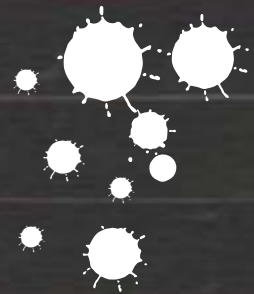


CHOOSING A SCHOOL ISN'T CHILD'S PLAY

One of the most difficult aspects of moving abroad is choosing the right new school for your child. In Switzerland, there are a number of options, including bilingual, international and local schools. So, how do you choose which is best? We examine some of the most important factors to consider.



By Clare Forrest | As a jumping-off point, parents should first consider how long they plan to stay in Switzerland. If you are here for a short-term, expat work contract, you'll need to determine whether it's worth placing your child in a local or bilingual school, or whether it would be better to keep him or her in an English-speaking international school.

If you intend to leave after a work contract ends, your child may benefit more from staying in an international school because it could foster a smoother a transition back to an English-speaking school system in your native country. However, if you want your child to gain an understanding of the language and culture while here, a local or bilingual school would be the answer. Also, if you plan to spend more than just a few years in Switzerland and want your child and family to integrate, a local school system may be your best option. Integration can be harder to achieve if your child attends an international school.

If you are not sure how long you will stay in Switzerland, there are other factors to consider that can help make your decision.

First things first

Your child's previous educational experience is a crucial factor to take into account. Young children who have already attended kindergarten or reception may be unhappy in a nursery school setting where the focus is solely on play. If you have young children who are learning to read and write, it is also worth asking which literacy programme the school uses. If a child has begun learning to read and write with one programme, like Jolly Phonics, changing to another could be difficult for them, particularly if support during the transition period isn't available. Likewise, a child who can already read and write may become frustrated if placed in a class where these skills are only just being taught.

In Switzerland, children typically begin kindergarten in the local school system between the ages of four and five, where the focus is on preparing them for school. Children are encouraged to become more independent and an emphasis is placed on developing individual, social and cultural skills. The kindergarten curriculum is theme-based and has the same educational goals as a typical primary school.

Your child's mother tongue and additional language skills are also important to think about. If you want your child to attend an English-speaking school, but your child isn't fluent in English, this needs to be considered carefully. Or, if you want your child to go to a bilingual school, but he or she doesn't already speak both languages, you will need to find out what, if any, provisions will be provided.

Finding out about the school's discipline and grievance policies is also important. How tough are they on bullying or racism, for example? How do they discipline the children? Does the disciplinary system match your own?

High marks, or just passing?

The qualifications and experience of teachers can be an issue in some international schools, as can turnover of staff.

The international community is naturally transitional, but a good school should still have highly qualified, experienced teachers who have been around for at least a couple of years. Any school that has a rapid turnover of staff should be approached with caution. Also, a school that teaches in English and/or German

but has few native-speaking teachers may also need further investigation.

Some children may require additional learning support at some stage of their education. The availability of extra help, and any associated costs should be checked out with the school prior to your child's enrolment. Another interesting question to ask is whether or not parents can be involved, in the form something like a Parent Teacher Association.

Other factors, such as whether or not the school employs subject-specialist teachers (for art, music and physical education, for example), are also worth inquiring after. If your child has a special ability in a particular area but the school you're evaluating has no specialist teacher, you may want to look at another school that does. The school's facilities – library, gym, science labs, etc. – shouldn't be overlooked, either.

It's class time

Your child's personality and ability to adapt to new environments should be important considerations, as well. An outgoing child who adapts easily is likely to fit into a bilingual or local school easier than one who is shy or timid. Does your child thrive in big, noisy classrooms with lots of other children? Or would your child find this unsettling, and prefer a smaller class with a less boisterous environment?

Class size and student/teacher ratios are must-ask about topics, since both can vary greatly at international, bilingual and local schools. When asked, most international schools say class sizes range from 16 to 20 students. Bilingual school classes generally include 16 to 18 students, and Swiss schools 15 to 20. However, when I was looking into schools, I was rarely given a definitive answer. And there is sometimes a disparity between what parents are told before signing on the dotted line and reality. The international school my son first attended said its "average" class size was nine to 12. However, on the first day of school, we counted 18 pupils between the ages of three and five. Only three were girls, and thus not the best mix for this age group.

I suggest visiting different schools during the school day to talk with the

teaching staff. It is also well worth taking your child for a second visit to get his or her impressions. Try to talk to other parents in the school to get their feedback. If a face-to-face discussion isn't possible, you could join an expat online forum for parents with children in international, bilingual and local schools.

Some good examples can be found at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Swiss-Schooling> and www.englishforum.ch (or by emailing Families-in-Zurich@yahoo-groups.com).

Looking ahead

In addition, your child's continuing education prospects need to be taken into serious account. After an education at a local, bilingual or international school, what kind of higher education or employment opportunities will your child qualify for?

If you are planning to stay long-term, this is vital. In particular, when your child approaches the conclusion of his or her primary school years, you will have important choices to make about what comes next.

