

EDUCATIONAL REENTRY BURN-UP

by Frank and Janet Ruddock



The Ruddocks have been posted to Kinshasa (1978-80) and to the Embassy in Brussels (1983-87). Frank is working in the U.S. General Relations Division in Ottawa. They have two sons, Patrick (8) left, and Robin (6) right.
* To know more about education allowances for such requirements as tutoring, please contact Lloyd Pochopsky, ABMA Tel.. (613) 992-9309

"Mrs. Ruddock, have you considered private school? Or French immersion—that will slow their English down." This statement, uttered by a public school official, was the beginning of one foreign service family's frustrations with a return to the Canadian educational system.

Two years at a British primary school in Brussels resulted in our four- and six-year-old sons reading, printing and doing beginning math. Two normal children, progressing along with their peers, happy in a school which encouraged (not pushed) children forward. We returned fully intending—buttressed by a lack of money—to send Patrick and Robin to public, not private, school. Our interest was in English language instruction, core French, and basic skills.

So where is the problem? A factor not unfamiliar to foreign service families: schools abroad start formal learning at a younger age than in Canada, with stronger programs to master basic skills. Thus, children considered pre-school age in Canada are already well advanced in basic skills, compared to children in Canada still in "readiness" programs in kindergarten.

Problem-solving being the metier of foreign service families, we enjoyed countless meetings and correspondence with teachers, principals, supervisors and trustees. Promises of allowing our children to progress at their own rate saw them still doing work they had mastered

long before. School no longer held any challenge and our sons became bored and frustrated. We did what we could at home, but, after fourteen months, we were losing the battle.

The pervasive attitude was that our troubles were of our own making, first by the mere fact of being in the foreign service, second by permitting our children to go to school early. The first suggestion of private school—by now a frequent refrain of other officials no doubt anxious to see the end of us—took on new meaning.

We found the Counterpoint School, one of a growing number of private alternative schools in Ottawa, flexible enough to respond to each child's talents and interests, while increasing their knowledge of basic skills. The school maintains a low pupil/teacher ratio with each child pursuing an independent study program.

The head start our sons gained in Brussels, viewed as an albatross around their neck by the public system, has been recognized and encouraged at Counterpoint, and both children are once again thriving.

While our concerns and priorities are not necessarily germane to everyone, we met many kindred spirits on our Kafkaesque journey through the educational system. The foreign service life creates conditions in which your child's education, on return to Canada, almost has to be tailor-made, otherwise there is a risk of stagnation or regression, in addition to the inevitable social dislocation. Even with the best will in the world, the public system seems either unable or unwilling to deal with a situation familiar to many foreign service families.

A final discouraging note. If you do not resolve the education dilemma during your time in Canada, you risk the reverse when next you go abroad: your children have now fallen behind the more quickly moving international systems. Money for tutors anyone?*