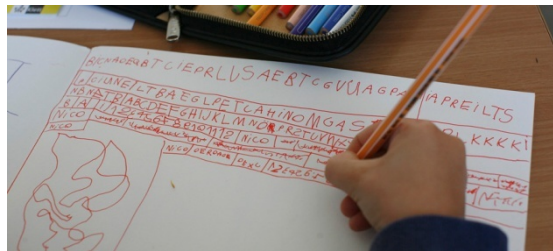


Prime Relocation

Schooling in Switzerland – Is it advisable to choose a Local or an International School?



The hidden advantages of Swiss schools over International Schools

Upon arrival in Switzerland, most expats that we deal with through relocation have only one question regarding education for their precious children – “how far is the nearest International School?” Although part of our job involves smoothing integration, we mostly submit to their demands and direct them to the nearest hub of expats. However, part of us is left wondering why transferees don’t even consider the local Swiss school – considering that it is free, it is the first thing that we would mull over if we were in their shoes! But beyond the price tag, the standard of Swiss education is very high (Swiss schools ranked highly in the recent OECD PISA study), and the long-term assimilation advantages it offers should not be under-estimated.

A Local Advantage?

There is arguably nothing more natural than sending your children to the local village school – the children can walk to school and reduce their dependence on their parents. According to a teacher at the International school of Zug and Lucerne, who decided to give the local village school a try for his children last summer “International kids are very dependent on their parents whereas Swiss kids are allowed more independence and this can be a good thing.” He swapped two of his eldest children to the Swiss school to give them the opportunity of “integrating into Switzerland better and learning the local language.” In his view, schooling is about discovering and making new experiences and change can be positive. His daughter is pleased about being able to go to the local school and when asked about the advantage says “well, it is easier to make friends at the international school, but my friends at the local school I will have for longer.”

For many, a change to the local school occurs as a natural process when families have made the decision to buy a house and settle down. If you want to have the complete Swiss experience, encouraging your children to join their neighbours at the local school and allowing them the opportunity of assimilating, is a way of offering them a taste of local life.

For Moira Walsh a corporate tax advisor at PricewaterhouseCoopers in Zug, the decision to send her children to the local village school was a conscious one to move away from the expat bubble and to expose her children to a set of children from a whole range of socio-economic backgrounds, not just high-earning expats. According to her “local schools offer our children a dose of normal life, similar to what I had back home in Ireland”. According to Moira’s experiences, it has been easier for her and her husband to integrate into Swiss culture through the children as they open doors and cross boundaries that adults can take much longer to cross alone.

Wish for Integration

Long-term expats sometimes begin to feel disappointed at their lack of integration into Switzerland. Living in the expat bubble, but never really partaking of Swiss life to the full, can be frustrating for some parents, who would welcome more opportunity of speaking German and integrating with their neighbours and local community.

Bi-lingual offers at local Swiss Schools

Several years ago Swiss grammar schools introduced a programme offering pupils the possibility of completing a bilingual Matura (similar to A-levels) programme which would especially appeal to bilingual pupils and offer a strong international aspect to their

Swiss education. Students on this programme receive lessons in English for about half of their Matura subjects. Moreover, in Zürich, the IB programme is already being offered as an option at many Swiss secondary schools and it won't be long before it appears as a standard throughout Switzerland.

The International Advantage

The current trend is certainly that International Schools are gaining international pupils, whereas local Swiss schools aren't always considered. In Zug, for example, the International School of Zug and Lucerne have seen their numbers quadruple in the last few years. They are not just filling up with native English speakers, but are attracting a large number of non-English speaking Europeans too, enticed, inter alia, by the English language skills on offer.

Many of our clients are also attracted by the familiarity of having contact with other families in a similar situation to themselves and are therefore placing contact and friendship as an important factor. It is also the high regard of an international school education in their home countries that attracts them. Certainly, the lure of the AP and IB programme, as well as the IBO Curricula play a role and another key issue is the concept of integration; international schools are known to offer an excellent support system to ease the transferees' transition. The package on offer is a large social network; quick guaranteed assimilation for the children and social activities and get-togethers for the parents. The International schools' ethos is based on embracing different cultures and nationalities and putting everyone under one roof; that is what they are about and why they work so well the globe over. Transferring your children from one school to the other if you relocate frequently is easy and simple, whether in Singapore or Zürich. Their message is well-marketed and their success here in Switzerland is clear.

Reasons why Swiss schools are initially unattractive to expats

Joachim Sonderegger, headmaster at the grammar school in Zug puts the low number of expats moving school systems down to deficiencies in their German language skills. According to him, "the key to success for expats in the Swiss school system is their German language skills". The recently established Integration schools have been a success in helping some newcomers to cross the threshold into the Swiss education path, but not many have dared to give it a try.

Misconceptions about Swiss Schools

There are some misconceptions about Swiss schools amongst expats. Some conclude that if they send their children to a German speaking school, they will become "German" and lose their "Englishness". This is a common worry based on parents own fears and anxieties. As there is little or no social network on offer as support for parents in Swiss schools, it can be a difficult path to take and it will take a large

amount of adjustment for both the child and the parents to get it right.

Conclusion

The type of school one chooses depends very much on the length of one's stay in Switzerland and the personality of your child; if you have outgoing kids with a communicative flair and a real desire to be integrated into Swiss life, both in terms of language and culture, then the local school could be the perfect option.