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Model Swiss schools abroad

Despite horrific reports on the state of schooling, the Swiss education system still enjoys an excellent reputation. It is a first-class export product. So Swiss schools abroad can be called exemplary in every respect.

DID YOU KNOW that there are seventeen government-recognised Swiss schools in ten countries outside Switzerland? And that these are largely spared the problems which plague teachers and students in Switzerland? According to Derrick Widmer, President of the Committee for Swiss Schools Abroad (Komitee für Schweizer Schulen im Ausland, KSA) in Berne: "Burn-out symptoms among teachers, problems related to criminality and drug-taking among students, and multiculturalism as a stumbling block are unknown at our schools abroad." Is it possible that such problems are restricted to our school system at home?

Some 6000 students are educated at Swiss schools abroad. They make up a colourful and ever-changing mix of nationalities. Approximately one-third of the students are Swiss, while the rest consist of children from the host country and other nationalities (primarily German and Austrian). Some have still to learn the language of the host country, while the majority of children from the host country know no German when they start school. "Children learn languages fast, that is not a problem; particularly since the teaching of foreign-languages begins much earlier than in Switzerland," says Derrick Widmer, "and naturally our schools are geared to their social and linguistic environment." Instruction is in German and the national language. Two schools also run a French-language department. The head of the KSA, Irène Spicher, even goes so far as to say that multiculturalism offers children "a clear advantage."

Needless to say, Swiss schools abroad cannot be compared with schools at home in every respect. Says Derrick Widmer, "Some of our schools abroad operate their own quality assurance system. They are assisted in this respect by their patron cantons and compete with other private schools. In every country they rank among the leading schools." This has a concrete impact: Students who do not wish to bow to school demands can be expelled. This is not always possible at home. Moreover, teachers who teach at schools abroad and may well draw a smaller salary are often more motivated. Students and their parents are regarded more as "clients" than in Switzerland.

The government-recognised Swiss schools abroad are private institutions run on a non-profit-making basis but according to economic principles. They are founded and financed by a Swiss Abroad association and receive a total of CHF 18 million from federal subsidies. Some are also partially funded by patron cantons. gk

Translated from the German.

Closer collaboration between schools



Rolf Grunauer was head of the Swiss School in Singapore between 1995 and 2000. Since then he has been teaching at the Voluntary 10th School Year College in St. Gall.

"Swiss Review": What struck you most about Switzerland on your return?

Rolf Grunauer: Swiss schools abroad are private educational institutions with a corresponding high degree of autonomy. State schools in Switzerland, on the other hand, are run on a completely different basis. So comparisons are difficult to make.

What struck me was the extent to which the potential for violence has risen visibly in Swiss schools. Also, in some schools the proportion of foreign children is very high. I also noticed that state schools are lagging behind in areas such as semi-autonomous schools, Internet use, early English teaching, sponsoring.

How do you deal with multiculturalism?

Like Switzerland, Singapore is a multicultural nation. Personally I had no problems dealing with different cultures. It was mainly a matter of getting to know these new "worlds". That was enormously enriching. One of the most valuable advantages was without a doubt my

own experience living as a foreigner abroad.

At the Swiss School we take every opportunity to integrate the facets of this multiculturalism in lessons and the everyday life of the school.

In Switzerland, however, I think the concept of multiculturalism is often negatively viewed. In my school in St. Gall we try to address the topic in the form of projects.

How can one promote an understanding of foreign children?

There is no ready recipe. The long-term strategy for success is founded on an open approach, a willingness to discuss problems, integration and mutual respect. Actually that should be no problem in Switzerland, whose citizens have been a colourful mix of cultures since day one!

How could we benefit from Swiss schools abroad?

Schools abroad could, for example, offer their expertise in school management, language concepts, integration in multicultural environments, sponsoring and publicity work in the interests of school development.

Interview: gk.