

# SchoolLinks

## School visits

from North to South and vice versa

PART 1: FROM SOUTH TO NORTH



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State of the Art

Exchange trips do not just start at the arrival. It requires careful planning well ahead of time. It is the intention of SchoolLinks to create an intensive cooperation during the year, with a visit being the highlight of the programme. Neither does the exchange finish at the departure, as a good aftereffect and follow-up after the trip are important for the further successful cooperation of the school link.

Most of the (practical) preparations have to be arranged by the visitors, but try to plan, coordinate and organise together as much as possible. It can only be a real exchange when the South as well as the North can learn from each other before, during and after the visit. This is the moment for building bridges with your partner school.

Even though you will prepare or plan everything to the best of your ability, remain aware that unexpected turns and surprises are also part of the upcoming experience.

Remember to capture the moment through the use of digital equipment (camera, phone, etc.), and write down important information immediately - as you know, the weakest ink is stronger than the strongest mind.

Good luck and we wish you a fascinating experience!



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# PRACTICAL PREPARATIONS

A visit from the South to Belgium is associated with some administrative arrangements. These have to be arranged mainly by the visiting school. Make sure that the visit is also supported by the rest of your school, so when you come back to give feedback on how to improve the programme, every staff member will receive the message positively.

Below are the guidelines to help you to successfully prepare your journey.

## TIP

The administrative services are often located in the capital city and you have to make time to make the trips over there, which is not always easy. For the schools located outside the range of the capital or not near the Belgium Embassy, planning can take some extra time so start to plan the trip well in advance.

## Who will be visiting?

Your school makes the decision on who will be visiting. It is of course logical that the principal and one or more teachers in charge of the schoollink will visit. They are the vital link of the cooperation.

To avoid erratic decisions, discuss the selection procedure in advance. Do all concerned persons get a chance to visit the partner school (at least once)? Does the partner school have a voice in this decision?

## Financial support

It is important for all participants to take into account the financial aspects of the visit, so as to avoid sudden surprises. The most important cost will concern food, lodging and transport. Check following aspects:

- Are the estimates of all possible costs made?
- Which costs are for the account of the visitors, and which costs for the receiving school?
- Who pays what, when and how?
- Is it possible to organise certain fundraising activities to cover some costs?

## VVOB's travel budget

You can request a travel budget from VVOB when submitting an action plan. Make good agreements with your partner school regarding which part of the budget is for which school (for example: expenses for the purchase of tickets, visa, passport, etc.), and which costs are administrated through the receiving school (for example: accommodation, transport in Belgium, etc.).

VVOB has foreseen in the grant a mandatory amount of 10€/day for the visitors from the South. This allowance is for you as the visitor, and cannot be used for the costs of the residence or to buy food. This extra small amount in cash is your pocket money to cover communication cost to home, souvenirs for school, etc.

### Attention:

- Before submitting the action plan, read through the document "Guidelines to fill in the action plan", to carefully check which costs can be submitted.
- Check and understand the exchange rate before you travel. Notify your bank, credit card company or other relevant financial institutions, that you are going overseas. Avoid carrying a lot of cash and consider using traveller's cheques or credit cards that are accepted in Belgium.

## Valid international passport

An international passport is crucial to travel to Belgium. Start the procedure in time.

Check the date of expiry of your passport, as some offices may require that your passport should be valid at least three or more months longer than the intended stay. The passport needs to have at least two consecutive blank pages. When travelling, make two photocopies of all your travel documents in case of emergency - should your documents get lost or stolen. Leave one copy with someone at home. Carry the other copy with your checked in luggage separately from the originals.

Should your school be able to privately fund pupils to also take the trip, be aware that most countries have put in place requirements to help prevent child abductions. They may require travellers to present proof of relationships to the children and evidence of consent from any non-accompanying parents.

