

# AN ALL-INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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*Dr Michelle Kleiss, Head of School, The Overseas School of Colombo.*

New Head of School at The Overseas School of Colombo (OSC), Dr Michelle Kleiss brings with her over two decades of experience as a teacher and an educational leader in the international school circuit, a multicultural world-view nurtured as a result of working in diverse communities, and a rigorous ethos of continuous school improvement. She outlined her future with OSC and reiterated her commitment to drive academic achievement along with personal development that would prepare every student at OSC to be future-ready.

**By** Udeshi Amarasinghe and Jennifer Paldano Goonewardena. | **Photography** Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda.

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**You are the new Head of School at OSC, can you tell us about yourself and your background?**

First of all, I would like to say that I feel very honored to be OSC's Head of School. I am originally from Canada and I grew up in Toronto. Upon receiving a full athletic scholarship in Field Hockey to the American University in Washington DC, I earned my Bachelor's Degree in Education. I then went on to complete a Master's Degree in K-12 Instructional Supervision, and a PhD in Educational Leadership. In 1994, I moved overseas to the Dominican Republic and worked at the International School of Sosúa as a teacher for three years, at which point I transitioned to Brazil to teach at the American School of Campinas in Sao Paulo.

Becoming a part of the international school community around the world subsequently took me to the Bavarian International School (BIS) in Munich, Southern Germany. While at BIS, an International Baccalaureate (IB) Continuum School, I received an award from the Association for the Advancement of International Education (AAIE) for my contributions to international education. In 2001, I headed to Cairo, as Principal of the American International School in Egypt (AISE). After two years in Egypt, I was invited to open a new school in Khamis Mushayt, Saudi Arabia. In 2003, I took on the Directorship role of the school in Saudi Arabia and my husband and I spent four years in the southern Abha region, where we expanded our family, and had our son. In 2007, we moved back to Cairo and I continued on as the Principal at AISE.

After a very enjoyable time in Cairo, I was appointed Head of School at the American International School in Cyprus and I remained in that role for a period of ten years. After such a long tenure, my family and I felt that it was time for us to move on to a new location, but it had to be the right kind of school and community to commit ourselves to. When I saw the opportunity at OSC, I knew it was the perfect school. I really fell in love with OSC and its community, its warmth and family feel, its international mindedness, diversity, and the quality of the IB programs it delivers. I am excited about joining this leading school and supporting its strategic goals going forward.

**OSC Is The Only IB School In Sri Lanka. Our School And Its Community Are Steadfast In Upholding The Mission Of The IB Which "Aims To Develop Inquiring, Knowledgeable And Caring Young People Who Help To create A Better More Peaceful World Through Intercultural Understanding And Respect."**

## **Can you speak about the importance of OSC being an IB World School?**

OSC is the only IB school in Sri Lanka. Our school and its community are steadfast in upholding the mission of the IB which “aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help create a better, more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.”

With over 40 nationalities enrolled in OSC, the IB philosophy is an excellent match for our families. The IB continuum of programs are demanding, yet holistic in their approach to teaching children. While some systems ask high school students to concentrate on three or four courses, the IB is valued for requiring its students to take six courses across Math, Science, Humanities, Arts, Languages, and Literature, and three of them must be at higher levels. The IB Diploma program also includes a Theory of Knowledge course, asking students to reflect on the nature of knowledge, and essential participation in additional activities defined by the creative arts and athletics as well as engagement in service projects, in order to obtain its prestigious qualification.

With 4,200 IB World Schools world-wide, our school is part of a network of schools serving 1,250,000 students. IB schools like OSC not only promote healthy relationships, ethical responsibility and personal challenge, but they also foster the development of the whole child as a life-long learner. With a balanced, connected, and conceptually-based program, the IB helps students appreciate languages, culture, and explore diverse world-views. At OSC this is vital, as our students and their families represent a variety of religions, cultures, and background values, so teaching them that “other people with their differences, can also be right” is of significant value to us.

When our students graduate, the IB Diploma opens all kinds of doors to them. The IB credential has the widest reach for entry to all national university systems world-wide, and is much sought-after by the world’s best universities

## **What about the school curriculum?**

The OSC curriculum is based on the IB and draws from educational standards around the world to complement its schemes of work. In the Primary Years the curriculum is transdisciplinary, but still teaches those important basic facts. One cannot, however, stop at teaching only facts and topics, to build a ‘thinker’ you need to teach big ideas and concepts that transfer over time and place. Our curriculum is built on essential understandings from a young age. In the Middle School Years, we teach all subject areas, but ensure there is a connection to the real world. We frame our curriculum with creativity, critical thinking

and reflection. In the High School DP Program, we further our breadth and depth of the course work, but also show students how they can be active participants in society. All of our programs are amplified by the IB Learner Profile which is a set of attributes that includes tolerance, respect for self and others, communication, discipline, self-regulation and reflective attitudes towards learning that will equip students for the future – a future we cannot even define.

Our IB students take higher level courses for depth, and standard level courses for breadth. In the last two years, they are required to complete a 4,000-word research project that parallels a mini master's/doctoral level thesis. Universities around the world recognize IB students as totally ready for tertiary success, and this recognition allows them admissions to fields of study and faculties of their choice.

