

Your Child's Education: What to Do When There's a Waiting List

Elizabeth Perelstein

With the rapid expansion of global mobility, companies are moving employees and their families around the world, at any time of year, often on short notice. While a sudden transition may support business needs, families have always been reluctant to move children in the middle of the school year. The situation has become increasingly dire as shortages of places at preferred schools have become the norm in many popular expatriate destinations. New schools are constantly springing up in response to this demand, but savvy parents are reluctant to enroll their children in untested schools, particularly if they have jumped through hoops to obtain coveted places back home. And even in destinations that boast a variety of schools, choosing a facility does not guarantee a child's acceptance.

Insufficient warning of an impending move can be disadvantageous, especially in certain host locations, making relocation—which is always challenging and stressful—even more complex (see sidebar, “Challenges Facing Parents in Select Cities”). While those relocated without adequate notice may be unable to gain admission for their children to their first choice school or the school that their colleagues' children attend, a more serious problem is that they may not have the option of sending all of their children to the same program. In some locations, who you know is what matters; in others, it is understanding the system and completing applications accurately and in a culturally sensitive and timely manner.

To facilitate a positive and successful educational move, particularly where places may be hard to come by, parents should take some important steps. As a fit between the child and the school is the key factor in determining a successful placement, it is important to be open-minded and consider all options—even those that may not be an obvious

match based on hearsay. There is no substitute for visiting a facility, discussing relevant concerns, and speaking with current and past families. Also beneficial for parents is evaluating why they are drawn to particular schools:

- Are they most similar to the children's current schools?
- Will the schools provide a comfortable culture for the entire family in which the family can envision building a community?

Finally, it is crucial to understand the “ins and outs” of the application process to successfully navigate a way into placement. The following descriptions of the current situation in a few cities offer a sample of what expatriate families may face.

HONG KONG

The most popular school among expatriate executives, offering a U.S. curriculum, is Hong Kong International School. Although waitlists vary considerably by grade, it can be much easier to find spots for very young children and high school students. This year, the middle school will complete expansion construction, resulting in a shorter waitlist and smaller class sizes. The facility carries the waitlist over from year to year, and corporations with a debenture have a decided advantage.

The English Schools Foundation (ESF) operates 10 primary and 5 secondary schools offering British National Curriculum. Schools accept families by catchment area—that is, if a family resides in a location zoned for a particular ESF school, the children are guaranteed admission. These schools receive a govern-

ment subsidy to provide an education for English-speaking children who cannot access the local system. Although not selective, they manage waiting lists at certain grade levels, particularly in some schools in expatriate neighborhoods. And ESF's new "corporate surety" scheme—that ran from April 2 to June 30, 2007—allows an employer to secure places for children of incoming employees prior to their arrival for the 2007-2008 school year, subject to availability.

The Canadian School, which offers an alternative English language curriculum, does not carry waitlists from year to year. It is selective. Test results play a role in placement, with a great deal depending on the child's previous school record and academic strengths and weaknesses.

MOSCOW

The only school with a long waitlist is the Anglo American School, which serves the diplomatic community (and certain companies that sponsored the school at its inception and are entitled to priority seating):

- If many diplomatic families arrive in August, the facility has to accept their children, no matter how full they are. As a result, the school is extremely cautious about admitting non-diplomatic children prior to August. All other families automatically go on the waitlist.
- If diplomatic families do not arrive by August or the number is fewer than anticipated, many students can be accepted from the waitlist, but by that time of year, they must have a strong back-up plan.

As an alternative, the British International School often has available seats. There is also a new English International School in a less desirable area of town, and another new school (International School of Moscow) that opened in April. All non-Russian schools prefer children whose mother tongue is English, but all schools accept children who are native speakers.

All preschools in Moscow have waitlists. Some expatriates send their children to Russian schools, claiming that the education is quite good. Comfortable that their children will acquire English from parents and relatives, they will raise them bilingually. Parents may have this philosophy for children of pre-school and kindergarten age, but it is less prevalent as their children enter the school-age years.

