

EDUCATION IN CANBERRA

Information on education in Canberra is included in this New Arrival Handbook and on the Embassy intranet. However, the best source of research and information regarding schools in Canberra is available on the Internet at www.decs.act.gov.au. The following is a brief summary only:

- Schools start in the first week of February, have 3 breaks of 2-3 weeks during the school year, and finish in early to mid-December.
- Children begin preschool at age 4 (some preschools age 3), kindergarten at 5, and go to primary school for years 1-6. High schools cater for years 7-10 (ages about 12-15) and secondary colleges for years 11 and 12. Some private high schools take students during years 7-12.
- Children in the Embassy community attend a wide range of schools, both public and private, in many Canberra suburbs. Although placing your child in a school is strictly a personal, family decision, you may want to get some candid feedback from families about particular schools of interest. If so, please contact the CLO and arrangements will be made to have families correspond with you. Also, since Canberra is spread out and busing may not be available in your area, you may want to consider a school in your neighborhood or that is closer to home.
- While GSO will consider incoming employee preferences for housing location, ultimately housing assignments are based on a number of factors, including availability and security.
- There are often additional costs for schooling in Australia that many families do not expect. Most of these fees are not covered by allowances and must be paid out of pocket by the employee. All schools require some sort of uniform, though public schools are much less formal than private schools. Families must pay the cost of the uniform out of pocket. Schools also require students (years 3 and up) to attend a camp/outdoor education program each year. The costs of these can range from a few hundred to almost a thousand dollars per child. Finally, many of the schools operate a "bring your own device" program and have specific device requirements. Check with your school of choice to determine which laptop or tablets are acceptable for your student.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Night courses are offered in many secondary colleges. The list of courses offered each semester is published in *The Canberra Times*, in a publication called *LINKS*, and in many neighborhood papers. *LINKS* can be found in libraries.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN CANBERRA

One of the most important issues for USG employees, military members and their families at Embassy Canberra is also one of the most complicated. The following information is provided to assist you in making this critical and very personal choice on behalf of your children. You may hear

that there is no school in Canberra deemed "adequate" by the Department of State's Office of Overseas Schools. This is simply a technical designation -- schools that do not use the U.S. curriculum, or that are religiously-affiliated simply may not be declared adequate for USG dependents' educational needs in accordance with Department of State guidelines. This doesn't mean that schools in Canberra do not provide a sound education for our children! There are some differences between U.S. and Australian schools, however, so read on.

There is no American or international school in Canberra. No school in Canberra uses an American curriculum, and though there is a large international student population here (thanks to the presence of embassies and international organizations in town) there is no international school. Most schools host foreign students and make them welcome. All schools use a basic Australian-type curriculum, though every school modifies the curriculum to suit its specific situation.

The academic calendar is based on Southern Hemisphere seasons. The school year begins in early February and ends in early December, with (usually) breaks in April, July and October. The long summer break is in December and January.

There are basically two types of schools at the primary and secondary levels in Australia. These are government (public) and non-government (private). Private schools are frequently religiously-affiliated, but typically provide a welcoming and accommodating atmosphere for students of all faiths (or none).

The grade structure is slightly different from that prevailing in the U.S. "Years" (grades) K-6 are primary or junior school. Years 7-10 are high school or senior school. Senior school may encompass Years 11-12, although there are also separate "colleges" for students in those years.

Admissions to public schools are based on both the "catchment" area (Priority Enrollment Area) and the discretion of the school administration. The catchment area is equivalent to an American school district: any child resident in the catchment (PEA) area is eligible for admission to the school. Most public schools in Canberra will also consider enrolling children who live outside their specific catchment areas if the school is not at capacity already. The Embassy is not able to provide official housing based on parents' preferences for a specific public school, but parents are encouraged to approach any public school that interests them to find out if the school is willing to enroll a student from outside its catchment area.

Admissions to private schools are made at the discretion of the school administration, based on submission of applications, transcripts and application fees. There is usually a waiting list for these schools, and entry to kindergarten, Years 1 and 7 are more difficult because these grades attract the longest waiting lists. Parents are encouraged to submit applications and supporting documents as early as possible, and make contact with the school administration to affirm their interest.

Most schools, whether public or private, will not confirm admission or enrolment until after you arrive in Canberra to begin your tour of duty. Plan to make school visits a priority in your first days at post.

