



Open Sky International - this outward-looking school is expanding exponentially but not losing touch with its core values.



Studying – the sky is the limit

The traditional view of French education is that it values academic and rote learning over self-expression and self-development. One bilingual school in Paris is challenging such beliefs, fearlessly following best international practice, borrowing from Britain, Singapore and Australia. Yet it also champions best French practice. Could Open Sky International be the model for schools of the future?

TEXT: LISA GERARD-SHARP | PHOTOS: OPEN SKY INTERNATIONAL

The French educational system was once considered a world-leader but has fallen out of favour, overtaken by more supple systems. According



"You have to be a good psychologist in my job, whether dealing with pupils, parents or teachers" (Head, Emmanuel Fayad).

to Emmanuel Fayad, Head of Open Sky International, the future rests with the best French independent schools, such as his own: "For 40 years, the French State has been destroying the educational system, so the country has dropped down the world league tables." As an internationally-minded school with a world-class curriculum, Open Sky seeks to redress the balance for its own students.

Parlez-vous français?

This co-educational Parisian day school promises a passport to a globally competitive education. Language skills are paramount: within two years, the school aims to make pupils functionally bilingual. As Fayad says: "We're truly bilingual, with an equal amount of

tuition in English and French. Most so-called bilingual schools in France really only do about four to five hours of the other language a week. There are only about three properly bilingual schools in the Paris area."

Open Sky is a nursery, primary and secondary school, currently running to middle school, with Year eight available from autumn 2019, and Years nine to ten in 2020. This will be followed by Year 11 (GCSEs) and Years 12 to 13, the final academic years, devoted to school-leaving A-Levels or the Baccalauréat. It is a challenging environment, with around 40 per cent of pupils coming to the school with no knowledge of English or French, 40 per cent with notions of just one core language and 20 per cent speaking English and French.

After intensive language courses, the pupils are competent in the two languages within a year, and fluent in both languages within two years. In addition, catch-up clinics, held outside main classes, help students who are struggling with specific topics.



practice on the planet. “As a fully independent school, we take the best methods from whichever system works for us,” confirms the Head. Throughout the school system, French, history, geography, art and sport are taught in French, while maths and science are taught in English. Language-learning embraces literacy and literature, not just language per se. At secondary level, science follows the English National Curriculum but is taught in both languages so pupils can pass exams in both systems.

As for maths, the methods are particularly eclectic: “In reception class, we use Australian manuals and then move onto methods prescribed by the English National Curriculum, weaving in a touch of the Singaporean approach,” explains the Head. “Then, at secondary school level, we use a mix of the English and French systems. The British system is geared to results while the French system is more about reasoning and results.” For Fayad, it is also about harnessing the best of both systems.

More holistic than hothouse

For all its academic excellence, Open Sky is not a pressure-cooker, unlike certain top British boarding schools. It is more holistic than hothouse, with time within the school day also devoted to drama, art, music and chess, along with sports such as tennis and golf. “We have five hours a week dedicated to activities, from sport to art,” adds the Head.

The school also teaches soft skills, such as cultural awareness and community-mindedness. Apparently, cultural awareness comes easily, with up to 35 different nationalities in the school: “For instance, pupils will see that their Indian classmates are vegetarians for traditional or religious reasons, while in the west it is a personal, minority choice.”

Open Sky is keen to avoid the pitfalls of many independent schools, including suggestions of snobbery: “We believe in excellence not elitism: excellence is open to everyone but elitism is open to very few.” The Head’s hopes for the school are sky-high: “We aim to become a world leader in English-French bilingual schools, within 15 years.”

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Astonishingly, there is no selection system: “We are confident about giving pupils the tools they need to succeed,” asserts Fayad. “What’s more, our values are based on excellence, respect, hard work and fulfilling one’s potential, so we also accept SEN children.”

Academic excellence

The school believes in excellence, with children reading very young, at the age of four. “Our pupils are a couple of years ahead of their rivals, whether it comes to learning multiplication or the simple past tense,” says Fayad, when discussing key aspects of the curriculum. As for mental arithmetic, “We want the pupils to use their brains, so no calculators are allowed in class until Year 11.”

The curriculum is sacrosanct but hard to summarise as it is a pick-and-mix of the best

