

EDUCATION: SCHOOLING

When expatriates are informed they have to move to the UK the major question asked is whether they should place their children into an International or British school system. There is always much debate and indeed, as the question has been asked over the last two years of which way the British system is headed, much has been made of the schools which now run the International Baccalaureate and many top British schools are now either undertaking the IB alongside A levels or indeed allowing the IB to stand alone and abolishing A levels.

The American and International Schools

It is true to say that all of the American and International Schools here in the UK maintain programmes to a very high standard. In London itself you will be surprised to find that there are a number of American and International Schools these are: The American School of London (ASL), Southbank International School, The International School of London (ISL), Woodside Park International and the International Community School (ICS).

In the Home Counties you have the ACS Schools Hillingdon International (Middlesex), Egham International and Cobham International (Surrey), TASIS, The American School in England (Surrey) and Marymount (Kingston upon Thames).

It is essential to realise that these schools will request reports from a student's former school along with the application and in many cases comments from current teachers in their assessment of a child before a place can be offered.

Essentially the first step must be to register as quickly as possible as soon as one realises that a move to the UK is going to happen. Placing the children on the school lists must be the first goal and one has to realise that a delay can see a child go from having a possible place to finding themselves on a long waiting list – demand is high and delay can be critical.

One needs to ascertain which system the schools undertake. In reality some will only

undertake the American Preparatory Programme, some only the International Baccalaureate Programme, some the British or a combination of a number of them.

As more and more families travel throughout the world and children become “global nomads” it is essential that one establishes early on which would be the best type of education for one's child – and one should always ask oneself where you might be in three to four years time because in many ways that will help in establishing what would be best for one's children.

All of these International Schools pride themselves on their placements to Universities, and with the right school, the path to Oxford, Cambridge, Yale or Harvard is very much an achievable goal, be it in the American, International or British system.

Each of these International schools outlines their programme on a website and the first task should be to see what they have to offer:

American School of London www.asl.org

ACS International Schools – Cobham, Egham,

Hillingdon www.acs-england.co.uk

Southbank International School –

www.southbank.org

TASIS – The American School in England –

www.tasis.com

International School of London –

www.islondon.com

Marymount International School –

www.marymount.kingston.sch.uk

International Community School –

www.skola.co.uk/ics/index.htm

North London International School (currently known as Woodside Park International)

www.wpis.org

Likewise if there are learning issues, one might wish to consider Centre Academy where smaller class sizes and more individual tuition are available – www.centreademy.com

If one feels that the American or International system may not be the best route then firstly one must also look at the differences between the British and International systems and what is currently happening in the UK.

British system v The International Baccalaureate

The late High Mistress of St Paul's School for Girls in London (Elizabeth Diggory) indicated that she believed GCSE's to be a waste of her girls' time. Quickly followed was the comment made by the Head Master of Eton (Tony Little), indicating that he thought them to be like Boy Scouts collecting badges.

Schools such as Sevenoaks in Kent, which for a number of years had the IB (International Baccalaureate) working side by side with the A levels, have now abolished A levels completely and their students will in future only take the IB. Eton along with North London Collegiate and Godolphin and Latymer have announced their intention to introduce the IB joining schools such as Kings College School Wimbledon, Oakham and Haileybury all of whom have already established outstanding results. Schools such as Winchester are rumoured to be following suit. Indeed Eton have gone one step further in that their fifth year students no longer take GCSE's but the boys go straight to AS levels. It is expected that both St Paul's Boys and St Paul's Girls may possibly follow this route before too long.

Students whose parents are continually moving around the world because of their profession (i.e. the expatriate nomad) will find the IB is clearly the best solution. A child is able to transfer easily into any school, which undertakes the IB, and follow a curriculum, which allows them to continually progress.

Many parents who live and work in ever changing areas within the UK itself also find difficulty when trying to change schools for their 15/16 year olds. They too discover different Examination Board requirements and different syllabus areas within subjects, factors which make changing school at this time in the pupil's life very distressing.

