

The role of a consultant in helping school start up, development and improvement

By Lesley Snowball

This article highlights key aspects of consultancy support that can be invaluable, to new schools (as specifically illustrated here) and equally to established schools seeking to develop and improve their educational provision.

For a new school, getting off to a good start is essential: adapting or building appropriate premises; choosing or tailoring a programme to match the educational philosophy; recruiting the best teachers; buying resources and equipment; establishing systems, policies and procedures; ensuring the first few weeks of school go smoothly. So much to do and, usually, so little time to do it.

Having an experienced consultant as a 'co-pilot' can save precious time and can ensure high quality right from the start without a long-term financial commitment. As a Putting it into Practice consultant, working with my husband who has a background in systems design, engineering and IT, I have supported schools and teachers worldwide for the past 20 years in establishing, developing and refining educational programmes. My extensive experience as a teacher, head of school, curriculum designer and teacher educator, combined with a determined focus on practical implementation and systems development, has ensured that the schools we work with move forward rapidly but sustainably.

A model of effective teamwork

Working together as a team with complementary skills enables us to 'add value' to the school's own expertise. This symbiosis provides the school with a good model of the effective staff teams that all school leaders strive to develop but rarely have time to fully analyse or implement. Further, the 'cascading' effect of modelling behaviours means that schools with effective staff teams are much more likely to develop effective teamwork amongst students. At every level, the effectiveness of teamwork is one of the observable and measureable descriptors of an evolving school and the more effective the teamwork, the smoother the school's evolution is likely to be.

Having 'been there' ourselves means that we understand and sympathise with the problems that arise and, as consultants, we often find it easier to see these connections and interactions more objectively - the analysis is much more difficult when you are 'embedded' in the process.

Flexibility and responsiveness

No two schools are alike so the specific nature of support is tailored for each school. Schools are very complex organisations and providing effective support requires a dynamic approach that adapts and responds to constantly changing needs. Our experience allows us to predict both the needs and the changes and to preempt problems before they arise. It also gives us a more balanced perspective so we can offer reassurance and potential solutions to problems that might seem insurmountable to the school.

Ownership and capacity-building

Our approach to supporting schools follows our philosophy on good teaching and is aptly described by a well-used saying:

Give a child a fish and he will eat for a day; teach him how to fish and he can eat for a lifetime.

We firmly believe that our role is to support the school in doing its own development so that it builds internal capacity and progress is sustainable. This is a very fine balance as it is very easy for schools to be disenfranchised by a consultant's expertise – systems, procedures and documents may all be in place but the staff of the school has been left behind. Our belief is that when the consultant has moved on to another project, the school's development should still progress effectively. To this end, we provide models, templates, frameworks and examples as springboards to accelerate the process and save time, while still ensuring school understanding and ownership. Our years of experience in many different contexts means that we have a wide range of high quality models to hand that can be tailored to each school's specific needs.

A brief overview of key areas in which a consultant can support a new school

Adapting or building appropriate premises – *What rooms are needed? How big should they be? What shape? What storage? How to balance access versus security? How will we organise parking and bus drop-off?*

Whether a school starts in a small-scale, modest, temporary setting or large-scale, ambitious, purpose-built premises, the number and range of questions to be answered can easily feel overwhelming, and success will depend on effective planning, project management, appropriate building design and adaptation, and optimization of facilities. In our experience, many school leaders spend more time sorting out problems and discontent about parking, school buses, the playground and the cafeteria than they do on education-related matters, so do try to get these aspects right from the start.

Choosing a programme to match the educational philosophy – *Should we choose off-the-shelf or tailor-made? How do we navigate the processes and forms for application, registration, candidacy, authorization?*

Choosing from ready-made, purchased programmes requires careful research, and even the most thoughtful choice can still end up as a compromise that doesn't perfectly match the school's needs. The alternative is to create a bespoke, made-to-measure framework, which requires purposefully designing, adapting, planning, resourcing and implementing quality curriculum, aligned to the school's philosophy and chosen pedagogical approaches. Navigating the procedures, forms and documentation associated with recognition by curriculum authorities can be extremely time-consuming and bewildering, and experienced assistance can greatly ease the stress.

