

Russian Teens Find Surprises in U.S. Schools

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

August 30, 2012



Aleksandra Voronova, of Fokino, Primorye region, standing outside her high school in Raleigh, North Carolina.

School started early for a group of Russian teens spending their first year away from home in the United States — and it came with a few surprises.

Yulia Sherstyuk, a native of Veliky Novgorod who's living in Soldotna, Alaska, was one of the many students to remark that U.S. high schools are more informal than Russian schools.

"In Russia, we are not allowed to eat or drink in the classroom. Here, it's alright," she said. "Also, in American schools, students can choose their classes, which is really great!"

Yekaterina Bubnova was surprised that students in her high school in St. Charles, Missouri, didn't stand when their teacher entered the room and that the teachers told the students about themselves.

The social hierarchy, with freshmen at the bottom and seniors at the top, struck Anna Filipchik, based in Alton, Illinois. "The whole school is divided between freshmen and those who are disgusted by and hate them," she said. "I'm happy to be a senior."

The school year starts Saturday across Russia, but it began in mid- to late August for many of the 244 Russians studying in towns across the United States as part of the U.S. government's FLEX exchange program, which started in 1992. The elite group of Russian 15- and 16-year-olds are ambitious, energetic, and sharp — quite possibly Russia's future leaders — and the skills, perspective and confidence they bring back could change the country from the ground up.

The Moscow Times has been following the teens from the beginning of the rigorous selection process last November and will continue until the end of the school year next summer.

Students who volunteered to share their first-day-of-school experience with The Moscow Times declared the day a smashing success, despite moments of chaos and awkwardness.

Aleksandra Voronova, a native of the Far East town of Fokino, who is living in Raleigh, North Carolina, was struck by the size of her high school. "There are 2,348 students!" she said. "Everybody was running to his class, so it was very chaotic in the morning."

The students were "very friendly and easy going," she said, adding that the music band welcomed her as a member of the family.

The academics didn't disappoint either. "I didn't notice the last bell because it was so interesting to listen to the teacher," she said. "I can't wait for the next day at school!"

No details were too trivial to mention. "The school bells don't ring, they squeak!" said Bubnova, the student in St. Charles, Missouri.

Students' host families lent a helping hand when it came to navigating sprawling school complexes, making introductions, and opening lockers, which are rare in Russian schools.

Yevgenia Rudenko's host siblings took her to school a day early to show her around. When she struggled to open her locker, they drew her a diagram of the lock.

Even though the students are selected in part due to their English-language skills, it wasn't always easy to understand what was being said. "The hardest part was understanding my classmates' speech and pronunciation, because they speak very fast and use special slang words," Bubnova said.

Program administrator Valerie Frank described the first two to three months of the program as an adjustment period. "Everyone's kind of in the settling in phase right now, meeting their host families, getting registered at school, picking classes," she said by telephone.

Homesickness and other discomforts can strike at any moment, something program administrators say they are well-equipped to handle.

"Quiet students sometimes have trouble adjusting to a host family that's loud and boisterous. Or they might think that somebody is laughing at their accent, or have problems with

the food," Frank said, adding that most problems could be resolved by a simple conversation or two.

But despite the rigorous selection process for students and host families, and additional support provided by regional placement organizations, about 5 percent of the students will leave the program early for various reasons, which Frank says is normal for programs of this type.

She added that it's difficult to predict who will succeed and who won't. "It's just a mystery factor," she said. "If you go back and look at the applications, you find that theirs were some of the best."

Students typically begin to thrive after the settling-in period is over. Many of them get involved in their communities and schools, from drama clubs to Olympics of the Mind, even going on to compete in regional competitions.

Once their eyes open to how amazing this or that activity can be, anything is possible, Frank said.

But these thoughts seemed far from the minds of the Russian teens on their first day of school.

Several were surprised to hear that many classmates have never traveled outside the United States or met a Russian, but they were delighted by their new friends' curiosity.

"Honestly, I didn't expect that so many of my classmates would be interested in all this information about my country, my exchange program, and my life," said Alena Gerachchenko, a Volgograd native studying in Raytown, Missouri.

Others were equally stunned to hear Russian spoken back to them. "Some students who study Russian were eager to show me their skills. It was rather funny, but I liked it," said Ilya Tolmachev in Juneau, Alaska. "Everybody was very talkative, supportive and open. I like these people!"

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