

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head of school

Since August 2022, Mark Wilson BA PGCE NPQH. Previously principal of British International School of Houston, USA and before that, headteacher at The British International School Shanghai, Puxi. Started his career in schools in the UK including a secondment to the UK's Department for Education's Innovations Unit, which piqued his interest in learning programmes that are 'fit for purpose and meet people where they are at'. From there he spent 13 years leading international schools and 'fell in love' with international education. 'There is less tradition weighing it down; it is more agile as a learning environment,' he explains.

He wasn't actively seeking to return to the UK but the opportunity to lead the only ACS international school to offer all four IB programmes was too compelling to pass up. 'The IB framework gives you autonomy to think about your community's needs. The world is changing fast and we must constantly adapt and do what's right for young people,' he says.

Parents say he buzzes with energy and enthusiasm and that he is 'fully engaged, always asking questions, giving his thoughts and getting everyone involved'. High praise for his warm and friendly manner – no tweed jackets or standing on ceremony here. Students respect that he's 'less authoritative, more approachable'. Perhaps knowing that he is a nine-times black belt holder helps to keep them in check!

It's not just the spectacular array of martial arts belts hanging behind his desk, his training in Taekwondo also offers valuable motivation for older students. 'We all have days when we feel like a white belt, when it all feels new,' he tells grade 12 students during assemblies, 'mastery comes from effort and hard work.' Younger students blossom from receiving the ACS Egham Jaguar – a soft toy handed out to those showing kindness, collaboration or a warm welcome to others. 'It's not about a piece of work,' he confirms, 'it's for demonstrating school's values.'

An open-door approach and engaging with students tops his agenda. 'I don't want to be the unknown head. It's a privilege to see students move through the school and then be the one to hand them their graduation certificate.' So too the relationship between school and parents - 'We're all in it together,' he says. Parents enthuse, 'It makes such a difference. Mr Wilson is a game changer.'

Entrance

Rolling admissions. Academically non-selective: no entrance test or interview but school reports, references and standardised test scores are checked. Responsive admissions teams give reassurance about moving to the UK, as well as walking families through the admissions process. 'They were amazing and so flexible. They kept in regular contact from our first call,' relieved parents share. Others confirm that 'they helped with every aspect, even making payments from abroad'.

Numbers are on the rise. Lower school is fast attracting interest from locally based British families looking for something different (to the English national curriculum) and those thrilled to sidestep the formalities of the UK's 11-plus. 'Families often make enquiries ahead of the typical year 7 move between primary and secondary school, and once they've seen the school they decide to come earlier,' says the admissions team. 'We welcome families whenever suits them.'

Majority stay in the UK (eg Oxford, UCL, King's College London and universities of Bath, Bristol, Birmingham, Newcastle, Loughborough), the rest heading to a wide range of countries including the US, Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Australia and Japan. 'It's about finding the right fit – students are guided well by advisors,' school says. Parents confirm, 'There is lots of support – counsellors make themselves available any time and school schedules (UK) university visits.'

Latest results

In 2024, average IB score of 34 (against a world average of 30), highest score of 42 with a 97 per cent pass rate (world pass rate: 80 per cent). Nine students achieved the prestigious bilingual diploma.

Teaching and learning

'It's hard to talk about the school without talking about the IB,' say parents waxing lyrical that 'this is the big attraction here'. Not just the diploma but the IB Primary (PYP), Middle Years (MYP) Programme and IB Career-related Programme (IBCP) too. ACS Egham is the only school in England and the first in the UK to offer all four IB programmes. If you are less than familiar with the programmes fear not as the school does an excellent job of bringing parents onboard - it doesn't take long for new families to join the ranks of the converted. 'It builds confidence, curiosity and citizenship. It allows students to think independently and creatively,' enthusiastic parents say. 'It suits children who like to figure things out for themselves. It fosters the critical thinking and research skills they need in business and life.'

School is split by lower and upper school but has three distinct phases: early years, lower school and upper school. Lower school follow the IB PYP, grades 6-10 follow the MYP – including optional MYP e-assessments in maths and English – and in grades 11 to 12, students graduate with either the IBDP or the IBCP. A high school diploma is also awarded.

Up to 33 in a year group (two classes) in lower school and 60-70 in diploma years, though subject-specific classes at this point drop down in size considerably as students choose between courses.

In primary years, teachers 'draw out the children's love of learning'. Topic-based, hands-on learning has children engaged from the off. Classrooms are comfortably messy - signs of the inquiry-based nature of the learning programme spotted in the array of creative materials and activity hubs dotted around – while others bring the outdoors in with woodland wallpaper. Multidisciplinary themes such as 'Who we are' and 'How the world works' has children ticking off maths, science, languages and social sciences. Real world application of learning sets in early: the grade 5 economy programme has children trading 'money', earned through action, spent on rewards. Parents invited in for reading practice once a week. French and Spanish both offered. Super Forest school enjoyed by all on a weekly basis – we hear the pancakes are legendary!

