

Chris Benson, Head of Primary Education © D.R.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF MONACO

By NICOLE RUSKELL

Experts in multi-lingual education

When it comes to multilingualism, the *International School of Monaco* (ISM) is a world-leader. This goes hand in hand with a diverse international student body: fewer than 10% of students are mother-tongue French and around 30% are native English speakers. The rest comprises a global mix of nationalities.

Riviera Insider spoke with Chris Benson, Head of ISM's Primary School about their bilingual curriculum and the importance of supporting literacy in additional languages spoken at home. Each year, from Kindergarten through Primary, the curriculum is designed around the best way to achieve "simultaneous bilingualism". From age three, classes are conducted in a 50/50 mix of English and French. At age four, they have French instruction in the morning and English in the afternoon, with social activities. Age five, the mornings are spent learning to read in English with two hours of French in the afternoon. This alternating system key to the development of simultaneous bilingualism. "The brain is like a muscle," explains Mr Benson, "two languages work it hard and the programme really develops problem-solving skills that can help the brain cope better with cognitive demands."

By the end of Primary, English and French are well established in the brain. This is when the third language is introduced. The Secondary curriculum requires a third language, which can be Spanish or a number of 'Mother Tongue' classes that ISM offers. These classes are designed for students who speak an additional language at home. Together with other students of similar nationality/language, they complete in-depth coursework on reading, writing and culture. Currently, ISM offers these 'Mother-Tongue' courses in Italian, German, Russian and of course, French. Mr Benson emphasises an important point that is sometimes forgotten or neglected in families who speak another language at home: literacy. "We have four very well-stocked, multi-lingual libraries," he says, "and they are very popular with the students, who are avid readers." He is emphatic about the goal of complete literacy in both taught languages and those spoken in the home.

It is a common problem with multi-national children who speak another language at home to not read or write it to a fluent level. Many times, this is simply due to parents not considering the importance of literacy because the child speaks fluently.

Tiziana Osborne, an ISM parent tells us: "Bringing up multilingual children is a privilege although it could become a struggle when you try to preserve their mother

tongue/s. I'm Italian and my husband Australian and we both always spoke to our daughters in our mother tongues while living in France. But we never taught our girls how to read and write in Italian. When I saw that ISM proposes Italian as a third language support for mother-tongue students, I thought it was pointless because they already spoke perfectly. What I didn't know, was how excellent the language department is at ISM and now both my daughters have reached a level of reading and writing in Italian that they would have not otherwise reached."

International Exams

Academic rigour is one of the foundations of ISM. Students sit for numerous international exams, including IGCSE (*University of Cambridge*) qualifications in languages and other subjects; French national exams and *Cambridge University* 'Check-Point' exams at specific stages. These all prepare the students for the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma, which differs from the French Baccalaureate (OIB) because it requires the knowledge of two languages. There is also the option, if the student has two first languages, to pursue a 'bilingual diploma' with their two first languages plus a third. For students who may want to return to their home country for university, the 'bilingual diploma' can give an extra advantage not only in university applications but also for future employers.

This has been invaluable to many students who have graduated from ISM. Laila Schlereth is a German parent with three children at ISM, one of whom has already graduated: "My eldest daughter was able to take Higher Level German in her IB and then went to university in Innsbruck, Austria. She speaks five languages today, and uses all of them! Now my son is taking Higher Level German for his IB and hoping to study in Vienna next year. My third and youngest child has chosen Spanish for her third language, so it really depends on the individual child. Most of all, I feel this is a gift you make to your children, whether they go into our family business or choose their own path, they have their languages and are really cosmopolitan young people with a totally international outlook." In today's world, the ability to speak multiple languages is quickly becoming a necessity. Multiple language skills encourage intercultural understanding, facilitate harmony and are highly valued by employers. ISM graduates are working in many fields across Europe and North America and around 90% speak at least three languages. ▶

