IN BRIEF

Two education leaders, Vincent Ferrandino and Hanif Hassan, discuss the need to share universal best practices to educate all children. Ferrandino is currently the director of the Office of Policy and Planning at the Ministry of Education in the United Arab Emirates. (Ferrandino served as NAESP’s executive director from July 1999 through March 2007.) Hassan has been minister of education in the United Arab Emirates since 2006. Before that, he was vice chancellor at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi.

Education leaders across the globe have a similar universal mission—to ensure that all children receive the best education possible. Two of these leaders recently sat down to discuss ways to identify what can be learned by looking at education globally, the importance of principal leadership, and how the partnership between the United Arab Emirates and the United States—including the relationship with NAESP—is helping to build cultural understanding and competency.

The United Arab Emirates’ Ministry of Education oversees 275,000 students in 750 public schools and is responsible for approving and licensing private schools in the country. The newly created Office of Policy and Planning comprises individuals with expertise on education issues in other parts of the world. They provide strategic planning for the country’s reform efforts and work with principals and teachers to be certain that the strategies and theories are put into practice.
A candid conversation with Vincent Ferrandino, former NAESP executive director, and Hanif Hassan, minister of education for the United Arab Emirates.
Principal Magazine (PM): Describe the partnership between the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) and NAESP.

Ferrandino: Recognizing the important role that principals play in bringing about change, it was pretty clear to me that if we were going to make a real impact in the U.A.E., we needed to find an entry point into the reform. As we looked at all of this, we felt that principals were the place to begin, and so we established this partnership, which is multifaceted.

NAESP is providing some training and support to the principals in the U.A.E. and is also in the process of developing a mentorship program that will bring principals in from the U.S. and from other countries.

My charge is to identify a best practice—wherever it is—and try to find a way to bring that practice into the U.A.E., so we’re looking around the world. If we find a program that seems to make good sense in Australia or in Canada or in Europe—anywhere—we try to understand it and conceptualize

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it so that it works well in the U.A.E. Our partnership is intended to help support the principals primarily—that’s the NAESP part of this.

PM: How has the growth of the U.A.E. affected the creation and implementation of the country’s education system?

Hassan: The education system in the U.A.E. has been expanding since the country was founded in 1971. The original concern was to build more schools to accommodate more students. Now the issue has become what kind of education we have to provide to our children. The country and the leadership of the country realize that this is the key to improvement in any aspect of our life. Education is not only about educating our children and providing them with skills, tools, and knowledge. It’s more than that. It is about how to really create good citizens—citizens who will be able to work in this global era and will be able to work and live in peace and harmony with all.

PM: What are you hoping to learn from other countries as you work toward creating a world-class education system?

Ferrandino: We need to clearly identify what it is that students in the U.A.E. need to know and be able to do to be effective in their future careers or education. We also recognize that today’s world is going to require certain skills and abilities from students that are very different from what has been required in the past. And we know that things such as the ability to think critically, the ability to be creative during the thought process, and the ability to problem-solve are key elements in one’s education today. So is the ability to work together with others primarily in groups. The curriculum that we are looking to put in place, and the process of instruction, needs to mirror those kinds of skills and create the possibility for those skills to be developed effectively.

We are also looking at some of the innovations taking place. We know that students in many cases are technologically much further ahead than many adults. Students are using technology...
The United Arab Emirates is located along the southern coast of the Persian Gulf. The country has 4.4 million residents and covers an area roughly equivalent to the state of Maine. Formed in 1971 by joining a group of sheikhdoms, the United Arab Emirates has seen dramatic changes in its brief existence, in large part due to the discovery of oil.

every day—to play and study and do their own research at home. For example, in Singapore they are beginning to experiment with using game technology to teach math and science. We think that’s something we could look at and see how we can import that. We also know, for example, that in Canada and the U.S. there has been a tremendous emphasis around development of creativity, problem-solving, and group learning. So we are looking at that as something we can bring in. We know, for example, that in the United Kingdom right now they are going through a massive rebuilding process of schools where they are looking at the actual structure of schools as a way to enhance the learning that takes place—make them “smart schools,” with technology prepared for students. All of these elements—and there are many others that exist elsewhere as well—are ones we are trying to incorporate into the changes in the U.A.E. system.

Hassan: I’m really confident that our students can achieve all of those things. The support and commitment are there from the leadership of the country. For example, just recently, we sent a group of students to the Netherlands where they were involved in a student exchange program with their colleagues from other European countries. Students from the U.A.E., as part of an international program, got to see how their academic goals compared with those of students from other countries. They came back to their own country with a different perspective.

PM: What advantages does the ministry have in trying to create a world-class education system?

Ferrandino: There is a strong national commitment to doing this at the highest levels of government right on down. There is much less red tape to go through to bring about change. There are resources being committed to getting this done the right way. I think there are a number of elements in place that are not necessarily in place in other parts of the world, and certainly not in the U.S.

In addition to that, the size of the effort is also more reasonable. If you are look-
ing, as is often the case in the U.S., at making a change in a school system that has hundreds of thousands of students, scaling up reform to that level is extremely difficult. We have not seen good examples of that. On the other hand, we are working with a school system in the U.A.E. that is roughly the size of a large county system. Furthermore, it is a country that geographically is relatively small, so the ability to bring about change in that kind of environment is more likely than it would be if the size were much larger and the geographic area were much broader.

PM: What can the United States learn from the U.A.E.?

Hassan: I would say that the U.A.E. has maybe the highest rate worldwide in terms of students who finish high school and pursue a university education. Over 95 percent of our female students who finish high school go on to higher education. Male students have several options within the country and abroad, and they are really committed. Even after they finish university, most of them really want to contribute and have an important role in society. These are good indications that education has become an important tool to serve the nation.

But I think both countries can use education as a tool for promoting the understanding of the other culture and the other side of the world. Through the United States working with the U.A.E., we can do a lot to maintain and enjoy a wonderful relationship in all aspects of education. This should become one of the areas both countries really work on because both countries can use education as a tool for spreading the culture of tolerance and understanding among different countries, different cultures, and different people from different backgrounds. Education has an important role, but only if we give it a chance and use it. I think this is the beginning of a long journey of working together, learning from each other, and promoting the culture of understanding that will help us both achieve our goals in the future.

Ferrandino: Just in the couple of years that principals from the U.A.E. have been coming to the NAESP convention, we have seen some significant breakdown of some of the stereotypes that exist. Unfortunately, we live in a world where most people’s impressions of others come from a quick 30-second clip on television or a statement made by some political figure. People tend to generalize those images. I think what we believe is that education is the vehicle by which cooperation and tolerance can be taught. We can all prosper in that environment. Through these kinds of exchanges—whether they be principal-to-principal, teacher-to-teacher, or student-to-student—we are going to begin to break down a lot of these stereotypes. When we begin to look at each other as individuals, as part of the human race, we build the desire and need to work primarily to make this world a better place for everyone.

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