Adjusting, Expanding, and Closing Schools

by Bob Pittman. This article was first presented at the 2000 IMKEC Conference.

A. Adjusting Schools

1. *Control*—Although reluctant to admit it, control is often a big issue.
   a) Christian Foundations—At times the control of the school is not adjusted in order to maintain the Christian foundations of the school. This is especially true when a large number of the business community use the school.
   b) **Doctrinal Issues—**Sometimes there is a desire to maintain control because of doctrinal issues. With some effort, many have found that even groups with very different doctrinal views can work together cooperatively in MK schools by choosing to focus on the common beliefs. Often differing views are discussed openly in the classroom and students are encouraged to work with their parents on what they believe. The school can even be a catalyst for unity between missions.
   c) **Christian Cooperation and Partnerships—**At times control may be shared out of pure generosity and a genuine belief that we are all working together to fulfill the Great Commission. In most cases it doesn't make much sense for missions to run schools in competition with each other in the same area.
   d) **Changing Population—**At times the demographics change to such an extent that it becomes appropriate to share the control of the school.
   e) **Responsibility—**Running a school can be a big responsibility. It may be that the responsibility becomes too great, and there is a desire to share the responsibility.
2. *Teachers*—It is always a challenge to find good teachers. Having more groups looking for teachers and being able to sponsor teachers increases the possibility of finding those teachers needed.
3. *Finances*—There can be "hidden" costs in running a school that fees don't cover. The more groups involved in sponsoring the school, the more these costs can be shared.
4. *Benefits vs. Costs*—Missions need to continually weigh the benefits of running a school compared to the costs.
   a) **Changing Mission Strategy or Focus—**It may be that a mission's strategy or focus has changed to the extent that the school no longer provides them with the same benefit it used to.
   b) **Changing Costs—**It may be that costs change (normally going up) to the extent that consideration must be given to making changes.
5. *Changing World*—It may be that other things have changed to the extent that changes should be considered in the school.
   a) **Boarding—**The need for (or lack thereof) may cause the rethinking (positives and negatives) of a boarding program.
   b) **Travel—**Changes in travel may affect who will or will not attend the school.

c) **Homeschooling—**The rise in homeschooling may affect the school.

d) **Governments—**Changes in governments may cause the school to rethink the way it operates. (For example, it may need to become an international school or open up to nationals. Visa restrictions could impact the school.)

e) **Changing Population—**As the face of missions changes, schools may need to change, too. Some of these changes would mean expanding the school's programs (see below). It may also mean dropping programs that are no longer needed. The missions community is becoming much more international, for example, and schools may need to adjust. As we work in partnerships with nationals, we may need to consider including their children in the school.

6. *Considerations*

a) **Impact on the Cause of Christ—**The school can impact the cause of Christ by meeting or not meeting the needs of mission families. It can be a positive or negative example of cooperation and sharing. It can be a catalyst in bringing missions together or serve as a wedge to drive them apart. It can also impact national Christians positively or negatively.

b) **Appropriate Focus—**It is hard to be all things to all people. It is possible to spread oneself too thin. It is also possible to be too focused. Finding the balance is the trick!

c) **Forced Change—**At times change is forced upon us. This is an opportunity to seek the Lord and His direction. It may be that although it seems bad, He means it for good.

B. Expanding Schools

1. *Increased Population*—The most obvious reason to expand a school is because of increased population.

a) **Mission Growth—**When the missions working in the area are growing and expanding, especially when they bring in new young families, the number of students can be
expected to grow.

b) **New Mission Work—**New missions coming into the area can also increase the demand on the school.

c) **Non-mission Increases—**The number of non-mission students (business, diplomatic, or national) can grow for a variety of reasons.

2. *Change of School Focus*—It may be that the school wants to reach out to the secular world to have a greater witness.

3. *Changes in Government Requirements*—It may be that the government asks or requires the school to take in more non-mission students. Accepting business students can put the school in the good graces of the government and may offer a unique opportunity to witness.

4. *Changes in Demographics*—It may be that there is a sudden influx into the area.

a) **Shifting Mission Populations**—There can be significant changes in mission populations.

(1) **Evacuations**—With the world seemingly becoming unstable, there are times when large numbers of missionaries are moved to new locations. This can put unusual strain on schools in those locations, and there often isn't much warning.

(2) **Limited Access Projects**—With improved transportation and communication, missions are finding they can work in new and creative ways. This may cause an influx, which might not have been anticipated. It may also cause schools to look at their definitions of missionary. The school may have to open up to students of businessmen in order to take in "tentmakers."

b) **Boarding**—Adding a boarding program may mean that the school needs to expand.

5. *Changing School Population*—These can put pressure on the school to add programs to meet their needs.

a) **Other Nationalities**—The number of non-Americans continues to grow in the mission community. Meeting their needs can be a real challenge.

