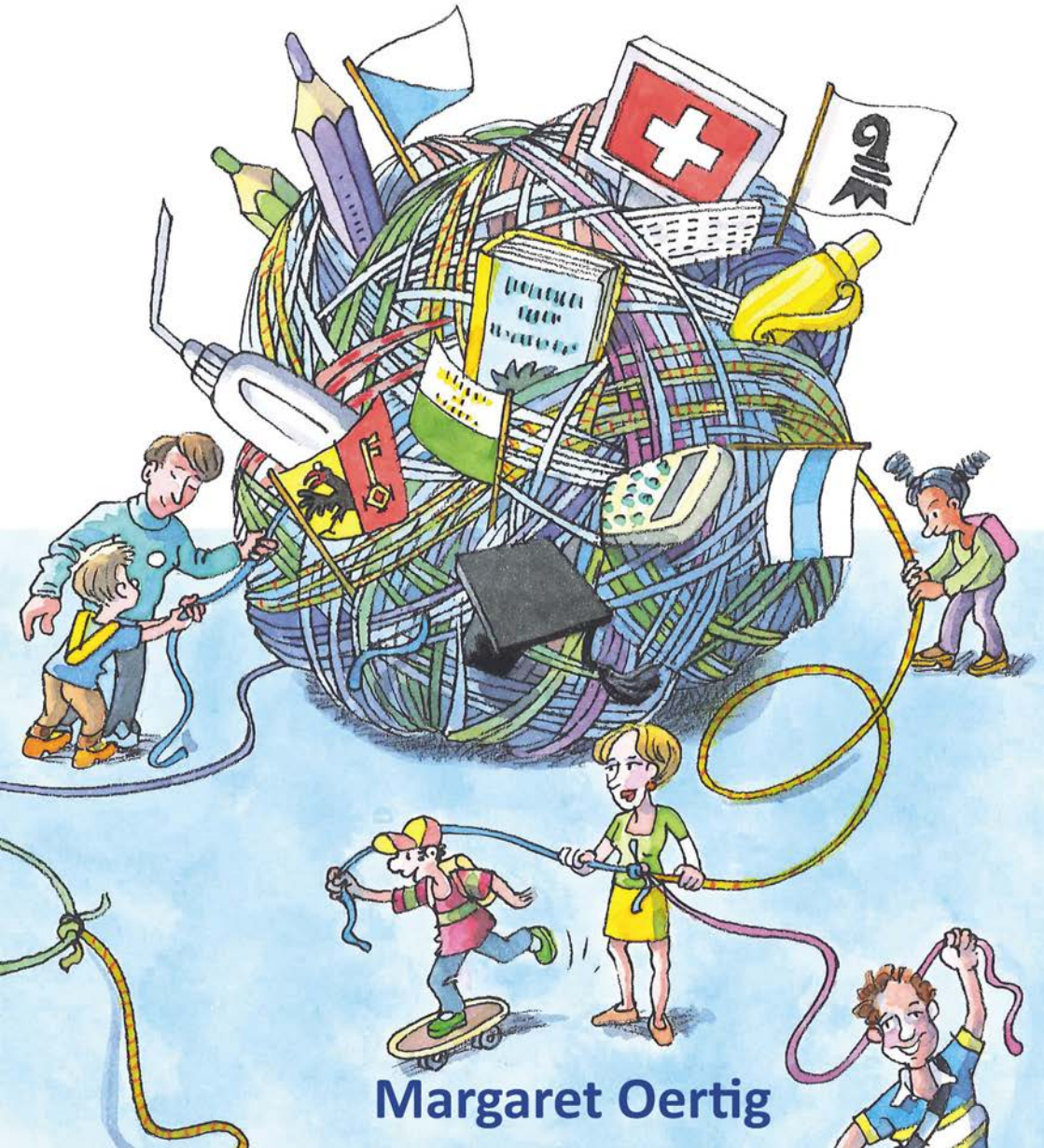
Going Local

your guide to Swiss schooling



Margaret Oertig

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Introduction

If you have moved to Switzerland from abroad and are considering sending your child to a local Swiss public school,[1] this book is for you. It aims both to inform and to reassure. It will provide you with detailed factual information regarding the Swiss school system in its amazing diversity around the country. I provide input from teachers and school management and present the views of incomers and locals who have gone before you. I spoke to (or corresponded with) well over 120 parents around Switzerland who have children in local schools, and asked them to share their concerns, experience and wisdom. Each of their stories could have made a book in itself. The final content is driven by the issues that incomers have found most challenging and would have liked to have known more about when they were starting out. The aim is to help you feel better prepared for the move you are making and increase the likelihood of your child making a smooth and successful transition to a local school.

Going Local contains basic information about how the school system works in each of the 26 cantons of Switzerland. It provides the correct terminology in the local language(s) for each stage of school, and tells you at what age your child will pass through these stages. It is not an in-depth guide to any particular aspect of Swiss schooling, but rather, aims to provide an introduction for people who are not familiar with the system.

