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EDUCATION & FAMILY

Where are all the Cheerleaders?

KRISTI LANIER

School spirit doesn't matter to Felix Falkenberg. A sophomore at the Shanghai American School (SAS), he shakes his head at the idea. "At the student council elections, the people always say they'll get the school spirit up," he says. "I personally don't really care."

For others, school spirit is an essential part of the high school experience. At a recent SAS parent coffee, high school principal Tarek Razik takes write-in questions from parents. Grabbing the first card, he reads aloud, "Where has the school spirit gone?" "In order for something to go away, you have to have it in the first place," he jokes back.

School spirit is a deep-rooted tradition in America and, to an extent, in Britain and Australia as well. The product of a U.S. public high school, my image of school spirit includes pep assemblies, Friday night football games, and people loyal enough to wear matching sweaters in school colors by choice. But then school spirit is easy in America - schools are located by neighborhood or town and compete against one another in athletics, so natural geographic allegiances emerge.

But transplant the American or British educational systems into an international setting and some parts of them might not take.

That may be why school spirit doesn't translate for Falkenberg. He's going to an American school in China, but comes from Germany. His mother, Elke, explains that German schools don't offer after-school activities like sports - the nexus for most outpourings of pride.

Mix in students from over 30 countries and it makes sense why fostering school spirit is a source of frustration for SAS's Booster Club leader, parent Kristie Johnson. At the meeting she tells the assembled parents, "We'd have more school spirit if we had more support." In response to Johnson's lament that they couldn't muster enough volunteers for an upcoming event another parent responds, "But that Friday is dog license renewal day."

The exchange typifies the cultural confusion over school spirit. But where SAS is struggling to define where school spirit fits, another school, Concordia, has adopted a more come-what-may attitude. Admissions director Robert Hulse describes the school as a "pretty tight community, there's spirit but it stops short of a parochial thing."

It's not that Concordia doesn't encourage spirit-building, but, according to Hulse, Shanghai can't support full-blown, American-style school spirit. "In the States, it's a much more sophisticated system," he says. "Who's the best basketball team or who's won the football championship the last three years. If you're the champion, then you have a legitimate reason to say 'we're number one.'"

On the other end of the spectrum is newcomer Dulwich College. The British school organizes students into houses and they compete in weekly activities for points. "Think the Harry Potter concept," says marketing director Wyatt Cameron. Maybe it's the Hogwarts connection, but this British brand of school spirit seems to have seized the student body. "They go nuts," Cameron says.

Dulwich may have a few advantages in the spirit department, however. It's new, it's small in comparison, and most of its student body comes from the same neighborhood, Jinqiao. Instead of hopping a bus for a long ride to and from school, many kids walk or bike making participation in after-school activities easy. Likewise, many parents hang around campus to chat. "What might help us is that we're a neighborhood school. There's easy access to the school, people will linger. It cultivates that sense of ownership," Cameron says.

Shanghai's rapid pace of change may be an overused metaphor, but it certainly explains the uneven evolution of international school spirit. As Razik tells the SAS parents: "We're in a school where school spirit is not yet a tradition. We have to take responsibility to start the tradition."



SCHOOLREPORT

