

## **Choosing the next school – returning to the UK**

Moving to a new expat posting, often the long reputed expat school is the obvious choice to put your child in, and even where there are wider options, often these are restricted by where there are places, or where a company may have a fast track debenture. Then often once in a particular expat Junior school, the best secondary option is to move on to its Senior school equivalent.

By contrast, perhaps the most complex and challenging school choice of all for expats is when parents decide that either it is time to return to the UK or when they consider boarding school for their children. With A Levels and increasingly IB as well seen as the world's educational gold standard and the ideal launching pad for UK university entrance, expats beware that you are not the only ones competing for places at British boarding schools. Some schools have quotas for people of different nationalities applying so you might be at an advantage with a British passport, but on the other hand, when competing against children who have been in British prep schools for years, coming up against them is not an easy option either. A number of schools now have a separate admissions criteria for British expatriates abroad, and these are certainly worth looking out for.

One key principle though is not to miss the boat. Make enquiries at possible schools of your choice sooner rather than later: schools requiring registration at birth are fortunately a rarity but it is advisable to contact a school well in advance of the proposed year of entry. Many schools have clearly defined entry schedules involving payment of a registration fee prior to entrance examinations and interviews. Note particularly that schools that begin at 13+ often begin their admissions procedures 3 years before hand and sometimes there is no leeway for late applicants. However, be aware also, that you do not need to pay a registration fee just to look round – make sure you do your homework and make the right choice before committing to paying a lot of unnecessary registration fees.

Another over-riding principle is the need for realism. Which schools are likely to offer your child a place? Coming from an expat environment where often one school fits all, parents generally don't know what schools in the UK are looking for in applicants, and furthermore, they are rarely the best judges of their children's levels. Overseas schools whilst usually honest in their assessments, are judging your children against their criteria and not that of UK entrance requirements. In addition to this, teachers in an international school often have little idea of the admission standards required for entry to a school elsewhere and rarely is it in a current school's best interests to help a pupil gain admission to another school. This is where expert advice about which schools to apply to can save you a lot of wasted registration fees and unnecessary entrance exams.

Although some schools provide examples of past papers, merely giving past papers to a child is not going to prepare them. Without understanding what the examiner is looking for and how to showcase your child's skills accordingly, even with an official mark scheme, parents lacking the educational skills often do their children a disservice by not being able to prepare them appropriately. But if you seek external help, make sure this is from someone who really understands the wider entry requirements too.

And apart from written examinations, be aware there are interviews to prepare for too. In recent years a new form of interview has emerged - the group interview - where observers record how well a child interacts with their peers, assessing both the child's ability to contribute to an academic discussion and also his or ability to interact socially with their peers. Some otherwise competent candidates have been known to fall at this hurdle.

If you know what you are doing, gaining admission to some of the UK's, and indeed the world's most prestigious schools, need not be such a demanding project. But in reality, with many expat parents' most recent experience of UK education being their own, a bit of professional guidance usually pays dividends and saves a lot of heartache all round.

Possibly though, even more complex than looking for a boarding school place (when there is often a larger geographical parameter to find the right school) is the scenario of a family returning to the UK and trying to find day places near their old home. Should you stay in the prep school system until your child is 13 or head for senior school at 11? Might state schools be an option – the local primary school rather than a nearby prep? Or the local comprehensive or grammar school instead of a nearby independent? Firstly you need to be aware of local education guidelines and again you need to know what you are looking for, particularly in the context of where your child is currently at school. How will they cope with a school of 200 when they are used to a large international school when a single year group is that size? And be aware of taking advice from friends and family locally when they are looking at the options from a completely different standpoint and experience. Even advice from ex expat friends is sometimes not helpful as even if your children were at the same expat school, with specific entry criteria to many UK schools, one school does not necessarily fit all.

In this information rich age, researching the basic information on schools through their websites, parents' reviews and league tables is relatively straightforward even if you are thousands of miles away. However, the difficulty comes in not just selecting the "best" school, but the school which is best for your child. This is a far more challenging decision and one which most expat parents need some guidance in navigating their way through the various options.

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