



# A global future

**Kevin Bartlett and David Willows** kick off our three-page special education report by examining how schools that cater for international pupils will cope in the digital era

## INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

When you ask people to imagine the school of the future, more often than not the conversation leaps quickly towards an imaginary world of either "no school at all" with teachers replaced by technology, or thoughts of extraordinary buildings in which children are engaged in unimaginably complex tasks, far removed from anything we experienced during our own school days.

As we attempt to plot our journey towards the future, it might be useful to strip our thinking back to a few simple, guiding questions.

### What will change?

A great deal. We are already feeling the transformative impact of the digital revolution on the learning landscape: the sheer quantity

of available information is expanding exponentially. Student access to it is 24/7/365.

The revolution in social media means that children can talk to each other at any time, anywhere, in ways that may make parents feel alienated and disenfranchised. The traditional physical and temporal boundaries between home and school are dissolving.

Teachers and students can work together at any time. Students can bully each other from the safety of their own bedrooms. Change is happening at a speed that is hard to manage.

There are also changes in curricular content. The need to address pressing global issues and educate students in 21st-century literacies is fast re-shaping content and pedagogy. Those

same global issues are also re-shaping school design and policy.

If we are to practise what we preach, our schools must be models of sustainability. The students produced by these schools will graduate into a changing world of employment.

They will move jobs far more frequently, and live in a greater range of locations. They will need to work in collaborative teams, be adept at rapid innovation in response to a highly competitive market, with powerful new economics dominating market trends.

Much will change. It is our task to prepare today's students for success in a world that moves more quickly, and less predictably; where work can be any time and "home" can be anywhere.



GETTY IMAGES

**Old-fashioned bricks and mortar schools will still have their place in the education of the future**

### What will stay the same?

The same answer: a great deal. We love our children and want them to grow up to be happy, successful, ethical human beings.

The essential elements in making this happen will not – should not – change that much. But what are these irreducible, timeless pedagogical elements?

It is quite simply: values and human relationships.

Pushed forward by the relentless winds of change, we

must never lose sight of what we stand for, and the value of authentic human encounter.

We must never lose sight of the fact that while technology can liberate, it can also isolate and alienate our students and blur the distinctions between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, the virtual and the real.

Despite the promise of the digital revolution, we cannot abdicate the responsibility we have – as parents and teachers – for helping

children come to a deeper understanding of truth, justice and "what is right", by passing on the stories that are good enough to live by.

Will "physical" schools and "real" teachers disappear? Not if we want students to learn. Certainly, they will have multiple access points to vast quantities of information.

But information is not knowledge. Information without human interaction is just information glut. It is the

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# Global future: coping in the digital era

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human connection, the opportunity for social interaction and, crucially, the power of human conversation that turns mountains of "stuff" into a personal bank of enduring understanding.

The test of schooling must be that new material is sufficiently "learned" for the student to apply the learning appropriately in the range of new and unpredictable situations in which these students will find themselves. That will not happen in virtual learning environments, devoid of genuine, human learner-teacher relationships.

We will see exponential growth in information, new markets, new products, new levels of personal adaptability and mobility. We are on a fast train, fuelled by technology. As we change, we will realise that ethics and relationships became more important, not less.

#### **How are international schools equipped to face this evolving reality?**

Remarkably well, we would argue. They are almost always

independent of large bureaucracies or political movements. They are "rapid-response" schools that can adapt quickly to changing learning environments.

They live the reality of "no borders", drawing students from a global catchment area, so are past masters at preparing children to move across boundaries: intellectual, cultural, physical.

They are well-resourced, so can invest in the technologies that are at the leading edge of learning and life. They have to because they serve parents who are informed and demanding.

But they are not just schools. They are communities. For an expatriate family, on the move every three to four years, they are the village, the social centre, the home town, the "third place". They are as focused on the students as people, and the parents as partners, as any local school.

Indeed, more so, as families tend not to have a well-established life outside school, so look to the school for everything. While this

places extra demands on the schools, it does have the benefit of making it easy and natural to share conversations about values, managing the realities of raising "digital children", while still emphasising the constants: bullying is bullying; plagiarism is plagiarism; respect is respect; service is service; information is not knowledge, virtual or not.

International schools are ideally placed to embrace the valuable in the new without displacing the valuable in the old. The proof of this is that, despite the current financial storm, the industry is booming. According to one recent study, the number of fee-paying international schools providing an English-medium education in September 2009 had reached 5,351 worldwide – more than double the number of schools in 2000.

"Whichever way you look at it," says Nick Brummitt, the managing director of ISC Research Ltd who undertook this study, "the English-medium international school market is not just alive but



**Business for international schools is riding high**

positively thriving. Using the lowest annual growth rate of the last several years, we can expect the market to double in size by 2020, reaching a market worth of £24 billion."

#### **Who are international schools for?**

Local families are pulling their children out of local, state-run schools, opting for what they see as the benefits of a truly international education. They are excited to think that their children will

have the opportunity to learn in an environment rich in cultural and linguistic diversity. For these families, an "international school" also means a "global" school for local families.

International schools have, from the outset, been dedicated to the challenge of developing educated, ethical, empathetic individuals, capable of "making a difference" in future society.

Many of us who have been involved in international education over the years are also deeply committed to the ideal that education does make a difference. We believe that the experience we offer, and the service we provide to globally mobile and local families, can make a better future for our children.

Certainly, international schools, with their high quality of service and their lack of state support, are expensive. However, whether they are looking for good value, or good values, international schools are increasingly the schools of choice with "national" and "international" parents.

#### **So what's the future of international education?**

Aren't they just an insignificant anomaly in the world of education, where the vast majority of students attend national schools?

Perhaps not. We believe that national ministries of education would do well to learn more about how international schools organise themselves to support diverse student bodies; how they have designed flexible, thematic conceptual curricula; how they manage their peer-driven systems of school evaluation; and how they work as communities with parents.

There is much here to be learnt and shared, if decision-makers in national educational systems would take a leaf out of the books of international school students and think across borders.

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