

Touching the future.....

I once enjoyed the distinct honor of taking a graduate educational administration class with a former president of a large American university. I recall his statement in class, "You cannot change the world." I took that statement as a challenge. As I envision my future goals and professional growth, I am considering how to invest my current and ongoing learning to impact the education of refugee children. I believe that refugee education is potentially one of the greatest international crises of my generation.

My first interest in refugee education occurred many years ago when I briefly traveled to Israel. I served on a medical mission team reaching out to Palestinian Christians in what was then the occupied West Bank. Many years have passed since that first trip. Evolving technologies now make the extension and delivery of educational services in the form of an online international school a realistic possibility. Three overarching topics define the beginning steps to developing an online presence; 1) Overcoming the political and economic obstacles to gaining access and providing educational services to international refugee children; 2) The process of accreditation for an international school; and 3) Technology resources available to refugees, and technological requirements necessary to build and maintain an online school.

A primary concern for reaching refugee children and providing an online school is access. The UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees) is the best source for information concerning political and economic obstacles to reaching refugee children. UNHCR also provides a description of existing structures for delivery of educational services to refugee children. A recent post states that more than half the world's 7.4 million refugee children are denied schooling. UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Volker Türk, indicated in a recent report that this statistic "was a timely reminder that that commitment of the UN's Sustainable Development

Goals to leaving no one behind had to apply to families and children fleeing persecution and conflict too.”

A second concern in developing an international online school is accreditation. An online school must meet many of the requirements that a "brick and mortar" would face. The challenge to accredit an international online school is accentuated by diverse national standards. At least two respected international accrediting agencies exist. The standards set by these agencies are the starting block to opening doors to an online presence for displaced students. (Accrediting Services For International Schools, Colleges and Universities (ASIC) is a highly respected independent accrediting agency based in the United Kingdom. Their accreditation process inspects ninety criteria over a range of eight areas of operation. The Council of International Schools (CIS) is a second accrediting agency that provides a mark of quality assurance. Cognia is another agency that accredits International schools.

Enrolling in the Master of Educational Technology degree program at Michigan State University (MSU) was the first real step for me towards developing this extensive vision of designing an online school. In my graduate program I learned how to develop online classes that meet high standards. I have also been challenged to accept a role as a leader of technology in education. Many online schools already exist, such as the Compass Charter School in California. Such schools serve as models for the development of an international online school. Much existing curriculum is copyrighted, so the need for financial backing and resources may present a large concern. However, a possible avenue of support might be to develop an affiliation with a college or university that already invests in international education.

While addressing each of these topics will require significant and ongoing research and organization, one further consideration must be addressed. The academic credentials required to host an online school are a real concern. At present, I am exploring the potential for seeking a Doctorate in K-12 Educational Administration at MSU. An earned

doctorate would be helpful in several ways. First, the degree draws international respect and credibility. Second, as a potential leader for a non-governmental organization, I would need not only the appropriate credentials but also the ability to interact with similarly credentialed leaders in the international education community. The barriers to establishing an innovative and flexible online international school for refugee students are not insurmountable. I will require time and patience as well as commitment to the vision to attain this goal. As I move forward, I will need to learn more, invest more, and seek the help of innovative educators who share an abiding concern for the education of refugee children.

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