

# THE EXPAT CLUB NEWSLETTER™

PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR  
A GLOBAL MOBILE LIFESTYLE

*The Best Tips and Advice for Expatriate Family Members*

## A PARENT'S GUIDE TO INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

*Mary Kay Bosshart has lived in the Carribean since August 1997. Her husband currently works for a multinational company and his work has taken the family to many different countries. She describes her experiences choosing and placing her two children in the international school system and shares valuable tips for others considering this option.*

### **1. Please describe the decision-making process you went through. (Did you know you would be moving again soon? If so, were transfer credits an issue? Did you consider home-schooling?)**

I think that it would be helpful to give you a bit of background information about our family. I am American and my husband is Swiss. During the first four years of our marriage, I worked in Switzerland. When I was pregnant with our first child, we decided that I would stop working and that my husband would change companies to work in the international department of his current company. We knew at that time that most of his career would be spent abroad. We are strong believers in the benefits of international schools and the experiences that living abroad offers to children so this was a deliberate choice that we made before we actually had children.

### **2. What are important factors to consider when choosing and transferring?**

We moved from Indonesia to the Carribean. Our children have attended international schools with American-based curriculum in both locations. According to their mission statements, the two schools appeared very similar. At first glance I thought that they would be, more or less the same.

- *After moving here however, I've discovered that the age of the school makes a large difference in both the stability of the school and the programs. The school in Indonesia was 25 years old, and the school here is less than 5 years old. We're told to be patient and that the school will be able to offer many more programs in the future but when you are in a country on a 3-5 year assignment and your children's education is at stake, you don't have the time to be patient! Given the option, I would definitely prefer to go to an established school.*

- *Another major factor is the type of Board that governs the school. In Indonesia, the school was governed by a parent board while our school here is governed by a corporate board. This means that the companies that made a capital contribution to the school have seats on the board and are able to determine the direction of the school. Several of these Board members do not even have children at the school and their interests are financial whereas a parent board is*

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more concerned with the quality of education. I've learned that many international schools originate as corporate board schools and once they are on their feet financially they mature into parent board governed schools.

- *It is also important to ensure that a school is accredited by a US accreditation agency, and/or the European Council of International Schools (ECIS).*

International schools with an American-based curriculum usually use standardized U.S. testing programs (such as IOWA tests) and you can ask the school for the results. It is important to remember though that scores will vary depending upon the number of "English as a Second Language" (ESL) students and that these tests are usually geared toward American kids.

#### 4. What other advice would you give to parents to help overcome changing schools regarding the children?

- *I contacted the school via e-mail and asked for the name of a parent in each of the grades that my children would be entering. It helped for them to have a personal "reference" and they could ask the questions that were important to them. They asked some things that I wouldn't have even thought to ask!*

- *If people have high school students, it is even more important that they find out if the sports or activities that are really important to their children are available at the new school. Yes, children are adaptable and yes, it will be great for them to learn about a new culture, but I always think that it is so unfair for parents to arrive with their children in tow and then discover that the school doesn't have a basketball team. So, parents should do their research beforehand. It is so easy with the wealth of information on the web. In fact, many international schools have websites so you can even get a peek at what the school looks like and find out about current activities. Our school posts the weekly newsletter and the PTO newsletter and these publications are good indicators of what is actually going on at the school.*

- *If your child has special needs, contact the coordinator immediately. Many international schools are not set up to handle children with special needs so a thorough interview is recommended.*

- *Find out if the school has a guidance counselor. We didn't have one last year and having one this year has made a world of difference in our children's school days.*

- *Find out if they have a high school guidance counselor or someone equipped to offer college placement advice. Parents should ask which universities have accepted students from the prospective school. Some parents were recently disappointed to learn that their daughter was not accepted by the college that she wanted to go to even though her grades were adequate because the school here does not have a reputation as a high level international school. Once again, the reputation of the school is quite often linked to the age of the school.*

- *Look at the student/teacher ratio. Usually international schools have a low ratio but our school just increased their ratio. This information as well as*

other important criteria such as nationality of teachers and students is available from the International School Services website at [www.iss.edu](http://www.iss.edu).

- *Find out about extracurricular activities offered. They are often included in the tuition of the school or are offered at a reasonable cost. Many times, because of language barriers, children cannot join the local soccer team and it is important that they have the possibility to participate in after school programs.*

Once again, I can't emphasize enough that parents owe it to their children to do their research BEFORE they agree to move to a country. Even then you can have problems but at least you will have the personal satisfaction of knowing that you did all that you could beforehand instead of feeling guilty once you arrive—and I have seen this happen on so many occasions!

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