Starting a New School

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

A. Background Work (Do your homework!)

1. Family Considerations:

a) **Numbers**—Are there enough families to warrant a school? With small numbers of students, the grade level distribution is also a factor, as teachers need to have reasonable teaching loads.

(1) **Elementary** – There should be at least ten students, representing at least five families for a small elementary school.[1]

(2) **Secondary** – There should be at least 30 students in grades 6-12.

(3) **High school** – There should be at least 20 students in grades 9-12.

b) **Commitment—**Are these families committed to starting a school? Are they committed to working together and using a common curriculum? Are they committed to being flexible in the program offered? A solid commitment of the parents to cooperate and work together is essential.

c) **Cooperation—**Are there families from other missions who are willing to cooperate? What is the level of their commitment? How many families (with how many students) from other groups (including business and diplomatic) would be interested in the school? What is the level of their interest? A cooperative effort for the common good will usually result in the best school.

d) **Nationalities—**How many different nationalities are represented in this group? How similar are their national curriculums? What are the expectations of the minorities? Will the school attempt to make adjustments for the different nationalities? What are the implications of those adjustments? Meeting the needs of those from other nationalities can be a challenge. It can also be very rewarding and enriching for American students. Especially if they are MKs, it seems important to do all that can be done to help meet their needs. However, this means being willing to do things a bit differently from the typical home-country system. This can actually be better if the best of each system is used.

e) **Projections—**What are the long-range projections for numbers of families and students? Is the school likely to grow? Will there be enough long-term need to justify the initial set-up costs?

f) **Special Needs—**Do any of the probable students have special needs? Special education? ESL? Physical handicaps? How many? What is the nature of these needs? What are the implications of these needs? Would the school be likely to be able to meet those needs with the resources available to them?

g) **Home-school Impact—**Is there a significant number of families that will choose to home school even if there is a school started? Does that impact the

[1] Established by the Inter-mission Work Party on MK Education (forerunner of IMKEC) in 1995.

school? Will the school be able to help those families? In what way? Will there be a significant number of families who will want to take their kids out of the school on a regular basis (such as taking them to the village)? Will the school be able to support that, even helping to provide materials for families to use while they are away?

2. ***Entity Considerations:***

a) **Strategic Value—**What is the importance of the school in the overall plans of the entity? What is the level of commitment of the entity to a school? How many language groups are in the entity? Will it serve other groups? Have those groups indicated a willingness to cooperate? If other groups cooperate, how will the control of the school be shared? How important is the control issue?

b) **Financial—**What financial resources is the entity willing to commit to a school (for example capital investment in property, buildings, furniture, science equipment, textbooks, library books, office equipment, sports equipment, and other resources; as well as operating expenses for those helping to initiate the school, such as travel, postage, photocopying, phone, government fees, consultant help)? What financial resources are other groups willing to commit?

c) **Personnel—**Is the entity willing to commit personnel to the establishment of a school? (For example, are they willing to obtain government permission and visas, to serve on the board, to prepare and follow up on funding proposals, to recruit and help teachers?) Is the entity willing to pull people from other jobs to teach in the event the teachers are late in arriving or don't make it at all? What about other groups?

(1) **Elementary**—one room school minimum: 10 students should have at least one full-time teacher who has experience and is qualified to teach.

(2) **Secondary**—grades 7-12 minimum: 30 should have a minimum of three full-time teachers

(3) **High School**—grades 9-12 minimum: 20 should have a minimum of two full-time teachers

d) **Support—**Is the entity "teacher friendly"? What will it take to make the entity more "teacher friendly?" Teachers have to be recruited twice—once to go and once to stay. It is easy to take teachers for granted and assume they are easily replaced, but keeping good teachers is always better than replacing them. It is worth the effort to try to keep good teachers.

e) **Cooperation—**Are there other missions that are willing to cooperate in starting a new MK school? What is their level of commitment?

f) **Other Resources—**What other resources is the entity willing to commit to a school (such as buildings, equipment, property)? What about other groups?

