

## N.C. firm sending foreign teachers into Maryland schools

By DAVID DISHNEAU, Associated Press Writer

HAGERSTOWN, Md. -- Last year, Diana Marco taught English in her native Venezuela. This fall, she'll teach Spanish in Hagerstown as one of 10 foreign teachers hired for hard-to-fill positions in Washington County public schools.

In a telephone interview from her home in Maracay, Marco, 32, said she is a little apprehensive about moving alone from a city of nearly 1.3 million to the western Maryland town of 37,000 for a three-year commitment.

"I don't know nobody there," she said. "I don't know how much I have to pay for gas, a car." And she isn't sure how much of her approximately \$37,000 salary - more than 10 times what an experienced teacher earns in Venezuela - is needed for housing, food and other necessities in the United States, where living costs are much higher.

But she'll be warmly welcomed by Washington County school administrators, who say they are pleased to be getting a teacher who will bring 10 years of experience and an international perspective to E. Russell Hicks Middle School.

With Maryland facing critical teacher shortages in seven subject areas, Washington County has turned with the state's encouragement to the Visiting International Faculty Program, run by a North Carolina firm that places foreign teachers in U.S. classrooms using cultural exchange visas.

VIF is the nation's largest single sponsor of nonimmigrant teachers - those who come to this country on work or cultural exchange visas - according to a 2003 study by the National Education Association, the nation's biggest teachers union. As many as 10,000 nonimmigrant teachers work in U.S. public primary and secondary schools, according to the report.

School districts around the country, including Cecil County and the city of Baltimore in Maryland, have used foreign teachers for years to fill slots, especially in language, math and science. But Washington County is the first Maryland school district to work with VIF, which had about 1,800 teachers in 10 states last year and has a reputation for supplying experienced, well-qualified instructors.

"The feedback we've gotten from colleagues around the country is that they do a pretty thorough job of vetting their candidates," said John Smeallie, assistant state superintendent for certification and accreditation with the Maryland State Department of Education.

Smeallie praised Washington County's participation in what he regards as a pilot project with statewide implications.

"The need nationally is so great, that for the foreseeable future, there's going to be a need for creative strategies to fill vacancies," he said. "We are continually thinking, truly, of reducing barriers and hurdles to strong teachers becoming certified to work in Maryland."

Despite the state's efforts to grow more teachers at home, its most recent Maryland Teacher Staffing Report, published last August, projected a statewide staffing pool of 5,783 for the 2004-05 school year, or 403 less than the projected 6,186 new hires. The report declared critical shortages in career and technology education; computer science; English for speakers of other languages; foreign languages; mathematics; science; and special education.

Five weeks before the Aug. 24 start of classes for this school year, Washington County officials said their hiring of 10 VIF teachers still left about 30 teaching positions unfilled.

"There aren't as many people choosing teaching as a profession," said Patricia Abernethy, the county's deputy superintendent for instruction.

Local and state teachers union leaders said the hiring of foreign teachers reflects inadequate pay in U.S. schools, which they said deters some people from choosing the field and causes others to leave the profession after a few years.

"I don't think it takes a rocket scientist to understand that if the faculty in the school or the system is constantly turning over, you can never get ahead of the curve and provide the kind of program that our children need," said Patricia Ann Foerster, president of the Maryland State Teachers Association.

She also expressed concern about a proposed regulatory change allowing the state to accept foreign teachers' home-country professional certification and documented experience as a substitute for a Maryland teaching certificate.

"I think parents and other consumers of public education are likely to ask the question, 'What does the professional certification from another country mean and how comparable is that to what we expect in the United States and specifically Maryland?'" Foerster said. "These are questions that clearly need to be answered, and I'm not sure I've heard an answer to that question."

Public school administrators in Loudoun County, Va., which used 50 VIF teachers last year, have no such qualms, said Wayde Byard, the system's spokesman.

"We're looking for highly qualified teachers; we don't care where they're from," he said.

Like Washington County, about 70 miles west of Baltimore, Loudoun County is growing rapidly and has found VIF a good source for some of the 800 new teachers it hires annually, Byard said. The number of VIF teachers in the district has grown steadily over six years, he said.

Byard' advice to other school districts considering VIF: "Just have an open mind. Realize that we live in a multicultural world and this helps introduce children to that."

VIF is run by the Center for International Education Inc., a for-profit company in Chapel Hill, N.C. Spokesman Edward "Ned" Glascock portrayed it as a global friendship program that happens to fill a business niche. "We are a cultural-exchange program. Our program isn't designed to fix the teacher shortage," he said.

Glascock said schools pay VIF \$11,500 per teacher to cover the costs of the teacher's benefits and the program's administration expenses. The teachers can stay no more than three years under the cultural-exchange visa, known as J-1 visa, which is administered by the U.S. State Department and the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The schools pay VIF teachers the same salary as those with comparable experience in their district, but they generally don't provide VIF teachers with benefits and they don't have to make Social Security contributions for the first 18 months.

Still, with the administrative fee factored in, each VIF teacher in Washington County will cost the district about \$1,300 a year more than a nonimmigrant teacher, district spokeswoman Carol Mowen said.