

Understanding the Dutch and international school systems: A guide for parents moving to the Netherlands



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Contact

- 🌐 www.anywr-group.nl
- ✉ christiaan.van-veen@anywr-group.com
- ☎ +31 235344188
- 📷 [in](#) Follow us on our socials

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The local Dutch school system: A brief overview

Education is compulsory in the Netherlands from the age of five, although most children start school at age four. The system begins with eight years of primary education (basisschool), followed by secondary education, which is divided into several academic and vocational pathways:

Secondary school tracks:

- VMBO (preparatory secondary vocational education) – A 4-year track focused on practical, vocational training.
- HAVO (senior general secondary education) – A 5-year program preparing students for universities of applied sciences (HBO).
- VWO (pre-university education) – A 6-year academic track leading to research university admission (WO).

After secondary education, students progress to either MBO (vocational training), HBO (applied sciences), or WO (research universities) depending on their chosen track and academic performance.

Grades in the Dutch system range from 1 to 10, with a 6 being the minimum passing mark. The system is decentralized, offering schools the flexibility to adapt to students' needs. It's generally regarded for its accessibility, structure, and quality.

International school options in the Netherlands

For expatriate families, international schools often provide a sense of continuity — especially helpful when your stay in the Netherlands may be temporary, or when future international moves are likely. These schools follow familiar international curricula and offer education in English (or other languages), easing the transition for children.

Common International Curricula:

1. International Baccalaureate (IB)

One of the most widely recognized global systems, the IB program is offered in three phases:

- Primary Years Programme (PYP) – ages 3 to 12
- Middle Years Programme (MYP) – ages 11 to 16
- Diploma Programme (DP) – ages 16 to 19

IB focuses on global awareness, critical thinking, and inquiry-based learning. However, not all IB schools offer the full sequence, and students interested in specific Dutch university programs (like medicine) should ensure their chosen school's curriculum aligns with entrance requirements.

2. British Curriculum

This system is structured around Key Stages and Year Groups, with a focus on academic depth in the later years. It culminates in GCSEs and A-levels, which are widely accepted for university admission in the UK and other Commonwealth countries.

Schools like the British School of Amsterdam and the British School in The Hague offer either a pure UK curriculum or integrate IB elements. British schools tend to have a more traditional culture, with uniforms and structured routines.

3. American Curriculum

The American approach leads to a standard U.S. high school diploma, with options for Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Schools such as the American School of The Hague often offer both American and IB programs, catering to diverse academic goals.

Government-funded vs. Private international schools

In the Netherlands, international education is available through both subsidized (government-funded) and private institutions.

Government-funded international schools:

- More affordable, with annual tuition typically between €4,500 and €9,000
- Follow global curricula (usually IB)
- Offer Dutch language instruction
- Cater primarily to expats and Dutch families returning from abroad
- May have limited extracurricular programs and services

Private international schools:

- Operate independently, with fees ranging from €12,000 to €25,000+ per year
- Offer multiple curricula: IB, British, American, French, and more
- Provide extensive support services, extracurriculars, shuttle options, and homework help
- Often attract a more diverse, long-term international community

Language support for non-Dutch speakers

If your child doesn't yet speak Dutch, don't worry — the Netherlands has a strong infrastructure for language support:

- Newcomer classes (taalklas) are available for children aged 6 and up, with instruction in Dutch as a second language for one to 1.5 years before transitioning to regular classes.
- Younger children (ages 4–5) are usually placed directly into regular kindergarten, where they pick up Dutch naturally.
- In cities like Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam, and Utrecht, placement in newcomer programs is often coordinated centrally.

These programs are publicly funded, although schools may request a small voluntary contribution.

Planning your move: schools & housing go hand in hand

Finding the right school and the right home are closely connected. When planning your move, consider:

- Commute time between school, work, and home
- Waitlists for private/international schools (some fill up a year in advance!)
- Siblings' school placements
- School catchment areas for Dutch public schools
- Your family's language preferences, duration of stay, and educational goals

Families staying long-term may opt for Dutch schools, especially for younger children who can integrate more easily. For shorter stays or with older children, international schools might offer better continuity.

Helping your children adjust

Children are often more adaptable than we expect. With the right support, most settle into their new environment smoothly. Here are a few tips:

- Younger children usually pick up Dutch quickly and make friends easily.
- International schools often assign buddies or mentors to help new students integrate.
- Dutch schools may feel unfamiliar at first, but offer rich, inclusive environments.
- Stay positive — your attitude sets the tone for your child's experience.

Parents who remain open, encouraging, and calm provide a stable foundation during the transition. Keep communication open, ask questions, and don't hesitate to seek guidance from teachers and coordinators.

Need Help Getting Started?

Still feeling unsure about where to begin? We're here to help. From school selection and enrollment to settling-in support, our team is happy to assist.

Contact us at info.nl@anywr-group.com — we'll help take the work off your hands and guide you every step of the way.

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anywr-group.nl



CHRISTIAAN VAN VEEN

christiaan.vanveen@anywr-group.com



IRENE BUNT

irene.bunt@anywr-group.com

 anywr
Netherlands

+31 (0)235344188