

who sets the price? how aelo swiss academy keeps tuition fair and competitive

A father once stopped me in the corridor after an open house evening, fee schedule folded into his jacket pocket, and asked the question most families are too polite to say out loud. "Who sets this number? And why should I believe it's fair?" He was not being hostile. He was being sensible. He had compared three schools, seen three prices that differed by thousands of francs for programs that looked nearly identical on paper, and drawn the obvious conclusion: somebody, somewhere, is choosing these figures, and the reasoning is invisible to him.

I want to answer that question properly, because it deserves a proper answer. Tuition is the second-largest financial commitment most families make after housing, and private education has a bad habit of treating its pricing like a state secret. At AELO Swiss Academy we take the opposite view. If you are going to trust us with your child's afternoons for several years, you should understand exactly how the price of that trust is built.

the uncomfortable question behind every fee schedule

Start with how much of the industry actually [reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com) works. Many private schools price the way airlines do: find the ceiling, quote it, then discount selectively. The sticker figure is set high enough that a "scholarship" can be awarded to almost anyone who negotiates, which means the scholarship is not really a scholarship. It is a discount dressed up as generosity, and the families who pay full price are quietly subsidizing the ones who haggled harder. Add recruitment commissions, glossy brochures, and fees that appear after enrollment like weeds after rain, and you can understand why parents get suspicious.

That suspicion is healthy. You should be suspicious. But suspicion without information curdles into cynicism, and cynicism helps nobody choose a school. So here is the honest account of how tuition gets set where I work, including the parts that are less flattering.

what your tuition actually pays for

Switzerland is an expensive place to run anything, and a school more than most. Teacher salaries here are among the highest in Europe, which is exactly as it should be, because the single strongest predictor of what a student learns is the quality and stability of the person at the front of the room. Roughly three quarters of every franc we take in lands in someone's paycheck, ours included. The rest goes to rent in a Swiss city, insurance, materials, exam registrations, and the quiet costs nobody thinks about: the heating in January, the software licenses, the replacement projector bulb.

Small classes are the other big driver, and the arithmetic is unforgiving. If you run a class of fourteen instead of twenty-eight, your teacher cost per student doubles instantly. That is not waste. That is the product. A teacher with fourteen students can read a struggling essay properly, can notice that a confident kid has stopped asking questions, can give feedback that actually changes how someone writes. But it means the price of that attention is real, and pretending otherwise would be dishonest.

the meeting where the number gets argued

Every autumn, four of us sit down with the actual numbers from the previous year: the academic director, the finance lead, a faculty representative, and me from admissions. We go through real costs, not projections that

flatter us. We look at the enrollment forecast. We listen to what teachers say the classrooms need, which is usually more mundane than people imagine: another set of textbooks, a second lab session, repair work on a room everyone has been politely ignoring.

Then comes the argument, and it is a genuine argument. Two years ago the first draft of the budget implied a fee increase of about six percent. We cut it to three. Enrollment had grown enough that the additional students covered most of the shortfall on their own, and none of us could construct an honest justification for taking more from existing families simply because the market would have tolerated it. Nobody in that room wants to be the school that priced a family out mid-program. That is not marketing language. It is the operating constraint we actually argue within.

cost-led, not market-led

There are two ways to set a price. The first is market-led: research what comparable schools charge, find the ceiling families will bear, and set your number just under it. The second is cost-led: add up what it genuinely takes to run the program well, add a modest buffer, and stop. The buffer matters, by the way. A school with no reserves has only two options when the boiler dies or a cohort shrinks: close, or hit families with an emergency increase. We hold a reserve of roughly five to eight percent of operating costs, which means when something breaks, we fix it without a special letter home asking for money.

AELO Swiss Academy prices the second way. The consequence is that our fees are boring. They move a little most years, sometimes not at all, and the movements track costs rather than ambition. Boring is underrated. A family planning three or four years of enrollment needs to be able to forecast, and a fee that jumps around makes planning impossible.

where we sit in the swiss market

Private day schools in Swiss cities commonly charge anywhere from the mid-teens to around forty thousand francs a year, and boarding schools run far above that. Within the day-school band, we sit below the midpoint for our category, and we know this because we check, every year, the same way you will. When families tell me they are comparing us with two or three other institutions, I encourage it. Ask all of us the same questions. Request the same breakdowns. A school that gets uneasy about comparison shopping is telling you something, and you should listen.

the fee you see is the fee you pay

The ugliest trick in school pricing is the low headline number followed by the invoice that keeps growing. Registration fees, exam fees, materials levies, "technology charges," mandatory trips billed separately, a graduation fee that appears in the final year when your leverage is zero. Each one is small enough to swallow and large enough, in aggregate, to add a meaningful percentage to the real cost.

