

ExpatriArrivals
local info for global expats

THE EXPAT'S GUIDE TO EDUCATION & SCHOOLS IN



2014/15 Edition

JOHANNESBURG

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is known for its spectacular scenery, moderate climate and for being Africa's largest economy. Fittingly called the "City of Gold", Johannesburg is the country's financial epicentre and, despite the challenges it faces, boasts the largest concentration of wealth on the continent.

A relatively new city, Johannesburg is both known for and shaped by its history, owing its prestige to the discovery of gold in the 19th century and its role in the country's struggle towards a racially inclusive democracy. A sprawling metropolis where residents live a culturally diverse, fast-paced and prosperous lifestyle, some parts of the city remain affected by crime and extreme poverty. Nevertheless, those who can afford it enjoy a high standard of living behind the electric fences of its leafy suburbs and affluent suburban estates, while their children have access to a world-class education.

South African schools are either government-owned public schools or independent, privately run institutions. In practice, some schools are semi-private, meaning that while they are ultimately accountable to the government, they are partially self-funded and are often able to offer better facilities and a higher standard of education than other government schools.

Public schools are state controlled and prepare students for the National Senior Certificate (NSC), commonly called the Matric Certificate, which is awarded in Grade 12. Independent schools are free to follow other curricula but have to be accredited by and meet the standards of the state's council for monitoring the standards of education in the country. Self-governing schools are further classified as being either international or private.

Private schools are often administered by a religious organisation or education company. They either write the examinations set by the South African Department of Basic Education or those of the Independent Examinations Board (IEB). International schools follow the curriculum and educational ethos of another country or of the International Baccalaureate (IB) organisation. Although some private schools have religious origins and may have a culture that reflects this, schools in South Africa cannot exclude pupils on the basis of race, culture or creed.

According to the South African Schools Act, the age norm of a grade is equivalent to the number of the grade plus six. Assuming they do not get kept back a year, students in South Africa start Grade 1 at seven years old and finish Grade 12 at 18. Some schools have an additional preparatory grade for children turning six in a given year, often known as either Grade 0 or Grade R.

Few tasks feel more daunting than selecting the best school for your child and the questions can seem endless. Will my child get the attention he needs? Will she be able to integrate back into our home system? Will he be prepared for college entrance exams? Will she be safe? Can I afford it?

The Expat Arrivals Schools Guide is designed to provide expat parents with some of the insights necessary for making an informed decision.

Although there are 11 official languages in South Africa, English is most commonly spoken in cities and Johannesburg is no different. While there is no official language of instruction, the best schools are usually English-medium schools. That is, however, where uniformity ends – schools in South Africa vary widely in terms of cost, quality and curriculum.

The Expat Arrivals Schools Guide for Johannesburg is designed to provide expat parents with an overview of the South African school system and to provide some of the insights necessary for choosing the best schools for their children.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN JOHANNESBURG

All schools in South Africa, whether public or independent, are required to meet the standards of Umalusi, the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training. The council oversees a number of education certificates, including vocational and technical diplomas. Most students in the country, however, study towards the National Senior Certificate which is awarded at the end of Grade 12.

Each of South Africa's nine provinces is responsible for funding the facilities and teachers' salaries of the schools within its boundaries. As a result, the quality of a public school partially depends on the wealth of its province, and its own resourcefulness. Some schools solely rely on inadequate government funding, have sub-standard facilities and struggle to attract experienced teachers. Others are largely funded by governing bodies consisting of parents and alumni, and are able to maintain good facilities, retain top-quality teachers and attract bright students.

MODEL C SCHOOLS

Expat parents considering public schooling for their children may hear about "former Model C" schools. This term refers to schools which elected to become semi-private institutions towards the end of the apartheid regime, often to allow for the admission of "non-white" children.

The Model C classification fell away under the country's new democratic government but the term is still commonly used to describe certain schools. While they are still controlled by the state, these schools are largely administered and funded by parent and alumni-run governing bodies.

The best among these schools tend to have long, prestigious histories and are almost always located in the city's more reputable suburbs. King Edward VII School in Houghton and Parkview's Parktown High School for Girls, for example, consistently rank among the best schools in the country. The fees for former Model C schools are often on the high end of the spectrum by public school standards, but they are still generally cheaper than private and international schools.

PRIVATE & INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS IN JOHANNESBURG

There are many excellent private schools throughout the country with good academic track records and international university acceptance rates. Given the range of good private schools in the country, they are often the first choice of informed expat parents moving to Johannesburg.

