

Schools in Spain

With Paraiso Homes

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Ask most Spanish parents what they think of Spanish schools and the answer is invariably "not much"! Fortunately this opinion is based more on "what was" as opposed to "what is" and whilst Spanish schools still do lag behind most countries of the EU, the system is dramatically and rapidly being improved. Perhaps more so than in other countries, Spanish parents take the education of their children very seriously, recognising the profound effect it can have on their adult lives.

The "yearn to learn" among Spanish children is probably stronger in Spain than most other EU states. In recognising this sentiment among parent voters, the government is constantly increasing the education budget.

There are literally tens of thousands of foreign children currently being educated under the Spanish education system but in some areas it is failing seriously - being either incapable or unwilling to spend the amount of money necessary. In some of these areas, expatriate children have never achieved further education and truant, bullying and other problems are part of the curriculum. In these areas, little point exists in taking your bright child who has just passed his or her eleven plus in the UK and thinking you can continue education at a state school. It may continue but learning will stop.

As with the UK state system, the Spanish system is not without criticism with many complaining that it is weighed down with traditional and unimaginative teaching methods. Poorly paid and poorly motivated teachers, poor teacher training and a high student failure rate led to considerable improvement in the system over the past decade but many argue that Spain's education system still has a long way to go. One criticism addressed was the requirement that children upon reaching the age of 14 decide then and there on whether to pursue an academic or vocation career. Many argued that this was too young and eventually the age was put back to 16. The Spanish education system consists of state-funded schools supported by a comprehensive network of private schools, many of which are foreign and include a considerable number of British institutions.

Thirty per cent of Spanish schoolchildren are currently being educated in private schools, most of which are co-educational day schools. Education in Spain is free - from nursery school through to university and is available for the children of foreign residents. Notwithstanding this, parents may have to pay for school books, a sum which could work out at €1 or €2 per week over the year. Perhaps a little more now that inflation is starting to bite once again.

Education statistics make interesting reading. 90 per cent of all children between the age of four and five attend nursery school and over 55 per cent of students remain at school until their 18th birthday. Of these, a further 25 per cent go on to vocational training and 30 per cent to university. When it comes to Spanish universities, criticism stops. They are comparable with any university in Europe but suffer the same problems in that most are overcrowded. It's not unusual among expatriates for them to send their children to British or American universities if they can afford to do so because courses tend to be shorter with far more flexibility than is the case in Spain.

Of particular significance to anyone with children who may be contemplating a move to Spain is the simple fact that the younger a child is when he enters the Spanish school system, the easier he will be able to cope. It is also the case that the older he is, the more problems he will have adjusting. Not only because of language problems but because the school curriculum is more demanding. Teenagers often have great difficulty learning Spanish and adjusting to Spanish school life with the result that many are unhappy for quite some time. Many expatriates, upon understanding the system choose to start their children's education in Spanish nursery and primary schools and then switch their secondary education to a private school.

Most foreign children cope well with being educated in Spain be it private or state education. Living in a foreign land is an adventure for most of them which offers both change and challenge and most rise to the occasion. In no time at all their thinking becomes international, allowing their behaviour to become the same in later life.

Spanish children are more than aware that the EU is made up of many different nationalities as most attend schools with pupils from many different countries.

Information about Spanish schools, both in the state and private sectors, can be obtained from Spanish embassies and consulates abroad and from foreign embassies and educational departments in Spain. If you are contemplating a move to Spain and have children of school age, education is probably the most important thing for you to consider.

For a child to enrol in a Spanish school requires an interview and medical but as with so many things in Spain, neither seems to happen. At the discretion of the school, there may also have to be an examination but in the case of a foreign child, the latter may prove difficult and this too rarely occurs.

If you have children of school age and are set on moving to Spain, this more or less, is the information you require. Be advised that procedures may change from area to area and time to time entirely at the discretion of the schools. In the main, the enrolment process used by Spanish schools is dependent upon the age of the child, who in Spain, must attend a school within a certain distance from his home. If you hear good things about a particular school and you would like your child to attend, it will be necessary for you to either buy or rent a property in the area.

Schools have annual quotas for their pupils and places are allocated quite simply on the basis of "first come, first served". The school enrolment period usually takes place early in the year and lasts for two months. Enrolment varies between regions but you will be able to ascertain the exact dates by contacting any of the schools in the region you intend to live.