You may already have your child in local school but would like to be better informed regarding the challenges and opportunities ahead. This book will also help you think ahead about your child's education path and prepare for particular milestones before they are upon you. An example of this is the streaming of your child into one path or another around the age of 11 (in most cantons). Teachers will start observing his or her academic potential well in advance of this and it is important to know what they are looking for. I discuss what these key streaming decisions may be based on,

apart from marks or external exams, and how you can support your child in this process.

The book also explains the alternative routes that young people can take in order to reach tertiary education at a later stage, if they are not ready for it earlier on. It is a very porous system and there will be a pathway that suits every level of motivation, interests and abilities at any given time. There are many routes that will get your child to his or her destination.

In addition to factual information, the book aims to inform you as to how local parents have handled the 'softer' school issues (which sometimes end up being the hardest ones). It refers to advice they receive from parents' organisations, books, magazines and the media as well as pedagogical and psychological experts. The concerns, experiences, opinions and reflections of parents from different countries are also presented, explaining how their children learned the local language, how they communicate with teachers and how they deal with particular challenges, such as bullying. Some of their children make a contribution to the discussion too.

Lastly, for anyone who has a more academic interest in the Swiss school system, this book also provides a sketch of the system as a whole, showing how it is slowly growing together. It outlines major themes common to all the cantons, summarizing the stages of schooling and how they are referred to in English and the local languages at national level.

Margaret Oertig
May 2012

Section one

Getting started

Chapter 1 Crash course in the Swiss school system

This chapter gives a brief overview of the stages of the Swiss education system, covering the ages of four to around 18 to 20, that is, from kindergarten until upper-secondary school. The terminology for all school stages in four languages can be found in Appendix 2.

In Switzerland, 95% of pupils attend public schools as the education is considered to be of a high standard. Pre-kindergarten, day care and playgroups for children under four are available, but are not part of the public school system. They all have to be paid for by the parents. It is unfortunately not possible to go into these in this book.

I recommend the English Forum (www.englishforum.ch), a community website with 60,000 members, as a starting point to ask for information and recommendations regarding day care, playgroups and private schools in general where you live.

The political background

There is no national Ministry of Education in Switzerland. Responsibility for compulsory education lies mainly with the 26 cantons, in four linguistic regions. 63.7% of the population speak German, 20.4% speak French, 6.5% speak Italian and 0.5% speak Rhaeto-Romansch.[2] The cantons may make school laws, but they

delegate the main responsibility for funding and running the schools to the municipalities (*Gemeinde (D), commune (F), comune (I)*[3]) that is, the town and village governments.

In 2012 Switzerland had over 2500 municipalities. Many small municipalities are merging and it is expected that there will be fewer than 2300 by 2020. They vary in size from 20 inhabitants to 370,000 inhabitants. No matter their size, the municipalities have a lot of political power. They use their populations' tax money to fund schools and employ teachers. They also take responsibility for quality assurance in accordance with cantonal regulations. In some municipalities schools are governed directly by an elected board of lay persons, others have professional school offices with the post of a head teacher. Citizens can vote on all municipal government decisions related to schooling, including how their money is spent on schools. Some municipalities have a more limited school budget than others.

How names are used in this book

With regard to people's names, parents are referred to by their first names and in some cases a pseudonym is used. Their children are referred to by their first initial to protect their privacy. Older children I interviewed may be referred to by their first name. I refer to teachers by their first name and the first initial of their family name. Experts and people in official roles are referred to by their first names and family names.

Harmonisation of school systems

Alignment of cantonal systems is currently moving at a fast pace, at least by Swiss standards. In the old system, compulsory schooling covers at least nine years, from primary school around the age of six to lower-secondary school, which finishes around the age of 15. In the new HarmoS system (see box on pages 14 – 15) compulsory schooling lasts 11 years for the cantons that are implementing it, as it includes two years of kindergarten. Upper-secondary school after the age of 15 or 16 is not compulsory, and lasts a further three

to four years, giving a total of 12 or 13 years in the old system and 14 or 15 years in the new system.

Numbering the years of school

Some cantons are already using the numbering of school years in accordance with the new HarmoS system. It is the aim of HarmoS to refer to the two years of kindergarten as 1st and 2nd class, rather than calling them the first two years of pre-school. This means that, in the HarmoS frame, the first year of primary school is known as the 3rd class. In this book I use the traditional term for the school year, and I add the HarmoS year in brackets, e.g. *3rd (H5)* class. The cantons counting in 'HarmoS years' are shown on page 253.

The school year

The school year may start any time from early August to early September, depending on the canton. It lasts around 37 to 40 weeks. Holidays vary from canton to canton, but there tends to be a short holiday period at Christmas, of around 10 days to two weeks, and the longest holidays are in July and August, lasting five to eight weeks. There may be an autumn and a winter week (or two) as well as ten days to two weeks at Easter. There are also a few days a year where there is no school, due to teachers' conferences, etc.

Travelling to school

Kindergarten and primary school are usually nearby and children are encouraged to walk there on their own, especially in German-speaking Switzerland. In rural areas, they may need to take a bus or boat, or even a cable car from a young age. Chantal (*see box on page 8*) told me that in her village in canton Valais, the children take the cable car down the mountain to kindergarten and school every day. One of the mothers accompanies the children for the first two weeks of kindergarten and, after that, they are on their own. Older pupils may either walk or cycle to school or use public transport, travelling longer distances than before by bus or train.

