



Strategic Audit Report February 2014

INDEX

- **Background**
- **The Visit**
- **Reviewed and Discussed with Stakeholders**
- **Initial Observations**
- **Executive Summary**
- **Vision for the Future**
- **Suggested Strategic Areas**

Strategic Audit Overview

Background

Founded forty-one years ago, ACS is an independent, not-for-profit school that provides a world-class education for children from 4 years of age to university entrance. Its goal is to graduate well-educated, socially aware and responsible young people who have a strong sense of values. The school currently enrolls 1089 students and occupies an 8,600 square meters site. The buildings are of a medium to low quality construction. The board's ambition is to grow the school to 1750. The school holds a unique place in the educational landscape, as it was one of the first international schools to be established in the country.

ACS has enjoyed a remarkable history that was marred for a period of time by a lack of strategic and sustainable leadership. In sharp contrast it is now a school where the new superintendent and the dynamic leadership team work closely with the board to ensure the school's future as an outstanding school. The creation of the strategic, financial and action plans will provide the route map to this lofty ambition.

The appointment of the new superintendent has created a new sense of impetus and together with the senior leadership team important priorities and actions have been identified that will play an important role within the strategic plan. The work carried out by the interim superintendent Bob Gross did much to ensure a smooth transition.

Two key questions the strategic plan must answer are – “Who and what does ACS want to be”? “What is its future niche”?

ACS has a long and complicated Mission Statement and lacks an empowering and motivating Vision Statement.

The Visit

Adele Hodgson visited ACS for a period of three days at the invitation of the board and the superintendent to conduct the strategic audit. The data collected from the meetings with all the stakeholder groups forms the basis for this report and has been supplemented with relevant information gleaned from documentation provided and the organization review conducted in December 2013.

The Strategic Audit involved:

- Meetings with representatives from all the stakeholder groups. These included the board, the superintendent, parents, students, staff, faculty and the senior leadership team.
- Reviewing relevant documents such as past stakeholder questionnaires, reports from third parties, financial and enrollment and student performance reports.

Reviewed and Discussed with the Stakeholders were:

- The current status of the school.
- The internal and external environment in which the school operates.
- The capability and opportunities for the school to improve and grow.
- The Vision for the future.
- The dampers to growth.
- The current most pressing issues.
- Affinity to the school.

It is important when reading this report to remember that it contains.

- Summary statements that represent complex issues.
- Information that neither seeks to outline every issue and option ACS faces.
- A clear focus on those key variables, which require action to ensure the future growth and well being of the school.
- Aligned stakeholder thinking on many issues

The object of this audit is to facilitate the school's growth and strategic development. ACS has the potential to be recognized internationally as an outstanding school and it is important that if this to be achieved a systematic and prioritised approach to dealing with strategic challenges should be followed. The strategic plan once developed will not only be the route map to the future but also a meaningful symbol of a strategically focused culture and organization.

Initial observations show:

- ACS board has a strong commitment to succeed
- A forward thinking superintendent who knows how to inspire, implement and monitor
- ACS possesses an enviable reputation in Abu Dhabi
- That being a not-for-profit is greatly valued by stakeholders
- ACS has many strengths to exploit and build on
- A need to manage the diversity of stakeholder needs and expectations.
- Academic Rigor is not aligned at all levels and grades
- Organization and Management infrastructures and systems are still a work in progress
- Student development, empowerment, performance and results require continuous review and monitoring to ensure every child is supported and challenged
- Strong and enlightened governance in place
- Pressing Facility needs
- A need for alternative revenue streams
- Working practices with ADEC should be reviewed
- A need to maximize the benefits of the brand and create a strong external network
- High demand for places could cause complacency

- Need to ensure continuity of leadership

Executive Summary

The school is a flourishing institution that is hall marked by a warm and welcoming environment. Every stakeholder group remarked on the strong sense of community and the variety of events and activities offered. The PTA, Viper Club and Staff Social Committee are to be congratulated on the essential role they play in facilitating this sense of community, but more could be done to encourage more parents and staff to volunteer.

