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STROTHOFF INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

Strothoff International School, Germany

A local curriculum with a global framework (International Baccalaureate) for applied "service" taking place within the community.



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At a glance

School group

Phorms Network of bilingual schools across Germany; Strothoff is one of two IB schools in the network

Place

Dreieich, near Frankfurt, Germany

Phase

Secondary (Grades 6 to 12), IB continuum school

Key partners

Local care and retirement homes, community groups, alumni, the IB

Contributor

Julia Campbell-Ratcliffe, Secondary School Principal

The learning is in the doing: a local curriculum combined with a global framework, and applied through service and active learning in the community.

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context.

Strothoff is a small IB World School with students from many cultural backgrounds. Like any school with a national curriculum, it must cover what the state requires while preparing young people for an interconnected world. Some schools in Germany run the state curriculum and the IB side by side, which Julia says can give students close to 60-hour working weeks. Strothoff starts instead from the state curriculum as the foundation, and from the perspectives its students bring with them.

Service learning is deeply rooted in the school's guiding statements, mission and vision. This makes it a strategic priority, supported by allocations of time, resources and staff.

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Working in partnership. Two things link learning to the community. The first is service. Service learning is a required part of the IB, linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, so learning moves from school to local community to global community. The second is active learning in the community. For example, after a unit on poetry from around the world, students write their own poems and organise a recital, catering included, at a local care home. Learning in the community is not about narrowing horizons to local jobs, but "taking the learning outside the school building and applying it in real world contexts". The skills students build this way, such as planning, collaborating and communicating, go with them wherever they choose to live and work.

The net: building capacity together

Strothoff uses the IB as a framework that is filled with the content and the competences of the state curriculum, rather than stacking the two curriculums, an approach Julia calls "synergetic". The IB framework lifts local content to the level of concepts: in geography, students explore "settlement" by comparing Frankfurt with London and Singapore. Teachers become facilitators who model inquiry, "a paradigm shift in terms of the role of the teacher". The wider IB network now encourages schools to combine local curricula with its framework, and Julia's work as an IB Educator Network (IBEN) programme leader, evaluator and curriculum developer brings learning from other schools back into Strothoff.

The Phorms network encourages the school to have its own focus areas. Service learning is one of Strothoff's.

What is in place

A combined state and IB curriculum; required service learning linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals; community projects such as the care home recital and an alumni network that returns to support students.

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The difference it is making

Students are more engaged and prouder of their work because they can see it contributing to something. Alumni say service projects strengthened university applications and taught them collaboration and project management. Many return to give careers talks and help students connect to other networks and professional opportunities.

Challenges and lessons learned

Some teachers underestimate what 13- and 14-year-olds can do, yet given real ownership, students can do far more than adults expect. Protecting time for service learning is a constant pressure.

How they made it possible

First step: the planning stage. Julia speaks of how the school considered how they could use the IB framework and the IB approaches to teaching and learning and combine it with using the state curriculum as a solid base. Simply stated, the state curriculum is what is being taught and the IB framework is how the students learn and are being taught.

Roles and time: teachers developing as facilitators of inquiry, supported by the IB network and Julia's IBEN role. Service learning coordinators work alongside teachers, and the school's CARE programme (Creativity, Agency, Responsibility and Empathy) gives middle years students up to four 45-minute lessons a week. Protecting that time is a constant effort.

Funding: the work is built into the curriculum and timetable rather than run as a separately funded project.

Building partnerships: for example, local care homes and community groups host projects; alumni return to support students.

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Starting with what you have: end one existing unit with students doing something real for the local community. Link service projects to your school group's values and partnerships, for example health partners or mental health priorities.

What we wish we'd known at the start

Trust students sooner: given real ownership, they can do far more than adults expect. Involve students more from the start in how they want to use the learning to serve the community, drawing more on their connections and experiences.



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In your setting

School context: Where could a unit end with students doing something real for their local community?

Working in partnership: What do our school group's values and partnerships make possible as service and applied learning opportunities?

Building capacity together: Does our curriculum connect local content to bigger concepts and global goals, as well as the students' own experiences and connections?

"The local curriculum is an important foundation. Developing the learning into meaningful service opportunities helps students to go further and really makes them recognise their purpose."

Julia Campbell-Ratcliffe

Full paper and supporting sources

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