

Dutch-run int'l schools another option for expat families

by *Ettie Zilber*

The availability of a good school for their children is a major concern for internationally mobile families when deciding whether to take an overseas placement. Pre-departure investigations, "look-see" visits and actual on-site school shopping are crucial to choosing the right school overseas. Of course, that's when there is a choice. In many postings only one international (or English-medium) school exists, for better or for worse. And when no school exists or what does exist is inappropriate and/or has a poor reputation, a family may refuse the posting altogether.

In addition to what kind of education their children will receive, families must factor in the cost of that schooling in making decisions to move abroad. Traditionally, employers have paid the bills for educating employees' children by including school tuition in the overseas package. As the cost of private education has risen, however, companies have tried to cut down on these expenses.

One way companies save money is to offer a salary package that pays for a less expensive school, if such a choice exists. Parents wishing to send their children to a more expensive school must then pay the difference themselves.

Because foreign ministries and private companies want to send personnel abroad, they have a vested interest in promoting quality educational options in host countries. The governments of the host nations are also interested in providing good school options. The economic, political, educational and social benefits of a resident population of expatriate groups are some of the reasons why many countries have established and are promoting their own very good in-

ternational schools. These schools are attractive options for expatriate families that want a good international education for their children at a reasonable cost.

The Netherlands, as part of its national education system, offers international educational opportunities for foreign nationals that compete with private sector schools for students. Currently, 8 such primary schools and 8 secondary schools are operating throughout Holland, concentrated in areas with large international populations from the diplomatic, academic, business, banking, tourism, industry, trade, shipping, and technological spheres.

The programs receive subsidies for each student from the Ministry of Education, as is done for any of the Dutch students. As these funds are insufficient to cover all expenses required (additional courses, specialized staffing, small class sizes, and professional development), there is a tuition charged, but at a very attractive one-fifth of private schools' costs.

The Dutch "IGO" (Internationally Oriented Education) departments offer a unique option for foreign nationals living in the Netherlands. The IGO departments are located in the same facility of a state school or in a nearby annex and are open to all foreign nationals, Dutch nationals returning from an overseas posting and Dutch students who can prove that they will soon be going abroad. Classes are conducted in English.

Most staff in the IGO are certified native English-speaking (NES) teachers. According to the administrators, there is no need to recruit teachers from overseas for an adequate supply of qualified NES teachers live in the Netherlands. Dutch teachers are hired

to teach in the English stream only after passing an external exam of English proficiency.

While there are variations between schools, in general the primary school curriculum is based on the British primary school curriculum, but currently there is a movement toward adopting the curriculum of the ISCP (International Schools Curriculum Project). Dutch is taught as a foreign language and with it Dutch culture. There are up to 17 students in a class.

Among the 8 secondary schools the curriculum varies between IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) or IBMYP (International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program) and, in the last two years of school, the IB (International Baccalaureate). The IGCSE and IB both have final external examinations. Class size is usually up to 25 per class, but it isn't uncommon to observe tutorials with 3-10 students per class. Classes include languages, humanities, maths and sciences, technology, arts and design and physical education. Students are encouraged to maintain their native language (A1) and sit for IB exams in both Language A1 and A2, which certifies bilingualism. Third or fourth languages (B exams) are offered and encouraged.

An interested addition to these IGO departments is that all 8 secondary schools offer bilingual (TTO) education to selected Dutch students, usually on the same premises or nearby, and thus there is much integration between the IGO and TTO programs. Most schools integrate the PE, art and design and technology classes, but a number of the schools unite the students in English academic subjects, as well. Another opportunity

for integration is with the Dutch students in the regular Dutch program on the same premises. Since all students use the common facilities and participate in numerous activities in and around the school, they come in daily contact with each other.

One noticeable difference between state-run and private schools is the extracurricular activities program. The private international schools are recognized for their well-developed enrichment and after-school programs and clubs. Other than Model U.N., Photography and Yearbook, extras are not offered through the Dutch state schools. The IGO students do, however, attend sports clubs, music classes, etc. in their neighborhood, as do all other students in Holland. Some might view this as a negative aspect of the program; however, others see this as an outstanding opportunity for interaction with the local society.

So why would the Ministry of Education support and encourage international education of foreigners in their schools?

The first European Ministerial Conference on the International Baccalaureate in 1979 in the Hague introduced the need for internationalization in education. The quality of the IB curriculum and its philosophy was attractive to those with a wider vision of education. Thus, in 1982 the idea was adopted in a few schools in the Netherlands on an experimental basis on the initiative of three school principals. "The Dutch government soon realized that IB schools might contribute to the improvement of the economic infrastructure of the country...[and]...successive Ministries showed great interest in the development of IB schools and supported them with advice, as-

sistance and funds. Without this aid, the experimental schools would not have pulled through in spite of their enormous enthusiasm and inventiveness." (van Elderer, et. al, 1996)

Holland is a small country among the larger states of Europe and its involvement in trade since the 16th century has always been a motivating force behind proficiency in communication skills. Therefore, the Ministry of Education has made internationalization a priority and is endorsing cooperative relationships with institutions in other countries as well as opening the Dutch system to students from abroad. It is felt that if the Netherlands is to broaden its horizons and look beyond its borders, it is important to develop the country and the economy.

What a better way to model and encourage internationalization than to invite foreign students into your school, offer them an internationally recognized program in a language medium they can use to integrate and socialize with the host students in the process? Imagine the implications of this integration when 10 years hence, these students attain positions of influence.

The Netherlands has set an example of how the state can compete with the private sector and reap the benefits for its own citizens. Private international schools should take heed.

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