Kindergarten *(Kindergarten, école enfantine, scuola dell'infanzia)*

Kindergarten is the first stage of schooling. It is funded and governed by the municipality. It lasts for two years in most cantons and three years in canton Ticino. Children usually start attending some time before or after their fourth birthday, as stipulated by the cantonal authorities (see Chapter 27 for details regarding your canton). Some municipalities offer only one year of kindergarten, and others offer kindergarten for two years but only make it compulsory for one year, or not at all. In accordance with the goals of HarmoS (see 'HarmoS' on pages 14 – 15), cantons are encouraged to have two years of compulsory kindergarten by 2015.

Children have around 21 - 25 lessons (of 45 minutes each) per week. Please check with your municipality regarding the local distribution of hours. These can range from four to five mornings per week and from no afternoons at all to five afternoons. If both parents are working, you may need to organise day care yourself. School day care tends to be more readily available in larger towns.

The maximum number of children in a class varies from 20 to 26, according to the canton, but numbers are often lower. Each class covers two year groups, or cohorts, so that every year, the older cohort leaves and a new, younger cohort takes their place. (They are often referred to as the 'big ones' and the 'little ones'.) In the traditional system, the children will have the same one or two kindergarten teachers for two years.

Primary school *(Primarschule, école primaire, scuola elementare)*

Primary school is also funded and governed by the municipality. It lasts for six years, from 1st (H3) to 6th (H8) class in most cantons. Some cantons are phasing out five years of primary school (AG, BL, NE),[4] or even four (BS), and all cantons except Ticino will have six years of primary school by 2015, in accordance with the goals of HarmoS. I refer to cantons by the official abbreviations used for them. Please see pages 258 – 259 for a full list of the abbreviations and the cantons to which they refer.

Children usually start attending school some time after their sixth birthday. (See Chapter 27 for details regarding your canton). If they are very advanced both intellectually and socially, they can be tested by the school psychological services and start school a year early.

Pupils have around 21 – 25 lessons per week in the first two years and around 25 – 30 in the following four years. Please check with your municipality regarding the distribution of hours. This can range from four to five mornings per week and one to four afternoons. The maximum number of pupils in a class ranges from 22 – 28, depending on the canton, but numbers are often lower, in particular in rural areas.

There is usually a change of class teacher after two, three or four years, although this may vary. There may be additional teachers for specific subjects such as handicrafts, music, or languages. There may also be an additional special needs teacher, language teacher and speech therapist working with the class as needed. (Please see also Chapter 24 on special needs).

Lower-secondary school

The different names for this school level can be found in Chapter 27, pages 246 – 248. Lower-secondary school may be funded by the canton, the municipality, or both, at the canton's discretion. It starts in the 7th (H9) class in most cantons (with other models being phased out as mentioned above) and lasts until the 9th (H11) class in *all* cantons. Pupils tend to be around 12 years old when they start, and around 15 or 16 when they finish. They have around 31 – 35 lessons per week.

Pupils are selected for different lower-secondary school levels based on their marks and other criteria. In some cantons they go to different types of schools, in others there are different ability classes within the same school, and in a third model there are mixed ability classes.

The maximum number of pupils in a class varies according to the canton from 16 to 27, with the most basic ability levels having the smallest classes (e.g. a maximum of 16 pupils).

Upper-secondary school

This level is not compulsory, but is attended by around 90% of the population. It lasts from the 10th (H12) to 12th (H14) or 13th (H15) class. Pupils start attending around the age of 15 or 16. They may be finished by the age of 18 or 19, but could be a bit older, as it is very common to repeat years along the way.

Pupils are selected for different types of upper-secondary school based on their class marks, entrance exam marks and other criteria. The main types of upper-secondary school are gymnasium; vocational education and training (VET), involving an apprenticeship; IT or commercial school; and specialised upper-secondary school. School-based education is funded by the canton while the cost of apprenticeships is borne by the federal government, the cantons and the companies. School-based programmes tend to have a maximum of 22 – 26 pupils in a class and take place for around 33 – 36 hours per week.

In some German-speaking cantons, very mature, bright pupils may enter gymnasium immediately after primary school. The six-year-long gymnasium (*Langzeitgymnasium*) spans the lower and upper-secondary levels in one institution.

Different paths

This book will explain in some detail that the academic path through lower-secondary school is the most typical route to gymnasium and a traditional university, for which the entry requirement is a Gymnasial Maturity qualification. The middle path is the main route to a specialised upper-secondary school, commercial school or to the most challenging apprenticeships. Bright pupils may then go on to study at a University of Applied Sciences and Arts or do Professional Education and Training (PET) at tertiary level. The basic path prepares pupils for practically-based apprenticeships. There may be further variations in some cantons. In all cantons it is possible for pupils to change their path at various stages along the route if they have good enough marks, are motivated to do so, and are willing to put in the additional time and work that may be involved.

