

Technoschools

First it was the space race, then the computer wars and the dotcom boom and bust. The new frontier? Ho Chi Minh City's very own schools. Words by **Will Peach**. Photos by **Rico Gonzales**.



Technology is a major variable in choosing a school for a child

DEEP IN THE EDUCATIONAL CLIMATE of Southeast Asia, a great contest is building. Schools are vying against one another, trying to get the upper hand. Parents are also seduced, aligning their tuition preference alongside the most attractive option. The deciding factor? Technology.

International schools are like any other business – they must compete to survive – and a whole host of factors can affect parents' choice of one school over another. However, according to Hal Philips of PR company Mandarin Media, the use or non-use of technology is the crucial market differentiator.

"All schools are striving to be technologically cutting edge," he explains. "It is the very thing that can make or break a school's reputation."

• A Battle on all Fronts

For parents, technology is a major variable in choosing a school for their child, a mark of an establishment's professionalism and quality. According to Hal, parents also see it as critical to their role as nurturers.

"Anxiety is often felt by parents whose children are being educated abroad," he explains. "They want to feel they are doing the best by them. This means giving them the opportunity to explore and use technology in their everyday roles at school."

TECHNOFILES

Computers for the whole class.



Whether students know it or not, they are embroiled in the race. Their adoption of computers and the internet makes it difficult to preserve the days of chalk and blackboards. The modern school must now provide all the tools necessary to access the Web 2.0. Failing to do so is perilous, both to business and learning.

◦ Who's in the Race?

"It's been our intention all along to offer the most technologically current learning atmosphere in Vietnam," says Ian King, general director of ACG. "It's what sets us apart from other international schools, not just here in Ho Chi Minh City, but across the region."

The school has installed miles of high-speed fibre optic cables beneath the campus. This gives students access to the World Wide Web anywhere on the premises.

But what about changes in the classroom? ACG is also utilising technology to transform the face of learning both at school and at home.

Blackboard, a school-wide management system allowing teachers, students and parents to access and work on projects online, has been implemented, as well as *Planner*, a programme that allows ACG teachers to share information, knowledge and resources with schools belonging to their group in Jakarta and New Zealand.

Competition certainly is fierce.

Noelle Iles, head of PR for British International School Vietnam (BISV), highlights just some of the things being done on each of their campuses.

"We are on a level playing field if not better," she says. "From the age of five, children at BISV are heavily involved in using technology. This enhances their learning experience."

BISV certainly boasts an impressive roster of tools. The school's library is completely digitalised. They have an online resource learning centre that matches that of ACG. They even have a state-of-the-art Macintosh suite available for both secondary and primary students allowing them to use and complete professional looking graphic design projects on-site.

If that isn't enough, BISV has also incorporated interactive whiteboard technology inside each of their classrooms, allowing students to play interactive games in the classroom and complete cutting edge presentations on a wealth of subjects.

"Technology has certainly opened up their world," she states.

The pace at which schools are moving is astonishing. The International School of Ho Chi Minh City (ISHCMC) has several networked computer suites and, like BISV, a unique suite dedicated to design technology.

ISHCMC also uses *Moodle*, a virtual learning environment similar to *Blackboard*. Combine this with students in grades nine to 12 using graphic tablets to keep paper use to a minimum, and they are a strong contender for the technology crown.

◦ Where does the future lie?

However, is all the emphasis on technological development healthy?

There are certainly discrepancies and disagreements about which tools help most. Andrew Gill, coordinator of administration, students and ICT at Australian International School (AIS) suggests that *Blackboard* and other virtual learning systems are "not suited to the tertiary sector."

This, he says, is why AIS uses the community portal *Studywiz*, designed specifically with primary and secondary students in mind. He also doubts the significance of tools like interactive whiteboards, saying that "most teachers can't use them effectively."

One thing is for sure. All these schools believe that investment in the latest technology is necessary for improving the overall quality of learning. It's no longer just simply a question of Photoshop over physics or Microsoft Office over maths. These subjects now complement each other. **W**