

## **SABBATICAL REPORT**

*Austin Clarke, December 2010*

I was privileged to have taken a sabbatical for the last term of 2011. In addition to taking a break, I visited 11 schools in order to broaden my exposure to independent schooling in South Africa. The schools I visited were Michaelhouse, Hilton College, Treverton College, St Henry's Marist Brother's College, Bridge House, Bishops, St Joseph's Marist Brothers, Kingswood, Woodridge and Mananga College. In every instance, I was welcomed and hosted very warmly.

One of my overriding conclusions is how proud we should be of that which we have achieved in such a short space of time. This is not just in terms of facilities and infrastructure but also in terms of reputation. Our name is very much out there and we are taken seriously by our colleagues in independent education. Our hosting of the Independent Schools Rugby Festival in 2004 is still spoken about by many schools.

I was also struck by the importance of the "arrival experience". Schools that are architecturally coherent with well maintained grounds stand out.

Before I left, I had some idea of the themes I was hoping to investigate but often ended up paying scant attention to the key areas, instead moving off into many other areas and learning a great deal more. The themes I investigated were:

- What defines the culture and ethos of a school?
- How are schools dealing with staffing issues, more specifically the recruitment, development, appraisal and retention of teachers?
- How are schools dealing with issues around diversity?
- Is there industry best practice around the management of prep and high schools on one campus?
- Use of IT in the curriculum and school administration.

### **Culture and Ethos**

In the words of one of the heads "we are all trying to be excellent at being generalists". This is true in the sense that we are all about offering academic, sporting and cultural excellence. From time to time every school reinvents part of itself and leads a charge in a particular direction. Some of the examples were cricket, laptops, design and technology, community service, pupil leadership, diversity, etc. Each initiative informs part of the culture of the school but is generally very easy to imitate and leads to an "arms race" between schools.

My conclusion is that culture and ethos is far more nebulous but there is plenty of evidence that can be accumulated around issues such as:

- Age, history and traditions
- Religious identity
- Gender of the school
- Combination of boarding and day pupils
- Facilities and fee structure
- Racial diversity of staff and pupils
- Involvement of parents and past pupils
- Dress and etiquette of pupils.

As a coeducational school with an equal mix of day pupils and boarders, in a semi urban environment, we are an incredibly complex educational institution. Compare us to an all

boys' school in a rural setting where all the pupils board and our complexity becomes evident.

As far as our dress and general decorum of pupils is concerned, two things were noteworthy. Firstly the courtesy of the pupils is critical. Schools where pupils acknowledged adults stood out. Secondly schools that insisted that the pupils were crisply dressed also stood out.

The involvement of our parents at Uplands is a further point that shapes our culture and ethos. In many schools the idea of a parents' forum or a parents' sports advisory committee was a completely foreign notion.

The culture and ethos of the school comes through in interesting ways. Some noteworthy examples were:

- The competitiveness of the school
- Attitude of the school to special needs pupils
- Racial diversity of the pupils and staff
- The sponsorship of clergy children
- Specialist sporting opportunities and other activities; eg, water polo, outdoor pursuits, etc
- Collegiality of the pupils and staff
- The affordability of the school
- The implementation of discipline. One school had tried the Truth and Reconciliation Committee approach to major disciplinary issues. In other words, if you provide full disclosure you would not suffer any consequences.

In summary, our Uplands identity, culture and ethos is multifaceted and informed by:

- A tradition of boxing outside our weight class and a "never say die" attitude.
- Although complex, one of our greatest strengths lies in our identity as a coeducational, boarding school of excellence.
- The general decorum, dress, courtesy and confidence of our pupils is critical. It is a never ending battle but we must not move the trench.
- From the purchase of our first debenture, Uplands has had a strong identity with our parents. This must remain a key area.

## **Staffing**

Staffing is a general and on going concern for heads.

All the schools I visited have, to varying degrees, an internship programme. These programmes generally focus on training of black teachers. No school held their internship programme up as a beacon of success. As an independent school sector, we have a great deal to achieve in this regard.

An interesting idea that I picked up at Michaelhouse was the concept of "Lectures at Lunch". On an ongoing basis, every week or two, a guest speaker comes in and gives input in a key area. Staff attend on a voluntary basis and topics range from information technology in the classroom to dealing with ADD children.

Another common trend that several heads spoke about was teachers who were not prepared to sell their life and soul to the school. The modern teacher has a life that is independent of the school and they appear to be guarding this more jealously.

A further issue that we really need to take note of in an Uplands context was the prevalence of staff housing in residential boarding schools.

Finally, on the staffing front, the issue of performance related bonuses is a very princely one. A couple of schools had tried this approach and abandoned it while others simply “would not go there”. A more popular approach was to compensate teachers for extra time and effort. The Uplands initiative of allowing pupils to complete a review for every teacher was fascinating to many of my colleagues.

Take-outs pertaining to staffing:

- We need to work harder and more collaboratively on our internship programme.
- We need staff housing.
- Committed career teachers are becoming harder to find and are demanding higher wages.
- We must proceed with caution as we implement performance based rewards.

