

Board of Trustees of the United Nations International School

Annual Report 2019-2020

Background

UNIS was established in 1947 as an International Nursery School in Lake Success, New York by a group of United Nations parents to provide an international education for their children, while preserving their diverse cultural heritages. The mission of the School is founded on the principles of the United Nations, and the link with the UN is what gives the School its unique character. Today, total enrollment is around 1,600. The student body represents over 100 countries, more than 90 languages are spoken the faculty represents over 60 different nationalities. Students come not only from the UN community but from other families in the New York area who desire an international education and diverse environment for their children.

The School's Board of Trustees consist of 18 trustees appointed by the UN Secretary-General. The UNIS By-Laws stipulate that the Board of Trustees shall publish an annual report to be transmitted to the Secretary-General of the UN and to parents. The present report responds to that mandate, and focuses on the activities of the Board during the school year 2019-2020.

Introduction

The Board of Trustees is responsible for the fulfillment of the mission of UNIS and for policies relating to the conduct and management of the affairs of the School. The members of the Board of Trustees include UNIS parents, both present and past, and UNIS alumni. It also always includes an external expert in the field of education, currently Dr. Anita Batisti, and two representatives from the United Nations: the current Chair of the Board, Catherine Pollard, Under-Secretary-General for Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance in the UN Secretariat, and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for UNIS, Ms. Joan McDonald. The Executive Director of the School, Dr. Dan Brenner, is an ex-officio member of the Board.

During the 2019-2020 school year, the Board held ten regular meetings, and one special meeting dedicated to discussing a new strategic plan. Most of the work of the Board is carried out through its various committees: Executive; Trustees; Academic Policy; Advancement; Buildings, Grounds & Security; Finance & Audit; Health & Safety and Strategic Planning. The committees are composed of a mix of trustees and members of the School Administration and staff, and in some cases UNIS parents, by invitation.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as of March 2020 all meetings of the Board and its committees were convened virtually, which, although the face-to-face interaction was missed, proved an efficient way of conducting business. Once the restrictions associated with the pandemic have been lifted, the Board will most likely adopt a practice of having a combination of virtual and in-person meetings.

Continued strong leadership of the School

In this second year of serving as Executive Director, Dr. Dan Brenner solidified his leadership of the School. The leadership team was further enhanced by the hiring of a new Chief Finance Officer, a Chief Academic Officer and a Director of Human Resources. Dr. Brenner has instituted several management improvements throughout the School in both business processes and reporting structures. The Board enjoys a close and collaborative relationship with Dr. Brenner, who participates in all meetings of the Board and its committees. Deputy Executive Director Sal Uy, who was also a UNIS alum, sadly passed away in March 2020 after an extended illness.

This year, Dr. Brenner's emphasis on transparency and communication with the UNIS community was especially important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Board appreciated his frequent, often daily, updates to the community, which were clear, factual and empathetic.

Opening the gateway towards online teaching

In the first part of the school year, Dr. Brenner sparked an idea to extend the School's reach by offering a UNIS education online to students in refugee camps and conflict zones. The Board encouraged further development of this concept, which would entail separate fundraising and coordination with UN and relevant non-governmental agencies. In anticipation of moving this project forward, Dr. Brenner began preparing for adapting classes to online delivery, examining appropriate technologies and training faculty.

While the refugee project had to be put on hold once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the preparations already undertaken enabled UNIS to quickly transition to online learning when schools had to close in March 2020. Dr. Brenner gave regular updates to the Board on the challenges encountered this year, and the extraordinary efforts of the teaching staff to adjust to a very different teaching model.

Crafting a new strategic plan for UNIS: 2021-2025

With "Vision 2020", the strategic plan adopted in 2015, coming to an end, one of the key tasks of the Board this school year was to develop a new strategic plan. The core work was

carried out by the Strategic Planning Committee, in close collaboration with the Executive Committee and the Board as a whole. The Executive Director was also engaged and contributed throughout the year, both on process and on the substance of the strategic plan. A one-day retreat in December 2019, facilitated by external consultants, was dedicated to discussing both overall goals and what defines the School, as well as the practical approach in coming up with a plan that can form the basis of the Board's work plan and also be informed by data.

The broader UNIS community was also given an opportunity to provide input through a survey, which was sent out to all UNIS parents, Tut-House students, staff, faculty and alumni in March 2020. A total of 1033 responses to the survey were received, providing a rich source of information for the Board.