## Visa

Most people from the South need a visa to visit Belgium (Schengen Area) as tourists. This is a sticker or a stamp that will be placed in the international passport by the Belgian Embassy or Consulate. You need to visit the nearest Belgian Embassy to obtain the permission to travel to and stay in Belgium. The Embassy might limit the number of applications accepted in one day, so make your appointment early to avoid disappointments.

### Attention:

- To request a visa you need a completed and signed visa application form (Schengen) and two recent photographs passport size. Other additional documents required could be an invitation letter, Schengen travel medical insurance, a return flight reservation, recent 3 months bank statements, etc.
- Choose your flights carefully. If a **stopover** should be necessary, you may need a **transit visa** for that country (temporary short period visa during your journey).

Visit the website of the nearest Belgian Embassy or Consulate for information, and/or contact them directly should you need further clarification.

- ▶ List of Belgian embassies and consulates:  
[http://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/services/embassies\\_and\\_consulates/belgian\\_embassies\\_and\\_consulates\\_abroad/](http://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/services/embassies_and_consulates/belgian_embassies_and_consulates_abroad/)
- ▶ Although the link below is in Dutch and French only, it can still be used to check a list of countries requiring a visa to visit Belgium:  
[https://sif-gid.ibz.be/NL/visumplichtige\\_derde\\_landen.aspx](https://sif-gid.ibz.be/NL/visumplichtige_derde_landen.aspx)
- ▶ How to obtain a visa for Belgium:  
[http://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/services/travel\\_to\\_belgium/visa\\_for\\_belgium/](http://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/services/travel_to_belgium/visa_for_belgium/)
- ▶ How to obtain a tourist visa:  
[https://dofi.ibz.be/sites/dvzoe/EN/Application-guides/Pages/Short\\_stay\\_for\\_tourism\\_purposes.aspx](https://dofi.ibz.be/sites/dvzoe/EN/Application-guides/Pages/Short_stay_for_tourism_purposes.aspx)

## Letter of invitation

Sometimes a letter of invitation is necessary to obtain the visa. Communicate with your partner school to prepare an invitation letter and have them send it to you before you visit the embassy or consulate. It is important to make sure that this letter mentions that you are invited through the Belgian partner school for the VVOB programme of SchoolLinks. It must have the heading, a stamp of the Belgian school and also the principal's signature.

You must have names of all travellers, the travel period and the main activities clearly mentioned. The office might also require a copy of the ID card of the host (front and back). Attach if needed the preliminary programme.

If the school link is also supported through, for example, the municipality (whether or not in the context of a 'city link'), it is best to have this included in the letter.

- ▶ You can find examples on the website:  
<http://www.scholenbanden.be/ondersteuning/bezoek>

## Health

You need a **valid travel health insurance** plan to cover medical expenses.

A travel health insurance should cover any costs of emergency evacuation, repatriation for medical reasons (also associated with returning the deceased home), emergency medical care and/or emergency hospital care during your stay/s on the **SCHENGEN territory**. This insurance must be valid for the whole of this territory and for the duration of the visit. The minimum cover is 30,000 euros. In principle, the insurance is taken out in your own country. Many travel agents and private companies offer travel insurance plans, but ask the competent consulate about the insurance companies whose contracts are accepted.

Check with your Belgian Embassy if you will need an International Certificate of Vaccination, commonly known as the **Yellow Card**. You may also want to create an opportunity to have a general medical check-up before taking the trip.

### Attention:

As you jointly plan the action plan, make a budget for the health insurance plan.

## TIPS

- If travelling during **flu season** (November through to April), the flu vaccine is recommended.
- On **long flights**, make sure to walk around the cabin and drink plenty of healthy fluids.
- If you are on **chronic medication**, pack enough to last your entire trip, including some extras in case of unexpected delays. Carry your medication in their original labelled container and carry them in your carry-on baggage to manage loss or delays. Get a letter from the doctor in case you are questioned about your carry on medication.

## Pledge

One condition for people from the South to obtain a visa is a proof of sufficient resources. This can be demonstrated through a Visa or MasterCard holding the name of the visitor, or through the submission of cash money (50€/day if you stay in a hotel, or 38€/day if you stay in host families).

