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At private schools, a surge of Chinese students



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Twins Wendy and Mary Wu from China who are students in a math class at The Newman School in the Back Bay.

By Laura Krantz and Jessica Meyers | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 27, 2016

EVERETT — Pope John XXIII High School once epitomized the parochial school experience, a concrete building where hundreds of poor Catholic children from Irish and Italian immigrant families sought a new future. For decades, a student from farther away than Malden or Chelsea stood out.

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Walk through the same doors now, and the tones of Mandarin Chinese bounce off the lockers. International flags fly between stained glass windows in a chapel-turned-dining hall. In one classroom, a crucifix hangs over a bookshelf with a Chinese dictionary — a reminder that almost half the school’s population hails from abroad. Three-quarters of those students come from China.

Chinese students have flocked to US universities for nearly 40 years. But as that country’s middle class balloons and competition for college acceptance rises, some families aim to jump-start the process by sending children abroad as early as junior high. This influx has spurred a side industry ripe for exploitation and shifted the makeup of secondary schools nationwide, particularly in private-school hubs like New England.

Elite boarding schools have found the surge so great that many are attempting to maintain a balance by accepting fewer Chinese. But many day schools, faced with financial pressures, have seized on the opportunity to enroll full-tuition students through partnerships with recruitment agencies, new dorms, and rejiggered curriculums.

“This school is not the school that was here in the 1980s,” said Tom Ryan, head of school at Pope John XXIII.

Chinese made up 35 percent of the 92,000 foreign secondary school students in the United States in 2015, according to the US Department of Homeland Security, by far the largest group studying here. The number of international students in New England alone rose from more than 9,000 in 2010 to nearly 14,000 last year.

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International enrollment at the Newman School in the Back Bay shot up from 29 percent to 36 percent in the past five years, with 70 percent of those Chinese. The MacDuffie School in Granby has more than doubled its international population in the past four years, to 160 out of 297 students total.

Lexington Christian Academy recently acquired a dormitory, largely for international students who pay \$61,860 a year for tuition and housing. In 2011, Pope John XXIII officials converted the school's fifth-floor convent into a dormitory for foreign students. Tuition there is \$9,500 annually, plus about \$30,000 for room and board.

This new wave of Chinese students, even as they seek educational opportunity, is also more vulnerable because they leave their families at a young age, travel halfway across the world, and juggle the insecurities of teenage years in a country they don't understand.

Some of these so-called parachute kids sink, but many do master a system of teaching much different than they knew, improve their English, diversify traditionally monochrome campuses, and better situate themselves to attend a US university. And yet the transition can feel jarring.

"The first day I arrived at my host family's, I shut the door all day and stayed in my room," said Ran Yixin, who entered George Stevens Academy in Blue Hill, Maine, as a hesitant 17-year-old sophomore.

Then the south China native started watching football games with her host father, joined the cheerleading squad, volunteered at a local church, and became a discerning lobster eater. She graduated last year and now attends Bunker Hill Community College.

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“You need to be versatile; you can’t be only good at studying,” said Ran, who like many international students, bounced between host families.

The desire to attend a US college often drives families, but, like Ran, many also seek to avoid the rigidity of the Chinese education system.

Most public school students in China focus their academic career on passing a single test, the national college entrance exam, which is taken in their senior year. Students study long hours, and their score on this test, called the gaokao, determines where they go to college and what majors they pursue.

This method, while prized for its rigor, leaves little time for hobbies or self-examination.

“The education system in China is quite harmful for personal interest,” said Ran’s father, Ran Qihui, who paid about \$46,000 a year for the US private high school.

Some Chinese parents worry the American approach, which emphasizes extracurriculars and encourages students to follow their passions, fails to instill the same level of academic skills as the Chinese model.

Unless parents can afford to accompany their children, it also tears families apart at the child’s most formative age.

“It’s like they start college four years earlier,” said Tracy Ren, a Beijing mother whose son went to Choate Rosemary Hall, the same Connecticut boarding school President John F. Kennedy attended. “If you want to send [your kids abroad] at 14, they’re gone.”

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Ali Fu from China with Priscila Forgione from Lynn work together at Pope John XXIII High School in Everett.

Ren helps run a parental support group on WeChat, a popular Chinese social media app, that translates to “Circle of Moms who want to Send their Kids to the US.” It has 50,000 followers.

Many of these are parents like Robby Yang, caught between keeping a child nearby and encouraging them to leave. Any reservations the Chinese father had about sending his son abroad ended when the boy started elementary school in Beijing.

He noticed that parents were asking the teacher what supplemental material they should buy for their 7-year-olds, in addition to after-school English classes and regular homework.

