



Meet the Director Zurich International School: *Elsa Hernández-Donohue*

Zurich International School was founded in 1963 and since then has welcomed thousands of students and their families into their close-knit community. In fact, this idea of community and, by extension belonging, is what makes Zurich International School (ZIS) the institution it is today.

Although ZIS offers a thriving academic environment, the school is deeply committed to helping prepare young people to succeed in today's complex, global community, through greater emphasis on justice, dignity and personal responsibility.

Recently ZIS welcomed a new Director to the school, Elsa Hernández-Donohue. Elsa brings with her a wealth of experience at international schools across diverse and exciting locations, as well as a real passion for inclusivity and the ideal that every child has the right to learn and succeed.

We had the pleasure of sitting down with Elsa to talk to her about her new role, her plans for the future and how this position at ZIS is a real homecoming in terms of her career.

Could you tell us about your career journey and how that led you to the role of director at Zurich International School (ZIS)?

I have taught and led in nine international schools around the world for almost 35 years. About 20 years ago, I worked at ZIS as a Grade 5 teacher. At that time, I

began wanting to explore the possibility of stepping into leadership roles, and the director of the school, Peter Mott saw that leadership potential in me. I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to take up informal leadership roles within the school. This sparked a desire within me to move to indeed pursue a career in educational leadership.

ZIS is such an amazing learning institution and as a result, people do not tend to leave! I realised that if I wanted to become a leader, I needed to explore different avenues. With the then-director's

blessing, I decided to interview for positions abroad. And that is when I got a principalship role at an IB World School in West Africa.

Five years later, we relocated to Jakarta, Indonesia, where I was the head of the elementary division at a large international school for seven years. Laos served as my home for the next six years while I served as head of school at a well-reputed IB World School.

When the Director role became available at ZIS, I was not sure I would apply for it, and once I did, I wasn't sure I would get the role it, but in the end, I decided to go for it. I enjoyed the process and I'm so delighted that they liked my authenticity, my background, and my passion for education, as well as other skills I have to offer. It has been a really incredible opportunity to come back to the place that in many ways inspired me to discover my leadership potential.

What is your personal education philosophy and how will you integrate it into the culture at ZIS?

One of the reasons I applied for this role was because my philosophy aligns very

closely with that of ZIS. Central to this, is the idea that every learner has the right to learn regardless of who they are, the language they speak, their cultural identity, or their learning variations. I believe in the value of providing inclusive environments for learners and embracing diversity as an asset to any community. I also believe that we need to be very clear about how we define learning success. With the support of a strong nurturing community, where parents and educators work together, and teachers are collaborators who are empowered to do their jobs, every child should be able to succeed.

What are your goals for ZIS moving forward?

I think that I've been fortunate to join the school at a time in which the importance of well-being has already been recognized both here and around the world. There is no denying that emotions play a significant

role in learning. We know for a fact that when students do not feel like they're part of the school community for whatever reason – their language competency, their cultural background, their faith, or any other aspect of their identity – it gets in the way of deep learning.

ZIS had already identified belonging as a focus area, which was perfect because, as I mentioned before, inclusion and belonging, is an area I am extremely passionate about. We are committed to working on this over the next couple of years because it requires long-term attention and focus for it to become a part of the DNA of a large organization where we welcome new students and families every year. We must develop that sense of belonging where everyone in our community feels valued.

We also believe that belonging is not one-dimensional. Not only must we feel like we are part of the community, but it is also about recognizing the responsibility that

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each member has to contribute, to nurture, and to ensure that the students, parents, educators and leaders are all working in partnership.

I would say that this is one of our biggest goals for the next couple of years and I am so fortunate that a lot of the foundation work has already been done. We offer a strong educational program that we are very proud of and that allows us to delve deeper into other areas the educational world has recognized as worth pursuing.

How do you approach curriculum development, and are there any changes or enhancements we can expect under your leadership?

The foundation of how I work as an educator and a leader is inclusivity. This means I have a vision and ideas in terms of what we need to do, but I really believe in the power of including others. I have my own aspirations but the execution of it needs to be done as a community.

Education has changed so much. When I went to school, and even when my children went to school, things were vastly different – the world has evolved, learning theories have evolved. We now know far more about teaching and learning thanks to technology than we did 20 years ago when I was a classroom teacher.

