



China's international schools re-open

Will Bedford, senior manager, schools division at ISC Research, explains the stringent procedures that Huili School Shanghai put in place to safely welcome pupils and staff back to school after COVID-19.

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Health and safety first

In China, schools have had to gain permission from their local education bureau to open. They were provided with strict requirements. These included the introduction of systems limiting campus access, heightened cleaning and sanitising regimes, processes to manage large group gatherings particularly around dining and assemblies and procedures for health checks during the school day. Schools had to ensure sufficient stocks of surgical masks, hand sanitisers and protective gloves.

Most schools established stringent deep-cleaning processes in preparation for re-opening. Many have also established new procedures for pupil transportation to and from school, and produced clear messaging about health and safety measures throughout the school.

Lydia Lim is the bursar at Huili School Shanghai which has a service agreement with the UK's Wellington College. She explains that the procedures for permission to open were stringent to ensure everyone's safety and to limit any further spread of the virus. "The process for gaining permission from the Shanghai authorities to re-open has been extensive and demanding", she said. "Our response plan has been agreed with our local education, health and food safety authorities. They have each carried out on-site inspections of our readiness to reopen Huili School".

Stringent new procedures

The school has high tech video scanners that indicate the body temperatures of all arrivals at the school gate. This is in addition to QR codes on parent phones. These codes show that members of their

household are healthy and have not left the city in the past 14 days, so allowing the pupil to attend school. Health and temperature monitoring of pupils, staff and contractors occurs three times each day (upon entry, at midday and at the end of the day). Year group zones, with social isolation grids for waiting, have been created for collection of children at the end of the day. The school has also developed a rigorous cleaning programme focused on high-touch traffic areas that include door handles and staircases.

The re-opening of Huili School happened, like all schools in China, in phases. As children returned, their first day was focused on special lessons about hygiene practices and preventative measures. In preparation for re-opening, all staff took part in extensive training to ensure social distancing requirements. ➤



► Addressing gaps in learning

Despite the significant efforts of teachers, pupils and their parents, online learning, regardless of how well it is planned and executed, cannot replicate the classroom experience. Many learning opportunities will have been missed. In addition, so much of the non-academic enriching curriculum, such as school productions and sports competitions which are at the centre of developing the whole child, will have been missed and may continue to be restricted while close contact restrictions remain in place.

At Huili School, school principal Stella Zhou says that teachers will use formative and summative assessments to identify pupil's needs. "We will collect and analyse the resulting data to track progress and agree intervention plans in each subject", she says. "This might include curriculum adjustments, intensive end-of-day tutoring, differentiated tutoring, and home-school communication. We will have parent-teacher meetings and pupil progress meetings with curriculum leaders". Stella adds that the school will be celebrating the work that has been done during the campus closure by displaying projects and outstanding work.

ISC Research is hearing that some parents are asking their schools to

extend the school year or offer free summer schools to the pupils for catch-up and some parents are seeking a rebate on this year's tuition fees, or a freeze or reduction in next year's fees. Some parents are also making claims about what other schools are offering. Schools have said they are learning to investigate and, where necessary, challenge fake news about what their competitors are offering as claims can prove inaccurate. Some schools are considering one-off bursaries for families who are experiencing temporary financial difficulty.

Many international schools have said they are already future-proofing; preparing education continuity strategies for possible additional campus closures. Schools are exploring the online platforms that work best for them and developing systems, structures and practices to ensure that all members of their school community are well placed should there be any form of disruption to classroom learning again.

The impact on pupil and staff wellbeing

COVID-19 has impacted the wellbeing of many people in different ways and for a variety of reasons. This impact does not disappear when campuses re-open. Many international schools