Cantonal diversity

This 'crash course' makes the stages of school sound fairly straightforward. You may be wondering why people say there is no such thing as 'the' Swiss school system. The reason is that when you look more closely at the stages of school outlined above, you will find that many aspects vary in one detail or another from one canton to another. As an example, different combinations of letters are used to name the classes or levels of lower-secondary school, such as R1, R2 and R3; P, E and A; VSB, VSG and VSO; A, B and C; E and G; or p, m and g. Neighbouring cantons may use different terms. The criteria for entrance to the different levels may also vary. It is difficult for parents to communicate across the cantonal divide at this stage. I therefore list the names of the lower-secondary school types and levels and their entry criteria in all the cantons in the cantonal tables in Chapter 27. The chapter covers a range of other practical matters too, such as the different cut-off birth dates for children to start kindergarten or school, and the year(s) in which pupils can start gymnasium in each canton. The broad overview of the school system for your canton will not be complete without referring to these tables.

A partial explanation for so much diversity with regard to the details may lie in the limits Swiss people set themselves in expressing their individualism. I spoke to someone at a Department of Education who explained the system in his small canton to me and commented, "We're a bit exotic." I came to the conclusion that all the cantons are exotic in some way or other. It has been my observation that individuals tend to prefer not to stand out too much in Switzerland, and that fitting in with the group is emphasised. It would appear that being special, different or exotic is transferred from the individual to the collective, and can be expressed to some extent at municipal or cantonal level.

HarmoS: harmonisation of compulsory education

This is a brief introduction to a fairly complex topic. This information given here should be read in conjunction with specific information on your canton (see Chapters 27 and 28). It is taken from the www.educa.ch and the www.edk.ch websites.

In Switzerland, the main responsibility for education and culture lies with the cantons. They coordinate their work at the national level via the EDK, the Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (*EDK, CDIP, CDPE*). It is referred to as the EDK in English on the official website. Legally binding, intercantonal agreements (known as concordats) form the foundation for the work of the EDK.

On the 21st of May 2006, the Swiss electorate and all the cantons voted by a majority of 86% to accept the revised constitutional provision of education. According to article 62 of the constitution, the federal government and cantons are required to work together and define key nationwide parameters. These include school entry, the goals of the educational levels, their duration and structure, the transitions in the education system and the degrees awarded. The Intercantonal Agreement on Harmonisation of Compulsory Education (HarmoS Concordat) is the instrument to fulfil these goals of the Swiss Constitution.

The individual cantons decide whether to join a concordat. A concordat is legally binding for the signatory cantons. HarmoS was adopted by the 26 members of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education to be ratified by the cantons, in accordance with their own political procedures. As a consequence of several initiated referenda on a cantonal level, citizens of several cantons voted on whether their canton should join the HarmoS Agreement or not.

Once ten cantons had joined HarmoS, the concordance came into effect for all cantons. By 2010 15 cantons had joined, representing 76.3% of the population. Seven cantons voted not to join (AR, GR, LU, NW, TG, UR, ZG). Four cantons had by then not yet decided (AG, AI, OW, SZ).

A transition period is now in place until 2015. In 2015 the EDK will assess the extent to which the goals of Article 62 of the constitution have been realised.

HarmoS measures

Under HarmoS, there are 11 years of compulsory schooling: two years of kindergarten, or pre-school, 6 years of primary school and three years of lower-secondary school. Children who are four years old by 31st July will start kindergarten the same year. In many cantons the cut-off date is earlier, and is being postponed by two weeks to a month every year until 31st July is reached. In other cantons (GE, NE, TI, VS), the cut-off date is later than 31st July.

While most cantons already have six years of primary school (whether or not they agreed to HarmoS), the cantons of Aargau, Baselland and Neuchâtel are changing from five to six years, and Basel-Stadt from four to six years. Only Ticino will continue to have five years of primary school. The EDK website provides an interactive map of Switzerland with diagrams of the school system in each canton for the current year.[5]

HarmoS also aims to set national educational standards to be reached in the areas of the school language, foreign languages, maths and natural sciences by the end of the 2nd (H4), 6th (H8) and 9th (H11) years. The aim is that the majority of pupils will exceed the basic competences defined. A first foreign language will be taught from the 3rd (H5) class and a second one from the 5th (H7) class. These are a second national language and English. In Ticino and Graubünden there may be a third national language.

A further aim of HarmoS at kindergarten and primary school level is to promote teaching blocks of full mornings, lunch and school-based day-care facilities, in accordance with observed local needs. This is an ongoing process, and the use of services generally incurs a fee. Cities tend to offer more supervision, but there may be waiting lists. Working mothers have a stronger argument for being given a place. It can be worth checking up on what is on offer before you move into an area. In some municipalities, extra care will be offered as a range of modules to choose from. For example, if your child is in kindergarten from 8 till 12, the modules could run from 7 till 8 am, then lunch from 12 till 2 pm, then afternoon modules, from 2 till 4 and 4 till 6pm. In other cantons, or municipalities, there may just be lunch on offer, or nothing at all. The school will close and your child will have to come home for lunch and stay at home some afternoons too.

Chapter 2 Making the move to a local school

What does transition involve?

People who come to Switzerland with small children tend to have the easiest time with the local system. Their children may lead a 'double life', experiencing different ways of doing things at home and outside the home. They first go to local day care or playgroup with children from the neighbourhood and soak up the local language and culture almost by osmosis. As an example, Helen is from England and lives and works in Zurich. She and her husband speak English at home to B, their two-year-old son. He goes to local Swiss day care and his first words were Swiss-German ones. He is hearing stories in Swiss German and learning local nursery rhymes. B will already be both bilingual and bicultural when he starts local kindergarten.

