

international schools



# What is Round Square?

**Round Square is a global movement in education that can impact the philosophical fabric of a school. John O'Connor reports on his experience of this international association of schools.**

I have been fortunate enough to work in international education for the past 25 years and have observed how much has been done by various organisations to reinforce and support the professional operation of international schools – self-study accreditation cycles, professional development networking and a myriad of structural and governance support services. If international education were a living creature then one could argue that the skeleton is strong and the body healthy. However, I have been concerned that the heart or soul of the same creature can sometimes be less well catered for, and that whilst some schools point to religious affiliations as the framework for their ethos, many schools, including those that are multi-denominational, look for a suitable umbrella for all those excellent activities that contribute to the ethos of their schools.

After some time I came upon Round Square, more a movement in education than anything else, a vision shared by the 100 or so member schools worldwide, and a commitment to nurturing the hearts and souls of young people through a philosophy of international understanding, commitment to democratic principle, environmental stewardship, a spirit of adventure, servant leadership and hands-on experience of service to the wider community.

The organisation called Round Square has its foundation in the theories of the German educational philosopher Kurt Hahn, who believed that schools should have a greater purpose beyond preparing young people for college or university. Hahn believed that it was crucial for students to prepare for life by having them face it head on and experience it in ways that would demand courage, generosity, imagination, principle and resolution. He also saw the dangers that are inherent for those children who come from a background of relative privilege – they can go through the corridors of their schooling without ever questioning their role in society, let alone appreciating that with advantage comes the



*Round Square conference at Wellington College, UK*

responsibility to contribute to society. In short, Hahn understood that without guidance children of privilege can end up self-serving non-contributors, despite their access to world class educational opportunities.

My current school, Brookhouse School, is in Kenya, where the gap between the 'haves' (who attend Brookhouse and several other international schools in Nairobi) and the 'have-nots' could not be wider. It was therefore, for me, a perfect fit to embrace Round Square because it addressed some of the most important questions I had about our role as international educators. I wanted to be able to say that our school consciously addressed these issues and was committed to producing young graduates who not only went on to first class universities worldwide, but took with them those values that would make them meaningful and courageous contributors to society when they completed their studies.

Round Square has done just that for our school, and many others around the world. It has allowed such values to be at the forefront of everything we do at the school, at the core of every assembly and the centre of our daily Citizenship program, uniting activities as diverse as the Model United Nations and the President's Award

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Scheme under one philosophical umbrella.

Round Square member schools believe that the pillars of Hahn's insight are the ideals on which our future is built. These broad fundamentals form the IDEALS of Round Square:

- I International understanding and tolerance**
- D Democratic governance and justice**
- E Environmental stewardship**
- A Adventure, motivating self-discovery and courage**
- L Leadership, and most importantly,**
- S Service to others**

However, Round Square as a global organisation is not only about philosophical considerations. Round Square schools commit themselves to collaboration and sharing with each other and engage in major activities, locally, regionally and globally, including:

- Annual regional and international student-led conferences that celebrate cultural diversity
- Local, regional and international student exchanges
- Round Square International Service (RSIS) projects that change the lives of less privileged communities or assist threatened environments
- Regional and local service projects that connect students directly with local community partners.

It is hard to describe the power and impact that attendance at Round Square student-led conferences has on your school. It takes a few years for the impact to fully permeate the fabric of the school, but when it does the effect is profound. Students at a Round Square school sense their connectedness with the Round Square family of schools around the world. And family is probably the best word to use in relation to Round Square. For no matter how large this family grows, and it is growing quite fast now that more and more schools across the globe become aware of its existence, Round Square remains a wonderful glue that binds together young people, schools and educators who see such values as crucial to genuinely holistic education.

So, Round Square is a global association of schools which share a commitment, beyond academic merit, to personal growth and responsibility through service, challenge, adventure and international understanding. Ultimately, Round Square seeks to empower students to become the leaders and guardians of tomorrow's world... rather than the leading exploiters of tomorrow's world. Quite a lofty aim in several ways, and yet it is given



*Round Square Board President H.M. King Constantine opens the Thailand conference.*

tangible and meaningful form in the shape of Round Square. In the last few years the annual international Round Square conference has been hosted in places as diverse as Canada and India, Thailand and the UK, Kenya and South Africa, always at the campus of a member school. Such gatherings of hundreds of students from around the globe really affirm the crucial part Round Square has to play in the evolving role of international education.

And these conferences are above all else memorable because they are such fun for the students involved as they exchange ideas, cultures and views with students from all over the globe, eventually discovering that they have so much more in common than they first thought, and that collectively they have a great responsibility for shaping the future.

So for me and for my school Round Square has been a great lesson in how a philosophy can take on a tangible shape and form, and bring so much that is valuable to the intangibles of any school. Round Square feeds the soul of a school and greatly enhances its ability to face the challenges of international education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. For more information on Round Square, please visit: [www.roundsquare.org](http://www.roundsquare.org)



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