

Innovative Approach to Student Support Services at ISB

Chris Schuessler October 18, 2018



Student Support Services at International School of Beijing

Students at International School of Beijing benefit from an approach to learning support that’s tailor-made for their school’s culture.

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A few years ago, the International School of Beijing re-evaluated its approach to its Learning and Support

Service programs. The goal was to widen the doors to service more students and to identify those that needed support sooner and more efficiently.

“Like a lot of international schools, ISB had imported the kinds of approaches to learning support that worked well in school systems in the West,” says Bill Hanagan, ISB’s former Director of Student Support Services. “But those are mostly huge systems with big, entrenched bureaucracies. They’re forced to do things a certain way because they have to apply one approach to a huge number of different kinds of school cultures. They’re done for reasons that just don’t exist here. So we realized that we could be a lot more innovative, a lot more nimble in our approach. We didn’t need to do hamper ourselves by adding unnecessary bureaucracy. We could find an approach that worked for us.”

A MORE FLEXIBLE SYSTEM

So Bill and the school’s leaders set about creating a more flexible and responsive support system. They knew they needed to be more inclusive in their support to meet the needs of a wider range of students.

“When I meet with parents who are considering ISB, a lot of them ask about our emphasis on ‘inclusion,’” says Tina Herman, ISB’s Director of Admissions. “Many of them are concerned that their child may be held back by this approach. I explain that as an international school, we’re trained to be rigorous in teaching our curriculum. We’re trained to look for differences in our approach to every student. We’re always ready to stretch them. That’s the nature of a good international school. This is all in alignment with inclusion.”

Hanagan believed strongly in a multi-tiered system of support for students. This approach stresses the importance of early intervention to best determine the kinds of support that each student needs.

“The goal of this approach is to match the intervention to an individual student’s needs as efficiently as possible. That requires frequent evaluation of student data to determine the level of support that’s needed.”

In this kind of system, more than half of students in early grades are placed into a Tier 1 learning program. This helps ensure that students and teachers are shoring up their core instruction first.

Hanagan instituted testing twice a year for students, measuring their abilities in reading, math and written language. If students are dropping below a certain threshold, the school will dig deeper into other data to find the root of the problem.

If a student needs more attention, they’re moved into a Tier 2 learning program. ISB’s team of support workers administers reading tests to these students every two weeks. They’re pushed hard to bring them up to speed.

“Tier 2 is designed to make sure that there’s not just a system problem disguised as a student problem,” says Hanagan. “We want to do everything we can to move those students out of Tier 2, and we are. Especially in Grades 1 through 3, students are moving out constantly.”

If the learning problem persists, students are moved into Tier 3, which involves developing an individualized learning

plan, or ILP. These extra layers of filtering makes sure that the school's support workers truly have the resources to meet the needs of Tier 3 students.

"I don't think anyone in Beijing is doing this kind of thing as well as we are. We have a systemized approach to addressing learning problems as well as behavior problems. It's personalized for individual students. And in most cases, that kind of intervention leads to them not needing a systemized plan anymore."

This kind of targeted, individualized system of learning support was exactly what ISB had in mind when it revamped its approach. "We wanted to broaden our ability to service," says Herman. "We brought in more experts in differentiated instruction, in supporting a diversity of needs. We developed a co-teaching model with more tailored lesson plans. So this approach is not just about servicing students with learning challenges. It's a pervasive philosophy throughout the school."

HIGHLY TRAINED STAFF

Another key feature of ISB's student support system is an emphasis on hiring highly trained, quality Learning Support teachers. "Too often, in an international school, support workers are spouses of other highly recruited faculty members, as a kind of bonus to entice them to work there," says Hanagan. "It's very important to us that our support workers can function as specialist consultants. They need to have status and respect amongst the school's leadership and faculty for this system to work."

There is routine collaboration between English as Additional Language (EAL) instructors, learning support teachers and the Department of Learning to develop protocols for support and intervention. They've ensured a commitment to a phonics program called Soundwaves starting in Kindergarten for core reading instruction, which helps students receive consistent instruction and support in reading and language. They've allowed for a dual services program, where students can receive extra support in both language and learning issues.

"It's all about finding the most challenging next step for our students, and finding the right kind of support to get them there," says Tina. "We want to guide our students to finding a path to success, and part of that is having specialized faculty who are trained to work with students in an international setting. All over the world, there are different systems, different teaching methods, languages – but it just comes down to good teaching.

In addition to support services within the classroom, ISB provides a team of counselors to assist students with a range of issues. The school is sensitive to the difficulties of adjusting to a different culture and different academic environment, and their support workers are trained to guide students through that process of transition.

The school's counselors also provide self-advocacy and mindfulness programs in collaboration with the school faculty. Together, they work to help students know themselves better so that they can focus on academic challenges. These programs help to empower students and often lead to more advanced training.

These kinds of programs are part of ISB's attempt to create a unique support system based specifically on the needs of their school community. "As international schools, we're able to design our own approaches and to be more efficient, and so I think we have to seize that opportunity," says Hanagan. "We've tried to do that here at ISB."

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