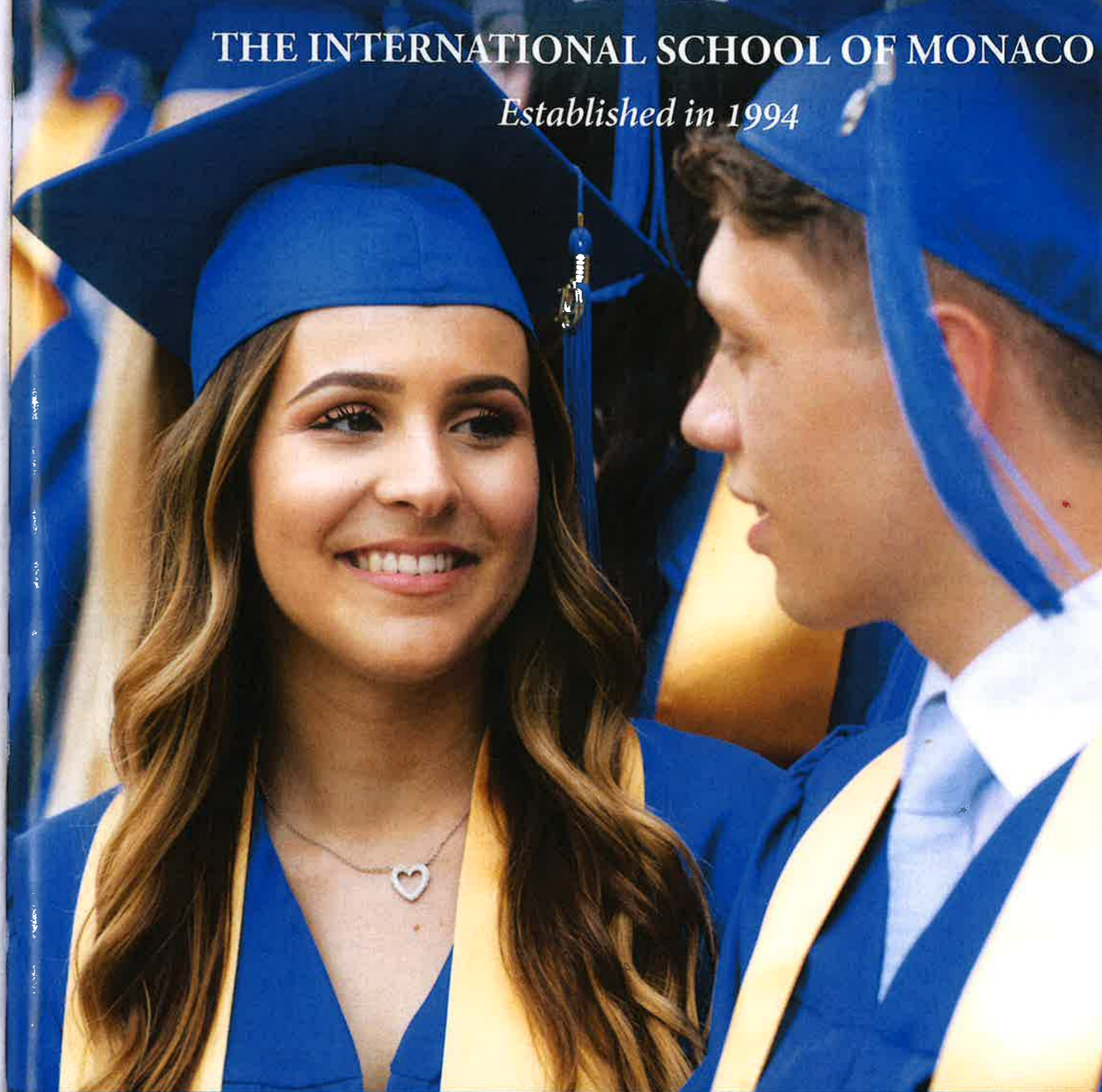
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