

Paving a globalised path: the rise of India's International Schools

Convinced her daughter wasn't fulfilling her full potential in a CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) school, Chaitali Ghorpade made the decision to move her daughter Mahek over to an international school.

"I felt that her thirst for knowledge was not being quenched, but now I can see her keeping herself more occupied and searching for answers to the storm of questions in her mind," says Chaitali, explaining her decision and the positive change it brought about.

And it would seem, she's not the only one with the idea.

ISC data reports that as of 2024, there are 6.9 million students enrolled in international schools in India, while The Times of India reports a 40 % increase in the number of international school enrolments between 2018 and 2023.

But what could possibly be behind this sudden uptick in the number of international school enrolments?

Chaitali's opinion represents that of a number of parents in the country with the means to consider this option over the myriad others on offer. These include CBSE schools which are managed by the Indian Union Government, and SSCE (Senior Secondary Certificate of Education), which many believe rely on 'rote learning'.

However, opinions to the contrary exist too, with an added layer of socio-cultural considerations, especially for the moneyed and global minded- a class of person that is now increasingly ubiquitous in India's urban areas.

"With the kind of family he was raised in, I didn't think he'd really fit in anywhere else," says Adheet Gogate, whose son Adwait has recently switched to an international school as well. Many coming from the same social strata as Adwait additionally have ambitions of studying abroad, which aids the gravitation towards an international school.

According to ICEF Monitor, the number of Indian students studying abroad is projected to rise to two million by 2025, reinforcing the idea that a number of Indian school-going youth have ambitions of doing so themselves and would therefore rather align their school learning patterns with what they expect to find when they're abroad.

"Ovie had decided that she wanted to study in the US when she was in the 9th grade itself," says Sonia Soman, whose daughter Ovie decided to move to an international school for grades 11 and 12 after finishing the first leg of her schooling in a State Board school, believing that the curriculum would prepare her for her undergraduate degree in the United States.

Having finished a Bachelor of Science at UCLA in 2022, Ovie is now doing a PhD in Chemistry and claims that despite being expensive, her international school education in India helped her get where she is through early experience with research and scientific report writing.

Jumana Gari, principal of Pune based international school, Bharati Vidyapeeth Rabindranath Tagore School of Excellence, says that most international schools are run at a higher cost due to professional development and the annual fees incurred to run the programmes.

Calling the move away from assessment of rote learning ‘refreshing’, Gari says that the Cambridge and International Baccalaureate qualifications of A Levels and IBDP are now recognised by the Association of Indian Universities as equivalent to that of the Indian Boards.

“Administratively, the challenge that international boards face is in getting this recognition, the process being comprehensive and longish,” said Gari, elaborating on the challenges faced by International Boards when setting up base in the Indian education market.

While growing interest in a wider and more globally flexible pathway to learning make international schools a popular choice for those students hoping to study abroad, international schools still face the challenge of assuring those who are enrolled in the school but do not wish to go abroad of a stabilised pathway ahead to universities in India, in terms of equivalence to Indian boards.

There is a total of 1943 International schools in India as of January 09, 2024, as per data platform Smartscrapers, and despite reports of the first international school being established in India in 1976, a more globalized world has now exacerbated an environment of hospitality that international school administrations in the country can enjoy.

It is widely believed that India’s National Education Policy of 2020 (NEP) which is set to be implemented in the following year will have a noticeable effect on International schools, as the newly drafted pedagogical structure will now align with that of most International Baccalaureate boards.

The previous system 10+2 system was made up of ten years of education for students aged 6-16 followed by two years of education for students aged 16-18 before they enter university. The NEP proposes five years of Foundational schooling for students aged 3-8, following which they will have three years each of Preparatory and Middle school until the age of 14. The last stage would be Secondary Schooling of four years till the age of 18. This will match the curricular structure followed by most schools of the International Baccalaureate board.

According to the Ministry of Education, the new system aims for universalisation and modernised transformation of the Indian education system through a change in assessment formats and a shift from rote learning, along with a flexible choice of learning patterns for students to choose their learning trajectories and interdisciplinary subjects of choice.

As reported by the Times of India, despite uncertainties over the logistics involving the shift for current students, the government is confident of a positive result in the academic year of 2024-2025, with most principals stating that teacher training for the implementation process must begin now.

However, seeing as this means that students may now be able to receive a similar kind of education in schools of Indian Boards as well, it remains to be seen whether this new change might be a blow to the novelty-based popularity of international schools in the country.