3. ***Location Considerations:***
   a) **Other Options—**What other options are there to meet the needs (such as national schools, mission schools, boarding schools, Internet schools, correspondence schools)?
   b) **Living Conditions—**How easy or difficult will it be to sustain teachers in this location? What specifically will teachers need help with, and where will they get this help? How long will they need help? Is the cost of living a factor? In what way?
   c) **Language—**Will teachers need to learn the local language? What are the implications of this for career teachers? For short-term teachers? What can be done to help them?
   d) **Government Regulations—**How difficult is it to get government permission to run a school? How difficult is it to get visas for teachers? What requirements would the government put on the school? Are there advantages to registering as an international school?
   e) **School Site—**How strategically located is the site for the school? Is it convenient to get to? Is it centrally located? Are there other reasons to be at this site? Is there adequate housing for families?
4. ***Mission Board Considerations for Teacher Placement:***
   a) **Relative Need—**How does this need compare with the needs of other locations (such as strategic need, teacher/student ratio for school, teacher/student ratio for mission, severity of need, other factors)?
   b) **Commitments—**What commitments have been made (such as contracts, agreements)?
   c) **Cooperation—**Are there other missions that are willing to work together on starting a school?
   d) **Specific Need—**How do the specific teacher needs compare with available teachers? What is the likeliness of success for the teacher?
   e) **Teacher Preferences—**What are the preferences of the available teachers?
   f) **Recruiter—**Who recruited the teacher? Were they recruited for a specific school?

B. First Steps

1. *Pray!* Ask God to make His will clear. (If it is His will, He will provide.)
2. *Establish a founding group.* A steering committee from the interested parties should be selected to begin working on the school. This group should be at least five members and no more than 15. Seven or nine would be ideal, but it is also good to get all interested parties represented. This steering committee will likely grow into a school board, so careful consideration should be given to including those of conflicting religious persuasions. Choose officers.
3. *Research.* Do the homework necessary to answer the questions in the previous section. Listen carefully to what is being said and not said.

4. *Meet regularly.* If the meetings are too far apart, progress will be slow and without consensus.
5. *Communicate.* Take minutes of the meetings and distribute them to interested groups and families.
6. *Seek community support.* Ask for input, listen to concerns, invite participation, and be sensitive to the impact on others.
7. *Form committees.*
   a) **Finance—**Begin putting together start-up costs and initial budgets, create a development plan, investigate sources of funding, and develop initial fee structure.
   b) **Facilities—**There must be facilities that allow for a healthy educational environment. Determine if facilities will be rented, bought, or built, and begin working toward an appropriate facility. Work with the Finance Committee to develop a reasonable start-up budget for facilities.
   c) **Public Relations (PR)—**Keep sending organizations and interested people informed, keep a list of potential students.
   d) **Academic—**Choose appropriate curriculum and materials.
   e) **Personnel—**One of the most important personnel needs will be finding the right administrator to run the school. Ideally this administrator should be involved in the planning for the school.
   f) **Policy Committee—**This committee will bring to the Steering Committee (later reporting to the school board) policies for consideration. These should be complied into a Policy Handbook, later to become the Board Policy Manual.

      NOTE: The function of the school board, once elected, is to set policies, not procedures. The administration then sets procedures (administrative policies) for implementing the board policies. It is critical that the board, when established, knows its limitations. It should not be working on procedures, but on policies. Also, individual board members, including the chairman, now have no power outside the board meeting, and it is only in casting their vote that they, as a group, have power.
8. *Decide what kind of school it will be:*
   a) Will the school accept nationals? If so, how does that affect the curriculum? (Sometimes the government regulations will not allow nationals to attend international schools.) Will the government want to prescribe the curriculum for nationals? How will that affect other students?
   b) Will the school seek recognition as a Christian school? In some countries of other religious persuasions, this can be a delicate issue. Will it accept non-ministry-related students and non-Christian students? (Some see this as an opportunity to witness to non-Christians.) Will it limit the number of those students? What will be the Christian distinctives? Is Bible a required subject? Is chapel required? What is the doctrinal statement?
   c) Will it be established as an International School? Will it accept students from the business and diplomatic community?

9. *Seek Government Approval.* This varies with the country as to how difficult it is to get government approval. Several questions need to be answered here:
   a) What categories and **regulations** are there for international schools?
   b) What is the **attitude of the government** towards Christian schools?
   c) Is there an **advantage** to getting teachers visas through the school?
10. *Publicize and accept enrollments.* (First establish acceptance policies.)
11. *Decide on facilities.* Consider the pros and cons of renting, buying, or building. Facilities must be conducive to a good educational atmosphere. They should be comfortable, relatively quiet, safe, flexible, have plenty of space for kids to move around, and not require long travel to and from school.

