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# Expats and Education: Public, Private, and Other Possibilities

By Jennifer Lang

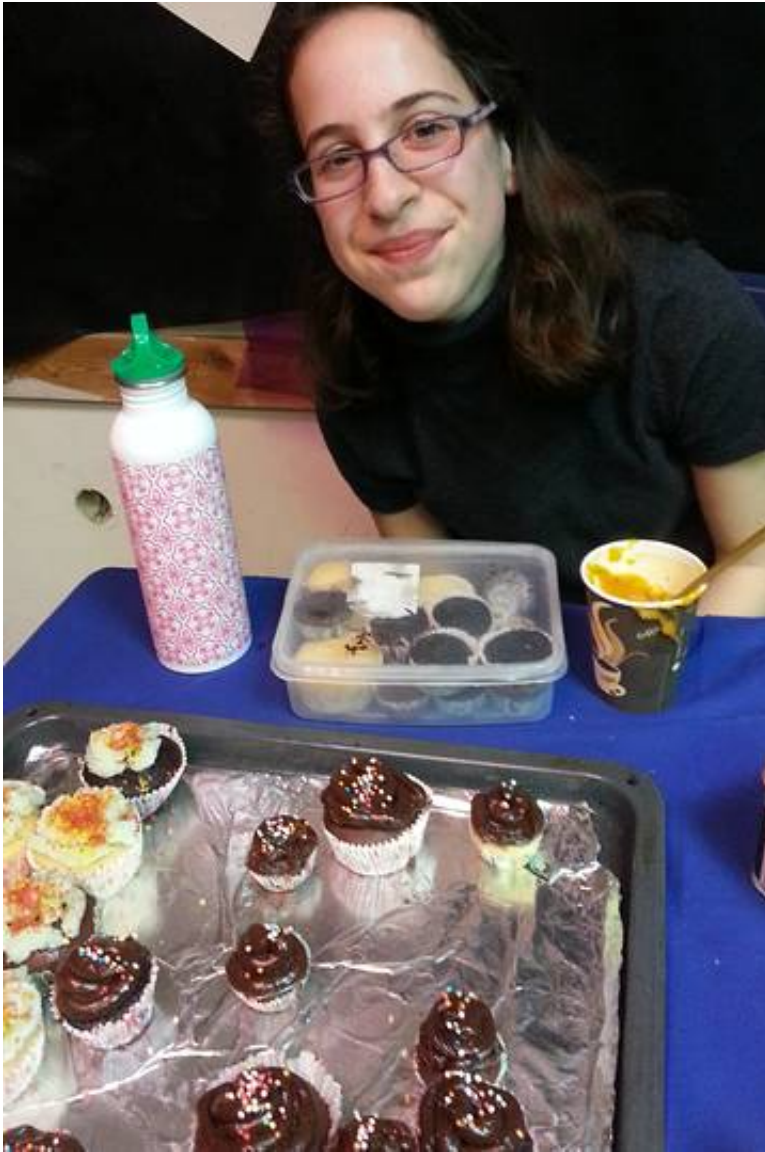


Lyall Harris's daughters, Savia, 7, and Isabella, 10, standing in front of their new school in Italy in 2012

PHOTO: Lyall Harris

**WHEN MOVING** abroad with children, finding the right school can be overwhelming. Oftentimes, the American or internationally-recognized schools come with a prohibitive price tag. They also seclude the children from the local culture and language, which for some people are considered two of the benefits of the expat experience.

When my husband and I were considering spending a year in Raanana, Israel, with our three children, then 14, 10 and 8, we researched online, called the city's department of education and spoke to other parents. The first question was public or private? If public, secular or religious? We immediately agreed that the cost of the nearby American international school and its seclusion from Israeli society didn't meet our needs. We wanted our children to learn Hebrew and to befriend the natives. In the end, we chose the religious public system for all three.



Simone Lang selling homemade cupcakes at Meitarim Raanana's annual fundraiser

PHOTO: Jennifer Lang

We left at the end of the school year, only to return three years later. Our eldest entered the army, while the younger two attended grades seven and nine, the first and last years of middle school. We knew the religious school system, which separates boys and girls after grade six and focuses heavily on memorizing Jewish laws and texts, no longer worked for our family, just as we knew the secular school system, with its indifference toward kosher dietary laws and Sabbath observance, didn't either.

Our best option was the semi-private school Meitarim Raanana—a diverse community of Jewish families with varied religious, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Its small classes bridge the gap between religious and secular beliefs so that its students learn about the wider, heterogeneous Israeli society.

Curious about how other expats around the world have dealt with the education issue, I reached out to four other Americans to hear what they chose and why.

**David McKeegan, a 40-year-old from New York City**, first moved abroad with his American wife so they could both attend business school in Barcelona in 2002. In 2009, they co-founded a business—Greenback Expat Tax Services, which prepares U.S. taxes for people living abroad—that enables them to work and live anywhere. (He contributes to WSJ Expat.) For the past six years, they’ve been on the move: the U.K., Spain, Brazil and Argentina. Currently, they reside in Bali with their three children, aged 5, 3 and 1.

“For our eldest, we used a local preschool in Bali up until kindergarten, then we switched to an international school with the IB program,” Mr. McKeegan said, referring to International Baccalaureate schools, educational frameworks and curricula geared toward children ages 3 to 19, which encourages them to be internationally-minded and think beyond their immediate environment. “When the boys are young all they really need is a playgroup-type setup, but once they start learning we want them in an accredited program should we relocate.”

