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FINAL REPORT: RESEARCH ON INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE HOST FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS

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INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE HOST FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS

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Acronyms

DoS	U.S. Department of State
CBYX	Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange
ECA	Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
FLEX	Future Leaders Exchange
IP	Implementing Partner
LC	Local Coordinator
MELI	Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation Unit
NOFO	Notice of Funding Opportunity
PD	Public Diplomacy
USG	United States Government
YES	Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange & Study

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Executive Summary

The hosting experience plays a vital role in shaping the overall outcomes of high school exchange programs by promoting cultural exchange, fostering personal growth and development, and building connections and understanding. Several factors have made successful hosting experiences more challenging in recent years.

Growing Contextual Challenges

- Youth exchange program stakeholders noted a marked decrease in volunteerism in the post-COVID era. Potential host families report more pressing immediate needs in their own families which negatively impact their interest in hosting, such as cost of living increases, occasional mental health struggles, or feeling disconnected from their communities. ECA Implementing Partners (IPs) also report that the numbers of Local Coordinators (LCs) they can call on to support hosting has decreased in recent years.
- A lack of financial support offered for ECA programs to offset the cost of hosting can be a barrier for host families. This may result in less diverse hosting communities. Program stakeholders report that there is a lack of diversity in host families, at least partly because more marginalized populations are less able to afford the costs associated with hosting.
- American public high schools face challenges with lack of funding, overcrowding, and understaffing. Schools have begun limiting spots for international high school exchange students, making exchange student placement more difficult.
- These challenging contexts may have shifted more burden to the exchange students themselves, whose experiences may be affected by stress from logistical constraints, inconsistent support from program staff, as well as host families and school administrators who are often stretched thin.

Operational Complexities and Understaffing

Youth programs' host placement and retention is a difficult process with many complicating factors. Complex bureaucracies, travel logistics, decentralized partner structures, and a high reliance on the efforts of mainly volunteer LCs make the process challenging on several additional levels. While this research provides general evidence that ECA's hosting systems are well-implemented, interviews with current and potential host families, school administrators, and exchange program implementing staff indicate that there are several areas where additional support, oversight, and resources might facilitate and strengthen the hosting systems for international students across the United States.

- IPs must ensure alignment of three key factors in a community: a trained, capable LC; a willing and qualified host family; and a host school with sufficient slots to accommodate exchange students. The absence (or withdrawal) of any of these criteria can mean that effort put toward the other components is wasted.

- These three components also depend on aligned timing. Final confirmation of many ECA-sponsored high school exchange student applications occurs later than that of private exchange program students. This delay, combined with increasingly early school enrollment deadlines, can make student placement for ECA programs more challenging than that of privately funded programs.
- The quality of support provided by LCs is a critical factor in ensuring strong oversight and support of hosting relationships. However, it seems that there is considerable variation in the capacity and effectiveness of coordinators for different IPs and programs. Providing additional support as well as more standardized guidance and oversight for staff in this key role may be beneficial.

Support (including that which decreases the financial burden of hosting) for host families, schools, and LCs may need to be increased to face heightened pressures in the post-COVID context. There may also be a need for ECA to give more consistent and targeted guidance to IPs, including more centralized quality control, oversight systems, and support for host families and schools. Additionally, in order to facilitate raised awareness and participation in hosting, IPs may also benefit from stronger marketing and recruitment resources and guidance.

Host Family and School Marketing

- Personal connection, trust, and meaningful support for hosting are the primary factors that prompt host family participation as well as keep host families and schools continuously engaged. Interviewees emphasized that building the relationships and networks to create strong hosting communities takes time and considerable effort, often over many years.
- In general, there is a need for increased awareness of hosting opportunities among potential host families. Host families largely considered word of mouth among trusted community members to be the most important tool for spreading awareness and building interest in hosting. National recruitment strategies that are not localized or targeted at particular communities are largely ineffective at creating successful student placements. Strategic use of social media that can build personal connection between potential host families and students could be better utilized.
- The themes that seem most compelling to potential host families and schools center around engaging in cultural exchange and learning, as well as making lifelong global connections. Outreach efforts should continue to highlight the opportunity to learn about different cultures, traditions, and languages firsthand, as well as the chance to form lasting friendships by welcoming an international student into their home. According to host schools, international students provide educational enrichment for American students, staff, and the wider community.

Background and Purpose

The Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation (MELI) Unit of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) in the U.S. Department of State (DoS) is partnering with the District Communications Group (DCG) to carry out market research about U.S. host families and host schools to support ECA-sponsored high school exchange programs, in particular the Congress Bundestag Youth Exchange (CBYX), the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX), and the Kennedy-Lugan Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program. These programs have been in operation for 40, 30, and 20 years respectively.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the motivations for why families and schools host ECA-sponsored high school exchange participants as well as what the barriers are to hosting. MELI is interested in exploring decision-making around hosting and related factors including compensation, communication, awareness, and perceived benefits, as well as possibly testing messaging strategies to boost interest and participation in hosting.

Context

Recruiting host families and host schools has always been a challenging aspect of international exchange administration. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with recent inflation in the United States, has exacerbated the challenge of hosting international high school students for many families and school communities. For the academic year 2022-2023, the Youth Program Division's placement partners could not find placements for all of the accepted students and ECA ultimately had to defer approximately 140 youth to the 2023-2024 academic year. In the 2023-2024 academic year, the YES program again had to defer approximately 30 students. This research intends to provide insights to ECA to support increased participation in hosting and improved management of high school exchange host families and schools for future programming.

Guiding Research Questions

1. What motivates families and school administrators to host high school exchange participants?
2. What benefits does hosting exchange participants provide families and schools?
3. What barriers and challenges exist for host families and schools?
4. What challenges exist for students who are being hosted?
5. For host families and schools that have hosted both ECA-funded and private sector-funded exchange students, how did their experiences differ?
6. What might prompt higher rates of participation in family and school hosting?
7. How might the benefits of hosting be best communicated to potential hosts?

Learning Agenda Questions

In addition to the Guiding Research Questions for this study, MELI has developed a Learning Agenda for ECA for Fiscal Years 2022-2026. The Learning Agenda seeks to address bureau-wide critical knowledge gaps that enable more efficient and effective programming when answered. It also identifies how the bureau will answer those questions and translate evidence into learning through specific, planned activities. Relevant MELI Learning Agenda questions related to this study include:

- **Question 1a**: What steps can ECA take to address barriers to participation in its exchanges and public engagement activities?
- **Question 1c**: How can ECA improve outreach to better reach desired audiences for exchanges and public engagement activities?
- **Question 4a**: To what extent, and in what ways, does pre-program support shape program experiences and outcomes for participants?
- **Question 3d**: How can ECA enhance diversity among U.S. host community locations, community types, and families? What role does host community diversity have on outcomes for foreign exchange participants and host communities?
- **Question 6f**: In what ways does exchange programming provide long-term benefits to the American people?

Research Methodology

Data Collection Summary

This study used qualitative methods and was designed to draw from a wide range of stakeholders that could speak to various perspectives of the international hosting experience. The study used qualitative methods because the research questions were exploratory and involved complex phenomena with the need for contextual understanding and subjective perspectives. The relatively short timeframe of this study also allowed for the richest feedback from qualitative methods since in-depth interviews and focus groups allowed the research team to capture participants' experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives. The original research design was expanded after the first wave of data collection, with the inclusion of alumni interviews as well as a larger number of program practitioners than originally planned; this allowed triangulation of data from more perspectives.

Segment	Type	Cohort	Recruited via	# of Sessions and Total # of Participants
Program Practitioners	Small group interviews	ECA program teams, including both academic and short-term programs	ECA referrals	3 sessions with 5 participants
Program Practitioners	Small group interviews	ECA implementing partners (IPs) and their Local Coordinators (LCs) in U.S. host communities	ECA referrals	17 sessions with 27 participants
Host Schools	In-depth interviews	Host school administrators (current or past) and teachers (one school group per discussion)	Snowball from ECA IPs	4 sessions with 4 participants
Host Schools	In-depth interviews	Potential host school administrators	DCG recruiter	6 sessions with 6 participants

Segment	Type	Cohort	Recruited via	# of Sessions and Total # of Participants
Host Families and Communities	Focus group discussions	Host families (current or past), including host parents, older siblings, and community members (deep-dive around one family node per group, up to six individuals)	Snowball from ECA IPs	6 sessions with 11 participants
Host Families and Communities	Focus group discussions	Potential host families, especially host mothers (up to six individuals from different families per discussion; pairs of groups at upper, middle-, and lower-income levels)	DCG recruiter	6 sessions of 35 participants
Alumni	In-depth interviews	Exchange alumni that were hosted by host families that participated in focus groups	Snowball from host families and other alumni	7 sessions with 7 participants

Limitations

Recruitment and nonresponse were the main challenges in data collection among potential and current host school administrators. Another limitation was the short timeframe of the study. Additionally, the original design did not plan for in-person fieldwork. While qualitative data collection conducted online resulted in insightful findings, in-person research might have provided richer contextual and observational data, especially for focus groups with hosting families and schools.

The main area of potential bias may have been in sponsorship or desirability bias in interviews with ECA IP staff; they may have wanted to present more positive experiences of their work to the evaluation team, knowing that the study was sponsored by the funding body. While this did seem to play a factor in a small minority of interviews, researchers worked to mitigate it in research design and execution. Moreover, most stakeholders were candid and forthcoming about challenges during qualitative research sessions.

Findings

When international hosting experiences go well, they can result in lifelong relationships, shared cultural exchange, and positive outcomes for exchange students, host families, and the broader communities. Positive exchange hosting experiences can foster personal and interpersonal growth, build connections across borders, and contribute to ECA's mission of mutual understanding.

"Every time I think of any good memory I have of the U.S., it's just me doing something with either my host brothers or parents. They were the whole experience for me. Without them, it wasn't anything." [Alumni, 2]

On the other side of the coin, the repercussions of unsuccessful hosting experiences can have negative consequences for exchange participants, hosting families, schools, and even communities. Hosting challenges can decrease future participation in hosting or exchange, and, in worst case scenarios, persistent issues could affect overall program outcomes.

Facilitating with partners to recruit, retain, and oversee host families and host schools are foundational processes to ECA's highest mission. The current environment means the likelihood of success is shrinking, and significant adjustments may be required to ensure a lack of hosts does not impede ECA youth programs moving forward.

What motivates families and school administrators to host exchange participants? What benefits does hosting exchange participants provide families and schools?

Host families and schools are driven by several motivations; both report similar benefits to students in successful international exchanges, citing personal growth, deep relationships, and increased understanding as the main benefits that make the exchange experience appealing.

Many hosts found fulfillment in contributing to global understanding, creating diverse learning environments, and building connections that extend beyond cultural and geographical boundaries. The motivations reflected a commitment to fostering cross-cultural relationships and preparing individuals in their families and schools for an increasingly interconnected world. Appealing to their different motivations and interests may help ECA partners best engage different host communities to encourage them to consider hosting.

Mutual Cultural Exchange at Home and School

Host families and schools often seek cultural exchanges with international students as their main impetus for hosting. In some instances, interviewed families did not have the means to travel internationally and wanted alternate ways to learn about and connect with other

cultures. Others were looking for ways to connect with their own heritage via someone from that place. In other cases, host parents were motivated after being exchange students themselves, having exchange siblings in their homes during their own childhood. Sometimes having a personal relationship with a LC led to the decision to host an international student.

"Connecting with your heritage, that's really impactful. That's why I became an exchange student. I'm Greek and I want to know what it was like to be in Greece, and that's what America is really about, all of these different cultures put together." [Local Coordinator, 8]

"Hosting an international student would not only benefit [the student], because they get to know what America is all about, but it also benefits me, because I would have firsthand experience in what their culture is about. What is it that make[s] them tick? What is it that make[s] them proud? All these questions, they will probably have a great insight that I have no idea. I can't just look up an online article and figure that out." [Potential Host Families, 6]

"My family is a little bit more, I'd say, international. My mom was [an] exchange student. Whereas my husband, his family, has never traveled internationally. Having some kid live with you sounds like the most crazy thing you would ever do because they weren't exposed to [hosting]. I think it's just they don't know what it looks like and maybe they never had an exchange student in their school, or they never interacted with an exchange student... My husband's family's perspectives have changed greatly just by being a part of it." [Local Coordinator, 8]

> It's basically gaining another family member in a different country that you can stay in touch with forever. I know that's not the norm, but I've been in touch with my host family for the last 15 years and they still come to visit me in California now. It's probably the best example of that.
>
> **Potential Host Families, 5 and High School Exchange Student Alumnus**

Many host families, particularly those who have hosted for longer periods of time, see the value of maintaining their connections

with former host students. Keeping up with students via social media or WhatsApp and seeing them in-person is a priority for many families. Host families shared how their students have come back to the United States to visit them or they have gone to visit their host students in their home countries.

"Some kids message more than others, but the ones that really continue to contact, that makes it worth it. Our Somali student is going to school in Fort Worth, TX and I had to go down there for work a couple times and I've gone down there to see him. He came up last year and spent Christmas with us. When we went to Japan, we saw one of our host students." [Current Host Family, 3]

Another benefit of hosting for families is increased worldliness and exposure to different cultures, languages, values, and perspectives. Hosts see the value in learning about other cultures and sharing one's own culture. Many families who have hosted an exchange student cited this as a primary benefit that would attract them to an exchange program.

You get that perspective of a new culture, language, food, just everything, but also it's going to gives you fresh eyes about where you live and the freedoms that you have and the privileges that you have when you're sharing that with somebody who hasn't experienced that, hasn't grown up with it. [Potential Host Family, 2]

I think there's very different motives for people to host. There's one, if you have your own kids, you want them to get exposure to different culture(s), different language(s) … so you would take on an exchange student so your kid learns. There's people that host whose kids are already out of the house.... So, for them it was more about really sharing the American culture and showing the exchange student the American way of life and also a way for them to bring another culture home and learning from the exchange student as well. [Potential Host Family, 5]

This interest in bringing an international perspective was also true of host schools. According to host school administrators, international students contribute diverse perspectives in classroom discussions, enriching the overall academic experience for all students,. This is true for schools in more diverse communities as well as those with immigrant communities, as the presence of international students creates a more inclusive and globally minded environment.

"We want to expand the perspectives that are in the classroom as much as we can. There's no way that that cannot *happen if you bring [exchange] students in." [Current Host School,4]*

"Global diversity is different than diversity within our own race and our own nation. There's certain experiences those kids [exchange students] have that are vastly different from Americans [that may be from the same race or ethnicity]. And I think that that is worth a lot if schools take advantage of that and have those kids share their experiences all year within their classes. And obviously those foreign exchange students are here in America for that same reason… to have that exchange of experiences. And that exchange of experiences is hard to measure, but it is something that I think is vital for our objective of teaching our kids more global perspectives." [Current Host School, 2]

Serving as an Ambassador of American Culture

Similarly, families shared that hosting international students provided a chance to share their own points of pride. Several suggested that the stereotypes about the United States among foreign publics are negative and narrow. Some even said it refreshed their perspective on how fortunate they are to be Americans. They relished the opportunity to share American culture and the unique culture of their community and family in a true, two-way cultural exchange.

"Especially after politically some of the rhetoric that has been bandied around the world about Americans, I was looking forward to an opportunity to show what regular Americans were like because I believe that, on the whole, people around the world have much the same motivations and people, when you get to know them personally, are generally kind and well meaning." [Current Host Family,1]

"You are an ambassador for a certain type of community, or a certain type of lifestyle that you live, or a certain type of ideology, or a certain type of value. So, it's really beneficial to do it because you're doing this humanitarian philanthropic work, this small idea of this partnership where you're exchanging cultures and ideas and you're also being able to plant a seed in each other's brain about where the other person may come from." [Potential Host Families, 6]

"You get to watch another person's view of the world that you live in change. Also, it teaches you a lot about what it might mean to be an American, to be living in this world where you have access to a lot of more items or desires or materials. I feel like you start to exchange so much in that way. You're not just exchanging a student, you're really exchanging all of these larger concepts." [Potential Host Families, 6]

Exchange students help compare and contrast American school culture to those of their home schools as well. In some cases, American educators leverage that knowledge to change some of their own practices and help international students navigate the differences in the school environments.

"I think our staff's pretty good at taking advantage of having foreign exchange students in classes and having them [share] their experiences from their country's perspective and adding that into dialogue in the classroom. And that can be a huge benefit." [Current Host School, 2]

"We have a South Korean [student] right now and learning how strict the different education systems are, how long they go to school - they go on Saturdays. They don't question the teachers. As staff, we have to learn all [these] cultural differences. So, if [students are] not getting it right away, how do we bridge that? How do we teach these kids that 'yes, we want you to ask questions'? We are approachable. So, I think just opening up our eyes and our minds to [the fact that] there are different ways to do things. There's no wrong way. There's just a different way to do things, and that's what we learned." [Current Host School,1]

Increased Cultural Competency

Part of the value of the culture-sharing and worldliness that all of the participants gain during an international exchange is the increased cultural competency. Host families, schools, and exchange students experience another person's culture first-hand during exchanges and have their own expectations and stereotypes challenged. Having conversations around the differences in family life or the education system in their home country opens minds to viewing the world through a different lens and breaks down preconceived notions or stereotypes. Even outside of the school and immediate family, the presence of international exchange students can reshape the perspectives of the community. One host family shared how hosting a YES student in a largely White Christian small town has exposed community members first-hand to someone from the Muslim religion and has altered their historic prejudices. Now the community is much more open to hosting students from religions and backgrounds different from their own.

