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«Чтобы построить школу, мне потребовалось почти два года»

Предпринимательница Елена Буянова – о том, как создать международную школу с нуля в чужой стране



Ольга Проскурнина ★ 0



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Во дворе школы Ехуперу
архив школы

«It took me almost two years to build a school»

Entrepreneur Elena Buyanova shares her experience of building an international school from the ground up in a foreign country.

In 2016 Elena Buyanova - who was the owner of the Russian IT Company named Oberon, which is famous for its call center services for banks and retailers—opened an international school, Exupery, not far from Riga. It didn't take long for the new school building to gather several awards for its remarkable architecture, and the number of those who were willing to enroll to the school was increasing rapidly. In her interview with the Republic, Elena Buyanova explains how she decided to invest in the education outside Russia, how much the program cost, and if it's possible to pay this investment off.

– How does it feel to create a private school for kids in a foreign country?

– When my family moved to Latvia, there were two international schools there, and a long wait-list for those who wanted to enroll. The schools were oriented toward the traditional education system. However, I am sure that this classical methodology of education, with the same number of school subjects and pedagogical methods, doesn't meet the needs and targets of a modern society. So, I thought I could create a new school. I believe if you want to make the world a better place you need to start with yourself and change what you can right where you are. I started my professional

career as a teacher of math, but I had to quit school, as I was not keen on the tutor's principles nor realization.

In our modern society, the educational system is going through significant changes right now. We don't know what professional path will be chosen by our kids, which jobs will be in demand, and which will go extinct. We ourselves have changed our career direction several times, and our children have to learn not professions but rather skills. Like, for example, how to find and use the right information in the informational chaos. Another important skill to be learnt is how to cooperate with each other at work. Despite all of our social media and modern gadgets, people are losing contact and it seems harder for them to communicate in real life, or to work to create something together.

– How do they manage to play online computer games like Fortnite?

– We have two sides of a coin here. On the one hand, the online games in general are a new industry with key players, teams, etc. People earn money here, build strategies, and become cyberathletes. On the other hand, most of the people just hide themselves behind these games, wasting their time. And as soon they have to communicate on the everyday level or during the process of studying, they face difficulties. Besides, they don't have the ability to present themselves. Children are not capable of defending their opinion calmly and with the help of logical arguments, without being hysterical about why they think this and that. In a classical school there is hardly a methodology to teach children how to cooperate, to use teamwork. That's why, graduating from such a school, adults are far from being prepared for the reality of the market.

– How do you think is possible to find a solution in a school education?

– One can learn how to stand for their opinion while debating. The same can help to learn how to write an essay. It's not an easy task as you have to learn how to form a question, how to research, how to find suitable pros and cons, how to answer by choosing your own position and explaining it. It's totally different from rewriting an article from the internet as it seems to happen in our schools of the post-Soviet era. We also have a school assembly, an institution of self-management that lets children take part in decision-making processes regarding the rules and guidelines of the school. For example, the children made the decision that we won't have a school uniform here.

It's important to learn such things starting from a very early age. That's why I'm fond of the International Baccalaureate system. One of its main principles is

the responsibility of a child for their actions, decisions and education. It starts from tiny things: it's not the parent who puts the sport clothes in a school bag, it's the child themselves. We start teaching children to be responsible for themselves from kindergarten onwards.

– Is your preschool a French one?

– Yes, the tuition is in French, and after graduation from the preschool, our children are almost bilingual. In preschool we add the English language (25-30 out of 40 tuition hours weekly) to the French one. It's important for their future school education to

allow them to understand the material. We support 4 languages at Exupery, including Latvian and Russian. English is the main school language according to the IB system.

– What are the educational standards you are working with?

– The IB System was developed after World War II in Switzerland for the international educational movement known as the United World College. By the way, the school founded by Ruben Vardanyan in Diligan is also in this system. IB doesn't have unified school books, so you can choose any working materials, like, for example, Oxford English or Math books. But the educational standards and academic results they have are the highest now. More than 1600 globally-known universities accept students with good IB DP (diploma program of international bachelor 11-12 grades) results without any additional exams.

