

# The Spanish schooling system

## The State System

State education in Spain is almost exclusively co-educational and is entirely free, from nursery school through to university. Finding a place for your child in a state run Spanish school is normally a straightforward affair for an EU citizen. You will need to provide the child's passport, birth certificate and a proof of address. Places are allocated according to catchment areas, so it is worth finding out about the schools in an area before buying property.

Some of the more popular schools have a waiting list but the local authorities have a responsibility to find an alternative school if necessary. In areas with large ex-pat communities, many Spanish schools provide special language coaching for new foreign children for the first few months.

For most Spanish children, school starts with nursery or pre-school at the age of three to five. Compulsory education begins at six years of age in a primary school and lasts for six years in all. At the age of 12, pupils move on to secondary education for the next four years. When they're 16, and if they've completed the four years, students are awarded a *graduado en educación secundaria* certificate and may attend a higher secondary school.

Pupils who haven't successfully completed four years of secondary education are awarded a school certificate. At 16, students may attend a vocational school which provides specialised training for a specific career. Spain has 75 universities 56 state-run and 19 private universities run by private enterprises or by the Catholic church.

If your child is of Pre-school age they will learn Spanish quickly and will soon become bilingual. Imagine attending a school however at the age 8, 10 or 13 where you cannot understand even simple instructions or talk to a fellow pupil. For your older child it could be very unsettling and he may suffer both academically or psychologically as a result.

One solution is to find a good Spanish tutor before you move. Between six months and one year of weekly tuition should give your child a good grounding to enter a state school, where his Spanish will then improve dramatically. A second option is to enrol your student in an international school for the first couple of years and then move them into the state system when their Spanish is of a sufficient standard. As parents it is important that you know enough of the language to communicate with teachers so that you are able to track your child's progress. Private Schools

Approximately one third of the children in Spain are educated in private schools. Most are co-educational, Catholic day schools, although a number (including some American and British schools) take weekly or term boarders. Private schools in Spain teach a variety of syllabi, including the British GCSE and A-level examinations, the American High School Diploma and college entrance examinations (e.g. ACT, SAT, achievement tests and AP exams), the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the Spanish *bachillerato*.

Most Spanish private schools teach wholly in Spanish, are state-subsidised and follow the Spanish state-school curriculum. To receive state subsidies and accept Spanish pupils, 25 percent of a school's total number of pupils must be Spanish and at least 20 percent in each class. As a condition of receiving government funding, schools with Spanish pupils are subject to inspection by the Spanish school authorities.

Private school fees in Spain vary considerably depending on the quality, reputation and location of a school. Fees are relatively low compared to the cost of private education in northern Europe and North America. Not surprisingly, schools located in Madrid and Barcelona are among the most expensive.

Fees at subsidised Spanish schools are around EUR 700 a year, whereas fees at independent foreign schools range from around EUR 4,000 a year to well over EUR 8,000 a year at senior schools (particularly for boarders).

Fees don't usually include registration, books, materials, laundry, insurance, extra-curricular activities, excursions, meals and transport (most private schools provide school buses). You should allow around EUR 800 a term for meals and other extras.

Most private schools subscribe to insurance schemes covering accidents, both in school and during school-sponsored activities. Some schools award scholarships and offer grants to help parents pay fees, depending on their financial circumstances. International Schools

Choosing an International school might be a sensible option if your child is older than seven. Placing a child in a Spanish speaking school at or above this age can affect a child's confidence if he is unable to understand the teacher or communicate with his peers. In most foreign schools, Spanish language and culture are taught daily and your child will build language skills gradually.

Once your child has a grasp of the language, assimilation into a state school will be far easier. In addition to American and British schools there are also French, German, Swedish and other foreign-language schools in Spain. Under

Spanish law, all foreign schools must be approved by their country's embassy in Spain.

Private foreign and international schools may have smaller classes and a more relaxed, less rigid regime and curriculum than Spanish state schools. They provide a more varied and international approach to sport, culture and art, and a wider choice of academic subjects. Many also provide English-language summer school programmes combining academic lessons with sports, arts and crafts, and other extra-curricular activities.

The focus in these schools is on the development of a child as an individual and the encouragement of his unique talents. This is made possible by small classes, which allow teachers to provide pupils with individually-tailored lessons and tuition. The results are self-evident and many private secondary schools have a near 100 per cent university placement rate.

On the other hand, one of the major problems of private foreign-language education in Spain is that children can grow up in cultural 'ghettos' and be 'illiterate' as far as the Spanish language and culture are concerned. Although attending a private school may be advantageous from an academic viewpoint, integration into Spanish society can be severely restricted.

Applications to private schools should be made as far in advance as possible, as some international schools have waiting lists for places. You may be asked to provide school reports, exam results and other records. Special Needs

Should your child have special needs, it is advisable to have any written documentation from the education authority in England translated into Spanish to be given to the new school. The educational laws in Spain state that special needs and disabled students should be fully integrated into mainstream schools where possible. Your child's requirements will need to be understood before they start school, as it may be some time before the school can use their own testing methods. Make the Move!

The number of foreigners in Spain is continually increasing and many families have fulfilled their dream of a life abroad with great success. Kids are surprisingly resilient and in the majority of cases they adapt quickly to their new lives. Those who have made the move often comment that the quality of life for their children is far better in Spain than at home, with more leisure time, an outdoors lifestyle and less crime. Don't let your kids put you off moving any longer. They will thank you in the end!