Yang tried to ignore the intensity of his son’s kindergarten, where some of the kids could read novels. But the child would cry because he couldn’t list addition tables or write as many Chinese characters as the others.

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“This kind of competition is everywhere,” said Yang, who works on the investment side of Pearson, a multinational education and publishing company, and commutes three hours a day so his son can attend a well-regarded school.

Schools acknowledge that revenue from these full-paying students motivates their recruitment. Many also hope to cultivate affluent international families into donors.

But administrators also say the influx is reshaping classrooms that historically have lacked diversity.

“We’re going to end up with a population of students who maybe aren’t so interested in putting a wall around their own country,” said Steven Griffin, head of school at the MacDuffie School.

An entire industry, both in the United States and China, has sprung up to funnel young foreign students to American prep schools.

Fees can run as high as \$50,000 for an agent to guide a family through the admissions process. Many of these businesses make additional profit by housing students in makeshift dorms or placing them with host families.

Schools use agents because they believe it lends legitimacy to students’ applications. But it also makes for unusually close partnerships between admissions officers and businesses, with money as a primary incentive.

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Nick Zhou, who is from China, played pool after school ended at Pope John XXIII.

“International students are a very lucrative market,” said Xi Zhang, founder of Boston-based FindingSchool.com, a website that provides information in Chinese about US secondary schools. “Although they can claim ‘I want to make sure our student body is diverse,’ lots of schools are doing this for the money.”

The MacDuffie School finds 80 percent of its international students through agents, Griffin said. The school pays agents a cut, 10 percent of the \$51,000 tuition that schools receive from the family the first year, and 5 percent in subsequent years.

Sparhawk School, an Amesbury day school, requires students from China, Vietnam, and Korea to apply through the Cambridge Institute for International Education, a recruiting company whose affiliate operates the school’s new dormitory in nearby Haverhill. The

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Waltham-based company, founded less than a decade ago, partners with more than 200 private and public high schools and universities, one of the largest agencies of its kind.

Although third-party companies assist many families with the unfamiliar process, some also manipulate naive parents eager to see their children succeed.

A Chinese parent recently contacted the MacDuffie School to tell the headmaster her family could no longer afford the mandatory \$40,000 annual donation. But no such donation rule exists. The family's agent made up the story, and the school never received the money.

With such high stakes — a child's or a school's future — the attempts at profiteering go both ways.

Lexington Christian Academy, whose student body is 11 percent international, last year asked a Chinese student to leave when, after several warnings, she did not complete her coursework. Her parents flew in and offered the headmaster whatever assistance he needed for her to stay.

“Eventually, what I understood they were saying was, ‘How much?’ ” Head of School Timothy Russell said.

Students face their own struggles as they confront an unfamiliar setting, often alone and with limited English skills.

Pope John XXIII sits across the street from a Dunkin' Donuts and the Rt. 99 Smoke Shop, between a convenience store and a nail salon. Some Chinese find suburban America a lonely transition from the crowded streets and flashy high-rises of Beijing and Shanghai.

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Augustine Wong, a Hong Kong transplant who attends the Newman School in the Back Bay, called the quiet West Roxbury neighborhood where his host family lives “gloomy.”

To help foreign students assimilate, schools sometimes require them to play sports or join clubs. The influence works in both directions: Chinese New Year has become a commonly feted holiday.

But lunchrooms tell another story, often divided along cultural lines. During a recent morning assembly at the Newman School, many Asian students grouped together on one side of the room.

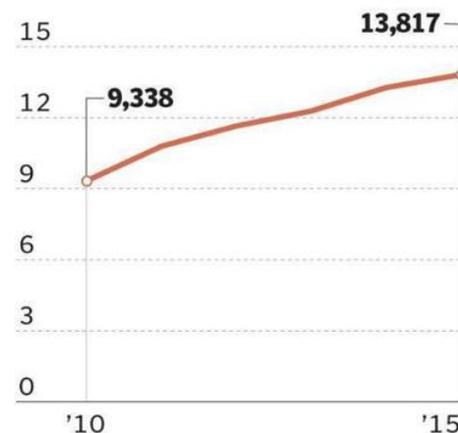
A few never escape that bubble, making it difficult to ever really fit in. And, every so often, something goes terribly wrong.

Three Chinese high school students in Southern California made headlines earlier this year for allegedly stripping another Chinese girl, burning her with cigarettes, and forcing her to eat her own hair. One of the student’s lawyers linked their actions to loneliness and the lack of parental supervision.

Such behaviors are rare. But students can find themselves squeezed between expectations of American teachers and pressure from parents unfamiliar with a Western education system.

