

# Impact of the International Program

---

***Presented to the Education Policy and  
Directions Steering Committee SD 61  
November 7, 2016  
By Lisa Rogers  
lisarogers@hotmail.com***

Madam Chair, Trustees, Administrators, Staff, Parents, Teachers and others – Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Lisa Rogers and I am a district parent with a child in grade 3 and another entering kindergarten in 2017.

Before I get deeply in to my presentation, I would like to provide a brief description of my background to provide some context. I need to make it abundantly clear to all those in the room that I am not against international programs, international students, immigration, or people from other countries.

- I have travelled, lived, worked and volunteered extensively in Asia, Hawaii, Brazil and Mexico for many months at a time;
- I was an international student myself just outside of Mexico City and participated in a homestay with a Mexican family that spoke no English;
- I volunteered at an International School in the Philippines while I was working there as a nurse;
- I read and understand English, Spanish and French;
- I have a Master's degree in Cultural Anthropology;
- I also have 7 years' experience in the provincial public service as a policy analyst and manager;
- I consider myself to be a Canadian, but also a global citizen.

It is within this context that I would like to raise concerns about the unintended consequences that the international program is having on district students. My hope is that this will spur on further discussion, immediate action and a critical evaluation of the impact of the international program on district students.

There certainly are benefits to having international students in our public schools. The program provides an increase in revenue and the potential for positive cultural exchange. It is obviously a high quality program that has received a great deal of attention and resources.

But I would like to dig a little deeper than that. What does the international program in our schools actually look like on the ground?

International students pay \$13,000/year in tuition plus room, board, travel and spending expenses in Canadian funds. They are not refugees or immigrants.

Currently, 1014 international students are enrolled in the district, with 92% being at the high school level. Approximately 14% of our high school students are now international students. These are record levels of international students in the district. We have never seen numbers like this before. This is new territory.

International students are not evenly distributed amongst our high schools. Lambrick Park has the highest percentage of international students at approximately 30%. That means almost 1 in 3 students at Lambrick Park is an international student. Oak Bay High has the highest actual number of international students at 191.

Do you think it is possible to implement a program of this magnitude and not have any unintended consequences to the system as a whole? Of course not. My major concern is that some of these unintended consequences are having a negative impact on district students.

In the following section, I will highlight four unintended consequences that have been brought to my attention by district parents and teachers.

These include:

- 1) Reduced access to high schools of choice
- 2) Further overcrowding at several high schools
- 3) Preferential treatment and prioritization of international students
- 4) Lowered overall English proficiency in classrooms

## **Reduced access to high schools of choice**

The first unintended consequence is the reduced access that some district students have encountered when trying to transfer to some of the high schools. This is in part due to increased population and local demand, but the 936 international students also play a part. To put it in context, 936 international students are more than the entire population of Victoria High or Esquimalt High or Lambrick Park High. That is an entire high schools worth of extra students!

Although the district has the choice of where to offer spaces to international students, current practice is to place them at the school of their choice. In terms of sheer numbers, they are predominantly choosing Oak Bay High, Mount Douglas, Lambrick Park and Victoria High. Transfers for district students to Mount Doug and Oak Bay High are - in particular - being limited.

## **Further overcrowding at several high schools**

The second unintended consequence is further overcrowding at three district high schools. Oak Bay High is already over 100%, Reynolds is at approximately 126% and Mount Douglas is at approximately 133% utilization. While I recognize international students generally prefer to attend some of those schools - and this is a competitive business-agreeing to place them in these schools further increases the overcrowding that already exists. It takes a difficult and frustrating situation for district students and makes it worse.

## **Preferential treatment and prioritization of international students**

The third unintended consequence is that district students are being prioritized beneath international students. For example, international students receive early admission to the school of their choice, while district students have to wait and apply for transfers in to the spaces that remain.

## Lowered overall English proficiency in classrooms

The fourth unintended consequence that has been raised by parents and teachers is the overall lowered English proficiency level in some non-English Language Learning courses. In some classrooms, a large majority of students are international students from non-English speaking countries. If international students' English proficiency is too low and there are many of them clustered in a few courses, this can in turn lower the level of quality, complexity and speed that information can be taught to district students. It adds to the challenges teachers face and reduces district students' access to teachers' time.

Here is what one high school teacher had to say "I have over 200 students and a quarter of them are international students. I'm teaching students who speak little to no English. This year I'm so overwhelmed."

Another example is a parent who said his grade 12 son was in a course where he was the only English as a first language student. His son felt isolated, alone and unsupported. The teacher was overwhelmed. Group projects, which were a key component of this particular class, did not work because the students could not communicate with each other.

The district parents I have spoken to find these unintended consequences to be of serious concern. Generally, the feeling is that in a K-12 public school district, district students should not:

- lose their school of choice option due to international students;
- have to attend a school that is being pushed overcapacity by international students;
- be prioritized in any way beneath international students, including early admission;
- have the quality, complexity and speed of a course reduced because of international students.

## A Call to Act and Evaluate

The primary mandate of the district is to educate the children of residents of SD 61 and provide them with the advantages they need to succeed in today's competitive world. These unintended consequences need to be remedied. Therefore, I call on the board and the administration to act in two specific ways:

First, as is practiced in other jurisdictions, the district could stop offering spaces to international students at schools that are overcapacity or had district student transfer

requests denied last year. You know there simply is not space in these schools, so one option is to close them to new international student admissions for 2017/18. Offer spaces in schools where there is less demand, but only if you can ensure the quality of education for district students does not suffer in those schools.

Secondly, design and conduct an evaluation of the impact that the international program is having on district students. Not just an evaluation of the international program in and of itself for the sake of program improvement, but an evaluation that critically examines how the program is impacting district students and the system as a whole.

Like any useful evaluation, it would need to involve all stakeholders, including district students, international students, teachers, administrators, district parents and international parents and more. The results should be easily and readily available to the public. The objective of the evaluation would be to produce data for informed policy decision making on issues including, but not limited to:

- Seat allocation
- % of successful/unsuccessful transfers
- Level of overcrowding
- Class composition, including ELL, international students
- English proficiency of international students
- Access to teachers
- % of international students in each class to maintain course quality and optimum cultural integration
- % of adult volunteers associated with elementary and middle school international students
- An audit of income and expenses for the international program and how much of the profits are being spent to improve the education of district students

In conclusion, I am in favour of having international students in our schools, but I want to be certain that it is done in a way that enhances – and does not deplete - the education being offered to district students. The district can continue to aggressively expand the international program but I am not convinced we should. The red flag has been raised by parents and I hope you will take action and consider a change in course.

The financial and cultural benefits of the international program could be seen as “the goose that laid the golden egg” – but we need to make sure the goose does not cost too much in other ways. It is not all about money. It is also not all about globalization. The education of district students is what matters the most.

## Sources

Greater Victoria School District – International High School Programs. Enrollment Information. October 3, 2016 (provided by Superintendent)

School Utilization – as at May [2016] (from the VCPAC website)