

International Students as Financial Saviours

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Maintaining a viable academic program in the face of rising costs and declining enrolments is a challenge faced by many administrators and school boards today. In an attempt to balance the financials, schools can fall behind in updating resources, try to teach a full program with fewer staff, neglect preventative maintenance, and reduce spending on professional development. Concerned constituents with school-aged children tend to gradually lose faith in the ability of the school to deliver a quality program and look elsewhere for educational services. This leads to further enrolment decline and increased financial pressure.



As the pressure mounts, the lamentations begin: if only the conference would give more money to better support the school; if only we could find an ideal administrator; if only we could replace some of the teachers; if only we could collect on all the outstanding accounts; if only our church members would give more money; if only the school was in a better location. In a worst-case scenario, the school falls into a death-spiral and closes.

School leaders are trying everything to check the decline. In the minds of some, the quickest and easiest solution is to market the program to attract international students. There is a seemingly unending supply of families around the world willing to pay big bucks to send their children to Canada for an education. And big bucks would certainly be a big help to our schools! If a family from overseas is willing to pay anywhere from \$10,000 to \$15,000 per year tuition for each child plus up to \$750 per month for room and board, the income for the school from one child can be equal to 4-6 of our local, domestic students. In addition, the international student typically pays all the tuition up-front, while we often have difficulty collecting tuition from our local students and families.

More students bring more money. More money brings more teachers. More teachers bring more programming options. More programming options bring more students. More students bring more money. More money brings better facilities. Better facilities bring more students. More students bring more money. What's not to like?

There is a movement in SDA education that seems to equate good financials with good education. Good education does require good financials, but to make financials our main measuring rod is extremely myopic. Although all the statements in the previous paragraph seem to be true, for a Christian school there is still one very important ingredient missing.

The primary reason for every new student being accepted into the school should be because they and their family accept and buy into the philosophy of Adventist Christian Education. They must understand our philosophical biases and embrace them. If the

school overlooks its normal screening processes or lowers Christian commitment and lifestyle expectations in order to attract more students (for the money), then the school enrolment very well may quickly shoot upward – for a while! Eventually, if the school has compromised its standards, or lost its focus and reason for existence, the enrolment of our core Canadian Adventist students will decline. It is essential that we re-educate, re-examine and re-commit our schools and our communities to our mission, our vision, and our reason for existence.

There are many things to consider when looking at the international student issue. For this article, I have focussed on just one, but the one that I believe is the most important. Without fully understanding why we exist, everything we do with international students has the potential to be a disaster for our schools. The British Columbia Conference has a number of schools with healthy international student populations. Our K-12 Board has commissioned a study group who has been working diligently to research how other Christian school organizations deal with the issues and to suggest parameters and working policies for our schools. Our goal is to take a systematic and philosophically sound approach from the Adventist perspective to enhancing our school programs through the acceptance of international students. I would suggest that all our schools across Canada do the same.