

Program Design: A Multicultural House System for the International School of Luxembourg

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At the International School of Luxembourg (ISL), we have a student body and faculty with great diversity and multiculturalism. We have students who are from every single continent with the exception of Antarctica. Our student population is made up of more than 40 different nationalities. Our staff population comes from all over the world as well. We have several staff members who have taught in more than one or two countries or even continents. This is the rich mixture of people who make up our school community. We as a school need to celebrate this variety. One way we can do this is through using a multicultural program called a house system, which I have designed .

General Explanation of a House System

If you have read the *Harry Potter* books by J.K. Rowling (1999) or seen the *Harry Potter* movies, you will have somewhat of an idea of what a house system is. In the books and movies, the students at Hogwarts (their school) are separated into different houses of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. The students, once they are sorted into these houses, compete with one another to earn points, generally through academics, sports, and overcoming adversity. If students make poor choices, they can also lose points for their house. The points are then used to decide who wins the House Cup at the end of the school year celebration. The design that I will be addressing uses some of these elements, but not all.

The house system has found its origins traditionally in British schools. In English boarding schools, students would be separated into different buildings for where they lived and this would become the students' house (Rowling imitated this at Hogwarts in *Harry Potter*). Within the house, students would eat, drink, and sleep with their housemates. Over time, the house system has expanded widely from British schools to areas such as Australia, India, or

Canada (places where Britain colonized), as well as several international schools (Memorial Press). It has also expanded from boarding schools to all different types of schools.

A house system nowadays, is basically a way of organizing students into groups or houses vertically across the grade levels. In each house, students are expected to work together to achieve common goals. They share a group identity, symbolized in their house name and logo. In essence, the houses create a smaller community for students and faculty to interact with each other in school. The Collegiate Way (2009) states, “It is not a building or a curriculum that makes a *house*: it is a network of member relationships, developed through long acquaintance in a stable community and regular interaction throughout the year.” In our international school, it will be quintessential for our students and faculty to use the house system to explore and learn about each other’s customs and cultures.

Description of the Design of the House System at ISL

The house system will create six different houses within the school. In each house, there will be roughly about 158 students per house from preschool to grade 12. Once the students are assigned a house, this will be their house the entire time they attend the school. When dividing the students, we will try as much as possible to include students with the same nationality in the different houses. This way, the students can have the opportunity to work with students who speak the same language or look similar to themselves. This is important for students to see or hear people with similar language or physical characteristics because then the students are able to feel represented at the school (Landsman, 2009. p. 23-26). Also, “if applicable, students are placed in the same house as siblings or parent (St. Catherine’s School).” By having the family

members in the same house, this helps to encourage support from the whole community (Lucaya International School).

However, the houses would not simply be split up by nationality. In each house, there will be a mixture of nationalities. For example, each house would be composed of students who are Swedish, Japanese, Icelandic, American, Canadian, etc. It would not be this house is the American house or the Japanese house. This way, students can learn from each other and grow in their appreciation of each other's cultures.

The faculty would also be split into the six different houses. This would be roughly about 27 members of staff per house. Again, with the diverse staff we have at school, this will provide students with the ability to see teachers from many different cultures and who speak many different languages.

In each house, the students will choose their name and design a logo. In order to support the local culture, it will be required that their name should have something to do with representing Luxembourg. Some examples of ideas would be names of castles, rivers, landmarks, or the Grand Dukes from the past or the present. When creating their logos, each house will also choose the colors to represent their house. These colors will be part of the logo and each house would be expected to wear these colors on the days when there are competitions. This will help to unify each house.

The students then would also adopt a phrase that would be the motto for each house. Some examples would be, "Perseverance will triumph," "Courage to the last," and "Loyalty and

integrity forever (Halifax Grammar School Mottoes for Glooscap, Privateers, and Royals).”

These mottoes should reflect what each house values and sees as important for themselves.

Description of the Design for Leadership

A house system requires leadership from both staff and students. Within each house, there will be many opportunities for students and faculty to take on both formal and informal leadership roles. In our school, we would have two members of the faculty who are the House Coordinators for each house (German Swiss International School). It will be their job to work with student leaders within the houses to promote and plan house events and activities. The students will get the opportunity to apply to be a formal leader. Then, based off of the applications, the faculty will work together to appoint leaders within each house. For each house, there will be a committee of student leaders. Each committee will be composed of four student leaders from the high school, three from the middle school, and three from the lower school.

