

At the request of the School Director and of Dr. David Cramer, Regional Education Officer, Office of Overseas Schools, US Department of State, I visited ISD to determine the extent and quality of the Special Needs services available. ISD is an international school serving 420 students of many nationalities and cultural backgrounds. The curriculum is American and recently the school has adopted the International Baccalaureate Diploma program at the grade 11 and 12 level. This is a highly academic college preparatory credential. ISD has approximately 50 faculty members and about 30 paraprofessionals and other staff members. The current director is in her first year at ISD and has a very strong background in Special Education.

During this visit I spoke with all administrators, staff members including all three Special Needs teachers, and several parents. All the administrators are experienced educators with specialized training. I observed a number of classes, especially those where special needs students are included with mainstream students. I also consulted with US Embassy officials during my visit.

Conclusions:

ISD is an excellent international school on the small to medium side. Historically a strong academic institution, the recent adoption of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program reaffirms the school's goal of providing a strong academic program.

The school employs three trained Special Education teachers, two of them part-time, who currently provide services to 27 students in grades K-4 and 13 students in grades 5-8. Most of these students have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, processing difficulties or specific learning disabilities such as Dyslexia. Four students have a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome, on the high functioning end of the autistic spectrum of disorders. One student has Down Syndrome. All these students are being accommodated on an inclusion basis with various types of push-in or pull-out support. One student who cannot access the regular curriculum is being supported by a dedicated paraprofessional or "shadow teacher."

The school seems to be doing a very good job, consistent with best practices in North America, with less than two full time special needs teachers. The small classes, use of push-in methodology and willing and flexible faculty seem to have made success possible for quite a wide range of students. It should be noted that according to the US Embassy psychiatrist there are virtually no support services available in the Dakar community. Because Senegal is a Francophone country, any specialists residing in Dakar would be likely to be French or Arabic speakers. Many special needs students need extra therapies such as speech therapy, physical therapy or occupational therapy. Small schools cannot easily afford to hire such specialized personnel. In Dakar several students benefit from an English speaking professional teacher/ social worker in the community who provides private academic and social coaching.

About half of the approximately 30 parents I spoke with said they are happy with the school and the services the school is providing for their child. The others expressed areas of concern including lack of transparency in policies regarding program review; slow and uncertain admission procedures and lack of reconsideration for a child denied admission. The use of the word “conditional” in the acceptance process seemed particularly upsetting to parents applying to the school from abroad.

Some parents seemed totally unfamiliar with commonly used terms such as “learning specialist” and “resource room.” Four parents provided me with lengthy written explanations of why they believe more profoundly handicapped young people should be accepted at ISD with one-to-one assistants, if needed. One compared ISD unfavorably to a nearby, unaccredited bilingual school that uses the one-on-one model extensively. Another parent gave the consultant a copy of a lengthy memo to the Board of Directors making the case for including severely challenged students.

To me the above indicates some misunderstandings about the use of a “shadow teacher” or dedicated paraprofessional. This type of individual typically provides continuing one-on-one support for a single child. However, unless this strategy is intended to provide support for a physically or medically compromised student, it is often a flag that the school is not a good fit for that particular challenged student.

Finally, a few parents of children who had been identified as gifted and/or talented in other places were uncertain about what if anything ISD is doing to meet their students’ needs.

Reportedly the school intends to form an Ad Hoc Committee, including 1-2 parents, to study special needs issues. It appears that some of the interested parents wish to use this as a forum for advocating for particular issues.

Recommendations:

- Admissions: The Board and the Administration need to decide and articulate what type of students will be served by ISD. A school of 420 students cannot effectively serve the full range. The Board has, by the adoption of the International Baccalaureate Diploma, reaffirmed its identity as an academic, university preparatory institution. It should clearly reflect this policy. A few suggestions include:
 - The term “conditional” should be omitted from acceptances. This is especially critical for families applying from abroad who must make relocation decisions based on school acceptance.
 - Diagnostic requirements should include specific recommendations for accommodations at school, not just a diagnosis and/or psychometric analysis. This material should also include a full description of accommodations at the current school.

- ISD should explore other assessment alternatives such as the African Regional Evaluation Service which is sponsored by AISA the regional international school organization. I will be happy to make some recommendations of diagnosticians available in Paris for Francophone students, if desired.
- A case-by-case decision should be made regarding students who require a dedicated paraprofessional and such students should be accepted in extremely unusual circumstances. Accepted students should be able access the regular curriculum with a reasonable amount of scaffolding.
- A short bullet list should be made available to embassies, non-profit organizations and companies with employees contemplating coming to Dakar so that parents can make a quick inquiry through their employer. An example of such a list is attached. (Attachment A)
- ISD should explore the option of on-line admissions testing and/or using the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing used by ISD and many other international schools for distance admission purposes.
- The ISD Learning Support Program Handbook: The school has produced an extensive Learning Support Handbook. This handbook is not available on the school website and many parents seemed unaware of the contents. With some edits and additions the Handbook should be placed on the school website and provided to all families with Special Needs children. The handbook should include:
 - The School philosophy that students should be cognitively able to access the curriculum adopted by ISD with a limited amount of remediation or scaffolding.
 - Whenever possible, parents should be members of any Child Study Team meeting that generates the Learning Plan.
 - A set frequency of meetings of teachers and parents should be established to assess each student's progress.
 - Delete mention of "years below placement level". This criteria is no longer used in the newly released Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM V) published by the American Psychological Association. Also, this is a particularly difficult concept with students coming from diverse backgrounds. Instead, repeat the philosophy regarding the ability of the student to access the ISD curriculum with limited support.

- A glossary of terms should be compiled including all vocabulary and acronyms used in connection with Special Education services with definitions. An in-depth explanation of all vocabulary, policies and strategies should be provided for any parent but especially those parents with linguistic or cultural differences.
- Vocabulary should not always follow the US Special Education model. For example, instead of Individual Education Plan (IEP) an alternative such as Learning Support Plan could be used. Following the US terminology exactly suggests that the school is obligated to follow the procedures prescribed under US Federal law. This is not the case. Even in the US private schools are not bound by this legislation and they certainly have no force outside of the United States. Some parents may be under the impression that because ISD receives a small grant from the US Government that all the US requirements apply.

General:

- ISD should consider adding some additional Special Education staff hours. The current staffing is less than is desirable for the size of the current caseload.
- Gifted: Provide in-service training for all faculty and make sure the Professional Library contains appropriate materials. Flexibility is the key to meeting each child's individual areas of talent. Pretesting in core subject matter areas should be used to avoid repeating content that has been mastered.

Respectfully submitted,

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Cleared: David P. Cramer, Regional Education Officer