

THE COMPLETE

HCMC International School Admissions Guide

*A comprehensive, school-by-school guide for parents
navigating international education in Ho Chi Minh City*

SPARK
ENGLISH CENTER

About Spark English Center Vietnam

We are an English school that provides English support for students at international and bilingual schools in Ho Chi Minh City. We specialize in **phonics-based English support**, helping children build strong English foundations so they can succeed academically and confidently.



ESL & Phonics-Based Learning

Building strong English foundations through structured phonics and ESL programs



Reading, Writing & Speaking

Developing fluency across all the language skills for academic success



Advanced Academic English

Preparing students for the academic demands of IB, British, and American curricula



IELTS & Test Preparation

Expert preparation for IELTS and other standardized English assessments

What This Guide Covers

- 1 The Admissions Landscape — Why HCMC is unique
- 2 The 3-Factor Framework — Readiness, Fit & Space
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The HCMC Admissions Landscape

Ho Chi Minh City has one of the most dynamic and competitive international school markets in Southeast Asia. Over the past decade, the sector has expanded significantly, driven by a growing expatriate population, an increasingly internationally-minded Vietnamese professional class, and strong demand for globally-recognized qualifications.

The fundamental truth:

Qualified applicant families consistently outnumber available seats — especially at popular grades and popular schools. An application outcome is never purely a verdict on your child's ability. It is also a function of timing, space, cohort balance, and the specific circumstances of that school in that year.



Schools operate as For-Profit, Non-Profit, or Government-Licensed with different enrollment rules



Vietnam's Ministry of Education regulates what percentage of students needed to be Vietnamese nationals



Class sizes are deliberately small (18–22 students) — caps are firm



Most schools use rolling admissions — when you apply matters enormously

The 3-Factor Framework

Nearly every admissions decision comes down to three factors

1

READINESS

Is your child prepared — academically, linguistically, emotionally, and socially — to join that specific year group, at that specific school, right now? Schools look for evidence your child can engage with the program and manage the demands of an international classroom.

2

FIT

How well does your child's learning style, personality, and needs align with how a school operates? IB schools value inquiry and self-direction. British schools value structure. Two children with identical records can have very different outcomes depending on fit.

3

SPACE

Even if your child is perfectly ready and a beautiful fit, if there is no available seat in their year group, they cannot be admitted. Class sizes are capped at 18–22 students. Schools manage cohort composition carefully: nationality mix, gender, English proficiency, and support needs.

Curriculum Frameworks in HCMC

1. IB (International Baccalaureate)

Inquiry-based, conceptual learning. PYP (3–11), MYP (11–16), DP (16–18). Strong emphasis on critical thinking, international-mindedness, and the learner profile.

2. British Curriculum

Structured, subject-based. Key Stages → GCSE (16) → A-Levels (18). Clear academic benchmarks, regular testing. Strong for UK university pathways.

3. American Curriculum

Grade-based K–12 with AP courses. More flexibility in subject selection, strong extracurriculars, holistic college applications. SAT/ACT recognized globally.

4. Australian Curriculum

Balance of academic and practical learning. Inclusive approach to diverse learners. Strong recognition across Asia-Pacific and beyond.

5. Cambridge (CAIE)

Cambridge Primary and IGCSE. Sits between British and IB approaches. Subject flexibility, strong in Asia. Pathway to A-Levels or IB DP.

6. Bilingual (MOET + International)

Vietnamese national curriculum by MOET (Ministry of Education and Training) blended with international elements. Less expensive alternative. Good transitional environment before fully international schools.

The IB Curriculum Explained

One name, three very different programs — admissions expectations evolve significantly

PYP

Ages 3–11

Primary Years Program

Most nurturing and flexible. Six trans-disciplinary themes. Focus on curiosity, communication, and early literacy. EAL support strongest here. Easiest entry point — more seats, greater language flexibility.

Low–Medium competition

MYP

Ages 11–16

Middle Years Program

Considerably more demanding. Multiple subjects, extended work, analytical essays. Academic English becomes non-negotiable. Students entering without strong English will struggle regardless of home-language ability.