Also take a letter from your employer stating designation, date of employment, salary, period of stay, purpose of visit and financial arrangement.

▶ You can find more info on:

[https://dofi.ibz.be/sites/dvzoe/EN/Application-guides/Pages/The\\_commitment\\_that\\_charge\\_will\\_be\\_taken\\_Annex\\_3bis.aspx](https://dofi.ibz.be/sites/dvzoe/EN/Application-guides/Pages/The_commitment_that_charge_will_be_taken_Annex_3bis.aspx)

## Plane ticket

The price for the ticket depends on the country from where you will be boarding, the period, the airline company, which ticket you take, flexibility, etc. It is important to gather enough information well beforehand and also ask assistance from your partner school. Sometimes it might be cheaper to buy the tickets in Belgium, sometimes not.

It is also recommended to take a cancellation insurance. If you cannot leave due to sickness, an accident, lack of a (timely/valid) visa, etc., the flight fee should be reimbursed. Make sure to be well informed on the conditions for cancellation insurance.

Sometimes the return flight has to be reconfirmed. This can be done online or by phone, but make sure you don't forget it!

### Attention:

Read the information on your ticket carefully, so that you do not miss your plane, as time zones can be tricky at times. Also, make sure you understand what is required from you as a passenger by that particular airline.

## Accommodation

It is common for the receiving school to arrange the residence of the visitors, since they know best what the options in the surroundings are. Between partners, discuss carefully what you would prefer and what the options are.

Arrange a place to stay with host families, as to stretch the grant received from VVOB SchoolLinks. Your partner school will be able to check with teachers, students and their parents if there are families who will be able to do this. This can also result in a more intense contact and an intercultural exchange within an informal atmosphere.

### VVOB's travel budget

A grant for the residence can be requested in the travel budget (20€ per person per day). This can only be used for the residence and has to be verified with a proof of payment. Make clear agreements with your partner school on how this will be arranged.

## Pack smart

- Pack according to the weather of the host country.
- Carry a minimum number of valuables, and arrange your luggage well so you can move quickly and freely.
- Avoid packing IDs, tickets and other documents in locations that you will not be able to access all times.
- In your luggage, have space reserved for items from your partner school to take along to your country.

# PLANNING THE EVENT

*What should be in the schedule?*

*This is the first step to be considered when thinking of the dates for visiting a partner school. The main reasons for the visit should be to work on the educational and cultural goals of the two schools. Collaborate with your teaching staff well ahead of time about the purpose of the visit. This is to make sure that the programme will be a good representation of everyone's interests.*

*During the preparation of the visit, frequent consultations with the partner school are necessary. This is to make sure that the programme is well adjusted to the needs of both parties.*

*Take into account that your partner school might want to organise your itinerary down to the last detail. Either way, a good preparation of the content is as important as the practical and administrative fuss involved in the visit.*

## Purposes of the visit

Visiting your Belgian partner school entails purposes on the level of the school and the school link, but also on a personal level. As a visitor you will focus on personal experiences to be shared with your school, while making sure you don't forget the objectives on the level of the school as well as the functioning of the school link!

Before the visit, it is important to formulate some concrete goals that you wish to reach as a school, during or after the visit. Below are some of questions to consider in your planning:

- Why are we visiting the partner school?
- What is the goal of our school with this visit?
- What is the goal of our school with the partner school?
- What do I wish to learn as a teacher through this exchange?
- How are we going to put what we learnt into practice?
- Who will be able to participate?
- How will I share my experiences with the rest of the school once I return?



In other words, the goals of the visit must be clear. It would be ideal to exchange the questions beforehand, since this helps to establish an open communication on the expectations. Moreover, the questions will help with the formulation of a concrete programme.

Take note that the answers to these questions can evolve at any time - from the beginning of the stay to the end. This is why it is useful to reassess the questions daily: review what you did or did not achieve, what you have learnt, what has changed for yourself, what can still be changed, and how your experience will impact on your environment back home.