The PYP exhibition (ahead of the transition to the MYP at the end of grade 5) offers an opportunity for young children to build confidence in presenting. Parents invited in to watch their children showcasing a book, for example, which they have created to help financial literacy.

The transition to MYP is supported with taster classes and a gentle introduction to moving between classrooms and teachers throughout the day. Plenty of information sessions for parents too, including their own invitation to join a taster class. 'It's brilliant,' they say.

In the MYP, an emphasis on reflection and self-learning kicks in. 'The IB feeds their hunger to learn and gives them confidence. It suits those who like to figure things out for themselves,' one mother told us, thrilled that she had moved her child here from another local school. 'As a British parent, it can feel a little risky to step away from the national curriculum but from the moment she started we knew it was the right thing.'

The personal project that marks the end of the MYP (grade 10 – age 16) is another much-loved milestone. Recent

projects include building a subsonic wind tunnel to test aerodynamic flight, restoring and converting an old petrol moped to electric (and getting it licensed as road worthy!) and forming a band and recording a music video that ‘wouldn’t be out of place on MTV’.

Moving into the final grades, most students study the IB Diploma Programme.

A broad selection of courses is on offer including business management, economics, psychology, sports exercise and health and computer science. French and Spanish offered as a second language, with home languages supported for those taking a bilingual diploma.

Expectations rise in the final two years, but parents say that students feel supported – ‘They always feel like they can reach out if they need help.’ Parents say the IBDP helps ‘students hit the ground running’ when they arrive at university. ‘Their IB learning and the international nature of the school means they are used to engaging with people from all walks of life, all backgrounds, race and creed,’ say others, albeit aware that ACS Egham is a microcosm of real life. For others, the introduction of the IB Career-related programme and its business, enterprise and entrepreneurship courses has been widely welcomed – and school confirms numbers are growing year on year.

Parents say that school ‘applies itself to academic focus’ but warn that in the IB programme the onus is on students to take responsibility for their learning. ‘If you put the work in, you’ll achieve the results you are aiming for.’ Head sums it up: ‘This is your journey, no one can force you to learn, our job is to inspire and motivate you, to surround you with great people and facilities. That’s at the heart of what we are trying to do.’

Even split between British and international teachers. Many arrive from leading international schools around the world and are IB experts – some have written the textbooks! Teachers, like students, are encouraged to think out the box, to take the lead in developing and innovating the learning environment. ‘If you try something and it works, you win. If you try something and it doesn’t work, you learn, you win,’ the head says, citing the Nelson Mandela quote: ‘I never lose. I either learn or I win.’

Teachers are supportive academically and emotionally. ‘There is always a conversation of how are you doing? Let’s look at where you are at and how do we make it better? That feedback loop is great,’ parents say.

Technology is used as an appropriate aid to learning. ‘It’s never just an expensive pen on paper or flashy distraction,’ head says firmly. Mobile-phone free policy in place throughout the school.

Learning support and SEN

Learning needs assessed on admission. Push in and pull-out support on offer. School says, ‘We are a mainstream school but are very good at meeting people where they are at and working with individuals to help them make progression.’ Parents concur: ‘They are always so supportive and go above and beyond.’ If school can’t support a child, they may suggest another school within the ACS group but stress they are proud of being an inclusive school in a mainstream setting and will offer a space if they can.

Homework clubs, extra maths and science support on offer for all. Super sensory room linked to grade 5 classroom for children who want time out.

Non-native English speakers access support from the school’s EAL programme. An afterschool mother tongue/home languages programme – currently covering eight languages including Swedish, Polish and German. Parents delighted that it supports the children with their reading and writing as well as speaking.

The arts and extracurricular

While facilities may not be as fancy as some larger schools, the school makes the most of what they have. Parents sing the praises of staff who go the extra mile, from opening classrooms for external providers to run after-school classes to taking the IB theatre students on trips to London productions.

Our visit coincided with this year’s production of Madagascar the Musical (a light-hearted contrast to last year’s

The life of Jack the Ripper, we heard) and enjoyed watching troupes of excited students rushing in and out of rehearsals. Parents reported that it was huge fun, especially the finale when they had the whole audience up and dancing! The outdoor amphitheatre also put to good use in warmer months.

