

From Australia to Asia

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Starting at a new school can be daunting for any child, but when the school is also in a different country, the transition can be an even more difficult prospect. The logistics of effectively settling in students from a variety of backgrounds is just one of the unique challenges faced by schools catering to expatriates such as the Australian International School in Singapore.

Established in 1993 with 32 students, the Australian International School (AIS) Singapore now boasts almost 2600 students representing about 55 nationalities. Of these, approximately 67 per cent are Australian, with New Zealanders making up a further 12 per cent. But while the figures do tell part of the story, it is only by visiting the school that you get the full picture of the joys and trials of being an integral part of the education of an expatriate community.

The campus is surprisingly large for a country where real estate is at such a premium, with multi-story buildings carefully organised around playgrounds and sporting areas. The configuration of the school is, however, as acting principal Andre Casson observes, a bit like his home state of Western Australia: "North-south it's very long, but east-west it's not very wide."

The physical size of the school, coupled with the large student population, are issues that AIS staff are very conscious of, and a number of programs and initiatives have been put in place to support students to make a smooth start at the school. Casson explains that statistically there is about a 20 per cent turnover of students in international schools. "But there are certain parts of the school where that transition is less apparent. For instance there's nowhere near 20 per cent going from Year 11 to 12. We're almost 100 per cent retention at that level."

To combat the transience of the population, buddy systems are used at different points. For example, Claire Ettinger the school's Communications Manager, whose own children are in elementary classes there, explains that each new child coming into a class will be matched with a buddy. "In elementary they hold off placing the kids in classes until they've met the families and they work out OK – so Fred is a real keen soccer player, well there's three classes he could go into but in that class Bob is brilliant and we'll pair them up together." Although in the long term students may not always bond to become best friends with their allocated buddy,



Acting principal Andre Casson



A special music program with Richard Gill

Ettinger says they always remember who helped them when they first arrived. The fact that most of the children at the school have had the experience of being the newcomer gives them a instinctive sense of empathy when new students arrive, but training is given to buddies to ensure that they can capably fulfil their role.

Year 12 students are also buddied up with a student from the pre-school area. This not only helps to settle the younger students into the school but as Casson suggests, “I’m sure the big kids probably get more out of it than the little ones. They just adore it.” The interaction with pre-schoolers gives Year 12 students a welcome break from the seriousness of their studies and provides a chance to de-stress.

Pre-schoolers are further supported as they face the transition to elementary school. In second semester, each pre-school group buddies up with a prep class, spends time working in the prep area, and starts having lunch outside where the preps eat so starting elementary school becomes a natural extension of what the students were doing the year before. Casson is very confident that the school manages this aspect of schooling well. “I think this is

Mother tongue classes are also offered in Korean and Mandarin

probably the best school I’ve ever worked at for transitioning kids in, because we’re very good at having kids come and go,” he says.

While many schools in Australia may do some or all of these things, AIS faces the additional challenge of needing to support parents and families as they get used to living in a new country as well. “In an expatriate setting, we almost become a community to ourselves. You know, you can go to Melbourne and Sydney and you can find Chinatown. What’s Chinatown? It’s where Chinese people can get together and they can immerse themselves in Chinese culture, talk Chinese and get the stuff that they know and love. We are almost like Australia town,” Casson asserts.

To facilitate this, the school has an admissions team who help prospective parents navigate the labyrinth of decisions that are associated with relocating overseas. Ettinger explains that members of the admissions team provide

advice on issues such as finding an area to live in that balances the students’ needs with those of the parents, a process that’s helped along by the fact that most of the team, not to mention the teaching staff, have been in the same boat themselves, so to speak.

A number of Australian traditions and events are honoured throughout the year, including ANZAC Day. For the second time this year, Australia Day was also celebrated. “At the beginning of the year we have a big Australia Day barbecue that’s run from here and we partner with the Australia New Zealand Association and the High Commissioner comes down,” Ettinger says. Although, of course, it’s not a public holiday in Singapore, over 3000 people attended this year’s event, which was held in the first week of school.

But with attendees from so many different backgrounds, other measures are required to make sure that all students are in a position to take full advantage of the education on offer. Three different levels of support are provided to students for whom English is not their first language. The first is the Partial Mainstream Course (PMC), which is available from Year 6 to 9. Students who arrive with very little English are placed in small groups of about seven or eight for the bulk of their classes, but integrated with other children from their year level for Art, PE and Music. “Then as the students are able to start to access the curriculum more effectively, they’ll go into EAL [English as an Additional Language], where they’ll do all their subjects with their regular teachers, but instead of doing English as a first language, they’ll do EAL,” Casson explains. From there, students receive support in the form of an extra EAL lesson in lieu of attending a Language Other Than English class.

Mother tongue classes are also offered in Korean and Mandarin. “The reason we’ve got the Mandarin and the Korean is because we have that critical mass of students that makes it justifiable... we’re close to having enough Japanese students to allow us to have a mother tongue Japanese class but we’re not quite there yet,” says Casson.

Maintaining a contemporary and engaging curriculum is clearly a priority for AIS. Last year



Student/parent teach me iPad class

Shane Ross, a teacher originally from Canada, initiated a pilot program with Year 1 students to extend their thinking during inquiry learning sessions. Working with the Teacher Librarian and a member of the ICT Team, Ross organised a solid 80-minute session each week during which students investigated a variety of things relating to the curriculum or their inquiry units in greater depth. With the added support of the teachers and teacher aides attached to each class, the lessons could be differentiated depending on where specific students were at.

