

celebrating on campus: how aelo swiss academy marks holidays and student milestones

The first thing most visitors notice about our hillside campus is the bell above the old farmhouse, and the second is that the academic calendar here runs on two tracks. One track carries lessons, examinations, and report deadlines. The other, quieter track tells us when to light bonfires, carve turnips, fold dumplings, and hand out pins to nervous twelve-year-olds. I have coordinated student life at AELO Swiss Academy for more than a decade, and I can say with some confidence that the second track matters more than outsiders expect.

For roughly 320 students between the ages of twelve and nineteen, drawn from more than thirty-five countries, this campus is not a place they leave at four in the afternoon. It is where their birthdays, their homesickness, their first sight of snow, and their final examinations all happen. Celebrations here are not decoration. They are how the school breathes.

why ritual matters when campus is home

Anyone who has worked in a residential school learns to read the emotional weather. Homesickness does not arrive at random; it gathers at predictable points, usually late October and the stretch between mid-December and the January return. A well-placed celebration does not erase that feeling, but it gives it a container. A student who is struggling can still look forward to the lantern walk, and looking forward is half of the cure.

Ritual also solves a quieter problem. On a campus where thirty-five first languages are spoken, shared ceremonies create common ground that conversation cannot always reach. A new student from São Paulo who arrived in September knowing nobody stood at the winter solstice dinner the following December holding a candle she had been given the job of lighting. She did not need to follow every word of the speeches. She had a role, and a role is a form of belonging.

There is a practical argument as well. When the whole community rehearses the same gestures every year, those gestures become shorthand. New students learn the school's character not from a handbook but from watching how the older houses behave at the pin ceremony, how the graduating class carries itself at the last bell. Culture transmits faster through ritual than through policy documents. I have come to believe that the calendar is the truest statement of what a school values, more honest than any mission statement.

the anchor points of our year

Our celebrations follow the arc of the seasons rather than the arc of the timetable. Over the years, five events have hardened into anchors, the fixed points around which everything else arranges itself.

- The matriculation ceremony in late August, when each new student receives the academy pin and, weather permitting, rings the courtyard bell once.
- Räbeliechtl in early November, our lantern walk through the linden avenue with turnips carved by the younger houses.
- The winter solstice dinner in December, the one formal sit-down meal of the year, with candlelight and the good table linen.
- Fasnacht in February, a deliberately modest carnival with masks made in art lessons and a great deal of confetti.

- Graduation weekend in June, two days of processions, picnics, and farewells.

Between the anchors sit the smaller markers: birthday waffles baked in the houses, the quiet send-off we give examination classes, the small noticeboard where university offers appear without comment. The anchors get the budget and the planning committees. The small markers get something else, which is constancy, and I am no longer sure which matters more.

swiss traditions, kept properly

Because we are a Swiss school, the national calendar comes first, and we try to keep these observances properly rather than performatively. The first of August is the clearest example. Hilltop bonfires are a genuine custom of the Bundesfeier, and ours burns on the meadow above the sports field, built with wood from storm-felled trees gathered that spring. The neighbor who serves as our volunteer fire warden inspects it, the house staff run the grills, and the evening ends with brätwurst, rösti, and a short address. Every year the address includes one sentence in Romansh, partly from respect and partly because the students have decided it is funny to applaud that sentence loudest.

November brings Räbeliechtl, the turnip-lantern walks familiar from German-speaking Switzerland. Carving turnips is harder than it sounds; the flesh is dense and the walls must stay thick or the lantern collapses. The younger houses spend two art lessons on it, and every year a few lanterns fail, which has become its own lesson in humility. The walk itself, with several hundred small flames moving down the linden avenue, is the image of the school I would choose if I could keep only one.

December is handled with some care, because not every family celebrates Christmas and we do not pretend otherwise. We speak of winter lights rather than Christmas when addressing the whole school. The Advent wreath, the windows, and the chocolate from the confiserie in the village are offered to everyone and pressed on no one. Our francophone students keep a small Escalade tradition of their own, melting chocolate in a cauldron for the dining room in the second week of December, and everyone else is invited rather than conscripted. That distinction, invitation versus conscription, took us a few years to get right.



Fasnacht in February is our smallest anchor and the students' favorite. Basel's carnival it is not. Our version lasts one afternoon, involves drumming of variable quality, and produces masks that range from genuinely impressive to alarming. The art department claims credit for the good ones and denies the rest.

many calendars, one campus

The international calendar belongs to the students, and this arrangement is deliberate. In September, any student or group may propose an observance to the student life office. Three conditions apply: a student must sponsor it, it must be affordable, and it must not collide with the assessment calendar. That last condition was learned expensively. The year we allowed Diwali to fall during mock examinations, the lamps burned on the terrace and half the participants were revising in the library instead. The following year the student council voted to move it by two days, and attendance tripled.

Lunar New Year has become the largest of these observances, entirely by accident. A student from Hangzhou asked the kitchen for a table, some flour, and two hours, and taught forty classmates to fold dumplings. The kitchen staff, who are the unsung heroes of this entire operation, counted roughly six hundred dumplings by the end. The following year the request was for three tables. It is now fixed in the calendar and the kitchen orders pork and chives a week in advance.

