

Moving with kids? Ten tips for choosing the right international school

by Jessica Eisner

Our family recently moved to Ecuador. Having relocated to Belgium just one year earlier, we thought we knew the ropes about how to find a good school for our kids (ages 6 and 8). However, just as the fundamental cultures of Latin America and Europe differ, so did our pursuit of a good school. Who would have guessed that in the bureaucratically stifling country of Belgium (where it took no less than nine people to finalize our housing agreement) we could get our child enrolled in an excellent school with a signed, two-page application? Whereas in Ecuador (where we expeditiously purchased a condo—from open to close of escrow—in six days), there would be more than a dozen requirements to fulfill before our children could attend school?

Having finally enrolled our children in what is proving to be an excellent school in Cuenca, where we live, I have now had time to reflect on information that might have helped the process go more smoothly. Here are my words of wisdom if you're facing the same challenges:

1 Ask yourself “why?” As with all major life decisions, you should examine your motives and goals. Are you relocating for your career, for the cultural benefit of your children, investment opportunities, or for a combination of these? Your answer will help determine what kind of school will be best for your family.

If you are moving primarily for your career—and the language and cultural benefits for your children are of lesser importance—then placing your children in a private international school with a good reputation (and where classes are taught in English) can make sense. The children's school work will not change as dramatically this way as if you had chosen a native-language school, but the trade-off will be that they will learn the new language slower, if they learn it at all.

If your primary goal is to enrich your children with the new culture and have them learn another language, then you probably want to find a school that teaches classes in the native language.



Photo courtesy of Jessica Eisner

In my conversations with parents who have initially tried public schools abroad, I have found that unless your child speaks the local language fluently, even the excellent public schools in Europe can be academically overwhelming and socially brutal for the newcomer. Rest assured that with some effort you will find a good school to suit your needs in medium-sized cities of almost any country. As a rule, don't rely on the Internet or the printed ads often seen in tourism or relocation publications for comprehensive information—historically, even the best schools have poor marketing skills.

2 Question everyone. Find as many people as you can to ask about locating schools, various schools' strengths, their reputations, etc. You should begin your school quest by asking any friends you have in your city/country of interest. Find out which schools they recommend—but don't stop there. Ask the IL in-country contact, if there is one in your country of interest. Once you get the names of a few schools, go see them for yourself—while you're there, ask other parents (if you meet them) and the administrative employees about the school. Check if similar schools exist in the area.

At one prestigious school in Ecuador, the classes for our younger son's age were all full, so we asked the director if he could recommend an alternative. He gave us three personal recommendations and another person at one of those schools gave us the name of the school we ultimately

chose. If your company is relocating you and either paying for your children's schooling or assisting with payment, they or the relocation agent may suggest a number of schools.

However, you should consider this list of schools incomplete. Search outside this sphere if you want to get a true feel for the various offerings in the region. It might be useful to look at a couple of “local” public schools.

3 Do the legwork. Once you have names of schools, the only way to figure out which is best for your child is to visit them—preferably while classes are underway. This will give you an idea of the teachers' abilities, the energy level and discipline in the school, the student population, and class size. We found, to our surprise, that many of the prestigious private schools in Ecuador have class

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International Schools, continued from page 19 sizes of 40 children.

I have also found, in both Belgium and Ecuador, that the word “international” is used liberally in the titles of schools, often for no apparent reason. You will discover whether a school is truly international when you visit and speak with the staff. You should also examine classrooms and sports facilities. In developing countries particularly, check the cafeteria area and bathrooms—these areas can be neglected (especially to the American eye) even in the top schools.

4 Don't follow the hype. You know your child best so don't put too much value on others' opinions when you are making your final decision about which school he should attend. In Belgium, after we had looked at about a dozen schools, we had the difficult task of deciding between two very different ones. One was a prestigious international school attended by many children of E.U. diplomats and NATO officials. It had great facilities, an excellent academic and sports program, superb teachers (I spoke with several), and even a “rabbit loan” program, where the kids could take a rabbit and cage home for the weekend. It also had a good student-to-teacher ratio.

However, we suspected that our kids (having transferred from a mid-sized, public elementary school in suburban Washington State) would probably be overwhelmed by the sheer size of the school. Thus, we chose a small but academically impressive Montessori school that offered grades K-6, and the children loved it. The school offered personal attention—something our children particularly needed as they approached their first French lessons.

