

School Watch;

Exchange student enrolls, but troubles may continue

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Body

On her first day as a Fayette County **student**, Anastasia Kotelnikova attended a pep rally.

After **school** board members voted at a special meeting last week to admit her, Anastasia's host parents Mary Anne and Verlon Osborne took her to Starr's Mill High **School**, **enrolled** her in the ninth grade and took her to class. The 14-year-old Russian girl arrived during fourth period and seemed a bit nervous, but teachers arranged for someone to accompany her to the rest of her classes and to the pep rally.

Now, neither the Osborns nor the **school** board is exactly cheering. The board has directed Superintendent Dave Brotherton to send letters of protest to immigration officials while the Osborns' lawyer tries to ensure Anastasia can remain here. "There are several reasons to be concerned," board member Connie Hale said. She and board chairman Woody Shelnett initially voted against allowing Anastasia to **enroll** because her registration materials were submitted late, and she is younger than U.S. immigration law allows for her type of **student** visa. She turns 15, the required age, on Oct. 15. "Somebody has messed up," Shelnett said.

He and Hale changed their votes only after Brotherton reminded them of federal guidelines mandating public **school** systems educate any child living in their districts.

"We were caught between a rock and a hard place," Hale said.

The board decided Brotherton should write strongly worded letters to immigration officials expressing their frustration at how Anastasia's placement was handled. She arrived on Aug. 23, the day before **school** started. ASA International, the company that placed her, submitted her paperwork late and started making travel arrangements without having the **school** system's permission to **enroll** Anastasia. The board voted to sever its ties with the company.

Ellen Jackson, ASA's local coordinator, said she knew the deadline had passed when she brought in Anastasia's registration materials. But Jackson said the **school** system should not have accepted the registration at all if it was going to turn down the girl.

Board member Bob Todd called that a foolish argument. "I am angry at the way it's been done and the attempt to place blame on this **school** system," he said.

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Todd suggested Brotherton send letters of protest about the matter. School board members of the future, Todd said, will have to decide whether to do business with ASA International again. Hale said the situation could sour future boards on the idea of having foreign students. There are three other exchange students in the system this year. "The taxpayers of this county are going to educate this child," Hale said, referring to Anastasia. "We have a policy, and now we're having to waive this policy. Why do we have a policy if we're not going to adhere to it? It's pointless. Things like this may cause a board to say, 'It's been nice, but maybe we don't need any foreign students in the system.'" Hale noted that when she became a U.S. citizen in 1971, she had to pass a citizenship test and complete a number of forms. "I had to cross every 't' and dot every 'i,'" she said.

Although both are clearly not happy with the situation, both Hale and Shelnutt have emphasized several times that they have nothing personally against Anastasia. "Please don't misunderstand," Hale said. "I feel sorry for the child. It's the adults I blame. (ASA International) put us in a very difficult position. It was very, very awkward." The board enacted a policy several years ago requiring foreign students registration materials to be in by June because exchange students had been showing up at the last minute, Brotherton said.

Hale said she feared the board was setting a precedent by allowing Anastasia to enroll. "I'm not on a witch hunt here," she said. Noting Fayette's swelling student population, she said she worried that without an exchange-student policy in place, "We'd have all kinds of them coming in at the last minute."

After the meeting, Shelnutt remained in the board room chatting with Anastasia and the Osborns. He asked Anastasia about her hometown, what classes she had taken and about Russia in general. "Kind of chilly over there, isn't it?" he asked. He and the Osborns also talked about their adopted Russian daughter, Anya. Then Shelnutt turned to Anastasia and asked, "Are you ready to go to school?" She smiled and nodded. "I hope you get your paperwork straightened out so you can finish the year," Shelnutt said.

Graphic

Photo :

Off to school: Host parent Verlon Osborn hugs Russian exchange student

Anastasia Kotelnikova on Friday after the Fayette Board of Education

reluctantly voted to allow her to attend Starr's Mill High School. /

MARLENE KARAS / Staff

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