



World Mobility Perspectives: School Rules

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Simple Steps for Navigating the Complex World of International Education



Were you ever the new student at school? If so, it's likely you can recall just how overwhelming it can be. The first day of school for any child is full of anxious moments and nervous feelings about the unknown – Will I make friends? Will I know how to find my classrooms? Will they understand me? Will I fit in?

Imagine what this must be like for children who are starting a new school in a new country. In addition to the normal feelings of anxiety, these children are also dealing with a sense of loss having said goodbye to friends and family and all things familiar as they move to a place full of unknowns.

While relocating internationally can be an exciting adventure, it can also be overwhelming for families, and the list of things to think about and manage is long. Internationally mobile families find ways to support one another and to be resilient. Global mobility programs and policies are designed to provide them with the additional support that they need. But when it comes to education and finding the right school in a city that is unfamiliar, a place where the options may be limited, or space does not allow for options, anxiety levels can rise simply because assignee parents and their children are not equipped to know how to even start the process.

This issue of World Mobility Perspectives will examine some of the challenges surrounding international schooling and present a few tips for global mobility professionals and assignee families when navigating the international school experience.

Background

In the Employee Relocation Council (ERC) and Towers Perrin Global Talent Mobility Study, education was identified as the top challenge faced by international assignees. If the family is settled, the working parent can be more productive and the international assignment will inevitably have a greater chance of success. The benefits of getting it right from the start are well worth the time spent in preparation.

But what about the children? A common term used when referring to children of this nature is Third Culture Kids (TCKs). You may have heard the definition, been reminded of the statistics, know how important it is to “get it right” when relocating with children, but what does that mean? What practical steps can you take to ensure that the experience is not only smooth, but also rewarding for TCKs?



Who are Third Culture Kids?

A Third Culture Kid is an individual who has spent a significant amount of their developmental years in a culture other than that of their parents. On average, a TCK will move four times by the age of 18 and an additional six in the subsequent 20 years. TCKs grow up in places that their peers and extended family members at home may know nothing about.

TCKs grow up knowing that they have to change their behavior, language and customs to suit the situation. Some might even call them “cultural chameleons” because, after a few relocations, no one has to formally teach them how to behave, it is something they often learn by experience (although intercultural training gives the whole family an added support and is considered a best practice). To that end, TCKs have a high degree of adaptability, grow up quickly and are more mature than most children their age. Other traits of TCKs include a high level of confidence, self-awareness and risk-taking.

Key Traits of Third Culture Kids:

- High degree of adaptability
- More mature than most children their age
- Self-confidence
- Self-awareness
- Risk takers

Although they may become more self-reliant, when children are relocating frequently the growth of their identity can be disrupted. A sense of belonging is important for any child, and the majority of TCKs rate their strongest sense of belonging in terms of relationships rather than place. A TCK will find it challenging to strike the balance between being youthful and experiencing life at an early age, and because of this, TCKs fit in with and relate best to others like themselves. They understand the importance of representing something bigger than themselves. On the surface, they tend to make friends easily and are fairly outgoing because they want to belong, but those friendships may only exist on the surface as they are always preparing to move on and protect themselves from a sense of loss when saying goodbye.

It is not surprising to learn that while TCKs sometimes have gaps in their education, they are four times more likely to complete a university education. Statistics confirm that 70% of students who grew up on overseas assignments reached a higher level of education than their peers at home, and 97% continued with further education (Source: Pollock & Van Reken, Third Culture Kids). Why is this not a surprise? Because studies show that internationally mobile families value education and have high aspirations for their children.

Finding the right school

The process of finding a school in a city you don't know is not only daunting, but can be frustrating, especially if there are limited options and long waiting lists. Difficulty in finding a suitable school is well known as a barrier to an employee accepting an international assignment. In addition to understanding the options available, it is important for assignee families, HR representatives, business leaders, educational consultants, global mobility professionals and schools to fully understand and consider who these children are and what their needs are when finding the right school.

What is important to the child and the family?

In order to make a smooth transition, you need to consider the children, understanding and validating their concerns about moving internationally, as well as the parents.

ACS International Schools in London, United Kingdom, completed a research project to try to understand what the real issues are for children during international relocation. The research found that when you ask children, they rate their top three issues as leaving friends and family, fitting in and making new friends, and finding the right school so they can do well academically.