The McKeegans don’t know how long they’ll stay in Bali, but they want the freedom to be able to move countries or even return home easily. “The IB program is recognized around the world and most international schools are on that program, so we can just transfer the kids into a recognized program in another country and they’ll fit right into the same grade.”

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**Three years ago, 47-year-old Lyall Harris**, an artist and writer, moved with her Italian husband and two girls from San Francisco to Florence, Italy.

“My husband had always maintained that kids can get a qualitative, solid education in the Italian public-school system, which he himself went through all the way until he finished musicology at the university in Bologna,” said Ms. Harris. After attending a nurturing private school in San Francisco, they were ready for a more academically challenging environment, she said.

Their girls, now 10 and 13, have just completed their third year in Florence’s public-school system. Ms. Harris said that the education has been acceptable, but that she feels something’s missing. “I’ve never heard the word interdisciplinary in Italy. School is still mostly organized in a subject-specific way with very little crossover. There’s a lot of rote memorization and uncreative homework. Fortunately, there is often some contextual frame of reference (the Greeks and Romans are not abstract realities here), but, tragically, not enough use is made of the many incredible resources available to Italian youth, mainly due to a severe lack of funds.”

Another thing Ms. Harris has noticed is how little parents are involved: minimal fundraising, no class projects, rare class visits by parents who may be in professions of interest for the children, no parent accompaniment on field trips, bureaucracy-laden forms of communication with the teachers. Ms. Harris still doesn't know the names of many of her children's classmates. "After having been involved in every art project at the girls' schools since preschool in America, I didn't mind the distance. But, in the long haul, there are limits to this approach for both parents and the school."

They had other objections—antiquated pedagogy, significant budgetary cuts and teacher strikes—which played a part in their decision to return to the U.S. this summer. "We'll be on the East Coast, back to private schools, but minus the warm and fuzzy methods of the children's early years," she said. "We're heading for rigor but one that has interdisciplinary written all over it."



Ecole Jeannine Manuel, in Paris

PHOTO: Luc Boegly

**Writer Tim Bridwell is another American in Europe**, a New York City native living in Paris with his wife and their two children, aged 12 and 15. When it came time to choose a school, the 51-year-old expat ceded the decision to his wife, who is herself bicultural, born in Japan and raised in France. They needed to find one school that encompassed their mixed heritage. "Since the majority of bilingual schools were beyond our means, we ultimately chose École Jeannine Manuel, a private school that follows the national curriculum with the exception of the English and Chinese programs, developed by and for the school. Its collaboration with the French Ministry of Education keeps its cost down, while admissions remain highly selective and the school's merit-based policy makes it competitive."

Outside of school, the Bridwell children study music and play two instruments at the public conservatory system, shunned by many expats for its competitive nature. Mr. Bridwell and his wife think the public conservatories in France offer one of the world's finest musical educations for those willing to navigate the system, which can be daunting.

Their a-la-carte strategy toward education—combining the best of both public and private—

enables them to select the highest quality education at the best value, Mr. Bridwell said. “The kids are happy. We’re happy. That’s what counts.”

But what happens if neither a public nor a private school work? What if you move someplace where the one international school is nowhere near, or isn’t in the budget, and the local school system creates too many academic gaps for the children should they eventually return to America?



Caleb Reeves, high school graduate, with his siblings Eden, Gabriel, and Elijah, from public school in Neptune Beach, Florida, June 2015

PHOTO: Jessica Towles-Reeves

**Such was the case for Jessica Towles-Reeves and her husband**, when they relocated with their four children—a 4-year-old, two 6-year-old twins and a 9-year-old—to Playa Bejuco, a beach town in Costa Rica. For the Florida native and former college adjunct, homeschooling seemed like the obvious answer since they felt the local school wouldn’t be rigorous enough for the children if they returned home and the nearest accredited international school was too expensive and too far away. “I thought if I could teach other people’s kids I could surely teach my own,” Ms. Towles-Reeves said.

The main concern with homeschooling is whether you’re teaching them well enough. Ms. Towles-Reeves devised her own curriculum and lesson plans. As a guide, she used K12, a private online international academy, which provided lesson plans and materials, as well as Florida Virtual School, a public online school for kindergarten through 12th graders. The family didn’t expect that the biggest hurdle would be books, which they needed but couldn’t always buy. The curriculum for both K12 and Florida Virtual School is online; the testing is online; the teaching is through modules with videos, reading, games, etc. “A teacher is

available for questions, but sometimes it takes a while to get a response, so I had to step in,” Ms. Towles-Reeves said.

When all the children were in elementary school it was manageable, she said, but by the time they ended up in upper-level math, they needed more than just her. “I was one person with four kids in three grades, working on numerous different class subjects, and still trying to run a business and be a mom. Our eldest, then 16, begged to be in a more normal school setting, and I finally gave up, which is when we realized we had to return to the States.”

The Towles-Reeveses now reside in the Florida beachfront city of Neptune, where their children attend public school in their age-appropriate grade, performing at or above grade level. “We still have our house in Costa Rica and travel there frequently with the intent of returning once our final child graduates from high school.”



*American-born, French-by-marriage and Israeli-by-choice, Jennifer Lang has spent the past three decades jumping between those three countries. Now living in Israel, Jennifer previously wrote [‘10 Things I Wish I’d Known Before Moving to Israel’](#) and [‘An Outsider Peering In’: An Expat Reflects on Israel’s Memorial and Independence Days](#). She blogs at [opentoisrael.com](http://opentoisrael.com).*

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