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BENEATH THE SURFACE: TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

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The Trends

Having recently spent nearly eight weeks in China, India, Jordan and Peru working with some prominent international school clients, I have come away with a few distinct impressions.

The more traditional and typical nonprofit international schools with parent elected boards certainly remain a mainstay for the English speaking international ex pat community or for those seeking an English based curriculum aimed mainly at preparation for universities in the US, Canada and the UK. However, the expansion of newly minted proprietary schools or those built by corporations, especially in China, is a fascinating development. Now, unlike in years past, most of these schools are accredited by CIS or other accrediting associations. They no longer have the label of being in business simply to make money.

In working with many of these corporate school models, I have perceived that they are not reluctant to pay competitive salaries and provide more than adequate resources and often the very best facilities. In fact, a number of these companies want to create flagship operations that create the benchmark culture, academic achievement, university placement record, and "cachet" that will enable them to build additional campus sites elsewhere.

I am not speaking here of some small minded family owned schools where investors or family members are earning quite a handsome return on their initial investment in the creation of the school campus and brand. Some (but not all) of these are leaning too heavily on school operations for repayment.

However, where a founder, owner or company has put down USD 40 million or more to build a plant and carry a school for the first few years in order to build brand name, results and reputation, there is a legitimate expectation that the school pay a return on investment equal to about 10% of budget. Many of these corporations consider this a fair rental value for the use of the campus. (In fact a number of non-profit international schools in China pay lease rentals as well on part or all of their campus lands and facilities.)



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What I find remarkable is the extent to which founding families and corporations are investing in reputation, status, and long term staying power and marketing competitively to ensure strong results. I have a new found respect for some of these schools and their founders.

The same trends that I described in China, I have seen in India even though India's booming growth lags a few years behind that of China and its economic results are more uneven. But here too, I have found a few entrepreneurs and founding companies/families whose impressive success in commercial and residential development have provided the impetus to move into other areas such as international education. By "international" I mean providing resident children holding national passports with the same opportunities and benefits of a global education that expatriates and some nonresident local passport holders receive.

I found the same in Jordan, where there are a number of family and corporate (as well as traditional international) school models. Here the Royal Family has also formed two new "international" schools.

The Challenges

Language and Identity

One challenge in these more corporate/family/sponsor models is the enrollment mix of expats versus locals. Or, stated differently in terms of identity and vision: Are we an "international" school or a local school with an international curriculum? Often this is related to languages spoken in the hallways and at recess and/or in the home.

Where any language, (for example, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, or Arabic) is the primary and dominant language spoken at home by 25% to 50% or more of the school population, we begin to hear the question "How 'international' is the character of the school?" It may have English as the primary language of instruction; offer the IB; place its graduates primarily in universities out of country, but it may still feel either uncomfortable to non native nationals or too "local" for expat families.

These questions of enrollment mix can be complicated and subtle. For example, the student population of one client school is 25% local Chinese nationals; 14% Koreans; 25% with Chinese ethnic background but perhaps speaking excellent or moderately competent English; and another 15% speaking several other languages from around the world. The flavor of the School seems "international", but how can one know for certain or monitor which language(s) are spoken in the hallways or after classes?

An interesting observation from my recent visits is one School's view that it is impossible to enforce



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or pressure the use of English outside of the formal classroom, while on the other hand, another client says that spoken English in the hallways as well as in the classroom is exactly the expectation. Its high school students tell me that while the policy can be difficult to enforce, by and large it works. Their feeling is that if you are a "local" speaking the local language in the corridors or at recess, you are not really living one aspect of the School's mission, i.e., to ensure that the quality of English enables students to attend top universities in the US, UK, Australia, etc.

Then there is always the push back from those growing numbers of local families who feel the local language (Chinese, Hindi, Arabic, Spanish etc) is not strong enough to give those students the choice to stay at home for university; or to have the ability to land a good job "in nation" and to have connections locally that further one's eventual career. This is a constant tug in international schools where a substantial number of the population is local, whether by passport or nationality.

