

ExpatArrivals
local info for global expats

THE EXPAT'S GUIDE TO EDUCATION & SCHOOLS IN



DOHA

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INTRODUCTION

The fossil fuel boom has elevated the tiny emirate of Qatar to the level of global player. Hundreds of thousands of expats currently live and work in Qatar, drawn to the promise of a high standard of living and plenty of opportunities in the oil-rich emirate. With one of the highest GDPs per capita in the world, a new life in Qatar is likely to be one with a high standard of living, but with a high cost of living to match – and this can be especially true of expat schooling options.

With Qatar's population being made up of more than 2 million expats (compared to just 300,000 Qataris), it follows that the demand for international schools is high. Thanks to Qatar's liberal national policies, there are several international schools in Doha offering a range of curricula to meet this demand.

The quality and nature of these schools vary widely, though, and expats from the US and the UK will find that while reputable international-, American- and British-curriculum schools do exist, the demand for seats is extremely high. It is essential that expats apply for spots at these schools as soon as possible, preferably well before the move.

The emirate has made the strategic decision to spend much of the country's fossil fuel wealth investing in a long-term knowledge economy. As a result, Qatar has become a leading force in global education innovation with a range of projects on the go, from grassroots literacy outreach programmes to advanced university research. The World Innovation Summit for Education, founded in 2009, is a Qatari initiative intended to act as a catalyst for education innovation. In the coming years, it is likely that more world-class private prep schools and universities will establish themselves in Qatar to accompany those that have done so already.

Qatar's education system is jointly managed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Supreme Education Council (SEC), although funding to the former is being reduced. The SEC controls education at all levels and has been given a mandate to improve the quality of education in Qatar, as well as to establish more independently managed schools.

The Expat Arrivals Schools Guide for Doha sheds some light on the local school system and provides insights to make the transition abroad as smooth and seamless as possible.

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

Government-funded public schools in Qatar are known as independent schools. As part of a wide-scale education reform, they're given relative autonomy in hiring staff and deciding on teaching policies. Teachers have been encouraged to adopt a student-centred perspective in the classroom, and the local curriculum has also been revamped in a bid to offer a more well-rounded education.

Certain groups are given priority placement in independent schools – namely, Qatari citizens, the children of non-Qatari residents who work in the public sector, and children who live within a particular independent school's catchment area. In the past, the children of private sector workers weren't admitted to independent schools. Today, they may enrol if there's space, but parents will need to pay 50 percent or more of registration fees upfront. Still, fees at independent schools are much more modest than those charged by international schools.

The standard of public schools in Qatar is quite high by international standards. Independent schools usually teach in Arabic and English, though education policies encourage a move towards fully English-medium public education. For those in Qatar for a relatively short period of time, though, independent schools may be an impractical option, especially in terms of the language barrier. Some parents also prefer their children to obtain an internationally recognised certification, or wish for their child to continue with the curriculum of their home country. In such cases, international schools are an option well worth considering.

In recent years more schools have been built, but seat scarcity is still a common complaint of most new arrivals, especially for those trying to find a place for a student between the ages of three and six. We advise that parents make any and all attempts to settle the school situation as soon as possible, preferably well before the move.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Privately run schools offering a non-Qatari curriculum are known as international schools. To many expat parents moving to the emirate, especially those used to free or affordable state schools in the US or the UK, these schools will seem simply too expensive to reasonably consider. But like Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Qatar's immigration programme is such that expats are likely to be in top-end pay brackets. In addition, some employers do cover the cost of international schooling, so it's always a good idea to find out if this is something factored into the relocation contract – if it isn't included, expats should consider bringing it up in negotiations.

There is a large expat community in Qatar, which means there is also a large number of international and private schools – following the American, Canadian, British, French and Indian curricula, among others. Others offer global programs such as the International Baccalaureate. Such an intimidating range of options caters to a growing expat community. The quality of facilities, the teaching style and philosophy, the curriculum, the demographics and the teaching language vary immensely from one school to another; and while most expat parents will choose an institution that mirrors the characteristics found in their home country schools, it's nonetheless important to conduct a fair amount of research beforehand.

While it would be impossible to say that all private schools in Qatar adhere to a specific standard, it is also true that some schools in the emirate offer an excellent brand of high-quality education that can land students at top-tier universities anywhere in the world.

Because schools offer such a range of curricula, there are no standardised test results expats can use to compare schools in the emirate, although expat parents are often able to compare examination results from international schools with those in their affiliated countries. Reviews and recommendations from other expat parents can also be a good starting point for further investigation. In addition, the Ministry of Education conducts inspections on schools throughout the emirate. The results, known as “school report cards”, can be viewed on the official website.

In March 2012, the SEC decreed that all schools must offer three compulsory subjects alongside their own curriculum – Arabic, Islamic Education, and Qatari History. In addition, schools may not use resources which go against the religious, moral and cultural traditions of Qatar, no matter what the subject.

ADMISSIONS AND ENROLMENT

Each year, the SEC announces a registration window for enrolment in private schools. Exact dates vary but this period is usually from March to October. While it is possible to register outside of this period, parents must obtain special permission from the SEC to do so. For independent schools, registration is in May of each year.

