What Districts Should Know About Recruiting J-1 International Teachers

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Statewide English Learner Administrators Conference

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Program Origin

The BridgeUSA Program is administered at the federal level by the U.S. Department of State (DOS) to promote international cultural and educational exchange. ISBE is designated by DOS as a program sponsor for the exchange visitor teacher category.

Program participants are “exchange visitors” and enter the U.S. on the J-1 visa, which provides employment authorization for activities strictly related to their program category. The program is primarily focused on intercultural exchange and is temporary, with a maximum duration of five years. Teachers must demonstrate an intent to return to their home country at the end of the program.

ISBE has been a designated program sponsor since 1999. We partner with Illinois school districts and international educational organizations to facilitate the recruitment and placement of highly qualified teachers in public schools across the state in grades preK–12.

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J-1 Visa Basics

- Visiting international teachers (VITs) apply for the J-1 visa at the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in their home country after the program sponsor has issued the Form DS-2019.
  - Spouses and children under age 21 may accompany them on the J-2 dependent visa.
- The initial program duration is three years with an option to extend for an additional two years pending DOS approval. Program may not be extended beyond five years.
- J-1 status provides work authorization strictly related to PreK–12 teaching in the host school district.
  - J-2s of working age may apply for employment authorization (EAD card).
- VITs are expected to return to their home country at the conclusion of the program.

J-1 Teacher Eligibility Requirements

- DOS administers the Exchange Visitor Program (EVP) under federal regulations (22 CFR Part 62).
- To qualify for a J-1 visa as an exchange teacher (22 CFR 62.24), applicants must:
  - Meet the qualifications for teaching in primary or secondary schools in home country of legal residence.
  - Be working as a teacher at the time of application with at least two years of experience teaching full-time or have completed an advanced degree within one year of application and have at least two years of experience within the past eight years.
  - Possess a degree equivalent to a U.S. bachelor's degree (or higher) in education or a field related to the content area in which they intend to teach.
  - Satisfy the teaching eligibility standards of the U.S. state in which they will teach.
  - Be of good reputation and character.
  - Come to the U.S. temporarily as a full-time teacher of record in a primary or secondary school.
  - Possess sufficient proficiency in the English language to function in U.S. classrooms and to navigate daily life.

ELS-VIT Licensure

- All J-1 teachers in Illinois are eligible to apply for the Educator License with Stipulations – Visiting International Teacher (ELS-VIT).
- VIT applicants who do not yet have an SSN may submit ISBE Form 83-92B to request a temporary ID number to create their record in the Educator Licensure Information System.
  - A copy of an initial offer letter from the Illinois school/district is required.
- ESL, bilingual, and world language endorsements are awarded for PreK–12 based on the language(s) of instruction of the applicant's teacher preparation program(s).
  - Additional grade level and content area endorsements are based on area(s) of teacher preparation as stated on foreign credential evaluation.
  - ILTS testing not required; cannot add subsequent endorsements after issuance.
- ELS-VIT is valid for five years and is nonrenewable.

ELS-VIT Application Requirements

- ISBE-approved out-of-country credential evaluation
  - Provides U.S. equivalencies for degree programs and teacher preparation
- Proof of English proficiency:
  - Bachelor's degree (or higher) with major in English, or language of instruction was in English
  - Cambridge English Assessment: CEFR level B2 or higher
  - TOEFL before Jan. 21, 2026: Reading – 18; Listening – 17; Speaking – 20; Writing – 17
  - TOEFL after Jan. 21, 2026: Score of 4 or higher in each section
  - Global Seal of Biliteracy with "working fluency" level or higher in English
- Application for VIT Endorsement (ISBE Form 73-03F)
  - District's attestation that each J-1 teacher hired meets ELS-VIT requirements, has a clear criminal background check from their home country, and the anticipated teaching position offered

Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) Requirement

- Districts must maintain a valid IGA with ISBE to host VITs, as required in the Illinois Administrative Code (23 Ill. Adm. Code 25.92).
- The IGA template was updated in 2025, replacing previous versions and extending its validity through June 30, 2030.
- Although both IGAs are executed between the host school district and ISBE, they serve distinct purposes: one governs participation in ISBE's J-1 sponsor program, while the other applies to participation through a third-party J-1 sponsor.
  - Districts are welcome to participate in both ISBE's and other third-party sponsors' programs concurrently.
  - To request the IGA for review or renewal, please email ExchangeTeachers@isbe.net.
  - Districts are encouraged to schedule a virtual meeting with ISBE's VIT program coordinator prior to their first year participating in the program.