On the strength of the program's success, and after a bit of negotiation with the pre-school over timetabling, Ross has extended the program to include prep and Year 2 students this year. "We're going to get the prep students to build photoelectric cells because they're doing a unit on matter so they've learned about materials – solids, gases and liquids – but I'm going to ask them well, 'Where does electricity fit?' Because it's neither, it's none of those things. Electricity is generated by a combination of those various materials," Ross enthuses.

From Prep to Year 8, the students at AIS use the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP) as a learning framework, underpinned by the content of the Australian Curriculum. The PYP offers a holistic approach to learning, fostering independence and placing a strong emphasis on inquiry strategies (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2005-2014).

In Years 9 and 10, students follow the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGSCE) curriculum. "We do IGSCE in Year 9 and Year 10 because it's very good preparation for the IB and the HSC and also because the Australian Curriculum is not really as well developed in Year 9 and Year 10," Casson says. Year 11 and 12 students can choose to complete either the IB Diploma, or the NSW Higher School Certificate, with around two-thirds opting for the HSC and the remaining third doing the IB.

Although a high proportion of AIS attendees are quite academically inclined, Casson also acknowledges that for some students, a pathway into traditional Year 12 courses may not be appropriate. "When I first came here we had



The curriculum is also enhanced by a steady stream of special programs

a student who was doing HSC physics... essentially because that was all that was left for him to do," he relates. "His other subjects were DT [Design Technology] and you go, 'Why are you doing Physics? This is cruel and unusual punishment!'" To cater for these students, the school is developing a vocational education stream. "We started last year with one, this year we've got three and next year we're going to go for five. My ambition is to have seven so on each line there'll be a non-ATAR option for a student to do," Casson says. It's a fairly unique offering for a school in Singapore, and a move that according to Ettinger, is making sense to many families. Without such an option, she explains, when kids are looking at more of a vocational pathway, "actually mum and dad have then got some difficult decisions to make maybe early on in terms of, 'Right do we need to go home even if we're not necessarily really ready because the option's just is not there?'"

Interestingly, although they are not required to participate in Australia's National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), for the past four or five years, AIS students have

sat the NAPLAN tests. "With the Australian Curriculum, you know you need to have standards that it's linked to, so the thing that we did have that we could reference to Australian norms was NAPLAN," Casson explains.

The curriculum is also enhanced by a steady stream of special programs and visitors made possible by the school's strong connections with state cultural organisations, the Australia New Zealand Association and the Australian High Commission. "We just had [conductor] Richard Gill. I came up and watched in this room, watched him taking a Year 2 class with his hip replacement walking around and doing these beat patterns; just amazing ...he was brilliant," Casson recalls. "He was with us for a week," Ettinger adds. "He did some workshops in the evening with parents as well and... he was the most exciting person we've had here. We've had lots of very interesting people, but he was an incredibly engaging speaker."

Daniel Jackson, the Best and Fairest player last year for AFL team Richmond, has visited in recent months, while earlier in the year Andrew Matthews, author of the best selling book *Being a Happy Teen* addressed the Year 10, 11 and 12 students and their parents. The latter was organised as part of the school's pastoral program, which has a focus on positive psychology.

AIS is also about to establish a school garden. "One of the exciting things for this part of the world is that the [Parents' Association] has just given us funds to put in a Stephanie Alexander Garden, which is something that is going to be very exciting for, particularly the preppies, but the entire lower elementary school kids because it's an opportunity to actually grow and see something come to life, harvest it and use it in cooking because each of the areas here have got cooking areas as well, which is just amazing," Casson reports.

Indeed strong parental involvement is another characteristic of the school. Parent helpers are a regular feature in the junior school, where they assist in the classrooms, but also with the gross motor program for younger students. Earlier this year, the Parents' Association established the 'Shark Shop', an outlet through which parents and students can purchase supporter wear for school sporting events.

Efforts are also made to keep parents up-to-date and involved with their children's learning. This year, the head of ICT organised a session with students from years 1, 3 and 5 during which they educated parents about the iPad program. The school has just rolled out a one-to-one iPad program for elementary students, so the session engaged parents in tasks that the students had worked on using iPads. "At one



point there was a lovely moment where some of the children, I think it they were Year 3s, were debating between themselves the best way to teach the parents how to use the particular app. It was really quite lovely," Ettinger smiles.

Although many of the teaching aides are locals, the vast majority of the teaching staff at AIS comes from Australia, but Casson admits he is keen to recruit educators of other nationalities as well to broaden the students' horizons. Casson himself, who has worked overseas for a number of years, is clearly enamoured with the experience: "The kids here are just so accepting. No matter what we

ask them to do, they just embrace it with a real wonder, real wide-eyed optimism. I think that's perhaps lacking sometimes in Australia; you know there's that cynicism that comes perhaps with kids now... You've got to be a certain type of person to come and live outside of your country and I think we benefit from that pioneer spirit that the kids have and the parents and the staff have."

Further reading

International Baccalaureate Organization (2005-2014) The IB Primary Years Program. Available from: <http://www.ibo.org/pypp/>. Accessed 26 July 2014.

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