Recruiting the best teachers – *What are the benefits of agencies, recruitment fairs, independent recruitment tours, skype interviews? How do we create job descriptions, professional and attractive advertisements, contracts? What are appropriate salary and benefits packages?*

From individual positions to schoolwide faculty recruitment drives, focus on quality is fundamental, and carefully choosing how to recruit can either ease or hinder the process. It is important for a new school to identify potential constraints (for example, statutory age limits, citizenship requirements, preference for teaching couples to ease accommodation needs) and also to identify the essential personal and professional characteristics of the new recruits. In our experience, personal attributes always carry substantial weight: a teacher who is open-minded, positive, adaptable and student-focused can easily learn the specifics of any curriculum framework. While many established schools prefer to hire only teachers with prior experience (for example, a five-year minimum requirement is very common), new schools may

benefit from new teachers who can bring higher levels of energy, commitment, enthusiasm and adaptability.

Buying resources and equipment – *What do we need? How do we balance quality, durability, value for money, cultural appropriateness? How do we fill an empty library? What are the priorities for a finite budget? How much art paper do kindergarten students use?*

From individual items such as pencils, paper and rulers to programmes, systems, fixtures and fittings, the process of equipping a whole school requires careful attention to detail to ensure quality and value for money. Many new schools fall into the trap of false economies, for example, by ordering in small quantities rather than making savings through bulk buying; by buying cheaper quality that cannot stand up to the wear and tear of constant student use and that then needs replacing after only a few months. Deciding what is needed is the first step, best approached systematically by referencing proforma lists from other schools or publishers / suppliers, rather than randomly by flicking through catalogues or websites. Depending on your school location, the ordering, payment and delivery can be fraught with difficulties, so time is of the essence to ensure you open with a fully-resourced school. And before any items arrive, it is essential to have in place an inventory system to log all materials and equipment.

Establishing administrative systems – *What policies and procedures do we need? How can we best organise HR, finance, admissions, attendance, security, curriculum, assessment and reporting?*

From small single-section schools to large all-age schools, designing systems, creating policies and writing procedures are essential start-up activities. Such systems, policies and procedures provide the foundation for your school and having them in place very early in the process can make all the difference between a smooth, seamless, enjoyable school start and a rocky, fragmented, stressful start. Systems give a school structure and policies bring consistency, both of which are essential characteristics of a successful organisation.

Ensuring the first few weeks of school go smoothly – *What training and orientation do our teachers need to help them to settle in and adapt easily to the country, culture, linguistic and school contexts? What is our 'meet and greet' policy? What needs to be in our welcome packs? What kind of accommodation assistance and preparation is needed? Who is the point of contact for trouble-shooting?*

From small numbers of local hires to large numbers of international recruits, new staff need to be welcomed and kept informed right from the minute they are hired; helped through their relocation, including travel, arrival and settling-in; effectively orientated to the country, culture, language and school contexts; and prepared for the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and resources they will use. It is important for new recruits to have clear guidelines about procedures, documentation and what they need to bring, and reassuring to have one consistent point of contact who can end unambiguous, timely and personalised responses to their queries. Even teachers who are seasoned travelers can feel vulnerable when arriving in new location, so the school should ensure that arrival arrangements are in place, including ideally, a personalised welcome from a school owner or leader, and appropriate accommodation, whether temporary or permanent.

Starting a new school – flying by the seat of your pants?

To start a new school you need:

a captain (the Head of School)

an experienced co-pilot (Putting it into Practice)

a vehicle (the school environment)

an engine (systems and procedures to drive everything forward)

a destination (vision and mission statements)

a map (curriculum and pedagogical approach)

a crew (governors, leaders, teachers, support staff)

a navigation system (strategic plan)

way points (development plans and targets)

fuel (the energy and drive to do all the hard work)

maintenance and repair (constant monitoring to assess stress points - timely intervention to avoid breakdown)

passengers (students who benefit from your services on their journey)

periodic mid-flight refreshments (take a break!)