Great strides have been made in establishing a synergy of thinking and effort between the superintendent and the board. Stakeholders value this development and there is clear evidence of optimism regarding the future. The board/superintendent partnership is greatly supported by the strong and committed senior leadership team, an essential element to the creation of an aligned organization. The board must, however demonstrate decisive and courageous leadership to ensure key decisions are made.

It is to be recommended that more focus be placed on measuring ACS standards against comparable global rather than local players. It is very easy for the high demand for places to make a school complacent and being one of the oldest international schools in the country means there is a real danger of eventually being left behind unless there is a culture of targeted investment and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Facilities

The ACS campus is tired and falls well behind in terms of large and mature international school standards. The state of the facilities was the first point each focus group made. While appreciating teaching and learning standards were not determined by facilities everyone agreed that the current facilities do not live up to the demands of the ACS Mission, international school standards and the school's aspirations. The school feels overcrowded and the facilities do not reflect the quality of the work conducted. In addition there seems to be a general sense that historically growth has not been well managed, which has led to the current situation. Various past facility development plans and changes have not come to fruition.

The school has created a high level of demand and it is currently perceived as being vastly superior to its competitors. Demand by far exceeds the places available. The market place in Abu Dhabi is, however, changing and we are seeing new entrants on a regular basis. Many of these schools offer better and more modern facilities.

Suggested solutions include the school optimizing and reconfiguring the current site with the objective of doubling the usage of land.

Parents

One of the biggest challenges the school faces is to manage the expectations of the different national groups. The diversity of needs and expectations was evident from data collected. There would seem to be a strong argument for a greater focus on parent education through segmenting the needs of the different national groups, One size does not fit all when designing and executing a communication strategy.

ACS superintendent and the school leadership have put a great deal in place since August 2013, but parents seem to be playing catch up. It is important to guide and support parents to a level of understanding and comfort concerning what their children learn, how they learn, what the expected outcomes are, and early warning when things are not going to plan. Too often communication is seen from the teacher/administrator perspective or their particular comfort zone.

While appreciating and valuing an American based education, European parents were concerned about re-entry into their own education systems. Interestingly some parents felt the school should be the equivalent of a good local American public school while others felt it should reflect the standards and practices of a top private or international school.

Great emphasis was laid on the warm and welcoming atmosphere, the diversity of the student population and the fact that the school offered a breadth of opportunities to students. They were impressed by the lack of bullying and the respect students showed to one another.

There was a genuine conviction that under the new superintendent the school is finally moving positively forward and there was a universal desire for:

- Continuity and stability
- An end to stagnation
- The board to make and implement the important decisions regarding the school's identity, growth and facilities. Decisions that would be honored by incoming board members.

There was a general consensus amongst the parents that the school was at an important stage of its history and that it could not proceed without a strategic plan. The role of the board and the superintendent in initiating this process was greatly appreciated.

Veracross was seen as a means to improve communication and its use as a targeted tool to manage information for parents was welcomed. Some parents currently felt out of touch or left behind. Informing and involving parents in future plans will result in key opinion leaders using their networks to create understanding, buy in and avoid rumors and misconceptions.

Parents appreciated the school's work and the aspiration for continuous improvement but were concerned about academic rigor at the lower grades, the need to set the highest expectations and to provide an environment that ensures all students, were

supported challenged and successful. The slogan “Its cool to be smart” was seen as a driver to student achievement.

Students

Students greatly value the majority of their teachers and praised their passion and engagement. They hoped that in the future there would be clear standards for teachers’ performance. They also stressed the need for clear student expectations and accountability standards.

MS students stressed the need for an improved approach to transitioning from the MS to HS. Students in the upper grades were concerned about the “bubble type” environment in which they lived and how important it was to prepare them for the rigor and demands of their future independent life at university and at work. They also felt that university/career counseling needed to play a more prominent role earlier in their school careers.

