

Our Children's Future

By: Colin Rogers

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When I came to Egypt in 1972, I worked as a trainer/advisor for the Ministry of Education El Mahed el Kawmaya department, spending two very happy years traveling around 8 English schools in Cairo and 5 in Alexandria. I worked for some of the great schools in Egypt; the English School in Heliopolis, Victory College in Maadi and Alexandria, English Girls College, As Salam College and Port Said School. As a young teacher, I was in total awe (and fear!) of famous school directors like Ann Khalafala and Mary Salama, although over time learnt that they were wonderful, caring human beings. Under an agreement between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Overseas Development in Britain, some 25 UK teachers were required to train, advise and introduce new teaching materials and ideas in the English schools. I wonder if any of you studied 'Look, Listen and Learn' by Louis Alexander in your primary school? Well, sorry about that, but I was responsible for introducing it into the schools in the early '70s! In my defense, at the time, it was revolutionary!

Thirty years ago, it was all pretty simple. There was the government system, and the language schools. The only difference between them was the foreign language, otherwise the curriculum was the same, the exam was the same and admittance to university was the same. Now times have changed and there is a truly overwhelming choice confronting parents. In English language schools there is the Sanawi'ama, IGCSE, IB, American Diploma and GCSE. Change the foreign language and we have the French Baccalaureate or the German Abitur. Roll on the Chinese, the Outer Mongolians and the Swahilis! Perhaps someone will open a Latin school?

Having been involved in running schools in Cairo for nearly 30 years, I must admit I am getting a bit breathless as I try to stay up-to-date with all the different systems, let alone all the curricula, exams and university requirements I am supposed to remember. Parents are always asking me which system should they choose, which is the best, how can they be sure their children will succeed? To be honest there is no simple answer, so I try to point out the advantages and disadvantages of what they should look for in a good English language school.

Before I get into details, one of things that I feel is really important when choosing is school is all the things they do that they do not have to do. So much of education these days is all about academic success and many schools forget to have fun with the students. However, the extras should be properly organized. We recently set up pony and horse-riding properly supervised at the Sakkara Country Club. We were delighted to find that they also offered tennis lessons with two Belgian professionals, with special equipment so that even our 5 year olds can play. Schools that arrange all sorts of interesting activities are schools worth looking at. So, here is my brief outline of the main choices.

In the Partnership of school and parents; we have to work together as best as we can, with what God gave us and try to feel Blessed!

Sanawi'ama

Part of the state system and usually reasonably priced, Sanawi'ama involves 3 years of secondary education after preparatory level Addadeya. Secondary 1 is a general broad-based course, and secondary 2 divides into arts-or science orientated subjects. Exams are run in both secondary 2 and 3 and the results are added together to give a final result. Sanawi'ama is a rote learning system without necessarily encouraging understanding. It relies on memory and being able to regurgitate facts and figures in the final exams. It is heavier on Arabic, rather than English.. However, it is a clear system and for students whose English might not be very strong, or students who feel comfortable in a very structured programme, it has its place. On the other hand many students take private lessons.

Cambridge IGCSE

This system has been running in Egypt for around 10 years and was introduced to replace the old GCE 'O' level. It seems to be reasonably priced, but with all the extras it can be expensive. It involves 3 years of secondary education, with students studying 4 subjects each in the first two years, sometimes with an A/S (advanced supplementary) in year 2, and then picking up AS and A levels in year 3. The delivery is not very imaginative, and most students go to school and then spend half the night in private lessons, where 'famous' teachers grind them through more facts and figures. (This doubles the price). Almost all students take private lessons.

IGCSE is also a rote learning system and in style is very similar to Sanawi'ama. To their credit, The British Council and Cambridge are trying to improve the system but it is an uphill battle. Unfortunately there are a significant number of IGCSE schools that do not seem to care about the children, only the fees.

American Diploma

This approach has become popular over the last 5 or 6 years but there are few schools who are offering with integrity. In the best schools, it can be very expensive with fees in hard currency, but it can be more reasonable if you opt for one of the many 'new' American Diploma schools, some of whom have questionable standards.

