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PREPARING FOR CHANGE

Aoba-Japan International School embraces an evolving world

Scarcely a day goes by when we don't witness technology impact our lives in a new way. With some jobs disappearing and others emerging in their place, schools increasingly need to consider how they're readying young people for the world of tomorrow.

In Tokyo, Aoba-Japan International School is at the forefront of preparing young learners.

"Really, when we think about it, there are a number of skills they need," said Karen O'Neill, Aoba-Japan's primary school principal. "We want them to be able to innovate, solve problems, and take wise risks. We want them to be able to communicate effectively. We expect our learners to be caring, collaborative creators and researchers. So, there are sets of skills that we want our kids to have so that they can actually apply their ideas to any situation they are confronted with."



QUICK TO ADAPT

Drawing on the latest evidence-based research, Aoba-Japan is implementing several new projects. Among these is the Collaborative Blended Learning Project, which seeks to find the optimum combination of face-to-face interaction and technology-assisted education.

This three-year project, consisting of research and professional learning initiatives, was developed in partnership with Australia's Southern Cross University. Working in teams, participants—called "Teachers as Researchers"—conduct classroom-focused research to build their collective expertise.

"What we're trying to do is innovate or disrupt the way that we traditionally do school, because—as the research literature tells us—not a lot has changed since my generation went to school," said O'Neill. "Because we're not a state system, we're not a British or US system, we're not confined by set traditions. We're an international school that can implement change quite quickly and quite effectively. We have staff that are very engaged in doing that."

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

In addition to being a fully authorized International Baccalaureate continuum school, Aoba-Japan also offers the A-JIS Global Leadership Diploma (GLD). Based on research, this diploma, led by world-renowned expert Dr. Paul Lowe, has been specifically



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designed to engender learner agency and self-efficacy as key attributes of success. Based on the principles of entrepreneurship and social responsibility, the GLD engages our senior learners in purposeful education. It allows them to identify where they want to go after graduation and plan how they are going to get there. They identify their goals and then select areas of learning to help reach them. The end game is to create individuals who are entrepreneurial and globally aware.

"They become very invested in what they're doing and have a natural enthusiasm for it. They know the reason for learning is to get them to where they want to be," explained Robert Thorn, an educational manager involved with the development of the GLD.

One popular aspect of the program is the One-Month Idea Transformation Process. Learners are tasked with developing an entrepreneurial mindset by turning ideas into real "products" that are of value to other people. By the end of the month, learners have a product and have developed the habits and dispositions needed to make things happen—to turn ideas into reality.

"We have found that our senior learners become really excited about this very real type of learning when given the opportunity to participate in its design and application," said Thorn.

INNOVATE

Aoba-Japan is also in the process of upgrading its physical infrastructure. New, flexible furniture was recently added to the primary and secondary schools to facilitate new ways of learning, and the school is also working with Chiba University to examine ways to restructure the campus to take this even further.

"Learning doesn't necessarily happen in the classroom," said O'Neill. "It can happen anywhere, anytime, in any space."

Such initiatives speak to the range of partnerships the school enjoys. However, it is not all one-way, and Aoba-Japan is seeking to develop a greater voice in the Japanese education sector to promote the innovative ideas and practices they're developing.

"With the other partnerships, we have a role in sharing our ideas in terms of what modern-day teacher training looks like," said O'Neill.

These innovations are also winning support from Aoba-Japan's tight-knit community.

"It's been very rewarding to see that the alignment between what we're trying to do and what parents want is becoming stronger, and I think that's where our sense of community comes from." ■



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