

Choosing a school

A major part of life as a school principal is helping parents choose the right school for their child. What are the crucial aspects to take into consideration in order to make a well-informed decision?

It is a crucial decision that they are making; different families and different children have different needs and, although schools are inclusive communities, they will all have their own ethos and pedagogical approach which may suit one individual more than another. The decision-making process is partially simplified if you're looking for a particular national curriculum or national system of education. In Bratislava, as in most parts of the globe, the British and American systems are most prevalent, but many other systems are represented. It will also be dependent on what stage children are in their schooling. Is your child outgoing, enjoying being among lots of children of their own age? Usually this type of child will thrive where class sizes are at least 15+ in size, where they are challenged academically by their peers and have a wide range of children to make friends with. But, if your child is introverted or very shy, you may feel that very small classes of ten and under are more suitable.

Ask questions

A great deal can be learned about a school through careful

research and analysis of data, but to make an informed choice a visit is vital. Your reaction to what you see, hear and feel when you visit should determine your final decision. You will be introduced to many people, hopefully including the principal or the heads of school. Ask lots of questions, and make sure you get full and convincing answers on issues that are important to you and your family. During your visit, also ask yourself some questions. Would you be happy to entrust your children's education and wellbeing to the people you meet? What is the atmosphere like? Is it purposeful? Are pupils and staff respectful of each other and communicating well? Are the pupils happy? Would you be pleased if your children conducted themselves in the same fashion?

Facilities

A school's facilities can also be used to seduce prospective parents, and can be very influential in the decision-making process. However, it does not necessarily follow that a school with outstanding facilities is of high overall quality. Also some

cities are 'wealthier' than others so comparing city with city on a school facilities basis should be put into that context. Facilities are of course important, and many good international schools try to provide as much as possible. Most schools these days also have significant ICT infrastructure in terms of suites or laptops and interactive white boards. A word of caution is once again in order. Are these facilities used well? Do they support high-quality teaching and learning? Many of the international schools in Bratislava are fee-paying and owned by private investors or international education companies. A good question to ask of schools, even if they do not fall into these categories, is how much of the profit or "capital fund" is ploughed back into the school's facilities and resources each year.

Staff

The single most important factor, I suggest, should be the quality of the people involved in the organization. Over the years, when potential parents have put me on the spot and asked me to tell them why they should choose my school, my answer has always been staff, staff and, in the final analysis, staff. To be successful, a school has to have high quality professionals across the age range and the subject areas, dedicated to the task of bringing out the best in the children in their care. The best staff do not focus purely on exam results, despite their obvious importance. They also concern themselves with their pupils' all-round development.

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The staff create the right environment, and are role models with a hugely important role in inspiring and developing children in many different ways. Good staff cater to each child's individual needs and understand how best to motivate and support the children in their care, thus bringing out the best in them. If you can, find out the school's attitude to supporting their staff in their own professional development.

Personal recommendations are best of all. Most schools will be happy to put you in touch with parents from your home country to give you an insider's view of the school and its performance. Beware of those schools who market negatively against competitor schools. It usually tells you more about them and their values than the competitor school! Choosing the right school is not an exact science, but with a little background work, some searching questions and a thorough visit, you can look forward to enjoying a happy and productive partnership with your children's new school.



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