Consider asking these questions of the assignee family:

- **Size:** Are they looking for a small or a large school?
- **Activities:** Is it important that the schools offer sports, music or arts?
- **Curriculum:** Is the type of curriculum important?
- **Repatriation:** How will the school experience affect their transition when it is time to go home?



Talking to parents

It is just as important to provide realistic information to parents. Nobody wants to be surprised. Parents need to be reminded that it will not be possible to replicate the school that their children are currently attending, and therefore they need to remain open-minded about the process, possibilities and school availability.

There are a number of ways to help families with the school search process, starting with an educated global mobility team. Be sure that the organization's local global mobility team and/or local HR support are up to date about the schools in the host location. This includes knowledge of any changes to curriculum, updates on facilities, administrative changes with the Head of School or Principal, or changes to the admissions procedures.

Find out if the schools in the assignment locations have experience of working with families who are relocating and if they have experience with the process of repatriation. Know what type of support programs, both academic and pastoral, exist for families in transition.

The best way to get to know the schools in host locations is to get to know the admissions contact at each of the schools. Visit the schools and establish a relationship with your organization. Keep in frequent contact with the Admissions Office. You will be more of an advocate for the assignees and transferring families you are supporting if you become an expert in the schooling options and if you are not an unknown face at the local schools.

To help parents to know what to expect, we recommend that the local mobility team member(s) and/or local HR representative take the time to understand the admissions process for the local schools, to know what is required to apply to the school, how decisions are made and what the deadlines are for applying. To ease anxiety for relocating parents, it is often expected that an organization should pay for school application fees.

As soon as your organization becomes aware of an offer of relocation being made to an employee with an accompanying family and school-aged children, it is important to contact the schools (directly or via an educational consultant), to enquire about availability. If the schools are taking appointments, the next step is to arrange for school visits on the family's preview trip to the new location.

Let the family know that appointments are often limited in many locations and, as a result, they need to be prepared to attend the appointments that are available. The more advance notice the school has, the more they can prepare for the family. Feel comfortable asking the school how they can help you to prepare the family for the process of applying. Remember to be patient with schools and recognize that they will be working with a number of families, and that your assignee's family may not be their top priority (yet!).

Be prepared to discuss alternatives to an assignee's "first choice school". It is important to explain to parents that there is limited space for schools that are in high-demand. If possible, try to ensure that assignee families are considering more than one school so that they have options when the admissions decisions are released.

What do schools want to know?

When contacting a school, try to have as much information on hand about a child as possible. Depending on the size of the school and the demand for places, school admissions offices could be processing a large number of applications at any one time. It's vital that schools have as much information about a family in advance of a visit as possible, so that time is spent wisely.

Know more than just the date of birth of the children you are supporting so that you can be their advocate. The following list outlines some of the important questions schools will ask:

- What is the child's previous school experience and what type of school have they been attending?
- What is the language of instruction of the current school?
- What is the year-group called in the home location (terminology can confuse both the school and the family)
- Is the child currently receiving additional support for learning or English as an Additional Language (EAL)?

If the student is receiving any support services, be prepared to share as much information as possible with the school. If the student is a non-native English speaker, find out how much experience of speaking English they have had either in or outside of school (if this is relevant to the types of school that the family is considering).

If a student is receiving learning support services, ask the school what they might suggest given the individual needs of the student. Be an advocate for the family, but also know the school's process. It is important to support the school as much as the family; such a partnership will benefit parents.