The situation is different for parents and children when the child moves from a local school in their home country to a local school in Switzerland, or from an international school in Switzerland to a local public school. Both the parents and their child go through an adjustment process. The child will be learning a new language and will get to know the teacher and other children using this new language. Communication styles will be different. Language is the aspect of adjustment that we can see and can most easily judge progress on. There are cultural aspects going on beneath the surface too. Some children will need time, patience and plenty of support and encouragement as they get used to a culturally different school environment.

As an example of a different environment, a key aspect of Swiss education is the emphasis on children learning to be self-reliant. This can be seen in the custom of encouraging them to walk to kindergarten or school without parental supervision in some parts of the country. There is also the expectation that a kindergarten child will learn to zip up her own jacket and tie her own shoes without help at the end of the morning. (Shoes and jackets with Velcro fastenings can come in handy at this stage).

Cultural differences

Example 1 - Giving comfort

My daughter tells the story of how, when she was three years old, she banged her knee on a chair while she was playing with L, a neighbour's child, who was also three. To her surprise, L offered her four options to 'make it better'. "I can blow on it, kiss it, stroke it, or sing *Heile, heile Segen*."[6] My daughter found the offer a bit strange but opted for all four anyway. L was Austrian, and had lived in the USA till she was two. Then she moved to Switzerland. She had already worked out that adults had different ways of comforting children, and that children had different preferences when being comforted.

Example 2 – Communication styles

Lorna taught English from home to five to eight-year-olds from her daughter's classes. She found it difficult to get them to behave and do what she wanted. When she watched her daughter's teachers work with the children, she realised they were being much more direct, using commands, rather than polite requests. "Sit down, Sara." or "Luca, put that down." She had been giving instructions that began with expressions like "Could you please…"

Resocialisation of parents

The process of cultural adaptation can be referred to as acculturation or even *re*-socialization for the whole family, as there may also be an adjustment for parents regarding what the school expects of them. They may be socialized in one country to get involved in the work of their child's school, taking part in classroom activities, even helping groups of children with reading aloud. Then, in another setting, they are resocialized not to get involved in the work of the school, but to leave it to the professionals. (Please see also sections three and five of my first book *Beyond Chocolate – understanding Swiss culture*[7] for further information on cultural differences that may be relevant). Until they get used to it, parents can experience their new hands-off role as disempowerment.

As well as the expectations of the school, the attitudes of other parents contribute to the resocialisation of parents. Alexandra Muz is a Swiss journalist who lives in Mexico City. She describes in an article how she became a 'tiger mum lite', a mild version of a 'tiger mum', as a result of sending her seven-year-old daughter to a prestigious private school there.[8] She ended up enrolling her daughter on a maths tutoring programme, like the other mothers around her. The children practised maths for 15 minutes every day all year, usually only with a lot of pressure from their mothers. Alexandra Muz comments that by the summer holidays her daughter could do as much maths as her cousin in Switzerland who was a class higher than she was. In Switzerland, if there is any pressure, it comes later, and it is mainly driven by the teacher. In this book you will read about children doing 15-minutes-a-day speed maths calculation homework under time pressure around the age of nine.

When should you make the move?

Given that the transition to a local Swiss school may involve both learning a new language and adapting to a new culture, whether and when to move should be considered carefully. It may be that you are on an expatriate contract and are not yet sure whether you will be staying in Switzerland. Some parents find sending their child to an international school makes it easier when they transfer their child to another international school in the next country. It is also easier for the children of native English speakers who will be returning home and going to school in their local system in the same language.

There may also be curriculum issues to consider. Some parents prefer to keep their children in an international school if they know they are going to be going back to a country where academic learning starts around the age of four or five. Children educated in the Swiss system may have some catching up to do if they go back around the age of six or seven. Many parents with older children say that, somewhere between the ages of eight and ten, the gap closes and children educated in Switzerland are doing as much or more than their peers in countries with early academic learning.

The view that the gap closes can be reassuring to parents who are concerned about the quality of the Swiss public school system. Kaya Usher-Samayoa is a senior consultant for the relocation company Ready Steady Relocate.[9] She explains that public schools do not have the best reputation in some countries and expatriates therefore do not expect them to be good in Switzerland. They think, 'It is bad there, so it must be bad here.' They are then pleasantly surprised to discover that their assumptions about Swiss public schools are wrong.

Another issue to be considered if you will be in Switzerland short term is whether your child will be learning only one language or a language and a dialect too. I found that parents in the French and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland are happier to expose their children to a new language, even if it is possibly only for one or two years.

In the German-speaking part, people are more hesitant to do this as, especially at kindergarten, children will be exposed to both High-German and Swiss-German and it can take a bit longer to sort the languages out.

All over the country, once people know they are staying permanently, they often decide to 'go local' and transfer their children to a local school. One reason may be that they would like them to feel at home in the local culture. In many cases, the company is not willing to continue paying the fees for private school long-term. Some try to do this as soon as they know they are staying, to help their child start to learn the local language and get used to local ways.

