

Graduation of first cohort of students from Azbuka Anglo-Russian international School in London

Первый выпуск русско-английской интернациональной школы АЗБУКА в Лондоне

Friday 24 June 2022 was no ordinary day for the Azbuka community. The school hall in a beautiful Victorian building in West London was packed with children, teachers, parents and friends, and with emotions: happiness and achievement, pride and humility, smiles and tears, sadness and reflection as they moved on.

The first cohort of students was graduating from Azbuka Primary School, signalling an important milestone in the success of the Anglo-Russian international primary school in London, and for bilingual education in general.

A small group completed Year 6, bringing to an end their studies using a pioneering 2-way immersion bilingual and multicultural education curriculum. They were all well prepared to move on to a range of highly regarded state and independent secondary schools around London.

Azbuka Primary School, the UK's only independent Anglo-Russian primary school, built on the Azbuka Foundation's oversubscribed Nursery school (est. in 2002), complementary Saturday school and education centre created two decades ago. The Primary school opened in 2016 and now offers full-time bilingual curriculum from nursery/reception through to Year 6.

The journey towards a full-time bilingual school has been long, exciting and challenging. Inspired by the vision of the founding members, it was formed as charitable foundation, independent from either Russian or British government funding and focussed, to serve the linguistic, cultural, social and academic needs of its own multicultural community. Over the years, Azbuka has attracted families, trustees and supporters from many different backgrounds, nationalities and cultures.

All of its students benefit from a fully immersive curriculum and rich extra-curricular activities taught in both Russian and English, drawing on the best traditions of both cultures. They speak 15 languages and comprise a thriving multilingual community with many mixed families and teachers with origins in the cultures of Russia, England, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, USA, France, Spain, Estonia, Italy, Sweden, Latvia and China among others.

Azbuka school has recently also offered a number of places to children arriving from Ukraine, with extra curriculum support for English, Ukrainian and Russian languages.

Maria Gavrilova, founder and headteacher, said: *"I'm thrilled to see our first students graduate. On the 24th June my dream came true. 2022 marks a really exciting milestone for Azbuka school, which our dedicated staff have been building with*

innovative approaches to bilingual pedagogy to prepare our children for the future in the best possible way, building on tolerance and understanding.

The gift of another language and culture is truly unique: from the early childhood it opens the doors to another way of comprehending the world, granting a gift of true understanding, love and compassion as well as wider academic, cognitive and economic benefits. In our world torn by division and confrontation, the very idea of a bilingual educational space - where children and teachers of very different cultures learn, play, make friends and work together – is becoming more important than ever. Every day at Azbuka brings more convincing proof of the humanitarian and unifying value of bilingual education.

The birth, survival and growth of bilingual education demonstrates a profound truth: humanity transcends conventional political, cultural or linguistic border. Connection and understanding are at the very depth of the human heart.”

Anastasija Royce, parent of one of the graduates, said: *“We were lucky with the timing: our son was in the first year the school started and is one of the first graduates. The incredible journey over the past 7 years was as exciting and fruitful as it gets in a caring and engaging educational environment.*

Azbuka is more than a school, it is an extended family to us and I am sure to all the children that attend the school. On behalf of myself and other parents I would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the head teacher and all teachers and staff for their professionalism, dedication and care, which made an extremely important difference to the lives of our children. May the School continue its success over the years to come.”

Paul Hume, head of English department and deputy head, said: *“I am so proud to have had the privilege of teaching this cohort from Year 4 to 6. The journey they have made, their progress both socially and academically, is testament to the quality of the school’s bilingual curriculum. It gives me great pleasure to see them graduate with fantastic results and I wish them every success for the future.”*

Dr Vally Lytra, an Azbuka governor and academic, said: *“Warmest congratulations to the class of 2022! As a new school governor, I had the opportunity and privilege to recently witness the Year 6 cohort in action. I was impressed by their confidence and their openness and curiosity about making connections across languages and cultures.*

I was equally impressed by the children’s welcoming attitude towards a new refugee classmate from Ukraine, who have joined the school. Its inclusive pedagogical approach and rigorous curriculum alongside an ethos of care and respect creates a nurturing environment for all children to grow academically, socially and emotionally and equips them with the knowledge and skills to succeed and make a positive contribution in a multilingual and multicultural world.”

Jelena Rosenberg, said: *“As a class teacher and Head of the Russian curriculum at Azbuka school I have witnessed and played my part in our school's development and growth, from a single class intake of just three student to the full primary school*

setting of today. Azbuka has grown as have its students, who together with their teachers and parents began an exciting journey into the world of bilingualism all those years ago. I am very proud of our Year 6 students' achievements and results.

Opening Azbuka school was a daring though well researched idea, the realisation of a dream for our founding members, who have managed to build a strong and enthusiastic team of teachers around them, who have poured all their knowledge, skills and creativity into the project.

It was a leap into uncharted waters for many of us. The big idea, whilst founded on strong theoretical principles, needed to be brought to life – a bilingual curriculum. This was a challenging task for both English and Russian teachers. With our students' interests and developmental needs uppermost in our minds, once the year one topics were carefully chosen; English and Russian linguistic objectives set; Peterson's Maths programme launched; and supportive literature in both languages ordered - the learning began.

Six years on, Azbuka school has developed a broad, culture rich, comprehensive and unique curriculum for all classes. Along with English, Russian and Maths we teach History, Geography and Science in both languages, covering a wide range of interesting topics.

All Azbuka school children have opportunities to apply themselves in art, dance and song, and to develop drama and circus skills. Our KS2 children participate in Spanish, practical Science and IT lessons provided by specialist teachers. In Azbuka we strongly believe and actively promote cultural interaction with the wider world beyond the school premises. Educational visits to museums, galleries, theatres and other cultural venues are supplemented with talks by invited speakers are all considered very important and therefore a compulsory and hugely enjoyable part of our curriculum.

All school staff work together in the education and development of our students to help them to become not only confident users of language and maths but also beautiful, kind and openminded individuals.”

The school is an integral part of the bilingual education movement in England, as a member of the Independent Schools Association (ISA) and a founding member of the Bilingual Education Alliance (BEA), a network and association of bilingual and international schools within the UK.