J-1 Program Sponsors in Illinois

- ISBE is the J-1 program sponsor for VITs who apply through its established international partner organizations.
- Two Illinois school districts have their own J-1 sponsor designation: Chicago Public Schools and Peoria Public Schools.
- There are also third-party J-1 sponsor organizations that may place exchange teachers in Illinois.
  - These programs are typically supported by teacher application fees and may also include fees for host schools/districts.
  - Third-party sponsors require a letter of no objection from ISBE.



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Considerations for Program Participation

- ISBE's VIT Program
  - No fees for districts to participate.
  - Access to established teacher recruitment partnerships and J-1 visa sponsorship.
  - Districts required to provide transportation from nearest major airport and at least seven days of temporary housing upon each ISBE-sponsored VIT's first arrival to Illinois.
- Third-party sponsor programs
  - May assist with teacher recruitment or may focus solely on J-1 visa sponsorship.
  - May assess fees to host school/district and to teachers.
  - May allow "self-placement," where a teacher can independently request visa sponsorship after securing a job offer, even if the sponsor has no established partnership with the host school/district.

Considerations for Recruitment and Onboarding

- Districts should be familiar with both the J-1 teacher eligibility requirements and ELS-VIT licensure requirements for screening VIT candidates in the interview process.
- Districts should be prepared to provide additional support to new VIT hires prior to their arrival through regular communication and/or virtual meetings.
  - Detailed onboarding that explains all relevant benefits and salary reductions (TRS, taxes, insurance, etc.) is required.
- VITs must be employed as a full-time teacher of record, and compensation must be commensurate with their experience and equivalent credentials in accordance with district salary scale as with any other licensed teacher.
- Districts must have new VITs complete fingerprinting, a criminal background check, and an employment history screening, as required with any new teacher hires.
  - State and federal criminal background check (105 ILCS 5/10-21.9)
  - Faith's Law, employment history screening (105 ILCS 5/22-94(c))

Additional Support for New VITs

- Districts must provide mentorship and professional development throughout each VIT's program.
- Districts are encouraged to:
  - Assist with temporary transportation, where to reliably purchase a car, apply for a driver's license, etc.
  - Guide VITs to the nearest Social Security Administration office to apply for their SSN.
  - Provide local resources for securing long-term housing, opening a bank account, getting a cellphone plan, setting up internet and utilities, locating where to buy furniture, etc.

ISBE's VIT Program

J-1 Visa Matters

- Issue Form DS-2019 and maintain exchange visitor records in federal SEVIS database.
- Advise VITs and host school districts on J-1 visa regulations.

Licensure

- Ensure VIT applicants meet all program requirements and will qualify for an Illinois educator license.
- ELS-VIT licensure endorsements: bilingual, world language, ESL

Partnerships

- Recruit qualified teachers through established international partner organizations.
- Place VITs for interviews with participating host school districts.

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Current International Partners



Spain: Ministry of Education



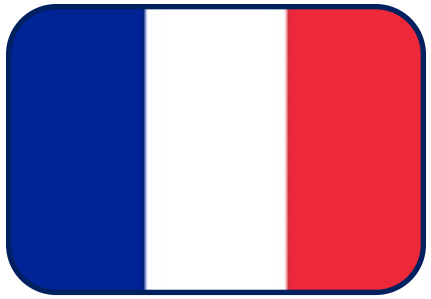
Mexico: Medina-Ramos Global Education Group



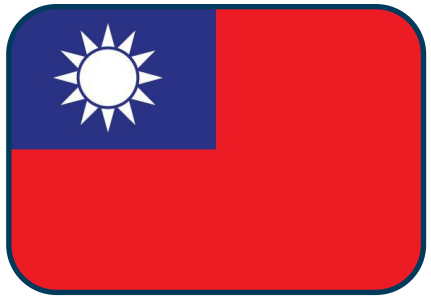
Morocco: Teachers of English Association of Morocco (TEAM)



Poland: Ministry of Education



France: Academic Region of Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes



Taiwan: Ministry of Education

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Current VIT Host School Districts and Charters