It is often asked what the problem seems to be with the GCSE and A level system in comparison with the IB. One example of how difficulties may arise is in the case of a child moving from abroad, to the UK with their parents at 15 years of age. The GCSE programme starts at Year 10 for a 14 year old and is a two-year programme involving considerable course work. That course

work is so demanding that no top school in the UK will allow any student to enter their programme after the half-term of the first term of Year 10. The very nature of the course does not allow for such a late start and would be poor educational practice. Thus for a 15 year old there are two options:

1. To start year 10 again with the 14 year olds and begin the system at the correct point – although this has worked for some, the social implications here are self-evident and can be for the pupil distressing, disruptive and undesirable
2. Undertake the IB where no such problems arise and movement into the system is simple. Pupils will have a year pre-IB preparing for the Diploma. At this point it must be stated that the IB is not an easy option, it is very academic and any school which undertakes the programme will wish to see that the student is capable of achieving a good mark.

Some Important Points Of Which To Be Aware

Most British schools abroad start their academic year in February undertaking the IGCSE programme. If a student completes their programme in February and as a 14/15 year old then moves with parents to the UK they will have already missed six months of the course and not be able to slot into the system; it would be necessary to begin the programme once again. Likewise the content of the syllabus used by the IGCSE is unlike that of the GCSE and therefore incompatible.

A 16 year old arriving with no GCSE qualifications and who wants to do A levels will be required by the top schools to acquire some GCSE results during the following year before returning or alternatively embarking upon the IB.

Parents who, for many reasons wish to give their children the "British Experience", must be sensitive to the needs of a 16 year old within an educational structure. Experience suggests that if a pupil is already established, for example, in the American High School Programme it is desirable that they should be allowed to complete it, if this is at all possible. Many children, at this time, do

not make the transition easily and although some do, it is important that the position in which they find themselves at an already emotional stage in their lives be carefully considered.

The question every parent should ideally ask before they move their children into any educational system is “Where will I be in three to four years time?” The answer is critical and the choice of education for the child should reflect the answer.

The IB with the Primary Years Programme (3-11), Middle Years Programme (12-15) and Diploma (16-18) allows flexibility within a demanding academic environment, especially for the family who by the very nature of their transitory lifestyle desire to provide a sound educational base for their children.

At the moment there are numerous schools undertaking the IB Diploma in the UK but only four, at present, provide all three programmes and are located in or around London:

Southbank International School –

www.southbank.org

ACS Egham International School –

www.acs-england.co.uk (Egham Campus)

International School of London –

www.islondon.org

Woodside Park International –

www.wpis.org

One other offers two programmes:

Marymount (Girls only) –

www.marymount.kingston.sch.uk MYP and Diploma

The IB website can be found at www.ibo.org

The most helpful and important move a family can make is to seek professional advice.

The system is changing and all pupils are individuals, what might be suitable for one child may not be right for another.

The British examination system of GCSE and A Level may not necessarily be the right one for your child’s needs and consideration of all the options is advisable.

The British System

It is widely accepted that the British Independent Education System remains second to none and therefore finding places in what are considered the top schools is not without hard work and

research. It is a surprising piece of knowledge for parents to learn when they plan on moving to the UK that the best schools require pupils to be registered at birth.

For the expatriate coming into the country this is probably somewhat astounding as well as another challenge to be faced. In short, the sooner that one undertakes the education search the better and as soon as one knows that a move is likely, it is imperative to seek help and advice. At least 7% of the population in the UK is educated within the Independent Sector.

In London there are approximately 60,000 children each day who travel across London to go to school; many children do not go to school within easy distance of their home but at an establishment where parents believe they will be academically challenged. To give some idea of the situation, some children in Kensington will catch the train from Victoria to attend Dulwich College south of the river; at least an hour’s journey each way.

The available systems are:

Senior (11-18 for Girls and 13-18 for boys)

Preparatory (7/8-11 for Girls and 7/8-13 for Boys)

Pre-Prep (4-7/8)

Nursery.

We will deal with each, beginning with the youngest.