High competition

DP

Ages 16–18

Diploma Program

One of the most rigorous pre-university qualifications globally. Six subject groups plus ToK, Extended Essay, and CAS. Near-native academic English expected. Written analysis, extended essays, oral exams all in English.

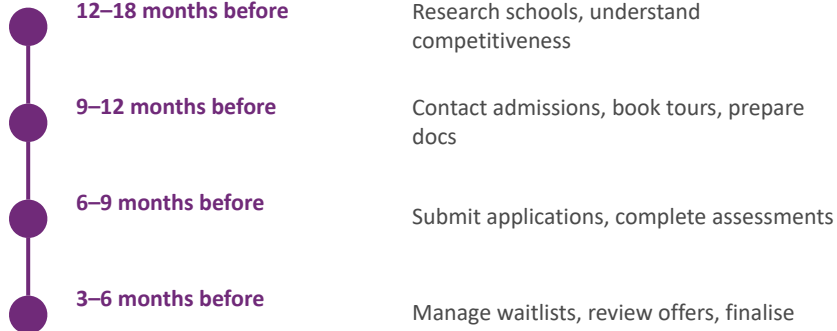
Very High competition

Entry Timing & Competition

Why Timing Matters

Families that begin research 12–18 months before their desired entry date have far more options. Families who begin 2–3 months before entry are competing for very limited spaces that remain after earlier applicants were placed.

The earlier a child enters the IB pathway, the more flexible admissions tend to be — and the stronger the long-term outcome.



Hardest Grades to Enter

Upper Primary (Gr 4–6)

Fewer departures, more academic expectations

Transition (Gr 6–7)

MYP begins, limited external seats

DP Entry (Gr 10–11)

Capped cohorts, subject constraints

Mid-year at any level

Entry Point	Flexibility	Long-Term
Early PYP	High	Very Strong
Upper PYP	Medium	Strong
MYP	Medium-Low	Moderate
DP	Low	Limited

Cross-School Competitiveness Overview

Typical demand patterns — always confirm grade-level availability directly with each school

School	Early Years	Primary	Secondary	DP Entry
EIS (Full IB)	Medium	Med-High	High	Very High
ISHCMC (Full IB)	Medium	Med-High	High	Very High
BIS HCMC (British→IB)	Medium	Medium	High	Very High
SSIS (American→IB)	Medium	Medium	Med-High	High
AIS Saigon	Low-Med	Medium	Medium	Med-High
Renaissance	Low-Med	Medium	Medium	Med-High
SNA Saigon South	Low	Low-Med	Medium	Medium
Anne Hill (Non-IB)	Low	Low	—	—
Aurora (Non-IB)	Low	Low-Med	Low-Med	—
Vinschool (Bilingual)	Med	Medium	Medium	—

Low = Multiple seats, flexible Medium = Some screening High = Limited seats Very High = Waitlists common

European International School (EIS)

IB Continuum: PYP • MYP • DP | Full IB Continuum on a Single Campus

School Overview

Widely regarded as one of the most academically rigorous and competitive IB schools in HCMC. Offers the full IB continuum from Early Years through Diploma. Attracts a highly international student body. Strong academic expectations, multilingual community. Best suited for students who are academically ready for inquiry-based learning, comfortable communicating in English, independent and resilient learners.

Admissions Process

- Initial enquiry and tour
- Online application submission
- Review of school reports and documents
- Student assessments (OOPT, CAT4 for older students)
- Student interview
- Admissions decision (offer, waitlist, or decline)

Strategic Advice

Apply early — earlier than you think necessary. Prepare documents before applications open. Avoid last-minute applications for popular grades. Always include at least one backup school. Being waitlisted at EIS is common and does not indicate a weak application. High test scores alone do not guarantee acceptance when space is limited.

