Mr. Richard Thornhill is the new principal at BISB. He has devoted his entire life to education and has had some notable experiences in his career. He was the Chief Executive Officer of a federation of schools in London for over 20 years. He was also appointed one of the first National Leaders of Education in the United Kingdom, leaders who work alongside schools to provide high-quality support to those who need it most. In addition, in the UK, he has served on the boards of the Training and Development Agency for Schools, an agency that trains teachers, and the National College for School Leadership, which aims to improve academic standards by ensuring teachers are qualified and motivated. Most recently, he was principal of the British School of Beijing.

We sat down with Mr. Thornhill to talk about how his time here has been so far and the future of BISB.

*How have you spent your time here so far?*

I have spent a lot of time working to understand how the organization works and the people within it. I have been trying to understand what they value about the school because there’s a reason they want to be here. This is important because as the leader of the school, I have to make sure I maintain the aspects of the school that are appreciated and not mess with them just to create change for the sake of change.

Now that I have gotten some time to know and understand the school in this way, I have begun to identify areas of improvement within the school, because my main purpose is to improve the school to the best of my ability. To identify these areas, I have made sure to speak to students and teachers as much as I can; I think I have spoken to almost every teacher in the school. I have heard requests for improvement for a wide range of things from lunches to complaints about too much homework. I have also been talking a lot to parents and getting their thoughts. Like this morning, for example, I was late because I was having a nice long conversation with a father who was dropping his son at school.

*How do you feel about the size of the school? What changes do you plan to make in regards to the size?*

A major aspect of the school that seems to be valued greatly is the small and close-knit community here, people can form very close relationships with each other. One area where I have heard the conversation is in regards to increasing the size of the high school given that it is quite small. The small size, while it is good in terms of close relationships, is still limiting in terms of social opportunities.

Overall, as a school, we don’t want to get too big, because then the close relationships and community are lost but at the same time, I can see why members of the school may want a larger size. This was reflected in the conversations that I had with parents, as many said they wanted the school to be bigger, but not too much bigger.

*How can you use partnerships to increase opportunities for students both on an academic and social level?*

There are other ways that we can increase opportunities within the school and high school without increasing the size of the school, namely through partnerships. We can use partnerships to expand the social size of the high school, giving students more people to connect with. BISB is in a strong position by being in Nord Anglia and being partnered with MIT and Juilliard. I feel that the connections with other schools and organizations could be used more effectively to provide students with the opportunities of a larger school.

Nord Anglia also has some major leadership opportunities for students which I feel have not been pursued at this school. Nord Anglia has a student advisory board, which allows students to work with the CEO, investors, and other leaders of a $2.5 billion company. This can open up a world of opportunity for them.

There are a lot of possibilities when it comes to working with other schools as well. Each of the Nord Anglia schools specialize in different areas and so giving students here the exposure to the specializations of other schools could be highly rewarding to them, and greatly expand the school’s academic opportunity, especially in subjects that BISB may not offer. For example, BISB does not offer Mandarin. Employing a Mandarin teacher at this school, for maybe only a few students who would take the class, would be costly. However, I know an amazing Mandarin teacher at my old school in China. By using the Nord Anglia connection, students here could join classes with that Mandarin teacher and the other Chinese students.

*What does your daily routine look like?*

Regardless of the day, I always start my day by welcoming students into the school. Mr. Gilhooly and I alternate between the lower car park drop-off and the main entrance drop-off. Here, I get to speak to a lot of parents.

The work I do is largely twofold. One part is creating and developing opportunities for students while the other part is the day-to-day running of the school. This includes making phone calls, paying bills, meeting with teachers, parents, and students. This week, for example, we have to get all the letters of recommendation processed and sent to colleges. There is even a third part in terms of the work I have to do in managing relationships with Nord Anglia. For example, I have to report the progress of our school to them.

*What challenges do you feel are currently most pressing for BISB?*

One of the challenges we're facing is to make sure that our curriculum is coherent and consistent, that teachers are planning each step and challenge well. This is a challenge that all schools face but is particularly significant here at BISB because of the way our school goes from nursery through high school. but of course. As the curriculum changes from year to year, we have to make sure that it is progressive.

*What are some pressing changes that you are looking to spearhead?*

One pressing change that we need to act on now, is reorganizing the Senior Leadership Team of the school. At the moment, members of our senior leadership team are responsible for the performance of the entire school, and this is very difficult because the needs of nursery students are so different from those of a middle school student and those of a high school student. So to enable us to deliver the highest quality curriculum, we need members of the Senior Leadership Team specializing at different levels of the school. This is also necessary to hold teachers to greater account for their performance. If Ms. Jane O’Hare for example is responsible for managing the teaching across, it is harder for her to analyze the performance of individual teachers. Reorganizing the Student Leadership Team will be very apparent in addressing the challenge of making our curriculum more consistent and progressive across grade levels.

*What are some longer-term initiatives that you are aiming to take?*

One slightly longer-term initiative is the integration of IT into the teaching and learning process. We aim to implement a digitized curriculum for students and teachers that is going to expand academic opportunities. Nord Anglia is currently working on developing a digitalized curriculum that includes numerous features including instantaneous assessment and communication with parents on a day-to-day basis. This project is costing a lot of money, as NAE has invested around 6.5 million dollars to develop this so far.

We are also looking at the introduction of one-to-one devices across the school. This would allow students and teachers to better access the digital curriculum. This would also be quite expensive given that we would need to buy 500 to 1,000 devices for everyone.

Another initiative we are looking to take, that might be shorter-term than this, is the implementation of a design and technology program. This has become a very popular subject as it applies science and mathematics, and suits the many students who are interested in engineering, design, and art, and particularly important for students who want to go study engineering in college.

*How do you look to expand opportunities for sports?*

When it comes to athletics at schools, there is no doubt that there is a significant difference between the British system and the American system. Are we ever going to be competing with the best American high schools in football, basketball? I'm afraid to say the answer is no. However, on that note, I am still keen to expand the PE and Athletics departments. We aim to make sure that every student can experience sports in a variety of ways through PE. On the athletics front, we are a bit limited at the moment, so will look to expand the number of sports we play competitively. However, I do not want to raise expectations too much as it is unlikely that we will ever be in a position where we have professional and college scouts knocking on our door.

*A popular desire among teachers is to have free lunch as a benefit, is this possible?*

Historically, staff has always paid for their lunches. If I wanted to, I could implement this policy tomorrow, but it is a lot more complicated than it seems when it comes to our budget.

So where are we on this? We're engaged in talking with staff about how we invest in their benefits package. I can spend more on staff, professional development and give them training opportunities or I could spend more on lunch. Many staff may appreciate free lunch, they may equally want better healthcare or free transport to and from school.

While free lunch seems like a nice and simple thing we could do, the costs are incredibly high. To feed 100 teachers every day, 500 meals a week. So that is 40 times 500, which comes out to $20,000. Very costly. Overall though, the question of free lunch comes down to how we decide to allocate investments in the teachers’ benefits package.

We thank Mr. Thornhill for taking the time to speak with us. We are excited by his robust plans and wish him the best of luck in the major initiatives that he will take to improve the school.