

# A New International School. The Real Goals of Education.

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Moving abroad can be a life changing experience. Some families choose to emigrate, pack up everything and move for good. Many more move for a shorter stay which may last for 2, 3 or more years depending on the contract or reason for moving.

Having children of school age requires choosing the way you want your child educated in this temporary environment. If a family is lucky, there is a choice of schools in the area and choosing the right school can be extremely difficult.

A family moving abroad has an amazing opportunity to give their children an enriched, culturally diverse experience. The chance to learn a new language, have friends many of whom live transitory lives and experience local culture and people. Parents who will see their children return to their home country for school, at some point wonder how their children will transition back into the school system they have come from. The reality for children today is that no one really knows what the world will be like in 3, 5 or 10 years' time. Schools and school systems are changing rapidly, so what should families look for?

An international school has a responsibility, in an increasingly globally connected world, of continuing to prepare students for what is around them, and what they will experience when they move on to another country, return to their native country or leave school.

But even though we are witnessing mind-boggling advances in technology in many aspects of life, the real goals of education have not changed. It is important that our children continue to love learning new things throughout their lives. We must nurture confident and healthy students, physically, mentally and emotionally, who understand their own bodies and ways of thinking. We want to encourage caring and compassionate students who will make a contribution to the well-being of the world around them.

Currently in the middle school (ages 11-14) at St. John's International School in Belgium, we are examining our curriculum framework and pedagogical practices to make sure that we are providing the best possible opportunities for our students. A quality curriculum and quality teaching go hand in hand as we go forward.

Skills and concepts that are vitally important for our students in this fast-changing world include collaboration, communication, global thinking, critical thinking and information technology literacy, which need to be fostered in a creative and innovative environment. Humans have a wide range of cognitive abilities and so we must offer a balanced curriculum, giving opportunities for our students to explore and experience in a number of settings whilst expressing their own creativity, curiosity, imagination and passion.

The role of a teacher can be seen as that of a coach. A great coach really understands his or her team as a group and as an individual. A great coach needs to help the individual understand what kind of a learner he or she is and how they learn best. A great coach also needs to know how to bring out the best in their students' learning and to help them set up and reach goals which push the limits of their own capabilities. Teachers and their students get to know how they learn best. Metacognition (knowing about knowing) should be an integral part of a sound curriculum. Teachers use varied tools and activities for helping students identify their learning style and can work out when and how to use particular strategies for learning which focus on the child as an individual.

In this age of instant information, teachers can no longer think of themselves as the sole giver of knowledge which is eaten and then regurgitated by the students. Teachers need to support, encourage and nurture a talent or interest and help students to learn independently. Maria Montessori once said :

“The greatest sign of success for a teacher is to be able to say. ‘The children are now working as if I do not exist’”

By establishing an exciting and welcoming learning environment, educators invite students to take an active role in the learning process, as they use tools provided to enhance and promote their own enrichment. This, in turn, builds the foundation of the entire community, as every individual student engages in learning as a celebratory and empowering enterprise.

At St. John's we have made huge advances in providing our students with these tools. We have a new data management system, full Wi-Fi throughout the school, one-to-one netbooks being rolled out in six grades this year, a new virtual learning environment for students (Study wiz) and a strong commitment to investing in technology and professional development for staff.

The embedding of technology for learning offers students and teachers an instant palate of colors beyond any palate they have had access to before in the classroom and at home. We offer new tools in a tool box equipped to tackle the many challenges students will face now and in the future. As with all tools we focus on highlighting the huge benefits whilst at the same time pointing out the dangers. Netbooks offer more opportunities to break down classroom walls and welcome in the world around us. A vast world with huge amounts of instantly available information. Used properly, a netbook is a tool which encourages innovation and creativity. We often see the computer as a source of information, like pulling a book off a shelf with hundreds of millions of books on it or watching a video created by someone else. At St. John's we harness the creative potential of these machines by encouraging students to create their own content, share their experiences and to learn how the immense power of social media can change the world by supporting social causes and philanthropy.

So when looking for an international school, make these questions a part of your list:

How do you encourage curiosity, imagination and innovation?

What opportunities does the school offer within the curriculum and outside for connecting with the local culture?

What are you preparing my child for?

What is the role of a teacher?

Make sure you get a chance to walk in to classrooms on your visit and really take a look at students interacting, creating and learning.

At St. John's, we have a strong commitment to what we see as the real goals of education: helping students to be themselves, reach their potential and help them to understand that they have choices in life that can have a huge impact on themselves and the lives of others.

There is a quote above a fireplace at Earlham College in the States that says "create a spark, light a fire and keep it burning". This, for me, describes our job perfectly. "Keep it burning" is our goal.