



Market Spotlight

EDUCATING EXPAT CHILDREN:

Negotiating Market Trends and Challenges

Introduction

When families with children relocate, schooling is often the most important part of the move - and the most stressful. Families worry about how the children will make the transfer from one country and schooling system to another. They are concerned about whether the new school will be a good one and how the children will cope with language and curriculum differences. What's more, changes in environment - when they return home as well as when they leave - can be unsettling and should not be underestimated.

For parents, the decision to accept an international assignment can hinge on whether or not the children's education will suffer. This is especially important to those whose children are at a critical school age (usually 12-18). Families like these are unlikely to risk disruption to their child's education unless their employer can alleviate this concern. So, for organisations relocating employees with families, the challenge lies in showing potential assignees the benefits of the range of education options available to them. Being able to visit schools, orientate themselves with the emotional and practical aspects of the new institution, and apply for and be offered a place at their school of choice can make or break a move.

The education market for relocating children in some regions is extremely advanced, and parents can often find welcome opportunities for their offspring. However the recession and subsequent economic downturn have brought with them new challenges - not only for the relocating family but also for the employer and mobility support function.

Changing Times, Changing Policies

Over the last eighteen months, many companies have cut back on support packages for relocating families. Some organisations still offer a full school search - including a needs analysis with the family, assistance with school selection, and help with the application process. However, the trend for others has been to instead offer a more general information service, comprising assistance with information on the host country's school system and advice on applying to state or private schools.

This general information service has occasionally been offered where an assignee has not been allocated a school fees allowance. But without sufficient support, there is a greater risk that the assignee will not find an appropriate school for their child. This obviously has a very negative effect on the families, adding to an already stressful situation. In some cases, it has led to assignment failure.

A Shrinking UK Market

Education in the UK has suffered a little during the recent financial climate, presenting some issues for people moving into the country. Many local families moved their children out of private schools and into state schools to ease problems with finances. This has had a notable effect on both the private and state sectors.

Private sector: a resilient market with opportunities for the incoming family

While many of the good private schools have survived this trend, some schools were forced to close. The more competitive institutions found that they had to once again market themselves in order to make sure their classes were running at usual capacity. As a result those top British private schools in London and the South East that were traditionally always full and with waiting lists now have the occasional spare place to offer a child moving in from abroad. Some of the smaller less competitive private institutions have been forced to offer more for the money and become more adaptable to suit the financial climate.

International schools offering the International Baccalaureate and American curriculum are still well supported by incoming families where companies will foot the bill for school fees. These schools are usually the most expensive and only affordable for those who do have a company allowance. 2011 has seen a rise in fees at international schools and UK private schools generally.

State sector: oversubscribed and littered with red tape

For families relocating to the UK and looking for places at state schools, there are now new obstacles to overcome. According to Government statistics, a record number of primary and secondary state schools are now overcrowded. Nearly a third of state secondary schools are full or have more pupils than they should. This means head teachers have to squeeze in an extra 54,260 pupils, according to the Department for Education.

Government statistics also show that one in five (3,444) UK primary schools are either full or operating over capacity. Primary head teachers are being forced to accommodate an extra 41,680 pupils. Factors such as the rise in immigration, a baby boom in the UK and the recession fuelled exodus from private schools have predominantly been the cause of this very difficult situation.

Families wanting a state school place for their child must plan carefully. Local education authorities in the UK will only accept applications from families living within their catchment area, and even then this is no guarantee of a place. This means assignees must pick a property without knowing if they will be able to get their children into a school. Assignees wishing to take this route need plenty of guidance to help them understand the process and to ensure they're making the right decisions for their family.

A Brighter Outlook Globally...

The international school market offers a different scenario for assignees. In most cases the assignee will choose to send their child(ren) to an international school as opposed to state education, which is not free in every country. International schools offer continuity of learning for the child irrespective of the stage they are at in their education. Many schools offer GCSEs, A Levels and the International Baccalaureate while some primary schools will offer the new international primary school curriculum.

The last few years have also seen an explosion of international schools opening around the world. Many of these schools are of a high standard. They are well staffed, with a good calibre of teachers and are adequately funded. Schools also have to be regularly inspected and tested by an international school body.

However, assignees should still seek advice as to the suitability of the school for their family. Standards can be high, but this is not the case for all schools. Furthermore, some schools can be remotely located. An education consultant can discuss transport options and spend time researching the schools within the area to find what is best suited to the child and family.