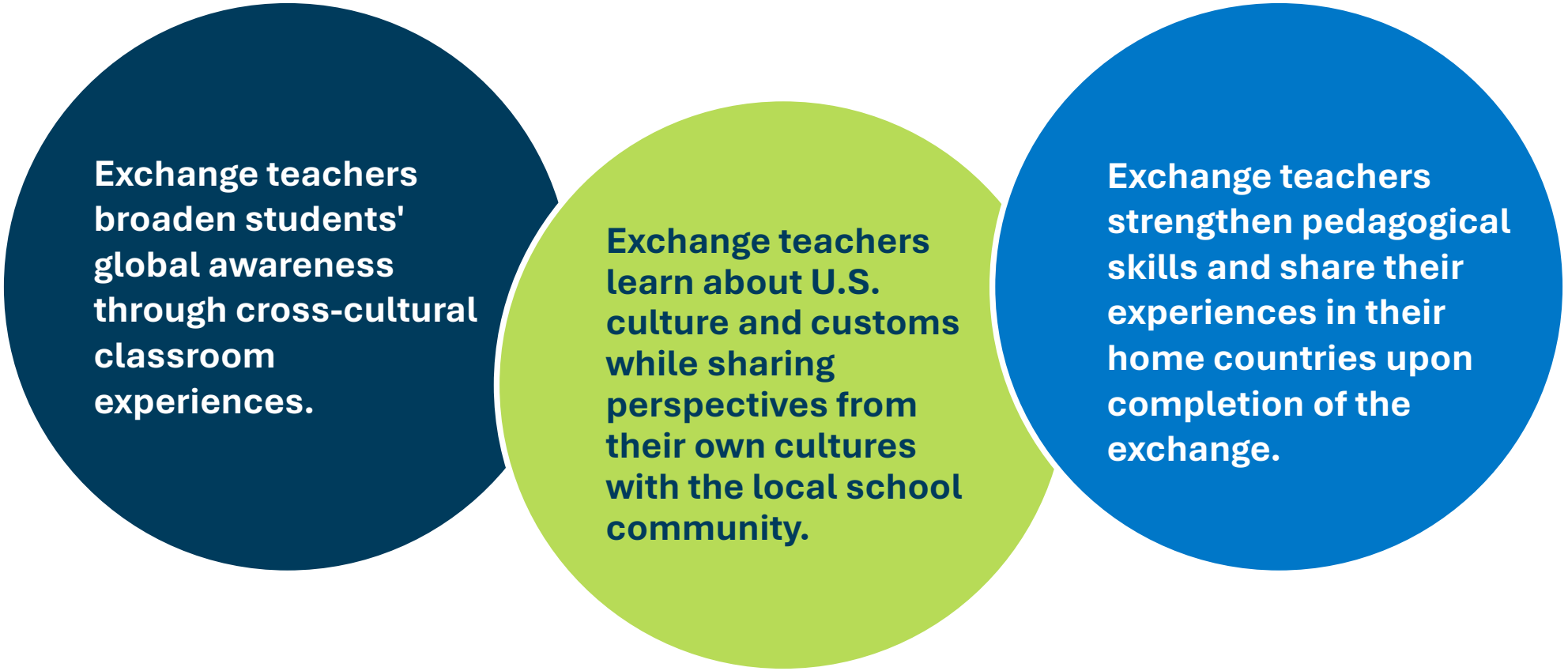
Beach Park CCSD 3*
Beardstown SD 15
Belvidere CUSD 100*
Big Hollow D38
Bloomington D87*
Carpentersville CUSD 300*
Cary SD 26
Champaign Unit 4 SD*
Cicero SD 99*
Crystal Lake CCSD 47*
DeKalb D428
East Aurora USD 131*
Elgin SD U-46 *
Elk Grove Village CCSD 59
Elmhurst CUSD 205
Freeport SD 145
Grayslake CCSD 46*
Harvard CUSD 50*
Hazel Crest SD 152.5
Joliet SD 86
Kankakee SD 111
Knoxville CUSD 202
Learn Charter Schools
Mahomet-Seymour CUSD 3
Monmouth-Roseville CUSD 238*
North Chicago SD 187*
Palatine CCSD 15
Prairie Hills SD 144
Proviso Township HSD 209
Rantoul City Schools 137*
Rhodes SD 84.5
Rochelle CCSD 231
Rockford SD 205
Round Lake CUSD 116
Schaumburg CCSD 54
Steger SD 194*
Summit SD 104*
Urbana SD 116*
Vienna HSD 13-3
Waukegan CUSD 60*
Woodland CCSD 50*
Woodstock CUSD 200*
Yorkville CUSD 115
Zion-Benton Township HSD 126

**Districts with new VITs starting SY 2026-27*



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Benefits of Participating



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Questions?

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