

# SCHOOL AS A SAFE HAVEN: SUPPORTING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES AFFECTED BY WAR IN UKRAINE

BY ADAM BEESON

*"We support peace and a world that cares to give rather than take. We are allied to all those who feel the quiet whispering of their conscience telling them to replace conflict with confidence and crisis with hope."*

– Paul McLean, Headmaster at  
The American International School-Salzburg

Like many international educators, the news of Russia's invasion of Ukraine elicited my memories of and concern for the Russian and Ukrainian students and colleagues that I have had the privilege of working alongside over the course of my career.

For several years, I was a resident assistant and teacher at The American International School-Salzburg, an intentionally small college-preparatory boarding school in Austria that each year welcomes a maximum of 100 secondary school students of approximately 25 nationalities. In Salzburg, I had witnessed, at the time of the Crimean Crisis in 2014, how quickly support in this unique community of learners was provided for and amongst students whose passport countries were being affected by the annexation.

Fast-forward eight years, and it was no surprise to me that, just hours after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I received a Statement from the Headmaster at AIS-Salzburg, Paul McLean. The statement begins as follows:

"The community of the American International School-Salzburg is a community defined by openness, acceptance of diversity and the appropriate college-preparatory education of young people from all over the world. For 46 years, our staff and faculty have welcomed students from all nations, all cultures and any belief systems. We welcome them with open arms and provide them with a safe place to live, to grow, to develop and to learn. We know them almost as well as their parents because we learn together, live together, take our meals together and trust each other with our health, security and happiness. We are one and many; different and similar; unique and diverse."

"The critically-essential values that underlie the remarkable transformation of a group of strangers from five continents into a community of mutually-respectful citizens are those that are essential in any family and in any community that identifies and works together toward a legitimate and worthy goal. They include acceptance of diversity and a willingness to subdue one's personal desires in order to further the interests of all; supporting the concept of a greater good and a more inclusive and mutually-caring society. They promote respect to all community members in their development of confidence and maturity while realizing their unique potential as individuals and global citizens."



## Supporting School Communities During War

In an effort to understand how international schools are supporting the wellbeing of Russian and Ukrainian students and families, I reached out to AIS-Salzburg to learn more about the current situation at the school and the actions they have taken since the invasion.

"We presently have eight students from Ukraine; nearly all of them from Kyiv or the immediate area around Kyiv," McLean told me. "One of them is from Kharkiv. Two of the students' parents have moved to the western part of Ukraine and several have notified me that they are presently safe."

"I have been in contact with them throughout the last five days and we have, of course, suspended any tuition payments, offered their children accommodation over the spring break, and are looking into requests from them to assist their children in getting their visas extended so as to stay in Austria over the summer as well."

"There are four or five students directly from Russia at the school. I have also been in direct written contact with all of the families, primarily in order to reassure them that their children will not be singled out for blame or experience any other form of mistreatment here at the school."

"There has been a bit of unnecessary tweeting going on online, but overall, these students and their parents are as shocked and regretful about the invasion as anyone else. We have pledged our support to them as well, although we have cut all formal agreements with agents and educational representatives in Russia."

### School-Wide Effort to Support Displaced Populations

In addition to caring for members of the school community affected by the invasion, students and teachers at AIS-Salzburg are taking action to support the wider population fleeing war in Ukraine.

"Although everyone is more than busy with their daily educational duties, we are putting together a number of efforts to directly support those who have been displaced and have abandoned their homes in a search for peace and security," McLean said. These efforts include:

1. Collecting all dried and canned food from the school's kitchen storage for shipment to a local Polish Church organization, which is transporting goods directly to the Polish-Ukrainian border. The school is emptying shelves and vending machines to contribute to this effort.
2. The school has rounded up all extra clothing, bedding, blankets, including extra physical education uniforms (t-shirts, sweat pants, hoodies, and shorts) and are shipping these forward.
3. AIS-Salzburg has declared itself a gathering point for any and all local donations and will see to their delivery into the hands of those who can reliably deliver it to the point of need.
4. The school has purchased a large number of first aid medical cases and will be sending these forward as well.

5. All members of the school staff have been invited to donate funds, with the school administration committed to doubling the amount, while making general school donations of funds as well.

6. The AIS-Salzburg Student Council will be discussing and deciding upon means to general funds and materials for direct assistance to those in need.

7. The school has offered the use of the school vans for transport to the Polish border.

"Due to the immediate need of those suffering because of the Russian Army's invasion of Ukraine, our efforts are a little bit scattered at the moment," McLean said, "but we expect to be able to focus these initiatives very soon and get badly-needed materials on the road and to the border where over 300,000 women and children primarily, need immediate assistance."

McLean noted that those who are able to assist the school in these efforts, or who have further ideas about how the school can provide the assistance required by this emergency, should contact AIS-Salzburg, and that monetary donations to support those in crisis can be made to Nachbar in Not (Ukraine Hilfe).

### Replacing Conflict with Confidence, Crisis with Hope

Actively supporting refugees of war is one way AIS-Salzburg is harnessing the energy of the moment to create a sense of hope within the school community. In his February 24, 2022 Statement from the Headmaster, McLean also reinforces the ways in which the school's mission and beliefs support a more peaceful path forward:

"These same values also reject violence, prejudice, discrimination and abuse. They abhor entitlement and injustice and stand strongly in opposition to all forms of illegitimate advantage and disregard for the truth. They provide a robust and justified opposition to those who would take advantage and gain benefit at the expense of others as well as those who would equate right with strength and power..."

"We stand firmly on the side of responsible actions, thoughtful consideration and positive futures. Our investments are in knowledge, healthy activity, kindness and creativity. We support peace and a world that cares to give rather than take. We are allied to all those who feel the quiet whispering of their conscience telling them to replace conflict with confidence and crisis with hope."

***Adam Beeson is copy editor for Wellbeing in International Schools Magazine. He has more than a decade of international school teaching and leadership experience in the United States, Austria and Costa Rica. Connect with Adam on [LinkedIn](#).***

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