

Facing the “Brutal Facts”

By Bambi Betts

In his widely acclaimed book, *From Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes a critical finding from his research that should be a wakeup call for international schools. To become “great,” an organization must “face the brutal facts.” And greatness in a school can mean only one thing: more and better learning for all.

How woefully far we are from that goal. What have been passing for facts have often been unchallenged perceptions, perpetuated by a culture of excuses. Whether through naiveté, cunning political savvy, or just plain ignorance, we in international schools continue to show an unwillingness both to find and to face those “brutal facts.”

Some challenging examples:

FACT: Dozens, if not hundreds of schools claim in their mission statements that they will educate their students to become global citizens. Yet, it is entirely possible (and very frequently happens) in an international school for a student to complete all the grades in the school and NEVER, that’s right NEVER, have to grapple with a global issue. This is true even in programs like the IB.

FACT: Despite decades of emphasis, and writing it into curricular “standards,” today’s secondary school graduates are no better at public speaking today than those of two decades ago. Moreover, according to polls of adults, public speaking remains one of their worst fears.

FACT: The majority of students report that they were never actually TAUGHT to do research. They were just ASSIGNED research.

FACT: Almost no school can claim “the ability to innovate” as one of its school-wide learning standards. How frightening for our on-going civilization to imagine another generation educated for compliance rather than innovation.

FACT: The underlying premise for an overwhelming number of practices in our schools is teacher equity rather than student learning. We are often more concerned, for example, that each teacher has an equal teaching load than whether individual students have equal opportunity to learn.

FACT: We frequently allow learning to be the variable, while sacred organizational structures (like departments, length of day, start times) are the constant. We ask not what structures would best support learning, but rather what learning might emerge from the sacred structures we have adhered to for decades. Organizational structures in our schools which supposedly support learning have not been significantly overhauled since well before the advent of the information age. We fear to question lest we “offend” a professional educator. Never mind about the learning.

FACT: In school after international school, a huge proportion of the writing program for children in elementary (and often secondary as well) continues to be based almost exclusively in creative writing - stories, poems, personal journals. Meanwhile, purposeful and technical writing - editorials, proposals, factual accounts, briefs - are largely ignored. And to add insult, we ignore the FACT that the transfer of writing skill from creative fiction to purposeful products is minimal.

For too long we in education have been too easy on ourselves. Too willing to accept the perceptions when finding the facts is either too hard or too demoralizing. We somehow have exempted ourselves from one of the primary ingredients that actually constitutes a profession - facing the facts and holding ourselves accountable.