

Foreign exchange students offer more than survival for remote Oregon schools - Part 1

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DORMS BRING DIVERSITY



Foreign exchange students live in student housing in five small Oregon districts, and locals say the teens enrich the high schools and communities.



SCHOOL DISTRICT	2016-17 FOREIGN EXCHANGE STUDENTS	TOTAL FALL 2016 HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT	TOWN'S 2010 CENSUS POPULATION
BURNT RIVER	7	23	71 (UNITY)
MITCHELL	8	28	130
PAISLEY	12	33	243
SPRAY	8	24	160
UKIAH	4	14	186

Credit: Oregon Small Schools Association, Oregon Department of Education, U.S. Census Bureau

Spray, in Wheeler County northeast of Redmond, in many respects typifies a remote Oregon ranching community. But the students' voices as they pursue a soccer ball under a hot early-May sun are tinged with Japanese, South Korean, Thai and German accents.

Eight of Spray High's 24 students are foreign exchange students living in campus dorms. The town, on a remote stretch of Oregon 19 north of the John Day Fossil Beds, hosts students from Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. Spray School District staff say the foreign students add a diversity and international outlook that local students would otherwise miss.

The exchange students also provide something even more tangible: critical mass and funding needed to create a learning

environment. But their presence here faces a funding threat every two years in the form of a 2010 law's consequences.

"Having them in the school is survival," said Dennis Starr, who teaches science, P.E. and weight training as well as being Spray's athletic director and a multi-sport coach.



Spray's P.E. class gets outside in early May on a field near the rodeo grounds. The grass is long and the fences are up because it will hold livestock soon.

In 1993, the district opened a six-student dorm across the road from the school to attract students from around Oregon and stabilize withering enrollment. A few years later, the school board and superintendent decided to invite foreign exchange students.

That addressed both the issue of school diversity and supplying a steady number of students to keep the school viable, said Superintendent and Principal Phil Starkey.

Four years ago, the district designated the dorm across the street for girls only and opened a six-bed boys dorm a mile away. All the dorm residents – half the high school's population – are from outside the district.



Toni Mueller-axt of Germany reads with Cooper the dog in the yard of the Spray girls dorm.

Funding for such on-campus exchange students is in peril, however.

A 2010 law restricts Oregon student funding for foreign exchange students living in dorms to five Oregon districts: Burnt River, Mitchell, Paisley, Spray and Ukiah. These schools get the same per-student funding for exchange students as they do for in-district residents. All tell a similar story of declining enrollment and a desire to bring diversity to their communities while stabilizing funding.

But under the 2010 law, funding for exchange students living in dorms will disappear when it expires July 1.

Spray gets about \$7,600 per student. The loss of Spray's exchange-student funds would roughly equate to losing one of its 15 staff positions, and already staff members wear multiple hats. Spray has four full-time high school teachers and two teachers who split time between the high school and elementary school. It needs a minimum number of teachers for core subjects in its four-classroom high school.



Jan Bolton (standing) is the librarian and media tech for Spray. She also teaches computer classes "and when the phone rings three times, I'm it."

The school and community say the loss would run much deeper, though, than what can be measured in dollars and cents.

With the foreign exchange program, local students experience an up-close and vastly different perspective of world events, history, culture, government and more.

"If we're working on an assignment from Japan, we have someone from there," said Bailey Moyer, a Spray freshman.

Foreign exchange students also tend to be highly motivated.

"It's a really good influence," said Steven Garcia, a Spray freshman. "It's a new way of looking at education."

Ed Knapp runs Spray's boys dorm with his wife, Connie, and both teach at the school. The dorm has six residents: from Germany, South Korea, Thailand and Japan and two from Oregon.

The Knapps have watched how exchange students affect locals in the dorms and classrooms.

"They have to learn how to be tolerant, learn how to adapt to people who have differences," Ed Knapp said.



Ed Knapp refurbished this house four years ago for a boys dorm for Spray High School. The boys helped him build a tall wood fence to shield the house from the highway.

Tucker Moyer, a Spray senior who lives in the district, put it another way.

“Seems like they do odd things, but after a while it seems normal,” he said.

People in the community embrace the students, inviting them into their homes. They talk with pride about “their” foreign exchange students and how much they broaden their community’s horizons.

“All the parents are guardians to all the kids because it is so small,” said Mike Austad, an area resident.



There are not a lot of places to go after school in Spray, so kids and faculty hang out in front of the old high school building at the center of campus.

Mitchell School District tells a similar story. It started taking boarding students in 1992 because of falling enrollment. Mike Carroll, Mitchell superintendent from 1983 to 2008, saw the success other districts were having with foreign exchange students, and began adding them about 12 years ago. Mitchell has 8 foreign exchange students.

Ask local students the most interesting thing they have learned from exchange students (if no teachers are in earshot), and they’ll laughingly mention learning to swear in different languages. But keep asking and they’ll discuss different world governments, cultural habits and societal norms.

The students are also learning things not explicitly taught in schools, from the way Asians divide the seasons to how Europeans hold a knife and fork.

"Makes me more open to listening to others' views," said John Eastwood, a senior living in the Mitchell dorm. "Helps you understand how good you have it."



Lively card games and a diverse mixture of ages and nationalities are a fixture of mornings in the Mitchell library before school.

The future of these small-school dorm exchange practices is dependent on the 2010 law. After the Oregon Department of Education ruled foreign exchange students living in dorms weren't considered district residents, the Legislature extended per-student payments for foreign exchange students through the 2010-11 school year. The Oregon Small Schools Association brought students from the affected schools to Salem to testify in 2011, and the law allowing the payments was extended another two years.

School advocates have been unable to create a lasting funding solution for the dorm foreign exchange programs at the five schools.

Justin Martin, OSSA lobbyist, speculates that resistance to a permanent solution reflects some sort of fiscal responsibility notion. Yet the total number of student payments it affects is about 40 out of an Oregon K-12 school population of more than 570,000.

"It really is budget dust," said Martin, who is working again this session to extend the funding another two years.

One quirk of the law is that foreign exchange students living with families will still be counted as district residents for funding purposes, so larger school districts without dorms are not affected. The five districts with dorms are sparsely populated, making it harder to find enough host families to attract the same number of exchange students they have now.

Paisley School District Superintendent William Wurtz says losing the exchange students would make it hard to fill the dorm and that would be devastating for his school in a remote part of Lake County.

"If we don't have kids in our dorm, we don't have a high school," Wurtz said. Paisley has 12 foreign exchange students, about a third of its high school enrollment.

Filling the dorms with Oregon students is not an attractive option either. The small class sizes, personal attention and high graduation rates appeal to many parents, but they also tend to draw students who are facing other problems.

Karen Ramer, a school board member in Burnt River for more than 20 years, sees numerous benefits with attracting exchange students.

"We first tried to recruit students from Oregon, but ended up with lots of students who really didn't want to be in our environment," she said. "We switched to exchange students because they wanted to be here and if there were any disciplinary problems, the exchange agencies sent the students away."

She said the exchange students have broadened the education of local students, increased cultural awareness, and provided extracurricular opportunities such as sports and FFA that wouldn't be possible with the low number of locals.

Ukiah School Board Member Norma Barber said financial concerns were not the most important factor.

"The most compelling reason to accept international students was that our population is very homogenous," she said. "We hoped that cultural diversity would be good for our students and that meeting people from around the globe could help our students gain a global perspective of sorts."

Part 2 - Foreign exchange boarding students fall in love with remote Oregon towns

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