Much the same as public schools, independent schools have to adhere to the standards set by Umalusi. The most reputable private and international schools tend to be accredited by the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA). ISASA requires its members to pass an inspection by the Independent Quality Assurance Agency before they can join, and they have to be inspected every six years after that.

Provided that independent schools meet the standards prescribed by the Department of Basic Education, they are allowed to manage their own learning, teaching and internal assessment. They can also choose whether to follow South Africa's national curriculum, the curriculum of the national Independent Examinations Board (IEB) or any other curriculum that it is recognised by Umalusi.

Most private schools either follow the state or the IEB curriculum, with senior students graduating from high school with a National Senior Certificate. The IEB qualification is internationally recognised and many of the students who graduate with one progress to international universities.

International schools in South Africa follow curricula and write examinations overseen by international bodies, such as the IB, the British Cambridge examinations (O- and A- levels) or the US Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs). There are only four English-speaking schools in Johannesburg that offer international qualifications – the American International School of Johannesburg; the British International College; Charter College; and Charterhouse.

There are also alternative learning options which are becoming increasingly popular with expat parents, especially those with younger children. This includes over 50 Montessori pre-schools and primary schools, a full list of which can be found at www.samontessori.org.za. There are also several Waldorf education schools, including the Michael Mount Waldorf School in Bryanston, to the north of the city.

ADMISSION TO PRIVATE & INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Independent schools generally accept applications throughout the year but the waiting lists for prestigious private schools can be as much as four years long for some grades. Applying for admission as soon as possible is important. Generally, some or all of the following documentation is needed to apply for a place at an independent school:

- A copy of the child's birth certificate
- Copies of the passports or South African IDs of the child's parents
- Latest school results (including official transcripts or report cards and standardised test results)
- A copy of the child's Study Permit (or proof of application)
- A copy of at least one parent's Work Permit, Permanent Resident Visa or Dependency Visa
- A completed copy of the school's Application for Admission form

Schools often charge non-refundable admissions fees and may also require certain fees to be paid in advance upon registration. Many schools require copies of all documentation to be faxed to them and, to confirm placement, request additional hard copies to be posted to them. Some schools also have admissions tests for English or maths proficiency to determine which grade would be most suitable for the child.

Students who are moving to South Africa need to apply for a Student's Pass at the Department of Home Affairs in addition to a Dependency Visa, although this can be done at the same time as applying for a place at a school.

TUITION AND FEES

Public school fees vary depending on whether the school is run by a governing body and where it is located. Schools that solely rely on the government are often cheaper but underfunded and provide a lower standard of education. Provincial education departments are responsible for public school funding, which means that schools in a relatively wealthy province such as Gauteng will command higher fees than those in poorer provinces.

The immediate area in which a school is located also plays a role, with schools in more affluent areas more likely to charge higher fees. The best public schools in Johannesburg cost between 15,000 ZAR and 35,000 ZAR a year.

Independent schools usually cost more than public schools and, in turn, international schools generally charge higher fees than private schools. On average, private schools will charge between 40,000 ZAR and 60,000 ZAR for Grade 1, and as much as 120,000 ZAR a year for Grade 12. The American International School, on the other hand, charges around 267,000 ZAR a year for Grade 12 in 2014. Fees do, however, differ between schools of the same type.

SCHOOL TERM AND SCHOOL DAY

Schools usually start between 7.30am and 8.30am, depending on the institution, and usually end at around noon for nursery school or between 1pm and 3pm for primary and high school students. Extra-curricular activities usually begin shortly after school for an hour or more. Many schools also have aftercare facilities for children who need to stay until their parents can fetch them. These often carry additional costs.

The school year in South Africa starts in January and ends in December, and is split into four terms. For 2014, the term dates for primary and secondary public schools in Johannesburg are:

- **Term 1:** 15 January to 28 March
- **Term 2:** 7 April to 27 June
- **Term 3:** 21 July to 3 October
- **Term 4:** 13 October to 10 December

Private schools generally follow the South African school year which unfortunately means that children from the UK or the USA will likely skip back a half year. The British International College follows the South African system, while the American International School of Johannesburg follows the international August-to-June school year which is divided into three terms. Charterhouse School and Charter College, on the other hand, start in January and end in December but divide the school year into three terms.

International schools also tend to follow the public holidays of their home country, which may conflict with South African public holidays, and therefore with expat parents' work schedules. Most schools do, however, publish their school term and holiday dates on their websites.

