

Melvin M. Kieschnick
Hong Kong International School

Past and Future: Big Dreams, Deep Commitment, Abiding Faith

Context of the Moment

I am deeply aware of the context of this very moment. It's just after school closes for the day, on a Thursday afternoon and you are anxious to get off campus. Some of you have even traveled a bit to get to this site. The unspoken but deeply felt thought is, "This better be good." My only consolation is that this could be Friday, and this could have been billed as a "mandatory in-service training session."

There is the added dimension of me being here, at least partially at the invitation of Kevin Dunning, new Head of School and you may well be wondering what kind of an ancient outside speaker is this that he, the new guy, wants us to be exposed to.

Yet there is more than that. Let me be clear. I stand before you this afternoon with great admiration, profound respect and utmost confidence. I come to you with deep gratitude for what has happened at HKIS in its distinguished history, for the lives it has touched, for the world it has enriched.

I come with the conviction that finally it all comes down to people; people like you and your predecessors. It is you and your predecessors who each day just do what it takes and you do it so magnificently. I bow my head in respectful gratitude.

My theme today is really quite ordinary. "HKIS – Past and Future: Big Dreams, Deep Commitment, Abiding Faith." Now that's a South China Sea in which I love to swim.

Big Dreams

It is now some 50 years ago that a small group of visionaries had a dream. And I want to speak just briefly of the context of that dream – for it took place in a Hong Kong very different from the Hong Kong of today.

Hong Kong was a British Crown Colony.

Universal education at any level was only a dream.

No cross-harbor tunnel existed.

There were no diplomatic relations between China and the USA.

The International Airport was Kai Tak in Kowloon.

There were hundreds of thousands unemployed, street sleepers, squatter huts,

Resettlement Estates with Boys and Girls Clubs on their flat roofs.

The principal US presence was closely tied in with the Vietnam War.

There were no international schools.
Of course, even then, the business of Hong Kong was business.

In the midst of this cauldron, all parents, whether they lived in a squatter hut in Kowloon or in an elegant apartment overlooking the opulent Repulse Bay Hotel, dreamed of a good education for their children. All parents wanted their children to be able to go to a school where they could be educated to more nearly become all that God intended them to be.

This, of course, was true also of the American parents. But it was hard for them, especially if they lived on the island and, most especially, if they lived on the south side of this island. It meant they had to send their teenaged kids to KGV. They had to adjust to a British School System. They had to make choices about O and A level matriculation exams. They had to travel some 90 minutes to get to school for a parent-teacher conference.

So in the heart and in the minds of some there began to develop the dream of a school with an American curriculum, a school on Hong Kong Island, maybe even in Repulse Bay.

Two of those dreamers were Joe and Dottie Mache, a couple with three children. They were Lutherans who made the trip every Sunday with their three kids to church in Shek Kip Mei in Kowloon. There they met colleagues who were very active in the education of the Chinese children of Hong Kong, and there I met them, for teaching Chinese children was my assignment. And soon a dream developed.

A K-12 school
An American curriculum
High quality academics
Concern for the whole child
Somewhere close to Repulse Bay – Stanley

And yes, with particular religious tradition – Lutheran – and yes, there was the hope that a church/chapel could be a part of this dreamed-for facility.

The dream took on a more specific shape – maybe 24 classrooms – maybe a school, which at the height of its success could reach an enrollment of 500. Soon the number of dreamers increased. Len Galster, the American Community, leaders of the church in the USA – and through the years there were always people who made the dream bigger: Bob Christian, Werner von Behren, Dave Rittman, Earl Westrick, Chuck Dull, Jim Handrich, Bruce Kelsh, Richard Mueller, Lois Voeltz – you know the names. You are among them. Always the dream got bigger, yet it always focused on kids and their families.

Dreams without action are pure fantasy which evaporates with the break of day. Dreams need, first of all, the underpinning of commitment. HKIS is the story of people of deep commitment.

Deep Commitment

Let me list just a few of the obstacles, which could only have been overcome by deep commitment.

I want to begin with the Hong Kong Education Department. The Education Department and Crown Lands which controlled all real estate was under tremendous pressure not to allow land or a special school for any population other than the locals, and to certainly not allow an American or International school other than British or to make any grant of construction money or school site.

But some of the Education Department leaders had a larger vision of what would be good, not only for a select number of parents and their children but for all of Hong Kong. They made the commitment to allocate land, to provide an interest-free construction loan and to permit a curriculum that was different. They made this commitment also specifically to the Lutheran Church because this church had demonstrated that it could operate schools of educational value, financial accountability and dedication to children.

