



News

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Cross-Border Relocation and Educational Continuity

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Given the rapid globalization of the international marketplace and the reality of continental "free trade", cross-border relocations are on the increase. For families with school aged children, educational continuity is a primary concern. In fact, their children's educational transfer is often the determining factor which dictates whether or not the relocation actually takes place. Quite simply, families do not want to jeopardize their children's educational opportunities as a consequence their move.

Over the last several years, human resource professionals within multi-national corporations (e.g., Proctor and Gamble, Imperial Oil, Suncor, TransCanada PipeLines) have critically examined "school selection" with respect to successful employee transfer. Based on their findings they have expanded relocation policy and guidelines to reflect cross-border educational disparity. American companies (e.g., Caterpillar) expanding into Canada have recently commissioned cross-comparisons of educational standards between the States and the Provinces in response to employee complaints that information on schooling varies from egalitarian "facts" to unreliable "opinion". Recognizing the impact of problematic and stressful school transfer, companies now accept the challenge of educational continuity as part of the relocation puzzle.

When coordinating cross-border relocation, it is important to recog-

nize that there are differences between "international" and "continental" transfers with respect to schooling facts and assumptions. For example, when a U.S. family is relocated to a principle city in Europe, the Far East or South America, the employee's children usually attend an "American" International School in which curriculum is U.S. based. That is, continuity in the student's educational experience is ensured. Pre-College preparation (e.g., SSAT, PSAT and SAT testing) is available in these settings as well as standardized testing (e.g., Iowa Test of Basic Skills) which provide the family with "objective" evaluation of their children's progress while they are away from the continental U.S. Although there may be cultural adjustments while on an international assignment, repatriation does not present educational 'surprises' for the family.

The Employee Relocation Council's June, 1993 survey of International Relocation Assistance indicated that 90% of the companies surveyed have a formal, written international transfer policy. Of note, the primary reason cited in this survey as to why an employee ineffectively performs on international assignments is "the inability of the family to adjust to the host country's physical or cultural environment". Poorly prepared transfers are stressful for the family, and costly for the corporation in terms of lost productivity and possible failure of the assignment (i.e., upwards of 40%). The survey found that companies recognized these fac-

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tors by including school finding assistance (66%), School Tuition assistance (86%) and Visitation trips for children in College (79%) in their international relocation policies.

These survey statistics apply specifically to U.S. employees relocating out of the continental United States to all countries, including Mexico. In contrast, the assistance provided to U.S. employees relocating to Canada has varied remarkably, largely as a consequence of the underlying assumption that the educational systems of the U.S. and Canada are basically equivalent. This assumption is reinforced by the fact that there are no 'American' International Schools in Canada. A transfer to Canada is generally treated in the same fashion as a domestic transfer.

But are Canadian Schools equivalent to U.S. and other international settings? A recent poll of families relocated from the U.S. to Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia provided a baseline comparison. Transfer issues faced by families moving internationally to or from Australia, England, Malaysia, Singapore, Venezuela, Tanzania, Turkey and Spain also revealed specific "factual" conflicts that served as obstacles to their children's educational continuity. "Obstacles" in this case refers to actual educational differences resulting in a qualitatively disparate schooling experience for the student and thus, a stressful challenge to the family. An overview of some of these differences illustrates.

One of the first challenges lies with kindergarten entrance. In most regions of Canada, children begin school in Junior or Senior Kindergarten. Children attend on a half-day basis and do not start full days until grade one. School Board policy is not to fund full day placements until 6 years of age. In contrast, children under five years of age in Australia, Ireland, Turkey and Japan attend academically oriented kindergartens on a full-day basis. Consequently, a child who has attended school full-time and who can read and write at a mid grade one level, is placed in a half-time, play focused kindergarten in Canada due

to official "chronological age peer" policy. This obstacle has resulted in the increasing demand for private school placements by parents who see their children as losing academic ground with respect to repatriation.

At the other end of the age range, ensuring University eligibility is a heated factor. By and large, families crossing international borders have strong educational values and expect their children to attend University. Hence university eligibility guides their selection of schools. Ontario's recent "destreaming" of the high school curriculum (i.e., the instruction of both non-university and university bound students within the same classroom) is viewed as an obstacle by these parents. In British Columbia, the "Skills Now" initiative represents a similar obstacle. As a pre-requisite to high school graduation, this initiative requires the student to attain a guidance "credit" in a supervised, community work placement. This and similar programming initiatives in Alberta and Ontario are not found in U.S. or other international educational systems making repatriation challenging with respect to course equivalencies.

An issue which has received little attention is the special demands placed on Canadian students who finish high school outside of Canada. When these students apply to Canadian universities, they are considered foreign students and must meet different admission criteria than their home town counterparts. If applying from an American setting, they must write comprehensive SAT examinations including two aptitude and at least three achievement tests. Although admission requirements vary among universities, a composite score of at least 500 is expected. This "requirement" is often a rude shock for the unsuspecting Canadian student with no tradition of SAT examinations. The International Baccalaureate is rapidly gaining in popularity as a compromise educational path. However, the equivalence of I.B. credits for admission to specialized university programs must be determined on an individual basis. The I.B. is also a demanding program which is not for all students.