A first key milestone is around the age of four when the child starts kindergarten and another at the age of six, when children tend to start Swiss school. In school, a group is formed and children get to know the classmates with whom they will be spending around six years in a fairly close-knit group. A third important milestone is when the assessment process begins, around the age of 10 or 11 in many cantons, to stream the children into different schools, classes or achievement levels. If you have the chance, it can be helpful to have your child already settled in a local school with a good grasp of the language, when the assessment process begins.

Juggling your lives

Sanjay and his wife are Indian and were both relocated by their company in India to Switzerland. He points out that, if both parents are working, this could influence the decision to go local as the issue of childcare arises. In the cases I came across where both parents worked full-time, they either had childminders or live-in nannies for their primary school children, or else they made sure that they lived somewhere that offered lunch at or near the school, as well as childcare before and after school.

The best of both worlds

Some expatriate parents send their children to international schools and later transfer them to local schools. Barbara is German and she and her Hungarian husband and their daughter all speak German at home. Their daughter spoke English at the international school she attended until she was ten. Barbara describes what she appreciated about the international school:

> They motivate the kids, focus on their strengths, and have the vision to educate them to be explorative, challenging children. It is brilliant how they inject into kids a fascination for reading and writing, learning it early. An example of this is already in kindergarten where they read books with five to ten words per page and feel successful because they have read a whole book. They make learning fun for the children. They integrate the use of computers in the different subjects. There was a Science Day in 1st grade which provoked a lot of independent thinking and exploring. Our daughter gave her first PowerPoint presentation in 2nd grade.

Barbara and her husband were aware that they would need to change to the Swiss system at some point. A basic driver was that the company was going to stop paying for their daughter's private education. The question was finding the right time to move:

> We found out that in canton Schwyz, the key age is twelve, or the 6th class, when they change to a different school type. So we

> worked backwards from there. The decision whether to take the exam to get into *Gymnasium* is based on marks at the end of 5th class and after the first half of the 6th class. So we changed her in time to enter the 4th class, to give her time to fill any gaps, then the 5th class would count and the 6th class was the decision year.

When they changed to the Swiss system, Barbara got extra maths lessons for her daughter from a local teacher who knew how maths was taught at the local school. She had heard from many people locally that kids were a lot further on in maths in the local Swiss system by the 4th (H6) class. She did not worry initially about her daughter's language, as they spoke High German at home, but realised later that there were gaps in her German grammar. All in all, they appreciated the international school but were also happy with the move, and the solid foundation provided by the Swiss system:

> My husband and I have discussed this. We think the Swiss school system is like going on a hike. You prepare well before you get moving. The children have their 'education backpack' packed properly. They put on the right shoes, and then they walk. They don't try to impress people by walking too fast at the beginning.

Barbara's daughter was a native speaker of German and there was no issue regarding having to learn the language of the new school.

It was the language issue that Kate kept in mind when she and her husband moved from the UK to canton Zurich with their two sons, J who was eight, and C who was six-years-old. They started them at the international school. The company was paying for their schooling and neither Kate nor her husband spoke any German, so Swiss school did not seem like an option. Kate appreciated her children's creative and imaginative teachers at the international school and the standard of English and maths was good. She also benefited from the very friendly support network of parents there, as there was no language barrier.

At the same time, their neighbours in the village were friendly from the start and Kate and her husband soon started to feel at home there. When J was nine, they started thinking about changing the boys to local school in the village. Kate had read somewhere that if it was left beyond the age of ten, language integration was much harder, so she was aware of the clock ticking for J. She describes the main reasons for moving them:

> It was meeting Swiss people who had such command of so many languages that was the deciding factor. I wanted the boys to grow up understanding cultural differences, and different languages, and I realised that being able to speak them is a huge advantage when it comes to employment. Also I was fed up with driving everywhere for play dates. In my mind, I wanted them to have friends round the corner, particularly now we were living in a country where playing outside is still considered the safe and normal thing to do.

They then moved their sons to the local village school, where they joined the 4th (H6) and 2nd (H4) class respectively. At the same time, Kate and her husband remain good friends with at least three families they got to know through the international school, as well as two of the teachers. As she puts it, "I now feel we have the best of both worlds."

Kate gives a highly entertaining as well as extremely informative account of her own and her sons' transition process and experience of Swiss school in her blog, *Swiss Family Taylor*.[10]

A gradual transition

International and bilingual school websites are in English and it is relatively easy to find out about these schools' profiles and what they are offering. It is more difficult to find out about the local Swiss schools if you do not speak the language. Stephen is Australian and his wife Renate, is Dutch. They moved from the Netherlands to canton Basel-Stadt with their four-year-old son, J. Even after over a year in Switzerland, Stephen still describes the transition process they face as a challenge: "Before we came to Switzerland we had a bit of an idea what the international schools entailed. But now, with the transition to the Swiss system, it's just the unknown."

J spoke both Dutch and a little English when they arrived, but no German. Renate told me that they sent him to a bilingual school first to make the transition smoother: "For us, the bilingual aspect was attractive, because at this age you can pick up the languages a lot quicker, and it is done very playfully. Once he has a proper basis of German, it is easier to go to the Swiss school."