## **Diversity**

In many ways, I was quite encouraged by our achievements as far as diversity is concerned. This was certainly the case on the pupil front.

While schools like the Marist Brother’s Colleges have had diversity as a focus for a long time, and as a result are quite representative, other more established schools see a 20-25% diversity ratio as a distant goal. Uplands has a multi national and multi cultural feel to it that was reinforced by Thandie Chaane’s comments at the beginning of the year. This is a strength to be built upon.

Diversity on the staffing front remains a challenge. Like us, schools outside of the main centre, battle to attract top quality black teachers.

Take-outs pertaining to diversity:

- Both by design and perhaps by accident we have got a great deal right at Uplands from a pupil enrolment perspective
- We have a long way to go from a teaching perspective and in terms of being more welcoming to our black parent community.

## **IT and the Curriculum and School Administration**

This is a pet topic of mine and I really enjoyed researching this area. Two distinct areas are apparent. Firstly the extent to which use of IT can enhance process of learning and teaching.

- Our approach to ensure that every classroom has a data projector and that the campus has broadband Internet access was the correct approach. However, these facilities are now pretty much entry to the game.
- It was interesting to note that one school that had become a laptop school more than six years ago, found that there was less than 50% take up by teachers on the use of laptops in the classroom. The pivotal issue is the extent to which staff have the inclination and or time to take up the cudgel and beat a precarious path through the IT in education undergrowth determines the success of use of IT in the class room.
- From an Uplands point of view, we have not done nearly enough to develop a collaborative teaching intranet. Bishops was particularly impressive in this regard. A teacher or pupil could “drill down” into the timetable to the actual resources used in each lesson. Electronic curriculum and assessment planning is taken for granted.

My second area of IT interest relates to school administration systems. The system is the nerve centre for all information in the school. It keeps track of biological information, school reports, absentees, etc. For some time, I have been anxious that the Upbeat system I

developed for Uplands was too reliant on me and was therefore placing the school at risk. A number of schools are re-evaluating their systems at the moment. Flagship revaluation is taking place at Michaelhouse, where they have employed a group of UK consultant to look at all their systems.

The conclusion is that, we do need to shelve Upbeat, but not yet. The replacement package needs to satisfy three requirements:

1. It must run like a school, and not like a programmer would like a school to run.
2. It must be easy to administer locally. In other words the back-end database must be open.
3. It must be web based.

While Upbeat satisfies requirements 1 and 2, we can only move when we find a package that satisfies all three requirements. I will be keeping contact with Bishops in this regard.

Take-outs for Uplands:

- We need to dedicate more resources, particularly Manpower resources, to getting our curriculum onto the intranet. I see this as a key area for close cooperation between Prep and College.
- We need to monitor the development of school administration systems with a view to moving away from Upbeat during 2012.

### **Management of Prep and High Schools**

Of the 11 schools I visited, nine had both high school and prep school sections.

My most interesting observation is that there is no single governance structure that works really well and that I could recommend for the Uplands Schools.

A very clear pattern emerged with regard to the operational side of running a prep and high school as a single brand.

### **Non Academic Areas That Were Integrated Between Schools**

1. Identity: Badge, uniform, etc.
2. Financial admin.
3. Marketing
4. Technology
5. HR; contracts and remuneration
6. Outsourced operations.
7. Project management
8. Maintenance
9. Grounds and Gardens
10. Outreach

### **Academic Areas That Were Integrated Between Schools**

1. Chaplaincy
2. Mission
3. Sport strategy.
4. Boarding

### **Areas of Operational Independence**

1. Academic delivery
2. Pupil selection
3. Staff selection
4. Sports delivery

## 5. Culture delivery.

### **General Observations**

I started off by commenting on how generally energising I found my sabbatical. Some of the points that I observed and feel that we must not lose sign of included:

#### Issues on Heads' Minds:

- Examining bodies: The decision to write IEB or state exams is hotly debated in schools. More visionary heads are looking at international options such as A levels and the International Baccalaureate.
- The professionalism of schoolboy sport is draining resources and detracting from sound educational practice.
- Sharpening the academic saw: Heads are regularly drawn into a range of issues that leave the academic priority on a back burner.
- Staff: the attraction of top quality educators, particularly male career teachers is a worry.
- Issues around diversity.
- Pupil numbers: With one or two notable exceptions every school I visited had spare capacity.

#### Other issues and observations

- Endowment funds: Well endowed schools with a strong non-fee source of income flourish during difficult economic times. I see making a start with this as a key objective for Uplands College.
- Schools that had introduced a long hike as part of their development for grade 9 or 10 pupils, have found it very useful.
- Second to staff housing, our major lack of infrastructure is around "quiet studious space". I am talking about more than a traditional library.
- Teachers are very busy everywhere but our staff is really busy! The complexity of our organisation, along with our integrated approach to education places a lot of strain on our staff.
- Our identity as an Anglican school is important. I was made to feel especially welcome by my colleagues in Anglican schools.

In conclusion I would like to thank the Board for agreeing to allow me to take a term off as a sabbatical. I hope the investment you have made in my development will pay dividends into the future of Uplands College.