

An aerial photograph of Johannesburg, South Africa, showing a dense urban landscape with numerous high-rise buildings. A prominent building in the center features a large mural of the South African flag. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue banner at the top and bottom containing text.

ExpatArrivals
local info for global expats

THE EXPAT'S GUIDE TO EDUCATION & SCHOOLS IN

Johannesburg

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa is known for its spectacular scenery, moderate climate and for being one of Africa's largest economies. Fittingly nicknamed the City of Gold, Johannesburg is the country's financial centre and, despite the challenges it faces, boasts the largest concentration of wealth in South Africa.

A relatively young 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 in its leafy suburbs and affluent suburban estates, while their children have access to a world-class education.

Parents moving to Johannesburg have a wide range of high-quality options for educating their children. South African schools are either government-owned public schools or independent, privately run schools. 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.

Although there are 11 official languages in South Africa, English is most commonly spoken in cities such as Johannesburg and consequently, it's the teaching medium in the vast majority of 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 education system and to provide some of the insights necessary for choosing the best schools for their children.

No matter where you're moving, few tasks can feel more daunting than choosing the right school for your children to continue their education, and the questions can feel endless: What curriculum is best? Will my child get the attention he needs? Will she be able to integrate back into our home system? Will he be best prepared for college entrance exams? Will she be safe? Can I afford it? Will he make friends easily? Will she overcome the language barrier?

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

According to the South African Schools Act, the age norm of a grade is equivalent to the number of the grade plus six, meaning that students in South Africa start Grade 1 at six years old and finish Grade 12 at 18.

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.

Parents may enrol their children at any public school in South Africa. There is no catchment area system in place although naturally parents will most likely want to enrol their children in a school close to home to avoid a long commute.

FORMER MODEL C SCHOOLS

Expat parents considering public schooling for their children may hear about "former Model C" schools. A term going back to the apartheid era, the name has stuck to describe schools that are partially funded and controlled by a private governing body as well as the state. The extra funding means they are able to maintain good facilities, retain top-quality teachers and attract bright students.

The best among these schools tend to have long, prestigious histories and are almost always located in the city's more affluent suburbs. The fees for former Model C schools are often on the high end of the spectrum by public school standards, but they are still cheaper than private and international schools.

PRIVATE AND INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Independent schools – that is, private and international schools – must be registered with the Gauteng Department of Education.

Most South African private schools either follow the state or the Independent Examinations Board (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 universities outside South Africa.

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

On the other hand, international schools are privately run institutions that follow curricular and write examinations overseen by international bodies. These schools are ideal for those who want their children to follow a particular curriculum, such as that of their home country. International schooling options in Johannesburg include schools offering the British, American, German and French curricula. Some schools also offer the globally recognised International Baccalaureate.

The most reputable independent schools are accredited by the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA). It's isn't compulsory for independent schools to be ISASA members, but those that are have to pass quality assurance inspections before they're allowed to join. ISASA continues to do regular inspections at its member schools to ensure that standards are being maintained.

ADMISSIONS AND ENROLMENT

For the most part, schools make it straightforward for parents to find out when and how they need to apply for admission. It is usually a matter of consulting the school's website or, when in need of more information, contacting the school via telephone.

Most independent schools, particularly international schools, accept applications throughout the year but the waiting lists for prestigious schools can be extremely long for some grades. Applying for admission as soon as possible is important. Some independent schools are more selective than others and may require children to take an entrance exam or attend an interview. Public schools, on the other hand, are obliged to admit eligible students if space is available and are prohibited by law from administering admission tests.

Though admissions policies vary from school to school, in general, expats will want to make sure that they have the following documents in order to apply for admission to the school of their choice:

- Birth certificate
- Immunisation card
- Transfer card
- Last school report card
- Study Permit
- Temporary or permanent residence permit, or evidence of having applied for permission to stay in South Africa

Students who are moving to South Africa need to apply for a Study Visa at the Department of Home Affairs, 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 or is purely a government school, as well as its location. Schools that solely rely on the government are cheaper but usually 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 affluent areas more likely to charge higher fees.

Most public schools charge around 20,000 ZAR a year, while fees of schools in wealthy areas – particularly former Model C schools – are often double that, around 40,000 ZAR a year or more.

The cost of tuition in private schools varies widely. Some are priced only slightly higher than former Model C schools, at approximately 50,000 ZAR a year for Grade 12. That said, the best private schools – particularly international schools – charge Grade 12 fees of 100,000 ZAR a year and up. Some schools charge fees in foreign currencies, such as the US dollar. After conversion, the resulting fees can be close to 500,000 ZAR.

There are also additional charges to consider, especially in private and international schools. Extra costs may include fees for application, placement and textbooks as well as a capital or building maintenance fee. Many schools, including public schools, offer optional camps and excursions, which also come at an extra cost. Other optional services, such as private buses or school lunches, will also usually carry a fee.

