

Postcard from Brussels

Imagining a partnership full of promise

By DAVID WILLOWS

By building a bridge
to the European
Commission, we
discovered a powerful
catalyst for change.

Our story begins with imagination.

Imagination is not, as some might suppose, a suspension of what is real in order to escape into fanciful, unrealistic thinking. Imagination, I would suggest, involves taking all the messiness of ordinary life and making an effort to pull it together into a bigger picture, where things seem to make more sense and where good things happen to a plan.

The official name of our plan at the International School of Brussels is ISB2010. It lays out an ambitious agenda around five priorities: student learning, professional learning, the campus, the environment, and technology. Central to every part of the plan is the concept of sustainability. In other words, ISB2010 is all about building a school that can sustain a truly innovative learning environment for today's and tomorrow's students.

So how can sustainability be achieved? One part of the answer, we are beginning to discover, is through the building of effective networks and partnerships. Partnerships not only help us achieve our goals but also enable the school to go further than even we had imagined.

Established in 1951, the International School of Brussels is a nonprofit, coeducational day school in the capital of Europe. Today, with 1,450 students aged 30 months to 19 years who represent 70 nationalities, it remains the oldest and largest English-language international school in Belgium. Driven by the core values of inclusion, challenge, and success for all, the mission of the school is to develop independent learners and international citizens who are equipped to be happy, successful, ethical contributors to the local and global community.

ISB2010 imagines a future for our school that is a significant stretch to attain. In short, we knew where



we wanted to go, even if we didn't know how we are going to get there. However, as we began to engage in a new partnership with the European Commission's Directorate General for Transport and Energy, some of the pieces of understanding began to fall into place. It was this partnership that allowed us to enter into new worlds of understanding, knowl-

edge, insight, and perspective.

In 2005, the European Union launched a major campaign—"Sustainable Energy Europe"—that was designed to raise awareness and change the landscape of energy both in terms of sustainable energy production and energy efficiency (see www.sustenergy.org). Because ISB had the reputation of being able to model good practice for other schools, we were invited by the commission for become the first school "Campaign Associate." The school welcomed this formal acknowledgment, since it gave the institution increased visibility. But it also had another, unexpected, and immediate impact: It challenged us to go further than we had gone before.

One of the most tangible expressions of this partnership was an environmental and energy day, set in the context of the European Sustainable Energy Week 2007. The day, called Reducing Our Impact, consisted of a series of plenary sessions and hands-on learning activities designed to help students realize how they can respond to today's global energy and environment issues while mitigating their own environmental footprint.

In total, the event involved more than 400 high school students and faculty members, as well as a number of external experts on the subjects of environmental impact and sustainable development. European Commission representatives were present, as well as other key external stakeholders from ExxonMobil, World Wildlife Fund, Unilever, Toyota, and the Brussels Institute for the Management of the Environment.

David Willows is the director of external affairs for the International School of Brussels in Belgium.

Reflecting on the impact of this day, high school student Rachel Chapman writes: "A day like this certainly makes you sit up and think! By measuring the size of our ecological footprint we realized it was time to begin to act. What is important now is to change what we do in the future and to believe we can truly make a difference."

This collaborative venture among students, faculty, and external partners is now an annual event at the school. Other schools in the area are keen to participate, and students are involved in the planning. This year we look forward to welcoming a number of UN agencies as well as representatives from Brussels-based NGOs, local environmental agencies, and multinational companies.

Beyond ISB, the "Sustainable Energy Europe" campaign is proving extremely successful. Originally foreseen to last four years (2005-2008), organizers have announced that they intend to prolong the campaign for a second four-year term, extending it until 2012. This will mean greater reach to citizens across Europe and undoubtedly an emphasis on the role of schools.

As the first school Campaign Associate in this initiative, much of our focus with the European Commission has been to think through how to involve other schools. We have also pushed the message of the campaign out to new audiences via a number of joint communication initiatives, including joint advertising, publications, and conference presentations.


From our perspective, however, the most important impact of this partnership is absolutely clear: by building a bridge to the European Commission, we discovered an opportunity for recognition and a powerful catalyst for change that is now affecting all aspects of the school and its development. At ISB, we are no longer content to engage in token environmental initiatives that are here today and gone tomorrow. Rather, we are committed to establishing coherence across all aspects of the school, connecting what the students are learning in the classroom with the way we manage the campus—in the

buildings we build, the partnerships we establish, and the many student and parent initiatives around the school.

So where are we going next? Today, teams of teachers across the school are working on a major curriculum initiative on global issues. This year's annual giving program is soliciting funds for a "Forest School Project" designed to ensure—via the building of outdoor wireless networks, an outdoor classroom, observation platforms, and signage—that the forest is preserved and yet is also a place where students can gain a deep understanding and respect for the outstanding natural beauty surrounding them.

New energy-smart buildings and mobility solutions are also being planned to promote and ensure that at every level and in every way we really do practice what we preach and begin to reduce a carbon footprint that for too long has remained too large.

And this really is just the beginning. As we move forward with ISB2010 we remain deeply committed to becoming a school in which lasting, creative partnerships between students, parents, our local community, and "vision partners," who share our core values, take us further than we can go alone.

Imagining the future of international education is certainly not an easy task. It requires courage and a constant willingness to dig deep into the complexity of the educational task and discover new patterns, configurations, and opportunities. Looking back, much of what we have discovered now seems so obvious. But maybe that's the point: Only in retrospect is it possible to judge the imaginings that began in our mind's eye. For ISB, we've seen what is possible. 

Send us a Postcard

If your institution is located outside the United States and you have an interesting story to share about a new exchange, opportunity, partnership, or program, contact Senior Editor Rachel Roberts at rroberts@case.org.