Language offerings were of concern to parents and students and in particular the teaching of Arabic. Students felt the teaching approach to Arabic was not conducive to learning and should be reviewed within the strategic plan. Language Arts were not seen as one of the strengths of the school. Science and math teaching were commended, as was the improved approach to the integration of technology. Students stressed the importance of technology; appropriate learning resources and the highest standards for the library. They advocated for dedicated study areas. There was in their opinion a need to offer more IB Diploma subjects. Sport, and the Creative and Visual Arts were greatly valued as were the CAS opportunities, MUN and Week without Walls.

Students were aware that the school would require additional income if the campus was to be brought up to the standards they had seen elsewhere and they felt they deserved.

The concept of a very active alumni association serving past students’ needs as well as benefiting the school was felt to be an interesting concept and important to creating a network of support.

Faculty and Management

While it is important to have a strong focus on teaching and learning, it is equally important to ensure that the support staff provides the service required and as stated in a previous report this is not always the case. It is to be recommended that there is a person (or company contracted) to play the role of Director of Operations.

All the stakeholder groups interviewed shared the perception that teaching standards were not always homogenous but applauded the commitment and personal attention students received. Concern was expressed that some teachers did not meet the standards required and could will be a barrier to future progress. The most important and expensive item in the school’s budget is human capital and it is important that they work collaboratively and not in silos.

To maintain the committed attitude the majority of teachers demonstrate requires that careful attention is paid to the role that recruitment, targeted professional development and retention practices play. The growth in the international school market means that one of the main challenges any school faces is the “war” for talent. It would be foolish to ignore that fact that the growth in the number of international schools in the world puts outstanding teachers at a premium. The strategic plan should ensure that work ACS has already started to define what “teaching excellence” looks like is deeply embedded into teacher practices and classroom management, appraisal and collaboration.

The teachers in the main are motivated and committed to the students and there seems to be excellent teacher/student relations. Teachers perceived that there was a lack of time for collaborative planning and reflection. This thinking may be influenced by the past and some teachers could still be playing catch up in terms of intellectual and emotional understanding of the constructive improvements that are being introduced. Teachers reflected that there were still divisional silos and that greater cohesion and alignment between the divisions was required.

Despite the introduction of a dedicated full time marketing/communication office the school still needs to do considerable work in terms of branding, networking with important opinion leaders and influencers, and strengthening its relationship and status with ADEC.

The senior leadership team is focused and actively promotes the school’s welcoming environment. They provide balanced physical and intellectual support to the superintendent and appreciate her knowledge, experience and inclusive style.

A recurring theme was that of managing growth, workloads, maintenance and lack of space.

Finances

The school has a clear budgeting process and employs a very dedicated and talented CFO (Director of Finance). ACS relies on school fees as their major source of income and the setting of these fees is sadly outside their control. Financial reserves exist as there has not been any large and significant capital budget item expenditure for some time.

School fees are pegged by ADEC and every effort should be made to position ACS as a special case and seek to exit from their regulatory control.

There was general agreement amongst all the stakeholders that the school should identify and develop alternative income streams. Fundraising is the most obvious of these income streams but requires substantial investment before a return on investment can be achieved. Fundraising could be tied to a capital campaign to fund part of the campus development. Relationships with the corporations represented in the school are a wonderful asset to this strategy.

Some parents felt that the school fees were high and our experience shows that school fees are subject to greater price sensitivity than in the past. There was,

however, a general understanding that if the school was to promote high standards in every aspect of its operations then regular strategic increases in school fees (if allowed by ADEC) were to be expected. Parents interviewed expressed the opinion that the price/value synergy must be kept in balance.

Facilities and Resources

Everyone saw the school's facilities as a major strategic issue and there was concern about increasing student numbers without considerable investment. The Middle and High School facilities were identified as being particularly poor. Some elementary school parents were worried about the number of students in some of the classes. The school's public areas such as the cafeteria, library, performing arts facilities, faculty lounges and work areas were cited as inadequate. The Business Office area is tired and shabby and does not reflect the school's brand, performance and aspirations. The admissions office is particularly cramped with no dedicated area for small children and even features a bank of outdated filing cabinets. Ideally, there should be an Admissions suite,

Sporting facilities were considered to be acceptable but below the offerings of some of the other international schools in the region. Substantial repairs are required due to past neglect.