At the final board meeting of the school year on 11 June 2020, the new strategic plan 2020-2025 for UNIS was approved by the Board of Trustees. This new plan sets out five strategic goals and identifies five priorities for each strategic goal for the coming five years.

Achieving academic excellence

UNIS has a rigorous academic program based on the inquiry-based approach to learning, which begins in pre-Kindergarten and culminates in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma. Through its Academic Policy Committee, the Board works closely with the Administration to address policy issues and ensure that the School employs the highest level of pedagogy to promote the success of its students. In this school year, the Committee focused on ensuring a smooth introduction of the new Teaching and Learning Policy, which had been approved by the Board in May 2019. A point of pride for UNIS is its excellent language program and the Board continued to follow the School's ongoing efforts to further strengthen the Program, including ascertaining proper alignment of the curriculum with the International Baccalaureate and the Common European Framework.

Another area of attention for the Board this year was ensuring that the College Office was sufficiently equipped to fully support UNIS students in the college application process. The Board supported the new vision statement of the College Office, and additional staffing resources were directed towards the Office to allow for an additional college counseling officer.

Financial health and stability

One of the paramount responsibilities of the Board is to approve the UNIS budget. This is a key task, where the Board's Finance and Audit Committee works closely with the Administration to prepare a budget proposal that reflects a prudent balancing of meeting the expected operational and capital requirements of the School while being mindful of limiting any tuition increase. The challenge of rising cost for UN parents has been a particular concern, especially since recent changes in the UN education grant have resulted in UN parents bearing a greater financial burden in the payment of tuition, particularly so owing to the delayed adjustment of the education grant's sliding scale brackets, which are still reflecting tuition fee levels of 2015.

For the 2019-20 school year, the Board approved a budget of \$69 million entailing a tuition increase of 3.9 % and a capital surcharge of \$900 for all families.

In addition, the Board has had discussions on the financial aspects of the Capital Plan that is expected to be implemented in the coming years. Upon the Finance and Audit Committee's recommendation, the Board approved expenditures not to exceed \$5 million for the initial phase of the Capital Plan, a new community assembly space or "multi-purpose room", funded from interest accrued from funds previously donated to the School.

The Board supported the Executive Director at the beginning of the school year in having an outside firm conduct a risk assessment of the School, focusing on business processes. This led to a number of useful recommendations which the School is in the process of implementing.

In accordance with common fiscal practice to periodically change auditors, the Committee reviewed other firms and selected *Marks Paneth* to be the School's new auditing firm, as of April 2019. The Committee began a discussion on the financial aid policy of the School, with a view to have the Board review the policy in the next school year.

Ensuring efficient and sustainable facilities fit for learning

Through its Committee on Buildings, Grounds, and Security the Board oversees both the maintenance and operation of the UNIS campus at Manhattan and Queens, as well as long-term planning for the facilities. Plans for a major building improvement project began already in the previous year, and during the 2019-2020 academic year the concept was further developed and the Board endorsed a three-phased Capital Plan, with a total cost of approximately \$50 million.

Overall, the Capital Plan seeks to ensure UNIS' long-term viability, to provide a dynamic and innovative learning environment, and to facilitate global connections. The Manhattan campus is almost half a century old and in urgent need of improvement. Classroom space has been virtually untouched since the 1970s. The Board recognizes the need to utilize the spaces in a smarter way and enhance the learning environment, while also reflecting the UN mission.

As a first phase, the Board approved the construction of a new community assembly space on the ground floor of the Manhattan building. This new common space will allow for greater flexibility in scheduling classes and events, and as an annex of the cafeteria will enable an entire Division or a multitude of groups to congregate.

The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly altered the context for pursuing this type of capital project, and the initial timeline and plans had to be reassessed. However, the Board is committed to pursuing a viable Capital Plan, as it is necessary for UNIS sustainability for the future.

Raising funds for advancing the School

While the UNIS's operations is funded mainly through tuition, voluntary contributions are an important addition to the School's resources. Every year, families, alumni and trustees are encouraged to contribute to the Annual Fund. As in past years, there was 100% trustee participation in the Annual Fund during the 2019-20 school year. However, in the spring of 2020, as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the UNIS community became increasingly clear, it was decided to cancel further solicitations for the Annual Fund for the 2019-20 academic year. Nevertheless, \$335,495 was raised for the Fund, representing 21 per cent less than the initial target that had been set.