Rationale: Why Would We Want a House System?

The mission statement of ISL states, “Our mission is to provide an outstanding education in a caring international environment, inspiring all our students to reach their true potential and to act as responsible participants in a global society (International School of Luxembourg).”

Although the students and faculty already do extraordinary work at ISL to meet this mission and make it a reality, using a house system will allow us to provide even more opportunities for students to realize their true potential. The house system will provide our school with a caring environment where everyone, both students and faculty, has a place and belongs.

The first sentence in our school philosophy statement says, “The International School of Luxembourg believes it is vital that we teach children the knowledge and skills they need to function successfully within both the community of our school and the multilingual, multicultural societies in which we live (International School of Luxembourg).” The house system provides an interactive, real world context for students to work together with many different cultures. It will challenge students to unite and collaborate in teams with students not only at the same grade level, but with older or younger students as well. It will provide younger students with role models to look up to in the older students and will give older students the opportunity to mentor younger students.

Our philosophy statement also singles out the following attributes as ones that we value with great importance: “inquiry, critical thinking, open-mindedness, risk-taking, creativity, and reflection (International School of Luxembourg).” The house system provides students with the opportunities to do all of these things that we say are important for the students to gain at our school.

The key elements that we want to focus on with this multicultural house system are leadership, community, compassion, and connections. We want to create communities within our school where the students can be leaders. We want our students build compassion for each other and appreciate one another for both their similarities and their differences. These communities need to be safe zones where students and faculty members can connect with and look out for one another. It is through these communities and connections that we can provide opportunities for students to engage in learning opportunities and to be successful.

With our school population and the high turnover rate of students that we have, it is important especially with new students that we create a community so that the new students can connect and feel like they belong. “Ensuring students feel comfortable in their new surroundings and making them feel part of their new environment as quickly as possible is key to avoiding this dip in (academic) performance (Garner, 2008).” As a school, we want all students to be successful. However, most students will not be successful until they are comfortable and feel like they fit in as an important part of our school. This is what a house system can provide because it automatically gives students a group where they belong (Sacred Heart College). Moving to a new school “is a big leap for many students for whom social integration is of greater concern than the academic challenge. Happy students will be successful (Garner, 2008).”

Looking at a personal example, I think will help show how what Garner says is true. This year, I had a Finnish student who started a few weeks into the year. He spoke very little English and he struggled for a very long time to feel comfortable and accepted. The parents of the student shared with me that they were very concerned because in Finland, he was very social and now in Luxembourg he felt disconnected because he didn't speak English well enough to relate with the other students. Also, in fourth grade there are no other Finnish students. If we had the house system setup, this student could have had a group where he could have either had other students at different grade levels or teachers that he could speak Finnish with.

The Learning Objectives for ISL's House System

The students will:

- Demonstrate leadership through taking on different responsibilities and roles.

- Students will have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership both formally and informally.
- Apply their communication skills with students from different grade levels and different cultures.
 - Students will have to be able to communicate with each other while working together. This will be important not only during activities, but also in the planning of activities. Students can also support each other by communicating in their native language with students who speak the same language.
- Discover how to create their own community within the school
 - It is critical for this program to be successful that students come away with a strong sense of community and belonging. With the guidance of the faculty, we want students to create a house that they are proud to be a part of and represent.
- Discover that sometimes in competition you can't win, but also that not winning does not always mean losing (Leipzig International School, LIS).
 - It is important for students to enjoy competition and realize the winning is not the ultimate goal, but working together to compete and do your best is.
- Learn to not only work for themselves, but to work for each other by creating support and compassion for one another (LIS).

- As part of a house, students will realize and learn that they have to think about more than themselves. This will help our school develop students who are not self-centered, but rather ones who want to help their community and have compassion for the human race.

Resources

The resources I have used were mainly looking at what other international or national schools are doing. This has helped me to formulate my own ideas and vision of what a house system for ISL would look like. The list is included in my references section at the end of this paper. I also was able to use a couple of articles on house systems as resources.

Last year, my school (ISL) began to look into creating a house system. However, the conversation stalled and really nothing has been done about it. I did take some ideas from what we had discussed last year and incorporated those into this paper.