C. School Board Actions

1. *Determine the mission of the school.* Will it be used to witness to non-Christians? Will there be a limit to the number of non-Christians? Is it there to serve the entire missions community or just the founders? Will it have boarding? Will it have American curriculum? What about other nationalities? Will there be a need for ESL? Special Education? Write a "Mission Statement" and "Philosophy of Education" to guide further decisions.
2. *Begin developing a Board Policy Manual.* It is important to record policies being developed. Remember the board's primary function is to set policy; the administration sets procedures to implement those policies. Individual board members, including the chairman, have no power outside of voting at board meetings.
3. *Determine the governance of the school.* It is important that the governance of the school be as simple and straight forward as possible. It is not good to have several levels of governance. Ideally the school administrator should report to the school board, which has final authority to own and operate the school. The school administrator must have access to the body that has authority to make the final decision regarding school matters.
4. *Develop a school "Statement of Faith."* Board members, administrators, and teachers should sign to indicate their agreement without reservation.
5. *Appoint an administrator.* This is a critical decision! Make sure the roles of administrator and board are clear. Remember, board members have no power outside the board meetings, and then only as they vote. Allow the administrator to do his/her job.
6. *Appoint staff.*
   a) **Standards—**First the board has to approve standards for staff (such as experience,
   education, and Christian commitment).
   b) **Support—**The board also has to decide whether the teachers will raise their own support or if the school will do direct hire. Direct hire will require higher fees. It may make it easier to get teachers but make it harder to get missionaries to the entity as they may have trouble raising the support needed.

c) **Local Hire—**The board has to decide if they will hire local teachers. One consideration here is that the government may want you to hire all local teachers.

d) **Teacher Evaluations—**The board should require the administrator to do regular (not less than once a year) evaluations, which are discussed with the teachers. The board should also plan to evaluate the administrator once a year.

7. Establish an Admissions Policy

a) Will the school accept others from outside the founding groups?
b) Will the school accept those with special needs?
c) Will the school accept those who do not speak English?
d) Will the school accept those from the business and diplomatic communities?
e) Will the school accept nationals?

8. Set Fees

a) Will there be **different categories of students** and how will the fee vary between them? Will there be various fees for missionaries outside the founding groups? for non-missionaries? nationals? those from non-Christian homes?

b) Will there be **separate fees** for capital funding?

9. *Approve Budgets.* Along with set fees, the board should approve appropriate policies for finances to insure fiscal responsibility. It may be that one of the supporting missions would do this for a while, but regular reports and accountability are essential.

a) **Start-up Budget—**This may need to be done in connection with approving the
Development Plan.

b) **Development Plan—**This is a plan for funding the Start-up Budget (foundations,
fund-raising campaigns, loans, membership fees from participating missions)

c) **Operating Budget—**The operating cost of the school should be paid from fees.

10. *Establish Capital Funding Policies.* How will large capital items be funded? Will there be an additional fee? What about depreciation? Replacement funds? What constitutes a capital expense?

11. *Establish Graduation Requirements* if going through grade 12.

12. *Get Government Approvals.* How the school begins may have a big impact on the future of the school. If the requirements to be established as an international school are appropriate, this may be an advantage if the country is tight on visas for missionaries.

D. Administrative Actions (with help from appropriate staff)

1. *Determine the Curriculum*[2]
   a) **How many non-North Americans will there be?** What are their needs? Is there any way the school can help them? How will the school maintain cultural sensitivity? Is there a way the rest of the student body can benefit from them?
   b) **What does "Christian School" mean in terms of the textbooks?** Must they be from Christian publishers? In what other ways will being "Christian" affect the curriculum?
   c) **Select and order textbooks.** This needs to be done at least six months before school begins in order to give enough time for the books to arrive. Most American teachers see this as essential to be able to teach effectively.
   d) **Select and order teaching and testing materials** (maps, transparencies, science equipment, PE equipment, standardized testing)**.**
2. *Select and order appropriate equipment* (overheads, copy machines, computers).
3. *Procure appropriate furniture* (writing boards and classroom supplies such as pencil sharpeners, clocks, waste baskets…).
4. *Establish operating procedures and forms* (attendance, tardies, grading, report cards, transcripts for secondary schools, record keeping policies and procedures, teacher evaluation).
5. *Begin making appropriate handbooks* (Student Handbook, Parent Handbook [these two may be combined], Staff Handbook, Course Description Handbook, Boarding Handbook).

E. Thoughts on Starting an MK School

All of this sounds like a lot of work, and it is. However, establishing a school can have a tremendous impact on the work of missions. It can serve as a magnet to draw people to an area. It can bring different missions together to work towards a common goal and give opportunity to interact on an informal basis. I remember seeing people from different missions completely ignoring the sporting event they had come to watch at the school because they were so engrossed in their conversation. This was the only time they ever saw each other. But if the school is not done right, it can be a real problem, causing divisions and draining away a lot of time and energy from mission leaders. It pays to take the time and get the help to do it right.

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[2] For small secondary schools or small high schools, see "Expanding a K-8 School to Serve High Schoolers: A Small Secondary School Model" by Bob Pittman, *Christian School Education*, Issue 5, 1998-1999, pp. 36-38. ACSI, Colorado Springs, CO.