While the market for international schools has grown across the world, there are two particular regions where it has been most pronounced.

Middle East: investing in overseas talent

Up until two years ago good schools and availability of places were very limited. Many of the Middle Eastern countries were trying to minimise the number of expatriates entering the region. But with the growth of the airline and construction industries in particular came the realisation in countries like Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE that in order to encourage a high calibre of workers from outside the region, they would need to accommodate families.

In the UAE, for example, land was given to international education companies to open good quality British and international schools. Many of these companies were British run and involved in the British Schools Inspections Service Ofsted. The resulting institutions are of good quality.

There have, however, been a large number of other international schools opening over a very short period. These schools are of varying quality. Careful guidance is needed as families select their school options and visits are recommended. Education has become big business.

Africa: opportunities abound, if you tread carefully

At first glance there are many British and international schools. Many were once thriving colonial private schools but some are now very run down and lacking in resources. Quite a number have changed the curriculum to that of the host country.

Once again, many of the best international and private schools in Africa have been taken over by education companies who might have two or three schools in the region or many schools worldwide. As with Middle Eastern schools, careful guidance is needed.

Educating the Whole Family is Key to Success

Clearly global market trends can make relocating assignees with children complicated. Given the variances in availability and quality, assignees and their partners are likely to be wary. In some respects, they are taking a leap of faith, and the unknown can be daunting. But there is plenty mobility professionals can do to alleviate their concerns and make sure everything runs smoothly.

Getting the whole family involved in the process from the start is a very positive way to make the relocation seem less like leaping into the unknown. A collaborative approach within the family to those aspects of life which involve every member will prevent future recriminations.

Reassuring parents whose children have special needs, because the options aren't as limited as some would expect. An education consultant can arrange any special assessments that are needed, and will advise on a range of issues to make sure the most appropriate solution is found for the whole family.

Inviting the family into presentations on the move will also help in getting every member to feel that their opinions and fears are being taken seriously. Combining this with accurate timescales, within which each part of the process is clearly organised, also helps to reduce uncertainty around the move.

Focus on the positives, because despite the potential challenges, the value of living in another culture can offer massive benefits to a child. Learning to get along with people from different walks of life, picking up a new language and gaining a greater understanding of the world around them is an education in itself - one that will last a lifetime.

Think about what happens when the assignment ends, because returning home in the middle of an exam period is just as problematic as moving out in the middle of one. So time the repatriation as well as you would the initial move to minimise disruption. If possible, the assignee should be helped to plan for their child's continuing education on repatriation before the assignment begins.

Using an education consultant as a first point of contact for the family throughout the move provides a familiar face that will be there to guide them through any potential problems, thus making the move seem much less daunting.

The Value of an Education Consultant

The education consultant will conduct a needs analysis on initiation, looking closely at the child's needs, strengths, weaknesses, family values (religious, non-denominational, single-sexed, co-ed, progressive, traditional, large, small, etc) and geographical logistics. They will then be able to identify a manageable list of schools to consider based on these criteria. The education consultant will also be able to provide plenty of information on the schools as the family narrow down their preferences. At the appropriate time there will be a need to look at availability of places, set up school visits, and assist with the school applications.

Throughout the process the consultant will also update and advise HR, keeping them up to date at key times.

Once school visits are planned the education consultant can give advice on what to expect and ask at the visit. Following the visit the family will want to talk through their experience and ask further questions. The education consultant will then guide the family through the last stage of the process and liaise with the school and the home search coordinator.

A good education consultant who understands the relocation industry, the current education climate and the delicate nature of a family move is key to a successful family relocation.

About Sterling

Sterling is a provider of global relocation services to some of the world's leading companies. Through our service delivery hubs in EMEA, the Americas and Asia Pacific, we help clients achieve their business goals by alleviating the operational challenges of workforce mobility.

Using in-house experts and our network of specialist global partners, we offer the full suite of mobility services. Relocating employees receive a dedicated Sterling team member as a single point of coordination, support and advice to ensure every part of their relocation runs smoothly.

Sterling is committed to quality and delivering an impeccable service, in every location. Our ISO and FIDI FAIM accredited quality processes guarantee our high standards are consistently maintained.

Client satisfaction is our ultimate goal. We've retained 100% of our top 10 clients for the past 5 years and last year 99.63% of relocating employees were satisfied with our service.

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