

ONLINE ROUNDTABLE. Melissa Butler, campus director **American College in Spain**, Chris Long, principal **English International College**; Amanda Hughes, school principal at **Laude San Pedro International College**; all brought their expertise to the discussion, moderated by **SUR in English** editor, Rachel Haynes

International schools and colleges all set for a successful new year

MALAGA

SUR in English. September marks the start of a new school year, and everybody now knows that with the pandemic nothing is as it used to be and there is a great deal of uncertainty. On Monday 6 September SUR in English hosted an Education and Learning Virtual Roundtable Webinar with professionals from three international schools on the Costa del Sol, to see how they were feeling and what they had prepared for the new term.

The webinar was hosted by SUR in English editor Rachel Haynes, and the participants were Melissa Butler, the Campus Director of The American College in Spain, Chris Long, the Principal of The English International College Marbella (EIC), and Amanda Hughes, the Principal of Laude San Pedro International College, who was unable to take part in person but provided her contribution to the discussion a little later.

Covid-19 precautions

The virtual meeting began with a look at how these international schools and colleges are feeling about the Covid-19 protocols which still have to be in place, and how they have prepared for a new year of teaching.

Melissa said the American College was completely prepared for the new term, which was due to start the following day, and the measures were the same as last year. Each pupil has a designated desk and screen, and wears a mask while they are sitting there, although Melissa hopes it may soon be possible for the mask rule to be relaxed at their desks, even if masks have to be worn as they move around the campus.

Chris Long, who was joining the webinar on the first day of term at the EIC, said the atmosphere was slightly different this year because people are used to the protocols now, whereas last year they were something completely new. He said people understand that the rules are necessary, although he too hopes that it might be possible for the requirement for masks in the classroom and student bubbles to be lifted.

At Laude, Amanda said, where the new school year had already begun, parents had been sent a Welcome document setting out all the proce-



A group of students listen to their teacher's explanations. SUR

dures that students, staff and families have to follow, and new families had received a very clear guide to show them where they enter the school and how to connect with the academic team, so that everyone feels supported.

All three said they were looking forward to this new school year and were excited about being able to do more extra-curricular activities this year. There is a sense that things are becoming a little more normal, and all the schools are placing a strong focus on activities relating to the environment and outdoor pursuits.

Nerves and excitement

Rachel asked about the atmosphere surrounding the start of term, and Chris Long said that on that first day it was really nice. "There are a lot of nerves today, but also a lot of positivity," he said. "There's a feeling of excitement about everything that lies ahead, and it is so nice to have them all back again."

Melissa Butler said she was expecting a lot of nerves when term began the following day and wasn't sure whether there would be much excitement, and if there was it would probably be more among the par-

Teachers and pupils are feeling excited and optimistic about the start of the new school year and feel that things are finally beginning to get back to something resembling normality. Here, three head teachers talk to SUR in English about how their schools have coped so far, what they are looking forward to this year and how proud they are of their students

ents than the pupils. Entry on the first day would be staggered, she said, so the new students can be welcomed warmly, and a 'class buddy' system would be in place for a couple of weeks, whereby older pupils befriend new ones and help them to become accustomed to their new environment. She said the staff were looking forward to the new term and seeing the children again. "We're missing them," she said.

At Laude, Amanda Hughes said the school's philosophy is based on their Three Pillars: that the children are Safe, Happy and Learning. "The safety and happiness of students, staff and families are so important at the start of any year when children meet new teachers, new friends etc. To do this during a pandemic means that we all have to take time to get to know each other. Interestingly though, one thing we noticed last year was that the children thrive on their school routines. They enjoyed the comfort of familiarity and continuity after so much change and uncertainty," she explained.

More extra-curricular activities this year

As mentioned earlier, all the schools

are looking forward to being able to do more extra-curricular activities and many of these have an environmental focus.

Chris Long pointed out that this is an important year for environmental matters, with the COP26 summit in Glasgow coming up, and that these activities will help to build a sense of community among the students. Whereas before the pandemic pupils at the EIC had had the chance to travel abroad, the restrictions made the school realise that they have fantastic local facilities which they have never really used. "The beach is an excellent resource," he said, "and we also have woods nearby which we have never used much. We will be doing much more local field work now".