High school is popular

The number of international students in New England high schools increased 48 percent over the past five years.



SOURCE: US Immigration and Customs Enforcement

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George Becker, a world history teacher at Pope John XXIII, says that many Chinese students arrive tired to first period because they stay up late to Skype with their parents. Some sleep for a few hours, get up around 1 a.m. to talk, then go back to sleep, he said.

Becker struggles to keep students with limited English skills engaged. He spends much of the first semester reinforcing the importance of participating in class and voicing opinions — skills that aren't always encouraged in traditional Chinese schools.

"I'm constantly thinking about making sure they understand this, or how can I connect this to something where they're from," Becker said.

The increase in foreign students also affects how and what schools teach.

Sparhawk School runs a course to prepare students for the English-language exam they must take to attend US universities, and it has trained its teachers on cultural differences between US and Chinese experiences.

MacDuffie School offers an international diploma for foreign students who don't meet the regular requirements for graduation. Lexington Christian Academy developed a special English-language learning program that some students attend before enrolling at the academy or at another secondary school.

"You're actually, in a way, changing the school," said Peter Upham, executive director of The Association of Boarding Schools.

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While the surge in international students brings more diversity of thought, it also threatens to shift the demographics too far in one direction, Upham said. His association has started a national campaign to encourage boarding schools to enroll more domestic students — 2,020 more by the year 2020.

Meanwhile, the region's elite prep schools, with their larger endowments, face less pressure to recruit international students.

Enrolling too many foreign students can backfire, said Chris Blondin, associate admissions director at Governor's Academy in Byfield, which has 17 Chinese students out of 400 total. Chinese families aren't attracted to schools that look too much like home, he said.

Deerfield Academy counts about 20 Chinese in its student body of 635. The school has watched the number of Chinese applications drop as families learn that it admits just one student for every 12 applicants and does not have an English-language learning program.

In coming years, the Newman School aims to reverse strategy and recruit more US students.

Headmaster Harry Lynch is proud of Newman's global reputation, but he frequently hears that the school is not well-known in Boston.

Lynch sat in his office one recent afternoon surrounded by stacks of American textbooks. The bell rang and students from around the world raced past his open door to class.

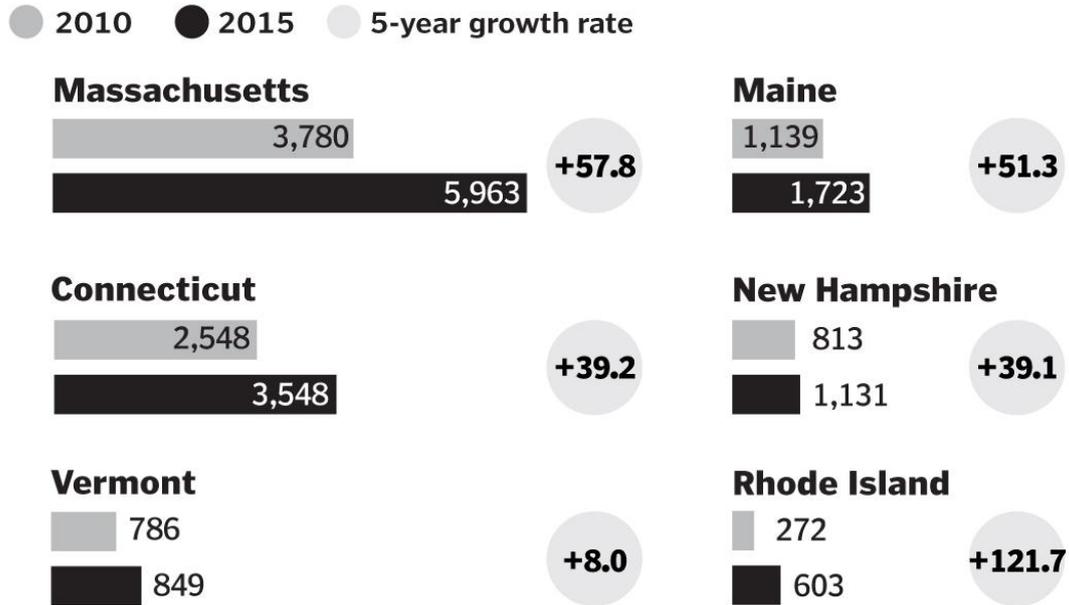
"When I look at the future of the school," Lynch said, "it has to rebalance."

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International students in NE high schools

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Massachusetts has the most international high school students compared with other New England states. Student enrollment and the five-year growth rate:



SOURCE: US Immigration and Customs Enforcement

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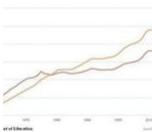


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