



Maria Coate says ISWA stands apart because of the relationships it builds between students, staff and parents. *Photo: Gabriel Oliveira*

Education opportunities start with the state's schools

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Some of Western Australia's top private schools are feeling the effects of the state's ongoing economic malaise, recording a decline in enrolments in recent years.

According to data available from the BNiQ Search Engine, WA's top five private schools have averaged a decline in enrolments of 6.1 per cent since 2015.

During this period, the state government has focused on increasing international enrolments in tertiary education, investing \$4.5 million in [StudyPerth](#) [6]'s efforts to market WA to international students.

However, opportunities are emerging for growth in international primary and secondary school enrolments, particularly from countries in Asia.

That trend is evident in the number of enrolments by Chinese students in WA primary and secondary schools in the year to date, which grew by 1.1 per cent against a national decline of 9.3 per cent.

Those figures suggest WA has unique appeal to overseas students, specifically from Asia.

One school well equipped to cater for international students is the [International School of Western Australia](#) [7] (ISWA).

As one of seven schools in the state that teach International Baccalaureates (IB), ISWA has for the past 15 years worked to facilitate unique, global curricula for primary and secondary students who come to WA.

Founded with the assistance of Chevron in 2004, the school was originally intended to accommodate families travelling to WA for oil and gas work.

Now, it accepts both local and international enrolments, teaching to the WA curriculum from kindergarten to year 10, as well as the IB program from kindergarten to year 12, with languages offered including Spanish, Mandarin and Italian.

"We teach in an open-minded way, as opposed to a parochial, Australian way," ISWA principal Maria Coate told Business News.

Leading a school that caters for a broad array of international backgrounds, Ms Coate said both public and private bodies were missing an opportunity when it came to overseas enrolments.

"I still don't believe our government understands the real opportunity that exists with primary and secondary education," she said.

"With tertiary education, we have this model where we bring students over ... we dump them into universities and hope for the best.

“That’s not our approach.”

Ms Coate said ISWA had worked with businesses over the years to develop unique education programs for students, including creating a bilingual French program for families who travelled to the state for work on projects overseen by Technip Oceania.

The school’s ability to develop focused programs for students is at least somewhat attributable to its size.

According to BNiQ’s list of schools, ISWA enrolled 290 students across kindergarten to year 12 in 2017, with Ms Coate telling *Business News* enrolments fluctuate in any given year up to 350 students.

She said those modest enrolment numbers had helped the school best service its students.

“We develop deep and authentic relationships between students, staff and parents,” Ms Coate said.

“Everyone is the same at our school; we think diversity is normal.”

While other schools taught to a multicultural student body, Ms Coate said ISWA acted as something of a global village for students, not only because it catered to a variety of nationalities but because the families who attended often ended up embracing the local community.

That’s evident in the growth of ISWA graduates who go on to attend university in Australia, increasing from 10 per cent in 2015-16 to 24 per cent in 2018-19.

“When I started with the school about five years ago, pretty much all of our graduates went back overseas,” Ms Coate said.

“Now, the majority of our graduates stay in Australia. And you know why? It’s because they love the lifestyle.

“When their families are with them, all they want to do is stay.”

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