We bundle instead. The published fee at AELO Swiss Academy includes:

- all instruction and standard assessments, including exam registration costs
- core course materials and textbooks
- the standard program of field trips and excursions
- access to scheduled academic support and tutoring hours
- the administrative costs of enrollment, transcripts, and references

If something falls outside that list, you will know about it before you sign, in writing, with a number attached. The test I apply is simple: would I be embarrassed to explain this charge to the father with the folded fee schedule? If yes, it does not go out.

what we deliberately don't spend on

Fair pricing is as much about restraint as about calculation. We do not pay recruitment commissions to education agents, a practice that is common in international education and can eat a substantial slice of a first year's tuition. When a school pays recruiters, every enrolled family is subsidizing that cost, because it is baked into everyone's fees. We would rather a family find us because a neighbor mentioned us, or because they sat in on a class unannounced.

Our lobby will also not impress anyone. There is no marble, no commissioned sculpture, no promotional film. The trade-off is deliberate: money that other institutions spend on impressing visitors during the ninety minutes of an open house, we spend on the person standing in front of your child for the other ninety minutes of their week. When you visit, judge the classrooms and the teaching, because that is what you are actually buying.

when the franc moves and when enrollment dips

Two edge cases reveal a school's real pricing character. The first is currency. Our fees are set in Swiss francs, and families paying from abroad in euros or dollars face exchange-rate swings they cannot control. Our policy is that the rate is locked at enrollment for the full academic year, and families can pay in interest-free installments across the year rather than in one bruising lump. We cannot abolish currency risk, but we can refuse to profit from it.



The second edge case is harder. What happens when enrollment dips? The tempting move, and the common one, is to spread the shortfall across the remaining families with a sudden increase. We have committed to the opposite sequence: discretionary spending gets cut first, classrooms get protected, and if a fee adjustment ever becomes unavoidable, families hear about it a full term in advance, with the reasoning laid out. This costs us money in lean years. It earns us something worth more, which is families who stay and families who refer us, because a recommendation from a parent who trusts the institution is worth more than any brochure we could have printed with the money we saved.



help that doesn't involve games

Some families need assistance, and a fair pricing model has to have an honest answer for them. We operate a genuine sliding scale, funded from the operating budget, assessed on documented need, and renewed by review rather than awarded as a one-time hook. Siblings receive a reduction. The distinction I would draw for you is this: real aid is funded by the school and costs the school something. Fake aid is a discount off an inflated sticker price and costs nothing. Ask any school you are considering which one it offers, and ask how the aid is funded. The answer is revealing.

how to pressure-test any school's price, including ours

You should not take my word for any of this, and I would think less of you if you did. Take these five questions to every school on your list, ours included, and compare the answers rather than the brochures:

- What share of the fee goes to instruction and the people delivering it?
- What is not included in the published fee, and what did last year's extras actually total?
- When did you last raise fees, how far in advance were families told, and why?
- Do you pay commissions to agents or recruiters, and is that cost in my fee?
- If enrollment drops, does the shortfall land on the remaining families?

A school that answers these plainly, even when the answers are imperfect, is a school that respects you. A school that gets defensive has answered the fifth question in its own way.

fairness is a habit, not a slogan

Nobody at AELO Swiss Academy wakes up wanting to be the cheapest option in Switzerland, because cheap education is its own kind of dishonesty. What we want to be is the school where the price survives scrutiny: built from real costs, argued over by real people, positioned below the middle of the market, and explained before you ever have to ask.

So ask. Request the full fee breakdown, sit in on a class, put the five questions to us in person and watch whether anyone flinches. The father with the folded schedule did, and his daughter is in her second year with us now. He told me later that the number on the page mattered less than the fact that we could tell him, within a franc or two, where every bit of it went. That is the standard. Hold us to it, and hold every other school to it too.