The music department has a ‘incredible rolodex’ of external teachers for peripatetic instrumental lessons and facilitates ABRSM and Trinity exams. While numbers may not enable a whole school orchestra, there is a small string orchestra and a jazz ensemble for brass and percussion players - Wall of Sound (school band) is also a firm favourite. Collaborations with external organisations including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Yehuda Menuhin School of Music offer further opportunities for budding and talented musicians alike. ‘School is too small to be all things to all people, but what it does, it does really well,’ one parent said.

Super DT lab – the first time our own skills have been put to the test, making a snazzy mobile phone holder for our desk! Impressive back-pack-a-mac and skateboards created by art, textile and design students on display. Gallery-worthy art works spotted hanging in the art department and around the school. We especially loved the huge exhibition wall inside the main entrance to the Mansion (school’s main building).

Good range of extracurricular clubs and activities - students of all ages are encouraged to get involved eg rocket club, coding club, Model UN and Duke of Edinburgh award. No shortage of students putting their hands up to start their own clubs either – one enterprising IB diploma student told us how they set up an international relations club ahead of making their university application for the same course.

Sport

Size alone means it can never live up to the ‘sports school’ reputation of sister school, ACS Cobham, but there are plenty of opportunities to get stuck into: soccer, track and field, cross country, basketball, volleyball etc. The ‘Team Jaguar’ emblem is regularly spotted at international school competitions around London and overseas.

The advantage of a small school, we heard, is that teams train by talent level not year group. Even students in the lower school are welcomed into teams if they are playing to the right level. ‘Teams do really well, even holding their own against the other ACS schools,’ we heard from happy parents. Recreational sports on offer after school, eg badminton, golf, tennis.

Super sports centre and outdoor facilities. The ‘sport bubble’ offers a useful covered sport and outdoor play area in winter – in summer it’s unveiled as another outdoor pitch.

Ethos and heritage

Founded 30 years ago, ACS Egham is the youngest and smallest of the three ACS International schools (ACS Cobham and ACS Hillingdon the other two), each of which have their own distinct personality and characteristics. ACS Egham stands alone as the only one offering all four IB programmes and for its homely feel.

If this isn’t draw card enough, families are won over by school’s beautiful, leafy campus. Located in 36 acres on the edge of Windsor Great Park, just 19 miles west of central London, with an old mansion house housing the main school building and head’s office. An array of more-modern buildings (charmingly named after trees - Cedar, Elms, Maple, Magnolia etc) creates a liberal arts style campus, with science housed in one, DT in another and so forth. A programme of modernisation is underway to open up some of the older spaces and bring light and space in - more reflective of modern university and workspaces. ‘We want to blend the best of both worlds,’ says head, ‘with the tradition associated with old buildings and a modern, contemporary feel inside.’ Work in progress.

School canteen offers freshly cooked hot meals with weekly menus given in advance. No uniform, many children wearing Jaguar ‘spirit wear’ on Fridays – staff too.

Light, bright school libraries for each of lower and upper school with a good home language section and cosy reading spots.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Creating a sense of belonging, community and cohesion is important in an international school with over 45 different nationalities, but school does this well. World maps displayed in both lower and upper school with students' home countries marked by flags. Student club, JAGS for Justice, promotes inclusion and diversity – 'student led, not student left'. 'Children can be who they want to be,' parents say.

A restorative approach is applied to discipline: engaging children in conversation and understanding, supporting them to consider and correct their actions towards others. Teachers take time to understand the children, their backgrounds and context to any run-ins but are firmly prepared to say, 'You could have handled that differently.'

Pupils and parents

Typically seen as the 'most British' of the three ACS schools – largely because the other two schools offer an American curriculum – though under 40 per cent of families are British and many are dual passport holders. Other families come from across the world – the Netherlands, Asia, Turkey, Middle East etc – with no one nationality larger than another. 'I love that my child is mixing with children from all round the world and gaining a cultural perspective,' said one parent echoing the sentiment of many.

Has a strong and stable community. There is little turnover beyond a few departing families heading overseas each year - once committed to both school and the IB, families rarely look elsewhere.

Many live within 20 minutes but some come from as 'far afield' as Chiswick and Richmond. 'People make a real effort to come here, such is the pull,' parents say. A few mutters that this has a knock-on effort on fewer school gate friendships. The PSO (parent school organisation) however hosts coffee mornings and BBQs etc to integrate new families and encourage parents to mix across grades and build a community feel.

Money matters

Families acknowledge that school sits at a premium price point but no complaints. 'If I had the finances, I would have come here sooner,' said one parent. School holds charitable status, and all profits ploughed back in.

The last word

A top-notch IB programme, 36 acres of glorious parkland on the outskirts of London and a welcoming, internationally minded 'glocal' community. As Marty, from school's production of Madagascar the musical, would say, 'This place is crack-a-lackin!'