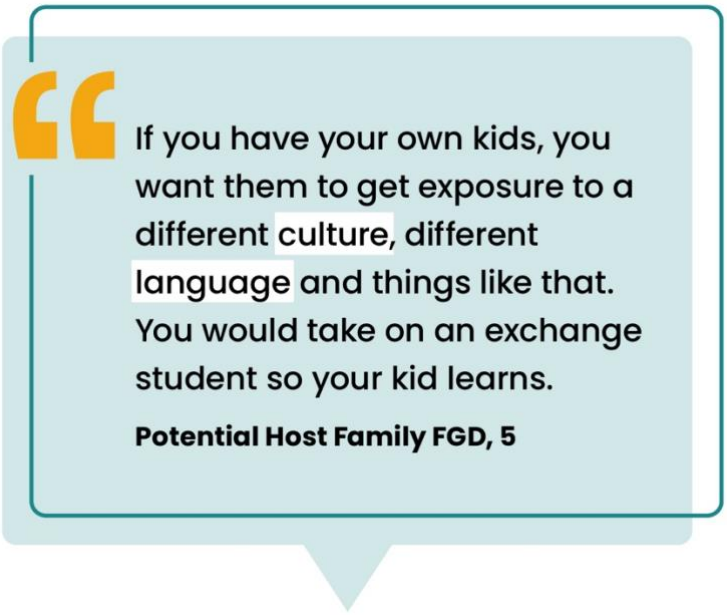
"There's a quote about travel being deadly to prejudice. In an area where I'm from [that is] very conservative, it's important that we expose kids to what the world is like. I always tell our [school] board that not only are we providing the value and the experience to students that are coming here, but our students are exposed to those other cultures by hosting those foreign exchange students. And then for our individual families that are hosting, we have families that have hosted that would have never been exposed to other cultures and have given their kids the opportunity." [Current Host School, 3]

Host school representatives also shared how exposure to different cultures and perspectives can help local students prepare to interact with others beyond high school. One administrator who worked for a school in a small, rural, homogenous community shared that students from the area often go on to college or the workforce in outside communities with greater diversity. Being exposed to diversity from a young age can help them integrate and work effectively with others in the future.

"We're in a world where we're really interconnected and it's so important to realize that we are much more alike than we are different and to learn to be curious and not judgmental. I think it can only benefit because they're [local students] going to go to college or the workforce, and there's going to be different nationalities there. So, I think it's [hosting international exchange student] the only smart thing to do and they [exchange students] just bring so much to us." [Current Host School,1]

Benefits to Host Siblings and Family Bonding

Many current and potential host families view hosting an exchange student as an opportunity to expose their own children to different cultures and languages, encourage them to interact and get along with people who may be different from them, and prime them to consider future international educational and career pathways.



"It was an experience for our children as well. You know the idea of meeting…somebody from a foreign culture, and I think that's one of those things that [is] sort of immeasurable, immeasurable as far as the impact that [exchanges] has with respect to relating to people of different cultures." [Current Host Family, 4]

"Our family has always just really been interested in other countries and other cultures and that sort of thing. I wouldn't trade it for the world… For our kids, making new friends is amazing." [Current Host Family, 3]

Host families shared that they and their families gained certain soft skills and greater empathy for people from backgrounds different than their own. Several discussed how they learned how to communicate more clearly not only with their host students but also with one another. One host family shared how their biological children strengthened their relationships with one another and gained problem-solving skills through hosting exchange students. Prior to hosting, they competed and fought with one another, but a third child diffused tensions, helping the children move on from interpersonal conflict and find ways to resolve situations. Now as adults, the biological children are very close. Even for those that have not previously hosted, there is an expectation that they and their family would experience growth in terms of cross-cultural skills, communication, and empathy.

"Our two kids had a hard time getting along in their childhoods. Now they're very close. [Hosting exchange students] changed the chemistry in a really positive way." [Current Host family, 4]

"There were three [kids], and so they [learned] problem-solving. The three of them went to visit Grandma in Iowa and they missed their connection. They ended up on a plane in Texas. But the three of them had to figure out how to spend their time in the airport, what they were going to do, and it wasn't the two of them arguing. It was the three of them problem-solving.You can teach your kids a lot of the content related things, but you can't always teach them social interaction. That is something that they have to experience, and this gave them that opportunity." [Current Host Family, 4]

"My older daughter had to share [her room] with [exchange student] for the first half of the year... And so, for my older daughter, when she got to college, and she was in a quad room, one room, four girls, she knew how to handle it." [Current Host Family, 5]

"I'd probably want to have that sense of fulfillment at the end of the program that I was able to mentor or help a student become the person they wanted to be. [Potential Host Family, 4]

Friendships and Connections

Many current host families shared that one of the reasons they initially decided to host an exchange student was for the opportunity to develop long-lasting relationships. Likewise, potential host families expressed a desire to develop longer term relationships with the students they might host. Alumni also desired strong bonds with host families and the opportunity to feel like an integrated member of the family. Family and school trips, activities, social clubs, and intentional time at home deepen these connections. IPs and LCs utilize this motivation to try to make the most appropriate match between families and students.

"When I was in college, I took a semester in London, and I lived with a family in southern England. It's a long time ago and I'm still in touch with them. They send me Christmas cards and birthday cards twice a year. But the fact that they still think of me and take the time and effort to hand write cards is amazing, and I reply. I think it's an interesting experience… to develop a long-term friendship." [Potential Host Family, 6]

"I shared with [friends] the thank you notes that the girls [our exchange students] had written to me. [One said] 'I have to admit I was nervous when I came because I didn't know if you would like me, let alone love me. I love you and that was the best week of my life.' And so those are the kind of intangible things that you can't put a price on. But that's why we're sold. That's why you'll keep doing it [hosting], and it matters." [Current Host Family, 1]

Community Service

Host families and LCs shared that volunteerism and community service are key motivating factors for hosting. For families with members who have done an exchange program in the past, some feel a desire to give back and provide a student with a positive exchange experience like they had. Others express feeling privileged, be it financially or socially, and have a desire to share what they have with others, particularly creating new opportunities for ECA students from less affluent backgrounds. Many LCs will highlight the merit-based nature of ECA-sponsored programs when pitching potential hosts.

"One big motivator is people that feel like they want to give back. Like I hear that [hosts] had a great life and they feel like the student is in need or it's like somehow paying it forward or giving back, doing their bit for the world. They see it as something that they can do as a service." [Local Coordinator, 5]

"*I was a teacher, I love teaching, so why not open my home to someone so that they can experience something new? There's so much going on in this world, and children, wherever they go, they just need that opening. And sometimes putting someone in a different atmosphere will give them a better chance at life, because now they're building the experience. When you have more experience, it's going to open more opportunities. When you don't have the experience, it's going to block you in." [Potential Host Family, 2]*

Relationships with and Loyalty to Exchange Agencies

Personal connection with and trust in LCs and IPs can also prompt participation and keep host families and schools continuously engaged.

Several current host families interviewed shared how their LC made the process easy for them, noting that they knew they could speak to someone quickly if they had questions. IPs and LCs

said proactive communication fuels relationships and long-term retention. The success of most LCs is grounded in the training and support they get from their national IP contacts: some IPs reported having monthly touchpoints with LCs.

“We pride ourselves on our support team, that we have really strong and intricate support that we give our families, and our students, and our Local Coordinators. We have a designated support team. I do monthly live trainings with the Local Coordinators. We have messaging that goes out to our Local Coordinators on our national level every single month. We really want to have people feel like they have multiple people to turn to if they need additional support. Whether it's students, families, or our Local Coordinators, we want to be right there in the thick of it with them." [ECA Implementing Partner, 7]

"We work directly with the schools to make sure they're comfortable with our program, make sure they're comfortable with our people, make sure they know our Local Coordinators, make sure that they feel that they can trust the person that is communicating with them. And I think that that trust is paramount for both the host families and for the schools. And I think that's why we have little success [recruiting] in the national level, but almost all of our success is on the local level because they have somebody there in their community that they've met, and they trust. And that takes away some of the fear of bringing an exchange student either into their school or into their home." [ECA Implementing Partner, 6]

“The student we hosted in the fall of [year], the night she arrived we were rushing her to the hospital by ambulance and she ended up spending two weeks at the [hospital]. So that was a huge ordeal. And you can imagine her family was freaking out. And through even such an experience, [the IP] was just a stellar organization. Just absolutely wonderful to work with. Not to mention well prepared for events like this through all the structure that they have. I just couldn't speak highly enough of the organization and trying to convey that to others that this is not a burden on you.” [Current Host Family, 2]

“We had [LC], who was excellent. And every month or so, she would call in. But then she also had meetings [with the students]. So that kind of preparation, it's like you can prepare them to come to the U.S., but it's also stages, right? So, she would prepare them for the next phase of them being here. The newness wears off and you're going to start feeling some homesickness and how do you deal with that? So that was really kept up and in all cases they had a post experience. You know, like training for cultural reentry, and they all did that. So, all along the way this was the case all along the way.” [Current Host Family, 4]

“If you ever need anything, they're also available by cell phone 24/7. We didn't feel like we were alone out in the woods by ourselves, and we'd have to figure it out.” [Current Host Family, 1]

This research finds that successful exchange experiences largely hinge on having a communicative, knowledgeable, and empathetic LC. LCs make matches between potential host families and students, ensure students get enrolled in schools, and act as logistical and emotional support for students and families. When LCs are able to make strong matches between families and students, students and families both feel supported. On the other hand, poor matches or poor support from LCs can make the hosting experience difficult for students and families,which can discourage families from continuing to host in the future. Consistent training, support, and check-ins with LCs by IPs and ECA can help ensure that LCs are equipped to conduct outreach, recruitment, and placement, as well as offer general support to students and families during the academic exchange year and beyond. One LC even shared a striking example of the power of their strong relationships with families in the community. They reported that, in the year that exchanges began again after COVID, they did not have to conduct any outreach to get host families, as the families proactively called and offered to host. While an extreme example, it may help to demonstrate how LCs are critical resources for making student placements.

“Literally I made zero calls that year. Everybody called me and said they wanted back in, and it was because of the relationship and they would only work with me. It is the relationship that's the most important part.” [Local Coordinator, 5]

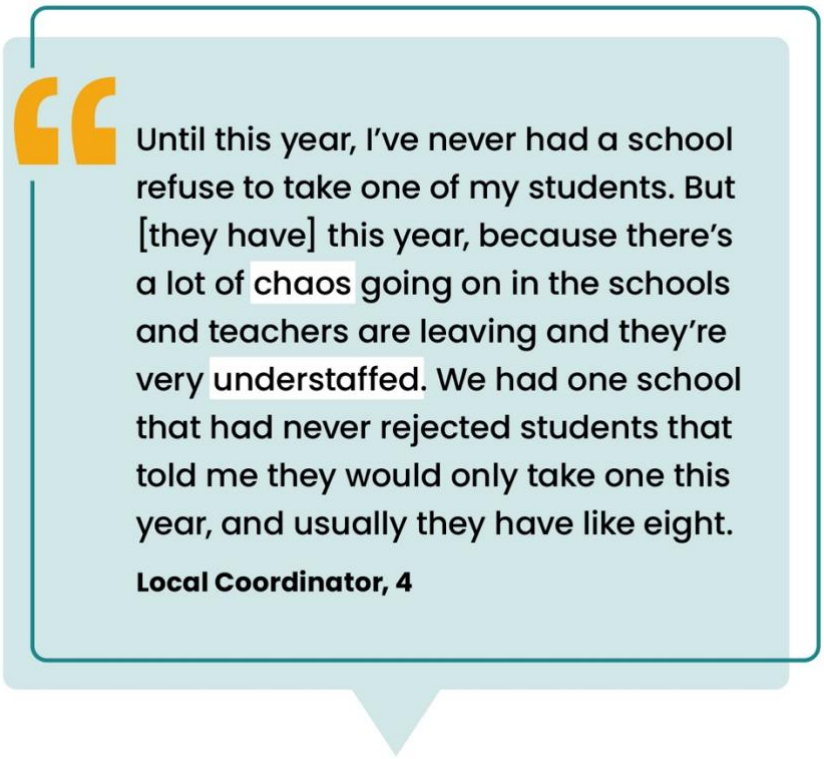
“I'm local, you know. This is where the student will be. There have been some coordinators that have placed here that do live in Missouri, but they might be like a two-hour drive away and so a lot of families and schools don't like that. And that's actually how I got one of my host families. They reached out to me about switching because they knew that I was here… It makes them feel like they're not alone in this journey. Like if they were to have an emergency or an issue with the student, they would have somebody that could immediately come to their house and help with that.” [Local Coordinator, 7]

“I think a Local Coordinator should be close to the student. Be aware of what (the) student does during their exchange here. My Local Coordinator would always check in.” [Alumni, 4]

“Being a coordinator is a part-time job, but my coordinator, just made it like it was her main job, so she was always active, even though sometimes maybe she had her family. But she was always in contact with me online, or she used to send me some plans beforehand, what was she planning to do. So, I guess they need to look for a motivated person who wants others [to have a] great experience.” [Alumni, 3]

"My coordinator who eventually became my host mother, she was very caring, but also she wasn't a soft person. She would talk to you about things, and she would ask you how you were doing and you could hear in her voice that she wants to hear what's happening, she's not asking this out of formality. And she would also ask, 'Do you think there is any problem in there or there?' And she was very much attentive to what you were saying....So when things got intense , she wasn't trying to avoid conflict very actively, she wasn't trying to downplay the situation. So, I was the one who was not sure of changing the host family and thinking that I still had to do things on my own and work things out. She made the executive decision for me to switch the family, so she was the one who knew that in this situation [the] problem is with the host family, and we need to change that." [Alumni, 6]

What barriers and challenges exist for host families and schools?



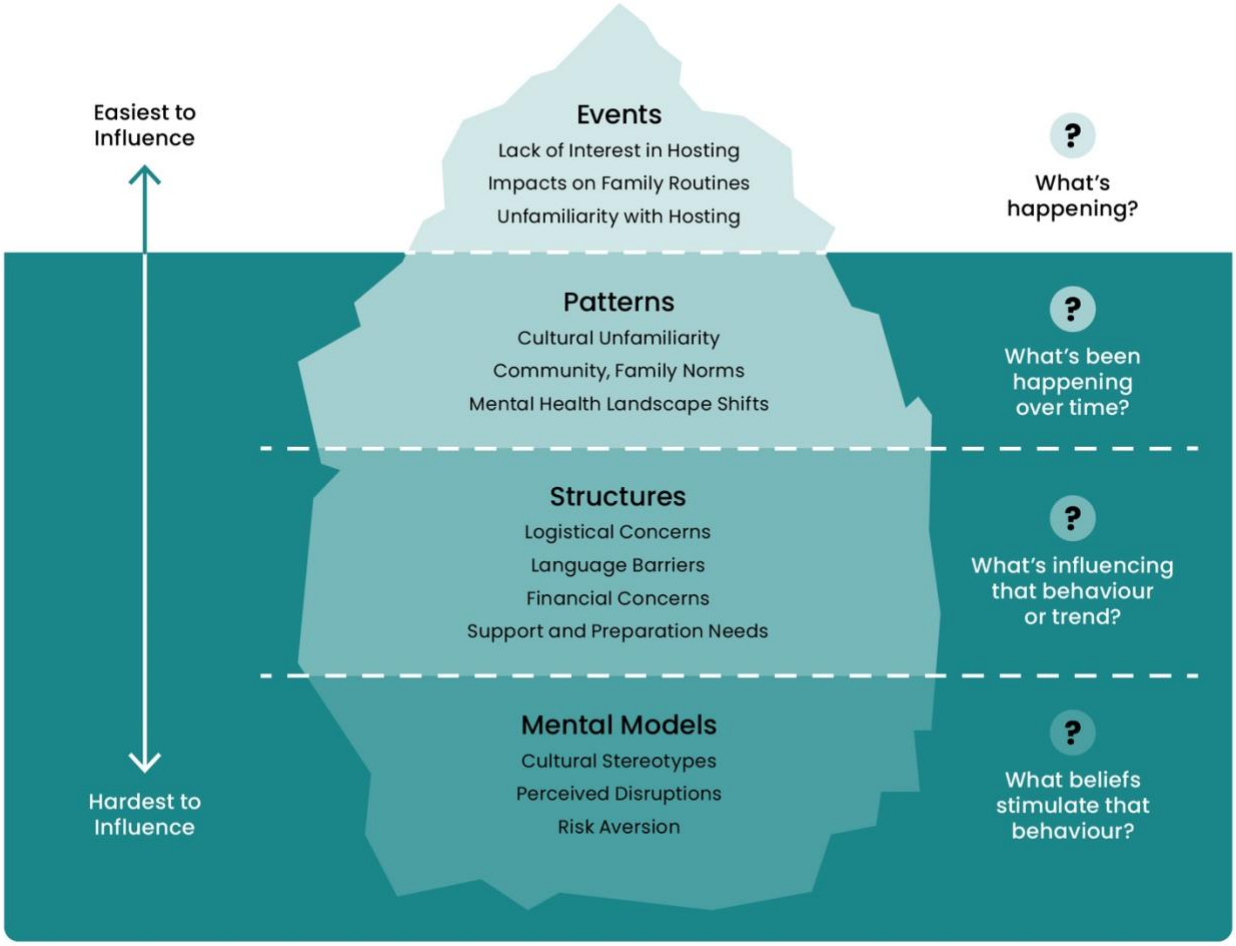
Despite the diverse and well-recognized reasons to host, the way that youth exchange programs are currently structured creates several layers of logistical and bureaucratic challenges that make achieving a placement increasingly difficult. Program stakeholders report that there has been an overall decrease in enthusiasm and willingness to host international students in the post-COVID era, particularly as mental health challenges both domestically and among international exchange students have increased. Moreover, host schools have limited resources which often limits their capacity to host exchange students. The combination of these factors has made placing students with host families and schools in recent years more difficult.

These challenges speak to the structural issues that lie at the heart of recent placement struggles. While marketing and messaging to recruit more families is one component of overcoming these challenges, some can only be overcome if ECA's processes and timelines adapt to the broader educational systems they rely on.

IPs and LCs shared that in the post-COVID era, they have faced additional challenges in placing students in host schools; for the first time in their history as exchange coordinators, many have failed to place exchange students at all. As the addition of exchange participants to their student body increases the burden on schools that are already under resourced, schools have allocated fewer spots to international students than in previous years.

"Especially since COVID, schools have been a really big issue. And I think that that's been felt across the industry. They [schools] realized that they don't need to have exchange students in their schools. So, they've tightened how many spots they're willing to allocate to organizations. [Before, they] might have taken 10 kids a year. [Now] they're only willing to take half the amount that they used to." [ECA Implementing Partner, 7]

The Iceberg Model: More than Meets the Eye to Hosting Exchange Students



Logistical and Bureaucratic Challenges to Placement

For a student to be successfully placed in preparation for their academic exchange year, three core factors must align:

1. There must be a LC nearby that has been trained and prepared to find host families and schools, and that can support students, families, and schools during the exchange year.[1]
2. There must be a host family willing to take an exchange student who successfully passes the background check and other onboarding requirements.[2]
3. Finally, there must be a school within the district of the host family that is willing to enroll the exchange student and has slots available for enrollment at the time of the placement.