Activities

The way the house system will be the most effective is to get the students involved in a variety of activities. Some of these activities can be divided between the upper school and the lower school or they can be used as a whole school. There is a difference here between these activities and ones that are done by teams for the school. The difference is “Only a few may represent the school in a team, but every single student represents their House, whether it be in academic, sporting or cultural activities (Dulwich College Beijing).” Listed below are some examples of activities which students would participate in.

House assemblies would be held from time to time, organized by the older students within the house. These provide opportunities for students to hear about upcoming house events, perform for fellow students (eg. music, drama, and dance), share about their culture, and to celebrate student sporting and academic achievement. The assemblies are a great opportunity for students to demonstrate leadership by designing the assembly and also incorporating aspects of each other's cultures. For example, students could use the assembly time to discuss and teach the other students about holidays such as Diwali, Hanukkah, or Sankta Lucia. They could demonstrate how what they do to celebrate these holidays and share the history and importance of them to their culture.

We would use the house system to also expand on our international lunch day that we have. Right now, the way this day is organized, the students often get to come in and eat lunch from a variety of countries that is made at home by each family. What we would do differently in the house system is within the houses, students could bring in food but also work together to create some type of display that they can present with information about their culture. This way there is a bit more meaning behind the international lunch than just sampling food from different countries.

At times the houses can compete against each other in a special event. For example, we could use sports day as an all school activity where the students would be split into their houses and compete in different events. Or there could be a debate contest in the upper school and in the lower school. Also, you could have a trivia quiz with students and with questions that would challenge students of all ages. Points are recorded during these events and a winner declared, but such competition would not extend beyond the life of the event itself. Unlike Harry Potter and many of the house system examples, I would see the house system for our school not necessarily

being focused around points. The goal for this system is not for the students to earn points, but rather to create a community where the students can share leadership and develop understanding of each other and their own cultures.

At other times houses might work on separate projects toward a common cause, such as fundraising. For example, different houses may raise money for separate charities throughout the year and by hosting different activities or events, to which they invited the members of the other houses as paying participants or as an audience. These special events would need to be planned, organized, and run by students from within each house, with the assistance of the faculty members. This would not be a competition among houses, but rather a way for students to realize the importance of helping out other people around the world.

In each house, the students would also create a tutoring system to help support students who are having difficulty in certain subjects (Oxsted School and Amity International School, Vasundhara). This could be with an older student helping a younger student. It could also be students across grade levels working together. Within each house, the possibility is there to have students work together to improve their overall academic progress and it provides the opportunity for students to give back to one another.

As previously stated, in each house, students will come up with their own house name, logo, and colors. They would have all of these designed on shirts. In addition to wearing these at competitions, every Friday would be house shirt day and students would represent their house and show unity by wearing their house shirt on that day (St. Andrews International School Bangkok).

Whether it is in the fields of performing arts, community service, sport, fundraising, assisting around the school, running an assembly, educating others or entertaining an audience, an effective house system provides a structure for students to take initiative, develop leadership skills and work together in smaller, multicultural groups toward a common goal. While it is certainly not the only structure that can be employed to realize these aims within the student community, it is a tried and tested one common to many national and international schools.

