



Learning Curve

Deciding on a school is one of the most important choices expats make in Singapore. For many parents of children with special needs, it is a complex and stressful search to find a suitable fit. **KATIE ROBERTS** talked to parents and educators about the current situation and the options at hand.

Chendo Chavarria moved from the US 18 months ago with his wife and their nine-year-old son Victor who has Asperger syndrome. Academically bright, but easily stressed in social situations, Victor had successfully attended a public school in the US with weekly speech therapy to work on pragmatics – the connections between language and social interaction which kids on the autism spectrum have trouble with – and had a shadow teacher in mathematics.

When enrolling him at a large international school here, his parents were upfront about his condition, and the school was willing to accept him. But, says Chendo, they underestimated the move for him from a small school of 500 to one with thousands of pupils. Combined with the stress of moving house and country, this made Victor very anxious and after a week his parents began receiving regular calls from the school about his behaviour.

“Basically, the school was not set up to deal with his ‘meltdowns’ in class.

Everything got too much for him and the school, so we agreed to him having a shadow teacher.”

At approximately \$4,000 a month, this was a disappointing experience for Victor’s parents. “We ending up paying a lot of additional money for someone who was sending a report every night of all the things that had gone wrong during the day. So we chose to leave voluntarily; the situation was escalating, and there are only so many phone calls you can take.”

The school helped the family look for alternatives and, Chendo says, the counsellor was very supportive. He adds that considering the school had no obligation to do so, it made a decent attempt at providing support for the family.

Victor is just one of an unknown number of expatriate children in Singapore who do not fit the mould required to enter one of the numerous mainstream international schools, and cope once they’re there. Like many other children, Victor has been diagnosed as having a condition on the autism spectrum. Others have dyslexia, ADHD, Down syndrome or other conditions characterised by specific learning differences that require assistance and intervention. For many families, finding appropriate education options to suit the needs of their children is extremely difficult.

Unlike the government-funded schools in the UK, Australia, the US and other Western countries, there is no legislation or regulation stipulating



that international schools must accommodate the needs of diverse learners. There is no government funding to provide for additional learning support in an expatriate child's existing school environment. There are facilities within local schools and several well-established specialist schools, but even Permanent Residents find these almost impossible to access due to their long waiting lists. Some mainstream international schools have learning support units and some allow shadow teachers and external learning support in the classroom, but on the whole the options are limited.

Critics say the admission processes can be selective, inflexible and

discriminatory and that the "one size fits all" approach does not accommodate different learning styles. When *Expat Living* asked what options were available for children with special education needs, only four of the 15 international schools contacted responded.

Education consultant Sarah Bowler, who has met with many families struggling to find a school, puts it this way. "There is a grey area for children who fall between the two spectrums – too high functioning to need a specialist school, but too low functioning to fit the mainstream criteria and flourish in a mainstream environment." She says it is frustrating that there is so little support for those students who are not fully independent, be it

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Concerned?

The CEO of the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS), Robin Moseley, advises parents not to let niggling worries slide for a few months or years. He believes that if you have a suspicion that something is not right, it is wise to act. "Don't let people talk you out of it. Ask the question, seek a second opinion and find out what's wrong. In all cases, the sooner you get onto it the better," he says.

academically, socially or emotionally, but not completely dependent either. "There is a huge gap in the market and this is coupled, unfortunately, with the stigma of not being good enough to attend a mainstream school. But in many cases, that's simply not true."

Sharon Solomon, Principal at The Winstedt School, agrees. "Kids in any classroom learn differently. Not everyone learns and processes information in the



same way. In large classes, it is easy for a child to skate through the system without teachers picking up a problem, but the gaps do get wider and wider the more they progress." All concur that it is essential to deal with the situation, and not sweep it under the carpet. Sarah Bowler says: "Parents should not panic; there are choices." Here are some of them.

Mainstream with a shadow teacher in classroom

Under this option, which nine-year old Victor experienced, the parent pays for a teacher to shadow the child in the classroom. Sarah Bowler says that some schools will allow this support. "Others with their own in-house learning support, however, tend not to want to take an external shadow, even if the parents are keen and willing to fund it." Choosing this option depends largely on the needs of the child and what the school feels able to accommodate. Its success also rests somewhat on the relationship and communication between the teacher, shadow support and parent.

Mainstream with in-house learning support

Some parents find that with the right teacher, and some external support, the mainstream system works for them. This is the most sought-after option, as it allows children to function in a mainstream school environment while still getting the support they need. However, there are few schools offering this support with immediate availability.

Dr Vanessa von Auer is Principal at the Integrated International School, which runs both a mainstream and a support programme. She says: "In a big school, the time and resources to continuously support students with learning difficulties are limited. If the teacher-to-student ratio is 1 to 25, for example, it is impossible to provide unlimited intervention or support, especially if student behaviour includes aggression toward others or themselves.

"More often than not in such cases, children will be asked to leave. Also, it often happens that in large classes



students may fall behind because they don't want to call out and attract attention to themselves in case they are pointed out as incapable."

She says small class sizes work for both mainstream and support kids when the curriculum is tailored to the children's needs. The support approach is offered for children who need more support such as behavioural intervention, a modified curriculum, or speech or social skills training. Mainstream kids, who are used to functioning independently, can also benefit from small class sizes. "Integration is key to both mainstream children and children with special needs, and everyone derives enormous benefits from shared learning experiences."

Specialised school with mainstream curriculum

Sarah Bowler says some kids simply need a couple of years of support to get back on track, and then they are able to reintegrate into mainstream schools. "Options for this route are The Winstedt School, the Integrated International School and Dover Court Preparatory School. Parents can also access intensive support services

through DAS International Services, Brain Train, Dynamics and numerous other independent institutions."