Competitiveness by Stage

Stage	Flexibility	Demand
Early Years	Moderate	Medium
Lower Primary	Moderate	Med-High
Upper Primary	Limited	High
MYP	Limited	High
DP Entry	Very Limited	Very High

What Successful Applicants Show

- ▶ Solid academic foundations
- ▶ Functional academic English
- ▶ Independence and self-management
- ▶ Positive school behavior
- ▶ Consistent school reports

International School Ho Chi Minh City (ISHCMC)

IB Continuum: PYP • MYP • DP | One of Vietnam's Longest-Established IB World Schools

School Overview

One of the longest-established IB World Schools in Vietnam and widely viewed as a top-tier IB continuum school. Strong academic culture with clear expectations for independence and engagement. Diverse international student body with consistent retention across year groups. Particularly emphasizes learning attitude and engagement, not just academic results.

Admissions Process

- Initial enquiry and school visit
- Online application submission
- Review of academic records
- Student assessment (age-appropriate)
- Student interview
- Admissions decision

Strategic Advice

Apply early, especially for August entry. Be realistic about secondary and DP entry points. Prepare children for independence and discussion. Avoid over-coaching interviews — authentic engagement valued more than confidence alone. Consistency between assessment results and school reports is particularly important at ISHCMC.

Competitiveness by Stage

Stage	Flexibility	Demand
Early Years	Moderate	Medium
Lower Primary	Moderate	Med-High
Upper Primary	Limited	High
MYP	Limited	High
DP Entry	Very Limited	Very High

What Successful Applicants Show

- ▶ Strong or developing academic English
- ▶ Consistent academic performance
- ▶ Positive learning behavior
- ▶ Independence appropriate to age
- ▶ Readiness for inquiry-based learning

British International School (BIS HCMC)

IB Diploma Program (Upper Secondary) | British Curriculum Foundation → IB DP

School Overview

Well-established school offering IB DP in upper secondary within a British-curriculum pathway. British curriculum in earlier years (Key Stages through IGCSE-style), then IB Diploma as senior option. Strong academic culture and exam preparation. Clear expectations for behavior, effort, and independence. Best suited for students thriving in structured academic environments with British or exam-based backgrounds.

Admissions Process

- Application and document submission
- Review of academic records and transcripts
- Subject-based assessments or written tasks
- English language assessment (if applicable)
- Student interview
- Admissions decision and offer (subject to space and readiness)

Strategic Advice

Clarify IB entry timing early. Understand subject prerequisites. Apply well before DP entry year. Competition at BIS is concentrated at the DP entry point rather than spread evenly. Internal students are often prioritised — external applicants entering DP face the highest competition. Consider whether the British → IB transition suits your child.

Competitiveness by Stage

Stage	Flexibility	Demand
Early/Primary	Moderate	Medium
Pre-DP Years	Limited	High
IB Diploma Entry	Very Limited	Very High

What Successful Applicants Show

- ▶ Strong academic records in previous curricula
- ▶ Clear subject strengths
- ▶ Strong English reading and writing skills
- ▶ Self-discipline and time management
- ▶ Realistic understanding of IB expectations

Saigon South International School (SSIS)

IB Diploma Program | American Curriculum Foundation → IB DP

School Overview

Well-established school offering IB DP alongside an American-style curriculum. Known for strong academics, supportive learning environment, and clear university preparation focus. American-style grading and assessment leading into IB DP. Emphasis on student support and wellbeing with strong expectations for academic integrity and independence.

Admissions Process

- Application and document submission
- Review of academic records and transcripts
- Subject-based assessments or written tasks
- English language assessment (if applicable)
- Student interview
- Admissions decision and offer

Strategic Advice

Apply early, especially for DP entry. Clarify subject prerequisites. Assess readiness honestly. Maintain backup DP options. SSIS places particular emphasis on academic writing, reading comprehension, consistency of performance, and ability to meet deadlines independently.

Competitiveness by Stage

Stage	Flexibility	Demand
Primary & Lower Sec	Moderate	Medium
Upper Sec (Pre-DP)	Limited	Med-High
IB Diploma Entry	Very Limited	High

What Successful Applicants Show

- ▶ Strong academic records
- ▶ Solid foundations in Maths and English
- ▶ Clear subject interests
- ▶ Ability to manage workload
- ▶ Resilience and self-motivation

Australian International School (AIS) Saigon

IB Offered Within a Flexible International Pathway

School Overview

Offers IB alongside other international curriculum options. More flexible entry point compared to highly selective IB continuum schools. Known for a supportive environment, diverse student population, and emphasis on student wellbeing. Multiple curriculum options available. Rolling admissions across most year groups.