Forgive me for getting very personal for a couple minutes. It was September 1965. My wife, Jane, had just been diagnosed with a cerebral aneurism. My family was frantic to get exit visas, air transportation for us and our five children, and surgery scheduled in the USA. On the way to Nethersol Hospital to arrange for Jane's transportation, I needed to stop by the Education Department for a meeting with the Director.

When I was in his office, he did a most remarkable thing. He got out from behind his desk, sat in a comfortable chair directly across from me, looked into my face and said, "Mr. Kieschnick, if you ever quote me in this I will deny I ever said it. But right here I have a personal memo that I am putting into the file of your proposed school. It says that should the school for whatever reason not be able to repay its loan, I recommend the loan be totally forgiven. If that were to happen, I know it would only be because a situation developed beyond anyone's competence or control, for I have full confidence in the vision of this school and the commitment of the people planning to operate it."

This type of commitment has been demonstrated over and over by a wide variety of folks throughout the history of your school.

I always think immediately of the commitment of teachers and staff. It is the day after day, semester after semester commitment of faculty and staff on which a successful school is built.

Then there is a special commitment required when there is conflict or unusual challenge. For example:

- The challenge of what the school's discipline policy should look like. In the 1960's an HKIS student tragically died from an overdose of an illegal drug. Some of the school's constituents then wanted to turn HKIS into a fundamentalist Law and Order school.

Straighten those kids out. Shape up or ship out! But wiser people were committed to a higher, more appropriate ideal and they were sustained.

- Another challenge: What does it mean to be a Christian school in a multi-faith school setting? What about the religion curriculum, the chapel services, etc.? There has been a steady commitment to be faithful to its Lutheran roots without becoming a doctrinaire, parochial school. Some tough commitments, but always a commitment to be true to the vision of the founders and to a great variety of religious or nonreligious diversity of the student body and the families from which the students come.

Commitment to expand. Reflect for a moment on what commitment it has taken to move beyond that first building: Leadership from staff, commitment from the school board, commitment of parents and students and staff to once again go through a building program, the commitment to move to Tai Tam, the commitment to the Middle School, the commitment to early childhood education, the *incredible* commitment of money from the community, a commitment that took on reality in the hard currency of interest-free, non-repayable debenture notes, each of US\$10,000. The list goes on, including a commitment to pay tuition comparable to a private US university. My head swirls just naming these.

So we pause to describe the dream and celebrate the commitment and we fall back on Abiding Faith.

Abiding Faith

It takes faith for a parent to entrust a child to the influence and direction of a school staff. Parents have consistently expressed that faith.

It has taken the abiding faith of the teachers that all their efforts will help each child be all they can be – healthy, spiritual, contributing members of the world.

For some there is also an abiding faith in the spiritual dimension of faith. It is their faith that in this school the students will learn of a God who is a God of grace and mercy, who cares for the redemption of all creation, a God who has a special love for children, a God who tasks educators with setting each child free to become all he or she is destined to be.

HKIS In the Future

Big Dreams, Deep Commitment, Abiding Faith. Now let me project those three qualities into the future.

Here are my personal dreams for HKIS:

1. That the expansion of your facilities to make them more appropriate for early childhood education will bear rich fruit. Every study of human behavior points to the importance of those early years. The parents who entrust their very young children to you have hopes

and dreams. I dream that the little ones here will be loved, respected and accepted; that their early years will be years of joy, growth, adventure and learning.

2. That HKIS will play its critical role in the new China. I must admit that in my wildest dreams I never thought that HKIS would be a school of China, an International English Language School with an American curriculum and Christian sponsorship.

It is my judgment that the 19th Century was the Century of the British Empire (We are a part of Exhibit A.) My judgment is that the 20th century was the Century of the USA (This school is Exhibit B.) It is my belief that the 21st Century will be the Century of China (This school is Exhibit C.) and here is my dream:

My dream is that the graduates of HKIS will actively help shape how China plays out that role 50 years from now. Graduates of this school will be in positions of influence in business, technology, education, government and international relations. They and their children will be electronically connected with each other and the world by whatever replaces Twitter, Facebook, Skype, etc., 50 years from now. Your graduates will absolutely help shape that world. I pray they will shape it in the direction of democratic freedoms, individual rights, international cooperation in the interest of justice, peace and adequate food, shelter and health care for all.