After one year of bilingual school, J speaks reasonable High German for his age. After another year they hope to move him to the

Swiss school in time to start the first class of primary school. At a bilingual school, children get a head start in both the local language and the culture. Some of the teachers are Swiss and the children will get used to their approach to teaching as well as local customs – for example, having to shake hands with the teacher when they arrive and leave.

Tünde is Hungarian and she and her Austrian husband lived in the USA until their daughter S was two-and-a-half. She had been diagnosed as speech-delayed in the USA, and they were advised to speak only English to her. Therefore she had no German at all. When they arrived in Switzerland she started attending a German-English bilingual day care centre. They wanted her to be in an environment where English was also spoken so that she would feel comfortable and have a smooth introduction to German as the new language. She was happy there, but was not picking up any words in German. After six months she started attending a German language Swiss day care centre for part of the day. She enjoyed it as much as the other one although she was still not speaking German. After ten months she started local kindergarten, which she enjoyed very much, and things took off. Within weeks she was telling her parents things in German. Parallel to this, her English kept improving. She speaks it a lot at home and is developing both at the same time.

Children can also learn the local language at an English-speaking international school. Kimberly is from the USA and originally moved to Zurich with her husband for a three year assignment. Their daughters, then eight and six years old, attended an international school, where German was one of their subjects. Once her husband's contract switched to local, it was decision time. Kimberly reports:

> We went through the agonizing choice of switching them to local school. We made the right decision, and moved them. B had just finished third grade and M fifth grade. They first went to the transition class with intensive German. They were only there until the Christmas break then moved to the 'regular' classroom. The German they had at the international school allowed for them to have a very short transition time.

Some parents with children of different ages try a combination of approaches. Karen and her husband moved from England and

settled in canton Basel-Stadt six years ago with their six children, then aged eleven, ten, seven, five, three and one. As a teacher herself, Karen found the idea of a completely different school system quite intimidating. "You're scared. You've taught in your own school system. You believe in it, you know how it works. We were told by others that we didn't need to know about the Swiss school system."

Their eleven-year-old started at the international school and stayed there until he had taken the International Baccalaureate six years later. He was already performing at a high level in English and they did not want to risk changing him to the local system. Their ten-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter went to bilingual private schools in preparation for changing over to the Swiss system. After three years, when their daughter was nine, Karen wished to transfer her to the 3rd (H5) class of Swiss school. She contacted the local school authorities.

> I asked their advice and they said that she might have to go down a year. I suggested getting her German teacher to write a report with examples of her work and they agreed to this. "Send it to us and we'll consider it." When they saw her work they said, "Fine, she can go into the 3rd class."

Although they were not encouraged to do so by others, Karen and her husband sent their fourth child to local kindergarten. There she was given extra German lessons. The two youngest children also went straight into the local Swiss system when their turn came and were given extra German too. Looking back, Karen says she would have gone local immediately with all six children if she had known more about the system.

In at the deep end

In some cases, expatriate parents do not know whether they are staying in Switzerland long-term but are still willing to give the local system a try. Especially in the French and Italian-speaking parts of the country, where there is little or no dialect, it can be fairly easy for children to go back home with a new language under their belt. Angela and her husband moved from England to French-speaking

canton of Vaud when their son was eight and their daughter was seven. They moved to a very multicultural area by the lake, with many expatriates, where around 80% of the children do not speak French at home.

> We were relocated by my husband's company and were expected to use the international school. However, it had no places and we were not happy about the education on offer elsewhere. At the international school, the fees would be paid on a sliding scale with the company's contribution decreasing every year, so we would have had to move them later to the local school. So we thought we would try the local school right away, for a year. It was good immersion for the language. They had done well at their level in the UK, so wouldn't be behind. They were to be given three hours of extra French lessons every week.
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> I was terrified. It was a huge leap of faith and the children were the ones making the leaps. I had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach every day when they came home for lunch in case it hadn't gone well. But it did. Now the international school has offered us places for them if we want it. We asked the children, and both were adamant that they wanted to stay in the local school. They like coming home for lunch every day for two hours and they like having Wednesday afternoons off.

Hannah was 10 years old, and in the last year of primary school in England when she arrived in Switzerland one Easter. She was very bright for her age and was put in the 5th (H7) class in Basel-Stadt. "In the beginning teachers came over to explain work in English," she told me. "Later they said it in simple High German. If I didn't understand anything, I just went to the teachers, they were all really helpful."

Many of the people I interviewed who now have older children are proponents of the 'deep end' approach. Looking back, they say things like,"If you are planning to stay, it is worth going local as soon as possible" and "Jump in while your children are small, before they get used to another way of doing things." The fact that there is now much more support in learning the language makes taking the plunge a lot easier than it used to be. More is said about this in Chapter 4.

Views of children who make the move

I conducted an interview in English with a group of eight 10- and 11-year-old girls who are now in local schools. They came to Switzerland from different countries and some have been in international schools too. Below, I provide a selection of their comments and their advice to any children who are going to start Swiss school. R (11) is British and started Swiss school at the age of nine:

> If you move to a new school you're obviously going to be upset that you're moving away from your friends. And the first time you go into a new class, everyone looks at you and you don't know what to say. You want to be nice and fit in but you can't. (I just wanted to go back out, and go home). But then after two weeks you're not scared any more. You're just a normal child, you're like them and it just takes some time to learn the language. But you'll learn it some time. Because they speak to you and you just pick it up from the other children. I think you shouldn't be scared because everybody's basically nice over here.