Each part of the equation can be impacted by multiple factors that complicate or lead to the failure of a placement. For instance, a host family may show interest in hosting because of national recruitment campaigns, but they may not live in an area where an IP has a LC located to support them. In other instances, there may be a host family approved to host but their local school has filled their available spots for exchange students and cannot accommodate additional students.

"We're in a situation where there's a gap between the number of placements our coordinators are finding or there's a mismatch. They'll find a family with no school. Then, there's a school that might be open, but there's no family… Or [a potential host family] might be an area where we don't have [a Local Coordinator] yet, so we get into

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[1] US Department of State J-1 Program Regulations 22 CFR 62.25 Secondary school student regulation five states: Make no exchange student placement beyond 120 miles of the home of the local coordinator authorized to act on the sponsor's behalf in both routine and emergency matters arising from that exchange student's participation in the Exchange Visitor Program;

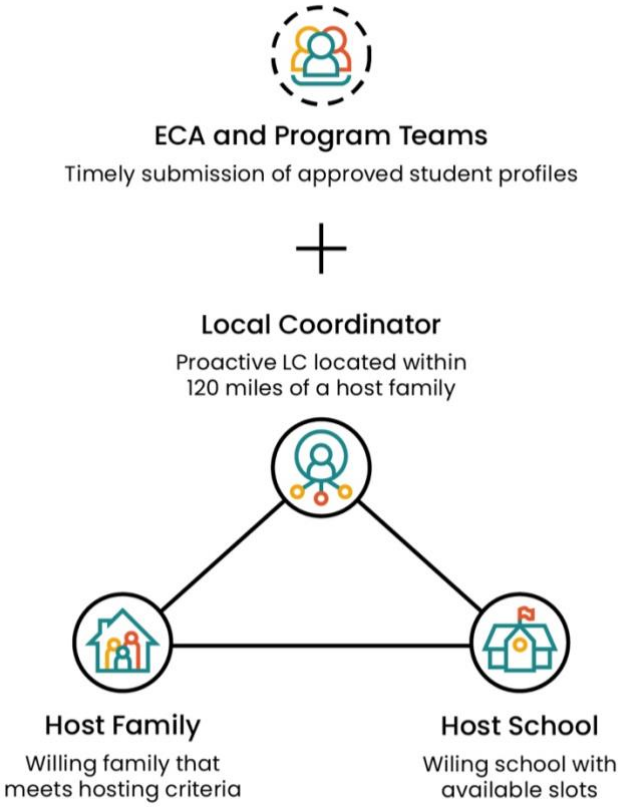
[2] US Department of State J-1 Program Regulations 22 CFR 62.25 Secondary school student regulations regarding host family vetting include:
(3) Have been vetted annually through a criminal background check (which must include a search of the Department of Justice's National Sex Offender Public Registry. In addition, Verify that each member of the host family household 18 years of age and older, as well as any new adult member added to the household, or any member of the host family household who will turn eighteen years of age during the exchange student's stay in that household, has undergone a criminal background check (which must include a search of the Department of Justice's National Sex Offender Public Registry);
(8) Maintain a record of all documentation on a student's exchange program, including but not limited to application forms, background checks, evaluations, and interviews, for all selected host families for a period of three years following program completion; and
(9) Ensure that a potential single adult host parent without a child in the home undergoes a secondary level review by an organizational representative other than the individual who recruited and selected the applicant. Such secondary review should include demonstrated evidence of the individual's friends or family who can provide an additional support network for the exchange student and evidence of the individual's ties to his/her community. Both the exchange student and his or her natural parents must agree in writing in advance of the student's placement with a single adult host parent without a child in the home.

those types of situations because we're trying to expand our geographies. There's a gap between placements that are being found and placements that we need." [ECA Implementing Partner, 5]

Earlier Enrollment Deadlines

IPs and LCs reported that many schools have begun pushing their enrollment deadlines up earlier each school year. Some cited enrollment deadlines for the academic year closing as early as February 28th – more than half a year before the school year begins. IPs and LCs often argued that early enrollment deadlines are one of the biggest barriers to placing students from those programs, especially because they are competing with other exchange programs for a limited number of slots. Some parochial schools have later enrollment deadlines, but IPs rarely have room in their budgets for even highly discounted tuition fees.

The Interlinked Components of Successful Placements



"One school in particular that I have, their application date is February 1. So, on January 31st at 11:59 me and my [regional director], we have everything queued up and ready and at midnight we hit send. And this year, we were able to get one spot. But by morning they already had like eight on the wait list. I was number three of five and I hit at 12 o'clock midnight." [Local Coordinator, 6]

"We have dug in with them a couple times because we got so frustrated in the past couple of years and as best I understand, and we can see that the entire cycle is earlier for YES. The deadline for us to apply, the notification timeline to us as IPs and then seemingly also the selection and notification process for the kids is also all of those things seem to be shifted by several months or more earlier for the YES program than the FLEX program, which is a piece of the puzzle, it's certainly not the only part of the puzzle, but it's a piece that's important." [ECA Implementing Partner, 6]

“So even if it's a grant student, and we can make the case that this is really beneficial to world peace, the school says sorry we're just not accepting any more students at that stage.” [ECA Implementing Partner, 8]

IPs and LCs noted that there is a distinction between larger (generally more urban or suburban) school districts and smaller (generally more rural) school districts. Larger school districts often experience more issues with overcrowding and are more likely to already have a more diverse population. On the other hand, smaller and more rural schools are less likely to have so many restrictions and are more motivated to host exchange students to diversify their student population.

“I feel like [the larger metro schools have] been a lot harder to do because they want you to work through the district level rather than per high school. The more small rural schools are typically a little more flexible just because they don't have the demand usually to accept high school exchange students.... In suburbs and in metropolitan areas we get a lot of schools that come back and say that their schools are already over capacity. There's a waiting list even at charter schools. Sometimes they tell us that they have the demands too high for their own population, so they can't squeeze a kid in who doesn't even live where they are taking kids from." [ECA Implementing Partner, 7]

“Most of my smaller schools are very flexible. My medium-sized schools, they're more flexible, but they still limit us to how many we can have and then our big high schools are very strict on how many they'll take, who they'll take, and some of them want to have a virtual interview with the student.” [Local Coordinator, 7]

English language test requirements can also pose delays that compete with school enrollment deadlines, particularly if a student needs to improve their initial score.

“Sometimes the first round of testing doesn't catch it [language proficiency] or catches it at very low and then they have to retest the students. And only after the retesting do they decide that student has to do the mandatory language program.” [ECA Implementing Partner, 8]

The delays can cascade, leading to a late-stage crunch that creates pressure for doubling up ECA students in single host families. That said, a double placement requires signatures from both students’ natural parents, which can still take weeks to coordinate.

“More often than not, double placements are pushed really hard at the end of placement season because there are simply no other host families who are willing to take on a student as an individual. End of story.” [ECA Implementing Partner, 8]

Uncertainty around Expectations and Troubleshooting

Potential host families and schools voiced concerns about getting advice and troubleshooting issues. Many expressed fears of the unknown such as: what to do in case of an emergency, how to balance enforcing house rules with making students feel comfortable at home, and how much teachers will need to adapt coursework for students.Assurance of consistent, reliable support is necessary to overcome their jitters and take the next step to apply to be host families or schools.

"I want to make sure that I know that regulations that are in place from the company standpoint, and then what I have to have in place at my house, if anything, for the foreign exchange student. Do I have to register them in a certain school? Just the rules and regulations based on what the company is requesting me to do. Maybe even interview the child who is potentially going to be coming over to live with me prior, just to make sure that they are a good fit. Interview the family, make sure that they are okay with the situation that they're going into, so that the student isn't just blindsided whenever they come over to my house, they know what to expect." [Potential Host Family, 3]

"I think there's rules for the exchange students, but sometimes they're not being followed. Who's going to take care of [it] if there's issues, if the exchange student is breaking the law or any rules, who's going to deal with this? And I would expect the organization to deal with that." [Potential Host Family, 5]

This concern contrasts with the positive hands-on LCs, described above. When LCs are not available to be proactive sources of information and allies, potential hosts are less likely to make the effort and take the risk to become actual hosts.

Potential host families expressed that they have little understanding of what their role would be in hosting exchange students. Some share that they have looked up hosting online but there is confusing and contradictory information. Many potential host families seek to understand how much they would be supported if issues arose with their host student. They also want to know if they will have economic assistance or if they will have additional responsibilities in terms of paperwork,medical care, and any other costs or obligations. They want to know exactly what will be expected of them and how they will be supported if things go badly.

"If there was a problem, I guess I would go to the agency and ask, there's a problem, but what do I do? How do I deal with it?" [Potential Host Family, 1]

"I think as far as support, I would want to be able to call someone right away if I have a question. So maybe a 1-800 number, a call center, somebody who knows this child or person that's in my house. I'd be like, they want to know if they can get their nose

pierced. Is that allowed? Am I allowed to make that decision for them? Something like that." [Potential Host Family, 3]

"Is their [student] insurance going to really cover them medically in the United States? Making sure, how do you guarantee that?" [Potential Host Family, 3]

Challenges related to unclear expectations can also begin with students and impact host family experiences. IPs, LCs, and a few host family members spoke about how students often come to the United States with visions of what the country will look like (i.e., New York City or Los Angeles). They are also connected with one another in country cohorts via social media and can see one another's exchange experiences which may seem more glamorous or active. Program practitioners and host families said that when students compare their own expectations or their fellow students' experiences with their own, they can sometimes become resentful of their situation. While students often settle in after several weeks, this can initially cause strain between the student and the host family. Some LCs and host families suggested that more clear preparation for students during orientation could help reduce these issues. One even suggested utilizing testimonials of students that had been placed in smaller or more rural areas; by sharing the positive outcomes they had experienced, incoming students could gain insights from their peers.

"My coordinators, they prepared us for anything. They told us, the students, 'Look, you might live on a farm or in a city. You might be expected to do chores for two hours a day or none at all. You are in this program. You must expect everything." [Alumni, 1]

"I think just trying to give every incoming student an appreciation or baseline knowledge of like every state, because I feel like there's a kind of disproportionately large amount of exchange students that they want to go to California and then they are placed in Indiana, and they just resent their family and everybody in Indiana because of it... And I think kind of putting some of those expectations...would be a little bit helpful." [Current Host Family, 4]

"Even within my own cluster, there (are) real jealousy problems because we have a couple of our host families who are more well off. And so, they do a lot of traveling and their student gets to go do a lot of things. Then some of our other host families just don't have those opportunities. So even just within our own cluster that has created jealousy. And questions are, 'well, how come this student got placed with the Jones family and I got placed with the Smith family?'" [Local Coordinator, 7]

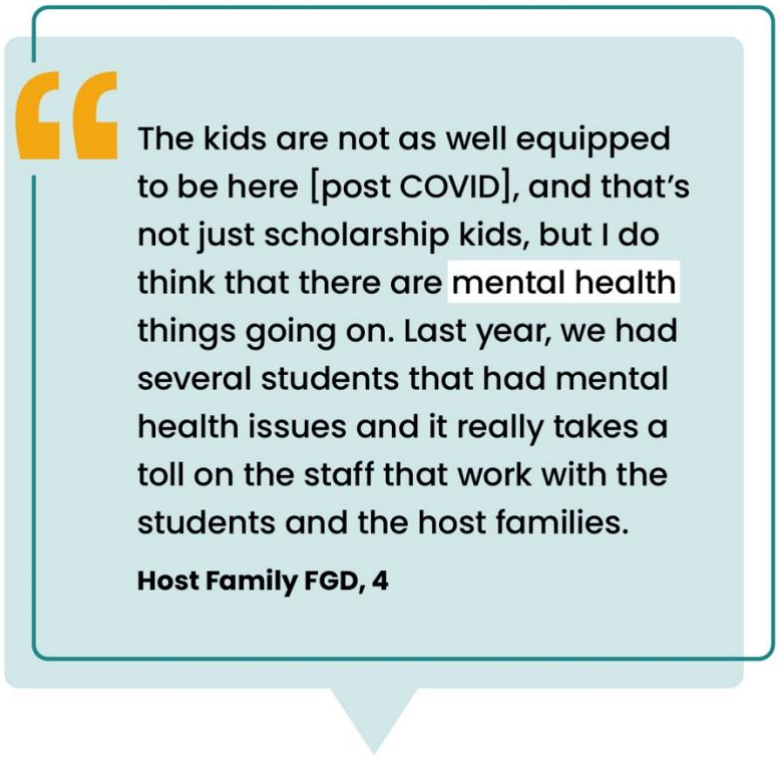
Mental Health Challenges and Isolation

Challenges related to mental health for both students and families have led to increased difficulties in securing American host families and schools for ECA programs in recent years.

Stakeholders mentioned that the continuing effects of the social isolation caused by the COVID pandemic were both a barrier to hosting and a challenge for adjustment during hosting experiences.

"There's been a lot more struggles with socializing with people based on COVID. I think that after COVID, people just really don't want to do things. They just feel like really burnt out. Like just most people, it's true for your average host family, your average exchange student. And I feel like people aren't wanting to host, people aren't wanting to do this, or do that. I think it's just like a general thing. COVID killed a lot of enthusiasm." [Current Host Family, 3]

"You know, kids being isolated, kids retreating into their devices and perhaps not having some of those really healthy outlets that we want students to have. COVID may be gone, but those practices remain. We at the school operate as a conduit to get the help that they need outside of the school, but I do think there's been an increase in the need and even in the younger years." [Host school, 4]



The interviews across stakeholders revealed that mental health challenges pose difficulty both to recruitment and continued host family engagement, as well as successful engagement on the part of the exchange students. IPs and LCs explained that since COVID, they have heard more from host families that they do not want to take in an exchange student because they are concerned about their own children's mental wellbeing. Likewise, IPs, LCs, and host school administrators have noticed an uptick in exchange student struggles with mental health during their exchange which negatively impacts their experiences both at home and at school. Concerns about how to manage student mental health were also recurrent themes in

focus groups with potential host families. Many noted the increase in mental health issues within the United States in recent years and worried that an exchange student may struggle with those same problems during their exchange. Alumni corroborated this and shared that they experienced heightened anxiety and mental load burdens, especially at the beginning of the exchange experience, because of the difficulties of integrating into a different culture, speaking their non-native language regularly, and not having their typical support system available to them.

"There's something going on with young people now...We do see a larger percentage of issues with that on the YES and FLEX side. When we promote them as a merit scholarship student, it's important that they are that [demonstrate the expected qualities] because that's what this school is expecting and that does not mean they're perfect and that does not mean that they aren't going to have adjustment issues." [ECA Implementing Partner, 6]

"I would want to make sure if they had taken any type of medication, because there's a lot of mental health issues, and… you want to make sure they sustain their stability while they're here too." [Potential Host Families FDG, 2]

"There is much more for you to handle as an exchange student than, say, a native. You have more anxiety to deal with and just more problems in general." [Alumni, 1]

Lack of Awareness

The research among potential host families revealed a lack of awareness about hosting opportunities, even though they said they were interested. They did not have the information they needed to make an informed decision or know where to seek out that information. Without personal exposure to families who host international students, potential hosts are generally unaware of hosting opportunities and are unlikely to seek out such opportunities.

"I've seen international students in high school. I've seen them in college. I don't think I've ever had the opportunity to speak with someone about their experience. I mean, it's not something that you hear people talking about like, 'Hey, I took an international student in my home.' That's something that is new to me." [Potential Host Family, 2]

Despite IP and LC efforts to spread awareness via word of mouth and social media, families most reliably learn about the opportunity from direct connections with others who have hosted. Many felt that, if they had not had a personal connection to hosting, they likely would not have ever heard about the opportunity. Most potential host families reported that they had never received outreach to become a host or seen advertisements sharing about the opportunity.

“Our family hosted an exchange student in my childhood. And when I was in high school, I did a summer exchange program, and my exchange sister and I are still close. But [for this hosting experience] it was like a friend of a friend thing. You know [other host parent], right? I was teaching a class and she was talking about her friend that was looking for exchange hosts and I said, ‘we would like to do that someday’ and within a week, [the LC] was on the phone.” [Current Host Family, 4]

“We started hosting because I had a friend whose family had hosted throughout her childhood. Her parents were educators and college professors, and so they always had students in and out. And we were like, ‘Oh, this is kind of fun. So maybe we should consider it.’ And then my friend became a Local Coordinator and I think she maybe hosted one or two. And then we were like, ‘OK, we want to do this. We've seen this first hand.’ [Current Host Family, 5 and prior Local Coordinator]

Decreased Interest in Volunteerism

Both current host families as well as program implementers report that the realities of post-COVID life increase some of the challenges of hosting. Many speculate that volunteerism and a sense of connection to community and community service organizations decreased after COVID. Some people spent so much time inside during COVID that they now feel compelled to try activities, travel, and engage with others in different places rather than feeling tied to the home taking care of an exchange student. Others became more insular after spending time alone and do not want to bring others into their space. IPs also note that there have been significant reductions on the numbers of volunteer LCs they can call on to support hosting efforts. For those LCs that have remained involved, they may be less willing to contribute a great deal of time, raising the time commitment needed of paid staff.