In addition, we teach the fine and performing arts, languages such as French, Spanish, Mandarin, and native languages to Sri Lanka, as well as physical and health education, and have a unique class called 'Advisory', which ensures each child has an adult advocate following their learning so that every child can meet their learning targets. OSC integrates technology to transform learning with the use of school provided Chromebooks, iPads and notebooks, computer labs, maker-space environments and labs, smart boards and 3D printers for students to create and innovate, just to name a few. Technologies allow students to create new understandings and communicate what they've learned. OSC is a Google Education School, and we have invested heavily in infrastructure to ensure that all classes are seamlessly connected with Wi-Fi, software and online programs.

### **What is the emphasis at OSC in terms of extracurricular activities, as this is important for the development of students?**

At OSC extra-curricular activities are a central part of a student's day. Extra curricular programs provide our students with the opportunity to risk-take and try something new like pottery, ceramic painting, or oriental dance, or to pursue their interests, hobbies and strengths such as scuba diving, wall climbing or sign language. While doing so, we teach important character-building skills like sportsmanship and how to compete graciously, respect, acceptance, patience, perseverance, cooperation and collaboration.

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We offer leadership programs, like Model United Nations, and Student Government, as well as performing arts, creative arts and athletics. A wide range of activities are on offer throughout the year, including unique service-learning projects and participation in the Week Without Walls, mixing cultural heritage studies with service activities. Our community supports so many causes and raises money to support families and institutions that have a wide reach across the island. 'Contributing' is a tenet that is highly valued at OSC.

**You mentioned about the importance of students being in a multi-cultural and diverse environment. Can you talk about how diversity could be inculcated or promoted in a school environment?**

OSC has an idyllic school motto - 'Unity in Diversity' - and this motto is lived throughout the school. An appreciation for diversity can be realized only when it is valued. At OSC, diversity and respect for differences are the cornerstone of our mission and our approach to teaching and learning. Our teachers teach how to exchange views respectfully, and how to integrate different ways of thinking. We celebrate language learning and see multilingualism as a huge strength. Our students respect themselves, each other and the adults in their environment. Our students are exposed to a variety of values that are different from their own. In this environment, and through the delivery of our curriculum and approaches, we teach children how to be flexible and adaptable in life, that we are not competing, but rather we are winning when we cooperate and collaborate and embrace our differences.

**How will Sri Lankan children benefit at OSC?**

All children, including Sri Lankan children, can benefit from an OSC education because we are educating the whole child by a world-class teaching faculty. We select our teachers from a world-wide pool of professional educators from all six continents with international experience. At OSC we understand that the greatest influence on student achievement is the impact a teacher can make, and therefore, our students are taught by certified and professionally developed educators who focus on research-based instructional strategies to teach students how to think. With a student-teacher ratio of 1:7, our class sizes are monitored to ensure individualized attention is maximized. Our students and teachers greatly appreciate the richness and heritage of Sri Lankan culture because our commitment to international education starts with the understanding that we have to know our local context and culture before we can appreciate someone else's. We further our commitment to Sri Lanka, through well designed and developed service projects in support of our local and regional communities.

Our teachers are always participating in cutting-edge professional development. We support our teachers' knowledge base by ensuring they are up-to-date with the latest educational practices and strategies that engage young learners.

OSC helps our students to learn how to operate in other contexts, and not in isolation. An OSC education is based on the pillars of cooperation and collaboration. With these pillars our students are future-ready.

I do not know enough about the Sri Lankan educational system yet, but I plan to learn about it. But what I do know is that parents everywhere want their children to be lifelong learners, empathic, caring and principled, and ready to enter a global economy with confidence - which is what an OSC education is all about.

### **What is the general trend in education around the world?**

From what I am reading, being 'future ready' is the key trend in education right now. It's about making learning whole and teaching beyond traditional methods. This includes embracing global perspectives, problem solving, and interdisciplinary learning, and moving away from teaching discrete topics without relevancy. It includes schools taking responsibility in developing the 'soft' skills that transcend cultures, and attitudes that encourage collaboration, cooperation, engagement and commitment. It's about real-world problem solving through creative means that lead to innovation, including the use of technology to transform our experiences and environment. In terms of educational leadership, I would say the concept of collaboration needs to be the priority, so that all parts are working towards learning impact. From the top down, from the bottom up, and across, we have to share what is working, and cooperate, and collaborate. Collective efficacy has the greatest yield on student achievement. If we work in silos, we don't achieve it. We need to be a team, and work as a team between all stakeholders and remove the divisions that often exist in education.

**My Main Priority Is To Support Our School As A Learning Community In Its Quest For Continuous School Improvement And Ensuring Student Achievement In All Areas.**



I suppose at the end of the day we have to stand ready to re-evaluate what is worth teaching and learning, and then be prepared to say that the rest is not all that important. It's an evolving profession, because we are constantly evolving

### **What are your plans for OSC?**

Initially, I need to get to know the community. The strength of a school is in its people. To start with, I need to get to know all stakeholders, and their hopes and dreams for the school and the students who attend. I plan on learning about our school as a global leading institution, and what we can do to make OSC go from great to greater. I have joined a fully international accredited and reputed IB school that has effective design principles at work, so now I have to honor those strengths, and its 62 years in the community, in order to determine how it can be taken to even greater heights. My main priority is to support our school as a learning community in its quest for continuous school improvement and ensuring student achievement in all areas - including our students' academic profiles and their social, emotional and physical wellness.