## Teamwork during the programme

It is best that the receiving school takes the lead in making a programme for the visit. Kindly remind them to definitely take into account your educational goals and wishes. In this way, you can work in consultation with each other regarding the details of the visit.

Make time to get to know each other. Once everyone feels comfortable in the group, you can go ahead with the intercultural process and activities. Reserve some time towards the end of the visit to reflect on the programme.

### TIP

Search for fun energizers and introduction games. It breaks the ice and brings people closer together!

## Choosing activities

When planning the trip, consider the following questions to be able to choose relevant activities to participate in during your stay:

- What are the benefits?
- Is there enough time to complete this activity, for example also for the debriefing or to relax?
- Are we well prepared to support this activity?
- How can we work with teachers in the partner school on this activity?
- How do we implement/adapt it into our own environment?

### TIPS

- Remember to continuously keep in touch with your partner school and let them know of your mission and goals so that they can schedule those in the itinerary. Ask the teachers of your partner school what they might be interested in from your country, so that you can take that information to them.
- As a school, you can reflect on the SchoolLinks programme, and make something you can take with you: letters, artworks, drawings, video messages, presentation booklet, and so on. Or, you can ask the students of both schools to make a small 'survival' comic book, typical young people's language (topic of your choice) etc., which you can even use as ice-breaker.

### *Possible activities for the programme during the visit:*

- Meet all members of the school link
- Do class visits
- Explore their curriculum
- Learn about the general school management
- Look for possible interaction for future collaboration/ activities
- Accommodate the vision on the school link and discuss and organise future common actions
- Review the action plan
- Gather materials to use in the lessons back home (photos, videos, objects, and anything empowering and interesting)
- Visit other schools in the neighbourhood or an institution for higher education with a teaching class.
- Reflect on the visit frequently.

### **Attention:**

The VVOB SchoolLinks team also would like to meet the visitors from the South. This can take place during a formal meeting (an evaluation or planning), but also on a more informal moment. So don't forget to remind your partner to invite the SchoolLinks team and to allow enough time in the programme for this! This can also be an opportunity to also get further clarification about the school link with both school partners present.



# THE VISIT

## Personal learning path

International cooperation through SchoolLinks will get you in touch with a completely different culture. You will also be confronted with some real 'differences' like material and financial inequalities, a different manner of communication and pace, another vision on the world, unknown social relations or political correlations, a different level of education, and so on. This confrontation can be difficult for both your partner school and you. Being exposed to another culture will feel strange to anyone. Embrace the challenges and aim to learn as much as possible during this short stay. The partnership should help you assess yourself in relation to your own environment and empower you to want to make a positive difference in your school community, despite all challenges you face daily.

During this short international experience, intercultural exchanges and acquaintances are an important part of the result. Therefore it is of utmost importance to take time to strengthen the bond between partners by making trips around Belgium, relax, and get to know the environment. Be innovative, and create an opportunity for a powerful learning environment. Who knows - going around might spark new interesting activities to focus on as partners.



### TIP

**Informal sessions** will create a great opportunity for making lots of contacts, getting to know the colleagues in different ways or discussing certain interesting topics freely. This is also a very important session, not to be underestimated during the visit!



## Intercultural learning: two-way traffic

Teachers are also learners, and the trip will challenge your knowledge of your own country. You will be confronted with a different cultural frame of reference while in Belgium. Take time to reflect on things you rarely thought about before. Be prepared for questions regarding your values, norms and way of life. Don't forget that those who will be your host will have almost the same experience when they visit your school.

Intercultural learning has to come from both ways. A meeting with your partner school raises questions and makes you appreciate certain aspects of your own life even more, but it can also provide you with a more critical opinion on your own life and environment. It is crucial how you will handle this new environment. Stay positive. You can, as they say, put on several 'cultural glasses' to take a look at the world. Many people assume that their 'lenses' are the only ones that are right and that their vision is universal. Such a vision disturbs intercultural meetings.

