



## THE EVOLUTION OF LAMAR HIGH SCHOOL

Lamar High School has used the IB Diploma Programme (DP) to help all its students work toward reaching their highest academic abilities. And they are achieving that goal: In May 2018, the school administered 6,591 DP exams.

Houston's Mirabeau B. Lamar Senior High School has been an IB World School since 1982, when it was authorized to offer the Diploma Programme (DP). In the 36 years since then, the scope of its DP has evolved, and that evolution has altered the shape of the school.

When former principal James McSwain (who was promoted to area superintendent during the summer of 2018) came to Lamar in 1997, only 85 students in the 2,600-strong student body were participating in the DP. None were of minority background or came from low-income households, McSwain remembers. "That was one of my first challenges."

Lamar was "very stratified by race and socioeconomic status," he says, and his mission became to change that separation of students by race and economic status.

The first step was to reduce the distinction between levels of curriculum, and becoming authorized to offer the Middle Years Programme (MYP) played a critical role. "We decided that was the vehicle that would help us change the culture of our school. It had everything we needed," McSwain says. "It is not a curriculum—it is pedagogical methods, it is standards, it is inclusion, it is international-mindedness and it is service."

Lamar received its MYP authorization in 2003 and implemented a whole-school model. "We were ending exclusiveness," McSwain explains. "Every [9th- and 10th-grade] student was MYP, and every teacher was trained. That began to help us change the entire school."

In addition to making the MYP model, philosophy and processes the default methodology for all 9th- and 10th-grade classes, Lamar took it a step further by requiring that all non-DP 11th- and 12th-grade classes—the so-called recommended classes—be taught using MYP methodology. Those teachers are trained in MYP methodology. In the recommended English course, the school built in a 2,500-word extended essay, shortened versions of the literary analysis papers and Socratic seminars. The MYP pedagogical model also is applied to all elective courses, such as music, agriculture and art. All of those teachers also are trained to implement the MYP model.

**Lamar High School  
(public): Grades 9-12**

**First offered the Diploma  
Programme (DP):  
1982**

**Total number of students:  
3,283**

**Area superintendent and  
former principal:  
James McSwain**

— “ —  
*If you're making it exclusive,  
you're not fulfilling the IB  
mission.*

— ” —  
—JAMES MCSWAIN



The personal project (a core component of the MYP) is completed by all 10th-grade students, including students with special needs, “because it’s all kids, not just some,” McSwain says.

By 2007, the school had changed the application process for the DP from “Tell us why we should allow you to be in our top program” to “Our top program is the default. Tell us why you should not be part of it.” Students who say they can’t handle the DP are strongly encouraged to try and to take DP courses. “We’re going to push you if we think you’re capable,” McSwain says.

Opening the DP to all students makes sense to McSwain for several reasons. “In my personal opinion, if you’re making it exclusive, you’re not fulfilling the IB mission,” he says. “If you want to teach international-mindedness and service, it has to be for the entire school. It’s good practice for all students at all levels.”

Having worked hard to make the DP accessible to all students, Lamar now encourages them to take advantage of that opportunity. School alumni who have attended universities such as Harvard, Yale and Emory attest to how well the DP prepares students for higher education. In addition, the state provides a financial incentive for participating in the DP: All state universities give at least 24 credit hours to students who receive at least a 4 on their exams and are awarded the IB diploma. “Yes, this is a lot of work right now, but so is a full year of college,” McSwain says. “But you save money.”

---

Being an IB World School that offers the Diploma Programme to all students has made Lamar High School more purposeful about what it does. “We have a much more clearly defined mission and direction,” says former principal James McSwain. The school tells new teachers they will work harder than anywhere else they have ever been, but he adds, “it’s good work and...you get to see kids do things they wouldn’t otherwise do.”

---

Lamar’s Student Service Center provides support to students through social services, financial aid, one-on-one time with teachers and mentoring. “We talk about them individually to see what their needs are, what is keeping them from being successful,” says Aida Tello, the center’s director. “So we set up treatment or an individual plan to...address their needs.”

Lamar recognizes that mentoring is especially critical for many students who come from minority backgrounds or low-income households. “We have a lot of really bright, capable kids who have no one at home who’s ever been to college. They don’t know anyone who’s ever worked as a professional,” McSwain says. “So that’s where the mentors are extremely important.” The school recruits as many mentors who are female or of a minority background as possible, the former principal says, so these students “can look at somebody who looks like me, talks like me, came from the same background I’ve come from, and look at them. Look at what they did.”

Approximately half of Lamar’s students qualify as low-income; 36.5 percent are Hispanic, 31.6 percent are African American, 24.5 percent are white, 5.1 percent are Asian, 0.5 percent are Native American, 0.1 percent are Pacific Islander and 1.8 percent are biracial or multiracial.

Lamar has also taken a step to engage all students with the IB by “flipping” the classroom. Teachers record 10- to 12-minute chunks of direct instruction. Students watch the presentation online at home (Lamar has a program through Sprint Communications that provides personal hotspot Internet access to any low-income student,) and fill in a graphic organizer, where they can note what they do not understand. They can watch the presentation repeatedly to help clarify, and parents can watch with them. Students then come back to class and work with the teacher to use the information. This approach “raises the bar for everybody. But it really raises the level of performance for struggling kids,” McSwain says.

The school saw evidence of improvement during the early 2000s when it reviewed results of a state test that measured the gap between its highest-performing and lowest-performing groups of students. All groups improved for more than a decade, and the academic achievement gap between the two groups closed by about 90 percent.

“To me, this is an equity issue for our kids because now [the underserved student thinks], ‘I don’t perceive myself as dumb,’” McSwain says. “You combine that with some things like mentoring and you end up with kids who can do a whole lot more than they originally thought they could.”

By introducing the MYP, making the IB the default pathway and creating additional support services, Lamar has provided access to a world-class education and shrunk the participation gap. The leadership team has driven the change and continues to believe wholeheartedly in the IB philosophy.

---

Lamar High School is taking interdisciplinary connections to a whole new level: It has designed its new building around the concept. Rather than having traditional classrooms, the building—scheduled to open in the fall of 2019—will consist of four flexible academic areas divided into neighborhoods of roughly 200 students. Each neighborhood will be taught by an interdisciplinary team of six teachers who will set their own daily schedule.

---