SHANGHAI

All schools considered "top" by expatriate executives have waitlists at most grade levels. Some of the most difficult to get into are the American schools (Shanghai American School, Concordia International School) and the British schools (Dulwich College International School, the British International School). Some grade levels experience waitlists as many as 30-40 students deep.

Challenges Facing Parents in Select Cities

- In Shanghai, the most popular international schools maintain two-year waiting lists.
- In London, one can gain access to entry grades at desirable schools (e.g., the American School) if applications are filed in early fall; later in the year, however, these places are virtually impossible to obtain. For families seeking British private schools, children's names are placed on waiting lists at birth.
- Admission to the most popular independent schools in New York City is uncertain, and indeed unlikely, if a family learns of a move after the traditional admission deadline and applies after December for the following year. Once a family signs a contract with a less desirable school, the family and company are committed to sending the child to that location. Should a vacant place arise later in the year, no other school will consider the application.
- In certain countries, particularly in Asia, debenture programs (the purchase of seats for the benefit of employees' children who otherwise meet admissions criteria) provide the security to enroll a number of employees' children in choice schools. Schools that no longer maintain waitlists, for the most part, offer debenture programs.

By the beginning of May, most schools know which students will return in the fall and have received payment for the following semester, allowing them to move students off the waitlists to fill places that have not been re-enrolled. However, more places open up all the time, as families and companies walk away from deposits that secure places when unexpected corporate transfers are announced after the payment deadline. Seat guarantees—available for purchase at Shanghai American School for US\$20,000—are good for 10 years, allowing a qualified student to by-pass waitlists, although a specific campus is not guaranteed.

BOMBAY (MUMBAI)

The majority of expatriates consider the American School of Bombay (ASB) their first choice. Covering kindergarten to grade 12, the school has become extremely popular over the past three years not only due to the efforts of a new superintendent, who has improved the quality of education, but also because it is the only American school. The waitlist varies from three-to-six months, with the majority finding a place after six months due to the frequent rotation of expatriates.

At ASB, candidates tend to use the following options to increase the chances of admission:

- Contact with the trustees or board of governors
- A strong recommendation from the principal of the previous school
- A recommendation from an influential expatriate whose children attend ASB

If the child is of nursery age, it is helpful to accept admission in a local nursery or playgroup for a short while to keep the child occupied. For those in a higher class, it is advisable to have the child study at the current school a little longer (if convenient) or obtain private tutoring to keep abreast with what was

missed at ASB, as admission to local schools is impossible. Families should plan well in advance, at least six-to-eight months prior to moving, if possible.

Families in South Bombay, with younger children, also consider DSB International School, with classes up to grade 7. DSB does not have a waitlist.

DUBAI

All international schools are private schools and predominantly offer either a British or U.S. curriculum. There are a handful of other schools, too: French, Indian, German, Japanese, Russian, and the Dubai International Academy, which offers an international baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. Most of these facilities are in the Jumeirah/Um Suqeim area, close to expatriate housing communities.

The reality in Dubai is that schools are full, waitlists are long, and facilities are not willing to entertain special requests for school tours or even accept applications in certain cases. Some schools have a two-year waiting list for most grades (e.g., Jumeirah English Speaking School, Dubai English Speaking School, American School of Dubai). The younger grades are usually more crowded, as families tend to move back home or send the children to boarding schools for secondary levels.

Because the school population is not very transient, it is not uncommon for only two or three seats to open up in each grade. The best chances for admission for the new academic year are in August, if the application is submitted 9-to-12 months in advance. Most schools start making admission decisions by February for the new academic year beginning in August. From an educational perspective, the best time of the year to move to Dubai is in the summer; the second choice is December.

Several large international companies based in Dubai for some time have bought debentures in various schools, circumventing the standard waitlist. At present, however, schools are not offering debentures,

Expatriate families need to understand the reality of the host school situation.

and even having one does not always guarantee admission. For example, without the right passport, sibling preference, and debenture, a student could be 80th on the waitlist. However, with all these items in place, the same applicant could be 12th on the waitlist. Good grades, positive recommendation letters, and sometimes being the right gender and nationality also play a role in admissions. Persistence can also pay off.

