

A World of Learning

By David Glaser

Enter through the gate leading to the Lower School and you're immediately confronted by a colorful array. Rows of flags flutter gently in the breeze flowing through the atrium that connects the Campus Center to the library. It's an iconic sight and one that represents the global diversity that is part of the culture at Saint Stephen's.

The flags change from year to year to reflect the nationalities of enrolled students, but the commitment to providing a truly "world-class education" never does. While similar phrases at other schools may not be much more than marketing jargon, the commitment to being "world class" is a literal reality at Saint Stephen's.

"Ever since I started here almost 30 years ago, we've had international students, so that part has been consistent. What has changed is the school's response to global education," said Upper School teacher Patrick Whelan. "We've been much more – as teachers – brought into this global education ethic. It's touched every single division and every single department. Instead of being something that we just do because we want to check off a box, I think it informs the decisions that we make."

Today, a visit by Head of School Dr. Jan Pullen to a classroom in Tanzania in 2007 is pointed to as the formal start of the school's global initiative. That trip began an email exchange between the

schools. Two years later, another trip by Dr. Pullen to a school in Guilin, China created a second core connection. There are now five schools considered "sisters" to SSES, with the subsequent additions of connections in Japan, Argentina and Honduras.

In the early days of the initiative, the relatively new video chat technology provided by Skype was utilized to help Saint Stephen's begin to shrink the globe. While it's likely that a visitor to campus today will encounter individual classrooms tuning in daily to interact with students in Canada, Kazakstan, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Italy, or elsewhere, the first Skype sessions were much less frequent.

"Every other Tuesday for China and every other Wednesday for Tanzania, we would meet them on Skype," said Spanish teacher Jennifer Hambrick, who has coordinated the global initiative at SSES since 2010. "Our teachers would march their classes across the campus and into the reading room off the library. Someone from technology would be there to push the button and make the connection. They'd do their lesson and then go back to class. It looks a lot different today."



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Japanese students visit



Jennifer Hambrick

Saint Stephen's regularly connects with 40 schools in 21 different countries. All seven continents have been in reach, including Antarctica where students interacted with a scientist conducting penguin research. Forty-four SSES teachers have already been active in the initiative. Many of them have created "partner teacher" relationships that have helped them shape their exchanges into truly meaningful academic lessons. They have come to consider their overseas counterparts friends.

The evolution of the program has also grown to include technologies other than Skype. Middle school students recently created a video exchange through YouTube with classes in Kenya, China, Honduras and Sweden.

Their video showed the contents of a common U.S. first aid kit and asked the other schools, "What does your first aid kit look like?" Sixth graders have used an application called Padlet to discuss books they've read with students around the country and the world. Eighth graders utilized Google Drive to share photos with students in Mexico who used the images to create sketches they returned to their Saint Stephen's counterparts. Marine science students have spoken with turtle researchers.

"My class is world cultures, so our global initiative has been great in that not only are the kids studying about it, but they actually get to meet and interact with students from a variety of other countries,"

Intermediate School teacher Chris Valcarcel said. "We've spoken with students from Japan when we were studying about Asia. We've spoken with students from Brazil when we were learning about Latin America and South America. We've talked about colonialism with students in Africa. We've used Google Earth to have international students show us their houses in Russia and China. We do virtual field trips to study the Great Wall of China.

"I've never been part of a school, as a parent or a teacher, that has really gone into the depth that we do at all levels and all grades. It's not uncommon for a Social Studies teacher to connect with other countries, but we do it with math, science, foreign language. I think we do a great job of implementing it across all of our divisions and all of our departments."

International travel is also a key component of the initiative. After many years of virtual visits to Guilin, Hambrick and Mandarin teacher Crystal Zhang took their first group of students to China last summer. Next summer, Hambrick and Whelan will guide a dozen SSES students to Japan on a visit that will include Shibuya Junior and Senior Highs in Tokyo. The school has sent its students to Saint Stephen's in each of the past three years and this will be the first reciprocal trip by SSES. The Dominican Republic and Haiti have also been on the travel list, and Hambrick hopes to add Cordoba, Argentina, where a former Saint Stephen's exchange student is teaching, to the roster in 2018.

"I think it's a unique program because our global education involves so many areas. The conversation in class looks and sounds very different because we have such an international flavor on campus. Global education programs at many schools consist of only travel. While that's great and is an important component, that also can leave it open only to those that have the means to travel," Hambrick said.

"We're also learning together throughout the year. I don't know any other schools that are doing it with the regularity that we are doing it. And it's not just, 'Hi, what's your name?' We're learning science, we're learning math, we're talking about novels, we're learning about poetry together. I think that's very unique to Saint Stephen's."



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USF Conference Institute



SSES in Guilin, China