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Planting the desert

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When the International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) in Aleppo supported its staff's needs with an international school, the city's inhabitants had a golden chance to participate in an independent curriculum patterned after the best international standards in use throughout the world.

ICARDA was formed after initial plans in Beirut were canceled due to the Lebanese civil war.

The center looked for land that represented similar conditions to those of Lebanon and found their target, inally, in the northern Syrian capital, Aleppo.

In 1976 an agreement was signed with the Syrian government giving ICARDA and the school the full blessing and support of former president Hafez al-Assad.

On a 948 hectare site, the school was housed in what is called "Office One" on the Aleppo Damascus highway, whereas the Tel Hadya countryside was developed into ICARDA's principal station.

Beginning only with eight students, the school saw rapid growth to its present population of around 250 students, locals currently comprising about two-thirds of the total school population, while other students are children of ICARDA scientists.

The school introduced totally different concepts from the traditional methodologies applied in Syrian schools, allowing students to become self-directed learners who think creatively and are prepared to take intellectual risks.

Since the foundation stages, the ICARDA School was seeking excellence in management and performance.

Within a short span of time, the school was fully accredited by the Middle States Association (MSA) of Colleges and Schools of the United States, affiliated to the International General Certificate of Secondary and inally the school adopted the International Baccalaureate program (IB).

All classrooms are provided with enough materials and supplemented with the best educational methodologies.

Second grade teacher Gill Assi, believes in what is known as the Primary Years Program (PYP) and in the necessity of discovery to enhance the learning process.

"The PYP is a trans-disciplinary program which is designed to foster the development of the whole child not just in the classroom but also through other means of learning where they observe and examine concepts and topics from different perspectives: language arts, science, math and social studies".

The school gives equal opportunities for foreign and local students to attempt the very best of the international curriculum.

"We believe in racial and religious equality of all our students," notes Robert Thompson, head of the school.

The school supports its students not only academically, but also psychologically and emotionally through its counselor, who is always ready to offer guidance.

"Students visit me very often seeking help and advice," says school counselor Teresa

Arajola, who believes in the necessity of having such advisory corners at the school.

“I listen to their problems and try to support them in making right decisions.

I also guide them towards choosing the appropriate career that goes in accordance with their abilities and aspirations.

” The school’s staff is a diverse mix of foreigners and locals, with the foreign teachers taking the lead roles in the educational process, while the locals are divided into subject instructors and teacher assistants (TA).

In both positions locals do not have similar financial status to that of their western counterparts, especially the TAs, whose job is summarized in supervising, grading, and substituting for the lead teachers when they are absent.

“Working for the ICARDA School gave me the opportunity to expand upon my experiences and broaden my knowledge,” says grade two TA Mir Sharalouk, when asked about why she accepts to work with comparably lower compensation.

“That’s fine, as I am still pursuing my studies at the American University of Beirut.

When I obtain my teaching certificate I will apply for another job with a salary to match my credentials.

” Thompson believes that the financial difference between foreigner and local instructors could be reduced in the future.

“We are trying to raise the salaries of our Syrian staff but that would be achieved at a slow pace.

” However, the financial status of the teachers does not affect the school’s warm and comfortable atmosphere where the children are motivated to learn and improve their skills, “I’m very happy at school because it gives me the chance to play with my friends every day,” says third grade student Bianka Venkataramani.

“I like my teachers too, they make me feel that learning is fun!”

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