"I feel like the desire to volunteer kind of died within COVID again because I feel like people were stuck at home and didn't have that in their life for a year and a half or two years. And during that time, many people found different hobbies and interests. And so then when we came out of it and we're like, ‘hey, our exchange programs are back on’:, their time was already filled with something else or their desire just kind of fell flat." [ECA Implementing Partner, 7]

“I think that after COVID, people just really don't want to do things. They just feel like really burnt out. Like most people, your average host family, your average exchange student. And I feel like people aren't wanting to host, people aren't wanting to do this, or do that. COVID killed a lot of enthusiasm. [Current Host Family, 4]

“Our estimation is that it will take some years to build our volunteer force back to its pre-pandemic levels. There are also societal factors at work that where our volunteers are

telling us, and where we're working on how can we best do the research that will give us accurate information, that's in itself not so easy. But, there does seem to be a bit of a shift in terms of where people or how much time people are willing to give as volunteers. [ECA Implementing Partner, 12]

Financial Burden

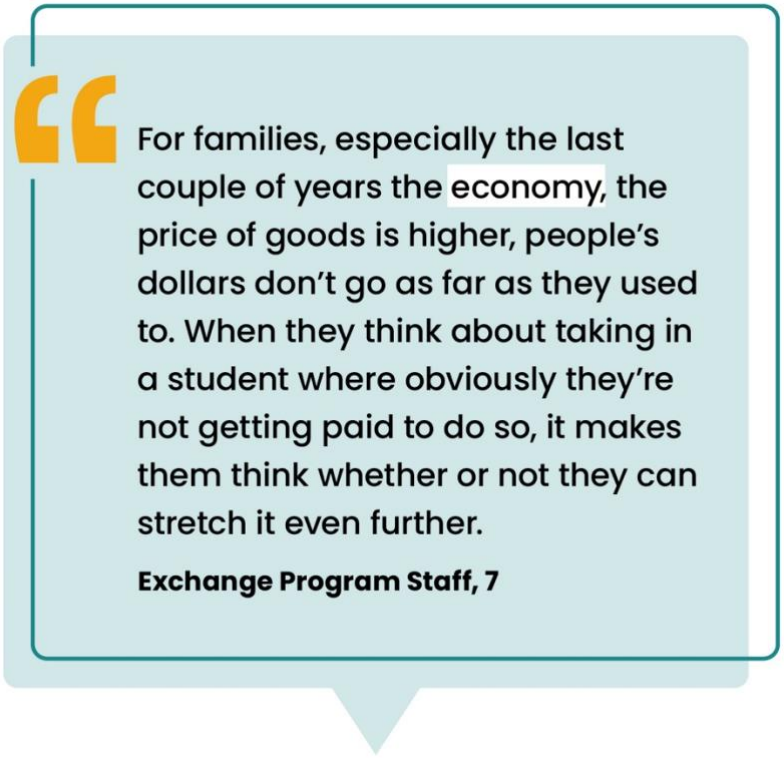
Hosting an international student comes with additional expenses, such as increased utility bills, food costs, and other fees such as school extracurriculars. Often, host families feel a sense of obligation to provide additional support to students, especially grant students with limited spending money apart from their monthly stipend. Many host families will support their host student financially by paying for sports and school activities, purchasing weather appropriate clothes, and other incidentals. Some potential host families are less able to pay for these extras and either stop hosting because of rising costs or decide they are unable to host because of the financial burden. One LC shared that some of the families most willing to host are those that do not meet the socioeconomic requirements set by the federal government.

"Some of our highest performing clusters that do want to still be active are in places where there is a significant cost of living shift over the last few years. And that's a place where our Local Coordinator has said houses in her neighborhood have tripled in value over the last three years. And so people that used to have a spare bedroom and the space and the resources to host a student are now looking at other family members moving back in, losing that set spare bedroom, thinking about gas for their Ford F-150 and like bringing a student to extracurriculars." [ECA Implementing Partner, 5]

"Not that the host family would be obligated to, but you do have a lot of situations of students that want to do activities... and it depends on what school you're at. The marching band fees here are $700 or $800, but at some schools there are $1500 or $2000." [Current Host Family, 4]

"COVID affected many things and the financial problems is the main reason why host families are saying no. Also, that is also important to check on the financial stability for them, I think, as the exchanger, because my friend, for example, had this experience when she was doing great with her host family, and host dad or mom lost their job in the middle of the year, and they could not support her anymore with food. She was struggling, and she used to visit me, and I'm sure that my own host family has done more than her host family in that period of time, so that is also important to check on host families during the year, not before and after." [Alumni, 3]

"The cost of everything has gone up. Everything is going up except the wages, basically. Food, that's number one. The only thing that went down recently was gas. I'll say that, but food. Maybe utilities. So, I mean that's something to consider how high your bills will be once another child comes into the household because you're basically going to be taking care of another child." [Potential Host Family, 5]



Several active and past host families also shared that perceived obligations to entertain exchange students can preclude potential host families from hosting. Though IPs and LCs often tell host families that there are no requirements to take students on additional excursions or activities, many families feel that they should spend money and time to do so to give the exchange students a fulfilling experience in the United States. Host families often argued that the program-funded excursions led by LCs fill an important gap for exchange students whose host families may not have the funds or the time to support extra activities.

"Once a month, the kids [exchange students] had an opportunity to do something, and sometimes it was like a tour of [the nearby city] or a pool party at somebody's [house]. I personally think that no child should go to school and then go home and go to school and go home and go to school and go home every day. They need to be able to join a club or go to the library or go swimming or something. And so those opportunities need to be made available and if there has to be money involved in it, then that needs to be taken care of." [Current Host Family, 5]

IPs' cost savings can trickle down to negative impacts for the students and host families. IPs provide students with a $200 monthly stipend to cover things like cellphone plans, clothes, and activities. Students having spending money of their own is "the exception, rather than the rule," for ECA grant students. With rising inflation in the United States, stipends are used up quickly. IPs provide host parents with a maximum annual incidentals fund of $300. Some IPs described a

process in which they require receipts for incidental reimbursement. Host parents often front the money to cover additional costs for students (such as for winter clothing or sports physicals) which strains them financially from the beginning. Additionally, as described above, many host families explained that the cost of these necessary items has risen and they often use their own personal funds to support students' experiences.

"We've asked them to kind of hold on to $100 of that [annual $300 allowance] because our new insurance policy through the Department of State requires students to pay a co-pay for visits to the doctor, which we didn't know before signing up for it. So our budget used to have $70,000 in it to pay for private insurance and that was taken out of the budget last year. And we signed up for [the DOS plan], which is free. We don't have to pay for it, but the students do have to pay that copay." [ECA Implementing Partner, 8]

"We heard from the field this year that they heard more than ever before that students are arriving with $0 in their pockets. They don't come with anything there...Students on the program do/can tend to come really needing that set up money and their monthly stipend of $200 to cover expenses." [ECA Implementing Partner, 8]

Competing Commitments and Privacy Concerns

Beyond the extra financial pressure of hosting an international student, families share that their busy lifestyles and schedules make it hard to find the time for hosting another child in their home. Families worry about the logistics of hosting, including transportation for the student, school arrangements, emergencies, dietary or religious requirements, and the overall adjustment of integrating a new person into their household.

"[I am concerned about] time management. How much time am I supposed to spend with the student or what if I have to work late hours? That's why I would want a student that's closer to my children's ages, that way if I'm not able to do it, then maybe my son can do it, maybe my daughter can do it." [Potential Host Family, 5]

"I think that families feel overextended, that they're already busy with their own kids. They just don't have time to take on another responsibility. I think mostly it's feeling that the amount of responsibility and the time it takes to put into having another person in your home." [Local Coordinator, 6]

However, host families interviewed shared that hosting was a matter of changing one's mindset about being busy. Several felt that, if you treat an exchange student like a member of the family, taking them to events and activities becomes the same as taking your biological children to their activities. Alumni shared that their host parents spending quality time with them was important. When host families and students share interests and hobbies it may be easier to find

mutually agreeable ways to connect. However, alumni stressed that the most important thing was that the hosts were willing and able to spend time with the exchange students in their home, in whatever form that took. Alumni interviewed for this study shared that the connections made with their host families were more important than any other relationships they developed in the United States, including those with their peers at schools.

"To me, your attitude about it is as much or more of an impediment [to hosting] than your age, or your financial capability or anything else." [Current Host Family, 5]

"We tried to treat them as just our children. I mean, they had the same responsibilities and the same benefits. You know, all the kids were treated the same." [Current Host Family, 4]

"We had similar humor. That's, I think, what really brings people together. Just we love the same TV shows, I love the same music...I was just hanging out with them more, I did not spend as much time with kids. And I think that that was kind of maybe something they did not expect, but overall enjoyed." [Alumni, 5]

Lack of Connections with Host Student Before Placement

LCs work to identify family motivations for wanting to host and match them with a student who has similar interests. For both families and schools, establishing a personal connection with the student beforehand helps to motivate them to want to host. A lack of information about the student can make families wary of hosting. Some program applications are not detailed enough to get a clear sense of the students' personalities; IPs and LCs described that a lack of initial personal information can inhibit the placement process.

"I think it's a get to know you session. It's not just with the student, but with the family, because you're taking responsibility of somebody else's kids. It's better to have that connection between the families. Treat each other like close relations. It makes a stronger bond. That way we know what the dislikes are, what the likes are, what the wants are, and things like that. And then a mediator or a counselor in between who can arrange these meetings, answer some questions and things like that. That way we both are connected, coordinated very well, and organized and things like that. And if there is a question, we know definitely who to reach out to and things like that." [Potential Host Family, 6]

"Would I be able to speak and see the student via Zoom? I think that might be very helpful to both parties, so it's not a total surprise. At least the parent or parents, children, they could speak with the student to just get a feel. I think that that would help. You know what they look like, you know what they sound like, instead of it just being on

paper where you've no clue. Maybe it's just not a good fit and it's best that you find out from the get-go so a better match can be made." [Potential Host Family, 6]

Alumni also expressed a desire to be able to connect with their host families with enough time prior to arriving in the United States. They shared that they experienced feelings of nervousness not knowing who they would be living with for almost a whole year. They wanted to be able to gain a sense of their host family members' expectations so that they could settle in more quickly upon arrival. Even in environments where video chatting is not feasible, some IPs said voice notes or introductory statements with a photo would help to create rapport before an exchange.

"I don't remember anyone else doing anything [to contact host families before] because I think the notification that I got, it just had the name of the host family, the parents, and it had their phone number in the U.S., [but not WhatsApp]. But nothing that would help me get in touch with them right away from Pakistan." [Alumni, 2]

Lack of Teachers, Funding, and School Resources

Rising inflation, reduced public school budgets, and high staff turnover restrict schools' abilities to accept and accommodate additional students. This also appears to be the case even in states where schools are paid per student by the state. School administrators note that budget cuts, overcrowding, high staff turnover, and other constraining factors have placed enough stress on schools that they feel they cannot accommodate additional, non-local students. Moreover, an emerging youth mental health crisis limits school administrators' and teachers' abilities to manage and accommodate student needs. As such, schools have reduced the number of spots available for international exchange students each school year, which forces LCs to take much more competitive and proactive strategies to get their students into the school as opposed to students from other programs.

"I mean it truly is a crisis. We need more teachers...with an increase in teacher turnover, inevitably that's going to impact the culture, the training. And when your culture and/or teacher training is lagging or suffering, it's really hard to get those [educational] gains. And oftentimes principals, school leaders, we're really driven...but we're drowning with unfilled positions. And then also just teachers in crisis, anything from their own mental health to impacts from COVID and impacts to their family." [Potential Host School Administrator, 4]

Lack of Training, Support for International Students

Some schools, particularly those in diverse districts or those that have hosted international exchange students for several years, are often well-equipped to handle any challenges of hosting exchange students. They provide orientations for students in which students learn

about club and sport offerings, guidance counselor support, and other school services (such as IT support, tutoring, and interpretation). One host school administrator shared how they can provide on-call interpretation services for students if necessary because they belong to such a diverse area with many foreign language speakers. However, for schools with fewer resources or those without deep institutional knowledge, they must rely heavily on LCs to provide guidance and support for everything from student educational needs (extra tutoring, interpretation services) to student well-being both inside and outside the school environment.

"We also had a coordinator at school who was responsible for us…But in my high school, it was really hard to find friends. So maybe this coordinator could have done something about it...Maybe to talk to teachers, for example, beforehand that you're going to have a new exchange student, because I was telling my teachers that I'm an exchange student, so if I make some mistakes in English, just know that it's not my first language." [Alumni, 3]

Even for schools with resources available, a lack of support or initiative from LCs and IPs can sour the hosting experience and make schools reconsider hosting in the future. Several host school administrators shared instances in which they had previously terminated relationships with certain exchange agencies because they had not received satisfactory support from LCs. These were always LCs unaffiliated with ECA exchange programs. However, one host school administrator shared how their district recently held a conversation to discuss the wellbeing of ECA exchange students placed by a particular LC in the area. They expressed concerns that students were having negative experiences with their host families and that the LC was not satisfactorily addressing these problems (including medical issues that were raised to the LC).

"We had a meeting about the lack of support. And when I say counselors, I'm talking all the district counselors. So all the three main comprehensive high schools in our district all experienced similar issues with this LC...Our whole entire district counseling staff discussed this. And they had some issues with the homes the students were placed in and then how those issues were resolved. It was most often issues with Muslim children and dietary and cultural requirements. Maybe they need a more proactive approach, some more training." [Current Host School, 2]

IPs and LCs interviewed also stressed that maintaining a trusting relationship with schools was a critical factor in making placements year after year. Most reported that they check in with students and families more frequently than regulations mandate to ensure their wellbeing. Several (especially those in districts with smaller schools) also shared that they checked in occasionally with school contacts or that they work in the local schools as teachers or staff and can check in proactively that way. Host school administrators also note that they work closely

with LCs; when the LCs do not offer strong support and action to solve issues, the host schools need to bear more of the burden themselves.

"[Me and my] coordinators here we try our best to be as efficient as possible when the schools contact you, that you're available and you check in with the schools and they know who you are and you thank [and support] them. It's a relationship." [Local Coordinator, 1]

"We had a student that was hosted through another organization that did not work out well in the very first couple of days of school and the student was having a meltdown. It was not a good family situation. The closest representative was in Pittsburgh, but she was away for the weekend and there was nobody that was able to come out and support that student from that organization. I ended up being involved and the student came and lived with my family for the weekend and a couple of days into the next week. I was disappointed in the support that that student received." [Current Host School, 3]

Resistance to Hosting Minority Students

IPs, LCs, host families, and potential host families all stressed the importance of creating a good match between families and schools and their exchange students. However, in some instances, practitioners and hosts mentioned religion and race as barriers. Often, IPs and LCs shared that Muslim students from the YES program are the hardest to place. Some potential host families noted concerns about hosting an international student who might be incongruent with their family's traditions and religious practices.

"When it comes to the FLEX and the YES programs, we tend to have students from non-traditional countries, non-traditional locations. This is not a very popular program we've found in the South. We have tried to make inroads in big states like Texas or Florida and they're not as receptive to having students from the YES and the FLEX program come either live with them or study at their schools." [ECA Implementing Partner, 8]

"We can't ignore religion and values like that. We live in such a diverse world and even such a diverse country that people's religious beliefs get to the very heart of things sometimes. I think that if you were trying to host someone that was somehow diametrically opposed to your religious or philosophical beliefs, that would be a really hard thing to overcome." [Potential Host Family, 4]

"We are Midwest. There is a church on every corner. So, the Muslim students are a little bit more difficult to place just because people are not educated about that faith in this area. They've never been exposed." [Local Coordinator, 7]

Because of these reservations, several IPs host cultural trainings with their LCs to educate them on some of these cultural distinctions as well as how to share knowledge about those cultures with potential families to build understanding and interest. Some IPs and LCs also take the strategy of pitching YES students to more experienced host families who have already navigated relationships with foreign students. Some LCs also mentioned that community exposure to Muslim exchange students in particular helps to break down barriers and increases support for hosting those students in the future. In practice, perceived cultural differences do not often appear to have meaningfully different impacts on how families and students get along. Instead, the kinds of cultural negotiations that families and students tend to have seem to be consistent regardless of where the students are from.

"I feel like it's familiar with German students, right? The [host families] can picture a German student in their head, whereas really educating people on the countries and the cultures that are YES and FLEX countries, there's more of a learning component to that when you're making kind of that sales pitch to the families and why they should consider a student." [ECA Implementing Partner, 7]

"When we started [hosting YES students in the community], that was when it [getting host families] was tougher. [But then] we welcomed [hosted] a boy from Palestine. He became really, really, really good friends with one of the other families at his school. He impressed them so much and getting to know him that the next year they hosted a boy from India that was Muslim, and they were open to it. So a lot of it is networking and building [relationships] as they're in the community and they're in their schools. It became easier. It's not as complicated now at all." [Local Coordinator, 1]

Limited Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility among Hosts

Because current outreach efforts rely so heavily on word of mouth, it is likely that the kinds of host families aware of and interested in hosting are limited to those within similar social circles as the current LC. None of the current host families or LCs interviewed for this study were people of color, and several mentioned that they have noticed a lack of diversity among host families.

Moreover, to ensure that students are placed within homes that can adequately provide for their care on their current income, there are legal regulations that require families to meet a certain financial status by not receiving government welfare or unemployment benefits. While these regulations are critical for student wellbeing, they may further restrict the types of families that can host international exchange students. These limitations on the kinds of individuals who host appear to be consistent across both ECA and non-ECA programs that support J-1 visa students.

"It does look like everyone [all host families] is a White Christian family in Iowa...I'm not saying that's like 100% of our families, but that is definitely the stereotype and we feel like definitely some people feel like they're not asked about exchange. Maybe they don't feel welcome to apply for the experience and some of that is down to our Local Coordinators networks themselves. Diversifying our pool of Local Coordinators from different backgrounds I think is really helpful in terms of the unique cohort , . They taccess unique kind of niche networks that we have reached out to." [ECA Implementing Partner, 5]

"The saddest part for me [is] the people that are most willing to host, that have the biggest hearts, are sometimes the ones that we can't approve just because of their financial situation or lack of space in their home. Whereas some of the families that have a lot more space and probably a lot more opportunities for a student tend to be a little bit more standoffish and not want to make that leap. We had a family that we couldn't approve because they receive unemployment benefits at this time. It's so hard to have those conversations with those families because we don't want them to feel like there's anything wrong with them. But there are certain boxes that we have to check to be able to place a student with them." [Local Coordinator, 7]

For host families and schools that have hosted both ECA-funded and private sector-funded exchange students, how did their experiences differ?

Host families and schools that have hosted both ECA-funded and private sector-funded exchange students report experiencing some differences in their hosting experiences. ECA-funded programs are perceived to be more mission-driven in terms of the goals and values conveyed to participants. Host families who participate in private exchange programs noted that students on private exchanges are more often able to pay for any additional personal expenses while ECA-sponsored students may not have as much flexibility and require more support from host families. They also noted that there is often a less complicated or time-consuming process to place participants of privately funded exchange participants.

