



CONCISE RESEARCH SUMMARY

The Primary Years Programme Field Study

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Abstract

This investigation of the authorization and implementation process of the IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) in Georgia schools, which combines an online survey with in-depth case studies, was conducted to provide insights that might improve the IBO's work and guide the efforts of schools seeking to offer the PYP. With regard to how schools move from interested to candidate to authorized PYP status, it was found that district-level support was important, and that schools strengthened teacher and parent buy-in by networking with other IB schools, sending teachers to IB workshops, and meeting with various stakeholder groups. With regard to PYP implementation, this study identifies six successful strategies: whole-school immersion, collaborative planning, continuous training, availability of resources, strategies to promote community involvement, and support from the school leadership. Challenges for implementation were limited resources, integration of state standards with the PYP curriculum, the trans-disciplinary nature of the programme, and district and state expectations. Recommendations from schools for improving IB support, particularly during the authorization process, include systematic networking with authorized schools, additional consultative support, more training for special area teachers, and better communication regarding feedback on applications and notification of the outcome of authorization visits.

Summary

In the second half of 2008, an investigation of the authorization and implementation process of the IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) in Georgia schools was conducted by the Education Policy and Evaluation Center (EPEC) in the College of Education at the University of Georgia, in order to provide useful insights that might improve the IBO's work and guide the efforts of schools seeking to offer the PYP. The study sought to investigate, first, how schools move from interested to candidate to authorized status, by exploring such aspects as how they learn about and follow IB regulations, who organizes the tasks necessary for authorization, how they advertise IB to the community, and how they meet IB and state or local standards. Second, the study researched how the programme is implemented, by looking at successful strategies, challenges, support provided by the IB, and other actions taken by schools.

For this study, researchers used a mixed methods approach. An online survey of 561 administrators and teachers at sixteen Georgia schools shed light on their perceptions and experiences related to PYP authorization and implementation, while case studies at three of these schools helped to gain a deeper understanding of school practices and their alignment with IB guidelines. The three schools selected – Fair Street Elementary in Gainesville, the International Community School in Atlanta, and Clubview Elementary in Columbus – represent different sizes and types of school systems, as well as different demographic compositions. At these schools, a total of 13 interviews were conducted with district-level and school-level administrators, 12 focus groups were held with teachers and parents; 16 classroom observations and various document reviews also took place. Data was analyzed across all subsections of the authorization process (the feasibility study, trial implementation, the IB team visit, challenges faced) and all areas of current implementation (philosophy, organization, curriculum, students and their families, overall implementation).

How does a school move from interested to candidate to authorized status?

Findings related to this first question indicate that issues related to district-mandated school reorganization, changes in the surrounding neighborhood and wanting to improve the reputation of the school are primary reasons behind a school's decision to implement the PYP. Important initial steps schools took to meet IB standards included networking with other IB schools, sending teachers to IB workshops, meeting with various stakeholder groups, applying for charter school status, and seeking additional funds.

Although the data indicates that teacher buy-in initially presented at least some challenge to the authorization process, schools managed to boost teachers' support for the PYP primarily by networking with other IB schools and sending teachers to IB workshops. Teachers also received a great deal of support from school-level administrators and the IB-PYP coordinator, who were instrumental in organizing the PYP authorization process. By spearheading a school vision, developing a plan of action, and communicating it, these school leaders boosted understanding of the PYP, strengthened teachers' commitment and collaboration, and fostered the use of new

teaching strategies. With regard to parent buy-in, 46% of survey respondents reported that it was challenging to at least some extent during the authorization process; school strategies to establish the legitimacy of the PYP among families and the local community included offering IB information sessions, involving parents in the preparation of IB reports and events, and partnering with institutions such as local churches, hospitals and non-profit organizations.