To Enrol Your Child

To enrol your child in a Spanish school you will require the following:

1. Child's birth certificate or passport together with a photocopy, official translation (which may not be required) parent's passports together with a photocopy.
2. Proof of child's immunisation.
3. Proof of residence. Obtain this from the town hall in your locality.
4. If your child is over 12, proof of convalidation.
5. Two passport-size photographs. One for student Identification card, the other for records.

Homologation/Convalidation

If you have a child over the age of 12 whom you wish to place in a Spanish secondary school you will also require proof of homologation or convalidation, which is the official verification of your child's education record. The forms to do this can be obtained from:

Ministerio de Educacion y Ciencia
C/Alcala,34
28014 Madrid
Telephone 0034 917 018 000

Send the completed form together with your child's school record book and/or examination qualifications, plus his birth certificate. If possible the process should be completed before arrival in Spain because in theory, a child will not be accepted at school until the official papers have been received and stamped by the Department of Education.

Expect the process to take between 3 - 6 months although a receipt from the Ministry for the homologation documents for your child should be acceptable.

The language problem.

Whilst understanding that their children are going to have to attend school in Spain, many parents are concerned as to how their child will cope with the language problem. It is a natural enough concern and there are many considerations to take into account when choosing a school for your child's education. If you cannot afford to educate your child privately then of course, the decision has been made for you. Your child will go to a State school within the area in which you choose to live. The opinion of many and supported by the writer, is that children under the age of nine, and preferably younger, are better off going to a State school. They settle quickly and learn the language at a speed which borders on the incomprehensible for their struggling parents. However, others disagree and ultimately you will have to make your own decision.

In many areas of Spain, placing a bright expatriate child over the age of 10 in a Spanish school is doing nothing good at all for his or her future.

The only schools in Spain using English as the teaching language are foreign and international private schools. The costs of these vary considerably and something we will cover later in this section. If your child attends a Spanish state school you would expect all lessons to be taught in the language of Spain. Not so! In some regions of Spain, lessons are taught in the language of the region which may be Basque, Catalan or Galician.

In some of these areas, parents may be offered a choice between Spanish or the regional language but this is by no means certain. Learning a regional language can prove difficult for Spanish children who have all the advantages of culture. For foreign children it can be much more difficult. If you have decided to live in an area where education is dominated by a regional language you may have to give serious thought to private education. If you send your child to a State school where regional languages are not applicable you will soon see that language does not pose the problem you may initially have believed it would. This is particularly true in the case of children below the age of 10. As with all learning, children of this age absorb information and retain it at a rate which can only be envied by adults. Reasonable fluency in 6 months is not at all unusual.

For children over the age of 10, the going may not be quite so easy as the ability to learn languages starts to diminish quite quickly after this age has been reached. Some experience considerable difficulty in the first year but usually achieve a degree of competency far quicker than their parents could ever do. Some but not too many state schools operate a system of providing intensive Spanish lessons for foreign children in order that they speak the language as soon as possible. As increasing numbers of foreigners settle in Spain, this method is likely to be developed further. Children who cannot read and write in Spanish are often relegated one year in order to be able to "catch up". Once fluency is attained the child can then be put into a class appropriate to his age group and knowledge.

When it comes to foreign children learning Spanish there are several lines of thought. Some believe a gradual introduction to the language is appropriate while others believe in throwing a child in at the deep end. It may well be there is merit in all methods but in the final analysis it will certainly depend upon the character, ability and self-motivation of each individual child.

If you know you are moving to Spain, before you leave your own country you should perhaps try to find Spanish lessons for your children. Night school, private lessons, computer programmes, it will all help bridge what is a very different but thoroughly enjoyable way of life in a country which has more than its fair share of sunshine.

There are many young families who embark upon what they believe will be the ultimate adventure. Having considered the matter for quite some time, they take the plunge and together with their young children move to Spain. Their children are put into Spanish State school and soon learn to speak Spanish. Their own language, whilst taught, may only be an hour or two each week. After three or four years, It is by no means unusual for some of these families to return to their home country for a variety of reasons.

At this time problems may start for their children who whilst competent in Spanish, are seriously behind in the study of their own language, particularly grammar and writing. If you move young children to Spain and then return to your own country, the price is more likely to be paid by your children. Many parents who send their children to Spanish state school are aware of this problem and ensure that their children receive extra tuition in their own language, often paid for privately. The cost for this is about £6 - 8 per hour and probably worth every penny for the peace of mind it brings.

