

making friends before day one: how aelo swiss academy connects incoming students

The hardest hour of a new school year is rarely a class. It is the first lunch. You walk into a dining hall where everyone else seems to belong, tray in hand, scanning the tables for a face that might soften. For a fifteen-year-old who landed in Switzerland two days earlier, jet-lagged and working in a second language, that hour can quietly shape an entire term. I have watched students navigate it well and I have watched them freeze, and the difference is almost never personality. It is preparation. The student who walks in already knowing a name, a face, and an inside joke from a group chat is playing an entirely different game from the one who knows nobody.

That observation is the starting point for how AELO Swiss Academy handles arrivals. Connection is not something we wait to happen in September and hope for the best. We treat it as part of the enrollment process itself, something built deliberately in the months between a family saying yes and a student stepping through the gate. What follows is an honest account of how that works, what we have learned across several intakes, and where it still falls short, because no school gets this perfectly right and pretending otherwise would not help anyone.

the first lunch is the real first day

Anyone who has worked through a few intake seasons knows the pattern. The students who find their footing fastest are rarely the most outgoing ones. They are the ones who arrived with a thread of connection already in hand. The research on school transitions points in the same direction, and although I would not claim precision about mechanisms, the broad finding is consistent: how quickly a student feels they belong in the first weeks predicts a great deal downstream, from whether [flight training](#) they raise a hand in class to whether they are still happily enrolled by the winter break. You do not need a journal article to explain the mechanism. Anyone who has eaten lunch alone understands it immediately.

The cost of getting this wrong is easy to underestimate because it is mostly invisible. Parents call in October about a child who is doing fine academically but eats alone, and by then the social patterns of the term have already hardened. Friendship groups formed in the first two weeks tend to settle and close. Breaking into an established circle in November is possible, but it takes a kind of courage that we should not be demanding of a homesick teenager when a bit of foresight could have made it unnecessary. The cheapest place to intervene is before arrival, not after the loneliness has already done its work.

the quiet months between yes and arrival

Most schools treat the gap between enrollment confirmation and the first day of term as administrative dead air. Forms, invoices, visa letters, a packing list. For many families this stretch lasts somewhere between three and nine months, and for most of it, nothing human happens. Into that silence, imagination flows, and imagination is rarely kind. Teenagers who are about to move countries have months to construct worst-case scenarios about the dining hall.

So we made a decision: the silence gets filled with people. When a family confirms a place, the welcome file opens alongside the admissions file, and within about two weeks the incoming student hears from a current student. Not from the school, not from an office, from a person their own age who was standing in the same scary spot a year or two earlier. Everything else we do grows from that first contact.

how the pairing works

The welcome mentors, as we call them, are volunteers drawn mostly from the senior years. They apply in spring and spend an afternoon in training before the intake season starts. The training is short on theory and long on judgment: what to share about school life, what not to promise, how to answer hard questions honestly rather than reassuringly, and when to quietly loop in a member of staff. A mentor who tells an anxious incoming student that they will love everyone here is not helping. A mentor who says that the first two weeks were strange for them too, and describes what actually helped, is doing the real work.

Matching is where the judgment lives. We look at language first, age second, interests third. The interesting question is nationality, and our answer is deliberately mixed. Sometimes we pair students from the same country, and sometimes we refuse to, and here is the trade-off we weigh. A buddy who shares your first language is immediate comfort, but that same comfort can calcify into a bubble that slows the leap into the wider community. Our default is a mentor who shares one genuine interest and enough language overlap for a real conversation, but who is not a mirror. The point of a welcome mentor is to open a door, not to build a shelter.

The first message is usually short, sometimes a voice note. I want to stress how much that detail matters. Hearing a real voice from the place you are heading toward does something that no brochure can do. One student described it to us as the moment Switzerland stopped being a website and became a place where actual people her age were already living. That is the entire objective of the pairing, compressed into a two-minute recording.

the digital common room

Each intake cohort gets a moderated group space, and we keep it small on purpose, usually somewhere between fifteen and thirty students. Never the whole school. Nobody introduces themselves into a crowd of three hundred, and asking them to do so just replicates the dining hall problem online, with better lighting.

The space runs on light rituals rather than constant conversation. An introduction thread when the cohort forms. A photo from your window, which turns out to be a wonderfully low-pressure way to see the enormous range of places our students come from. A question of the week, run by the senior students, on topics like the worst thing you have ever packed or what your school was like. Staff are present but quiet. The goal is not volume. The goal is recognition, so that when two students who traded messages about a shared football club finally stand in the same hallway, they are not meeting for the first time.