SCHOOL TERMS AND SCHOOL DAY

Schools usually start between 7.30am and 8.30am depending on the institution, and typically 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 and last around an hour or more. Many schools also have aftercare facilities for children who need to stay until their parents can fetch them, though these usually carry additional costs.

The school year in South Africa starts in January and ends in December, and is split into four terms. With few exceptions, private schools and international schools generally follow the South African school year as well. This can complicate the matter of grade placement for students coming from a schooling system with a September start. Most schools will require such students to remain in their current grade level when transferring, resulting in the student having to repeat part of the academic year. In rare cases, some schools will let pupils jump ahead to the next grade instead.

LOGISTICS: UNIFORMS, BUS SERVICES AND TEXTBOOKS

Even if their new school upholds their home country's curriculum, teaching language and education philosophy, expat parents and children will both most likely have to get used to a few nuances.

Schools in South Africa usually have uniforms, although private schools are free to determine their own policies regarding this. In the case that uniforms are required, they can be bought at a school shop or designated school uniform store.

School transport is usually available for surrounding areas in the form of school buses or minibuses. Independent schools usually charge extra fees for students making use of this service.

In public schools, officially accredited textbooks are supplied by the government. Students use the books on a loaned basis and they remain the property of the school. Some schools use additional textbooks to cultivate a more in-depth knowledge of the subject, and these must often be paid for, either in the form of book loan fees or by a direct purchase. In independent schools, the cost of textbooks is usually included in the yearly fees, or may be charged in the form of a textbook levy.

SAFETY AT SCHOOLS IN JOHANNESBURG

With South Africa's high crime rates, expat parents may wonder whether their children will be safe at school. While there is violence in some South African public schools in poor areas, these aren't the type of schools that expats would normally consider for their children. Expat children in Johannesburg are highly unlikely to be affected by crime while they're at school, even at public schools. In addition, the best schools are almost without exception in prestigious suburbs patrolled by police and private security companies. Many also have their own private security guards.

Nevertheless, it is always a good idea for parents to visit a school before enrolling their children. Expat parents should also try to find out how other children travel to school, whether the surrounding area is safe, whether any of the students at the school walk to or from school, and what security precautions the school has in place. Taking the time to consider these basic factors goes a long way to putting one's mind at ease and ensuring that the school is a safe, positive environment.

HOMESCHOOLING

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

Homeschooling is legal in South Africa, and parents wanting to homeschool their children have to apply to the head of their provincial Department of Education. This involves submitting supporting documents as well as motivation for application.

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 that specifically offer advice and support for parents homeschooling their children in South Africa.

A popular middle ground between homeschooling and private education is distance learning. A range of options are available, with some South African colleges offering IGSCCE and A-Level qualifications via correspondence.

NURSERY SCHOOLS

Nursery schools in South Africa provide 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. Nursery schools and pre-schools in Johannesburg are largely run by private organisations.

Some pre-schools (and some primary schools) offer a reception year, known as Grade R or Grade 0, prior to the first year of school. Currently, this year doesn't form part of compulsory schooling. However, this looks set to change over the coming years as legislation is being adjusted.

TERTIARY EDUCATION

There are a variety of options when it comes to higher education in South Africa. All legitimate universities and colleges in South Africa are accredited by the Department of Higher Education and 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.

The University of Witwatersrand, simply known as Wits, is Johannesburg's most popular educational institution and is consistently ranked as one of the country's best. The University of Pretoria is another good option, situated in South Africa's administrative capital an hour away from Johannesburg.

To attend a tertiary institution in Johannesburg, expats should first apply for admission at the university or college of their choice and then apply for a Student Permit with the 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 or a first-time assignee who's never had to do much more than pack lunches, it's always a good idea to consider a few key principles when making choices about a child's education.

THE EXPERIENTIAL ELEMENT

This might not be the first thing on an expat parent's mind, but it is an important aspect that's worth serious consideration. Relocation can be challenging for young students and it isn't unusual for parents to ask how moving might affect their children's lives.

Anything radically different from a child's previous experience must be considered with great care. It is important for parents who plan on moving overseas to evaluate their children's needs and abilities and try to find a school that best aligns with their priorities. If a child has special needs, parents need to be certain that a prospective school can cater for them. Similarly, it is important to choose a school that offers courses or activities that develop and foster a child's interests and talents.

CURRICULUM

Most expats choose a curriculum that aligns with that of their home country. However, it is also important that they make sure that the curriculum is challenging enough for their children. This point is central to the decision-making process, especially for parents with children in high school approaching the time when college applications begin. In such cases, it's a good idea to find out about the standardised test the curriculum at each school is geared toward, as well as which diploma is granted upon graduation. It is worth noting, for instance, that the International Baccalaureate curriculum is accepted in many countries.

Besides these fundamentals, it is also important to have a close look at the extra-curricular options a school offers. The best institutions will have a balanced blend of sports programmes, will encourage their students to take part in community activities, and will offer a range of cultural activities such as art, debating and music.

