

Practices of Effective International School Principals

Part I: The Written Curriculum

By Bambi Betts

During a recent seminar of over fifty international school principals, each was given three minutes to list all their activities, in a typical day at school. Without exception, each was able to list well over thirty-five activities; the only limitation being how fast one could write. When asked, however, to describe, in one sentence, the primary role of the international school principal, they found this a much more difficult task. Responses ranged from “to make sure the teachers are happy,” to “manage the day-to-day running of the school.”

This series of articles will suggest that, in the big picture, the primary role of a principal is to ensure that students learn, as Roland Barth puts it, “to provide the conditions under which people’s learning goes off the charts.”

The activities principals engage in should ultimately all improve student learning. They can be arranged into two broad categories: proactive and reactive. Within each of these two, there are activities in which principals engage that are very close to student learning and those that are more distant from student learning. The goal is to expand the repertoire of practices that are likely to have the strongest impact on improving student learning – to spend more time more effectively in the proactive, close-to-student-learning category.

These articles will describe five such practices that are particularly necessary in international schools.

The first and most essential of these is: Ensure that there is a clear usable written curriculum in place that describes essential learner out-comes and standards, assessment strategies, and essential instructional strategies. While such a “practice” may sound obvious, for every five international schools surveyed in 1996, four either had no such written curriculum or had a textbook-driven curriculum, with no particular guidance for the new (or the “veteran”) teacher. Understandably, it is inconceivable to most of our boards and parents that, after decades of working at improving formal education, we still cannot or are unwilling to state what we intend to do all day with their children and what they will be better at in June than they are in September.

Why is a clear, written curriculum so essential in the international school? It provides the sole road map for both student learning and thereby “school improvement” efforts. If we have no idea where we are going, how can we possibly know when we’ve arrived, or even when we’re close? It is the single most important vehicle for transmitting what the school values and for driving daily instruction.

With its naturally transient faculty, student, and parent populations, the international school “reputation” relies heavily on the understanding that, regardless of mobility, students attending this school can expect a quality education. It is only through the promise of a curriculum, carefully crafted

to include what students will learn, how they will learn and how we will know what they've learned, regardless of changes in faculty, that this can be achieved. The curriculum becomes what the school is.

International schools are private institutions that (in most cases) offer a service at a price. In many cases they have a clear mission, vision and philosophy. Without the benefit of ready access to other quality institutions, it is easy to slip into believing that the vision is being accomplished without actually articulating what the vision means in practice or having any real means of assessing it. In many international settings, we are lulled into believing that our schools are effective at all levels because they are full and getting fuller, although we are often "the only game in town."

An international school, or any other school, shouldn't be judged by the number of students it claims or the number of zeros in the salaries it pays. It should be judged by the quality of what it teaches and to what extent students are learning. How can this be achieved without a clear usable written curriculum, which defines that "quality education," including practical, day-to-day, means of achieving it?

What happens in a school that has no clearly articulated curriculum? Teachers teach what they are comfortable with, using the methodologies they believe in. Regardless of how exceptional a teacher might be, the school cannot, for example, assure the parents of two ninth-grade students with different English teachers that they will have any common learning outcomes. How does a principal (and indeed a board) respond, for example, to a parent of a ninth grade student who doesn't agree with the curriculum a particular teacher has selected? Unless the school has clearly communicated to the parents and other school community members that what is taught is up to the teacher, what is the recourse? If learning is the primary purpose of our schools, what and how well students learn cannot be left to chance.

The effective international school curriculum will certainly include what students should know and be able to do, and what "habits of mind" the school will help them acquire. This does not imply, however, a simple prescription list of content; it implies describing essential concepts and abilities based on the school's vision of the purpose of education.

But there is a strong case for expanding the definition of "written curriculum" in international schools. The well-crafted written curriculum will extend beyond the typical 'Student will...' list. It will include guidelines for and descriptions of major assessment strategies, as well as key teaching methodologies that reflect the school's philosophy of teaching and learning. Once it is clear what students are expected to accomplish, teachers both need and appreciate help in determining how to get them there and what "success" will look like.

Given all the current research about empowering teachers, developing teacher-leaders, etc., how can we suggest that the international school curriculum include both key, required assessment strategies and teaching methodologies?

Consider this scenario. A school holds a belief that "Students learn through writing" and that becoming an excellent writer is a desired outcome. Would it be acceptable, then for a 6th grade teacher to require a single, two-page piece of writing each semester? Would it be acceptable for a student to complete that same 6th grade without ever having learned the writing "process"?

If the principal finds these unacceptable, the curriculum is the place to make it known. The curriculum is the vehicle through which we are able to translate the important beliefs of the school into daily classroom practice. Both our assessment tools and the day-to day instructional strategies are concrete curricular tools. The curriculum is the teachers' major source of guidance regarding what the school is trying to accomplish and what that means in their classrooms. With a written curriculum, which specifies learner outcomes only, we set the stage for an extremely vulnerable, unpredictable, journey for all concerned.

A written curriculum with these three components acts as a point of departure for virtually every major school improvement effort. Once the curriculum is in place and regularly in use, it acts as a shield against the "band-wagon fad" approach to education we have so often been accused of as educators. As an example, recently large numbers of international school have become deeply interested in improving assessment practices in their school. Many of these are the same schools that have no written curriculum.

But how can student progress be more effectively assessed when it is unclear what students are meant to achieve? If these schools had clear, written learning outcomes in place, they would be in a much stronger position to evaluate if particular new assessments strategies are appropriate and likely to improve student learning. Without them, it is the proverbial shot in the dark.

The written curriculum, with these three components, continually focuses the school on its real purpose, helping to avoid making changes which may seem like "the thing to do," but that are actually unrelated to improved student learning.

There are those who would argue that having such a curriculum in place stifles the creativity of the teacher and risks losing the "teachable moment: to predetermined learning. These arguments both misjudge the power of a sound written curriculum, as well as set the stage for schools to take even bigger risks with their students. Isn't it much more serious to do what many schools do now: risk having many students not learn how to make a decision, or solve a real problem, or read beyond a typical ten-year old level? Creativity in teaching and a written curriculum can and do live productively together.