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*Did you know that 44 % of companies do not pay for the cost of boarding school?*

Source: Mercer's 2011 Worldwide Survey of International Assignment Policies and Practices

# The Expatriate

# Observer

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## Key Elements in Choosing an International School

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As expatriates embark on their first assignment overseas, they often bring the family along. As a result, the elements that comprise an expatriate package (e.g., compensation, housing; shipping and storage), while important, are not as important as ensuring that family members are comfortable in their new surroundings. This point is particularly true for children, as a new school can sometimes become an obstacle to a successful assignment. Hence, dependent education is an essential component in the expatriate package, as expatriates take on the daunting task of choosing a school.

The child or young adult will face a new curriculum, new friends, and possibly a new language – all while living in a new country away from everything and everyone that is familiar. Therefore, most expatriate families tend to choose an international school over a local school while on assignment. This article will discuss the factors involved in finding the best fit for your child.

### School Characteristics That Matter

International schools offer a similar curriculum to the child's school in the home country, as well as a venue for the children to speak in their native language. An additional advantage is the opportunity to build a social bond with other expatriate children who are undergoing a similar transition. Such comforts can make a world of difference when choosing a school and enhancing the child's successful transition. Some locations have a number of international schools from which to choose. Before making this important decision, whether for elementary or secondary schools, the family has many elements to consider. Some key parameters include the following:

- Education level and experience of the teaching staff
- Language preferences
- Availability of learning specialists (e.g., reading and speech classes)



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- Child-to-teacher ratio
- Language arts, music, art, and writing
- Course curricula, such as business or college preparation
- School accreditation
- Tuition fees

Additional concerns for parents and students include whether the facility is in a safe neighborhood with minimal pollution and noise, as well as being easily accessible from all

routes into and out of the city. No matter the host location, the trek to school in the morning and afternoon can be a challenge. Location, location, location is key.

When searching for the right school, the family should do a substantial amount of research. It is important to make time to tour the school in person, meet the head or director of the institution, visit the classrooms of the child's grade level, and observe the current student body. Consider the following questions:

- Are the children happy?
- Are the students engaged in the classroom?
- Do the teachers seem bored?

Ask multiple questions until you get the answers you need to ensure a good match between the school's philosophy and the goals for your child's education.

## Chart 1 Typical Employer Practices for Additional Expenses

Expense Item	Americas	Asia Pacific	EMEA	Japan	Worldwide
Entrance fee	65.2%	62.1%	51.2%	97.4%	68.5%
Local transportation to/from school	53.3	42.5	33.2	92.7	56.0
Textbooks	56.0	39.1	25.4	64.9	49.3
Uniforms	31.7	26.4	17.1	23.0	26.0
Educational material	29.0	21.8	15.1	31.9	25.8
Donation to school	2.9	6.9	3.4	78.0	19.3
Parent-Teacher Association fee	3.6	4.6	1.0	24.6	7.5
School trips	5.7	12.6	3.4	8.9	6.5
School meals	5.7	9.2	3.4	8.4	6.1
Other	2.9	3.4	3.4	7.9	4.1
No additional costs	21.0	27.6	37.6	0.5	21.0

Source: Mercer 2011 Worldwide Survey of International Assignment Policies and Practices

## The Admissions Process and Beyond

The expatriate parent and child will need to go through an admissions process that is similar to that of a private school in the United States. The process can be taxing, time-consuming, and costly depending upon the number of schools to which you apply. Typical steps in the process include the following for each school:

- Completing the school's application
- Submitting the required documents
- Undergoing an evaluation assessment or screening of the child
- Paying the application fees

However, after the documents are filed, fees paid, and assessments analyzed, there may not be a spot for your child or the school may not consider the child a good match. To secure a spot at the beginning of the school year, it is best to apply to a minimum of three schools. This precaution provides options in case the first (and, even, second) choice turns you down.

The last parameter in choosing a school — annual tuition — is no less important. Many schools have standard expenses: nonrefundable fees for registration and application, capi-

tal improvement costs, and tuition paid in one or two installments. Some employers pay a portion of school expenses. According to Mercer's *2011 Worldwide Survey of International Assignment of Policies and Practices*, most global companies cover basic tuition fees, textbooks, application fees, and transportation to and from school. (See chart, "Typical Employer Practices for Additional Expenses.") Before making a final decision on the school, verify with your human resources representative what the company will and will not cover.

Obviously, not all foreign educational institutions will have everything the family wants and needs for their children. Parents, along with the child, should map out the most important components and search for those schools that have most of the desired characteristics. Many books and websites are available, such as the Council of International Schools ([www.cois.com](http://www.cois.com)) that offers information on more than 100 international schools, accreditation, newsletters, and so on. In addition, each international school has a website that describes the admissions process, tuition fees, and information to assist you in finding the best school for your child.

## Children's Comfort Helps Ensure a Successful Assignment

A child's education is high on the priority list when a family is deciding whether to accept an international assignment. For some families, education has an even higher priority than any benefits that might be gained from living abroad. Many parents worry about the lack of home-country equivalent facilities in the assignment location, except in the private sector. International or special schools catering to the needs of expatriate children exist in nearly every country, with widespread associations and private organizations maintaining standards for many of them. To find the best match for your child, do your homework on-line and in person.

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