(1) **ESL**—Many of these nationalities speak languages other than English. Koreans are one of the largest groups.

(2) **Non-American Programs**—Some schools offer Mother Tongue classes or classes in the history and culture of these nationalities if there are sufficient numbers.

b) **Nationals**—As missions increasingly look to partnering with nationals in mission work, they need to consider the impact this is having on the national children. Taking well-educated nationals out of a large city and putting them in a small town in that same country may mean a much lower standard of education for the children. The schools should consider how they might meet those needs.

6. *Changing School Programs*—As new programs come along, there is pressure on the schools to add them (for example, computers, ESL, and Special Needs). While some of these may or may not mean an increase in attendance, it may mean that additional staff, facilities, and budgets are needed.

7. *Evaluating the Advisability of Growth*—It is easy to say it is always good to grow. Then again, some people want to keep things the way they are and are threatened by change. These are some factors to consider in deciding:

a) **God's Leading—**There are times when God's leading is clear and not always in a way that we would think. If this is the case, it needs to take precedence.

b) **Impact on Mission Work—**This should be one of the primary considerations. Will allowing the school to grow allow mission work to grow?

c) **Impact on Minorities—**It is easy as part of the majority to feel it isn't much of a problem for the minorities who may not be served. It is important to listen carefully to what they are saying. Many do not want to complain or seem ungrateful. It may not be culturally appropriate for them to tell the school just what they think.

d) **Cost—**What will the cost be to expand? What will be the cost of not expanding?

e) **Other Options—**Are there other options that might be better?

f) **Long Term Projections—**What are the long-term projections? This is not always
possible to know. There are times when decisions must be made in faith.

C. Closing Schools—

This is one of the hardest things to do. There is a sense of adventure and excitement in starting a new school. It is fun to watch it grow. However, a shrinking school population is tough, even if the school is not in jeopardy of closing. Typically the new school population is skewed to the elementary side, while the shrinking population is skewed to the high school side. It is much easier to have a "one-room schoolhouse" with elementary students than with high school students.

1. *Keep the school open*. Perhaps it is not necessary to close the school. It may mean doing things differently, but it should be considered.

   a) **Back to Basics—**If the school is shrinking, it may be able to survive for a while by getting back to basics. Perhaps high school electives could be offered through
   correspondence schools or the Internet.

   b) **Multi-grade classes—**In elementary school multi-grade classes can be used. In high school classes can be grouped and courses taught on a rotating basis (for example, group grades 9 and 10, and offer Physical Science one year and Biology the next.)

   c) **Other Missions—**Are there other missions in the area that could join in the school? Perhaps it would even be appropriate to phase the school over to their control.

   d) **Other Non-Mission Groups—**By opening the school up to the business and diplomatic communities, it may be that the school could be kept going. While it would be nice to keep the Christian focus, if necessary the school could be phased over to these communities with the understanding that they would keep their Christian foundation, at least for a time.

   e) **Nationals—**NICS[3] has found that there are often upper-class nationals, many of whom are Christian, that are looking for a good education for their children. It may even be appropriate to work out an agreement with NICS for them to take over the school.

   f) **Move the School—**Sometimes schools must move because of the need to evacuate from countries—a reason other than the school getting too small. In these cases, consideration should be given to the feasibility of moving the school to another location. This may even help where the school is becoming too small if another location would attract more students.

[3] Network of International Christian Schools, *www.nics.org*.

2. *Merge with Another School*. It may be that the school can merge with another school nearby. Even if it requires boarding, it may be worth considering. It is much easier to keep moral up by joining another school that is doing well.
3. *Supervise Correspondence.* As the school gets too small to continue a full program, it may be necessary to phase into a supervised correspondence program where teachers monitor and supervise students working on external programs (e.g. NorthStar Academy, University of Nebraska). The teacher(s) would also organize activities for the students, such as field trips, socials, and sports.
4. *Support Other School Options.* It may be that by providing a teacher, an international school would be willing to work out an agreement to give tuition credits in lieu of a teacher salary. Placing a boarding home parent couple from the closing school at another school may give the continuity and bridge that would make that option more attractive. It may even be that the mission should make funds available to support these options because of the uniqueness of the situation.
5. *Focus on the Positive!* Closing down can be very depressing. Especially if the school must close, it is important to work at being positive. Rather than thinking of closing (quitting), think about finishing! Look for opportunities to celebrate! Include the students in activities where the mission is completing their task. If there is a ceremony to turn something over to the national church, celebrate it! Rejoice that they are able to take on that responsibility. Don't allow negative thinking. Have a big completion ceremony, and if possible, invite past students and faculty to come and celebrate. Make a booklet celebrating the school, giving the history, interesting facts, stories, poems, pictures, and the names and addresses of alumni. The choice to focus on the positive will enable the school to finish their task, "Not somehow, but triumphantly!"[4]

[4] Dr. V. Raymond Edman, past president of Wheaton College