MANAGING EXPATRIATE EDUCATION IN OVERSUBSCRIBED LOCATIONS

Why Hong Kong, São Paolo, and London can be among the toughest places for expats to find appropriate schooling—and creative solutions to the issues families face.

By Elizabeth Perelstein
Hong Kong has long had a well-earned reputation as one of the toughest places for the children of expatriate families to gain admission to the school of their choice. “Shortage in International Schools Threatens Hong Kong’s Position as Financial Hub,” read a headline in *Economy Watch* just a year ago. Not only in Hong Kong, but throughout the world, education is ranked among the top challenges for families relocated by their companies.

In a recent report published by Brookfield Relocation (see chart below), education is cited as the third-highest concern among participants, and one can reasonably infer that each of the other categories (“location difficulties,” “family adjustment,” and “spouse/partner resistance”) may include some degree of concern regarding children’s education. This is consistent with the experience of School Choice International over 14 years of working in the field of global education. Families today seem more stressed than ever and more adamant that if concerns regarding their children’s education are not successfully resolved, they will not accept the assignment they have been asked to undertake. As a result, companies are paying huge sums of money to iron out schooling difficulties, and the stakes continue to rise.

**ISSUES IN HONG KONG**

**Limited availability of places for expatriates:** During the SARS epidemic of 2002–2003, when a large number of expatriates fled the country, many school places were filled by local students whose parents wanted to provide their children with a pathway toward a university education in the U.S. or the U.K. Unlike schools populated by expatriate children, where one-third of the class typically turns over annually due to repatriations, those with local students see much less turnover because locals tend to stay for their entire school careers. Now that the expatriate population in Hong Kong is booming once more, there is again an acute shortage of spaces.

**Local schools are not considered a viable option by many parents:** Language differences as well as curriculum and cultural differences concern parents who

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**RELOCATION CONCERNS**

- **Location difficulties:** 21%
- **Children’s education:** 35%
- **Family adjustment:** 38%
- **Spouse/partner resistance to international relocation:** 48%

*Source: 2012 Global Relocation Trends prepared by Brookfield Relocation*
Waiting lists at international schools can approach 70 students per grade.

—Source: The Wall Street Journal

may consider utilizing local schools in predominantly English-speaking countries. Schools that are international in name but populated largely by locals create worry among Western families who are concerned about social interactions and fear that the main language of communication will not be English. The issue is not only with the curriculum, but also with the way things are taught. Many Asian countries still tend to be paternalistic societies where boys are favored, there is a lot of rote learning; most kids take extra classes to prepare for year-end exams, creativity and outspokenness are not as highly valued as conformity and consensus, there is little time for extracurricular activities, and the academic pressure is tremendous.

Traffic: Rush hour travel between Kowloon and Hong Kong Island is very difficult, making it unrealistic to separate children in a single family or to use new schools or campuses that may be opening up far from work and home life.

Cost: Debentures or capital levies are a historically accepted way of allocating scarce spaces in Hong Kong international schools. As families and companies increasingly believe this is the only way to gain admission, competition for debentures is growing, prices are escalating, and a thriving black market has emerged. An article in the South China Morning Post on Sept. 12, 2012, reported that even the schools of the English Schools Foundation (which manages more than 40 schools, many of which are used by expatriate families) have begun a controversial program of charging HK$500,000 (US$64,500) for seats beginning with the 2013 academic year.

Issues in Brazil
Brazil has quickly become an advantageous place to do business. Add to that the preparations for the upcoming Olympics, and cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are inundated with expatriate families seeking school places. As in Hong Kong, the demand simply cannot be satisfied through traditional avenues.

Limited availability of places for expatriates:
Historically and today, well-to-do Brazilians have used international schools to educate their children. As in Hong Kong, local families do not vacate places readily despite expatriate demand.

Academic calendar: In the Southern Hemisphere, the academic year is based on the calendar year rather than the school year that is used in Northern Hemisphere countries. As a result, children moving in are required either to jump ahead a semester or to be held back a semester. The same difficult decision occurs when families return home. International schools typically use a Northern Hemisphere calendar; but this is not always the case—which creates great confusion and contributes to difficulties placing multiple children from the same family.

Curriculum: While there are schools that offer the British, American, and International Baccalaureate (IB) curricula just as in other countries, Brazilian law requires that a school that enrolls Brazilian students must also teach a Brazilian curriculum. Expatriate families typically do not find this an asset. The mixture of languages, in the eyes of many expatriate parents, causes the curriculum to lag behind that of other international schools, since local students may not read and write at the same level as the expatriate children. Also because of the large percentage of

Graded: The American School of São Paulo currently has 1,000 students on its waiting list, 500 being expats.

—Source: Graded Admission Office
locals at the school, Portuguese is the main language used outside of the classroom.

**Traffic:** While several international schools have opened additional campuses, they are often quite a distance from the original location. Given the challenging traffic conditions in these popular cities, commuting time can be significant, and separating children between campuses is therefore usually impractical.

**Safety:** Safety is a consideration in every aspect of relocation to Brazil. Due to the perceived wealth of expats relative to much of the local population, much effort is devoted to ensuring secure campuses and safe transport to and from schools.