Recognition of the Specialness of ECA Students

Across cohorts, participants shared that exchange students from ECA programs often stand out compared to students from other privately-funded programs because of their relatively high academic commitment and engagement in the community. Because students in the CBYX, FLEX, and YES programs must compete against thousands of other applicants for their funded spots, IPs, LCs, host families, and schools feel that those students are often more dedicated to their studies and are more motivated to make a connection with their host families work.

"I think our students, like our FLEX students that are here on scholarship, [they have more] teeth into it as far as why they're here. They seem to buy in, jump in with both feet to be an exchange student. They work very hard at their studies." [Current Host School, 1]

> Our experience has been that a lot of the grant kids and scholarship kids have just been a lot easier to be around, have been just kind of the more pleasant exchange students. A lot of the scholarship students seem to have more responsibility, [especially] some stuff they've had to do with community service.
>
> **Current Host Family, 3**

"It definitely is easier for the privately funded [students]. We tend to get the grant students late. I start placements in January. Our grant funded students don't tend to come to our system until April and May and at that point some of our host families might have already picked a kid. I think that [if] those kids [were in] the system earlier and available, it would be easier to place them." [Local Coordinator, 8]

"There's a lot of difference [between ECA-funded students and privately-funded students]. For one, [ECA-funded students] have a lot more to lose because they won this experience to be here. They understand the purpose more of being here... they're here for more of a cultural exchange. Their expectations are better prepared versus the other students who we have more problems with their expectations being skewed. The reason why is because [ECA-funded] students are not found by companies but by State Department people, people that are monitoring the grant. They have to apply, they have to go through interviews. So it's like either they go home or they make it work. These students, they put a lot of effort and time." [Local Coordinator, 4]

"I've talked to other people who have hosted [non-ECA exchange students] and have had negative experiences and I always tell them if you want to host really good students, go through [YES and FLEX], because this is a very competitive program. These students aren't paying to come here. They've earned their way. They don't have that sense of entitlement." [Current Host Family, 2]

Despite perceptions of how special ECA-funded students can be, it can take more work on the LCs' parts to find families interested in hosting ECA students, which dampens prospects for

matching up-front. LCs who are up for the challenge of finding hosts for grant students leverage the unique mission of ECA exchange programs to promote hosting of CBYX, FLEX, and YES students among potential hosts. For host families that regularly host, some say that they prefer hosting ECA students moving forward because of the merit-based nature of the program. Potential hosts often appreciate how motivated, engaged, and well-behaved many of the ECA program students are; they share that that openness and willingness to embrace the experience enriches the relationships for host families. However, some practitioners explain that expectations are higher for ECA exchange students, and that hosts have less tolerance for behavioral issues among ECA students.

"Nine times out of ten, our FLEX and YES students are the best students on (the) program...They are so driven to make a difference and to take part in this cultural exchange and to do well in school and all these other things and those are wonderful things. But at the end of the day the Local Coordinators are like, oh, they have to do these additional expense reports and these other questions that we get for our semi-annual [ECA] reports. Local Coordinators talk… So like it's kind of like, are you prepared to like take on this additional like work?" [ECA Implementing Partner, 8]

"*The YES program* and *the FLEX program [have] that reputation [that] it's really good and beneficial when it's a positive. But I have heard that when we have the rare case where a student is misbehaving...There's more of a tendency of the host families attributing it to the program* rather *than the individual and I've heard placement organizations say we have this Brazilian student and it's not like in the future the family says, well, I never* want a *Brazilian student* again *but they will make the connection to the program for our students. If they have a bad experience with the YES student, they'll kind of attribute that and say I don't mind hosting, but never a YES student again. Especially if they've not had previous good experiences...to kind of override that impression. But the reputation gets applied to the program where it doesn't seem to do that with private exchanges." [ECA Implementing Partner, 1]*

Decentralized Systems for ECA-funded Programs

The decentralized structure of the various partner organizations involved impedes efficient placements. In addition to ECA program teams, these actors include in-country partners (international organizations with a presence in sending countries that find and recruit students), U.S.-based placement organizations, subcontracted placement bodies, and LCs. Despite certain consistencies in J1 visa requirements (i.e. not paying host families, doing background checks, etc.), this decentralization can impact communication timelines and

recruitment of families and schools, which in turn leads to wide variation in the exchange experience for students, families, and schools, as well as missed hosting opportunities.[3]

In this current ECA placement system, any form of delay can have far-reaching consequences on placement success. IPs and LCs across the board shared that they have observed many schools pushing their enrollment deadlines earlier in the year, especially since COVID. This change is compounded by ECA program schedules: nearly all IPs and LCs shared that they receive applications for YES and FLEX students sometimes months later than they receive applications for students in their privately-funded programs, often after many schools have filled up or closed enrollment. When asked why this occurs, IPs speculated that delays were related to grant structures and the need to consolidate student profiles from disparate in-country partners.

"Specifically to the YES and FLEX program, we get our applications after many, many school districts have already closed their enrollment for exchange students and these types of policies and procedures are becoming more and more common... This is why we have been for years begging the YES and FLEX side to get us applications much, much quicker so that we can compete for those school spots because you know there are giant private programs out there like you know the EF [Tours]'s of the world who have lots of applications and are happy to fill those school spots now before we even get the application." [ECA Implementing Partner, 6]

[3] ECA contracts with over a dozen U.S.-based placement organizations who manage the placement process, ensure compliance with J1 visa regulations, conduct orientations with students, and manage any challenges that occur during the exchange year (including student emergencies and placement changes). IPs have LCs across the country who conduct outreach to host families and schools and directly monitor and support all active placements. Several IPs decentralize further by awarding subcontractors to do the placements, further stratifying and differentiating how placements are achieved. ECA also acts as the overseeing body in this process providing guidance on J1 visa requirements, student application processes and acceptance factors, and providing overall guidance and support to IPs. They are the intermediary between in-country partners embassies and U.S.-based placement organizations.

"In many cases, we've been told two or three years in a row that [ECA] have applications in hand with final selections made but are unable to allocate them to placement organizations because the grants have not been finalized yet. And so sometimes we are not getting applications until March. In some cases, it's just way too late. It has a huge impact on our ability to get kids placed...That whole grant cycle, I know it's a very bureaucratic and technical process, so I can't begin to tell you how to fix it, but it has to be a top priority to get that fixed and the entire cycle shifted forward if we are going to tackle this problem on the FLEX side." [ECA Implementing Partner, 6]

Some LCs also described how host families are sometimes unwilling to wait for the confirmation of a YES or FLEX student (even if that would be their preference) and end up not hosting or selecting another student who is already confirmed. IPs and LCs reported that they are unable to place students in certain areas if applications arrive after school enrollment deadlines. Some IPs said that they have begun to receive earlier applications, particularly for FLEX students, after discussions with ECA partners. Earlier receipt of applications would help to guarantee spots for the students.

"We don't normally get our first trickle of our YES and FLEX students until February. We get more within March and then we get the final allotment usually in April, which is late cause a lot of the leads [for host families] we're working with ahead of time. I used to be a field director and I would have families all the time that would want to host African students, which is the YES program. And we would wait and wait and wait to try to get the school spot. But the school had a deadline of March 20th and nine times out of ten we didn't have any African students to give her. So, she would have to pick another country." [ECA Implementing Partner, 7]

"I've been told that the notification also gets delayed because of the grant cycle issue because part of the grant cycle determinations is determining how many spots will go to each country, and until they know the exact number of spots for each country, they cannot make final selections and notify those kids. All of these issues are tied together and that grant cycle issue needs to be fixed and shifted if we are going to really make significant progress on the FLEX side." [ECA Implementing Partner, 6]

"Let's say I have a family now that is interested in hosting for next fall. The whole year away. Let's say they have a particular country in mind like Georgia. I don't know what those students are going to be til maybe April. So if they [can wait I will give them a student from that country], but if I'm going to lose them as a host family, I'm going to be like 'Oh, well, while I'm waiting for those students, I have these students available' and I'll send them the bios of those students. It's a big commitment, so they might lose interest or the schools can close out. So if a high school is only allowed to accept five students, I can't wait until April or May because they're closed out already." [Local Coordinator, 6]

They also mentioned that the automated flight assignment and arrival timeline for ECA students is logistically problematic for families and schools. When youth program students are confirmed and matched, they are assigned to a group flight with a chaperone. This can create issues where families with pre-planned summer vacations or full-time jobs out of the home cannot accept students when they are scheduled to arrive – sometimes up to a month before school in their district starts – and instead choose to drop out of hosting, which creates last-minute heartache and uncertainty for the student and their family. They described delaying confirming host families to avoid triggering an early flight assignment. On the other hand, some otherwise amenable schools will reject students who get assigned to travel itineraries that would have them arrive after the start of the formal school year.

"We might very well have their placement by mid-July, but the school might not start until September 1st.... they arrive at the beginning of August [after getting assigned an arrival date based on their confirmed host]. Then they're sitting at their host family home for an entire month. So we wait until their placement deadline has passed so they get pushed to the next arrival date, and then, that way, they come closer to their school arrival date. … It's frustrating for the host families and local coordinators. And it's also frustrating for us because we are literally keeping a student in a queue for an extra month or two… This year we did find that there were some students who arrived super early and they did have problems. It's a homesickness thing. It's, 'I'm bored and I don't have any friends because school hasn't started' type of thing." [ECA Implementing Partner, 8]

"Some of the grant students arrive so late in the school year. We have schools that start so early. Some of the schools start the last week of July. And what I'm seeing in trends is that those early schools not only do they want the students here, by the time school starts...they also want specific English requirements, which I mean any school can say that. But it's super hard, like there's no way we're going to get a Sierra Leone kiddo and this really beautiful school that has so many amenities because they just gave her to us [host family] too late." [Current Host Family and LC, 3]

In addition to logistical challenges, the decentralized and complex network of stakeholders also creates substantial communication issues. Some IPs also argued that being disconnected from in-country partners makes placing students more difficult. As a result, they cannot directly communicate with partners to ask clarifying questions about students which may help them make better matches. For their privately-funded students, they are able to communicate directly with in-country partners and can more easily determine the best student-family matches.

"If you look at the YES and FLEX and CBYX, there's so many different organizations that are in play in terms of recruiting, like having the recruitment organizations on the ground getting all those applications and then once they get through them they go into a

big pool and then [there are] all the organizations for placement, all the students are just kind of funneled down. I think that there's just some time delays and I also think with our private programs we work with our partners directly. So, if we tell them we want files early, they can start working on the ground sooner." [ECA Implementing Partner, 7]

More Logistical and Administrative Barriers and Limited Pre-Placement Communication with ECA

Without prior communication with the exchange students, host families and schools are limited in their understanding of the student and how best to prepare to host them. In some cases, this delays the placement all together because information such as allergies and lifestyle preferences are not included in ECA applications. Host families share that the photos that are provided in advance are passport photos and not personal photos. Particularly for ECA exchange students, regulations and varying program conventions can prevent the student and the family from being in touch in advance, despite mutual eagerness to communicate.[4] Even after securing a placement, communication is often limited and has to go through multiple phases of different organizations, including ECA data entry processes that some IPs said are onerous and clunky. For families and schools for privately funded students, there is relatively much more pre-placement communication. The students and families are able to be in touch directly prior to arrival, which can facilitate a strong foundation and clear expectations prior to the start of the program.

"The standard application for YES and FLEX, it's just not as comprehensive. We get a lot more photos for our private program students. A lot of times too with our YES and FLEX students that photo that we get of the student is usually just their passport photo, and so they're very straight faced. And so when families are fully vetted and they see that face, they're like, 'oh, they don't look happy'. If they've hosted especially before they've seen these smiling and happy kids and so the stoic faces don't do them as many favors. And then again with our private students, we have them do a voice recording and that's just another way for the host family to be able to [connect] 'cause we can't show them video, right? But they can listen to the student and that helps bring a connection. It's just like an added little carrot for the family, since they don't really get

[4] US Department of State J-1 Program Regulations 22 CFR 62.25 Secondary school student regulation states: (2) Prior to the student's departure from his or her home country, sponsors must advise both the exchange student and host family, in writing, of the respective family compositions and backgrounds of each, whether the host family placement is a permanent or arrival placement, and facilitate and encourage the exchange of correspondence between the two. And (4) Ensure that access to exchange student photographs and personally identifying information, either online or in print form, is only made available to potential host families who have been fully vetted and selected for program participation. Such information, if available online, must also be password protected.

that much information in the beginning to have a little bit more to go off of." [ECA Implementing Partner, 7]

"It takes hours and hours of a whole different staff to cross over that [DoS-provided] information [about grant students]. And then even the information we do get either, A) comes a little bit later than our fee paying J1 high school students, [and] a lot of times, B) it's incomplete information, meaning we're constantly having to go back for additional questions. Things like are you allergic to dogs? Or are you scared of dogs? Or are you OK being with like young kids? [Are you OK if we place you with] a same-sex couple? Would you be OK with a single host parent? Would you be OK with a double placement? A lot of those questions get asked like when our fee-paying high school students are applying." [ECA Implementing Partner, 8]

"I didn't know much about the family. All I knew was that their last name was [name of family members]... So I just went on Facebook and tried to look for [name of family members], and I did find people with that name. I wasn't sure if it was them or not but somehow I ended up sending a friend request to [name of family members] and I texted them. I remember texting, and I was very nervous and I was just like, 'Hi, hello. I'll be living with you for a year, apparently.' And she was really nice. She helped me with some of the questions I had. I wasn't really sure about what kind of clothes to bring, how warm or how cold it was going to be. And she filled me in on how the weather was in Indiana. They lived in Indiana. " [Alumni, 2]

"There are days where, in our height of placement season, we're finalizing 57 placements in a day. The amount of time it takes for us to go in and do each individual placement – there's a lot of information involved, versus if we could just like pull a report, put it in an excel and then just upload it, triple check that everything is accurate and then just like go about our day. That would make things so much easier I think for our staff." [ECA Implementing Partner, 8]

Varying Levels of Ability to Provide Support and Oversight

Most LCs that work on ECA programs serve on a volunteer basis and have other full-time paid jobs outside of exchange placements. Some LCs receive small stipends for placing students, though based on the evidence in this study this does not seem to be typical. LCs described these roles as "jobs of passion" and reported spending large amounts of their free time on making student placements and monitoring current placements. However, many made clear that these roles are not sustainable for many volunteers because of the overall burden of the job, both in terms of time and stress level. Many LCs describe having to be on call all the time, often leaving their own families and personal commitments to respond to calls to support

students and families. They share that if their role was a full-time paid position, they may have a greater ability to make successful placements for students with families, but that they are constrained by their other commitments. Those that work as LCs in full-time paid roles may have greater flexibility for recruitment and monitoring of students and host families.

"I mean, if you're putting in all those hours posting and sending emails out...there are times I've posted thousands of emails trying to find placement for a particular student. I don't get paid for that. So yes, that [not getting paid] could have affected [my ability to make a placement]." [Local Coordinator, 6]

"I have nine [exchange] students and honestly, it's been overwhelming, so I actually have a partner that's coming on next year, another coordinator, and we're going to kind of just tag team on that and help each other out and split the students because it's been a little much this year to have nine because I work full time and my kids are teenagers, and it's insane." [Local Coordinator, 7]

What host-related challenges exist for exchange students?

Host families and students sometimes encounter conflicts or disagreements related to cultural differences, personal preferences, or living arrangements. Cultural differences in communication styles, values, and social norms can also contribute to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Students often experience loneliness and anxiety related to being away from home and adjusting to a new environment. Host families may also experience challenges in providing emotional support and assistance to students during the adjustment period. Effective conflict resolution strategies and open communication are essential for addressing issues, as well as maintaining positive relationships and consistent support from exchange program staff.

Need for Host Family to be a Safe Haven

Given the general challenges of integrating into a different environment and the increase in mental health challenges among exchange students, there is a need for the host family situation to be a safe and comfortable space. Alumni stress the importance of creating a good match between students and the host family while ensuring that the host family environment is stable and safe prior to making placements. One alumnus described the host family home as their "safe haven" from the stressors of dealing with a new school and social environment; they argued that the host family placement is the most important factor in a student's exchange experience. Addressing these challenges requires proactive communication, cultural sensitivity, flexibility, and mutual understanding among host families, students, and program organizers.

"A good host family is the number one thing. At that point, you're 17. You're an emotionally unstable teenager. You really do need to feel good at least somewhere because for me, you go to school, I'm anxious the entire time...I come home, and... you just need some time to not be anxious. I think it is crucial that you feel like you are welcome there at the very least. Getting along with and being able to talk to your host family and to have fun with them is, of course, a bonus, but at least you need to feel welcome, and not extra like a part of the family." [Alumni, 1]

"The [host families] need to be open-minded...welcoming. Having an exchange student, you're supposed to see it as having a child, so you have no idea how this child is going to turn out, but, at least as I see it, you have the responsibility to love it and to care for it anyways. I think it should be pretty much the same with exchange students. You have no idea who are you going to get. If you don't get along well, it doesn't diminish your responsibility in any way." [Alumni, 1]

Conflict Resolution and Oversight

Alumni shared that they did not always feel well-equipped to deal with disagreements or misunderstandings that arose with their host families. Some alumni received the message that they should adapt and persevere, even if their home situation was difficult. Alumni reported that their host families reminded them that they were not being compensated for hosting them. They also received the message from IPs and LCs that they needed to be as agreeable and appreciative as possible because of the opportunity that they were given to participate in the exchange program. This message may result in some exchange students not reaching out for support when they might have benefitted from it.

"I always thought that I had to be very adaptive...to persevere and...be the person who always works around other people. ...I realized that there is a certain point from which the relationship between people and you is no longer just what you do. It also depends on what they want and if they want to work on it. So, in a sense it taught me to stand up for myself. And it also taught me that even if you are told that you need to be the person doing everything, there are points when you can assess the situation and conclude that from this point onward, it isn't just me and this relationship can only work if the other person also works as hard as I do." [Alumni, 6]

"The relationship with the host mother over the months...the tension built up slowly. And I didn't really realize that I myself was very tense in the household until I realized that I was walking on my tiptoe so nobody would notice when I was going to the bathroom...I didn't want to be the type of person who goes and like, 'Oh, I have this problem, it's horrible.' So I was like, okay, 'This is my exchange year. I'm living in a different family, they're not getting anything for having me. So I'm going to try my best to be not a

nuisance to them and also try to be as good of a person as I can towards them.' I didn't really want to have any conflict, and I also thought that this was the part of the challenge that I had to overcome. It was the coordinator who decided that it was time for me to move." [Alumni, 6]

One aspect of exchange preparation that alumni felt could improve was expectation-setting training and support for what to do when there were conflicts or challenges with their host families. Alumni and families alike shared that more communication, conflict, and cultural integration training or support would be welcomed. They also asked that their feedback and opinions be considered more in host family placement and management processes.

