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destination analysis

US high schools

US high schools are popular with international students wanting to perfect their English and go on to higher education in the USA.

International student numbers at high schools in the USA have stayed fairly constant over the last few years, according to the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). The most recent statistics reveal that there were 15,226 international students studying at the 1,228 member schools who completed the survey in 2007, a marginal increase of four per cent over the previous year.

Some schools, however, report a growing interest among international students for high school programmes in the USA. "Virginia Episcopal School (VES) has increased its international enrolments dramatically over the past several years," relates Pam Barile at the school in Lynchburg, VA. "Our largest international population is students from Korea. Most US boarding schools are experiencing an overrun of applications from Korea."

Jesse Roberts, Director of Admissions at West Nottingham Academy in Coloma, MD, says that they are currently seeing a "tremendous amount of interest from Asia". He adds, "Korea and China are at the top for competitive students seeking education in the USA. We are also seeing interest from Eastern Europe and Russia."

The majority of international students studying in US high schools have their eye on future education goals and Roberts says that their students work hard to this end. "We [prepare] students for an amazing and endless list of choices in higher education," he says. "Do you want to go to a school of 40,000 students and enjoy the college lifestyle? Do you want to go to a school of 750 and know everyone by name? Students choose to study in the USA because of what could come next."

Robin DePaolis, Associate Director of Admissions at St Timothy's School in Stevenson, MD, agrees. "The USA's appeal to most students seeking English speaking destinations is that they seem to want to experience the US culture and educational atmosphere and get the exposure to the colleges and universities here," she says. "With St Timothy's being so close to DC and Virginia and many top notch US colleges and universities in this area, we actually bring our students to many of these institutions for speakers, tours, concerts etc. They love that!"

When it comes to marketing overseas, some schools find that they have more applications from international students than they are able to accept. Chad Barnett from the Linsly School in Wheeling, WV, says that they enrol students from up to eight different countries each year. He comments, "We frequently review over 100 files to find the four-to-six [candidates] who are the best fit for our school. Students and consultants find us through their own research. Linsly's website is the primary introduction for nearly all prospective international families."

Other schools are more proactive in their marketing efforts, although Roberts emphasises that former and current alumni often prove to be their best tool. "Although we are making strides to market ourselves in emerging markets, when we have a new student who does well with us, typically word-of-mouth brings the best new candidates to our attention," he says.

Barile agrees that international students are quite proactive about finding where they want to study in the USA themselves. "VES does market internationally," she says, adding, "Typically the international students find us on their own through our website [but] we work with several consulting agencies as well."

Agents feature prominently in the marketing activities of St Timothy's School. "Our agents are probably the most valuable resource as they deal with the families directly," confides DePaolis.

Roberts points out that maintaining high standards is imperative to maintaining the USA's appeal. "Schools need to be continuously mindful of the marketplace," he says. "We collectively need to make sure that we are following through on the things that we say we do well, constantly seek to improve our programming and curriculum. Otherwise, we [risk the benefit] of having international students on our campuses – diversity in education."