SAFETY AT SCHOOLS IN JOHANNESBURG

The first question expats often ask when moving to South Africa is whether their kids will be safe. It's a question that gets different answers depending on who is being asked. Disgruntled South Africans living overseas, patriotic locals and expats who have lived in the country for years will all have different perspectives.

There is violence in some South African public schools but these aren't the type of schools that expats would normally consider for their children. While they're at school, expat kids are extremely unlikely to be affected by crime. As is the case in many other cities, however, petty theft and muggings could be a problem for children who have to walk home over long distances or take public transport.

The best international, private and public schools in South Africa are, however, almost without exception, in prestigious suburbs patrolled by police and private security companies. Most also have their own private security guards.

Nevertheless, it is always a good idea for parents to visit a school before enrolling their children. In Johannesburg's case, expat parents can find out how other children travel to school; whether the surrounding area is safe; whether any of the students at the school walk home; which security precautions the school has in place; as well as whether there is a private school bus.

Taking the time to consider these basic factors goes a long way to putting your mind at ease and ensuring that your child will be in a safe, positive environment.

HOMESCHOOLING AND DISTANCE LEARNING

There are many good South African curriculum schools, but the best among them are often pricey and have long waiting lists. Expats who intend to live in Johannesburg for a limited amount of time and on a limited budget, or those waiting for a place at a school to open up, might find that homeschooling is a viable option.

With a relative lack of affordable alternatives to South African curriculum schools, there are increasing numbers of parents choosing homeschooling and distance learning over the South African public education system.

In 2011, the South African courts ruled that homeschool educators did not have to follow the national curriculum or hold teaching qualifications. This allows parents to educate their children (whether themselves or by hiring a tutor) provided that they follow any curriculum that is recognised by the Department of Basic Education and Umalusi.

Parents wanting to homeschool their children have to apply to the head of their provincial Department of Education, which involves submitting supporting documents as well as motivation for application, which requires supporting documents of its own. A full list of these is available on the websites of the Department of Basic Education as well as the Gauteng Department of Education.

The decision to homeschool a child should only be taken after careful consideration and thorough research. In addition to international resources, there are a number of websites about homeschooling in South Africa such as www.homeschoolinfo.co.za; www.tuisskolers.org; and www.homeschooling-curriculum-guide.com

A popular middle ground between homeschooling and private education is distance learning. A range of options are available with, for example, the British International Distance College and Damelin College both offering IGSCCE and A-Level qualifications via correspondence.

NURSERY SCHOOLS

Nursery schools in South Africa generally provide three years of pre-school education for children aged three to six. As with other schools, the quality, cost and ethos of nursery schools and pre-schools in Johannesburg varies.

They can be run by a range of private organisations, including religious groups, businesses and independent schools. Many established religious private schools have pre-schools that feed into their primary schools and encourage a religious outlook from a young age.

International schools such as the German International School use their kindergartens to begin bilingual education and admit children who don't speak the school's primary language at home. The Department of Education does not regulate pre-schools unless they offer a Grade 0 level education for older children, in which case they will need to be registered as an independent school and abide by Usasa's regulations. Some pre-schools also choose to be accredited by ISASA.

TERTIARY EDUCATION

Parents have a variety of options when it comes to higher education in South Africa. There are 23 publicly funded universities which are divided into three categories. Traditional academic universities offer a theory-orientated degree; universities of technology known as "technikons" offer more practical vocational diplomas and degrees; and comprehensive universities offer a combination of the two.

There are also a number of private colleges in Johannesburg which offer diplomas in subjects such as design, film, theology and business. Some of these have affiliations with foreign organisations in Europe and the United States.

All legitimate universities and colleges in South Africa are accredited by the Department of Higher Education. Most will have a comprehensive list of courses available on their websites. Students are admitted to traditional universities on a competitive basis, on a score calculated from their South African National Senior Certificate or equivalent. Students with a South African Grade 10 or IGSCCE-level qualifications may attend vocational universities.

The University of the Witwatersrand, commonly known as Wits, is the most popular educational institution in Johannesburg with expat students. Consistently ranked as the second best university in South Africa after the University of Cape Town, the QS World University Rankings for 2013/4 placed Wits at 313th of out over 700 institutions.

To attend a tertiary institution in Johannesburg, expats should first apply at the university or college of their choice and then apply for a Student Permit with the South African Department of Home Affairs.

