

# GENEVA SCHOOLS

## MAKING THE BEST CHOICES

*It is a perennial problem, not just in Switzerland or neighbouring France, but also around the world. What's the best option for my child? A local school? An international establishment? Or sending them off to board? Education specialist Anne Keeling explores some of the options for ensuring that parents make the right choice.*

**B**ritish expatriate Mel McGarry has four children; two of them at a local Swiss school for Early Years, while the older ones are enrolled in an international one. "I wanted the two little ones to learn French," she says. For McGarry, it's all about being part of a community, where one gets to meet everyone in the village and benefits from Switzerland's local education system which is widely regarded as both excellent and well-rounded, regardless whether in French, German or Italian-speaking parts. But ultimately, she adds, it's not if, but when they will go to the international school. "My children are international children. As expatriates, we don't know how long we will remain in Switzerland, so providing them with the best long-term opportunities; for relocating to another school in another country, for their higher education options too, I need to ensure they are educationally agile."

For the older children, she has opted for Geneva English School (GES), which, located in Genthod outside of Geneva just off the lake road, describes itself as a British school with a global outlook. Its small size (280 children in primary, and a brand new secondary which opened last September) sets it apart from most of the other international schools in and around Geneva, some of which are teaching almost 2,000 students.

McGarry is not alone among expatriates considering Swiss public schools for her younger children. Many are motivated by the cost. Another more recent concern is the

impact that the new Trump presidency could have both on United Nations agencies, which partially subsidize educational costs, as well as corporations. The fact that UN organizations may find themselves with less funding could have a severe impact. Some are already talking about cutbacks. It is a similar situation with the private sector.

"Less schooling is being paid by companies so more employees are paying for their child's education themselves, or obtaining public school places, especially for younger children," explains Relocation Manager at Sterling Relocation in Geneva, Kim Wark. He provides relocation support for many families moving into Geneva. The fact that the public option is completely free and the structure is quite good is a deciding factor for some families, he notes. However, given that the learning is in French, other families that expect to eventually return to their home country, or have older kids thinking about examinations or considering higher education needs, it is a different matter. Such parents tend to keep them in the system and curriculum they're already used to. For them the international schools are the answer. "Schooling is a huge decision for families," notes Wark. "It's usually the first question that needs to be addressed apart from immigration."

Norbert Foerster, the Director General of Institute International de Lancy in Grand Lancy in the Canton of Geneva, which offers both a French and English system, says he's seeing fewer children transition from the local school to international school after primary than in past years. "Most families are making the decision at the earliest stage; if they are in a local system, they tend to go through the entire primary system then change," he says. Transitioning from a public school to international can have its challenges, he admits. "If children don't have language skills that can be a problem, and the curriculum and system is not the same; parents see that after some time, there are gaps for sure. We deal with that of course but I think it's important for parents to make a decision from the first year as the paths are not the same."

Institut International de Lancy has over 850 students aged from 3 to 18, and currently has children from 93 different nationalities including Swiss locals. "That's Geneva for you; the UN and multinationals bring many expats from all over the world," Foerster points out. It's one of a number of expansive international schools in Geneva including the International School Geneva, which now has three main campuses, and Collège du Léman, each location with well over 1,000 students offering a wide range of facilities and options for students.



Mel McGarry prefers the alternative option, notably a small international school environment as offered by GES, and also, further afield, at Brillantmont International School in Lausanne. “Both my extrovert daughter and my more introvert son have a sense of belonging that comes from a school where everyone knows each other,” says McGarry. “There can be pros and cons to this; you can lose out on additional competition with a smaller group, but in a smaller group there are fewer places for you to hide. That smaller class size and the size of the school really helps.”

Head of Admissions at Brillantmont, Sarah Frei, believes a small school is an advantage to many children given that it can offer a far more personalised approach to education. “Small doesn’t mean missing out. We offer some very strong extra-curricular activities including TEDx, Model United Nations and Habitat for Humanity,” she maintains, GES headmaster Tim Meunier agrees about the benefits of school size. “For over fifty years, we have purposely kept the school small to ensure that every child is known, and supported as an individual,” he says. “We’ll reflect this same approach in GES Secondary. Geneva needs such a school.”

Several of the international schools around Geneva meet specific needs of different families. Leysin American School, for example, provides a vital boarding option. “Only about 20 percent of our parents live in Europe,” says Head of School, Marc Ott. “Most of our families live in the Middle East, Far East, North or South America. Typically, children are here because there is no adequate schooling where they are. Some are families who are moving out of Geneva but wanting to keep their children here for stability in their education. Others, it’s where both parents are travelling with business and need their child to board. There are plenty of very good day schools here in Geneva; we are primarily focused on providing a boarding solution.”

Susan Krumrei, Europe Consultant for ISC Research, the leading provider of data and intelligence on the international schools market, observes that Geneva’s options are outstanding. “It’s not just the fact that they are offering excellent curriculum programmes and qualifications that are globally respected such as IGCSE, A levels and the International Baccalaureate, but the international schools in Geneva also have an exceptional reputation for helping children to develop the skills of critical thinking and

## AND ON THE FRENCH SIDE...

Across the border in neighbouring France, notably in the Pays de Gex, there is the option of having your child attend a free local primary school, while also taking part in the modestly-priced weekly English National Programme, which was initially created by CERN for its employees. This is designed to keep your child up with English (there are also options for German, Dutch, Spanish and other languages) just in case one changes systems or moves elsewhere in the world. Once out of French primary school, your child can opt for the International Lycée (which includes a Collège) in Ferney-Voltaire near Geneva airport, which is state-run and has recently expanded to a second campus in St Genis. The Ecole Jeanne d’Arc in Gex, which is private, also offers bi-lingual programmes similar to Ferney. Both cost far less than Swiss-side international schools, but one needs to be resident in France.

The French system, however, is not easy. Some parents have found that while one child may do well, another may not. This produces situations whereby families may have one or two children on the French side and another in Switzerland at one of the international schools. The advantage with the French International Lycée approach, however, is that high school graduates who obtain their International Baccalaureate also emerge with a multi-cultural education incorporating two entirely different ways of thinking. Many universities and companies find the ability of such students to adapt to different cultural mind-sets a highly desirable asset.

### *The Editors*

international mindedness,” she says. “Demand for school places has remained high. Many schools are at capacity and some have waiting lists for certain ages. It’s good to see another option (GES Secondary) about to open.”

Nick Smith, Community Liaison Officer at the UK Mission to the United Nations which supports the relocation of families working at the Foreign Office agrees. “We have more families here than we used to. It’s a popular posting. Geneva is great for kids. It’s a safe place to live, the schools are excellent; they’re definitely a draw. I don’t think there’s a bad school here, but you have to find the right school to suit your child. Visit some schools before you decide; it makes such a difference. At the end of the day, your school selection can be as simple as it being all about the people you meet during your visit.” ●

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