

Leading Through COVID-19

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PRINCIPAL OF MAPLE LEAF INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL – WUHAN

by

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Maple Leaf had been successfully operating British Columbia Offshore Schools in China for 25 years, and has endured its fair share of obstacles.

No past experience, however, would challenge school leaders like COVID-19. The entire world of education was impacted by COVID-19, but that impact was first felt in Wuhan, and the first Canadian teachers to bear its consequences were BC teachers at Maple Leaf Wuhan.

Maple Leaf International School – Wuhan opened its doors in 2007 and by the 2019/2020 school year there were 1,500 BC students enrolled in grade 10–12, and more than 60 BC teachers. In February 2020, many staff left the country to enjoy their month-long Chinese New Year holiday. The four-week vacation turned into an accidental diaspora – to this day many of those teachers have not been able to return. When China closed its borders in March 2020, only eleven BC teachers remained in Wuhan. They endured a 79-day quarantine. They lived not knowing what the future would hold, but knowing that all the hospitals were full and that a massive hospital was being built to accommodate the ever-increasing number of COVID-19 patients. The kindness of Chinese neighbours kept them sane, and kept them supplied with food and resources.

In the midst of it all, over the course of a week in February, teachers learned to use an online learning platform. The next week, students learned the platform and teachers collaborated to upload lessons and resources. On March 1, 2020, full time classes resumed via the online platform. The year was completed with remote learning.

In March of 2020 – in the middle of the city's quarantine – Michael Brown accepted a position as Principal of Wuhan Maple Leaf High School. He began his tenure in August of 2020, shortly after the lockdown was lifted.

JACKIE KERSEY: Michael, you returned to China in the middle of a pandemic in February of 2020. In March you accepted the Principalship in Wuhan. What was going through your mind at that time? (*What was he thinking!?*)



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MICHAEL BROWN: I returned to Weifang – the city where I was working in China – before the China border closed. I had decided to look for new opportunities and discovered there was a BC school in Wuhan looking for a Principal. I threw my hat in the ring. In retrospect I don't think there were too many hats in that particular ring at that time (*laughs*).

JK: *Why Wuhan?*

MB: My family asked the same question. My major is history. The historian in me was curious as to what this experience would be like – being there in that moment so soon after the 79-day lockdown. Another reason was my wife and I, after retirement, have always wanted to donate our time to places that need support. I thought Wuhan could be a precursor to this. I imagined it would be a tough sell to get educators there.

JK: *Were you not concerned about COVID-19?*

MB: No. I thought that if there was a place where officials would want to prevent major outbreaks it would be Wuhan. When I arrived, the office staff lauded me as a hero. I should have run with that! However, I knew I would be safe.

JK: *You mentioned the office staff. Was there teaching staff there when you arrived?*

MB: We only had eleven teaching staff on the ground, folks who did not make it out or who chose to stay during the pandemic.

JK: *How do you feel this experience impacted them?*

MB: It had a huge impact. Imagine being stuck in the middle of a crisis in a country where you don't know the language, facing a disease that no one has ever

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experienced before. I would be surprised if anyone came out of that without some sort of PTSD. They are the real heroes.

JK: *How so?*

MB: I get a little verklempt talking about this. When I arrived, there was a surprise welcome party held in the office. These teachers and their families who had just been through a hellish experience were so inviting, so gracious, and so concerned about my wellbeing, it was overwhelming.

JK: *So, staff returned to work for the 2020/2021 school year on August 15 with classes beginning on September 1?*

MB: Correct. About 1,400 students showed up ready to attend in-person classes. We had eleven teachers and one administrator on the ground, and two admin out-of-country with about fifty teachers instructing remotely.

JK: *Logistically that must have been challenging.*

MB: Absolutely. We had two weeks to set up cameras and microphones in classrooms, find and train teacher assistants to supervise online courses, train newly hired staff, and distribute learning resources. It was a tall order, and if not for our Chinese partners we would have been in a real pickle. They were amazing. They secured TAs from local universities, and ensured all

had a criminal record check. I was part of the training. They were all aspiring educators. It was invigorating. The tech folks were able to set up the cameras and mics and by September 1 we were good-to-go. The admin team who was not on the ground looked after the training of new staff.

JK: So, what was September 1 like?

MB: It was seamless... I'm kidding! It was bedlam. We had the foundations set up, but the school's bandwidth could not manage the traffic. We had teachers not being able to connect to their classrooms, some of our TAs were overwhelmed. I was running around just trying to problem solve with the help of the teachers on the ground. The tech guy was amazing, to this day I don't know how he managed. As the week progressed, things got better, but did not normalize until around mid-October.

JK: And what do you mean by 'normalize'?

MB: Great question. We became accustomed to the 'new normal'. We accepted the fact most teachers would remain teaching from their home countries into the second semester. We did try to normalize in the sense that we focused Pro-D on non-COVID-19 issues. We tried to find ways to do staff events that included our on-line teachers, for example events like escape rooms were organized to promote community. However, there was nothing 'normal' about the 2020-21 school year.

JK: So, what did you learn from this experience?

MB: The biggest thing I took away from the experience was not something I learned, it was the cementing of something I knew. Educators are resilient and passionate. When I look back, I can't believe what the staff accomplished. The teachers who were there

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in August had gone through the entire Wuhan ordeal and were working under stressful conditions, while many other teachers started their day at midnight. Some single parents were trying to work through the night, and child mind during the day. Add the anxiety caused by trying to obtain the proper documentation to get back to Wuhan, and then having to endure a quarantine of up to five weeks. It took its toll, there's no sugar coating it; teaching is stressful, and this took it to another level.

JK: Did you consider the school year a success?

MB: Absolutely. When I look back it was the most adversity-filled, yet successful year in my career. A staff member once said we were "building the plane while flying it". That struck a chord with me. We landed the damn plane. The graduation rate was 98%. Watching those graduates cross that stage is something I will never forget. All staff on campus attended. The students presented each teacher with a bouquet of flowers. The genuine gratitude and concern the students and teachers had for each other was written on their faces. The entire experience affirmed for me that educators are a special breed.

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