The China People's Daily has reported that there are already 171 cities in China with a population of over 1 million each; 10 have more than 4 million people each. That number will only increase dramatically during the lifetime of your current students. That means many will lose touch with the earth, rivers, trees, fields – nature. You know about that because, to some extent, that describes life for some Hong Kong residents. My dream is that HKIS continues to foster and nourish programs which help students stay in touch with the earth and that they will carry good memories of this with them into the cities of China and other countries of the world.

3. My Dream is that you increasingly tell the HKIS story, especially in the USA. Tell the story of the many marvelous ways you enrich the lives of your students, particularly through your Service Learning model.

I recently attended a meeting of Lutheran school educators from around the world. I was enriched by my conversations with school administrators from Hong Kong, Shanghai, Hanoi, Australia, India, Canada and South Africa. What struck me was how much these school leaders could teach the USA educators, especially Lutheran urban schools. They are looking for new models, for new energies, new alliances. You have so much to share. My dream is that you will do that – find partner schools, share information with principals, visit those schools and invite their teachers and leaders to visit yours. In this shrinking world, HKIS can play a unique and wonderful role.

4. My dream is that you will continue to be a part of the birthing of new schools internationally, not limited to but especially those related to the Lutheran Church, as you have done and are doing with Concordia International School in Shanghai and Hanoi.

5. My last dream emerges out of my Lutheran tradition, but is not unique to that tradition. It includes at least these components:

A daily affirmation of each individual as a unique child of God, created in the image of God, loved by Christ and open to the Spirit's leading.

A strong sense of vocation (calling of each individual). Martin Luther firmly rejected the notion that only a select few (like priests or nuns) had a calling from God. He affirmed that every person in whatever situation in life – whether parent, scientist, bus driver, computer scientist or cook – could achieve purpose within that “station” and bring to the world service for hope, joy, beauty and fulfillment. Bring that to each student.

Deep Commitment

Yes, all of this will require some very deep commitments. I call upon you to be committed to the values, traditions and ethics of all that has made you what you are and to changes that are required at an ever-increasing rate. It's tough to keep these in balance. I know that as I get older I tend to resent change; yet I know that the essence of stability is change. I repeat, “The essence of stability is change.” It may be hard for you to think of that as next year you rise earlier to get to the Chai Wan site. Your routines will be upset. You will be asked for personal inconvenience, even sacrifice. Yet I plead with you to be committed to that which will enable you to fulfill your dream.

I call for a continued commitment to a cooperative faculty/staff environment. You are all strong people or you would not be here. Bring your strengths and a willingness to say things like, “You know, you could be right,” or “I don't really agree, but if that's what we've said we'll do, count me in.”

Your new Head of School, Kevin, has my commitment and, I trust, will have yours. For the last few years I have watched the remarkable record he achieved at his former school in Las Vegas, Nevada. I say, “If that guy can do what he did at the Lutheran School in that absolutely unique spot on this planet called Las Vegas, I just bet he will do well at this other unique spot called Hong Kong.”

The final commitment to which I call you is to simply take very seriously your role in the individual lives of each of your students. I know this is not easy. Some of you interact with many each day so it is difficult to remember each one. I am reminded of my grandson, Ryan, a freshman at the University of Connecticut. He went to a very good high school in West Hartford, Connecticut. I recently spoke with him about his high school teachers. He had some good ones – and then there was Mr. B. Ryan said, “You know, he was my teacher for three different classes. I made an A in each of those classes – and he does not even know my name.” Make the commitment to know your students, by their names, and by more than their names. Let them know that you know each of them and care for each of them, from the brightest and most eager

to the shy and timid one who is afraid to say his or her own name. You know them. You call them by name.

Abiding Faith

I close by calling each one of us to continue to be nourished and empowered by an abiding faith.

It is my faith that the same God who blessed and sustained us in the past will be true to His eternal promise of continued protection, energy, resources and fruits of the Spirit, joy, patience, hope and peace.

It is my faith that Kevin, our Head of School, will provide leadership that is visionary, competent, appreciative of the past, rooted in current realities and confident of a brighter future.

I have faith in you, the faculty and staff for the 2011-12 school year. I have faith in your daily encounters with each other, the students and the parents, that you will celebrate each day and help achieve the mission of:

Dedicating your minds to inquiry,
Your hearts to compassion,
Your lives to service and
Global understanding.

You will provide an American-style of education grounded in the Christian faith and respectful of the spiritual lives of all.