«School is the people, not the walls»

– What does a school need to get IB accreditation?

– It's not that easy. You have to develop a program that suits the standards and values of the IB, and to train the teachers either online or with the help of the trainers from Switzerland. The tuition should be guided by IB policies and rules. There are annual reviews to check if the school meets all standards of the IB program.

– How much does it cost in time and money to organize all this from scratch?

– It took me almost two years to build the school, starting from the words "I want to build a school" to the moment it was entered by the first students. We had a very good Latvian architect, Yuri Lazis, who finished the project within three months. Half a year later we started the construction process, and within 9 months the building was completed. The speed was not at the expense of quality; the architectural aspect of the school building won several international professional awards. The building itself and the equipment cost was about 16 million EUR.

– Was it your money or did someone invest in the project?

– It was our family's money.

– What else do you need to build a school?

– You need to have a great team. Any school is always people, not walls.

– Where did you find them?

– We started from the nursery. My daughter in Russia went to the French nursery in Moscow. The French team was looking to move out of Russia and I invited them to join my project in Latvia. Why did I choose Latvia? As a child I spent here a lot of time and I like being here. Also, due to some private circumstances, we moved to Latvia. I believe that the French preschool/elementary school education system is one of the best in the world. The middle school and the high school can be discussed, but the nursery and elementary school are great. After the French nursery, kids can distinguish Monet from Manet, speak fluently in French, English, and their native

language, play theater, draw, feel absolutely free, and feel unafraid of expressing their opinion.

- Will your investment be paid off?

– Well, there are capital investments: money spent for the building and equipment. We don't plan to return this investment; it's our gift for the children, an investment into society. The operational costs are the salaries, working materials, and all further purchases for the school. According to our business plan, the school will be self-sufficient next year.

– The annual tuition fee is 16,000 EUR. Do you enroll any students, or do you have an entrance test?

– In the first two years of our existence we enrolled everyone. Now we're not capable of that doing that; many grades have only 2-3 places left.

Interior of the Exupery school

«It's interesting to build a new type of school»

– What is the perspective of your company? Last year the authorities said that the government was planning to invest 1 trillion rubles into the digitalization of Russia. Do you plan to pay any part of this budget?

– We will not take part in this initiative, so I won't comment on it.

– Besides your IT company Oberon, you also had a separate business related to wine and flowers, correct?

– Yes, we had a company called WRConcept that was focused on floral and landscape design. This business existed for 8 years, from 2006 to 2013, and taught me a lot. First of all, I learnt how to create beauty. At the beginning we had several shops to buy wine and flowers for the evening. It was even the name of the brand those days – Wine and Roses. But at the end we had only one shop, as it became difficult to get the license for the alcohol. So, we took a new step and started to make landscape design. We had many clients and amazing floral artists. But after the crisis in 2014 we made a decision to close this business. When you have nothing to eat you don't buy expensive flowers anymore.

– Do you want to open the same style of school in Russia?

– My family and my kids live in Latvia now. So I'm very interested in building a new type of school to teach children all the competencies that are demanded by the market. I want children to go to school with pleasure, not because they want to get a certificate to enter a university. It's important to me to do this project. And to create a good school I need about 10-15 years, so let's see.

I'm a professional teacher at the end of the day. I dream that children will be taught by successful professionals and experts, not by the graduates of the pedagogical universities. I do like educational system of Finland, as they cancelled pedagogical universities and created coaching faculties in the professional universities instead. These people tutor and coach a child in their field of experience.

Recently I asked my 8-year-old daughter. "Why do you think fish are swimming?" She answered: "I don't know, because of flippers?" I said: "If I gave you a flipper, would you be able to swim?" She answered: "It also has gills."

I was like, and so, what else? And she was digging into this topic until she learnt about the air bladder that shrinks when a fish goes deeper and distends when it goes up. And she was interested to find it out. But the most interesting and challenging task is to teach your child not only to find an answer in Wikipedia, but to think through their answer and to make it unique. The art and skill of thinking is exactly what make our children competitive in the most turbulent situations.