

O'Hara goes across the Pacific to partner with Chinese school

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Cardinal O'Hara High School will soon be saying, "Ni hao," to a lot more international students. The Tonawanda school has signed a deal with the Kent School of China that will bring up to 20 students a year from China to Western New York to learn in the Catholic tradition while preparing for college in America.

For over 15 years, O'Hara has welcomed students from Asia and Europe as part of its international program. Students who wish to attend American colleges often come to the States for high school to learn the English language and familiarize themselves with American customs and way of life. Most students and their parents learn about American schools through word of mouth in their homeland. That's how the Kent School agreement came about.

The parents of a current Chinese student at O'Hara spoke to a friend who spoke to George Chen, the founder and president of the Kent School. Chen asked to partner with Cardinal O'Hara to be the co-educational Catholic destination for some of his 11th- and 12th-grade students. The schools signed an official partnership last September. This fall, O'Hara should receive two or three pilot students, then another 10-20 students in the fall of 2020, mostly in grade 12, and up to 20 students each year after that. The Kent School also has a partnership with a school in Niagara Falls, Ontario. A third school in Medina will open in a few years.

Asian parents who hope to send their children to American colleges and universities, will often send their children to American schools as a stepping stone, preparing them, both academically and culturally, for American colleges.

"The families and students from other countries, they are very goal-driven. They want success in their family. Now that the Western world is opened up to them, they see the key to success is by getting an American education," said Doug



DAN CAPPELLAZZO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Cardinal O'Hara High School junior Chloe Wu, who is from China, enjoys her art class and her faith-based education at the Town of Tonawanda school.

Buczak, director of enrollment and admissions for O'Hara. "In Asian countries it is very lecture-driven, very note-taking-driven. There is no classroom discussion. There are no critical thinking skills used."

The adjustment from the Asian education system to American colleges can cause a culture shock. Attending a college-preparatory high school, such as O'Hara, eases the students in to the Western education system. For some students, Cardinal O'Hara may be the first time they hear about Christianity or play soccer.

At its peak, O'Hara had 33 international students. Currently, there are 13, which Buczak considers a good number. "You want to keep things in balance between your domestic population and your international population," he said. "You also want to keep things in balance between countries, so that you don't have too many students from one country. (If so,) they start to cluster together and only speak their native language. You want to give them American high school immersion, and they want to be immersed in American high school. So, you want to keep things in

balance."

The students may be shy at first, but once they get some confidence, they start to involve themselves in school activities, said Buczak. Students take part in National Honor Society, where they do service projects and tutor younger students. Some have joined the golf and baseball teams. One student plays piano at school liturgies. This past February, the international students organized a Chinese New Year celebration.

Outside of English as a Second Language classes, all international students follow the same schedule as the locals.

Lori Panero, English teacher, also teaches ESL to students who need it. She currently has students from Vietnam, Japan, China and South Korea. The students learn the words within a year, but American expressions and humor can be difficult.

"For me it's not a challenge at all, it really isn't, just because I have a high patience level," Panero said. "We just work through it. If there is something I don't understand, or if there is something they're just not getting or they need help, then we work on it."

Benefits to the school are

twofold. International students pay higher tuition, so it helps the school financially. Also, all the students develop a global view by being exposed to different cultures.

"I think it benefits our student body enormously, because they have that opportunity to interact with students from so many cultures," said Principal Mary Holzerland. "They would never have that opportunity had we not had this international program. They get to become friends with these young people. Many of them carry that well after they graduate from Cardinal O'Hara. They learn about other cultures, then become accepting of other cultures. It has a lot of positives."

Ruisi Qin, also known by her American name Teresa, likes that she can pursue her own interests by choosing her classes.

"Chinese education is more strict," she explained. "Here I can take what I want. In China I have to learn what my school gives me. So, I have more choices here."

She has already applied to several colleges with plans on studying biotechnology. At O'Hara she has joined the International Club, and had a part in the school musical, "Beauty and the Beast."

Xing Hai Feng hopes to study pharmacy in college and has already been accepted to Niagara University and Canisius College.

"I'm pretty interested in college education in America, so I decided to come here early to get used to the environment in America. That's why I chose to come to O'Hara," he said. "I like the teachers here a lot, and I have made a lot of friends."

When Buczak got involved with admissions at O'Hara five years ago, the one thing he had the most to learn was how the international program worked. "I've really enjoyed it. It's been very interesting. I love learning about the kids, their stories, what their hopes and goals and dreams are."

He traveled to China in March 2018, visiting cities, such as Beijing, to understand Chinese schools and schools that use a Western philosophy.