During the authorization process, alignment between the PYP and the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS), which are mandatory, was considered challenging to some extent by a majority of survey respondents (65.2%). Although the case study data reveals that schools have made progress in integrating the PYP curriculum with GPS standards, some standards in the state curriculum still do not fit well with the IB units and are taught separately. District-level support was considered to be important during the authorization process; reported areas of support include providing full-time faculty positions (i.e., PYP coordinators), funding workshops, and granting charter school status or allowing increased autonomy. The three case study schools are charters, which gives them some latitude for implementing district requirements which may not be consistent with the IB philosophy.

How is the PYP implemented?

Findings related to how the PYP is implemented identify six categories of successful strategies, as well as four challenging areas. The first successful strategy, “whole school immersion,” refers to the attempt to surround students and teachers with the PYP by making it visible in the school and promoting the IB philosophy throughout the school day, as well as ensuring that all special areas teachers also integrate the IB units in their instructional plans. Secondly, collaborative planning, through both grade-level meetings and meetings across grade levels, together with sufficient planning time were frequently cited by respondents as one of the most successful implementation strategies. Third, continuous training, ranging from IB workshops and visits to other schools to onsite weekly professional development meetings were considered vital.

The availability of resources to purchase materials to support each IB unit and the existence of a media center were also considered essential for successful implementation. Strategies to promote family and community involvement during the authorization process have also tended to go beyond traditional outreach methods such as newsletters and websites; case study schools encouraged widespread participation by inviting everyone to all School Council and PTA meetings, and making special efforts to communicate with parents in their native languages when necessary. Finally, all stakeholders and survey respondents viewed strong support for IB by the school leadership as a key factor for successful implementation. The PYP coordinator was identified as the most important person for keeping teachers on task and maintaining the overall focus on IB goals. Indeed, one case study school with a part-time PYP coordinator lagged behind those with full-time coordinators in terms of progress towards transdisciplinary teaching and use of the inquiry method.

Challenges for PYP implementation were consistently clustered in four areas: limited resources, integration of GPS and the PYP curriculum, the transdisciplinary nature of the programme, and district and state expectations. Limited resources were mentioned most often, and referred to

insufficient time for such things as planning and whole-class instruction, a lack of adequate materials to support IB units, and even a lack of space for displaying work and carrying out projects. The majority of schools struggled with integrating the Georgia standards, which are content-specific and rigid, with the IB, which is concept-focused and fluid. Teachers have thus found it challenging to teach the GPS facts and dates while honoring the global focus of IB, although most agree that their schools have developed strategies to try to accommodate both. Schools also reported difficulties achieving IB's trans-disciplinary instruction, and found math the most challenging subject to integrate. Finally, although the case study schools are charters and thus district expectations have not been very challenging, schools have expressed concern that these could become a problem in the future, particularly initiatives for school improvement or report card requirements.

Areas of support from IB and recommendations for improvement

With regard to the authorization process, the majority of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that IB provided support during the feasibility study (87.5%), the trial implementation (80.5%), and the IB team visit (74.5%). They also found the IB visit team's report particularly helpful and supportive. While implementing the PYP, administrators and PYP coordinators, who have the most direct contact with IB, reported knowing where to get answers from the organization. Teachers consider IB workshops and training opportunities as a useful form of support. The IB website is also seen by some as a source of support, but others consider the curriculum resources inadequate.

During the authorization process, most teachers and administrators acknowledged that learning about IB is a process they must go through mainly on their own; nonetheless, schools consistently would like more support in four areas. Firstly, they suggest that IB facilitate systematic networking, in order for pre-candidate and candidate schools to connect with authorized schools. Secondly, numerous interviewees requested more time with the IB consultant and more feedback during the period between Application A and Application B. Some have expressed the need for more help prior to Application A, and others, who have additional funds for hiring consultants, would like to see a list of consultants/experts who could be hired for a specific area, and who would be familiar with local requirements. Thirdly, more training opportunities for special area teachers was recommended. Finally, schools mentioned the need for better communication regarding feedback on applications, particularly Application B, and notification of the outcome of the IB authorization visit.

This summary was developed by the IB Research Department. For more information about IB research, e-mail the IB Research Department at ibru@ibo.org.