

VALUES COHESION FOR SCHOOL CULTURE SUCCESS

BY KATHY WOOD

AFNORTH INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IN THE NETHERLANDS WAS SHORTLISTED FOR AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL AWARD 2020 FOR IMPLEMENTING AN INITIATIVE THAT ENCOURAGES COHESION OF VALUES WITHIN A UNIQUE SCHOOL COMMUNITY. SCHOOL DIRECTOR, KATHY WOOD MBE, EXPLAINS.

AFNORTH International School (AIS) is a Dutch Foundation established around an innovative and ambitious international model for education. The school provides an education commensurate with the national requirements of its four founding nations – Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States – with the expectation, as agreed by all four nations, to develop a mutual understanding of a shared school culture, common courses, language learning and intercultural exchanges. Board members from each of the founding nations lead the school, and an International Directorate works with the Principals from each national section to implement the model on the ground. More recently, the international vision for the school, set out in 1967, was proving difficult to realise in practice, and perception of working in ‘silos’ was becoming too much of a default mode.

NEW WAYS OF WORKING TOGETHER

In response to several internal pressures, such as curriculum reviews and unexpected levels of mobility due to economic situations, the founding nations found themselves having to substantially restructure within and across national sections. If the international vision was to be sustained, it was obvious that new ways of ‘working together’ had to be found. As a school, we needed to embrace a whole system transformation to find a common platform to address this challenge. The question posed was how do we continue to flourish in a world that was threatening to become more isolating and complex, and retain the goal to keep the shared school culture alive?

Following wide consultation, it was identified that a collaborative, curriculum-based initiative across four nations, involving the wider international community was required. The ‘International Collaboration’ initiative was introduced in 2017 with the sole purpose of bringing together the staff of four different national sections in order to establish and embed a commonly agreed ethical values approach.

The internal challenge could be compared to six ‘schools’ from four different countries, working collaboratively on a shared international vision and so an unconventional strategic approach was called for. It required bridging national norms and cultures, challenging complacency, agreeing on the ethical vocabulary that would help to nurture ethical intelligence, deepen





THE AIS GLOBE SERVES AS AN EXHIBITION SPACE TO HIGHLIGHT GLOBAL ISSUES

understanding and empower all learners to adopt and embed their own moral compass.

Or, put simply, I mean a set of personal core values that guide their decision-making.

SMALL STEPS, BIG FOOTPRINT

We set about exploring how we could bring about a cultural shift that placed Values-based Education (VbE) at the core of our work. We deliberately selected the model of peer-to-peer leadership in our approach (staff and student) and this has been a powerful tool to bring about sustainable change. The International Collaboration initiative has resulted in implementing an internationally agreed set of ethical values and a collective agreement on a deeper learning framework (6 Cs/ competencies based on the work of [Michael Fullan](#)) to support students in their personal, social and ethical development and assist them in thinking and acting as responsible global citizens. We adopted four levels of approach to ensure staff from each national section had a role in coming to an agreed understanding. We then modelled the agreed ethical values for students, in a way that is evident in everyday practice.

We held two staff professional learning days in May and October 2018. ‘Values-based living’ was led by Neil Hawkes, the founder of [VbE](#) and a communication workshop was led by Ben Walden of [Contender Charlie](#). Passions were ignited, debate on the deep meaning of our work

challenged preconceptions, common goals and purpose were cemented, and this set us on a journey to engage in reassessing our identity and agreeing on a common vocabulary.

The initiative established an international group who attended the ECIS Leadership Conference in November 2017 to cement and kick-start what continues to be an inspirational journey. This group worked on developing three sub-themes: Deeper learning; What it means to be an inclusive international school; and How environments (social, physiological and pedagogical) can affect learning, achievement and attitudes of students and staff. The three themes guided our strategic work together and homed in on reflection addressing our identity, a sense of belonging and ethical values. Time for listening to, meeting with and gathering student, staff and parent views was undertaken. The group planned and executed the time given over for international release professional workshops, provided regular updates on progress with newsletters, and presented to the Principals and Board of Governors regularly. Critical thinking and creativity were identified as specific competencies staff required professional help with to embed with their students.

MANY NATIONS, ONE WORLD, ONE RESPONSIBILITY

We held ‘International Student Collaboration Days’ and designed pilot projects that role-modelled and demonstrated the deeper learning



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competency approach. For example, pilot projects involving Grade 10 US students working collaboratively with Canadian/UK Grades 1 and 2 on ethical values; a Forest School Project focused on the core values of the '6 Cs' and by investing in our physical environment, encouraging collaborative practices. The results of the pilot work provided the foundations that have seen the Governors committing further time for staff to work collaboratively.

We launched an environmental initiative 'Many Nations, One World, One Responsibility' where over 800 students from 22 nations designed and implemented a sustainable Plastic Pandemic project. 'The Globe' was created during one of the collaboration days and serves as an exhibition space for art installations that highlight issues where we collectively have to take responsibility for our world. This day aimed to link ethical values and global environmental issues, highlighting the fact that many countries around the world are taking different perspectives. We wanted to equip and empower students with what Neil Hawkes calls a personal holistic competence, by exposing them to expert knowledge and high levels of peer engagement, helping them to realise they can make a difference both at an individual and global level. These student-led projects encourage learners to grasp how ethical perspectives and conventions can differ within and between societies.

LEADERSHIP INVESTMENT

Various strategic activities supporting a 'bottom-up' approach were adopted and implemented at student and parent, staff, management, and Board of Governors level. These included redesigning the website to showcase the impact of our international collaboration initiative, establishing release time for staff and students to actively participate in planning and implementation for cross-national work, and professional workshops challenging adults to role model and shape how to communicate across cultural boundaries.

The cohesion of values within a unique school community has helped us to embrace cultural diversity. It has demanded high levels of cooperation, flexibility and tolerance and most importantly, it has given us a shared ethical values-based vocabulary to help our students to dig deep! We know that the future belongs to those who have a strong set of values and can move within the globalised world confidently and effortlessly, knowing their own culture and being open to others. Our journey continues.



THE AUTHOR

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