Private Education

In Spain, there is a very wide range of private schools. There are parochial schools, international schools, bilingual schools, American Schools and British schools. Most are co-educational and between them they educate just over one third of all children in Spain. Most are catholic day schools but some British and American schools take weekly or full term boarders. Private schools follow the same pattern as the state schools, operating a Monday to Friday timetable, with no Saturday morning classes.

It is generally believed by many foreigners that all private schools in Spain are under foreign ownership and control. Not so. There are numerous Spanish Private schools teaching wholly in Spanish and of these, many are subsidised by the State. Some international schools are also subsidised and follow the Spanish state-school curriculum. Others are also state-subsidised and follow a bilingual English/Spanish curriculum and are authorised to accept Spanish pupils. If a private school is to receive a state subsidy and be able to accept Spanish students, at least 25 per cent of a school's total number of pupils must be Spanish and have at least 20 per cent in each class. Conditional on receiving state funding is that schools with Spanish children accept inspection by the Spanish school authorities.

As with private schools anywhere, fees in Spain vary considerably and are determined by many factors among which are: reputation, quality, location, examination results and probably the most relevant of all - what the market will stand. However, in regard to the cost of private education in the UK and USA, fees for private schools in Spain can be described as moderate, if not low. As you would expect, schools in major cities, particularly Madrid and Barcelona are among the most expensive.

If you send your child to a subsidised Spanish school, you should expect to pay in the region of 600 Euros per annum or just under £400 sterling. An independent foreign school will set you back anywhere from 1800 euros (£1150.00) to over 6,000 euros (£4,000.00) - particularly where pupils are boarding. In many cases there are a host of extras to contend with such as books, meals, insurance, laundry, transport, excursions etc. If a child is particularly bright, it may be possible under certain circumstances to obtain a grant or for a scholarship to be awarded if the parents find they have difficulties in meeting the schools financial requirements. British and American private schools may have smaller classes and a more relaxed regime and curriculum than Spanish state schools. Further, they often provide a much more varied approach to sport, culture and art and offer a wider choice of academic subjects. Most of the private schools that advertise on the Internet claim that their aim is the development of each child as an individual and the encouragement of his unique individual talents.

The results from many of these schools indicate that this policy is successful in that they have a very high university placement rate. On the other hand, consider this: if you have taken your children to Spain in order to create a better life for them, do you really want to isolate them from the very thing you are trying to achieve? One of the disadvantages of educating children in foreign private schools is that they grow up in Spain as cultural illiterates, experiencing difficulty with true integration into Spanish society. Worse still, often they have no recollection of society in their own country. Private schools will deny that this happens or make light of it but they would, wouldn't they. In fairness, some private schools do recognise this problem and have programmes designed to bring their pupils into contact with the real Spain and its culture. When it comes to the education of any child, there is much to consider. Your move to Spain will require careful thought in regard to your child's education because if you get it wrong the result will be his to carry for the rest of his life. Happily, most parents seem to get it right.

Teach English

It may be worth considering attending a "Teaching English as a Foreign Language" (TEFL) course before coming to Spain. If you hold a TEFL certificate you will be well prepared to join one of the many language schools as a teacher of English to Spaniards.

If you think you have the ability to teach there are now very good online courses where you can obtain a diploma which will stand you in good stead in any non English speaking country. Visit this website for more information.

Learn Spanish

Speaking Spanish fluently will certainly stand you and your children in good stead if you want to integrate into the community; therefore it's prudent to start to learn the language before you arrive in the country. It's a good idea to do at least some Spanish studying before you leave the UK. There are a couple of excellent online courses which you could try, probably the best and most thorough for those who really determined to learn is Linguaphone, No reading, no writing - just listen and **learn Spanish** with their bestselling audio-only course. Ideal for everyday conversation in business or pleasure, learn while you drive etc.

So what now?

There are many resources for education in Spain and it all depends where you intend to live. We can't offer specific advice but it will ,pay to do some research and make some decisions first. The one thing Spanish schools have that many British schools lack is discipline and children are expected to conform to certain rules and standards which is perhaps part of the attraction of Spain although not everyone will perceive it. However you see it, it is another good reason for living in Spain and let us hope that it isn't lost in the race to modernise this lovely country.