

International Education

IN CANADA'S BEAUTIFUL GULF ISLANDS SCHOOL DISTRICT

It is often difficult for students, parents and agents to differentiate between international programs, especially when they share certain geographical similarities, access to major urban centers, or comparable community sizes and features.

What is unique about the Gulf Islands International Program? To adequately answer this question, one has to address several key considerations, including community, school, international student services and agent relationships.

Community:

Although the Gulf Islands consist of five main islands, the Gulf Islands International Program is located on the largest of these islands, Salt Spring Island.

Salt Spring Island's reputation as an international center of the arts has contributed to its unique charm. The island has recently become one of Canada's most desirable places to live. It is often compared to Whistler, which is a mixed blessing.

Interest in the beautiful, tranquil setting has created a very upscale, highly educated and professional community. On the other hand, real estate prices have risen in accordance to the demand. Fortunately for the residents it has not resulted in many of the urban problems that are associated with growth. We still enjoy a lifestyle that is safe and virtually free from crime.

The local community is highly supportive of youth and considers a good education to be a community value. The award winning secondary school is often cited for its architectural design, which reflects this sense of community. The commitment to youth is reflected further by the current construction of a new community recreational center next down to the school.

Sometimes I am asked, "Don't the kids feel isolated living on an island?" Some probably do, but the tradeoffs are worth it for the majority of them. Most of our 60 international students come from very large cities, some larger than the entire population of Canada. Would they like more access to the malls and the excitement of the city? I am sure they would at times. Would they prefer to be in the city programs? This is where it becomes interesting?

The answer is absolutely not. They quickly adapt to the rural lifestyle and enjoy the sense of community they feel. It can be lonely in the city, but this is not the case on Salt Spring. Our students report feeling welcomed and appreciated by the community.

In reality, it is relatively easy to go to the city on the weekends should they choose to do so. Victoria and Nanaimo are only thirty minute ferry rides away and there is regular

ferry service to Vancouver. The truth is they usually prefer to stay on the island with their friends.

Like teenagers everywhere they enjoy a night out, which usually means going to movies, parties, dances, games, community events, or out for dinner.

For students with an interest in recreation, the islands are a recreational paradise. The protected waters surrounding the islands are ideal for kayaking, canoeing, sailing or fishing. The quiet roads and island network of trails attract hikers and bikers alike.

The island boasts numerous activities for the sports enthusiast. Soccer is the biggest community sport. Our teams are very well respected in the lower Vancouver Island region.

Evening events include open volleyball, basketball, roller hockey, the martial arts, archery, trap shooting, badminton and much more. Horseback riding, which caters to the beginner to the most advanced riders, is also available. Additionally students can join a wide variety of community clubs and activities. It is often said that only the boring are bored on Saltspring Island.

It is the policy of the Gulf Islands International Program to promote participation in school- or community-based activities. For students with an interest in the visual or performing arts, Saltspring Island offers numerous opportunities to get involved beyond those provided by the school.

High school students routinely participate in community choirs and bands, as well as a variety of dramatic and musical events. Dance and music instruction and tutoring is available for everyone from the novice to the advanced or most gifted performer.

It is important to remember that the Gulf Islands are home to many of Canada's best musicians, dancers, actors, writers and artists. Like the rest of the community, these talented residents are often more than willing to share their gifts with our youth, which includes our international students.

School

In 2004 the Gulf Islands School District adopted a four-day school week. An extended day ensured that the total instructional remained the same. The number of instructional hours is mandated by the Ministry of Education and is not negotiable. A fifth day of instructional support, including English and ESL seminars, Math tutorials and homework assistance was made available to the international students in a graduation program.

Other activities, including field trips, Advanced Placement Art, recreational programs and performing arts workshops are also available to interested students. Many of the sports team and the Gulf Islands School of Performing Arts shifted their practices and rehearsals to Friday.

It is interesting to note that government exam results have remained constant or improved since the introduction of the new schedule. With the additional assistance and support available to them, many of our international students have enjoyed some of the highest exam marks that we have seen since the birth of the Gulf Islands International Program.