How to help the family of a child with special needs

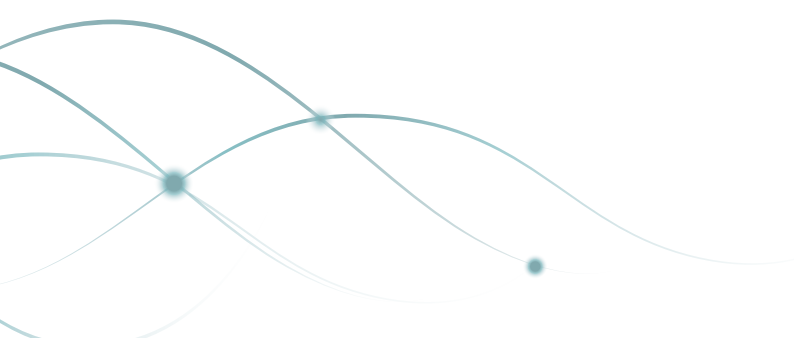
If you're working with the family of a child with special needs, it is important to obtain as much information as possible in advance of contacting the school so that you can present an accurate profile of the student. If the student has an Individual Education Plan (IEP), a Student Support Plan (SSP) or similar, this is incredibly helpful information and should be sent in advance of a school visit. Most schools will require any standardized assessments or diagnostic tests that may be available for a student. Always ask if a student has had an Educational Psychological Report.

Schools' support services will vary. Do your homework – find out what is offered. Does the school offer similar services to those the student is currently receiving? If not, will the student be suitably accommodated in the school? If parents provide support outside of school, what exists in the host city? Be prepared to ask the right questions and have as many answers as you can for the family. Please note that many international schools do not offer extensive learning needs support due to limited resources.



What if a student has specific learning needs?

Learning needs support can range from minimal support provided in-class, "pull-out" support provided outside of the classroom, or one-on-one assistance five days per week. It is critically important to know if a child is currently receiving support of any kind. Often parents are hesitant to talk about their child's learning needs but it actually helps students during the admissions process. Schools will quickly identify the learning needs of a student, and therefore the sooner they know the information, the sooner the school can determine if the student is a good fit and if the relevant resources are available for the student.



What can you expect from the school?

Schools have a responsibility to support families in transition too. You should feel comfortable challenging schools to offer a high level of support for TCKs and assignee families. Ensure that all schools provide a formal tour and orientation of the facilities. Make sure that the children know the basics, such as where to find the toilets, how the lunch program is handled, what a daily schedule looks like, what they need to bring to school on the first day, what are their teachers' names, and who can they go to if they have questions. Will someone be with the student to ensure that he/she has someone to eat lunch with and play with on the playground? All schools should have a buddy system for new students. Do not be afraid to ask what the schools offer.

While it is important that the children know what to expect, it is equally important that parents know what to expect. Most schools understand the importance of the partnership with parents.

Some schools do it better than others and offer formal Parent Associations, often called PTAs (Parent Teacher Associations). Similar to the student needs, parents need to know who they can approach with questions, what type of support will be available for their children, how the school will communicate with them, and what volunteer opportunities might be available. The school can play a critical role in ensuring that parents are settled in their new location too. Many schools offer welcome committees, or parent support groups. Both are helpful in putting parents in touch with others who speak their native language or have children of similar ages.

Conclusion

The key to the success of finding the right school for assignee children is for global mobility professionals to remember that, in addition to the company, there are three vital stakeholders in the process: the child, the family and the school. To satisfy the needs of each, you have to be well informed:

- Know as much as possible about the child (needs, interests, previous experiences, current situation, etc.)
- Have a thorough understanding of the family's needs and preferences
- Have a good knowledge of the available schools (size, philosophy, availability, approach to teaching, approach to new students, etc.).

Remember to be an advocate for the family, but also be realistic about the schooling options in the organization's assignment locations, especially those locations where business needs are critical and unique assignee skills are needed. And remember that many times the family can become focused on one specific school, and may tend to ignore other schools that also have a good fit with the child. Being familiar with the options available and having the knowledge to inform on the differences and similarities between the schools, can help in supporting the family's school search.

Once the family finds the right school, the working partnership between the family, the school, and the organization's global mobility professionals can bring about a smooth and successful transition for everyone.



A typical school admissions process:

Step 1: Visit the school for a tour and to gather information

Step 2: Apply to the school – an application typically includes the following:

- A complete application form and application fee
- Health form
- Previous school records
- Confidential reference
- Parent questionnaire
- Copies of passports
- Proof of parent employment
- Possible onsite assessment

Step 3: School decision – school may ask for further information

Step 4: Family financial commitment – a non-refundable confirmation fee

Step 5: Orientation arranged by school for student

Step 6: Enrollment



This article was authored by Julia Love, Director of Admissions, International School of Kuala Lumpur, and Lisa Johnson, Global Practice Leader of Crown World Mobility's Consulting Group.

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