Other observances are quieter by design. Eid al-Fitr begins with a breakfast to which the whole house is invited, and during Ramadan we shift evening study earlier and keep a quiet room available near the dining hall so that fasting students are not seated beside steaming trays. A Nowruz table appears in the entrance hall each spring, assembled by three students with objects brought from home. Thanksgiving gets pumpkin pie in the bistro and nothing more, which the North Americans say is exactly right.

The lesson across these years is that not every holiday needs a stage. Some need only a table, a name on the menu, and proof that somebody noticed. Over-programming is the error I see most often when schools attempt this work, and the correction is almost always subtraction.

milestones: pins, houses, and the last bell

If holidays give the year its shape, milestones give each student a place in it. The first of these is the pin. On matriculation day, each new student's name is read from the house ledger, one of four houses named for Swiss peaks: Rigi, Pilatus, Säntis, and Jungfrau. The student crosses the courtyard, receives a small silver pin bearing the academy's edelweiss and bell, and rings the courtyard bell once. On a heavy intake year that is more than forty rings spread across a long August afternoon, and the length is deliberate. Older students line the courtyard and clap each name. Nobody hurries it.

The houses carry the smaller milestones through the year. House points are recorded in the same ledgers, and each June the ledger passes from one house captain to the next in a short ceremony that most visitors would find unremarkable and that our students treat with complete seriousness.

Academic milestones are marked with restraint by policy. When Matura results arrive in July, the campus is nearly empty, so we invite the class back for a dinner in September rather than pretend to celebrate into a void. University offers go on a single noticeboard without rankings or comparison, a rule the students defended to me before I defended it to them. Personal milestones appear at Friday assembly: a first solo concert, a completed ski tour, the citizenship ceremony of a student who naturalized last spring, for which we hung her new flag in the dining hall for a week.

Graduation weekend is built around two gestures. The first is the procession through the linden avenue, the same avenue the lanterns walk in November, which the departing class walks in the opposite direction, outward. The second is the last bell, rung not by staff but by the class president, one long deliberate ring that the whole school stands to hear. Since five years ago, graduates also post a letter to themselves, to be opened at their first reunion. The archive box in my office is filling steadily.

the quiet work behind a good party

None of this happens by enthusiasm alone, and I want to be honest about the machinery, because schools that romanticize celebration usually run chaotic events. Every term event gets a six-week lead time and a budget we plan at roughly fifteen to twenty-five francs per student, with graduation costing considerably more and justified separately. Every event lead works from the same short checklist, refined over a decade of small failures.

- Set the date against the assessment calendar before anything else is agreed.
- Collect dietary and religious requirements from the houses two weeks ahead, not at the door.
- Write the weather plan on the same page as the main plan, with a named decision maker and a fixed switch time.
- Brief house staff on which students may sit out, and provide a quiet room without requiring anyone to justify it.
- Assign one person to photography consent, and to checking images before anything is published.

The deeper principle is that student committees do better work with a small budget and real authority than with a large budget and supervision. The one year we hired an outside band without consulting them, the students listened politely for forty minutes and then quietly relocated to the terrace. Since then, the committee owns the playlist, the menu options, and the floor plan, and the events have been better for it. My role is to protect the budget, the safety plan, and the inclusion briefing, and then to stay out of the way.

when plans meet weather, exams, and teenagers

The umbrella graduation is part of our lore now. One June, rain arrived an hour before the procession, and the entire ceremony moved into the sports hall https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ in under fifty minutes, an operation I can only describe as controlled panic. The linden avenue became a corridor of staff holding umbrellas between the hall and the picnic tents. Families still refer to it affectionately, which taught me that imperfection, handled with composure, often bonds a community more tightly than perfection.

The kitchen has its own scar tissue. Electric burners tripped the circuit twice at one fondue evening before we learned that any menu involving heat requires a cold fallback, now permanently written into the plan as bread, cheese, and soup. And the winter solstice dinner taught me the value of assigning the right small job: a first-year from Seoul, visibly adrift three weeks into term, was given the candles to light. His mother wrote afterward that he had described the moment to her twice on the phone. The candles cost four francs.

what we count, and what we remember

We do track the ordinary measures: attendance, the return rate of student volunteers from one year to the next, feedback slips collected at the door. Volunteer return is the figure I trust most, because enthusiasm is easy to fake once and difficult to fake twice.

But the measures that convince me are stranger. Alumni write to ask whether the bell still rings. A graduate flew back for a Räbeliechti she had no connection to except memory. Last August, a former house captain stood in the courtyard and clapped for students she had never met, because that is what the older students did when she was twelve.

That is the real function of all this lantern light and bell ringing. The examinations fade into transcripts, and the timetables are rewritten annually. What remains is the shared memory of flames moving down an avenue in November, and the sound of the school counting a new student's name. A calendar is a promise kept in public, year after year, and at AELO Swiss Academy we intend to keep keeping it.