Nursery

It is most important that children are placed into Nursery from the age of two and a half. Unlike other countries this is not a play process and although elements of experimental and educational play are involved, it is conducted in a structured and learning environment. In the UK, at this age, the Reading and Writing process will begin.

It might, to many, coming from outside the UK seem extraordinary that the most prestigious and successful ‘Pre-Preps’ will require a child of only four years of age to be tested in order to obtain a place – but they do and delay can be critical.

In one of the busiest areas, registration is a priority. In Kensington and Chelsea there are 51 Nurseries at the moment and all are fully

subscribed with waiting lists. Places do become available and it is essential to be fully conversant with the localised movement. New and potentially good nurseries are regularly being launched but those with established reputations, naturally have long waiting lists. Local knowledge and a reputable consultant can provide sound advice in these areas.

Pre-Preps

Some Nurseries are part of Pre-Preps and indeed some Pre-Preps are part of established Preparatory Schools. Like nurseries these are in high demand and it is important to register for a place as soon as possible.

Head teachers may decide not to grant an interview with parents if they do not have a place available. If they have a waiting list already and offer to place you on this list, it could be that the number is already some 40 strong.

It is prudent that parents do not expect of right a definite place. Parents should be realistic in a competitive environment and understand that their first, second or even third choice may not be an option.

Without wishing to paint a pessimistic picture it would be sensible for parents to be aware of some of the established and long standing situations. In the top Pre-Preps such as Wetherby for boys and Pembridge Hall for girls it is standard procedure and a requirement to register within 24 hours and 14 days of the birth respectively of a prospective candidate. Places after that are extremely rare. Every child of 5 years of age has to be in full-time education; however State Education now exists from the age of 3.

The Independent Sector is in consequence under heavy pressure and again space is limited.

All children will normally be tested at 4 years of age to see if their ability is acceptable for a place. The level of education at these schools is high, with the aim being to gain a place at an established Prep School. In some schools an Educational Psychologist will undertake the testing.

Prep Schools (Preparatory)

Prep schools start at ages 7 or 8 depending on the history of the school. They run through to 11 and 13 respectively for girls and boys. They have to

ensure their educational standard is strong – their success or failure depends on their placing their charges in the top secondary schools.

At Colet Court (Prep for St Paul's Boys) the entrance examination at 6+ for entry at 7 years of age, will require a prospective candidate to be able to discuss some 15 (fifteen) books, at interview with the Head, that he has read. This is a somewhat daunting but not impossible task for a bright six year old. They will usually be examined in English, Maths and Verbal Reasoning. There are later points of entry, at 10 or 11 years of age, to some of these schools but once again we ask parents to be aware of the fact that there are some 118 students who will compete for just 11 places.

A child who is 10 for a girl and 12 for a boy will find a place in a Prep School quite difficult to find. Entry at this late stage would mean a very short preparation time before they have to take entrance examinations for a Senior School and any Prep School, who guards their academic reputation closely, would be very wary of that happening.

Independent Senior Schools

These schools are by their very nature well established with a long history, many going back even further than the first English Parliament in the 13th century. The top schools will have entry points for girls at 11 and boys at 13 and then not again until the sixth form at 16. In the case of Eton and St Paul's, a child not registered by ten and a half will not be allowed to sit for entry at 13.

The North London Girls' Day Schools require registration in the November before the set birthday for entry and will sit examinations in the January following.

Some of these schools will allow the entry examinations to be taken overseas if they are assured that a child's current school can provide a strict examination process. This does allow some flexibility and a child is able to work in a known environment. Some schools will require pupils are brought here for testing and it is essential that the child is allowed a couple of days, at least, to recover from tiredness and flight fatigue.

Independent Schools are very much governed by League Table results and these are produced on their success rate at GCSE and A level. Results are published annually and are available to all. It is essential to understand that the grading is for 5 GCSE passes at grades A* - C; somewhere like St Paul's Girls' School has a pass rate of 75%+ of their girls obtaining A* and A grade in all of their examinations, which for some may number 11 or 12 examinations.