"I don't remember anybody talking about the possible conflicts that could happen that are not the type that you can just resolve through communication. Most of the time when we were talking about things there, it was always like, 'Okay, so if you are in a tough situation, you need to be flexible, you need to talk about this. You are all adults there, or at least they are adults, you may be close but not quite and you need to be able to deal with this problem. You need to talk things out.'" [Alumni, 6]

"See if [host families] are really people to trust a kid for one year, a whole year. I had lots of friends having trouble… There were some bad ones. There was unfair treatment. I don't know why they would treat a kid like that, and I would get surprised how the program would choose that kind of host family." [Alumni, 4]

"It would be very good for alumni to conduct some questionnaires for host families, because I think everything starts from host family. If you have good family, nothing else matters. You have bad high school experience, like family is still there for you to make you feel better. I know that they are doing some background checks and stuff, but I don't think it's enough. I can't say anything about my host family in a negative sense, but others I know they did not really have [a good experience]. Some of my friends even had to switch states because they did not have good families." [Alumni, 3]

"[My friend] had some huge troubles with their host families...When the student reached out to the Local Coordinator or even the central office of [exchange organization] they should actually see what's going on. One of my friends had troubles that her host parents would just take her phone throughout the whole year. They didn't even give her a chance to call anybody. She was just texting us through one of her American friend's phones at school. She actually reached out to her Local Coordinator and they did nothing. There were lots of cases like that. I don't know what their coordinators were like because I haven't experienced that kind of situations, but I think they should take into account students' opinions, their rights at home. I know almost all the host families, all

the American families, they have their rules at home and stuff, but she didn't have... any right to take her stuff." [Alumni, 4]

Negative Effects of Tension within Host Families

Alumni shared that strained relations within host families can create negative effects on host students that jeopardize their whole exchange experience. This can be true even when the conflict is not directed at the exchange students themselves. While there were only a few alumni interviewed for this study, several of them brought up issues that they dealt with personally or had heard about from other exchange students. Some alumni who experienced hard situations with their host families said that the trauma of their experiences continued long after their return to their home countries. IPs, LCs, and even host schools shared the multiple layers of support available to students during their exchanges, including reaching out to LCs, IP staff, and school counselors. However, in practice, students may not always take advantage of these support mechanisms because of the overarching narrative focused on the opportunity of taking part in this fully funded exchange. Students share that they do not want to "mess up" the unique opportunity of studying in the United States.

"The host sister was gone. The host mother was constantly trying to call her and a lot of tension built up. Because of this tension, I also wasn't really able to focus on studying very well... I was like, 'I'm not going to sleep on time. I can't wake up on time. I'm always tired.' So by this time I was talking to my coordinator, I'm like, 'We have the tension right now. I don't really know how to deal with this'... My host mother was very furious...She stopped communicating with me and she was clearly annoyed when she saw me. During this time, the coordinator was looking for a host family who could take me, but she couldn't find it. So I moved into her household. The family itself was blacklisted." [Alumni, 6]

"I'm sharing a side of an exchange program that many people don't talk about... There were constant arguing sessions before and after dinner. Usually my host father would make 'jokes' that were homophobic or complain...this kind of thing would escalate into full arguments... Also there was this incident between host father and at that time my host sister… It had so much emotional influence on me that I had symptoms of PTSD even after year and a half. Every time I wanted to talk about it I would just start crying and the first time when I actually was able to tell my parents about that was probably one year after I came back to [my home country]. When I say that I had PTSD symptoms, I mean that every time I saw my dad drink even one glass of any kind of alcohol, I would get anxiety. Every time anyone spoke to me or even around me with a little mad or even loud voice, I would have anxiety attacks and would start crying uncontrollably. Every time there was a little argument in my family (once again not even

involving me) I would have flashbacks and start crying... I have never had any of those symptoms before that incident." [Alumni, 7]

"That one incident really shifted my mental health and my second half of the exchange year was not that great to put it lightly. I don't think that they are bad people, I think that they are quite opposite. Every family has some kind of crisis at some point and I just happened to be there." [Alumni, 7]

What might prompt higher rates of participation in hosting?

Current exchange program stakeholders, potential host families, and schools shared a wide pool of motivations to host an international exchange student and expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity. However, there are several potential areas of improvement that could move potential hosts from interest to involvement.

First, there is a strong need for increased awareness among potential host families and schools about the opportunity to host exchange students, as well as the benefits and responsibilities for hosts. When building awareness, there is a need to emphasize personal testimonials and success stories which draw more attention from an audience, as well as highlight the kinds of benefits that are appealing for many host families and schools. Moreover, increased funding support for host families can offset any additional financial costs related to hosting an exchange student, especially within the context of rising inflation in the United States. Finally, to ensure continued participation from host families and schools, there must be a focus on standardized and consistent training for LCs and ongoing support for hosts. Though historically it has not been necessary, the current circumstances suggest that it may be worthwhile to pilot providing financial compensation for all LCs, which in turn could encourage LCs to invest more time in securing placements.

> It's just more awareness, you know, is really the key. The more people you talk to, the more people that know about the program and the more that are going to participate.
>
> **Local Coordinator, 4**

Increased Awareness

IPs and LC staff agreed that there is a general lack of awareness about the opportunity to host. LCs, host families, and host schools also shared that there seems to be a lack of awareness around the actual responsibilities and experience

of hosting exchange students. Many potential host families worry about the added time crunch and financial burden hosting a student may have on them. Potential host schools may be concerned about stretching limited school resources to support additional students. Expanded outreach efforts must clarify the parameters of hosting and the kinds of support families and schools can expect to receive. This will reduce stressors about potential burdens and challenges of hosting as well as encourage more families and schools to take part in the opportunity.

"We try to get out in the community a lot. We'll meet with local civic organizations. I have my students present to them and that has helped a lot just to kind of break that barrier a little bit and that's how we found a few of our host families is through the civic organizations. We have Rotary Club, we have Optimist club and we have Kiwanis Club." [Local Coordinator, 7]

"I think we just need to educate potential host families that 'you're not changing your life and you're not spending a fortune. You're sharing your life and you're guiding another human being in the U.S. and teaching them how to adapt and how to be a citizen of the world.'" [Local Coordinator, 3]

"As people see the impact [hosting] can have on them, when they see my [exchange students] and how they talk about that or their friends talk about [the exchange experience] then that's how we start to build that awareness. And I feel the more I host and the more kids I have in the schools, the more other people will see it." [Local Coordinator, 8]

Highlighting Success Stories

Building more awareness can best be done through highlighting success stories and sharing how participating in an exchange program can have personal and community impact. Several LCs and one host school administrator shared how they frequently brought exchange students to local organization events (I.e., Rotary Club meetings) or school board meetings to share about their experiences and achievements during their exchange. In one instance, when a school board was considering cutting support for hosting international exchange students, an LC had a past exchange student send a testimonial to the board about his success as a result of the program. The success story and personal testimonial from the student persuaded the school board to continue hosting exchange students in district schools.

"One of our boys from Yemen, one of our scholarship kids that just did amazing. He was at one of the Georgia schools and they just loved him. He is now a businessman. And we've kept in touch and we had him write a little bit about his experience. We had this picture of him as a grown man now, and some of his pictures [when he was in the school]. We went to one of the school board meetings and we shared how important it is to have exchange students and what it means to experience this and 'look at this young

man and how much of a difference it made for him.' And so they said, 'yeah, we'll let you go ahead and put a few students [in the schools].' So sometimes we've convinced the board to change their mind." [Local Coordinator, 1]

More Persuasive Messaging

IPs and LCs often stressed that each host family is unique in what they are looking for in a hosting experience; they work to get to know the family's circumstances and interests to pitch hosting certain students based on those factors. That said, across all interviews, common compelling themes emerged. Above all, potential host families and schools want to feel a personal connection with an exchange student, and they want to know that they will have the support necessary to handle any challenges through the hosting experience.

"One of the things that a lot of people actually felt was good about what the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel (CSIET) did. They created these posters, digital or printed, that we could use however we wanted to, but they had these cute photos and some real kind of catchy phrases. One of my memory was like, 'Eat pancakes with a kid from Cairo.' They were just kind of fun, made it more personal. You could picture yourself doing that." [ECA Implementing Partner, 10]

Some of them [Facebook ads] would have little blurbs. It'd be like, 'Apollo is from this country in South America and he is 15 and his interests are this and his grade average is this, and he's really excited about doing blank in the Phoenix area.' So kind of like a little personalization touch...I just looked at one that I had screenshotted in advance of this conversation, but it was like, 'He likes soccer, he's got a B plus average in his grades and he really likes math and he's excited.' It's just kind of fun to get a short blurb of what this guy was looking for out of his whole family." [Potential Host Family, 4]

"It's really getting to know the family, figuring out what's their motivating factor to want to host, you know, figure out that motivating factor. What's their family dynamic look like? Do they have any specific cultural or country interests or languages that they want to get to know or maybe already know and then using that information to then kind of start looking and giving them a short list of students to look at?" [ECA Implementing Partner, 7]

Moreover, host schools want to know that hosting an international exchange student will provide their own local students with an enriching educational experience by exposing them to diverse cultures and perspectives. This idea is particularly salient for smaller, more homogenous school districts whose students may not have as much exposure to individuals from other cultures and backgrounds. When asked how they would pitch the idea of hosting an international exchange student to other school administrators, one shared that the most persuasive message would be to tell them that this is an opportunity to provide an immersive

educational experience for students for very little monetary investment. Compared to other educational programs which may cost a school tens of thousands of dollars and only impact a few individual students, hosting an international exchange student requires very little additional investment and can impact dozens of students.

"You [other school administrators] spend tens of thousands of dollars on other educational programs that many times sit on a shelf. You can host a foreign exchange student in your district, and it really doesn't cost anything more because you're going to have that extra book...that extra desk. You're not going to add teachers. You're not going to add an extra bus. So that would be the message. You spend a lot of money for educational programs, but if you want to have more bang for little buck, it would be [beneficial] to host the foreign exchange student in your school district." [Current Host School, 3]

As a part of the interviews with current and potential host families as well as LCs, researchers also discussed what messages might be the most effective in conveying the benefits of hosting international exchange students. Host families mentioned several consistent themes they believed might be most compelling, highlighting that different messages might be more or less appealing for different families. Overall the most frequently mentioned themes were those that focused on the creation of lifelong connections, increased global perspectives, as well as community service. Host families share that highlighting success stories and emphasizing the support that host families receive are also key areas that should be central to outreach campaigns.

Themes to Highlight in Hosting Outreach Campaigns

Cultural Enrichment	Emphasize how hosting provides a unique opportunity for cultural exchange and exposure. Highlight the chance for both the host family and their children to learn about different customs, traditions, and perspectives.
Global Perspective	Stress the importance of fostering a global perspective in today's interconnected world. Hosting international students allows host families to contribute to global understanding and diplomacy at a personal level.
Educational Opportunities	Communicate how hosting enhances the educational experience for the host family's children. Exposure to different educational systems, languages, and learning styles can broaden their horizons and improve their academic and language skills.

Personal Growth and Development	Stress the positive impact hosting has on the local and global community by promoting cultural diversity. Emphasize how hosting is a powerful form of community service. Hosting international students contributes to mutual understanding, both at home and abroad.
Building Lifelong Connections	Emphasize the potential for building lasting friendships and connections that extend beyond the hosting period. Hosting provides an opportunity to create meaningful relationships with people from around the world.
Community Contribution	Stress the positive impact hosting has on the local and global community by promoting cultural diversity. Emphasize how hosting is a powerful form of community service. Hosting international students contributes to mutual understanding, both at home and abroad.
Support and Resources	Clearly communicate the support and resources available to host families. Let potential hosts know about orientation sessions, ongoing assistance, and the network of support from schools and exchange programs.
Testimonials and Success Stories	Share testimonials and success stories from previous host families. Real-life experiences can be powerful in conveying the positive impact hosting has on individuals and families.
Flexibility of Hosting Options	Highlight flexible hosting options, such as short-term stays or welcome hosting, to accommodate different family schedules and preferences. This can be used as a gateway to longer hosting experiences.
Recognition and Appreciation	Communicate how host families are valued and appreciated for their contributions. Recognition events, certificates, or acknowledgment in community settings can reinforce the importance of their role.

Incentives and Financial Support

Host families note their concerns about rising inflation and how that increases the financial burden of hosting. Program teams, IPs, and LCs recognized that rising costs are negatively affecting many American families. That said, a few LCs shared their perception that providing stipends for host families might change the motivation for some host families. They shared a belief that providing a stipend to host families large enough to act as additional income could attract different types of hosts.

"You shouldn't have to reward a host family for wanting to expand, to share their cultural experience. You should do it from the heart. [But] I know right now it's hard. The economy is just [bad]. And people are really struggling to make all the ends meet." [Current Host Family, 6]

"What is there already is that the families can be confident that the students have a little pocket money every month. That's really helpful for the students who are coming from various backgrounds, ensuring that the students come with those resources that they have, and the allowance for them to be able to help pay for prom and stuff that they would want to pay for their own kids, but may not have all the extra funds, the yearbook, that winter coat that an Indonesian student would never possibly fathom that you need for the families in Minnesota. So, that incidental allowance is helpful and it does make a difference." [ECA Implementing Partner, 12]

Providing stipends for host families is currently not allowed under J1 student visa regulations, however, there are opportunities to increase financial assistance by providing higher incidentals reimbursements or monthly student stipends. All host families that host ECA exchange students receive a set incidentals fund to help pay for things like winter clothing and school fees. However, rising inflation eliminates these modest budgets quickly. Some LCs and host families reported that the cost of a new winter coat or a required sports physical can use the entire fund for the whole exchange year. Most host families want to provide students with the best possible exchange experience. Many reported spending their own personal funds to support students with fees or cold weather clothing (as well as additional things like sports uniforms or club fees) that exceeded their incidentals or monthly stipend budgets. Providing a higher host family incidentals fund or monthly student stipends can reduce the financial burden of some of these additional, yet often necessary, items. While student monthly stipends were increased in 2023 from $120 to $200, some stakeholders believe that this is insufficient and that greater financial support of host families would help alleviate the financial burden.

"I think that [higher incidentals payments] would definitely help, especially because our sponsored [ECA] students, they come over with very limited funds, right? Some of them ...don't have the monetary support from their natural parents that the core [privately funded] kids have. And we try to reiterate to them [host parents] that they are not required to buy anything for the students but honestly as a host mom, if you see your student really want to, you know, go out for basketball and they have to pay $50.00 for a pair of basketball shoes, and they may not have the funds for that because they had to buy a winter coat that took a lot of their incidentals, we're probably going to buy that for them." [Local Coordinator, 7]

"I think for the students, the stipend, there's maybe some expensive states where you need more than $200 a month, but most of them don't need more than that since it's just kind of fun money or whatever, for the most part. But the parents, they are spending a lot more on things and when it's a necessary thing, it's kind of hard. There should be more reimbursement available for that like the host families." [Local Coordinator, 5]

Some LCs and families shared that non-monetary offerings could alleviate some of the financial pressures of feeding and housing an additional person. Most often, participants suggested incentives such as pre-paid gas cards or grocery store gift cards. They explain that these incentives could help to offset some of the additional costs of hosting a student, especially for families who are more affected by the rising cost of living. Some families mentioned that the programs could offer incentives such as national park passes or vouchers for events and activities that they could take their host students to as a part of their exchange experience. They reasoned that vouchers such as these would allow host families to treat their exchange student to a fun family activity that they would also enjoy and that they might not otherwise be able to afford.

"I'd be interested if there [were] a perk or something that's not necessarily money, but that would be useful for the child and for me like a Sam's Club membership or something like that." [Potential Host Family, 1]

"Even if there was a fund for the families, kind of an incidental fund where they could do activities with their student, you know, maybe they're going to go to a theme park. So, they have a budget of this much that they can submit for reimbursement or things like that. Yeah, that would actually be a great idea, because then they could do things with their student, and it's not going to affect them financially as much as it is right now." [Local Coordinator, 7]

More Oversight and Training for LC Support for Families, Schools, and Students

Levels of training for LCs, as well as orientation and ongoing support for host families and schools, appears to vary across IPs. Variation in LC training can impact their preparedness for orienting and supporting host families and schools, which can influence the hosting experience. All IPs reported carrying out LC trainings to prepare them to find, onboard, and support host families and schools. However, the content and extent of LC trainings appears to vary across IPs. Some LCs get additional briefings on different cultures (such as sensitivity training on Muslim religion and culture and how that might impact student behaviors and expectations) which they can share with host families and schools to prepare them for hosting students from diverse backgrounds. Other LCs reported lower levels of formal training from exchange organizations.

In addition, some IPs give host family orientation information to LCs in a standardized digital format and others provide printed documents to walk through with host families. These orientations include information such as the responsibilities of host families, expectations for students (including additional requirements for ECA exchange students), emergency information, stages of the exchange (excitement, homesickness, etc.), and communication strategies. Typically, this orientation is provided in-person, though some LCs described sharing pre-recorded orientations with host families. Based on their level of experience and training, some LCs add their own information to the orientations and use past lessons learned to brief families. Several stakeholders indicated that levels of orientation and pre-program support have decreased in recent years.

Some IPs provide more resources or guidance during host family orientation than others. One LC shared how they created host family contact lists (after receiving consent) that were shared among all host families if they wanted to set up additional group activities with their students or connect with other host families to get tips on hosting. A host family from a different IP shared how their IP also provides a live Google Doc form to host families and their students, which helps them establish ground rules for the house and share their preferences. The host family shared that having this questionnaire beforehand helps to head off potential miscommunications during the exchange and ensures that students know the expectations before they even arrive so they can settle in quickly.