TEACHERS AND CLASS SIZES

A school is only as good as its teachers, who are one of the most important determining factors influencing a child's education and development. Though it can be difficult to find out how "good" a teacher is, there are some basic questions that parents can ask to draw some general conclusions.

Ask about the qualifications the school requires its teachers to have and whether it encourages them to take part in professional development courses. Find out about the average teacher turnover and, above all else, enquire about the average class size, as even the best teachers can become swallowed by a giant sea of eager students.

PROXIMITY

The public transport system in Johannesburg has been under continual development since the introduction and expansion of the Gautrain, a rapid transit system. There are also Gautrain buses that cover some areas not reached by the train. Both are a safe and reliable way to travel but there are significant limitations in coverage.

As a result, many parents have to arrange for their transport themselves, so it's important to consider the distance between home and school. The majority of expats start by finding a decent school close to their place of work, and a home that's a reasonable distance from both of them. It's important to keep in mind that Johannesburg's traffic does get quite congested and it may be wise to seek advice from locals on which routes to avoid.

If living far away from the chosen school is unavoidable, it's worthwhile to explore alternative arrangements, such as whether the school has a private bus transport system or whether there is a local carpool.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Though Johannesburg has a limited number of international schools on offer, those that exist can generally be trusted to provide a good quality of education. Parents should contact schools directly to get the most up-to-date information, and to enquire about admission policies. In primary schools especially, space can be limited, so it's important to start the enrolment process as early as possible.

American International School of Johannesburg

Address: Private Bag X4, Bryanston, 2021

Website: www.aisj-jhb.com

Email: info@aisj-jhb.com

Telephone: +27 11 464 1505

Gender: Co-educational

Curriculum: American and International Baccalaureate

Ages: 3 to 18

Background

Founded in 1982, today the American School has over 500 students on the Johannesburg campus, a 58-acre campus in Bryanston which caters for students from pre-kindergarten to Grade 12. A second campus in Pretoria caters for pre-kindergarten to Grade 8. The school's facilities include science laboratories, computer laboratories, two libraries, a gym, a swimming pool, sport-specific fields and courts, a fine arts centre and a cafeteria. There is a wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer. Competitive sports include basketball, soccer, volleyball and swimming, but students can also take part in rock climbing, horse-riding, badminton or martial arts, among others.

British International College

Address: 130 Bryanston Drive, Bryanston, 2191

Website: www.bicollege.co.za

Email: info@bicollege.co.za

Telephone: +27 11 706 7775

Gender: Co-educational

Curriculum: British

Ages: 6 to 18

Background

British International College is a British-curriculum school in Bryanston, near Sandton. The school offers a prestigious academic program as well as a wide array of sporting and creative activities. The college is one of the few Cambridge International Centres worldwide to be awarded Cambridge International Fellowship Centre status. There is also an affiliated distance learning college.

Charter College

Address: 2 Johan Rd, Roodepoort, 2040

Website: www.chartercollege.co.za

Email: admin@chartercollege.co.za

Telephone: +27 11 794 7132

Gender: Co-educational

Curriculum: British and South African

Ages: 14 to 18

Background

Situated in Honeydew, Charter College offers students a progressive education that emphasises respect and encourages a healthy balance between academics, sports and cultural activities. Class sizes are limited to 24 students, ensuring that children are given individualised attention. Extracurricular options include sports such as soccer, tennis, cricket, hockey, rugby, horse-riding and orienteering alongside cultural activities like drama, chess, public speaking and art club.

Deutsche Internationale Schule Johannesburg

Address: 11 Sans Souci Road, Parktown, 2193

Website: www.dsj.co.za

Email: dsj@dsjmail.co.za

Telephone: +27 11 726 6220 / 1

Gender: Co-educational

Curriculum: German and South African

Ages: 3 to 18

Background

The Deutsche Internationale Schule Johannesburg, founded in 1890, is one of the oldest schools in Johannesburg. The school has approximately 1,000 students, making it the largest German school in Africa. Pupils not from German-speaking families may start at the school from kindergarten, and mother-tongue German-speaking children from Grade 1. There is also an English-medium high school stream, where non-German speakers can begin at the school from Grade 8. The campus includes a well-equipped library and internet café, a covered sports complex, an art centre, an amphitheatre and a separate kindergarten building.

Lycée Français Jules Verne

Address: Corner Bauhinia and Cestrum, Morningside, 2057

Website: www.lyceejulesverne.com

Email: admin@lyceejulesverne-jhb.net

Telephone: +27 11 884 89 36 / 7

Gender: Co-educational

Curriculum: French

Ages: 2 to 18

Background

The Lycée Français Jules Verne is a French-curriculum school in Morningside, Sandton. The school provides a fully bilingual teaching system where all daily classes are taught in both French and English. There is a strong rugby tradition at the school – it takes part in a number of international rugby events, and pupils have the option to take it as a school subject in high school. A good variety of other extra-curricular activities are on offer, including ballet, taekwondo, basketball and violin. The school has top-quality sports facilities and well-equipped classrooms with interactive whiteboards.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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

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