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International School Heads Step Up

“The time has come for a new global vision for learning, and it is time for international school heads to help lead the way,” said Robert Landau, President of the Academy for International School Heads (AISH) at a seminar/think tank on the shores of Lake Starnberg, Germany. Over 50 International School Heads representing primary and secondary schools in 26 different countries met this month in Munich for four days. Facilitated by Dr. Michael Thompson, noted author and psychologist, and inspired by keynote speaker Dr. Yong Zhao, a Chinese immigrant to the U.S., author of ASCD’s Catching up or Leading the Way, and currently Presidential Chair, Associate Dean for Global Education, and Director of the Center for Advanced Technology in Education at the University of Oregon.

Our world has changed tremendously in our lifetimes, and educational structures, paradigms, and philosophies mostly have not. Schools of the 19th century were designed to support the industrial revolution and, according to Yong Zhao, have had more success in sorting the masses rather than educating them.

Students who fall off the educational conveyor belt in most parts of the globe have far fewer vocational choices and often don’t have the tools to adapt well to the demands of our rapidly changing world. While school survivors have learned how to play the educational game, they don’t necessarily know how to learn, how to reflect on their own learning, nor how to apply their learning to novel situations.

Creativity, so vital to the entrepreneurial spirit needed to thrive in a globalized economy, is rarely an educational goal and is more often consciously or unconsciously squelched in schools around the world.

International school heads, joining the growing throng of educators who realize that our schools are long overdue for a significant overhaul, are poised to create a modern “manifesto for learning” that will help our factory-styled schools to substantially retool for the middle of the 21st century and beyond. Uniquely positioned as completely independent schools, with only voluntary alignment with any national or international organizations, international schools can effect fundamental change without extensive political constraints. International schools primarily serve globally mobile families who experience a world that is rapidly changing.

Protracted economic, environmental, and geopolitical issues are time bombs waiting to explode unless creative, internationally-minded, and active problem-solvers quickly emerge to address them. Fortunately in this day and age, many students have far more learning tools at their disposal and are coming to school with information-accessing skills that previous generations didn’t have. As a result of extensive brain research in recent years, we also know more about how students and adults learn best. What we lack are schools that are designed to leverage this new knowledge and these skills in order to optimally prepare students to thrive in the world that they will encounter.

The AISH “think tank” focused on four fundamental questions that we need to thoroughly contemplate as we consider the way that schools need to adapt to our students’ current and future needs.

- 1) What matters? Developing a learning paradigm for the 21st century
- 2) With what do learners come to ‘school’? Identifying and acknowledging the ‘learner’ of today.
- 3) How do we learn? Addressing and incorporating new learning about learning.
- 4) What tools/resources are available now? Understanding the impact of technology on schools as providers of learning.

As Yong Zhao pointed out, many of the lessons of John Dewey have withstood the test of time. Dewey said that “education is life,” and Dr. Zhao essentially asserted that our lives have evolved dramatically while our schools have mostly ossified in their structures, content, and methodologies. It is time for some serious rethinking about the whys, whats, and hows of school.



Academy for International School Heads

Serving International School Heads through focused advocacy, support and professional development

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As AISH CEO, Bambi Betts, continually asks, “If not international schools, then who will lead us towards our educational futures?” Through collaboration with its members and with other organizations around the world, AISH is ready to address these questions with an emerging manifesto. AISH envisions the following next steps:

- Synthesizing and publishing answers to the four think tank questions
- Distributing a list of must-have attributes to schools and university teacher-education programs for educators of the future
- Identifying and publishing a list of universities who model futuristic learning modes so secondary schools can recommend them for continuity of optimal learning into tertiary education

In order to pursue these objectives, AISH seeks collaborative partnerships that will help formulate a manifesto for learning, which will guide schools the world over to recreate themselves in the manner that our students need.

The Academy for International School Heads (AISH) is a non-profit, member-based professional organization, dedicated to support, professional development and advocacy. Founded in 1999 by 15 internationally-minded organizations and individuals, including the likes of the the European Council of International Schools, Office of Overseas Schools/U.S Dept of State, Lehigh University, the University of San Diego, AISH now counts over 350 individual and supporting members based in 120 countries around the world. www.academyish.org.