J (10) is English and started French school at the age of four:

> At first it's scary but you should be confident because you'll soon learn the language. They explain it to you. I learned the language really quickly, so when I was six I could speak it fluently. And if I don't understand I can just ask.

M (11) is Hungarian and started Swiss kindergarten at the age of five:

> When I first came here there was a girl in my class who also spoke English so I was happy there. And every day I had German with the teacher and it really helped me. And in school every time a new kid comes, they can learn German really fast because they are surrounded by lots of German-speaking people. I really like it that you stay a long time with the same kids and the same teacher. Because you get used to them. For me, my class is like a family because I have been so long with them and I enjoy every bit of being with them.

E (11) is Brazilian and started Swiss school at the age of ten:

> When I first went to the Swiss school I learned German better when I just started talking more and reading books. I got some books from the bookstores and the library. At home I wrote down every new word to memorise it better.

D (11) is Columbian and started Swiss school at the age of seven:

> When my parents told me we were moving to Switzerland, I got very sad because I couldn't be with my best friend any more. I thought in the new school I would just sit around and look at the other children playing together and I wouldn't have friends. But it was completely different. On the first day I got really nice friends. Every girl who comes here thinks too she won't have friends, but she shouldn't think that because you will get friends.

These girls had mainly positive experiences. Most of them joined classes where there were other foreigners, many the children of other expatriates. Other young people report that making friends will not happen so quickly. It may be partly a matter of age if children are less open to newcomers as they near puberty. It could also be partly due to the peach and coconut phenomenon I describe in my first book, *Beyond Chocolate*.[11] In a 'peachy' environment it is easy to start getting to know people, but relationships may not be long-term. In a 'coconut' environment, people may be more cautious and possibly distant at first. It takes time to build relationships, but once they are established, they are enduring.

A is an 11-year-old English girl who started Swiss school at the age of 10. Her account shows how this may work in practice:

> When I first came here I was really lonely. I tried making some new friends at Swiss school, but they mostly laughed at me, probably because I said something that was funny in German without meaning to. As time went on and I learnt more German, I could speak more to everybody. It helped when I kept changing seats in the classroom every two months because then when I needed somebody to help me with things I didn't understand, I had different people to ask.

> I soon made some new friends and I now have two good friends at school. I sit next to one of them at the moment and when we next all change places I will sit next to the other one. Though I now have friends, I will never forget how it felt when I was so alone. So now, when some of the girls in my class fall out for a while, I sit with the girl who's alone as the other one will have lots of people on her side – I won't let anybody else be alone like I was.

A's mother Claire commented on the turning point, from her perspective as a parent:

> I think the big change happened for A when the class went away for a week to a cabin up in the mountains – she was forced into a situation where she was surrounded by her classmates for a week, had to speak German (and some Swiss German) and had to socialise with the other children. Before she went she was very hesitant about going and was very unsure of herself and how she would feel being in that situation – however, the change in her when she returned was incredible.
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> All of a sudden there was a lot of, 'B did this' and 'C did that' and since then A has felt more part of the class and settled into school life more. I think a large part of the problem with foreign children being integrated into Swiss school life has to do with the fact that all the children in the class will have been schooled together since kindergarten and therefore have formed very close friendship groups. It is natural that is difficult for 'outside' children to find their feet in those groups, but once they are accepted they seem to be totally accepted.

Kevin is Irish and goes to local school in Basel-Stadt, where he was born. When he was 13 he spent two weeks at a local school just across the border in France. It was part of an immersion programme called *Sprachbad*. He commented on how the children in France were a lot friendlier to him as a newcomer than he would expect his peers back in Basel to be:

> In breaks they crowded around me. They tried to speak German to me and asked me loads of questions. They also willingly gave me information about themselves. Swiss kids wouldn't do this. They like to stay together. Once they have their own friends, they don't need anyone else and don't reach out to others.

Hannah experienced the approach to newcomers as quite different in Switzerland than in her school in England, and gives the following advice:

> Unless the teacher tells the other children to show you round, they stick to their groups. These are strong and hard to break into. Don't wait till they approach you, it's not going to happen. Go up to someone, try and talk to them, go around with them if they will let you, go with them if they ask you and laugh with them, try and be part of the group. In England in my school, if you had a new girl, everyone would follow her around. It was exciting, the new girl was fussed over and people fought to be her best friend. After the excitement wore off, they decided if they really liked them or not. In Switzerland you have to fend for yourself, and make the first move. There are no ready-made friends.

As Claire mentioned, it seems to be easiest for children to integrate if they join a class as it is forming – for example in the first year of kindergarten or the first year of primary school. After that, it is still easy to integrate if new children are regularly joining the class. The other, newer children are likely to be the most open. Joining a class where everyone else has been together for years involves being proactive, as Hannah describes. It can be an advantage to go to a school where there are regularly new children shaking up the class dynamics.