We are also careful about what this costs. Our families span time zones from Vancouver to Shanghai, and incoming students are usually finishing demanding school years at home. Screen fatigue is real, and the last thing a nervous fifteen-year-old needs is another platform that generates obligation. So the space is optional, asynchronous by default, and capped at two live gatherings before arrival. No streaks, no points, no gamified anything. Friendship is not a fitness app, and treating it like one teaches students to perform rather than connect.

small gatherings, not big webinars

The live gatherings we do run are small. Six to eight incoming students, two senior students, one member of staff, forty-five minutes, built around one or two prompts rather than an open floor. Large video calls favor the confident, and the confident are not the ones who need the room. We offer two time slots for each gathering so that a student in Latin America is not routinely asked to attend at midnight.

The single most effective pre-arrival artifact, though, has been the least glamorous one: a recorded walk through campus. The dining hall, the boarding house corridors, the route to the sports hall, the view from the library window, filmed once and reused each year. Incoming students rewatch these clips far more than we expected.

One girl told us she had watched the dining hall segment four times before she flew. Not because it was cinematic. Because it was the room she feared, and repetition turned it into a room she could picture.

Parents get their own separate session, because parents ask different questions. Wifi, laundry, the homesickness protocol, how first-weekend calls home actually work, what happens if a flight is delayed. Giving parents a calm, factual channel of their own also protects the students' channel, which we will come back to.

when day one finally arrives

All of this groundwork converges on a single afternoon. Where schedules allow, welcome mentors meet incoming students at the station or the gate, so that the first face a new boarder sees in Switzerland belongs to someone they already know. Lunch tables are seeded rather than assigned, which is a distinction that matters. Nobody is told where to sit, but there is always a table where the answer to the question "is this seat taken" comes from a familiar face. Orientation groups are built on existing pairs wherever we can manage it.

The effect is hard to describe to someone who has not watched it happen. Knowing one person changes the texture of the whole day. The dining hall stops being a test you can fail and becomes a place where someone waves you over by name. That wave is the entire product of the previous six https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ months of quiet work.

what we have learned the hard way

I want to be honest about the limits, because the polished version of this story would be dishonest. Some pairings simply do not click. When that happens, we re-match quietly, without drama and without assigning fault, usually within the first fortnight of contact. Forcing two teenagers to sustain a rapport neither of them feels reads as a school assignment, and teenagers can smell a school assignment at a hundred meters.



Introverts need their own lane. Some incoming students never turn a camera on, answer a question a week late, and still arrive feeling quietly prepared. That is a success, and it took us a couple of intakes to see it that way. We also learned to trim. One cohort told us, politely but clearly, that four pre-arrival gatherings was too much on top of their final exams at home. We cut to two and nothing was lost except the guilt of students who could not attend.

The most important lesson is about promises. Do not promise best friends. Promise familiarity. Most buddy relationships fade naturally by December as the incoming student builds their own friendships, and that fading is the sign the scaffold worked, not the sign it failed. The point was the bridge, not the marriage.

a quiet word for parents

Parents are usually more anxious than the students, which is natural and not a criticism. The instinct that follows is to manage everything, to join the student chats, to interview the buddy, to draft the replies. I would ask you to resist all of that. The message from the mentor should be answered by your child, in their own words, even if it takes a week and even if it is awkward. Awkward is fine. Awkward is practice, and the practice is the point.

A few concrete things help:

- Let your child answer the mentor's message themselves, however slowly and however briefly.
- Save your questions for the parents' channel rather than the students' space.
- Pack one familiar object for the room, something small that makes it theirs on the first night.
- Agree on a contact rhythm before departure, so that silence on a Tuesday never gets read as crisis.

if you are incoming: what to actually do

For the students reading this, the same honesty applies. The program only works if you put something into it, and the something is smaller than you fear.

- Reply to your mentor within a few days, even if it is only two sentences.
- Say one true and specific thing about yourself, because specific is what people can respond to.
- Ask one concrete question about something you actually wonder about.
- Show up to one live gathering, camera off if you prefer.
- Give it three weeks after arrival before you judge anything, including yourself.

the long game

Friendship cannot be scheduled, and I would distrust anyone who claims otherwise. Loneliness, on the other hand, can be prevented, and prevention is mostly a matter of timing. The modest goal of everything described here is to make sure that when our students walk into the dining hall on the first evening of term, they are not beginning from zero. They are deepening something that already has a foothold.

Switzerland is a country where things tend to run on time, but friendships here, as anywhere, move at their own pace. A school that receives students from every corner of the world owes them more than a precise timetable. It owes them a running start on the human part. That is what we are trying to give at AELO Swiss Academy: not guaranteed friends, but the end of guaranteed strangers. The rest, as it always has, belongs to the students themselves, one lunch table at a time.