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JAMAICA PLAIN

But does the cafeteria serve bangers and mash?

By Kristin Erekson, Globe Correspondent | September 5, 2004

Ben Nuzzo is an ambitious kid. He studies a lot, gets good grades, plays the piano, and even likes science.

He is also a huge fan of the British invasion -- not pop music but pedagogy. For four years, Nuzzo has experienced a rare, royal treatment: Many of his friends are British, his teachers are British, and he studies the British National Curriculum.

His next step: starting classes next September at Eton College in Windsor, England, where he will be following in the footsteps of those most British of boys, princes William and Harry.

Nuzzo, 12, of Chestnut Hill, is one of 240 students attending the British School of Boston in Jamaica Plain, where children study the British National Curriculum, taught by teachers from the United Kingdom.

With enrollment jumping from 25 to 240 students in four years, the for-profit school moved from the small St. Mary's School in Dedham to Jamaica Plain and broke ground in June on a new school on the campus of the Showa Boston Institute. The school is expected eventually to accommodate 450 students from the nursery level through the International Baccalaureate Program -- a challenging diploma program for high schoolers. Annual tuition at the school ranges from \$16,800, for nursery level through fifth grade, to \$18,300 for sixth grade and above.

"I felt kind of weird on my first day of school" at the British School of Boston, said Nuzzo. "I wasn't sure if there would be anyone American."

But to Nuzzo's surprise, 65 percent of the students are American. Of the remainder, 30 percent are British and 5 percent are Russian, Italian, Dutch, or other nationalities, said headmaster Andrew Jedras.

The British School of Boston was designed originally for British expatriates to continue the British National Curriculum in the United States. But the school's international appeal and individualized teaching approach attracted many American families as well as other cultures within suburban and urban communities.

James Fraser, a professor of history and education at Northeastern University, said the British National Curriculum is not "any better or worse" than United States curriculums but they "are quite different."

"The whole curriculum in Britain is set in London and then implemented throughout the schools," said Fraser, 59. "In the United States, the states have the ultimate say and the higher level of autonomy. Each school committee in the US also has a great say. . . Curriculum is centralized in Britain and decentralized in the US."

Beyond academic standards, Catherine Marchetti of Dedham said she found a positive environment at the school that gave her confidence about enrolling her children, John, 13, and Arianna, 9.

"I liked the atmosphere and the people," said Marchetti. "This is definitely a place where I would like to leave my children. There was something that gave me the feeling of a nurturing environment, . . . a place that will continue to teach them what I teach them at home."

School staff members strive to teach manners and respect for others and to ground students in global issues. Students take trips to Paris, Rome, and London.

Marchetti chaperoned one of these overseas adventures last year and was amazed by her then-8-year-old daughter's knowledge about a city on one of their stops: Bath, England.

"There were headphones with recordings at these different sites and my daughter listened to every single one," said Marchetti. "It really opened her world. My kids teach me things."

The British National Curriculum encourages students to engage in analytical thinking rather than rote memorization, according to Jedras. The curriculum is structured into three "key stages" rather than grades to allow children to move at their own pace. An 11-year-old who is ready to start calculus, for example, can do so, said Jedras.

"My children are gifted learners," said Jim Nuzzo, 49, the father of Ben, 9-year-old Emma, and 5-year-old Spenser. The British School of Boston "truly tries to find a child where the child is rather than trying to make them fit into a cookie cutter."

Instead of the MCAS, students take United Kingdom assessment tests, said Jedras.

The tests include some multiple-choice questions but encourage students to solve problems in their heads, said Nuzzo.

For the 2002-2003 academic year, students achieved the highest scores in English, mathematics, and science, according to a British School of Boston test result booklet distributed to parents.

"These kids enjoy the process" of learning, said Marchetti. "They are taught to think. That's why the scores are higher -- because of the way your children learn and develop a love of learning."

Nuzzo's high test scores qualified him to take the entrance exam for Eton College.

Next year, when he trades his British School of Boston uniform -- blue slacks, white collared shirt emblazoned with the UK and US flags, and a blue-and-red-striped tie -- for a new one halfway across the world, he will be prepared for life in England.

And it will help having a friend -- another British School alumnus -- nearby, attending Westminster.

"The best thing about the British School of Boston," said Nuzzo, "was getting into Eton." ■

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