Admissions Process

- Initial enquiry and school tour
- Application and document submission
- Review of academic records
- Student assessment (age-appropriate)
- Student interview (older students)
- Admissions decision and offer

Strategic Advice

Consider AIS early if flexibility is important. Use AIS as a realistic option alongside more competitive schools. Clarify IB availability and pathways by year group. Ask about support services upfront. Particularly suitable for students transitioning into English-medium education or families new to international schooling.

Competitiveness by Stage

Stage	Flexibility	Demand
Early Years	High	Low-Med
Primary	Moderate	Medium
Lower Secondary	Moderate	Medium
Upper Sec / IB Entry	Limited	Med-High

What Successful Applicants Show

- ▶ Age-appropriate academic skills
- ▶ Willingness to learn
- ▶ Positive learning behavior
- ▶ Openness to feedback
- ▶ Realistic support needs

Renaissance International School Saigon

IB Offered Within a Balanced International Program

School Overview

Known for balanced, student-centered education with IB pathways at key stages.

Academically solid but more flexible than highly selective schools. Strong emphasis on holistic education, wellbeing, and community engagement. One of the schools in HCMC that commonly uses cognitive ability assessments (CAT4) from Year 3 onward — used for understanding learning potential, not as pass/fail.

Admissions Process

- Initial enquiry and school tour
- Online application and document submission
- Review of academic records
- Student assessment (including CAT4)
- Student interview (age-dependent)
- Admissions decision and offer

Strategic Advice

Consider Renaissance as a strong mid-range option. Apply early for upper secondary entry. Clarify IB pathways and subject options. Be open to placement recommendations. Works best for families seeking strong academics with balance and support rather than extreme selectivity.

Competitiveness by Stage

Stage	Flexibility	Demand
Early Years	High	Low-Med
Primary	Moderate	Medium
Lower Secondary	Moderate	Medium
Upper Sec / IB Entry	Limited	Med-High

What Successful Applicants Show

- ▶ Steady academic progress
- ▶ Age-appropriate English proficiency
- ▶ Positive learning behavior
- ▶ Openness to feedback
- ▶ Developing confidence and independence

SNA Saigon South Campus

IB Continuum: PYP • MYP • DP (Developing Program)

School Overview

A growing IB World School offering the full IB continuum. Greater admissions flexibility than the most established IB schools. Combines international curriculum ambition with developing IB culture and comparatively flexible entry points. Growing international student population with moderate class sizes and emphasis on bilingual and international education.

Admissions Process

- Initial enquiry and campus visit
- Application and document submission
- Review of academic records
- Student assessment (age-appropriate)
- Student interview (older students)
- Admissions decision and offer

Strategic Advice

View SNA as a growth-oriented IB option. Clarify programme maturity by division — ask how long the DP cohort has been running and what recent DP outcomes look like. Apply early for DP entry. Consider long-term fit, not just availability. Pair SNA with at least one established IB option when possible.

Competitiveness by Stage

Stage	Flexibility	Demand
Early Years	High	Low
Primary	High-Moderate	Low-Med
Lower Sec (MYP)	Moderate	Medium
Upper Sec / DP Entry	Limited	Medium

What Successful Applicants Show

- ▶ Age-appropriate academic readiness
- ▶ Developing English proficiency
- ▶ Positive learning behaviors
- ▶ Willingness to engage with inquiry-based learning

Non-IB Schools

When IB Is Not the Right Choice — And That's Okay

IB is not the right fit for every child, at every stage. Many non-IB schools provide excellent education, support bilingual development, nurture confidence, and prepare students well for future transitions.

Play-Based & Progressive

e.g. Anne Hill

Focus on early childhood development, minimal testing, strong social-emotional skills. Best for ages 2–10.

Inquiry-Based (Non-IB)

e.g. Aurora

Student-centered, project-based. Develops critical thinking without exam pressure. Good bridge school.