**Cost:** There is a widely held belief, unconfirmed by the schools, that supply and demand has created a new category of admissions similar to the Hong Kong concept of debentures; some employers are believed to have paid close to US$450,000 per seat to ensure that their employees’ children obtain places. If true, this will edge out expatriate children whose companies are not willing to support international schools at this level.

**ISSUES IN LONDON**

In London there is a large selection of schools for expatriates, because many local state and independent schools are considered options in addition to the international schools. However, the admissions process for state and independent schools can be quite complex and difficult to navigate.

**Location of international schools:** In the greater London area, numerous international and local national schools offer American, French, German, and International Baccalaureate programs. However, due to space constraints in London proper, many of these schools are in the suburbs, so demand for school places in urban London outstrips supply, as is the case in many other popular expatriate cities.

**Timing:** British families typically put their children on lists for schools at very early ages, often at birth. Families coming in with older children face an admissions landscape that appears daunting at the outset, as many of the schools they have heard about will likely be full at every age level. In British schools, families need to give notice of leaving only one term in advance of departure (there are three terms per year), so there can be uncertainty about chance vacancies until the last minute.

**Curriculum differences:** Although at first glance, a common language and academic year make it appear easy to switch between the American and British systems, they are more different than it would seem. Families must assume that their children will experience curriculum gaps and overlaps, both on the move abroad and when repatriating. British children typically begin reading, writing, and math facts a year or two before these are taught in the U.S. Parents are afraid that their children will not be able to keep up when moving to the U.K. and worry again when they return home that they will be ahead of their peers and not challenged. For older children, subject matter specialization begins much earlier in the U.K., while American high school students are expected to take as broad a set of courses as possible. Concerns over university placement permeate decisions as to whether to choose local or international schools.

**Testing:** Academic tests to determine access to the best schools are given at every stage of a pupil’s life. Non-British parents, unaccustomed to having young children take tests with such a great impact, may shy away from exposing their kids to rigorous examination preparation at such an early age. And because schools are judged based on ongoing school placement, they may be reluctant to take expatriate children who may not perform well in the year preceding examinations.

**Chicken or egg—entry complications for state schools:** State schools, particularly in outlying areas, can offer an excellent (and cheap) education at a time when companies are eager to reduce expatriate program costs. While families are guaranteed entry into a school within a catchment area, they are not able to choose a particular school until they have secured housing. British schools are numerically ranked, so typically the schools with the highest ratings are full, leaving an expatriate family the least attractive schools in the catchment area once they commit to housing.
FACTORS AFFECTING THE FUTURE

Economic realities of the past several years have caused successful companies to be more nimble and able to shift gears as business opportunities emerge in new locations. Unfortunately, schools, which are often run on a nonprofit basis, have been notoriously slow to respond to change, and they often lack the financial resources to do so effectively. Difficulties range from constructing facilities to dealing with licensing complications to getting qualified teachers.

These issues have prevented the supply of educational establishments from keeping up with demand in many locations. Even when new schools are opened, parents worry about enrolling their children in institutions that do not have a proven track record of academic quality or success with ongoing placement in schools or universities—so new schools are hard to sell to expatriates.

Such problems will continue to affect educational opportunities for expatriate children in these challenging locations and in areas that will attract business during the coming years. We have not even mentioned the complications involved in education for children with special needs. For a large segment of the student population, special education raises even more significant challenges—enough to merit an entire article. Parents and companies need to be flexible and open to different ways of thinking about schooling when moving abroad.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

1. As school placement consultants, we find that most families come to us with a particular school in mind. But when we shift their focus to the child’s strengths, weaknesses, and interests rather than the brand name, they are able to recognize the advantages of schools that may be less well known or popular—and where there may be vacancies. Flexibility is the greatest source of opportunity a family can have.

2. Although parents find it difficult to put their children in a new school, learning to evaluate new schools based on the fit with their child can give parents confidence in schools that do not have a proven track record.

3. Boarding schools, either back home or close to the parents on assignment, may offer the most attractive alternative.

4. A particularly interesting development in the educational arena is distance learning. This option can be used while a family waits for a space to open up at their first-choice school or to supplement education at the school they have selected. In some cases, the distance learning school becomes a family’s school of choice while abroad, offering them both accreditation and a customized program for their children.

According to a recent National Public Radio podcast, technology is changing the future of education. Stanford University has an online high school, and other degree-granting distance learning schools exist for children as young as kindergarten age. NPR technology correspondent Steven Henn said:

“Interactive quizzes and other tools have made it possible to deliver a class that really has value to hundreds of thousands of students. … In the early days of online education, … basically you had a camera in the back of a lecture hall video-taping a lecture. This is really quite different.”

Now that Harvard, MIT, and Stanford are committing major resources to the field of distance learning, its former stigma is bound to fade. More experimental parents are increasingly willing to take a chance, enrolling their children in online learning communities while they spend time on a waiting list, or even for the duration of an assignment. In my opinion, distance learning is at the forefront of the future of education domestically as well as internationally. This is a cause for great optimism for companies as they follow their business needs that require moving families to new locations.

It is critical that HR collaborate closely with education providers to help parents get on board with the concept of distance learning as well as other nontraditional alternatives, as increasingly creative educational solutions are required to move families overseas.

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