Variations in pre-student arrival support can impact host family preparedness and their ability to manage any challenges that arise over the course of the exchange experience.[5] School administrators who belonged to districts where they had hosted students for many years did not recall any kind of orientation provided by the LC when they first began to host students. Likewise, LC involvement in and support of host schools varied. Some were heavily involved in school sports and volunteer events to demonstrate support for the students and raise awareness for international student exchanges. Others were only in contact with the schools in cases where students were experiencing difficulties at school or in their host family environment. Host school administrators shared that consistent and reliable support and guidance from LCs is critical to a positive hosting experience.

[5] Although host families interviewed generally shared positive feedback with the support they received from their LC during their hosting experience, the use of snowball sampling to identify host family interviewees who were specifically referred through implementing partners may have led to the inclusion of participants who are relatively engaged and active hosts and who have had overall positive experiences and relationships with placement organizations. Interviews with alumni revealed a more mixed picture about the support they received from LCs and IPs.

"We don't actually have any orientation for schools that I'm aware of. We have a packet that we send the schools with all of their [student] background information and that sort of stuff and I'm their direct connection between them when it comes to host families." [Local Coordinator, 8]

"The schools are different, like the school system. I was really going through those teenage years, so I was really socially awkward...I wish they had maybe some kind of workshop or training to just not only talk about cultural differences but also talk to people that we all have social anxiety sometimes and it's fine. This is where it gets harder because the goal is not only to overcome this social anxiety, but also to get to know new people with new language from absolutely different backgrounds." [Alumni, 5]

Peer-to-Peer Host Family Networks

In addition to guaranteed support from IPs and LCs, host families appreciate having connection with others, particularly with more experienced host families who may be able to provide mentorship and guidance for hosting international exchange students. As mentioned above, one LC created an open contact list among host families so that they are able to contact one another, set up joint activities, and share insights on hosting. The host family of this LC shared that it was a good way to feel connected to other host parents even if they did not plan activities with them. Potential host families are particularly enthusiastic about being connected with more experienced host families as a way to learn from peers and dissuade concerns that they may have. Establishing formalized peer-to-peer mentorship opportunities between new and experienced families could help relieve any anxieties or concerns new host families may have and provide them with a second layer of support outside of the LC.

"We are regularly in contact by email with host families and we build a community. When we send out emails to host families, we do not blind carbon copy everyone. Everyone's email is visible, so everybody has each other's contact information and when, for example, there's a weekend activity taking place that's in town or one family wants to go to the movies or whatever, they often will share that information with all of the host families to see if other families want to meet up." [Local Coordinator, 3]

"Other people who have hosted know the pitfalls and things that you can fall into and then can offer you tips so that you make sure that ... I believe somebody else was talking about wanting to make sure that it's a mutually beneficial relationship. So I mean especially when it comes to looking at an agency, I'd want to work with a group that had experience and weren't just trying to do something new." [Potential Host Families, 1]

"I'd like to see some kind of mentorship in the program. People who've done it before. Maybe I can talk to them besides the support in case there is some emergency. [To]

have somebody be available on the other side to work with me. That would be great. Like if I do decide to get into this program, what would it take to be a great host for these students?" [Potential Host Family, 4]

How might the benefits of hosting be best communicated to potential hosts?

By tailoring messages to address the specific needs and interests of potential hosts, and by using a combination of storytelling, statistics, and community involvement, the benefits of hosting international students can be effectively communicated and appeal to a broader audience. Moreover, ECA can leverage its existing prestige to build partnerships with potential host schools and emphasize the benefits of hosting to key decision-makers.

More Localized and Targeted Outreach Campaigns

Broad outreach methods such as national campaigns or general public awareness building often do not reach the kinds of families that would be most likely to host an exchange student. It can lead to interest among families that may not meet minimum requirements or fall outside of the scope of the geographic range of LCs. Instead, outreach should be localized and strategically target families with motivations more closely aligned to the goals of exchange programs.

"We do national campaigns for recruitment using web access. You know, clicks Facebook. Those have very little success in reality. I know that YES and FLEX are doing similar campaigns. Also, very little success from those. Primarily the placements are generated by somebody in the local community going out or going online and finding somebody in their local community that's willing to host the student." [ECA Implementing Partner, 6]

A better understanding of specific types of families that are most apt to be successful hosts might help to create targeted outreach campaigns that are the most effective. By tailoring communications to specific types of host families, organizations can ensure their messages are relevant and meaningful, which increases the likelihood of engagement and resonance with the target audiences. In interviews and focus groups with host families, LCs, and program implementers, certain host family types, or personas, emerged. By understanding the needs, preferences, and behaviors of the different types of host families and tailoring messages and communication strategies accordingly, IPs can increase the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of their outreach efforts.

Host Family Personas

Cultural Enthusiasts	Families with a strong interest in cultural exchange and a desire to expose their own family members and children to different cultures. Seek to broaden their cultural perspectives, foster global understanding, and provide an immersive cultural experience for both their family and the international student.
Global Citizens	Families with a global mindset, often well-traveled and open to diverse perspectives. Embrace hosting as a way to continue their global engagement, share experiences, and create connections with individuals from different parts of the world.
Educational Supporters	Families with a keen interest in education and a desire to support students pursuing academic goals. Provide a supportive environment for international students attending schools, offering guidance on academics, and helping them navigate the educational system.
Language Enthusiasts	Families who are passionate about language learning may see hosting as an opportunity for language exchange and learning. Excited about the prospect of improving language skills and creating a language-rich environment for their families.
Community Servants	Families with a strong sense of community service and a desire to make a positive impact. Host international students to contribute to global understanding and goodwill, viewing it as a form of philanthropy and an opportunity to make a difference.
Empty Nesters	Families whose children have grown up and moved out, leaving extra space in the home. See hosting as an opportunity to utilize empty bedrooms, share their home, and enjoy the company of a young person, while also providing support and guidance.

The host family personas listed above are the most frequently mentioned overarching types of families mentioned throughout data collection for this study.

Develop ECA Partnerships with School Decisionmakers

IPs and LCs shared that Department of State partnerships with schools, school administrators, and departments of education (both national and state-level) might build greater awareness of exchange programs and prompt increased support for engagement and recruitment. They mentioned that ECA participation at in-person events such as the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel (CSIET) conference can improve visibility of exchange program opportunities and open administrators to the possibility of flexing policies to improvement in exchange student enrollment. Indeed, potential host school administrators and current host school administrators both recommended that ECA be more visible at in-person conferences for national, state, and local school administrator associations. Potential and current host school administrators argued that building strong relationships with key decision-makers is critical for motivating schools to host. This could be done through creating relationships with district-level decision-makers or building networks through educator professional organizations. Getting one influential "cheerleader" to spread the message about the benefits of hosting can encourage school districts to take on the opportunity.

"I was kind of glad to see when I got the invitation to participate in this because we don't really see it a whole lot. So more of a communication either through our cooperatives or through the state's department [of education]. And the Commissioner of Education here in Kentucky sends out a weekly newsletter to all the superintendents with different initiatives that are going on across the state. So if this is something that would be added to those and communicate with that, it may be an opportunity to share the experiences that you have and the opportunities it may have for school districts along the way." [Potential Host School, 1]

"I'm a member of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. The blast emails that they send out and an engaging 'click this link to read more about how to have an international program at your school', that's something that would be appealing." [Potential Host School, 5]

LCs further suggested leveraging partnerships with schools to support their host family recruitment efforts through school newsletters or in a dedicated page on the school website where families can learn about hosting exchange students. Several IPs and LCs mentioned ECA's joint letter with the Department of Education to schools about hosting exchange students and felt that it was "a step in the right direction" but that ECA could build more active partnerships with schools. Highlighting the contribution of hosting schools and providing higher level recognition could create more good will and interest in hosting communities.

"I would like to see ECA somehow partner more with the schools so that the schools help more with this as well. So while the school will accept an exchange student, they're not necessarily helping to promote that and say, 'Hey, families have any of you thought about hosting an exchange student? Here's contact numbers if that's something that you're interested in.' Maybe if there was [sic] resources for the schools where they can link on their school websites? Most of them don't even have anything on their websites about foreign exchange students. If they do it's my bigger schools that have that application process and so they have it built within their websites. But most of my other schools don't have anything on there that they accept foreign exchange students. So ECA providing some of that language and the resources to post that [would be helpful]." [Local Coordinator, 7]

"[ECA should help with] schools accepting students and not having an understanding what exchange is and how it impacts their school and what it brings to their school. I spend a lot of time talking to principals and counselors about how impactful it is to have a kid from another country that's completely different, the impact you can have on that child's life, but also the kids that are involved, all of them that become friends with them, have an interaction with them it might change their perception of that country or that nationality, or even that religion. So that's the biggest hang up is just understanding it." [Local Coordinator, 8]

"The medallion program, it matters to a certain subset of schools as a retention [method] because those are the achievement schools. So, achievement schools want the blue ribbon, like their trophy case if you will. It's not effective with every school, but it makes a marginal difference. It's important to open up new schools, but it's really important to keep the schools that we have. Sometimes that recognition of their efforts adds up to getting some leeway or retaining a school's interest. I think the certificates are also more impactful if we can give them in that year that they've hosted a student." [ECA Implementing Partner, 12]

Use of Word of Mouth and Personal Testimonials

Positive word-of-mouth or direct observation of exchange students in one's community can motivate families and schools to participate. LCs rely most heavily on word of mouth to build networks and find host families. LCs ask their current host families to share their positive experiences with other family, friends, and community members and encourage them to participate. Also, exchange students can be good ambassadors for hosting through the friends they make in school and the volunteer work they do in their local communities. Several LCs described leveraging FLEX and YES student volunteering requirements to intentionally bring visibility to the programs and opportunities to host. However, word of mouth has its practical

limits. If the LCs and/or host families belong to certain social circles, word of mouth may not expand much beyond those circles, which can limit the diversity of potential hosts.

LCs shared that student engagement in local communities, either as volunteers or participants in activities or groups, can be and has been used as an intentional marketing strategy. Many IPs shared that exchange students present on their countries and their experiences to their local host communities during International Education Week as part of their exchange requirements. Some LCs shared how they successfully recruited new host families from local community organizations where students give presentations.

"The students themselves do a really great job of promoting what the programs do, what the programs are. So having those students in the schools in the local community volunteering, you know, attending youth groups, attending Boy Scouts, being on the sports teams, really promotes the program and helps build that sort of capacity for new host families to want to experience it themselves once they see their neighbor or another member of their community enjoying it." [ECA Implementing Partner, 6]

"I think when they [potential hosts] can actually meet the students face-to-face, that makes a big difference. It's one thing when you're hearing about a student through Facebook or through social media. But to actually meet our kids face-to-face has been a real big difference. It kind of makes it more real to actually have them in front of you and hear about their experiences and some of the things that they've experienced in their own countries and why they want to be here so bad. And so that has really pulled on the heartstrings and opened the doors a little bit more." [Local Coordinator, 7]

"You know what would call my attention to, is during the marketing, whatever gig they're going to be doing, it's having some feedback on the aftereffects, after having someone in your home, and people are talking about, 'We had a great time. I used to do this, but I don't do that anymore. We learned what the real truth was about each other's culture.' And you get entered that way. I think it'll be a good marketing thing if you have a little speaking easy about what it was after the guest left and what you learned. A little blog like that." [Potential Host Family, 2]

Customize Outreach and Recruitment Templates, Strategies, Resources

LCs spend hundreds of hours posting outreach materials to social media, speaking with potential host families, and searching for new avenues to market hosting opportunities just to place a handful of kids. This work is in addition to the ongoing support that they provide students, families, and schools throughout the academic year, orientations for new families, and submission of student applications to schools. Additionally, most LCs hold full-time jobs outside of exchange program coordination, which further limits available time for marketing

and outreach. While most IPs provide generic flyers to LCs, methods and strategies of outreach are inconsistent across LCs. Several LCs reported that they would benefit from additional support in how to reach out to potential host families. This could include providing funding for placing local advertisements, providing high quality digital and printed flyers, conducting outreach to schools on behalf of LCs, and training for LCs on strategic outreach best practices.

"We do also use technology like they [IPs] have the resources to help us with media presentation. Like they can do a mass email. I mean we can do that but it's harder, we all work full time. This is not our full-time job and so helping us find those families in the community…like our director, she emailed, you can get mass emails for like different schools so, helping us with our networking is huge. And I've always said... Why not help us? … help us with the promotion with the marketing because I'll be honest, my husband's a graphic designer so it drives him batty when they leave it to people who have no idea what they're doing … and it looks so unprofessional. … We need to look professionally, look like we know what we're doing. So they make brochures, they send them to us, or they send a link and we can print them off. And sometimes to print off a nice one, it's a little more expensive than you know. [So I think] 'I'll just do a couple.' So really, honing in on the marketing [will be helpful] and our agency is starting to do that." [Local Coordinator, 1]

"I think the State Department if they wanted to help with marketing that would be great. Maybe providing funding to organizations specifically for marketing, because if it was more local, it might make more of a difference. For example, if I was to have $500.00 for Facebook ads, I could go pop that up there and you'd have more people, getting more inquiries where if you just put it out on a broad scale and you said 'OK here in all of the United States, here's $1,000,000 for marketing', then you might be plugging people to areas where there isn't schools and there isn't families and there isn't a stable coordinator." [Local Coordinator, 4]

"It's hard to translate [promo videos] into finding host families or schools, but it's great to have high production value pieces that we can utilize in different ways. They're most effective when they can be customized. Every organization needs to attract host families to its organization and get those leads through their process. So, customizable is really key. Anything we produce, we also produce customizable. So, that is really important. I think they're always impactful. We are always looking for compelling images, any kind of media that we can use. So, they are helpful." [ECA Implementing Partner, 12]

Incorporate Social Media Best Practices

The feedback from program implementer staff indicate that there is room for more strategic and consistent use of social media to promote awareness and involvement in hosting exchange

students. While some LCs make use of social media to recruit potential host families, the use of online recruitment methods seems to still be limited. Those that used social media for outreach felt that it was a useful resource but wanted more guidance and support for how to leverage it as a tool to increase awareness of hosting opportunities.

Several LCs pushed the importance of personalization where possible when posting and conducting outreach. Although it is against regulations to post photos of the students themselves, one LC recently began using AI to produce graphics that could represent students and their interests (such as cartoon imagery of a boy from Malaysia kicking a soccer ball). This LC felt that those personal details spark people's interest more than a printed bio sheet and allow potential host families to find interests in common with exchange students. Another LC shared how they used Facebook to identify local area interest groups for parents and posted outreach directly to those groups' Facebook pages. They noted that this strategy requires considerable amounts of time to find groups, share outreach, and reply to any potential leads, sometimes requiring "thousands" of messages to find a single family.

"I have a separate profile on Facebook just for [implementing partner] and so I share postings about needing host families, but I share a lot about what my students are doing while they're here. Again, to try to make that more personal and have people feel like they have that connection to them. So, like yesterday I got to share that three of my students got chosen to go to the Civic Education workshop. I'm in D.C. and so people like in my page are like 'wow, these kids are awesome'. We're so excited for them and so that has really helped too, just bringing more awareness to the program in general and all the different types of students we have and the difference between sponsored students and core students." [Local Coordinator, 7]

"I go on all the local Facebook pages and post on those, so I'll go into every Facebook page that has the word Austin in it. You know, whatever it is. 'Round Rock PTA.' And then I go on that [Facebook] site and I do really direct Facebook posting. Austin Moms Network, Austin ISD, Austin Vegetarians, Austin Home Schools. Anything that has those words in it, I'll go in and I'll type in the name of the area and see what pops up. And I just start sending out posts. I'll use the graphics [that the implementing partner provides] and I'll put my own wording to it. Or I have pictures from past students like at a party." [Local Coordinator, 6]

However, social media was not used consistently by all LCs. One argued that social media was ineffective, and they did not spend their time trying to leverage it. Another reported that, after spending many years building personal networks in the community, that it was more valuable to leverage existing relationships and connections to make student placements than to

continue using social media to build awareness. They have since suspended use of social media almost completely.

"Years ago, I really put a lot into the Facebook ads, the reaching out to people with personal messages. I did a lot of more like cold calls. So I utilized much more social media messaging. And after those first several years, I put less and less money into the ads. What happened is that I had built up, you know, I have connections now. And I just kind of built from there like it just widened and the circles just got bigger and bigger." [Local Coordinator, 5]

Some potential host families shared that it is not easy for them to find the information they seek on hosting, expressing that the websites they have visited are too general and do not answer their specific questions or address their concerns. They asserted that they would like to be able to find one central location where they could find all the answers to their questions. Some even shared that they had visited crowd-pooled information websites like Reddit to try to find direct answers to their questions instead. Cross-promotion on social media sites, links to more detailed IP websites, and a detailed Frequently Asked Questions section that is easy to find would facilitate increased awareness and information about hosting opportunities.

"I would think about social media because everybody's on social media, especially Facebook, Instagram as well. So start telling them a few things, maybe send some pictures to show them and what would they get and the sense of doing this and just put the word out that way…If you want anything, sell anything, to buy anything, go to social media. Nine times out of ten you're going to win that way." [Potential Host Family, 1]

"[I would want to see a resource that could] answer all of these questions that we just brought up and all of our concerns, have answers to all of that ahead of time so that it's easy enough to go down the list on the site and find these answers. A giant FAQ." [Potential Host Family, 4]

Conclusion

ECA-sponsored high school exchange programs are implemented through a strong network of program teams, embassies, IPs, LCs, families, and schools to host international students from around the world. As one exchange alumni put it during their interview, the hosting experience is the "key to the whole exchange experience." To facilitate greater participation and even more successful hosting systems in light of increasing financial, mental health, and social challenges, ECA may need to provide stronger support for host families, schools, and communities.

Increasing awareness of hosting opportunities using strategic audience-tailored communications, strengthening orientation and problem-solving systems, supporting stronger oversight mechanisms, providing additional incentives to host families and LCs, and using continuous feedback loops will support more successful recruitment and experiences for hosts. In turn, these can improve overall satisfaction of exchange programs and more meaningful and transformative experiences for exchange program participants, host families, and the broader community.

Recommendations

This study identified several areas where ECA and its partners can improve the likelihood of efficient and supportive placements for students. These include strategies for optimizing family and school outreach and recruitment; training and orientations for LCs, students, and hosts; continued oversight and support throughout the exchange program; and continued engagement after the exchange ends. These have been divided into recommendations for ECA and recommendations for implementing partners.