When it comes to enrolment, some schools are more selective than others. This is particularly true of international schools, which may require children to take an entrance exam or attend an interview. Preference may also be given to children of particular nationalities.

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:

- Completed school application form
- Proof of vaccinations
- Proof of medical examination
- Birth certificate of child
- Child's passport or identity card
- Parent's passport/s
- Residency permit
- Recent reports from previous school
- References from previous school
- Proof of address

Some schools only grant admission during the designated period, while others have rolling admissions policies granting entrance whenever space becomes available throughout the year. So, even if a place can't initially be found, it's important to stay positive. After all, Doha can be a transient place, and spots can open up just as quickly as they can close. That said, it's crucial that

expats apply to more than one school so that their child has a seat somewhere at the start of the school year.

Expats moving to the city without having secured a slot for their children should keep in constant contact with school administrators, put the word out on expat forums and networks, and utilise any company contacts that can facilitate the process – one never knows when another family has to repatriate.

TUITION AND FEES

One of the major benefits of utilising Doha's public school system is the cost – fees are significantly lower than those found at international schools, which can soar up to or even above 50,000 QAR a year for Pre-Kindergarten and 80,000 a year for Grade 12.

Application fees of around 600 QAR are charged, regardless of whether a child is admitted. Once a place is offered, it can cost around 4,000 QAR to secure the spot. In addition, some schools will charge fees for registration, textbooks, and facility use – not to mention the cost of uniforms, bus services, canteen lunches and in some cases extra-curricular activities and school outings. Many of these extra costs might not be covered by an employee education allowance, so it's important to take this into account when considering options.

Most fees are due at the beginning of a school year or in one or two instalments.

SCHOOL TERMS AND SCHOOL DAY

Schools start between 7am and 8am depending on the institution and end at around noon for kindergarten, or between 1pm and 2pm for primary and high school students. Extra-curricular activities take place after school for about an hour or more. The school week is from Sunday to Thursday, as Fridays and Saturdays form the weekend in Qatar.

Private and international schools usually align themselves to schools in their affiliated countries or to international school terms. The academic year at most schools is from September to June, with a long mid-year holiday during Eid. For specific dates, it's best to check with individual schools. Most will publish their school term dates on their websites.

HOMESCHOOLING

Though until recently homeschooling was virtually unheard of in the Middle East, Qatar included, there is a small network of parents in the country who have decided to educate their children at home with the help of online academic systems and support groups. The scarcity and cost of places in international schools, coupled with a burgeoning expat community, has forced into being several alternative learning options for expat parents.

There is a growing number of parents who choose to homeschool their kids themselves with the help of international homeschool and distance learning programmes, homeschool blogs and private tutors in Qatar. For foreigners, there aren't any laws that prohibit homeschooling.

There is a wealth of information on homeschooling on the Internet. Parents considering homeschooling their child in Qatar should carefully weigh the pros and cons of their decision, and should consult with the Doha Home Educators group or other homeschooling organisations for more information.

NURSERY SCHOOLS

Expat parents with little ones too young to start primary school or kindergarten will find plenty of options for nursery schools in Doha, although international nursery schools can be surprisingly expensive.

Nurseries accept children from as young as four weeks to as old as five years, but each institution will have its own age requirements. Several international schools also have nursery and kindergarten years that act as feeder classes for the school.

Alternatively, those keeping their kids at home can explore the option of playgroups. These are mostly more suited to younger toddlers. The Doha Mums Group is a popular group, and lists good nursery schools on its website.

TERTIARY EDUCATION

Some international universities have opened satellite campuses in Qatar, including Carnegie Mellon University and Georgetown University. These are clustered in Education City and operate under the umbrella of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, which is a non-profit, government-supported organisation aimed at promoting education and research. Approximately half of the students in Doha are expats. Fees for university are often the same for both local and international students.

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 is not typically 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. This is a normal anxiety that many expats deal with, and the best way for parents to address it is to think carefully about their child's preparedness for a new school context and their ability to enjoy, succeed and grow throughout the experience.

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 for a school to offer courses or activities that develop and foster a child's interests and talents.

CURRICULUM

Most expats tend to choose a curriculum that aligns with that of their home country, but it is also important to make sure that the curriculum is challenging enough for their children. This point is central to the decision-making process, especially for parents with kids in high school approaching the time when college applications begin.

Those with older kids should find out about the standardised test the curriculum 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 arguably the determining factor that influences 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.

Find out 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, find out about the average class size. Even the best teachers can become swallowed by a giant sea of eager students.

Lastly, visit the school and meet the teacher to find out how friendly, enthusiastic and knowledgeable they are about the school and its curriculum.

PROXIMITY

It's essential for expat parents to consider geographic proximity and travel time to and from school. Though traffic congestion isn't as hard to handle as in destinations like Dubai, it still exists, and there's nothing worse than a long commute with little ones in the back seat.

