

# Private School in Moscow Loses All Foreign Staff

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March 03, 2014



Private secondary schools in Russia like Atlantic International School are attracting local and foreign students.

With only three months left in the academic school year, dozens of expatriate parents are looking for Moscow schools to accept their children after the prestigious Atlantic International School lost all of its more than 40 foreign teachers.

The Atlantic International School, which describes itself as an independent, non-profit organization with three schools in Moscow, announced in an e-mail to parents on Feb. 26 that its foreign teachers had been declared non grata, barring them from returning for five years.

The problem, the e-mail says, stems from an unknown person who contacted the Education Ministry at the start of the school year to complain about the school's teaching, sparking a series of about 30 government inspections that ultimately resulted in the discovery that the foreign teachers did not have the right visas to work in Russia.

The director of the school, Kaya Farik, said the complaint was filed by "envious people trying to damage a successfully growing business," according to the e-mail, a copy of which was provided to The Moscow Times by parents of students at the school.

With the education of more than 600 children facing serious disruption, parents and school staff have signed a petition addressed to President Vladimir Putin, the prime minister and the Education Ministry, asking for their intervention.

School administrators have offered assurances to parents that they were trying get the old teachers back or, most likely, will be forced to hire a completely new staff with fewer native English speakers. But as a cloud of uncertainty hangs over the school, parents are looking for ways to make sure that their children can successfully finish this school year.

"Parents are, of course, scrambling to find alternative arrangements for their children, which, needless to say, are not easy to come by, and it is unlikely that the other international schools in Moscow will be able to pick up all of the slack," said one expatriate parent whose daughter attends the school.

School officials refused repeated requests for comment over the past week. A top administrator, Galina Kovalenko, agreed to discuss the situation after a staff meeting Monday. But after the meeting, she said that the only comment she would offer was that the school was ready to return to work without any problems.

The school also has a St. Petersburg location, and a representative there said its foreign teachers did not have any problems. One parent said, however, that the St. Petersburg school was the first place affected.

The school, which was fast growing, had planned to open a campus in Minsk and a fourth one in Moscow later this year.

The Atlantic International School opened its doors to children from the ages of 2 to 18 in 2009, with a stated goal of providing a high-value education to the expatriate and local community. On its website, the school extols its use of native English teachers and the fact that it is a registered Cambridge International School and licensed by the Russian Education Ministry. Annual tuition runs from 800,000 rubles (\$22,200) for nursery school to 1.1 million rubles (\$33,350) for high school.

In recent years, international schools and preschools have become increasingly popular among people living in Moscow. Dozens of international schools, including the Anglo-American School and the British International School, offer education in English, French, Polish and other languages.

The Atlantic International School underwent about 30 inspections by Russian authorities since the start of the school year in September, but it passed all but the last of them with only minor reproaches, said one parent, who like many people interviewed for this report spoke on condition of anonymity, saying they feared drawing negative attention to themselves or their organizations.

The inspections started after a complaint sent by parent identified only as Ivanov to the

Education Ministry at the beginning of this school year, one parent said. School officials have failed to link the common Russian surname to any of its students, leading parents to see the complaint as a trumped-up pretext for the inspections.

School administrators told parents earlier this year that their foreign teachers had left the country to process new visas at the request of the Federal Migration Service. But after leaving the country, the teachers were notified that they would not be allowed to return for the next five years for national security reasons, the school board informed parents at a meeting two weeks ago, one of the participants said.

Details about the visa situation are murky. A Federal Migration Service spokesman said he was unaware of any problem involving the school's teachers. A British Embassy spokesman also knew nothing about the matter.

Regardless of the cause, it is clear to parents that the school is unable to fulfill its curriculum with the current teacher shortage, leaving them seeking new schools for their children. Not many schools appear able to help on short notice, but at least one, the British International School, which offers a curriculum similar to Atlantic's, said it was considering opening classes to accommodate some of the children.

International schools said they were not afraid that Atlantic's troubles might be part of a broader trend that could affect their foreign staff.

"I am afraid to even guess what the incidents with Atlantic were caused by," said an employee at an international school. "But as we are kind of colleagues, we feel strong indignation about what happened."

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/03/03/private-school-in-moscow-loses-all-foreign-staff-a3264>