Anomalies Of Which To Be Aware

Parents need to be aware that some top schools still have Saturday morning school with sport in the afternoon. This is very much part of the British system and the ethos of the school. This is a non-negotiable part of the school week. If you wish to have your child attend a particular school, but want the weekends for family time, then it is vital one checks the school's requirements.

At its best the British System of Education is one of the finest and it therefore follows academic standards are very high, as is the level of expectation from pupils.

Some parents are rather astonished when they are told that their child coming from another system will possibly be behind the British system; it is not a condemnation of child, system or country, simply that we do things in a different order here. Particularly in Maths and English students may find themselves struggling in the examinations. Parents to whom this is indicated would again be sensible to take advice before committing themselves to the "British Experience". On a positive note, numerous schools will wish to have a cross section of pupils within their establishment and as always, will invariably, give credit for other skills and accomplishments where necessary.

It is important that parents ensure that the school is aware of their child's strengths, especially in areas such as music, drama, sport and other hobbies or interests; again these are a considerable part of an established school ethos and play a vital part in a child's development as a well-rounded student. Most established schools have Scholarships or Exhibitions within these areas as well as the academic fields.

Pupils Seeking Entry at Fifteen

In the UK, whether a pupil is in the State or the Independent Sector for Education, the General Certificate of Education (GCSE) examination is taken after a two year structured course that generally commences in "Year 10" at the age of 14.

This structure does not allow, by its very nature, a child to start in the system unless they enter at the beginning of the GCSE programme.

It is not unknown for a 15-year-old pupil to join at the beginning of a programme by placing them 'out of year' with the 14-year-old candidates. This obviously has a cumulative effect and although in some cases works well, can be both academically and socially disruptive for others.

Perhaps a school, which offers the International Baccalaureate (IB), may be the answer and, as with all other aspects of education, it is advisable to seek proper help and guidance. Please also be aware that even if a pupil is already in a British School abroad, the process is not necessarily simplified. It will depend on the syllabus and examination board and also when the academic year commences, whether or not a smooth transfer may be effected. Occasionally some leeway is offered but no school, concerned about standards and quality of pupil preparation will allow any student to start the GCSE programme after the first half of the Christmas term of the first year of the course.

Starting The Process

It is important to register a pupil as soon as possible and that includes payment of the registration fee, which is non-refundable.

Parents coming to the UK need to bear in mind that some schools have hundreds of applicants for few places and many British parents will automatically register with a number of schools and therefore allow themselves a higher chance of securing a place of their choice.

You are respectfully advised that queue jumping, favours or monetary offerings are never acceptable. No matter from which school your child comes, they will be fairly considered and assessed, upon their ability amongst their peers within the school and nothing else.

The British are renowned for their patience in queuing and that is true of our schools. Although

no one would wish to appear flippant in any dealings concerning education, it is always sensible to remember one senior Head who always informs over-zealous parents, "It would not make any difference if you were the Queen of England, your child would not jump our list". One is at least assured of fairness for all.

The Final Stages

Once registered and a place offered, a deposit is required upon acceptance and is a legally binding contract which commits you to the school. If deposits are paid at more than one school you will be committed to paying the first term's fees at those schools, regardless of whether your child eventually attends.

Please do not assume that one may be able to flout this rigidly enforced system, those who have attempted to do so have found that it is to their detriment and cost.

Likewise ONE TERM'S clear notice of your intention to withdraw is strictly enforced, or the next term's fees are liable.

The Way Forward

As we have highlighted throughout, the process of finding your child the right school is a very important one. At times the whole process may appear daunting, but you are not alone and there

is sound professional advice to guide your steps through the various procedures. It is very easy to become overwhelmed with myriad views from those who are perhaps not as conversant with the system as they might like you to believe.

A professional adviser has a wide bank of experience and local knowledge and his or her reputation is founded upon and only continues by giving impartial and comprehensive information. Likewise in this country, it is believed that a school is always as good as its Head. Reputation and change can be dramatic, therefore be advised by someone who knows the schools personally and operates in the here and now.

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