ICT is taken seriously in the school and under the new Technology Director further investment and planning will take place. The students would like to be part of a committee to review and discuss the integration of technology into the curriculum and its usage.

Classrooms were seen as being well-resourced but far from ideal in terms of size, layout and functionality.

Governance

All the stakeholder groups were impressed that the board had initiated the strategic planning process. There was a desire for continuity on the board and for a clear differentiation between the role of the board and the superintendent.

The board is highly motivated and determined to ensure the school's future. This will be best achieved through the strategic, action and financial plans, dashboard management and targeted communication to the school's stakeholders.

The board is eager to see ACS become a school that demonstrates excellence at every level. These aspirations, although highly desirable, do bear a substantial price ticket and this must be recognized and activities prioritized.

To ensure continuity and strategic focus the board should prioritize on an ongoing basis for succession planning.

External Environment.

ACS operates in a unique and interesting part of the world, which due to its high quality of life encourages families, staff and faculty to stay. Abu Dhabi is a financially strong major hub that benefits from continuous development and investment in the infrastructure. The demand for school places is enormous.

The school's relationships with the royal family, ADEC, politicians and local opinion leaders could be used more beneficially and these relationships need to be further developed. It is important to use the networks of the parents to support these aims.

The major possible external challenge to the school is the creation of another high quality American curriculum school. Bearing in mind the rapid developments in the country, this is not outside the realms of possibility.

Conclusion

The school possesses meaningful potential and enjoys the active support of a great many people. It is important that the strategic and action planning processes address the core issues and that the board, superintendent and the senior leadership team systematically align, implement and monitor the results. This will ensure the school moves forward in a sustainable and cohesive way.

Vision For The Future Collected from Stakeholders' Comments

The future ACS is a well-governed and stable school, which enrolls 1750 students from diverse backgrounds. There is the appropriate organisational and management infrastructure to support the school's growth and the demands of the school's Mission, and Values. The school works closely with ADEC and is viewed as a totally independent school. The school possesses a wide network of influential supporters who actively support the Mission and Vision.

As an outstanding school the quality, safety and attractiveness of the educational space, resources and surrounding grounds are one of ACS' hallmarks.

The well-aligned, articulated and rigorous American Curriculum and IB Diploma program form the school's academic offerings. There is an equal balance between the teaching and learning standards and the need to offer strong co-curricula programs.

Attention is given to motivating, supporting and challenging all students and the IB Learner Profile is demonstrably at the heart of the school's philosophy. Every effort is made to ensure students develop a strong sense of accountability and are well prepared to meet and master the demands of the rapidly changing world.

The school enjoys an increasingly strong reputation in Abu Dhabi, the Middle East and the world. It attracts, develops and retains outstanding teachers. All of the school's stakeholders feel empowered and informed and close attention is paid to the individual needs of students and their families.

ACS makes strategic use of its strong finances and generates alternative and sustainable sources of income. The annual budget reflects the needs of the school's strategic plan. Salaries and benefits are competitive and the institution is known for continuous professional development, which is aligned to strategic goals and has maximum impact on student achievement.

The alumni of the school are active supporters and ambassadors, and former parents continue to support the school because they value the role ACS played in their lives and those of their children.

Strategic Areas for the Strategic Plan

It would be wrong at this stage to be prescriptive regarding what these should be but it seems likely that they would include.

- Education – teaching and learning standards, support and focus
- Finance – financial and risk management, price/value, alternative income streams, effective budgeting, investment and resource allocation.
- Marketing – brand awareness/management, PR, internal/external communication, networking, Alumni, alternative income streams.
- Faculty/Staff – quality, recruitment, retention, professional development, salaries/benefits, appraisal, teamwork and synergy.
- Students – programs, motivation, breadth of opportunities, support systems, admissions, leadership.
- Organization and Management – processes, procedures, systems/processes, staffing roles and responsibilities,
- Governance – strategic, board make up, role and responsibilities, teamwork, transparency, communication.
- Facilities – the appropriate environment to meet the demands of the school's market position and ambitions, and the high standards demanded in international education.

Respectfully submitted,
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ECIS