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Building International Partnerships: Country to Country, School to School

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Cover Page Footnote

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The world has never been smaller than it is today. With the proliferation of technology has come an access to cultures, events, ideologies, and societies that have not been evident in the history of human kind. Countries today are interdependent in the areas of education, medicine, business, commerce, and politics. No longer can a country adopt an isolationist mentality and expect to provide for its citizens all the educational and material benefits of a progressive society. Spaulding et. al. (2001) posited that today's students should be prepared to become globally literate and be responsible for becoming citizens of the world. One possible way to accomplish this imposing mandate is to create an international collaboration with peer schools such as the one that currently exists between University School in Johnson City, Tennessee and Colegio Americano in Guayaquil, Ecuador.

McLaughlin (1996) provided a framework for this collaboration in his view of global education, "Global education attempts to teach people how to live in a world that is increasingly interconnected and interdependent. This method of education works to establish cross-cultural understanding and to develop cooperative attitudes needed to solve world problems." This type of collaboration is designed to teach students and adults from different countries to respect cultures and develop relationships and friendships that will last a lifetime while providing a vehicle for sharing ideas and strategies for dealing with global issues and different perspectives.

The collaboration between two schools began in the summer of 2009 with a visit from the principal of Colegio Americano, the school board chair, and the director of Blue Hill Academy, a post-secondary school on the campus of Colegio Americano. After several days of meetings and tours of the area it was decided that a similar group from East Tennessee State University and University School would visit the school in Ecuador. While there in the late fall of 2009, a partnership agreement linking the four schools was signed. At the center of the agreement was the visitation of high school students to the schools for the purpose of building friendships and mutual understanding. Also included in the agreement were statements addressing academic collaborations for all four schools. Emmert and Pearson (2007) summed up this four-pronged relationship best with this statement: "International Education comprises educational efforts that infuse globally oriented content, perspectives, and experiences into all levels of education as a means to increase awareness and understanding of the diverse

world in which we live.” This international collaboration is designed to accomplish that task.

Over the two and one-half years of the partnership, there have been two visits to University School from Ecuadorian students and one visit by University School students. Two other visits are planned, one from each school to the other, in the winter and summer of 2012. These visits entail extensive time spent in classrooms of the visited school along with overnight trips to areas of interest in each country. While in Ecuador, University School students visited the 23,000 foot high Chimborazo Volcano in the Valley of the Volcanoes as they traveled through the Andes. Colegio Americano students visited Washington, D.C. where they spent three days touring our capital and then traveled to Gatlinburg, Tennessee where they visited the Smokies and aided the American economy at the outlets.

The most significant part for each group proved to be the housing arrangements. Host families provided housing for the students in both countries for the three-week visit. While there they lived the lives of their hosts. They ate the foods, attended the events, dealt with different ages of family members and immersed themselves deeply into the fabric of the families. Dearforff (2006) wrote about developing intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes and the framework for immersing these students in the different cultures certainly accomplish that task. University School students shared how surprised they were to have dinner at 10 o'clock at night while Colegio Americano students were surprised at how much fast food was eaten by American high school students. Neither of these two musings was world changing, but what it did do was provide a way for students to consider and respect the way other people from other cultures lived their lives. This is at the heart of international collaboration.

As these types of relationships develop, a deeper level of trust, understanding, and cooperation can be expected. Franks (1998) stated that, “as the world grows increasingly interdependent, we discover even more opportunities to learn and work from each other ... All over the globe, nations face a critical need to develop and maintain a supply of their most valuable resources: trained and productive workers.” These students who visit one another today will be those workers who will be leaders and contributors tomorrow. Learning about one another supports the cooperative effort needed in the economic, political, and social lives of emerging citizens of the world.

We often ask ourselves “what are we preparing our students for?” and “what is the best way to prepare them for tomorrow’s world?” There is no one best answer to either of these questions but it is certain that the world these students will inherit will be different than the world the leaders of today inherited. Education provides the best vehicle for preparing students to be competent world citizens. In order to accomplish this task, Weinbaum and Rogers (1995) suggested that rethinking curricula, teacher preparation, and collaborative planning would be effective in making these international collaborations successful. They also thought traditional schedules and studies of best practices would be beneficial.

In any endeavor involving the blending of cultures, obstacles that arise have to be addressed openly and honestly. School schedules, expectations of the leaders of the collaboration, expectations of the students, and parents involved all have to be discussed in a manner that opens the door for meaningful dialogue so that these issues become less of an obstacle and more of a stepping stone. The benefits of an international collaboration far exceed the work it takes to make such a venture happen. Students and adults gain valuable insight into the lives of those in another part of the world. They come to appreciate the differences and view these differences through the lens of first –hand experiences rather than using some deep-seated prejudice that may exist as a result of not knowing but only suspecting.

Becoming a competent and informed citizen of the world is certainly a goal worth pursuing. University School and Colegio Americano, though 5,000 miles apart, are two schools that are making the effort. They are interconnected at the most basic of levels – young people connected because of a natural curiosity to learn about others. Technology has certainly assisted in this endeavor, but the willingness of students and adults from both cultures to interact and share ideas and dreams for the future has been the key to making this international collaboration successful. Global interdependence will not disappear. Education and individual schools committed to providing these types of experiences for students will certainly determine how prepared our students are for living and working in this type of world.

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