Expat schools ride wave of demand

Waiting lists grow as enrolments and applications swell at international schools in Singapore

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Singapore has about 40 foreign-system schools that cater to various education levels. No figure is available for the number of expatriate children now in Singapore, but the number of permanent residents awarded last year rose to 57,300 — a 9.6 per cent increase from 2005 and a 55.3 per cent increase from 2004.

A foreigner who wants to pursue full-time study Singapore must apply for a student’s pass. According to the Immigration & Checkpoints Authority, there were 79,200 student pass holders at Dec 31 last year — an 11.6 per cent increase from 71,000 a year earlier.

Based on these figures, Singapore has passed the halfway mark under its “Global Schoolhouse” initiative, which aims to attract top educational institutions and 150,000 foreign students by 2012, including those who accompany their parents who move here to work.

In line with this move, the education industry’s contribution to gross domestic product has doubled, from 1.9 per cent or $3 billion in 2002 to 3.8 per cent or $8 billion now. The goal is 5 per cent by 2015.

Unlike the local universities, Singapore’s foreign universities have seen a jump in foreign student applications and enrolments.

Singapore American School (SAS) spokesman Beth Grimsen said enrolment has surged by 600 or 21.3 per cent to 3,200 in the past two years. “SAS has seen stronger growth in the past two years than in the years prior to that.” Since SAS moved to new premises at Woodlands in 1996, enrolment has grown 68.3 per cent and it had to expand its high school in 2004 to “accommodate exponential growth.”

Enrolments have also risen at Tanglin Trust School (TTS), which has mainly British students. Its student population has grown at a compounded annual rate of 3.5 per cent in the past five years to 2,200. Over the same period, revenue has grown at a compounded annual rate of 6.5 per cent and school fees have blown out beyond 29.3 per cent.

A spokesman said growth in enrolment may seem low but is “actually considered positive and significant given the current space at TTS”. Higher fees were brought on by higher overheads, and not because of the increase in students, he said.

Global Indian International School (Newly Opened in September 2004)

Enrolment: 1,817

Increase: 34.5 per cent over last 2 years

International Community School

Enrolment: 304

Increase: 55.9 per cent over last 2 years

Singapore Management University

Current foreign student population: 196 permanent residents and 732 foreign students in its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes

Nanyang Technological University

Current foreign student population: About 3,812 undergraduates and about 2,818 postgraduate students

National University of Singapore

Current foreign student population: About 4,780 undergraduates and about 4,500 postgraduate students