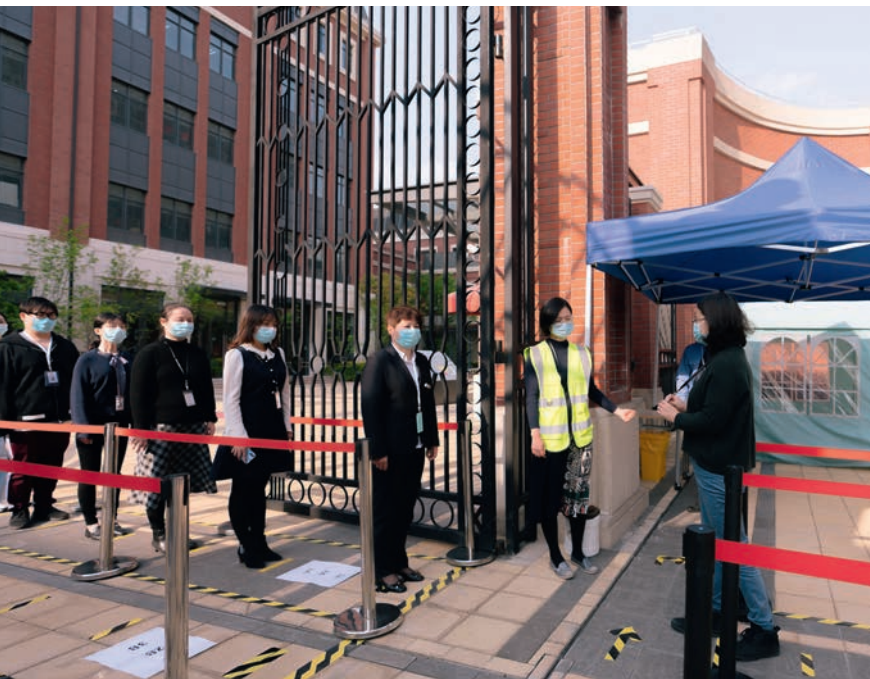
are reporting that they will be focusing on the wellbeing of pupils, staff and the wider school community for an extended period to support those who have felt particularly isolated and lonely, those who may have financial worries, those who will have medical concerns and a new fear of becoming ill, those who are mourning the death of a loved one whose funeral they are unable to attend and those who have missed other significant events. For an extended period, there will still be limited opportunities for children and staff to mix and socialise closely, and this too will have an impact on their wellbeing.

At Huili School, the principal explains how the house system has been valuable during campus closures to support wellbeing initiatives. "Our housemasters have been having online one-to-one meetings and house meetings", says Stella. "Rewards such as house points have continued to be issued. Excellence and our Huili values have been celebrated in weekly online assemblies. Pupils have valued these online group interactions".

Once pupils returned to campus, Stella says the timetabled wellbeing lessons supported and encouraged children to reflect on their experiences and to make positive changes which will improve their happiness. Other wellbeing lessons focused on hygiene and preventative practice. ►

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◀ Video scanners indicate the body temperatures of all arrivals at the school gate





► **Planning for change**

Many international school leaders are recognising that the campus closures have created opportunities to look at traditional education structures and practices in different ways. Gerard MacMahon, executive master at Huili School Shanghai, believes that the months since January have generated a wealth of research and experience to draw on. "I think the experience of so much online teaching will cause us all to reflect how best we are making use of the privilege of children and their teachers being in the same room together," he said. "Didactic, content-focused learning can be delivered online, so are we making the best use of the hours of human contact we have between pupils and their teachers when they are able to be in classrooms, science labs, music rooms, theatres and sports halls together? Are we making the most of the opportunities for children to share ideas, collaborate, enjoy teamwork, be inquisitive together, discuss ideas and test their mutual understanding?" he added.

Huili School, with the support of Wellington College, is bringing progressive and effective methods of Western teaching practice to China and complementing the more content-focused learning excellence of the Chinese education system. It is a model that other British independent schools are applying in various forms, not only in China but throughout many parts of Asia.

More school development overseas?

Further development of British independent schools overseas is likely even in the wake of COVID-19. As has been seen following other historic crises, investment interest in international education development does not appear to be waning. International schools in many countries have demonstrated themselves to be resilient and adaptable during the pandemic; many delivering relatively good levels of distance learning. This, coupled with the demand for quality education and the long-term, consistent revenue potential from annual school fees, means that international schools remain a strong interest for investment.



Heightened cleaning and sanitising regimes

As the world recovers from COVID-19, more British independent schools are expected to be attracted to such an overseas development option; one that will support and enhance their brand and their income stream if they know an investor partner will provide the financial backing.

China is a popular location right now for brand development because of the huge demand for high premium education but so are several cities in South East Asia where there is sufficient demand for premium education aligned to a foreign brand, offered at a price point that enough people are willing and able to pay.

Following another worldwide crisis; the global financial crash of 2008, relatively few international schools suffered significant loss of enrolment. Most that did were schools heavily dependent on the children of expatriate professionals working for large multinational corporations that downsized.

International schools in China and the UAE were noticeable for their exodus of expatriate professionals, who made up a significant percentage of pupil enrolment. However, there was sufficient demand for international school places by local families in both countries to keep enrolment levels stable at many international schools.

Historic analysis shows that local international school parents only withdrew their child from their international school as a last resort. This is especially true in Asia where education is valued extremely



highly. During the global recession following the 2008 financial crash, many parents kept their children in international schools after the recession, even though they were financially impacted in other aspects of their lives. A similar scenario is likely to follow COVID-19.

ISC Research has published a White Paper evaluating the impact of historic crises on international schools. A free copy is available at <https://www.iscresearch.com/whitepapers>

▲ New processes are in place to manage large group gatherings particularly around dining and assemblies



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