Most expats find the best thing to do is to find a decent school close to their place of work, and then find a home that is a reasonable distance from both of them. If living far away from one's chosen school is unavoidable, it is important to make sure that the school has a private bus transport system,

as the public transport system in Doha is virtually non-existent. Most, but not all, international schools offer a private transport option for an additional fee.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Doha has plenty of international schools to choose from. 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 soon as possible.

ACS Doha International School

Address: PO Box 200568, Al Oyoun Street, Gharaffa

Website: www.acs-schools.com/acs-doha

Email: dohainfo@acs-schools.com

Telephone: +974 4000 9797

Gender: Co-educational

Teaching language: English

Curriculum: American and International Baccalaureate (IB)

Age: 3 to 18

Background

This school is a member of the ACS International Schools Group. ACS has three other schools in the UK offering the IB curriculum, the American curriculum, or both. ACS offers world-renowned programmes and holds its staff to high standards. The Doha campus is a purpose-built, state-of-the-art facility, which features interactive whiteboards in each classroom, division-specific libraries, well-equipped, subject-specific rooms, an indoor swimming pool, a multi-purpose sports hall and shady, outdoor recreation areas. There is also Wi-Fi throughout the campus.

American School of Doha

Address: PO Box 22090, Doha, Qatar

Website: www.asd.edu.qa

Email: admissions@asd.edu.qa

Telephone: +974 4459 1500

Gender: Co-educational

Teaching language: English

Curriculum: American

Age: 3 to 18

Background

The American School of Doha was founded in 1988 as the American International School but changed its name in 1997. To accommodate a growing student body, the school moved to expanded, purpose-built facilities in 2009 and now has about 2,000 students of about 80 nationalities. The campus has Wi-Fi, computer labs and ceiling-mounted LCD projectors in each classroom. There is also a double gym, a fitness centre, an indoor pool, a theatre, two libraries, a full soccer pitch and a 400-metre track. The school offers a number of extra-curricular sports including basketball, badminton, climbing, soccer,

tennis, softball, baseball and swimming, as well as a fine arts club, a band and a choir, and a forensics club.

Compass International School

Address: P.O. Box 23479, Plot 13, Al Waab Al Abareeq Street, Gharaffa Area No. 51

Website: www.cisdoha.com

Email: admissions@wclschools.org

Telephone: +974 4487 7445

Gender: Co-educational

Teaching language: English

Curriculum: British, IB

Age: 2 to 18

Background

Compass International School opened in 2006 to meet the needs of the growing expat community. This well-regarded school has 700 students of over 50 nationalities spread across three campuses in the western and northern suburbs of Doha, near Education City. The facilities are modern and spacious, and the main elementary school building is a former royal palace. Compass International offers a British curriculum with international elements. The school also offers a Dutch First Language Programme which provides up to five hours a week of Dutch language and culture (Nederlands Taal en Cultuur – NTC) lessons to Dutch and Belgian students. The school's wide range of extra-curricular activities includes golf, yoga, taekwondo, sailing and many other clubs and sports.

International School of London, Qatar

Address: PO Box 18511, North Duhail, Doha, Qatar

Website: www.islqatar.org

Email: mail@islqatar.org

Telephone: +974 4433 8600

Gender: Co-educational

Teaching language: English

Curriculum: IB

Age: 3 to 18

Background

The International School of London (ISL) opened a branch in Qatar in 2009. The school currently has about 800 pupils of various nationalities. A candidate IB World school with a focus on multiculturalism, ISL provides mother-tongue instruction for all languages in addition to its mainstream English programme. The school also has a Transition Program to help families relocating from overseas settle into life in Qatar. The school campus consists of a purpose-built, air-conditioned building with large classrooms, a library, two IT suites, three science laboratories, two art rooms, a food technology room, auditorium, assembly hall and gymnasium.

Qatar International School

Address: P.O. Box 5697, Doha, Qatar

Website: www.qis.org

Email: info@qis.org

Telephone: +974 483 3456

Gender: Co-educational

Teaching language: English

Curriculum: British

Age: 3 to 18

Background

The Qatar International School, a profit-driven day school owned by Sheikh Ali bin Ahmed bin Thani Al Thani, has a long history. Having started as a small pre-school in 1977, the school has since grown to have over 1,600 students of over 50 nationalities. The school moved to its latest, custom-built campus in 2001. The current facilities include a swimming pool, large sports hall and several subject-specific rooms for art, music and science. The campus was also upgraded to include interactive whiteboards and Wi-Fi, among other additions. A number of after-school activities are offered, for the most part free of charge.

Sherborne Qatar

Address: PO Box 1108, Doha, Qatar

Website: www.sherborneqatar.org

Email: office@sherborneqatar.org

Telephone: +974 4459 6400

Gender: Co-educational

Teaching language: English

Curriculum: British

Age: 3 to 18

Background

Sherborne Qatar is the daughter school of the prestigious British school of the same name, founded under a royal charter in 1550. The school is a member of Qatar's Supreme Education Council's Outstanding Schools Programme, the only British independent school to have been invited to participate. A wide range of after-school activities is provided – ranging from Thinking Skills to Modern Dance, French to Choir, Sailing to Brownies.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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

<http://www.expattarrivals.com/qatar/doha/moving-to-doha>