Placement of a student in a specific year is another issue that school administrations will not settle until they have met you and your child. There is no way of guaranteeing that your child will be put half-an-academic-year ahead, or drop back by the same amount, although the school administration will usually be willing to listen to parental concerns in this regard. If you are transferring in the Northern Hemisphere summer and wish your child to move half-an-academic-year ahead, you should plan to arrive at post in the first half of July, before Term 3 begins at the school of your choice. A timely arrival does not guarantee that your child will move ahead, but it may help.

The general Australian curriculum is different from that of most U.S. schools in important ways, most notably in Years 7-12.

Australian schools do not cover U.S. history in significant length or breadth; U.S. civics is not in the curriculum. So, if you are returning to the U.S. when your child is in high school, you may have to supplement this U.S. graduation requirement with a U.S. History course through homeschooling or with an online program.

Australian students study Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Calculus, Biology, Chemistry and Physics in a "spiral" curriculum (some of each in every academic year) rather than in separate years as in most U.S. schools. Thus a student who has progressed through the entire Australian curriculum in Years 7-12 will have acquired proficiency generally equivalent to U.S. students graduating from high school. However, transferring between an American school and an Australian school in the high school years is a complex process and requires considerable research on the part of the parents, including consultation with the school administrations to ensure both full coverage of math and science, as well as careful preparation for the transfer back to an American school at the end of one's tour of duty.

Grading and assessments are handled somewhat differently in Australia. Students frequently take multiple-choice tests to assess their progress against students locally, state-wide (Canberra students are assessed against peers in the State of New South Wales) and nationally. Report cards are issued only twice a year. Grades are frequently assigned "on a curve," meaning that a limited number of top grades will be given out regardless of actual scores. It is important for parents to find out how their children are being assessed and what the grades they are receiving mean, as each school -- indeed, every teacher -- differs slightly from every other one. CLO offers the Terra Nova standardized tests, which can assist parents in determining if their children are keeping up with U.S. educational standards.

There are no specific Advanced Placement (AP) courses available in Australian schools, and some schools do not have institutionalized programs for gifted children, but there are advanced courses (sometimes called "Extension") available in most schools, especially in mathematics and sciences at the college level. There are several public primary schools that offer gifted and talented programs, so make sure to ask your local school. A website to check out regarding volunteer and parent-based gifted & talented programs is <http://nswagtc.org.au>. The International Baccalaureate (IB) program is currently available at several schools across Canberra.

Parent-teacher interaction is as important here as anywhere else, though the level of communication is sometimes less than is found in US Schools. This may require some "self-starting" and extra effort on the part of the parent to meet a level of communication each family is comfortable with. Students are expected to take a more independent roll in secondary school (years 7 and beyond). In these grades, there is often the expectation that students will raise any questions or concerns with teachers before parents become involved. If parents find it difficult to develop such relationships, they are urged to be in touch with the school administration.

Sports and activities are somewhat less emphasized in many Australian schools, only because they are so well-organized and readily available in other venues. Every school holiday, the Australian Capital Territory government publishes a thick handbook of day camps and short courses both instructional and fun for school children on vacation. While schools have sports teams and clubs, mostly in the upper years, these are also commonly available outside of school. CLO can provide information on opportunities.

Australian schools put considerable emphasis on developing children's social interaction skills, including making presentations. Schools here generally assign less homework than American children are used to; many projects are assigned as group projects. Annual "camp" is a major feature of the calendar at most schools. In the primary years, the annual camp may consist of one night of children bringing sleeping bags to the school auditorium, overseen by teacher chaperones.

Camp increases in duration and physical challenge in successive scholastic years until, for example, nine days of Outdoor Educational training in a remote area of New South Wales for Year 10. Camp is considered an important part of the curriculum as a team-building exercise. Please note, these camps are not covered by tuition and must be paid for out of pocket for families.

Uniforms are commonly worn by schoolchildren in both public and private schools in Australia. They range from very traditional and formal to a polo shirt in the school colors. The uniforms are usually available for purchase from a school store. The cost of the uniform can be incredibly expensive and is not covered by educational allowances. Families should take this into consideration when considering schools.

