

# Second to None

## Tokyo's International Education



Students enjoying their lessons at Nishimachi International School

By Danielle Demetriou

Tokyo is a city that has long been synonymous with innovation and quality—from its Michelin-starred sushi restaurants and futuristic robots to its impressive skyscrapers.

However, something else should be added to the list that may not be quite so celebrated but is no less impressive: the city's international education environment. Tokyo is home to several high-quality international schools, which are as acclaimed for their stellar educational standards as they are for their focus on both Japanese and overseas cultures.

The rise of international schools in Tokyo may not be surprising in view of the soaring number of expatriate families starting life in the Japanese capital in recent years. The number of foreign residents in Tokyo has reached a record high, with approximately 449,000 long-term and permanent residents living in

the city as of January 1, 2016—an increase of about 8 percent over the previous year—according to figures released by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

The attractions of living in Tokyo are clear: it is not only a sophisticated contemporary metropolis but also a clean and efficient one, with an enviably punctual transport system and a near-zero rate of street crime. Tokyo's international education scene is the cosmopolitan icing on the cake. At present, 13 international schools are officially recognized by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, and some are accredited by the International Baccalaureate system, enabling graduates to attend universities overseas.

Among them are St. Mary's International School, The American School in Japan, The International French School in Tokyo, The British School in Tokyo, Nishimachi International School, and the New International School of Japan. The number of students at these schools is bolstered by the increase in Japanese

children whose parents are no doubt drawn to the idea of a cosmopolitan and high-quality education with a focus on a non-Japanese language, usually English.

The appeal (and importance) of learning English has perhaps never been stronger in Tokyo, where more and more leading industries are increasing their emphasis on staff who can speak English to remain globally competitive in a fast-paced commercial climate.

Tokyo's international schools do not focus only on English-language education; cultural aspects are also of paramount importance, with many establishments teaching pupils about customs, philosophies, festivals, and social structures in countries around the world. One example of an establishment that is blazing an educational trail is Nishimachi International School, which is located in the Azabu district of central Tokyo and first opened its doors in 1949.

Today, around 400 students from over 30 countries, from kindergarten to ninth grade, attend the school. Bringing children together, regardless of language or culture, is the school's guiding philosophy, as articulated by its founder, Tané Matsukata: "To share, to live and learn together, and yet keep a special identity—that is Nishimachi."

Michael Hosking, the school's Australian headmaster, explains: "Nishimachi is absolutely unique because it is widely recognized as a fully accredited and authorized international school, where students can develop both English and Japanese simultaneously. Many families are drawn to this possibility. Classes are in English, but all students receive daily Japanese-language lessons. There is an expectation that students who complete ten years of schooling at Nishimachi will be bilingual."

No less than language studies, a cultural focus on Japanese customs and traditions is regarded as important, according to Hosking: "Numerous Japanese culture programs are held throughout the school year, including visits by sumo wrestlers, *taiko* drumming, rice growing and harvesting, the celebration of cultural days, and making mochi (rice cakes). In the middle school, besides daily Japanese-language lessons, Japanese social studies is also a separate subject."

He adds: "Students who learn to become bicultural and bilingual will be able to smoothly make the transition to being multicultural, understanding diversity, and becoming multilingual as appropriate."

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Participating in various extracurricular activities at Nishimachi: rice harvesting, pounding rice for mochi (rice cakes), and playing the *koto*.