Curricula differences represent

additional obstacles requiring considerable clarification and individual planning. One most obvious challenge, of course, lies in the second languages studied in different educational regions. Students transferring from Australia and the far East are generally unable to continue with their Japanese or Chinese studies. American students rarely find continuity with Spanish except in some of the urban high schools. Conversely, American students who studied French in elementary school in Canada rarely continue upon return to the U.S. Although history and geography curricula naturally differ between countries, catch up has not proved to be a real obstacle except for students taking the SAT who perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage.

Those of you who have seen television ads for "Hooked on Phonics" can appreciate the importance placed on early reading by today's parents. The transfer of primary children (i.e., Grades 1, 2 and 3) throws many students into the middle of the heated pedagogical battle between "whole language" and "phonics". In the primary classrooms of most Canadian Provinces and northern American States, Whole Language is the main strategy used to introduce reading and writing. In contrast, in European, Australian and mid-western American settings, language "mechanics" (i.e., phonics and grammar) are taught directly. Although most children attain grade 4 with relative equivalence in their literacy development, transferring a youngster from a Whole Language oriented primary system in grade one or two has proved to be a critical obstacle with respect to the child's perceived competence and loss of self esteem as they struggle within a non-compatible curriculum.

A similar challenge exists with math and science curricula in that the Canadian curriculum utilizes a "spiral" approach in which math and science concepts are introduced in the Senior Grades (i.e., grades 6, 7 and 8) in sequential stages of increasing depth. In contrast, most American school systems introduce specific content "modules" (e.g., pre-algebra, pre-calculus) in considerable detail as

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pre-requisites to High School courses. Most American students entering Canadian Senior math or science courses report lack of challenge and the need to "catch up" upon repatriation. Parent reaction to this curriculum difference is the single most cited reason behind requests for private school placement in Ontario.

A concern that necessitates advance planning and coordination is the transfer of children with learning exceptionalities. Children with special learning needs require more specialized educational settings and teaching. Intellectually gifted youngsters require enrichment and youngsters with learning disabilities require trained teachers and reduced classroom size. Regardless of the nature of their exceptionality, when transferring students with special needs, it is critical to be aware that the "definitions" of exceptionalities (e.g., dyslexia) vary significantly between both School Boards and Educational systems. These programs are also costly and consequently each educational system has a "lega" process which must be followed in order to ensure the child is placed appropriately. The identification process translates into bureaucratic delays and/or inappropriate placements. Without adequate prior negotiation, the stress on the child and the family is incalculable.

By far the single most stressful feature of any educational move is the timing of the school search. As indicated, global relocations are on the increase as a consequence of systematic corporate expansions. In contrast, family relocations are rarely planned with respect to the school year as they generally take place in May or June when most public school systems are preparing to 'shut down' for two months and most private schools have generally closed their admissions. The last minute panic experienced by families faced with empty schools is overwhelming. Adding to this challenge is the assumption that the family can find a house and school within a week, usually one or two months prior to a summer move.

As one examines the educational

options open to a family relocating with their school-aged children, notable differences in educational philosophies between Canada and other countries are apparent. Given these obstacles to educational continuity, the student most definitely at risk during a relocation is the teenager who will be completing High School, although Kindergarten and primary students also face specific curriculum challenges. For the majority of students entering elementary school, the choice is broader and factors such as age, prior educational experience, exceptionality and the location of the family's residence with respect to catchment must be taken into account.

Identifying these obstacles is an important consideration when transferring a family. It is crucial to explore educational factors openly with each family well before either relocation or repatriation. The use of standardized interview instruments, such as, the *Relocation Risk Index* identifies families for whom the relocation offers a particular disruption to educational continuity. Families need to be instructed on how to create an objective *Educational Portfolio* containing anecdotal reports, curriculum statements, teacher references and work samples for each of their children to facilitate school transfer at both ends of their relocation assignment. Families can also be encouraged to maintain contact with their original home school system and engage in periodic communication with school officials while on assignment. This ensures as an important source of information regarding SAT preparation, changes in course requirements as well as facilitating the eventual repatriation of the student.

As all families are realistically concerned about "gaps" in their children's educational skills and course knowledge, six months prior to repatriation students benefit from standardized educational screening to provide an objective determination of grade levels. This testing is both brief and inexpensive. The objective information derived is then utilized to determine whether the student requires any specific skills or content tutoring to facilitate repatriation or

transfer to a new international system.

With respect to timing, at least four months advance notice prior to relocation or repatriation reduces the stress inevitable in a last minute school search. As most school systems are closed over the summer, negotiations for school transfer should ideally take place in March or April. The fact that schools in the U.S. begin in late August should also be taken into account when planning a move. Similarly, the fact that the school year begins in January in Australia and Japan is a specific consideration when negotiating a student's entry grade in the target school.

Unbiased information regarding educational differences provided to families prior to relocation serves to reduce stress significantly as well as identify potential obstacles unique to the family. In situations where there is an indication of educational risk, a consultation in person or by telephone addresses concerns and allows alternative strategies and professional intervention in the targeted school systems well in advance of an employee's relocation. This objective consultation serves to confirm local standards and identify educational expectations.

The educational challenges faced by a family undergoing a cross-border relocation reflect real differences in educational philosophies between Canada and other countries. These differences can present obstacles with respect to educational continuity. It is apparent that no one relocation policy can serve to determine which is the 'best' schooling option. However, we know that successful relocation is ensured when there is a positive foundation of continuity. Educational continuity, in turn, requires careful planning and support both before and during relocation. ❧