5 Give yourself time. The old adage about learning languages also applies to trying to find the right international school: “You can't start too early.” If you are transferring in the middle of a school year due to a career change, relocation agents may be able to help you with getting into a good school—but, due to constricting factors such as enrollment capacity, curriculum, etc., this may not ultimately be the best school for your child. If you plan to change schools at the normal break in the school year, realize that not all countries follow the American schedule. Many Asian and coastal South

American countries begin their school years in late spring or summer, for example.



6 Understand deadlines. We missed the premiere inscription and testing deadlines in Ecuador.

However, the matriculation deadline was another matter. The matriculos deadline was the third week in August, by which time all students who had an inscription needed to have their enrollment requirements completed and documented. This included records from the previous school, a physical exam, immunization records, recent hearing and visual examinations, copies of identification cards (or passports), placement testing (especially mathematics), and an interview with the school psychologist.

The matriculos is also the point when the first big school payment must be made. Most schools in Ecuador then give monthly invoices, called pensions or mensuales.

7 Know what is expected. Once we met the entrance requirements and paid our matriculation fee in Ecuador, we were given a list of school supplies and stores where we could purchase uniforms. In Belgium, schools charged an arm and a leg for tuition, and were generally well stocked with schoolbooks, computers, art supplies, and library fodder; the Belgian school supply list was short, and schools that required uniforms were few.

In Ecuador, almost all schools, public and private alike, require a uniform—one dress, one “everyday,” and one for sports—and the list of necessary supplies is extensive, including not only folders, pencils, and notebooks, but also arts and crafts supplies, markers for the teachers' whiteboards, and toilet paper. When we were purchasing the list of items, I reminded myself that the most important thing was that the school provides good teachers and support personnel, clean, modern facilities (including computers), and a healthy environment for my children.

In addition to the tuition, uniform, and supply requirement, our enrollment in the Ecuadorian school was finalized with our signed commitment to follow the school rules. We had to agree to attend meetings requested by the teachers, and it was forbidden for our children to bring cell phones, toys, or electronic devices to school. If even seen, the contraband would be confiscated immediately—no questions asked.

8 Respect the culture. In addition to the uniform requirement in Ecuador, there were several other new things for us to absorb. Ecuador is a Catholic country; most unusual for us was the prevalence of religion—even the ones that professed to be secular or non-religious.

When I questioned the director of one school about the religious curriculum she said, “We are not a religious school and we do not have religion classes



because we know we have students from many different religions." I asked what religions are represented and she replied, "Oh, there are many who are not Catholic; they include Christians, Protestants, and I think we even had a family who was Methodist last year." If you are Muslim, Jewish, an Atheist or a Rosicrucian and you are moving to a Latin American country, you can expect many small surprises and prayers sprinkled throughout even the most "non-religious" school day (unless you manage to find one of the rare religious schools that caters to your particular religion in the larger cities).

If you are not prepared to have this influence in your child's life, you should seriously reconsider your move—or prepare to home-school. In contrast, Belgian schools that taught religion were clearly identified and secular schools strictly avoided the topic.

Food is another major mediator of culture. The Belgian schools encouraged healthy eating and typically offered what might be considered elegant meals for the childrens' lunches, for example, paté on toast and French onion soup.

The Ecuadorian schools also offered comida tipico (typical native dishes).

9 Don't expect change overnight. Contrary to popular belief, many children over the age of 5 are not sponges who will adjust to anything and learn their new language practically overnight. Though relatively young and exceptionally bright, our children have already defied the three-month rule for absorbing the language of their new country and I suspect they may do it again here in Ecuador.

To combat this we have enrolled them in additional Spanish classes and in extracurricular activities to encourage speaking with other kids.

10 Expect to keep working. Once you have chosen the correct school and completed the requirements for your child to begin, your work has only just begun. If you are fluent in the local language, the least you will have to do is review homework and understand notes and phone calls from the teacher. Parental obligations seem to be more significant at private schools, so time spent helping with playcostumes or for fundraisers, etc. may be substantially more than you were used to in the U.S.

If you are not fluent in the language, or if your child is having trouble adjusting to his new environment, then you can add translating everything that your child brings home, working with the schools translators, and possibly even visits to the school director and counselor to the growing list of your parental chores. In my experience, the time required seems to have increased from what I was used to while living in Washington. IL