No matter how hard you try to avoid pitfalls like stereotypes and generalising, there is a big chance that you will experience some form of cultural stress. This cultural shock is typical for someone who is immersed in a different culture. Use humour, be creative and take on an active, curious attitude. The differences are not better or worse, just different. Ask questions when you are confused and try to understand each other. Be empathetic at all times.

## Contact with home

You will probably like to call home to keep them informed. Check for the possibilities to arrange this and take into account possible time differences.

Maybe the only possible moment will be in the evening when you are with your guest family, but perhaps they don't have Skype. Is there a shop in the neighbourhood where you can buy international telephone cards? For costs like this, you can use your pocket money of 10€/day.



# BACK HOME

*You have been part of an intercultural learning process. A good evaluation and follow-up are essential to ensure a sustainable cooperation.*

## Personal impression

Once back home you can experience a (reversal) cultural shock. This can sound strange, since you know the environment and everything and everyone around you. Some experiences and impressions from the North can get you to think or to see things in a different way.

The personal processing of your experiences and impressions from during the visit is very important. Take your time to talk to other travellers. Check what you wanted to achieve during the visit, and what your personal expectations were. Use the notes you made of your experiences, lessons and ideas.

Below questions can help during the thinking process:

- What is your general impression?
- What will you always remember?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- What is your vision now on the contact and cooperation with the partner, and why?
- How do you see your own environment now? Do you see things in a different way?
- What are you going to do with these experiences?
- What would you do differently next time?

### Attention:

**Very important** is to contact your partner school again to thank them, to resume made agreements, and to let them know about the progress made in the SchoolLink programme since your departure.

## Evaluation of the visit

Once the first impressions and emotions are processed, it is important to process the visit together with the rest of the group. Try to think about how you can organise this with colleagues who also participated in the exchange.

Some suggestions:

- Look at the preparation and the initial goals of the programme. Were they achieved? Why (not)?
- Let everyone pick a photo of the visit that describes best their feelings, and have them share this with the group.
- Has your view on the school link or cooperation changed?
- When and why did or didn't it change?

The working group should check if the personal goals and those of the school are fulfilled, what the strengths and weaknesses of the collaboration are, what the gaps are that need to be attended to in the programme. During the next visit (from North to South or vice versa) this can all be taken into account. Share your experiences with the rest of the school.



## After the visit

In the best case scenario the whole school was involved in the visit in some way. This is not always the case, due to different reasons (other activities besides school, other priorities, a tight schedule, etc.). Ordinarily, the school community will be interested to hear about your experiences in Belgium, since your visit was announced to them.

This step is very important, as it expands the base of the school link with several involved people. Think of a way to give your experiences a permanent place in the school, for example an information board, an exhibition, a game or a quiz, a video, a book, a website, etc.

Possible activities after the visit:

- Organise an information day regarding the visit for the whole school, maybe together with an open day or a parent-teacher conference.
- Make a video or presentation with pictures and other images from the visit, and create a travelling exhibition, which will be rotated to all classes.
- After most visits, an intensive contact is established, especially during the first months. Thanks to blogs and online groups it is now very easy to exchange pictures, stories, films, etc. This is also something that can be done with other pupils and colleagues!
- Involve the (local) press in the exchange visit and also in the activities afterwards.
- Communicate with your colleagues about those aspects that you would like to adjust in the school link programme.
- You can work with colleagues to use the collected materials (photos, videos, objects, exercises and learning materials) for lessons on themes like ecology and environment, geography, history, language, mathematics, and so on.

Remember, not everyone will understand your experiences. Use what is applicable in your school environment to improve on teaching and learning. Rome was not built in a day; take conscious steps to involve everyone in the further development of the programme.



### Attention:

Don't forget to send the report of the visit to the VVOB Schoollinks team. This is a great way to share experiences with other Schoollinks participants on the website or in the newsletter!

We hope the experience you will gain through the visit will benefit you and everyone around you.

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