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Kenya: We Are Working Towards Democratising Success - Marie Leznicki

INTERVIEW

By Henry Wanyama

Marie Leznicki is the Vice President, marketing and brand strategy, at Bridge International Academy. The academies offer low cost education at informal settlements. He spoke to the Star's Henry Wanyama.

What is the philosophy behind Bridge International Academies?

At Bridge, we are working towards democratising success. We want every child to have access to a high-quality education, which will allow them to have the life they deserve.

When did Bridge International Academies open in Kenya, and how has been the response? The first Bridge International Academy opened in term one (January) 2009. Response has been great as evidenced by our rapid growth. Today, just five years since that first academy opened, we already have 259 academies educating approximately 80,000 pupils - and we're continuing to grow! Parents are very happy with the quality of education they are getting and the improvements they're seeing in their children. Plus all this at a price they can afford (average monthly fee is Sh560).

What is the total number of children in your academies?

Approximately 80,000 pupils attend Bridge International Academies.

What about the number of teachers, their qualification, and emoluments?

Bridge employs a little under 3,000 academy staff. They have all completed the Bridge International Training Institute and graduated at the top of their class. Bridge is very selective about who teaches at our academies. In fact, we only hire the top 14 per cent of people that we interview.

Teachers are paid at the 90th percentile, meaning they are paid better than 90 per cent of the other teachers in their communities. They also receive training and ongoing professional development.

Why do we hear reports of teachers being arrested for running your schools illegally without syllabus.

Bridge follows the national 8-4-4 curriculum and works closely with the Kenya National Examination Council to make sure all of our branches are registered as Kenya Certificate Primary Examination testing centres. Our first Class Eight will sit KCPE in 2015. We have also been involved in conversations with the Ministry of Education since 2009 on the private sector provision of basic education, working closely as a partner to the ministry in Kenya.

Where are the academies most concentrated in the country?

Bridge International Academies are present throughout most of Kenya!

How many academies do you currently run in Kenya?

As of January, there were 259 Bridge International Academies in Kenya. We plan to add approximately another hundred this year. We also plan to expand internationally to Nigeria and Uganda, and India soon after.

How much have you spent in this investment and how does the fund revolve to be enough for you to open more academies?

All academies are able to sustain themselves on their fees alone. This includes all operational costs such as teachers salaries, books, water, etc. Our model was built for scale, with plans to have very many academies from the very beginning. This way we can cost-share and ensure that our quality is very high and prices are very low.

Why is it that the academies are in Kenya alone?

Bridge was founded in Kenya because of the country's immense passion for education, quality of local talent, innovation leadership in the region - and need. With only 44 per cent of Class Eight pupils receiving a passing mark of more than 250 in KCPE, we have a national crisis in education that needs to be fixed.

Now that we have the model running smoothly in Kenya, we plan to export it to other counties, while continuing our growth in Kenya as well.

What would you say is different in your academies in terms of teaching?

Unfortunately, as the World Bank reported in 2013, teachers in government schools in Kenya are absent from class, at 47 per cent of the time, teaching an average of only two hours and 19 minutes a day. At the same time, 35 per cent of teachers couldn't pass an exam based on the curriculum they teach (African Development Bank report 2013). It's impossible for pupils to learn in these situations; no one is teaching them!

At Bridge, all teachers use computer tablets to teach. These tablets provide teachers with pre-planned lessons for every subject in every class every day following 8-4-4. This ensures that teachers have the content knowledge to teach pupils everything needed to pass KCPE and succeed in life. Being data-enabled, the tablets also monitor teacher attendance via lesson delivery, guaranteeing to parents that their children are receiving new lessons all day long, every day.

Lastly, teachers enter pupil marks into the tablet. These marks are collected from all classes across all 259 of Bridge's academies and are used to understand how pupils are performing so that future lessons may be improved. Pupils also receive a range of text books and practical learning tools, plus have homework books.

Whose syllabus do you use when teaching?

Bridge follows the national 8-4-4 syllabus.

Did you conduct any research in Kenya before you established the need for low cost education?

Yes, extensive research was done (and continues to be done) in Kenya, as well as in other developing countries. Door-to-door household studies are conducted with families as well as research and meetings with key stakeholders across all sectors of education nationally and internationally.

Under what category do your schools fall?

Bridge International Academies are low-cost private schools. They fall under APBET - the Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training.

Is there an informal schools policy in Kenya?

Yes, APBET works specifically with private schools that serve poor, marginalised populations.

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