Recommendations for ECA

- Process improvements
    - Review and consider expanding ECA program application forms to include additional information to facilitate placements, such as personal preferences and an option to opt-in for double placements. This should be completed by both exchange students and families.
    - To reduce time spent on data entry and allow more time for host recruitment, allow LCs and IPs to submit information about students via Excel spreadsheets, rather than needing to update individual student profiles in ECA's database prior to the recruitment process beginning.
    - Consider moving up the ECA NOFO cadence and/or program application deadlines to give IPs and LCs more time to place confirmed students.
    - Allow for students' out-of-pocket medical co-pays to be reimbursed beyond the monthly stipend amount.
    - Either develop a new external website on hosting or revamp the existing DoS site to serve as a central point of information and resources on hosting. Create a user-friendly, information dense site with strong search engine optimization and encourage IPs to cross-post the website across their platforms as well as boost it on social media.
        - The website should include FAQs and clearly outline the requirements for host families, including eligibility criteria, responsibilities, and commitments, as well as highlight the support and resources available to families throughout the hosting experience.
- Outreach and Recruitment
    - Encourage communication and tactics that humanize the host family recruitment and placement process, for instance, through student videos and audio clips.
    - While word of mouth and personal referrals will likely continue to be the bread and butter of new host engagement, provide strategic social media training and

tools for IPs and LCs, including specific guidance on adapting outreach to local contexts and particular audience segments.
    - Provide high quality digital and printed outreach materials for IPs and LCs to tailor and use.
    - Provide additional funding for LCs to conduct localized marketing and community outreach activities.
    - Develop strong relationships and partnerships with secondary school decisionmakers through in-person participation at professional conferences and/or building networks through educator professional organizations to raise awareness of hosting exchange students as a low-cost educational opportunity for local students.
    - Offer stronger incentives for hosting, including higher student stipends and non-monetary incentives like vouchers and discounts to offset rising costs and support activities and engagement with host students.
- Orientation and oversight
    - Create and distribute standardized guidance for conflict resolution as well as cultural sensitivity training for all LCs,host families, and schools. Cultural sensitivity trainings should be included in IPs' standard orientations for families and should be shared with key host school administrators.
    - Increase ECA program team touchpoints with IPs throughout the exchange year to support feedback and communication loops, in particular to provide support for host family issues that may arise. Developing a strong learning culture around the challenges of hosting may lead to more transparency between IPs and ECA to collaborate to address issues when they arise.
        - Develop clear criteria under which IPs are obligated to inform ECA for instances of potential abuse or trauma.
- Continued engagement and recognition
    - Host standardized program reflection and debriefing sessions post-program for students and hosts to provide feedback on the experience and connect with peers about their experience.
    - Provide more recognition for host families and schools. Establish recognition programs to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of host families. This could include awards, certificates, or public recognition ceremonies to honor outstanding host families for their dedication and commitment to cultural exchange.

Recommendations for IPs and LCs

- Outreach and recruitment
    - Localize outreach and communications messaging rather than mainly utilizing standard nationwide outreach strategies.
    - Support more effective use of social media campaigns to spread awareness of hosting opportunities, especially in developing customizable templates for IPs and LCs to use across their own platforms and communities.
    - Consistently leverage exchange student voices to share testimonials with potential host families and potential host school decision-makers.
    - Tailor outreach messaging and campaigns to potential key host personas utilizing compelling messages such as those focused on learning about other cultures, increased international exposure, and globally oriented community service.
    - Continue to invest in building long-term relationships with schools, sharing success stories, and giving recognition to their contributions.
    - In recognition of the importance and amount of work that goes into matching students with host schools and families in the current environment, pilot a program where LCs in strategically selected markets are compensated.
- Placement Processes
    - Once matches have been made, facilitate online student-host family meet-and-greets to build bonds prior to student arrival. Provide student bios and personal statements from students to host schools to prepare schools to host as well, encouraging them to assign buddies to each new exchange student at the school.
    - When possible, develop a deeper bench of short-term host families to reduce strain on LCs. Allow for these families to volunteer to serve as welcome families, emergency hosts, or other shorter-term hosts as needed.
- Orientation and Oversight
    - Provide more standardized orientations for students, families, and schools to include expectation setting and tools for conflict resolution.
    - Implement cultural sensitivity and conflict resolution training for LCs, host families, host schools, and exchange students. Regularly provide updated guidance for expectations to returning host families and schools. Seek ways to take the onus off the student during times of tension.
    - Normalize, share, and encourage use of multiple points of contact for host families, host schools, and exchange students if they do not feel that they are receiving satisfactory support from their designated LC. Program stakeholders should be mindful of power dynamics and messaging that may implicitly or explicitly deter students from reporting issues, and seek ways to take the onus

off the students. Include robust crisis response plans in host family and school orientation materials.
        - In areas with high concentrations of students, hire backup or co-LCs to reduce the time burden on LCs and ensure that students and hosts are well supported.
    - Proactively conduct outreach to students and hosts in addition to LC monthly check-ins with clear and consistent guidelines to check that the student is having their basic physical, emotional, and social needs met within the host family.
    - Invest in regular monitoring and feedback mechanisms for host families and schools, providing multiple means for communication, to supplement and serve as a back-up to LCs. This can take the form of informal check-ins, feedback surveys, individual support plans, and anonymous email or telephone hotlines that are available to all parties as well as to potential concerned friends or community members.
    - At the completion of an exchange, allow alumni to provide feedback on their host families, LCs, and schools to inform future strategy and student placements.

- Networking and recognition opportunities
    - Create mentorship networks or online communities for host families and potential host families to connect with one another, share experiences, and provide mutual support. These networks can serve as valuable resources for hosts to exchange tips, advice, and best practices for hosting international students.
    - Facilitate meetings where potential host families can meet and connect with current host families and exchange students. This will allow for potential hosts to ask questions and understand more about the hosting experience firsthand.
    - Organize special events to recognize and celebrate host families' contributions to cultural exchange. These could include appreciation dinners, cultural festivals, or other community events where host families are honored and thanked for their hospitality and generosity.

Appendix: Key Takeaways from Academic Literature

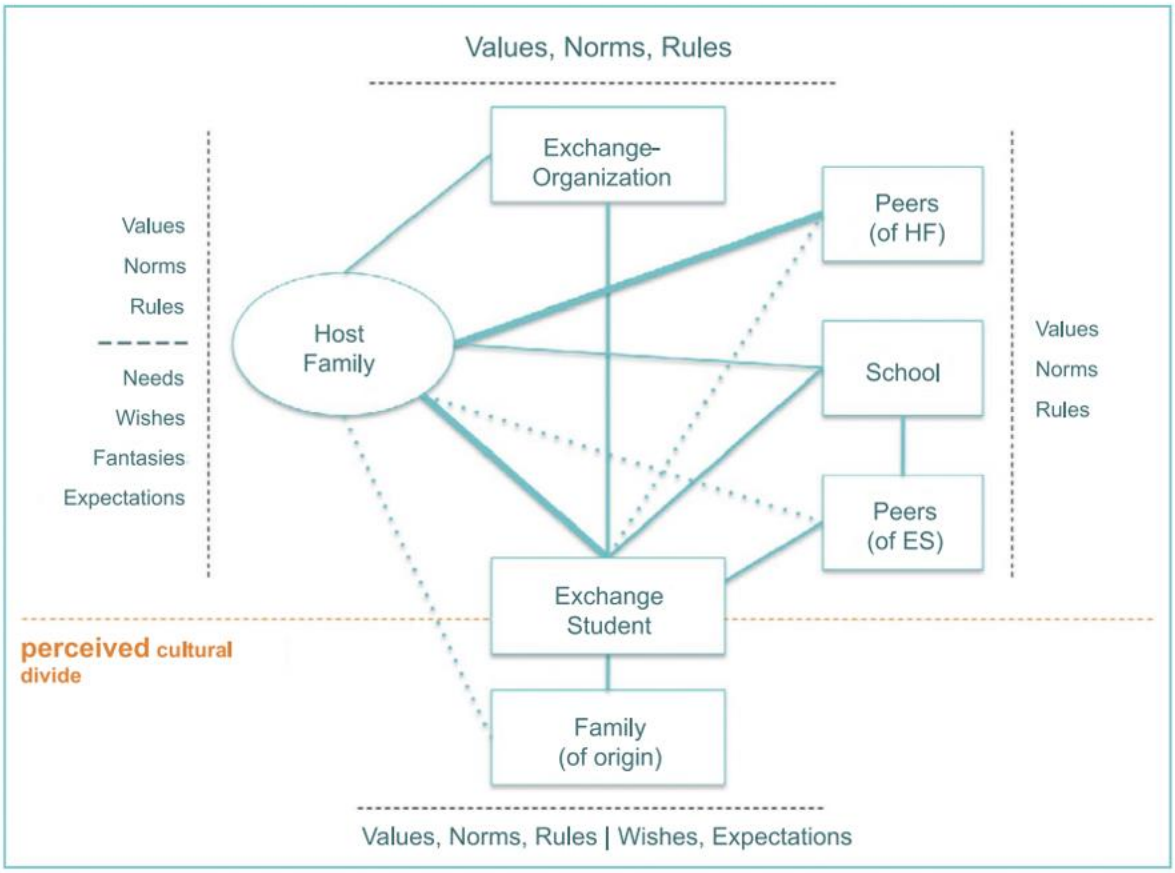
As part of the discovery phase, DCG conducted a literature review to better understand the existing knowledge and best practices for hosting exchange participants on a household, school, and community level. The findings in the academic literature mirror and support the findings of this study in my ways. Among the findings were the following key takeaways:

While there is need for greater research, some studies indicate that the positive outcomes for exchange participants are similarly reflected in host families. Despite abundant literature on the topic of international exchanges, much of it focuses on student-related experiences and overlooks the perspectives of the host families and school community. Information on the processes for families and schools to host exchange students are also limited. Additionally, much of the available literature is outdated, with relevant research mainly done in the 1980s-2000s. However, the existing research does generally show self-reported positive outcomes for host families and communities. One evaluation of a youth exchange program solicited input not only from alumni of the exchange program but also from those in the hosting community including friends, parents, siblings, and other relatives. According to Boyd et al. (2001) both exchange program alumni and their references agreed that alumni were more sensitive to other cultures and more aware of global events after the exchange program. Both groups of respondents concurred that family, friends, and community of alumni were also more sensitive to other cultures and more aware of global events after the alumni's participation in an exchange program. In other words, the program seemed to have impacts beyond the direct participants—that is, ripple effects.

The most successful hosting experiences are based on a desire for mutual cultural exchange. A study by Owen (1971) found the relationship between exchange youth and host families to be complex and suggested better integration of the exchange youth into the school and community. Host families can offer exchange youth access to language development opportunities, cultural immersion, and community resources (Castaneda & Zirger, 2011). Several studies show that the mutual exchange of language and culture in these programs has a positive effect on the hosting family. There is greater cultural awareness among host families of foreign exchange youth (Boyd et al., 2001; Olberding & Olberding, 2010; T.E. Systems, 2002, 2005). Lowe, Askling, and Bates (1984) found that host families benefit from their participation in exchange programs through (a) personal development in their attitude, interest, and understanding of other cultures; (b) the development of close relationships between the family and exchange youth; (c) the development of an international network of people interested in global affairs; and (d) through an increased understanding of international relations resulting in increased civic mindedness. One study, conducted with German host parents between 2006 and 2007 about their experiences with a one-year stay of a guest student in their family

revealed that the guest families' experiences are determined not only by the character and sociocultural background of the guest student, but to a higher degree by the specific motives, wishes, and expectations of the host parents themselves (Weidemann& Blüml, 2009). Ensuring that host families are sufficiently prepared and supported to host and are driven by the desire for mutual cultural exchange may be the key factor for positive hosting and exchange outcomes.

From Weidemann, 2009: Action field and importance of social relationships as perceived by host families



Successful hosting implementation is predicated on clear and consistent communication. This is true both prior to the exchange student's arrival and during the homestay. Clear communication must exist on three fundamental levels: 1) from the program implementing partner to the host schools and host families; 2) from the host families to the students, and 3) from the host schools to the students. Clear communication ensures that each stakeholder in the exchange is aware of their roles and responsibilities and can head off any negative interactions or experiences by establishing shared expectations both before and during the homestay. The literature indicates that international students experience the greatest

difficulties integrating into their new school environments when there is little cultural understanding and empathy from school staff (Alsup and Egginton, 2001; Özturgut and Murphy, 2009). IPs should provide basic training and set expectations for host school staff to ensure that both students and staff experience the greatest benefit from the exchange. Moreover, implementing partners and the host schools corresponding to different host families should provide training and guidance prior to student arrival so that they are prepared for unique intercultural interactions and have established their own expectations with students in order to reduce miscommunications. A study done by Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart in 2002 among host families highlighted that most of the onus of communication and adaptation is on the exchange student themselves; but for a more positive and enriching exchange and hosting experience, this responsibility must be shared by the students, the home institution, and the in-country program administrators. The implementing programs and schools must involve host families in ongoing discussions regarding their roles and provide feedback for meaningful interaction.

Many host families continue to host repeatedly, seeing value in the experience. There are multiple reasons that families participate in exchange programs. These include having an interest and curiosity about others; wanting to have different experiences, help, or be recognized; reciprocating for a family member's participation in a similar program; providing an international experience for their own child; experiencing new family interactions; and alleviating empty nest syndrome (Arnold, 2012; Weidemann & Blüml, 2009).Individuals also participate in exchange programs by hosting to compensate for limitations that make personal travel difficult (France & Rogers, 2012). International Student Exchange and other exchange program implementers report that a large majority of those that host exchange students do so repeatedly. A study of international secondary exchange students in Hawaii and their host families indicated that many host families continued to host many times after their first experience, recognizing the value hosting brings to their family (Sustarsic, 2020). This finding indicates that there is a long-term potential benefit of engaging new host families who may host repeatedly, and therefore is a need for broader awareness of hosting opportunities and its benefits. Both increasing awareness and information about hosting may be needed to boost host family and host school engagement in exchange programming but also developing messaging that is compelling for those in the hosting communities.

The lack of financial compensation is a barrier to hosting, especially in less privileged households and communities. Although there is not extensive coverage in the literature of potential host families that may have participated but did not due to lack of funding, there is coverage of challenges of the added financial burden on families that do host. Much of the literature surrounding the lack of financial support for exchanges focused on the barriers of funding for students themselves, but there is discussion that a lack of financial assistance of incentives also results in a lack of diversity in hosting families. (Alsup & Eddington, 2001) and

(Williams & Johnson 2011; ECA Equity Assessment 2023). Lowe, Askling, and Bates (1984) examined the experience of host families of the Council of International Programs in which professionals from foreign nations come to the United States for a professional two-way exchange. The authors found that a common complaint among host families was the expense of hosting. When funding is mentioned in the literature, experts stress that the lack of financial support may restrict the kinds of families that elect to host exchange students to those who have the financial means to do so.

Lack of resources and cultural training for hosting is a barrier within U.S. educational institutions. The literature indicates that schools often have a lack of experience with engaging with international students and coordinating with families and program stakeholders to meet the needs of exchange students. International students not only have different cultural backgrounds and potential language barriers but may have differing educational needs and concerns. This requires school staff to be appropriately trained in intercultural interaction and communication. Özturgut and Murphy (2009) note that international students face the most difficulties when they cannot acquire the sufficient amount of information to help them adapt to the school environment and often feel that school staff do not have enough empathy towards their unique needs. Alsup and Egginton (2001) noted these same barriers in their examination of obstacles in international educational exchanges and recommended that schools should ideally have dedicated staff focused on supporting international students. As many public schools in the United States are under-resourced, this additional burden may be a barrier to participation as host schools.

Busy schedules, increased stress, and differing expectations are all challenges to hosting. The limited number of studies that focus on families hosting exchange youths contributes to the lack of understanding on this experience. Pitts's (2009) study on Americans studying abroad found that the exchange participants hoped to integrate into the host family as extensions of their own close relationships. The process of accepting an exchange youth into the home can upset family dynamics and contributes to an increase in the overall stress in a hosting family (Weidemann & Blüml, 2009). For some families, the perception of the exchange youth as a family member has significant positive effects, making them feel more supported and able to best integrate into their host families, schools, and communities (Mains & Rowles, 2013). Also, the integration of an exchange youth into the family sometimes results in shifts of reevaluation of the family's existing roles (Oliver, 2012). Busy host family and exchange student schedules are cited as common barriers to the development of strong host family-student relationships. Exchange students cite waking up for early class, having classes in the evenings, extracurriculars and different schedules from their host family as obstacles for strong relationship building (Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2013). When scheduling conflicts prevent an exchange student and host family from interacting on a personal level, students may feel alone in their new

environment. With minimal time shared together, students have a harder time connecting with their host family, a factor that is critical to enjoyment of the exchange (Hong, 2016). In the best cases, the host families are able to get past these challenges and adjust their schedules, roles, and expectations to make their guest's experience a richer encounter. In the most successful hosting family relationships, host siblings and parents created time and opportunity to share community events and culture with exchange students, as well as creating personal and family time to share themselves (Delong at al., 2011).

Social media and word of mouth are crucial for hosting recruitment. Strategic and effective use of social media and word-of-mouth stand out as valuable recruitment strategies. Programs and IPs that have visually appealing, clear, and sharable online content about hosting seem to have the most successful hosting infrastructure. The use of success stories, infographics, short-form videos, and other visually compelling and accessible content gain the most traction online. In addition, word-of-mouth communication that encourages new host families to apply and engage is particularly effective. Potential families are most likely to trust the positive experiences of people they know personally. The best paths for increasing awareness of hosting opportunities are likely through LCs, allies, and alumni that can use their existing networks to spread the word about opportunities to host and share their potential benefits. Another study of the Council of International Programs exchanges found that eighty percent of the family members learned about the program through a personal contact with someone who was involved with the program. This demonstrates the importance of networking that occurs at the local level during the recruitment of host families (Lowe, 1984). One study focused on a Japanese-U.S. student exchange with a homestay component revealed that in 100 percent of cases, it was either the mother of the family, or, less often, a child in the family that prompted them to commit to participating in an exchange program as a host family (Mains, 2016), which indicates that messaging campaigns should likely be directed to mothers as the main decision-makers.