

CREATED TO BE IB

From writing its handbook to unit planning to assessing students, District of Columbia International School aims to follow IB principles and philosophy.

Rarely does one school establish another school. However, five language immersion charter elementary schools in Washington, DC, worked together to found District of Columbia International (DCI) School in 2014. Its purpose was to offer the Middle Years Programme (MYP) and Diploma Programme (DP) in order to best serve the five schools' students as they progressed in their education.

"The IB is the cultural centre of the school," says Dean Harris, the MYP coordinator.

That is exactly how Washington Yu Ying (which offers the Primary Years Programme), Mundo Verde, DC Bilingual, Latin American Bilingual Montessori and Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter Schools envisioned DCI.

Here is the way that DCI's website describes the thinking behind its establishment: "The Member Schools have philosophical and pedagogical frameworks in common that facilitate achievement and success: all five offer language immersion to their students in key world languages; all implement a curriculum framework that is based on inquiry and internationalism; and all have a focus on sustainability and social justice. Finally, they are all high-performing charters with a history of successful fiscal and educational practices." Parents at all the schools had asked for a way for their children to continue their education journey and supported the establishment of DCI.

DCI was authorized to offer the MYP in 2016 and the DP this past spring. The IB learner profile, however, has been used by the school from the beginning to organize its faculty and family handbooks and guide policies.

District of Columbia International School (public charter): 6th through 11th grade (12th grade to be added in fall 2019)

First offered the Middle Years Programme:
2016

Total number of students:
870

Middle Years Programme coordinator:
Dean Harris

Principal:
Simon Rodberg

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—DEAN HARRIS, MIDDLE YEARS PROGRAMME COORDINATOR, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

For instance, academic honesty and the code of conduct are in the family handbook section titled “Principled;” DCI’s approaches to teaching and learning are explained in the “Inquirers” section and reporting and home-school communication policies and procedures are included in “Communicators.”

Every day at DCI, middle school students study English, math and Spanish, French or Chinese. On alternating days, students take electives and other core courses such as science, physical education, arts, societies and design. Electives and core courses are offered in Spanish, French or Chinese, in addition to English. Unit planning is designed to encourage inquiry. For 9th and 10th grade, critical thinking and research are taught in what Harris describes as “almost a junior Theory of Knowledge class.”

“We want to have the IB at the core of everything we are,” Harris says. As part of its wholehearted application of IB principles and philosophy, DCI embraced the idea of using eAssessment. The school wanted to do everything it could to offer students the MYP Certificate; it also needed a valid, reliable test for science after all the data from DC Public Schools’ science testing were thrown out for this school year. In addition to sciences, the school chose the Individuals and societies eAssessment exam for its students.

Having taken a professional development workshop on eAssessment, Harris knew that the exams would be engaging for students and would help the school make sure “we were on the right track.” He wrote a blog post for the IB as he anticipated the school’s participation for the first time this school year, saying, “We are looking forward to adding the MYP on-screen examinations to help us to make judgments about student achievement in these

important disciplines that are part of the IB’s broad and balanced approach to education. We will be able to assess our students in Individuals and societies subjects, and compare their progress with peers in IB World Schools around the world. We plan to use school-level results to us make judgments about the effectiveness of Sciences and Individuals and societies courses offered at our school.” Data packet testing was done in March.

Technical issues were discovered after the data packet testing, much to DCI’s disappointment. While the school tried to find a workaround, in the end it was decided to wait until 2019 to begin eAssessment.

Meanwhile, DCI continues to receive positive feedback about the MYP from parents, students and teachers. “Our families love the MYP and IB - it is one of the reasons that we are sought out or that children attend the feeder schools,” Harris says. “Similarly, our teachers seek us out because we are an IB public charter school.”

At the end of the 2017-2018 school year, DCI held a showcase of students’ personal projects, which showed parents the benefits of the MYP. One parent who came had not been fully convinced of the value of the MYP, although her son appreciated it. That day, she was overwhelmed by what her son had done on his own for his personal project. “This is the pinnacle of learning,” she told Harris. “This is something I didn’t get to do until later in life.” She also made a point of talking to every member of the school’s leadership team about her change of heart.

Families who want their child to attend District of Columbia International School apply online via the My School DC Common Lottery. The lottery process is used to apply to all public charter schools in Washington, DC. Students are matched with schools based on several factors, including the number of spaces at each school; sibling and other preferences; and each student’s choices. Students who have attended any of DCI’s five member schools receive a preference to attend DCI.