Bilingual (MOET + Intl)

e.g. Vinschool, Wellspring

Vietnamese curriculum + international elements. Structured, exam-driven, bilingual instruction.

Anne Hill International School

Play-Based, Progressive Early Years & Primary Education | Non-IB

School Overview

One of the most well-known play-based, progressive international schools in HCMC. Follows a child-centered philosophy with minimal formal testing. Prioritizes wellbeing over academic acceleration. Develops confident communicators. Primarily serves Early Years and Primary. Not a full secondary pathway — view as a foundation school to build confidence before transitioning.

Admissions Process

- Initial enquiry and campus visit
- Parent conversation with admissions or leadership
- Child observation or play session
- Enrollment offer (subject to availability)

Strategic Advice

Choose Anne Hill for who your child is now, not fear of the future. Ask clear questions about age range and exit points. Many families transition to IB primary, British, or American schools after. Plan transitions 1–2 years ahead and support academic skill-building before moves. Not suited for parents seeking accelerated academics or heavy homework.

Competitiveness by Stage

Stage	Flexibility	Demand
Early Years	High flex	Low
Primary	High flex	Low

What Successful Applicants Show

- ▶ Curious and expressive children
- ▶ Enjoy imaginative play
- ▶ Benefit from gentle structure
- ▶ Developing English confidence
- ▶ Need time to mature emotionally

Aurora International School

Progressive, Inquiry-Based Learning Beyond Early Years | Non-IB

School Overview

Progressive, reflective, student-centered, intentionally non-IB. More academic structure than play-based schools like Anne Hill, while avoiding exam-driven pressure. Emphasizes student voice, deep thinking, reflection, and real-world relevance. Project-based learning with close teacher-student relationships. Serves Primary and Lower Secondary.

Admissions Process

- Initial enquiry and school tour
- Parent conversation about philosophy
- Student interaction or trial day
- Review of school reports
- Enrollment offer (subject to fit and space)

Strategic Advice

Choose Aurora for learning style fit — not as a compromise. Students often transition into IB, British, or American schools after with planning. Many students who felt pressured elsewhere re-engage with learning at Aurora. Academic rigor comes through thinking, reflection, and sustained projects, not exams. Plan transitions at least 1–2 years in advance.

Competitiveness by Stage

Stage	Flexibility	Demand
Primary	High flex	Low-Med
Lower Secondary	Moderate	Low-Med

What Successful Applicants Show

- ▶ Enjoy asking questions and thinking deeply
- ▶ Like discussing and reflecting
- ▶ May struggle with rote learning
- ▶ Value creativity and autonomy
- ▶ Openness and willingness to engage

School Overview

One of the largest and most well-known bilingual school systems in Vietnam. Combines MOET curriculum with enhanced English instruction and international components. Strong academic structure, clear expectations and discipline. Standardized across campuses with large school communities. Multiple tracks: standard bilingual, enhanced/international-oriented, and pathways aligned to international qualifications. Families who own property at Vinhomes receive priority in the admission process.

Admissions Process

- Application submission
- Academic placement testing
- English assessment
- Review of previous school records
- Enrollment offer (based on results and space)

Strategic Advice

Clarify which track you are applying for — not all tracks are the same. Understand how much English instruction is included. Academic pressure can be higher and teaching style more traditional than international-only schools. A strong option for Vietnamese students aiming for bilingual fluency. Plan ahead if you may want to transition to fully international schools later.

Competitiveness by Stage

Stage	Flexibility	Demand
Entry Years	Moderate	Medium
Popular Campuses	Limited	Med-High
Higher Tracks	Limited	Med-High

What Successful Applicants Show

- ▶ Perform well in structured academic settings
- ▶ Comfortable with exams and testing
- ▶ Can manage homework and expectations
- ▶ Respond well to clear rules and routines
- ▶ Motivated by grades and achievement

The Application Process: What Schools Want

Core Documents Required

School Reports (2–3 years)

Most weighted document. Shows consistency, progress, effort, teacher observations beyond grades.

Parent Statement

Explain why you're applying, what you seek, anything important about your child. Most under-used opportunity.

Student Snapshot (1-page)

Name, strengths, growth areas, learning style, languages, interests. Not always required but always welcomed.