Melissa Butler agreed. Like those at the EIC, students at the American College will be taking part in beach clean-ups and the school is keen to offer scuba-diving as a new extra curricular activity. "We have agreements with some local clubs, and scuba-diving can also be linked with beach clean-ups," she explained. She also emphasised that these after-school activities bring the students together, and they feel part of whatever they are doing.

Amanda Hughes is also enthusiastic about the extracurricular activities this year. "They give the students the opportunity to follow their passions, learn new skills, develop new friendships and practise communication in a variety of ways," she explained. "When we restarted our extracurricular activities this year we could see how much the children and families appreciated this additional service".

While health experts stress the benefits of outdoor activities during the pandemic, they are by no means the only ones to be offered by these schools this year.

Students at the EIC have a "rich programme of activities," said Chris Long, including sports, debating, coding and performing arts. "We put a show on every year and invite parents and members of the community to come and see it, and the preparation for that begins with choir, singing classes, drama etc".

Melissa Butler said that as well as all the extra activities which are being introduced this year, she is looking forward to students at the American College being able to go on trips around the area to places such as Granada and Ronda, and discover the local culture, as many of them are unaware of it. The pupils will also have the opportunity to try new things, with guest speakers on matters such as survival, kickboxing and other options. "We hope this will encourage more interaction and the students will enjoy spending time together," she said.

Size and support

The American College of Spain, the English International College and Laude San Pedro International College are all very different. The American College prepares students for the American university system; many students from the EIC go on to universities in the UK and Laude is based upon the English National Curriculum with an option to study within the Spanish system from the age of 12, but they are all small educational centres and they believe this helps the rapport between pupils and teachers and between students of all ages, which means there is plenty of support, something that is needed



Melissa Butler Campus director, American College in Spain

"Every student has a designated desk and screen and wears a mask while sitting there, but I hope the mask rule will be relaxed soon"

"The extra-curricular activities bring students together and they feel part of whatever they are doing"

"We will maintain some online teaching methods but face-to-face is better for teachers and students"



Chris Long Principal, English International College

"It feels a bit different this year because everyone is used to the protocols, whereas last year it was all something new"

"We realised that we have fantastic local facilities for extra-curricular activities which we have never really used"

"There are some benefits to technology and it's good to know the hybrid system is there if we need it"



Amanda Hughes Principal, Laude San Pedro International College

"All parents were sent a Welcome Document setting out the procedures and new families received a very clear guide"

"The activities give the children the chance to follow their passions and develop new friendships"

"I am so happy that we are back on campus and will continue to work alongside our outstanding team"

after the difficulties of the pandemic.

What will stay?

Asked whether the schools will be continuing with any of the new technologies which had to be introduced as a result of the pandemic, Melissa said some of the online teaching methods will be continued, although the American College would prefer face-to-face teaching as much as possible because the hybrid approach is harder for teachers and not as beneficial for students.

Chris Long pointed out that teachers had had to upskill very quickly because of the pandemic, and that there are some benefits such as the ease of holding meetings and sending information online, but he too feels that although the hybrid method of teaching is good, he would prefer a total in-class system because it is less disruptive. "However," he said, "it's good to know that that system is there if we need it".

Despite all the difficulties and problems faced by school pupils last year, many of them did well in their exams. Chris Long says the EIC's GCSE and A-level students had been fantastic, even though so many things were different. For example, they had to wear masks to do the exams, and that raised the question was it fair for them to have to do exams at all if they had to wear masks, and the whole approach to education throughout the whole year had been different. "They have been remarkable and they deserved to do well," he said.

Melissa Butler explained that the American system is different as the exams take place all through the year, and are sent from and graded by the USA. "It's very good, but it's a different system," she said, "and we're lucky we can do that."

And Amanda Hughes summed everything up nicely: "I feel hugely proud of and happy for our graduates who have achieved wonderful exam results. I am really excited to see the school continue to grow and develop academically for the children. I am so happy that we are back on campus and that we will continue work alongside the outstanding team of colleagues that we have at school," she said.



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