Because of societal changes, technological advances, and so many other factors, we have to realign our thinking in terms of what and how we teach. For example, we

have a rock-solid written curriculum at ZIS. We are highly innovative, and for the last couple of years, we have developed a strong STEM program. I believe in the value of developing an innovator’s mindset where students allow their creativity to flourish through science, technology and mathematics learning opportunities. And that innovator’s mindset also shows up, if you will, through the Arts. And at ZIS, the Creative Arts also has a place of significance in the lives of our students.

I know that our faculty in the Lower School has identified language, specifically English language literacy – so reading, writing, oral language, and listening – as a curricular area to embrace as part of our curriculum review process. I look forward to how we will be able to consider the concept of belonging as we review our written and taught curriculum. We have 47 different nationalities in the Lower School and 59 in total when we add the Secondary Campus. Every one of those children and their families deserve to feel like they are seen, heard and valued through the curriculum we teach. That is long-term work that great institutions of learning embrace.

And of course, part of that concept of belonging has been brought to life by our commitment to offering a Bilingual Education Program that is allowing students to not only engage with subject area and character skills learning but also do so in two languages, German and English. We are excited about the growth of this



important pathway of learning for our students and families who choose to join that offering.

What do you see are the biggest challenges and opportunities for ZIS?

As much as we love technology, we must be mindful of it. We want to use technology ethically, and that includes making sure that we develop creative and meaningful ways to engage students in this topic of conversation. We cannot ignore that the same exciting opportunities that new technologies are presenting to us, AI for instance, is also challenging us to ensure we are truly developing the critical thinking skills needed so that when it comes to technology, our students can evaluate what they are seeing, how they are using their

tools, and doing so for a good purpose whether it is learning-focused or otherwise.

Student well-being is a critical aspect of education. What measures do you intend to implement to support student mental and emotional health?

We have an incredible team of counsellors who are helping us to deepen and broaden our well-being initiatives. Over the last couple of years, our Director of Student Life, as well as numerous administrators and classroom teachers, have been training and exploring how to implement a restorative justice system at school.

Our goal is not to punish students for their missteps but to work with them to help them understand the impact of their actions. This program is in its second year

and I’m really excited because we are already seeing the positive effect of these restorative practices.

With the rapid advancement in technology and pedagogy, how do you plan to incorporate innovation in the learning experience at Zurich International School?

20 years ago, when I started at ZIS, we had a Technology Integrators team. It was groundbreaking at that time! Nowadays the integration of technology is seamless. It is embedded into the DNA of the school and as a result, I believe we are at a different point in our technological journey.

I am really excited about how STEM is evolving at ZIS, complementing and building on our already Creative Arts

programming. Our students are developing innovative mindsets – they have the ability to wonder, to inquire, and to explore. And those are three skills that will serve our students for years to come.

What role do you believe parents should play in the education of their children at Zurich International School?

Parents are an integral component of the learning equation. Parents know their children best, by the time they start formal schooling, they’ve already spent at least three years with them, and of course they love their children.

Parents have the best intentions for their children. Therefore how can we not engage with them? Parents can contribute to our learning about their children, so that we can



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respond to their child’s needs and who they are as individuals.

Our parent community is incredibly supportive. They attend events, volunteer in classrooms, and generously contribute their time, professional expertise, resources, and financial support. This support is especially important as we are a not-for-profit school, and it greatly enhances our educational offerings.

We rely on our parents to help us understand their children, but we also count on them to learn alongside us. Our mission emphasises being a learning community, and with the diversity within that community, we gain valuable perspectives on what teaching and learning should look like.



Looking ahead, where do you see Zurich International School in the next five years, and what steps are you taking to get there?

This is a very timely question because the board of trustees decided to wait until I arrived and became familiar with the community before reviewing the school’s strategic plan. We are also currently

undergoing a re-accreditation process with the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), which accredits international schools. This process is a natural part of the accreditation cycle. These two concurrent efforts will help us identify our short- and long-term planning priorities.

Our commitment to sustainability in all facets remains central to our future strategy, as does our dedication to ensuring that our students are both supported and challenged. These principles, along with our commitment to community, will form the foundation of our progress over the next two to five years.