EAL/Support Disclosure

Always disclose honestly. Schools have limited EAL capacity. Better to know upfront than discover gaps mid-year.

ID & Health Records

Passport, visa/residency docs, immunisation records, allergy information.

What Assessments Cover

Early Years

Play-based observation, informal interaction, communication & readiness focus

Primary

English screening, literacy/numeracy tasks, classroom-style activities

MYP/Secondary

English proficiency (OOPT), CAT4 cognitive ability, subject-based tasks, interview

DP Entry

Prior curriculum review, subject-specific readiness, analytical writing, detailed transcripts, interview on motivation

Key insight: Assessments are diagnostic, not eliminative. Schools are not looking for perfect scores — they are looking for readiness, placement information, and support needs. A single test rarely determines the outcome on its own.

English Readiness: The #1 Factor

If there is one single factor that determines whether a child can access, participate in, and thrive within an international school, it is English proficiency.

Social English

Conversational ability — greetings, basic requests, everyday interaction. Many parents mistake this for readiness. Acquired relatively quickly (1–2 years) but is NOT sufficient for academic study.

Academic English

Reading complex texts, writing analytical essays, understanding subject-specific vocabulary, participating in academic discussions. Takes 5–7 years to develop fully. This is what schools assess.

What Parents Can Do

- ▶ Start English support before the application, not after gaps are revealed
- ▶ Maintain a home reading routine in English — 20 minutes a day makes an enormous difference
- ▶ Continue professional English support during the school year, not just around admissions
- ▶ Build real ability over time rather than coaching children to fake abilities in assessments

Managing Outcomes: Offers, Waitlists & Declines

When You Receive an Offer

- ▶ Pay deposit at first-choice school immediately
- ▶ Notify declined schools quickly to free seats
- ▶ Read deposit and withdrawal policies carefully
- ▶ Some deposits are non-refundable
- ▶ Don't hold multiple places indefinitely
- ▶ Respond within the deadline (typically 7–14 days)

Understanding Waitlists

- ▶ Waitlist = qualified but no current seat
- ▶ Not a rejection — many waitlisted students are fully qualified
- ▶ Confirm interest politely and promptly
- ▶ Ask about movement expectations
- ▶ Keep backup plans active — do not rely on waitlist alone
- ▶ Let go when another strong option is secured

Managing Declines

- ▶ Most commonly reflect space constraints, not your child's ability
- ▶ Ask admissions for any feedback they can share
- ▶ Use feedback to identify and address gaps
- ▶ Consider a preparatory period with targeted English support
- ▶ Return attention to other shortlisted schools
- ▶ A deferred assessment is actually a positive sign

After Admission: Thriving, Not Just Surviving

Even the most prepared child typically takes 6 months to a full year to feel genuinely settled.

What to Expect During Transition

- ▶ Fatigue — processing a new environment in a new language is exhausting
- ▶ Quietness or withdrawal — regrouping before participating
- ▶ Temporarily lower academic performance
- ▶ Social uncertainty — building friendships takes time
- ▶ Increased emotional sensitivity at home

How to Support Your Child

- ▶ Attend open days, parent evenings, information sessions
- ▶ Read teacher reports and follow up with questions
- ▶ Contact teachers early if you notice struggles
- ▶ Maintain 20-minute daily English reading routine at home
- ▶ Continue professional English support during school year
- ▶ Approach concerns collaboratively, not defensively

Planning the Full Journey

Don't assume siblings follow the same path automatically — sibling priority varies by school. If transferring mid-year, invest in preparation first. Before committing, ask: If this school offers PYP only, have you secured MYP options? Are fees sustainable long-term? How portable is the curriculum if you relocate? An admissions outcome is not a verdict on your child's intelligence, potential, or worth. It is a logistical snapshot of readiness, fit, and space at a particular moment in time.

**The goal is not to 'win' a school place —
but to find an environment where your
child can grow, learn, and thrive.**

Spark English Center Vietnam is here to support your family
at every stage of the international school journey.

IB English • ESL • Phonics • Reading, Writing & Speaking • IELTS

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