the program, including enrollment increases and cultural diversity, relate directly to the literature on international students in higher education. These tensions between resources, in this case enrollment, and cultural diversity are evident in higher education and in the high school example of Lakeside. In both contexts there is a perception that international students are needed for revenue, enrollment, and stability, and that they also contribute to the educational environment because of the diversity they bring. But in higher education in general, and at Lakeside in particular, little has been done to implement programming that could contribute to the educational benefits of having an international student body, either in teacher or student training. One explanation could be that resources really are an issue; in a school already concerned about finances, which is bringing in students to improve the financial situation, using resources for programming to help those students and the communities they are entering may seem challenging. At the same time, such programming may be the key to maximizing the benefits of international programs in the future.

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