Toward the end of the primary school years, teachers will evaluate the work, performance and learning behaviour of students who attend Swiss state schools (parents are included in this process on a regular basis). Decisions are then made as to whether a child moves on to a *Realschule* (basic courses and basic requirements), a *Sekundarschule* (expanded courses and medium demands) or the *Gymnasium* (much higher demands and preparation for university).

In the Swiss school system, the emphasis is on vocational and general education. The majority of students go on to a vocational course, with a small percentage going on to attend university. This needs to be borne in mind if you want your child to get a university education, either here or back at home. You can find helpful and more detailed information about the Swiss school system at: www.educa.ch.

If your child is at an international school and following the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme, the choice is straightforward since such schools continue through the primary and secondary years. Children can continue with the IB

until they have completed the programme of study or individual certificate level. The IB programme is offered and accepted in many international schools worldwide, so would aid your child with a transition into other English-speaking schools if you relocate.

Some international schools will also provide their own high school diplomas, which may be accepted by international universities. However, the continuing education of your child needs to be discussed in advance with the school, to ensure that once your child has completed the IB they can be assured of continuing at a university of their choice, be it here or abroad.

For those children attending bilingual schools, the choice of where to go after primary school is wider. Some smaller bilingual schools only take children until the end of the primary years. After that, they can switch to the Swiss school system, go into the international school system or enrol in a larger bilingual school that continues with a secondary education.

Scheduling

Transportation to and from school, and the school's location, are important points to consider. If you cannot drive or walk your child back and forth to school every day, you'll need to find out what alternatives, if any, the school provides. Is there bussing? If so, at what extra cost?

Often problematic is the school day schedule, particularly for those who have children in local schools. For example, in the Zurich area, children attending local schools typically come home at lunchtime and have every Wednesday afternoon off. Obviously, this can cause a big problem when both parents work.

In addition, local schools often have different starting and finishing times depending on the day. International and bilingual schools may have more standard hours, and also offer before and after school care, but these benefits usually aren't free.

Costs and the dotted line

In general, if you want your child to attend a private international or bilingual school, there will be substantial costs in-



involved. They can range from SFr 22,000 to SFr 36,000 per year, depending on your child's age, grade and whether they will attend full or part time. Costs additional to tuition are also common, such as application and enrolment fees. For expats here on work contracts, it is worth checking with your employer to find out about the benefits they offer in conjunction with education.

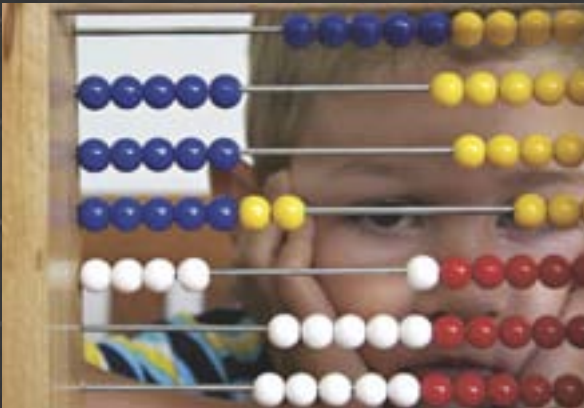
Admission policies, registration fees and waiting lists are commonplace in the most popular international and bilingual schools – finding out about them is crucial. In addition to detailing the grounds

of accepting pupils, they explain the admission procedure, application process, what the minimum requirements are and whether they have company sponsors or cooperation agreements with certain companies.

Admission priority is commonly given to students with parents who are employed by companies that sponsor or have cooperation agreements with the school. It's worth checking with your employer to see if they have arrangements with any schools. In over-subscribed schools, this arrangement may help your child jump the waiting list, or guarantee

him or her a place at the beginning of the next term. Priority may also be given to students who already have a sibling at the school, or those willing to commit to a year's attendance.

We discovered the unfortunate side of company sponsorship schemes when trying to secure a place for our son at an over-subscribed international school. He was in 2nd place on a waiting list for six months before we were informed it was highly unlikely he'd get in. The reason, said the admissions administrator, was the school's company sponsors had yet to confirm how many places they wanted for their employ-



ees' children. We were also told that applicants from these families could jump over those on the waiting list who weren't part of a company sponsorship.

We had no option but to look at other schools and say goodbye to our SFr 500 application fee. Such fees are typically payable on application, but not refunded if you withdraw or the school simply doesn't have a place for you. Yet not getting our son into that school means he is now happily ensconced in a new bilingual school, and speaking German better than I.

Examining a school contract in detail before you sign on the dotted line is also

strongly recommended. Most private international schools run on yearly contracts and the fees are often paid up front. You will want to know ahead of time what will happen if there is a breach of contract. For example, if you remove your child because you're unhappy or have to leave unexpectedly before the contract ends, or if the school no longer wants your child to attend, what happens to the fees paid, or those due?

Homework pays dividends

Before you make your final decision, do your homework! Although it may sound

like a daunting exercise, finding the right school for your child is worth it. Sorting out problems (that could have been prevented with research) that occur once your child is in school can be hard; getting your child into another school if things go wrong can be harder still. However, as we have realised through personal experience, no matter how much homework you do, the proof of the pudding really is in the eating.

On that cheerful note, I wish you good luck!