Even in the best bilingual schools, both languages are never equally well spoken and understood. One is always slightly favored.

On the other hand, in Beijing, for example, everyone wants BOTH: excellent Mandarin AND very strong English. This dual language proficiency is particularly difficult to achieve yet it is viewed as providing the widest and most attractive range of educational and career opportunities.

Mission and Vision

When these schools engage in strategic planning, almost always an enrollment/marketing/vision exercise is key to ensuring that the parents and students share a common vision about the school's identity. If the school does not assess the "mission congruence" of new families applying, the school may find itself drifting away from the mission of the school. The enrollment determines the mission over the long run and in many international schools, over the short run as well.

An example of this was one client where the high school parents and faculty all agreed on a more western model of turning out "well rounded" children. Involvement in community service, the arts, athletics and student leadership were all important facets of the mission, in addition to a focus on academic rigor. After a while teachers noticed that more and more of the younger parents in particular did not buy into the mission of the "all round" child as reflected in low or sporadic student participation in extracurriculars and athletics. These parents simply wanted stronger local language, math and science and prominent university placement, all clearly with Harvard in mind.

This occurred because the School had not been interviewing entry level families to assess mission congruence but had been simply accepting their children based upon test scores or academic potential. As a result of a strategic planning process, that School now does interview all incoming parents to ensure that the parents indeed want what the School's mission offers and are not just



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saying what they think the School's admissions office may want to hear.

Mission congruence is absolutely essential to keeping the "international" in many of these schools where the title may exist but the reality of what an international school means, may not. There are many good, local, private schools worldwide that have taken on the label of "international" and have adopted the IB and thereby presume that they are international schools. A great number of state schools in Australia have adopted the IB. Does that make all of these Australian schools "international?"

So are these schools "international" or local schools with an international curriculum? The answer is that they need to be addressing and monitoring internal and external perceptions on an ongoing basis. The best ones are trying to generate sufficient market demand by EACH of the subsets of their populations to ensure the integrity of the mission as an international school with a truly mixed and international community, while still meeting the needs of an appropriately sized segment of the "local" community.

For example: if a school in a country with a tradition of vegetarian cuisine is serving vegetarian only meals, and the expats feel that practice is a symbol of the local nature of the School population, does that have anything to do with being an "international school?"

If a school in Latin America is using the South American calendar but is still serving a subset of a North American and European expat population, does the use of this calendar signal a local school rather than an "international school?"

If most of the students from the school go to universities "in country" rather than any number leaving the country for university does that make it a local school rather than an "international" one?

If 70% of the parents are local or local language speaking, and only 15% or less of the parent body speaks English as a primary language, does that make it an "international" school or not?

What is an "independent" school versus an international school? In other words, when do these so called international schools just become perhaps very good but clearly local independent, private schools with a global as opposed to a local vision and purpose?

Lessons Learned to be a truly "international school":

Achieving mission clarity;

Marketing effectively to distinct and varied populations, including ensuring that the local population of self payers or any single non English speaking nationality does not become more than



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40% of the total school population;

Ensuring the target language remains the lingua franca of the hallways and dining room; and

Ensuring the continued ability to attract, hire and retain reasonable percentage of foreign hire teachers

A Final Note

One school client asked me to interview a group of high school students. They told me they were very confused about the English language instruction they had been receiving. First they had a group of teachers from the UK who taught them with a distinct British accent. Then teachers mainly from New Zealand replaced those and the students began to take on another new accented English. Now they have mainly American teachers, and the confused students have noted yet again dramatic differences in the way English is "spoken".

All of this represents just one of many elements of an international school that a leader needs to understand: An international school culture is not all about just the IB or about the number of overseas hires a school brings on board. It is also about the mix of teachers; the training of the teachers; and their attitude about the school's mission and their workload expectations. It is all about how long they may stay and about trying to ensure that institutional memory does not reside entirely with the local teachers who never leave (as teaching there is one of the best jobs in the country) and the international teachers who always leave (except in Western Europe where they almost never leave).

John Littleford
Senior Partner