It involves a combination of continuous assessment, (keeping up your GPA) and final exams. In schools that are honest, it is a good system. The problem is that in many local 'American Schools' there is no serious outside authority monitoring what the school is doing. Ask them if they are accredited and then check out the 'Accreditation Agency'. For US\$10,000 I can buy accreditation tomorrow without anyone ever visiting my school. Problems usually occur when your child is required to do the SATS exam in high school. The exam is marked externally and then many parents are shocked that their supposed A-grade student (as reported by the school) has suddenly failed.

American Diploma, if taught well by qualified staff in a committed school, is better than Sanawi'ama and IGCSE in as much that it takes into account all the work the children do, not just how well they do in a single exam at the end of the year. Some of the better schools have good facilities for slower-learners and offer a very wide range of subject-options that also appeal to high-flying students. Few students take private lessons - good schools provide support at

no extra cost. Pick your school carefully and don't be impressed by endless As and Bs unless you are sure that the school is serious and reports honestly.

The British GCSE, A/S and A-Level

This is a new system that has only recently been introduced in Egypt by Edexcel, the old London Examinations Board; The students' English needs to be good.

In the British International School in Zamalek, and the New Cairo British International School in Khatemeya, you pay in hard currency, which with current devaluations in the Egyptian Pound can be expensive. My school has been offering it since 2000 and we are a registered GCSE center. We are currently the largest GCSE center in Egypt and fees are in Egyptian pounds. Currently, we are charging LE20,000 a year (bus extra). Yes, prices will probably go up next year, but we still aim to be affordable.

We switched to GCSE because the curriculums are imaginative and modern. The children attend a full teaching day and study steadily. It is a combination of course work (20%-30% of grades), and in some subjects like Maths and science, modular exams are included (6 mini tests students do during the two-year course each worth 5%) which are added the final exam. If students do not do well in a particular test, they can re-sit.

What I feel is really fair and sensible about the whole system is that almost everything is taken into account, so the students feel rewarded as they go along. However, whilst the teachers are involved in grading and moderation the final decision is made externally in London. So, we can't tell you your child is 'doing fine' when he is failing. Very few students take private lessons. If they do, they are subject specific where the school organizes extra help. The school provides internal support classes.

GCSE has to be taught by qualified and trained teachers, not 'famous' teachers. It is taught over 2 years (GCSE) then goes on to A/S levels in secondary 3 with a non compulsory option for A-Levels in secondary 4. Interestingly, some 70% of my existing students who are going into AS levels have already opted to take year 13 as they understand this will considerably improve their grades

when entering higher education and it should give them a better than average chance of getting the university and the faculty of their choice. They can easily apply abroad, having achieved all the qualifications they need.

Whatever system you are interested in, it can only be good if the school cares about the students and teachers. Here is a basic check-list of just 10 things you should think about when choosing a school:

1. Is the school properly licensed?
2. Do they teach Arabic and Religion seriously?
3. Does the school seem to be designed for children, is it reasonably down-to-earth, or does it look like a 5-star hotel?
4. Do they have clear information, parent guides, curriculums outlines, parent/school policies? Do they encourage parents to come into school if there are problems?
5. Are the class sizes reasonable and are the teachers really qualified?
6. Have they got a good range of real facilities that are obviously used? Art, music, ICT, sports, drama, science labs, libraries?
7. Do they issue regular reports? Do they have parent/teacher days?
8. Do they have a strict entry procedure, or do they take anyone who can pay?
9. Do they offer extra activities that are properly organized?
10. Are children, already in the school, happy?

I believe a good school should be able to answer all 10 questions positively. There is no real difference between managing a factory or a school. A well run factory assumes that the managers know about their products and quality control. The same for a school; the managers need to know about education and how to ensure a quality product. It is also comforting if the management understands Egyptian culture, Egyptian parents and children as most 'International' schools in the city have a very high proportion of Egyptian children.

I wish you well in your search; I hope these thoughts are useful ■

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