

Head of School

La Lettre, Winter 2010

The School of the Future

“The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind; creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers and meaning-makers; these people will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys.”

Daniel H. Pink, “A Whole New Mind”

If one asks people to imagine the school of the future, more often than not the conversation veers quickly towards an online virtual world with teachers overwhelmingly replaced by technology. In fact, if one considers the large percentage of teachers destined for retirement over the next 6-10 years (the National Association of Independent Schools estimates more than 60% of the current academic workforce) and the much smaller number of young people entering and staying in the profession, this scenario is not hard to envisage. We are already feeling the transformational impact of the digital revolution on the learning landscape: the sheer quantity of information and students’ access to it is overwhelming. The revolution in social networking media means that we may talk with each other at any time, anywhere, from a variety of portable or handheld devices, and traditional temporal and physical boundaries between home and school are rapidly dissolving.

However, according to Dan Pink, Al Gore’s erstwhile speech-writer and author of *A Whole New Mind*, the future belongs not to people who have mastered the left-brain qualities of the Information Age, but to those who have developed the so-called “right brain” qualities of inventiveness and empathy. Pink theorizes that, having passed through the Agricultural Age, the Industrial Age, and the Information Age, we have now reached a Conceptual Age, where the importance of Creators and Empathizers will be paramount. The argument at the center of Pink’s book uses the two sides of our brain as a metaphor for understanding our times and references six essential right-brain aptitudes on which both our professional success and our personal fulfillment may depend. If International Schools like ours are to practice what we preach in terms of preparing our students for the 21st century, our classrooms must therefore become models of creativity, innovation, sustainability and regeneration, to prepare our students for success in a world that moves more rapidly and less predictably than ever before, a world where “work” can be anytime and “home” can be anywhere. Students graduating from our schools will change jobs more frequently and live in a greater range of locations than ever before. They will need to be intellectually conscious of, and conscientious about, the world’s important issues, to know how to work in collaborative teams with people from other backgrounds and cultures, and eventually to be adept at rapid innovation in response to highly competitive international markets. At the same time, our classroom pedagogies must reflect the fact that information is not knowledge. Information without human interaction is just information glut. It is the human connection, the opportunity for social interaction, and

the power of human conversation that turns a never-ending potential for the accumulation of facts into a personal bank of enduring understanding and “aha moments”. Any new material must be sufficiently “learned” for the student to apply it to the range of new and unpredictable situations in which they will find themselves. And that will not happen in virtual learning environments devoid of qualified and experienced human teacher contacts.

Pink’s second book, *Drive: the Surprising truth About What Motivates Us*, takes a look at what truly motivates us as human beings and how we can use that knowledge to be successful. He suggests, as many educators have before him, that the motivators leading to high performance and satisfaction at home, at school and at work, are not external rewards but rather the deeply human need to direct our own lives and to learn and create new things....the need to achieve autonomy, mastery and purpose. This, of course, is what we have always believed to be true at French American International School. In the classroom, on the recreation yard, on the overnight and international exchange trips and through the community service programs, we are teaching autonomy and independence and social purpose. We allow students to learn from their own errors, without shielding them from every pitfall along the way... we allow them, yes, to fail sometimes, because nothing is more powerful or more motivational than success and enlightenment which comes after hard work and personal diligence.

A major challenge in 2010 is to deliver a challenging and relevant program of study that not only harnesses innovative thinking about technology but also responsible thinking about ecology in a highly urban campus setting. More than 50% of the world’s population now lives in cities, and, according to a recent study by the United Nations, this number is set to rise to 75% by 2050. While the heart of downtown San Francisco is a great place to nurture and educate the next generation of citizens, artists, architects, industry leaders, entrepreneurs and policy-makers, until now it has been a little harder to demonstrate the hands-on pleasures and productivity of working with the soil. Now, however, we are very excited about a partnership we are developing with the city-sponsored Hayes Valley Farm project, just down the road from our main campus, which will not only provide our students with truly tangible experiences in planting and harvesting, but also with the opportunity to learn directly from expert environmental scientists and activists about the delicate balance of nature and our responsibility to protect it.

At French American International School, we cannot imagine ever working towards a goal which does not actively promote and integrate a strong model of academic excellence. The many positive cognitive, affective and creative effects of learning in two languages or more from a very young age are well-documented. So many successful models exist which can be readily adapted to just about any context that we have favored an approach to curriculum development and design which gathers the best from a variety of national and international methodologies. If we accept that teachers are life-long learners too, the important thing in an academic community is to discuss, to listen, to try new ways of teaching, and to always be open to innovation without arbitrarily eliminating the successful tried and true ways of delivering program. Research shows time and again

that highly qualified teachers and a rigorous, challenging program of study are the backbone of any school's success, just as the children are its heart and soul. A cart-load of laptops or a bevy of teaching assistants are no substitute for a carefully-constructed, coherent and relevant curriculum in the hands of a top-notch teacher.

Even the 16th century philosopher, Montaigne, long before anyone had heard the term "globalization", condemned insularity and separatism, and wrote about the importance of mixing with the world. We must do so, because our lives depend on one another. We're all in the same boat, not in separate boats passing each other by. In the last analysis, we are not simply in the business of developing good scholars, but also of developing good people, open-minded citizens with strong critical thinking skills. Community service and civic-mindedness are more important today than ever before, and, if one believes that a purpose of an international education is cross-cultural communication and bridge-building, it is extremely important that our students see the world beyond the four walls of the classroom, not just virtually, but actually.

In essence, we believe that to enlist in an academically rigorous program of inquiry-based, student-centered education in an international context is to enlist in a search for authentic, objective, measurable, provable knowledge and for a variety of cultural lenses through which to interpret it. It is to enlist in an exploration of enlightened, rational, humanist core values. And it is to inherently embrace the struggle against the banality and partiality of the mass media, against the current crisis of ethical leadership, against the insult of propaganda masquerading as truth, and against societal ignorance and apathy. We'll accomplish this embracing information technology as one of many tools, in a never-ending variety of innovative ways. We'll accomplish this through a true concern for our diverse planet and our interconnectedness. And we'll accomplish this through our many human interactions, our academic debates and our no-holds-barred discussions. What better or more relevant mission could there be for our schools, as we pass from the Information to the Conceptual Age?

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