

COUNCIL ON STANDARDS FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL TRAVEL

OVERVIEW

The CSJET School Forum project facilitates educator-to-educator discussions on the benefits of hosting international students and sending American students abroad. These discussions, held via conference calls, address challenges and obstacles that educators and school officials face when working with international exchange programs.

These fora are intended to be used as training tools for local exchange program representatives, field staff and volunteers. By providing an “educators’ perspective” on youth exchange programs, CSJET is working to build stronger relations between the U.S. school community and international youth programs.

The following is a summary of the first CSJET School Forum held on May 6, 2009. To access an audio recording, visit the “Members-Only” webpage at: <http://www.csiet.org/members-only/SchoolForum.htm>.

If you have suggestions for the next Forum, please contact Lisa Reed at lreed@csiet.org.

Question #1: How are local and state budgets affecting placement of exchange students in your schools? Has the swine flu impacted this?

Conclusion: The economy is not having a direct impact on the number of student placements being accepted because most schools are given state aid based on attendance of exchange students. Some placement issues include rapidly growing enrollments and some schools not being able to handle extra students. Also, some families are not able to afford hosting foreign students due to the recession. Currently, the swine flu has not had an impact on enrollments.

“Suddenly the country has a face... each of the students does just that. They represent their country so well...they’re living examples of the language and so suddenly that language comes to life with them being here.”
-Margaret Holt

Question #2: What are the most significant advantages of hosting exchange students? What are some of your experiences with exchange students, both inbound and outbound, in your school community?

Conclusion: International exchange students bring new perspectives to schools in terms of their home country and culture, including religion and language. Foreign students bring the great asset of diversity to an otherwise culturally and ethnically homogenous school in some cases. Additionally, schools hold cultural events involving exchange students, which foster cultural understanding by American youth, and at the same time can assist in finding more families to host exchange students. Lastly, friendship is one of the most significant advantages to exchange programs that greatly benefits both the exchange and host students. These bonds build lasting ties within the school community.

Question #3: From a school’s point of view, what are some of the concerns and challenges you have when working with exchange student programs?

Conclusion: A common concern is the lack of English language proficiency. This puts students and host families in a difficult position, because educators cannot place students in situations where they won’t be successful academically. J-visa regulations require language proficiency prior to issuance of the visa, so students are screened by U.S. consulates abroad.

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“One of the things that we do to integrate (foreign exchange students) into our school is we make them part of the student council... so they can understand all the traditions- the homecomings, the snow carnival, all the dances- all the things...that are a part of our heritage...”

-Jim Wencel

Another challenge can occur when area representatives recruit host families before they have worked out the details with the school district. A problem arises when the school may have already met their hosting capacity. Pre-placement meetings, held by the school at the beginning of a cycle, have proven extremely helpful when trying to put schools and programs in sync.

Question #4: What can CSIET-listed exchange programs do to promote schools’ acceptance of foreign exchange students? How do you overcome schools’ restrictive policies when it comes to the number of exchange students they can accept?

Conclusion: Many school placement limitations can be dependent upon school board policies and who happens to be the principal or enrollment officers. One school may have a very strict limit, while another may not put any limits on how many students to accept. Program representatives often build an “educational” relationship with a principal in advance to grow the awareness of the benefits of hosting a foreign exchange student at their school. In addition, instead of programs asking schools to make exceptions for particular instances, working with schools and school boards to improve their overall policies in broader terms can be a more mutually beneficial approach to take, for both parties.

“As a principal, my advice (for area program representatives) ...is to be in touch early and often with the school personnel... and don’t get too far down the placement road before you involve the school, so that you’re moving towards the goal together.”

-David Waters

Question #5: Sometimes schools say, they cannot take an exchange student because it will affect national and state testing scores, or No Child Left Behind scores. In reality, the U.S. Department of Education states that exchange students are here on non-immigrant visas*, and they are not intended to be tested as far as the No Child Left Behind assessment. Do issues arise concerning testing requirements and exchange student programs?

Conclusion: Although NCLB guidance is clear on testing requirements for foreign exchange students, individual state procedure vary. According to Diana Jarrett, Virginia has Standards of Learning (SOL) tests, which are end of course tests. If an exchange student is enrolled in a course that requires this, they must take that test at the end, and this applies to any student enrolled. This is generally not an issue, because foreign exchange students tend to do very well on these end of course tests. If there is an issue with a student pertaining to this, then they are generally placed in a non-SOL course. Jim Wencel states that Michigan does have tests during their junior year, but that generally does not hurt the school’s scores. The tests are not given until the second semester, so the student should be more acclimated language-wise, and exchange students are generally very intelligent kids, and they tend to score at least equal or higher than other students taking the test.

“Let’s understand that concerns- they are minimal compared to the advantages and positives that come out of this.”

-Diana Jarrett

*See www.CSIET.org, School Resources for written guidance on NCLB.

Question #6: How does your school encourage more American students to study abroad?

Conclusion: Today there is more flexibility for making up required coursework and needed credits through online courses, summer school, etc. Often, the seed is planted when students go overseas for a shorter amount of time, such as a week or so, and realize how eye-opening the study abroad experience can be. In addition, study abroad fairs can host exchange programs to come and share information. Guidance counselors can be extremely helpful in these events as well, by sharing how studying abroad will benefit the students in future educational and career moves. Also, having American students who are alumni of study abroad programs return to U.S. schools and speak to foreign language classes can be particularly helpful in recruiting students for exchange or study abroad programs.

Overall, schools can provide constructive problem-solving approaches to the perceived barriers to studying abroad. The key is to work with the students well in advance of exchange in terms of graduation requirements and credit acceptances.