Gulf Islands Secondary School currently enjoys a reputation for academic excellence. According to the most recent Fraser Institute Report on Schools, which is commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Gulf Islands Secondary School ranked third best on the list of all public high schools on Vancouver Island. For more information please see <http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/admin/books/chapterfiles/70BCESC06VSL2.pdf#>.

Gulf Islands Secondary School is committed to continuous improvement and increased performance. The most recent government exam results were among some of the best in the province. One of our international students from Taiwan scored an impossible 100% on the Math 12 government exam. Many of his international peers were in the 90% Club.

For students who are interested in language development, Gulf Islands Secondary School offers English as a Secondary Language, French Immersion, French and Spanish. In the case of French Immersion, all instruction and coursework is taught in French.

Gulf Islands Secondary School is also committed to social and human development. The school actively and consciously promotes student participation. The majority of students are involved in school activities, including sports and the arts.

Leadership is a key value. It is our belief that the school outperforms other schools because of the school's focus on participation. The school enjoys a positive school culture, which promotes learning, and is free from violence, gangs, graffiti, vandalism and cliques. Teachers, students and parents share a sense of community.

Gulf Islands Secondary School is also a leader in career development. For international students who are considering a "gap year" before entering an apprenticeship or technical program, our vocational and work experience programs might make logical sense. Not only would they enjoy an international experience, they would get relevant training from the Canadian perspective in an area that they enjoy. Our Chef Training program, for example, features quality instruction at the industrial level.

Sports play a major role at Gulf Islands Secondary School. For students who are only considering a semester of study, it might be important for them to know when certain sports are available to them. Generally the volleyball season runs from September through mid-November. Basketball follows and continues until the end of March. Aside from senior boys' soccer, which parallels the volleyball season, junior boys' and girls' soccer is played in April and May, along with most track and field activities. The American football season runs from September through November, while tennis and golf are played from April to June. Given the relatively mild climate, however, both of these activities are available throughout the year to the committed athlete.

Music, dance and drama are also important to the culture of the school. Dance and drama are available in both semesters. Both programs offer community performances. While Jazz Band, which is designed for gifted performers is available through the year, as is the choir program, it is important to note that Jazz Choir, the junior concert band and beginner guitar program are often limited to the first semester.

Some international students enjoy exploring their leadership, tutoring and counseling skills. Gulf Islands Secondary School offers Leadership, Peer Tutoring and Peer Counseling programs.

In an effort to promote community and a sense of involvement within the International Program, we offer numerous events for our international students, such as volleyball tournaments, skating trips, ski trips, kayaking and wall climbing adventures at difference times throughout the school year. For many of these programs they are either free or subject to relatively small fees. Depending on the length of stay, our international students are given a small activity subsidy to offset some of the costs associated with the fee-paying programs.

International Student Services

Perhaps one of the features that sets the Gulf Islands International Program apart from many of the other programs in Canada is the level of personal service that our program provides.

As advocates of the total quality movement we are committed to continuous and relevant improvement. Despite being a relatively small program we constantly strive to make our program better. To that end we have developed a language instruction program that is consistent with the educational goals of our students. Pre-assessment determines the language needs of each international student. To ensure that instruction is consistent with the language needs and educational goals of the students we have adopted the four level ESL program designed by the Richmond School District.

We firmly believe that our program is only as good as our homestays. Rather than doing homestays off the side of our desks, we have an experienced counselor with career development and post-secondary experience. Our Student Services Coordinator works with the students, parents and agents to ensure the best matches possible with the host families.

The Student Services Coordinator is also responsible for medical insurance coverage. It should be noted that the provincial Medical Services Plan is mandatory for all students who have resided in British Columbia for six months or more.

Our international students enjoy easy access to personal, post-secondary and career counseling, as well as the services of community counselors, peer counselors and peer tutors.

As the Director of the Program, it is my responsibility to ensure that our program lives up to our claims of excellence. I am primarily responsible for the well-being of all the students in the program and I acknowledge and respect my obligation to the students, their parents, their agents, the school and the community. I am primarily responsible for all marketing activities, program direction, and the application process, including visa renewals.

What is particularly important about the Gulf Islands International Program team is the fact that we are all school-based, which means we are close to the students and able to address issues quickly and effectively. We look after our students. We know them and they know us.

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