TIPS FOR CHOOSING A SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD

Whether a seasoned expat who has had to sift through countless school choices before or a first-time assignee that's never had to do more than pack school lunches, it's always a good idea to think about some key principles when deciding about a child's education. There is a vast assortment of choice when it comes to things such as curriculum, teaching philosophy, extra-curricular activities and the general experience different schools have to offer. It is helpful, however, to keep the following in mind when doing preliminary research.

THE EXPERIENTIAL ELEMENT

Not always the first thing on an expat parent's mind, but nonetheless an important element worth serious consideration, is the kind of experience a school offers its students. School can be challenging under normal circumstances, and moving to another country deepens the adjustment that students have to make at a new school.

Parents often wrestle with the choices they have to make for their children as well. This is a normal anxiety many expat parents have to deal with. The best way to confront it is to carefully think about how ready your child is for a new school and how similar the experience a school offers is to the school they attended back home. Anything radically different from a child's previous school has to be considered with great care.

One approach to take when trying to find a school in Johannesburg is to ensure that the school offers subjects and activities that address and will foster your child's interests both in and out of the classroom.

CURRICULUM

This point is central to the decision-making process, especially for children approaching the time when the college application process begins. While most expat parents prefer a curriculum that aligns with that of their home country, this can be problematic in Johannesburg as there are few schools which offer an international curriculum. Parents need to weigh up the relative merits of spending large amounts on an international education or spending less on a school that offers the South African curriculum.

Some schools aim to emulate the home environment of the curriculum they offer, while others opt for a more multi-cultural approach. It is up to expats to decide whether they want their children to have an international experience, or whether just living in South Africa is enough of a cultural experience for their children.

Expat families staying in Johannesburg for a limited time might prefer placing their children in a school where the curriculum flows seamlessly from their old school to the new one, in part to minimise the adjustment when they go back to their home country.

Perhaps most importantly, parents should make sure the curriculum is challenging enough for their children. Those with older kids should find out which standardised tests the curriculum is geared towards, whether alternative benchmark tests are used in conjunction with the curriculum, as well as which diploma is granted upon graduation.

It is worth noting that the IB curriculum is accepted in many countries while the IEB National Senior Certificate is relatively new and, as a result, might not be well known in some parts of the world. It is, however, recognised by UK NARIC, the British Government's agency for providing information on international qualifications. According to NARIC, the IEB secondary school qualification is broadly comparable to the British GCE Advanced Levels.

Besides what is taught in the classroom, parents should also have a close look at the kinds of extra-curricular options a school offers. The best schools offer high-quality options in sports, music and culture, and encourage their students to take part in community-orientated activities.

TEACHERS AND CLASS SIZES

A school is only as good as its teachers. The relationship between teacher and pupil, and the quality of instruction at a school are arguably the determining factors that influence a child's education and development.

Determining how "good" a teacher is might seem difficult but there are certain questions that parents should ask. Find out about the qualifications the school requires of its staff, and whether it encourages its employees to take part in professional development courses. Finding out about average teacher turnover can also be useful, since happy teachers who choose to stay at a school are more likely to be effective teachers.

Above all else, find out about average class sizes. Even the best teachers can be overwhelmed by a sea of students. Lastly, visit the school and meet the teachers to find out how friendly, enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the curriculum they are.

PROXIMITY

Most of the time, the public transport system in Johannesburg is not a viable option for travelling to and from school, and most parents have to arrange for their children's transport themselves. For this reason, considering the distance between home and school is important.

The majority of expats find a decent school close to their place of work, and a home that is a reasonable distance from both of them. This is a fairly easy task in Johannesburg, since the upmarket areas where expats tend to work also offer good housing options and the best schools.

It is still important to keep in mind that Joburg's traffic is the worst in South Africa. According to TomTom's Traffic Index for 2013, Johannesburg is the 20th most congested city in the world and commuters can expect a 45-minute delay for every hour travelled during peak times.

If living far away from your chosen school is unavoidable, it is important to make sure that it has a private bus transport system, that there is a local car pool or that there is an aftercare allowing children to stay at school in the afternoons until their parents can fetch them.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit the Expat Arrivals Guide to Education and Schools in Johannesburg online for a list of private and international schools in Johannesburg:

<http://www.expatarrivals.com/south-africa/johannesburg/education-and-schools-in-johannesburg>

For more information on moving to Johannesburg, including accommodation, healthcare and transport in the city, have a look at our Expat's Guide to Johannesburg:

<http://www.expatarrivals.com/south-africa/johannesburg/moving-to-johannesburg>