Assessment

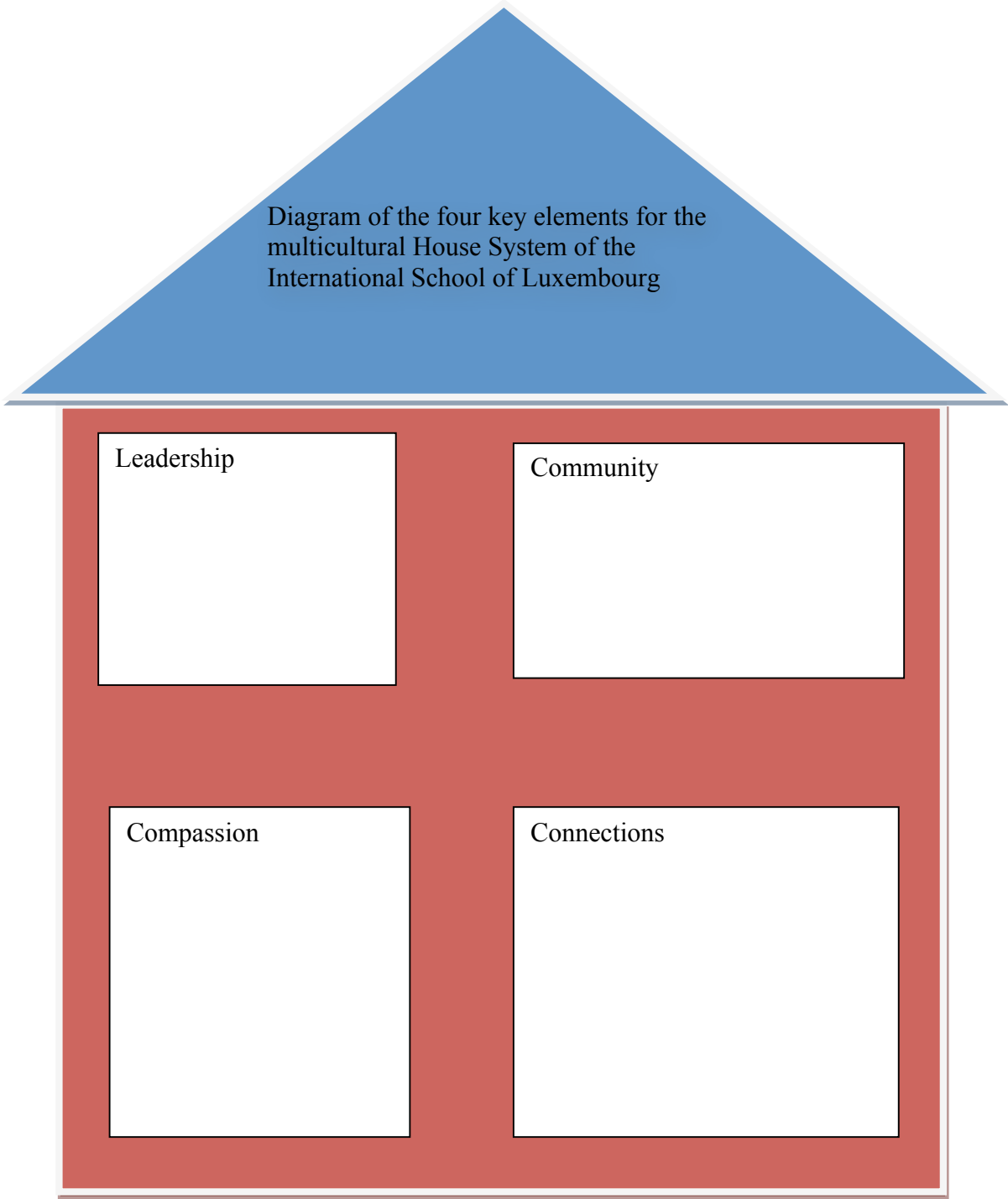
The best way to assess this program is through a survey given two times per year (one in the middle and one in the end of the year) with the students, faculty, and parents. The reason why I think this is the best way is in order for this system to be effective we would need ongoing feedback to make any changes that are necessary to best meet the needs of the students. The survey would question what is positive about the program, what can be improved, what have the students learned from the program, and what challenges does the program face.

Factors to Consider

One of the biggest factors to consider for this program to be successful is time. Students and faculty need to be given time to work together to make this program worthwhile. While this program will take away from some class time, I do think the overall benefits of this program will exceed the loss of class time. ISL is an academically demanding school with the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. However, all of a student's education should not happen merely in the classroom. The house system would allow for students to gain an education about working together and making a strong community.

Another factor will be the involvement of the faculty. I think with having the faculty involved it is important that they actively participate in order to make this successful. This way they can help guide the students in how to go about making their ideas a reality. The more faculty members are open and dedicated to this program, the better the program will be for the students. This also will give the faculty a chance to connect and form bonds with students who they normally would not work with. This can give these students someone else that they can trust and go to for support.

I have created a framework to begin the house system. However, once we begin to implement it, we would have to be flexible and make adjustments as needed. It will take some time and organization to get the students organized into the different houses, but the overall benefits of this program makes it worth the hassle of having to do these things. If our focus at our school is on the students and student learning, then I feel it is necessary for us to have the house system because it provides real world learning opportunities for students to discover new things about each other and their cultures, as well as, how to create a community of their own.



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