The Board began formulating a capital fundraising strategy for the needed renovation activities, including the possibility of naming opportunities. A policy on "Naming" was being discussed in the Board's Advancement Committee, ultimately to be approved by the Board. The backdrop of the pandemic was a potent factor in the second half of the school year, and hampered any serious initiatives for fundraising.

Keeping students healthy and safe

Through its Health & Safety Committee, the Board works closely with the administration and staff to ensure that UNIS offers a safe and nurturing environment for students and that appropriate policies are in place to support this goal. During the 2019-20 school year, however, and as noted in other parts of this report, operating the School in a safe manner in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic was the dominating issue. Dr. Brenner kept the Board regularly informed of the protocols in place, his contacts with New York State and City health authorities, and his efforts to support the staff and students during this stressful time.

Strengthening links with the UN

The Board sees it as one of its standing priorities to strengthen the ties between the School and the United Nations, to which it is linked both institutionally and ideally. Presently, the fact that both the Chair of the Board and the SRSG are individuals who have had long and significant careers as international civil servants in the United Nations adds impetus to efforts to concretize this link and weave the UN more into the everyday life of the School.

The Honorary Trustees, who are all Permanent Representatives¹, are an important diplomatic link between UNIS and the UN, and efforts continued to strengthen this relationship. In November 2019, the group of Honorary Trustees met with Secretary-General Antonio

¹ Permanent Representatives who (1) have a child or children attending the School, or (2) represent a country that has more than 10 nationals enrolled as students, or (3) a country that supports any of the language programs at School are invited to serve as Honorary Trustees.

Guterres, along with the Chair of the UNIS Board of Trustees and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for UNIS. Another highlight was the Secretary-General's address to the UNIS Graduating Class of 2020, delivered virtually in May 2020.

The institutional link with the UN is probably the School's greatest asset, and the Board is continuing to explore ways in which to manifest UN principles and issues in the School's curriculum and culture. This goal was also made more prominent in UNIS' new Strategic Plan, adopted in June 2020.

Review of Board Policies

During this school year, the Board began a comprehensive review of all of its policies, contained in the "Board Policy Manual". In addition to updating and streamlining, the goal was also to identify any gaps where new policies needed to be formulated, and to ensure that Board policies were high-level statements of purpose and principles, with details and processes more appropriately contained in School regulations. All of the Board's committees were engaged in this thorough review. A final compilation of revised policies was approved in principle by the Board in June 2020, with further fine-tuning to be done in the following months.

Communications with UNIS constituencies

There have been continued efforts this year to improve communications between the Board and the rest of the UNIS community. The Chair of the Board of Trustees sent two letters to the community, one at the beginning of the school year in September 2019, and a second one in January 2020. In addition, she contributed a message to both the fall 2019 and spring 2020 issue of UNIS Magazine.

The Board also enhanced its presence on the UNIS intranet, accessible to the UNIS community, offering more insight into its activities, including brief summaries of all its regular board meetings.

Selecting new trustees for vacancies on the Board

As is customary, the Chair sent a letter in January 2020 inviting applications from interested individuals to serve on the Board of Trustees. In the end, there was only one vacancy on the Board. With the expected departure in the near future of H.E. Mr. Burhan Gafoor, Permanent Representative of Singapore, the Board deemed it desirable to have another diplomat join the Board. Following consultations by the Chair, the Board selected H.E. Mr. Mohamed Al Hassan, Permanent Representative of Oman, who was later appointed by the Secretary-General to join the Board as a Trustee as of July 2020.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

At the end of the school year, UNIS became aware of an Instagram account entitled *Black at UNIS* where past and present students of colour shared personal stories of events at UNIS where they had suffered from racist comments or behaviour from fellow students or teachers. On 29 June 2020, an anonymous letter was addressed to the UNIS leadership on behalf of *Black at UNIS* listing a number of demands for change. Another letter on the same date came from parents of Black students at UNIS.

In the course of the summer of 2020, the Board fully supported the Executive Director in responding to these serious concerns and recognized that the School had work to do to elevate diversity, equity and inclusion and make all students feel safe. Several trustees joined the Executive Director in a meeting with parents of Black students, and later a meeting with Black students and alumni. The position of the Board is that UNIS must be an institution that advocates for and models the ideals embedded in the Charter, including the dignity and worth of every human being. Any expressions of racism are unacceptable. The Board will continue to focus its attention on this priority in the coming school year.

Catherine Pollard
Chair, UNIS Board of Trustees
April 2021