School fees: public schools are free to residents (including U.S. Mission staff posted to Canberra). Private schools charge tuition and other fees. Every USG agency has its own regulations regarding reimbursements to parents for educational expenses. The Department of State's regulations are based on the principle that the USG pays tuition, certain fees and other expenses that parents wouldn't have to pay if their child were enrolled in public school in the U.S. The parent pays for expenses s/he would have had to cover were the child attending public school in the U.S., including clothing (i.e., uniforms), supplies, activities (including school sports) and field trips (e.g., excursions, the annual camps). The education allowance for Canberra is regularly updated so that it covers tuition and other appropriate fees at the private schools attended by Embassy children. If a family chooses to send their child to private school, please remember that the cost of these non-reimbursable items can be quite expensive given the chosen school, age and activities chosen by their student.

Parents should note that all schools in Australia have active and enthusiastic parents' organizations, and fund-raising is a year-round effort. The funds raised are important contributions to educational infrastructure and activities in the school. You will be asked to participate and/or contribute. This is often a wonderful way to integrate into the local community. Both are optional, of course.

While rare, American students have experienced forms of bullying by Australian students. This is no more common in Australia than in the U.S., and the school administrators have uniformly been responsive to Embassy parents' complaints on these incidents. Even more rare are instances of anti-Americanism; Embassy Canberra's Front Office and Management Counselor take these reports -- sporadic as they are -- very seriously and have when necessary made representations to school administrators who have always proven willing to address the issue quickly and firmly.

School transportation in Canberra can be via public buses that are designated as school buses when carrying students to and from school during the early morning and mid-afternoon hours (bus tickets can be bought in individual or rechargeable bus cards can be purchased at newsagents). Many parents drive their children to/from school. For nearby schools, many children walk or ride bikes. The Department of State reimburses its employees for home-school travel expense using standard USG mileage costs. Public school buses are not guaranteed for every student and school, but there are also public city bus routes on which students can hop on/hop off.

A snapshot of some of the schools our children attend:

Brindabella Christian College: <http://www.bcc.act.edu.au/>

Burgmann Anglican School: <http://www.burgmann.act.edu.au/>

Canberra Girls Grammar School: [Canberra Girls' Grammar School](http://www.canberra-girls-grammar-school.edu.au/)

Canberra Grammar School: [Canberra Grammar School - Home](#)
Canberra Montessori: <http://www.canberramontessori.com/>
Emmaus Christian: www.emmaus.act.edu.au/
Forrest Primary School: <http://www.forrestps.act.edu.au/>
Franklin Early Childhood School: <http://www.fecs.act.edu.au/>
Garran Primary: www.garranps.act.edu.au/
Good Shepherd Primary School: www.gsps.vic.edu.au/
Harrison Primary: www.harrison.act.edu.au/
Holy Spirit Primary: <http://www.holyspirit.act.edu.au/>
Mawson Primary Spirit: <http://www.mawsonps.act.edu.au/>
Mother Teresa Catholic Primary School: <http://www.motherteresa.act.edu.au/>
Nguannawal Primary School: <http://www.nguannawalps.act.edu.au/>
Orana Steiner School: <http://www.oranaschool.com/home>
Palmerston Primary: <http://www.palmdps.act.edu.au/home>
St. Edmund's College: <http://www.stedmunds.act.edu.au/>
St. Michael's Primary School: <http://www.stmichaelsps.act.edu.au/>
St. Monica's Primary School: <http://www.stmonicas.act.edu.au/>
Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic School: <http://www.stspeterandpaulcatholicschool.net/>
Canberra College: <http://www.canberrac.act.edu.au/>
Gungahlin College: <http://www.gungahlincollege.act.edu.au/>
Yarralumla Primary School: <http://www.yarralumlaps.act.edu.au/>
Malkara School: <http://www.malkara.act.edu.au/>
Melrose High School: <http://www.melrosehs.act.edu.au/>
Narrabundah College <http://www.narrabundahc.act.edu.au/>

There are many more primary and secondary schools in Canberra than are listed above; some websites to research other possibilities are: http://www.det.act.gov.au/school_education and http://www.det.act.gov.au/school_education/non-government_education. There are children who are home-schooled by their parents; and some attend school away from post (boarding school or another situation). There are numerous web-based resources available to assist with research of those possibilities too.

The bottom line: it's a privilege for us to have such a wide range of choices for our children's education in Canberra -- parents are urged to research their children's opportunities here very carefully prior to arrival. Please consult with the Community Liaison Office -- the CLOs will be happy to provide you with the names of contacts at the schools or other parents who are willing to share their experiences with you. Contact us with any questions you may have at CLOCanberra@state.gov