NEW YORK

There are surprisingly few international and other national schools for foreign families. New York City schools share a common calendar that requires applications a year in advance, which does not meet the needs of sudden corporate transfers. For the most part, New York City independent schools do not admit students mid-year, although employees may be transferred at any time throughout the year.

Most private schools have long waitlists once the application deadline is over at the end of December. Although the waitlist response means different things in different private schools, it generally means that the child is socially and academically qualified for that particular school, but cannot be accepted because of limited space. In effect, there are too many qualified applicants. Qualified children who apply after the deadline automatically go on the waitlist unless there is an unlikely chance vacancy.

EASE THE TRANSITION: CONSIDER THE ADVANTAGE OF MOVING WITH CHILDREN

Relocating families are under a lot of stress—moving between countries and jobs, while trying to find schools and housing, with education often the number one priority. To make the transition easier, expatriate families need to understand the reality of the host school situation before the move and have realistic expectations, patience (admission may come

down to the wire), flexibility (serious consideration of non-traditional schools), and persistence. (See sidebar, “Practical Advice for Expatriates.”)

When considering the right schools, it is important to keep an open mind and be prepared to abandon “mental baggage” from the child’s prior school situation. Each country is different, and schools everywhere operate within their cultural context. Since no school is perfect, parents have no choice but to compromise. Lead children by example; after all, children listen to their parents’ reactions and are far more likely to view the experience overall, and the school in particular, as a positive adventure if the parents view it that way. Be courteous and professional in dealing with the schools because administrators

Practical Advice for Expatriates

- Try to arrange as much lead time as possible before the move.
- Recognize that schooling will be a complex issue and make it a priority.
- Don’t commit to housing before finding schools, as a circumscribed geographic area may further limit your options.
- Contact the local company office for suggestions and speak with colleague families who have or have had children in school.
- Research schools on the internet, narrowing down the choices to two or three schools, or five or six, depending on the number that exist and the realistic chances for admission. *Make sure you have at least one back-up option, and decide on your 1st, 2nd, and 3rd choices.*
- Write to the school registrar, requesting a 30-40 minute time slot to call and ask questions.
- Set up a testing date for the children if applicable.
- Arrange for a school visit, and bring a complete set of admissions documents and extra recommendation letters from the current head of school/teachers. Do not hesitate to ask all your questions.
- Ask the school for a list of current parents to whom you can talk about their experiences.
- Make a pro/con list, but don’t get too attached to any solution.
- Write thank you notes to all the schools.
- If admission is tight, call every two weeks to check the status. Find a delicate balance between seeming interested and being pushy.

are also under a lot of pressure and appreciate a few kind words accompanied by a correctly completed application package.

Although the waitlist situation can be daunting, moving children to a new country, whatever the actual academic program may be, is always an education in itself. In view of the current school scarcity in many key countries, parents need to view the move as an opportunity to think about key family values, and reflect on who their children are at this point in their lives. They may be seeking a school for a student who is very different from the child they first enrolled years ago. While some aspects of the educational environment may be non-negotiable, other aspects of the child's school experience may be flexible in a new location and, indeed, may suit the student better than the prior school.

If the host community has significant waitlists, parents may have no choice but to reframe what they are looking for in education as something beyond schooling. Learning about new cultures, meeting new people, making choices, and coping with adversity can be lifelong skills that serve children well beyond their expatriate years. Children who understand the "big picture" and have a global context are far more capable of picking up any material they may have missed while educated abroad, and are more likely to get the most out of their future education—wherever it may be.

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Publisher Geoffrey W. Latta

Editor Virginia G. McMorrow

The Expatriate Observer is automatically sent four times a year to all purchasers of ORC International Compensation Services data.

Additional magazine subscriptions and back issues are available at the following prices:

With an ICS data service

Additional annual subscriptions \$25.00 each

Back issues \$7.50 each

Without an ICS data service

Additional annual subscriptions \$50.00 each

Back issues \$15.00 each

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ISSN 1085-682X

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