The Winstedt School's Sharon Solomon says the majority of children she accepts have found that a bigger school did not work for them. "In many instances, families come here feeling helpless and desperate. There is so much misinformation and so many empty promises out there, that they don't know what to do.

"Some parents find it hard to accept that their child has a learning difficulty, but children are not unaware that they have a problem. They are extremely observant of their peers, and are often more aware of their own inabilities than their capabilities. This can really take a toll on a child, and you cannot cocoon and protect them from it."

She believes that small class sizes, capped at 15 – the direction in which the US is heading – provide a learning environment that does not short-change children. "Education is not just academic. It is also social and emotional, and about meeting the needs of the child. We focus on a teacher nurturing a child, rather than delivering content. It is about instilling a lifelong joy in learning."

Home-schooling

This is an option that an increasing number of expat families are following. The one-on-one K12 programme follows the American curriculum and combines online and textbook learning. Chendo says that after his experience in a mainstream school, Victor has settled into the programme, finds the curriculum challenging enough for his above-average aptitude and is supported by his mother as learning coach. They have attended gatherings with other Singapore-based children doing home-schooling and have found that very beneficial.

The Way Forward

Everyone interviewed for this story agreed it can be challenging to find appropriate schooling options for the needs of individual children, but that there are options. Here are five tips to help guide you:

1. **You are not alone.** Find a support network with other expat families who are confronting similar challenges. They can not only serve as a sympathetic sounding board, but also offer valuable advice.

2. **Advocate for your child effectively.** Engage the school openly and constructively to determine whether it is a good fit for the requirements of your child. Though this might result in disappointment, it may be preferable to withdrawing your child at a later date.

3. **Provide extracurricular support.** In Singapore, there is no shortage of therapists qualified to deliver a broad range of services for kids with special needs or learning differences. They can offer speech and occupational therapy, behavioural intervention, counselling and more.

4. **Beyond the academics.** If your child doesn't do well in team-based sports or athletics activities, one-on-one instruction can be a good option, but it's important to be very open from the start with the provider or instructor.

5. **When school doesn't work.** Look at home-schooling, which delivers a self-paced, individualised education programme. This is well suited to kids with special needs or learning differences who do not do well in the hectic environment of an international school.



Canadian Karen Lay has three children and has lived here for over 10 years. Her first child, Keaton (10), was born prematurely and diagnosed with severe cerebral palsy. He is in a wheelchair and cannot speak, although he can communicate through sounds. "Through those," Karen says, "we know when he is happy or sad". They employ two helpers who provide round-the-clock care, something that she says would not be financially possible in Canada. Keaton attends **Rainbow School** on weekday afternoons. A public school, it is equipped for physically disabled children and was accessible to them because they are PRs. Karen also recommends **Kaleidoscope** for therapy services.

RESOURCES

DAS International

A specialist arm of the Dyslexia Association of Singapore, the school provides a one-stop referral point for a range of special needs learners, including psychological assessments, a pre-school intervention programme and specialist tuition. Assistance includes literacy, numeracy and writing skills, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, individual curriculum support, study skills and exam preparation, behavioural and social support. The specialist Bridging Programme is for children who are experiencing difficulties in learning that affect their ability to independently access a mainstream curriculum.

6336 2555 | dasint.org.sg

Integrated International School

Two streams – a main stream for children who function independently and a support stream for children with learning differences who need intervention and extra assistance – are offered in one inclusive environment. The school does not believe in a “one size fits all approach” and encourages children to develop critical thinking skills. Its small size allows an emphasis on academic goals with flexibility to accommodate every student’s learning pace. Counsellors, behavioural therapists, psychologists and other specialists are on staff.

Curriculum: Australia’s New South Wales curriculum for primary school; accredited as a Cambridge Certified School to offer IGCSE and AS/A levels.

Educational approaches: mainstream and support

Class size: 1:8 (teacher-to-student ratio in main stream); 1:4 (in support stream)

Ages: From four to 18 years

School size: 70

6235 9602 | iis.com.sg

Tanglin Trust

Follows the UK National Curriculum. Has a dedicated learning support team for infant, junior and senior schools and a full-time Educational Psychologist on staff. Placement is subject to the school’s capacity to provide appropriate individual support.

6778 0771 | tts.edu.sg

The Winstedt School

Offers a one-stream curriculum that is academically and socio-emotionally focused on the learning experience of the child. Aims to meet the needs of learners of average and higher cognitive ability, the gifted and those who may have been diagnosed as having a language-based learning difficulty. Committed to providing support to learners who have emotional or behavioural problems related to educational frustration. Students work with in-house professionals such as occupational therapists and speech pathologists where appropriate.

Curriculum: International Primary Curriculum (UK); a Cambridge Certified School for IGCSE (2015 cohort)

Class size: 1:6

School size: 50

Ages: 4.5 years to 11 years (2013 enrolment)

6836 1128 | winstedt.edu.sg



Chendo Chavarria, expat parent and advocate blogger for autism spectrum families
tgwendoe@mac.com

Chiltern House

6242 8368 | juliagabriel.com/chiltern

Dover Court Preparatory School

6775 7664 | dovercourt.edu.sg

Genesis School for Special Education

genesisschool.com.sg

K12 Home-Schooling

K12.com

Live and Learn

6329 6464 | liveandlearnasia.com

Sarah Bowler

educational consultant
8268 5232 | jsjconsulting.asia

St Gerard’s School

stgerards.com.sg

SSNAP, a support network for parents of children with special needs who live in Singapore.

ssnap.info | sspecialneedsandparents@gmail.com