



## SOUTH SIDE HIGH SCHOOL'S JOURNEY TOWARDS INCLUSIVENESS

South Side High School went from academic tracking to inclusivity by requiring every student to take at least one Diploma Programme course.

Twenty-two years ago, South Side High School (SSHS) had only 30 Diploma Programme (DP) candidates. Now, with a student body of just under 1,100, all students at the Rockville Centre, New York, school will take at least one DP course before graduating. In the spring of 2018, 90% of the class of 2018 took at least one DP exam, 60% completed the requirements of the DP, and 41% of the class earned the diploma. All of this is happening at a public high school in the United States, where it is more common to find small DP cohorts - often selected by restrictive gatekeeping measures.

"This [increased enrollment] clearly didn't happen by default," says principal John Murphy. "It was a conscious decision."

### The school steadily moves toward inclusion

The program began in 1981, and by the mid-1990s it became the school's honors program. During the 2011-2012 school year, SSHS began requiring all students to take higher-level English A: Language and Literature. Other DP courses include physics, chemistry, math studies, mathematics, history, psychology and theatre.

The community owes it to students to offer courses such as higher-level math and physics "irrespective of what their address is," Murphy says. "You create the best system for all students as a consequence of which students are served."

As a result of that approach, South Side High School's minority and low-income students outperform their peers on state assessments: The SSHS students earn the New York State Regents diploma more often. The diploma with advanced designation is earned by 46% of the school's African American students, 73% of the school's Hispanic students and 61% of the school's economically disadvantaged students, while the statewide rate is 31% for the advanced designation diploma. South Side also has one of the highest graduation rates in the state: For the class of 2018, it was 99%.

"Heterogeneously grouped classes improve school climate, student performance, students' self-perception and their own expectations for themselves and brings the staff together toward a common goal," Murphy says. "If I walk down the hall, I shouldn't be able to tell the class by the students' skin color."

**South Side High School  
(public): Grades 9-12**

**First offered the Diploma  
Programme (DP):  
1981**

**Total number of students:  
1,100**

**Principal:  
John Murphy**

**DP coordinator:  
Elizabeth Nisler**

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”  
—JOHN MURPHY, PRINCIPAL,  
SOUTH SIDE HIGH SCHOOL

Inclusion has been part of South Side High School's culture for decades. "There's no such thing as fair tracking," Murphy says, so the school and its feeder middle school began detracking students in the mid-1990s. This allowed students to begin taking the required math class sequence which would permit them to take algebra in eighth grade and give them the option to take advanced math classes, such as the DP math courses, in 11th and 12th grade. Currently, more than 75% of SSHA students take a DP math course.

## Learning for life shouldn't be an elite endeavor

South Side tells students considering the DP that it is "not a series of separate courses but a program of learning that gives them multiple assessments that match competencies in life."

Students leave South Side eminently well prepared, Murphy says, whether they go on to university or not. "The decisions are theirs legitimately and are not based on a lack of experience," he says. "There is always the element of choice." For example, even if a student takes the DP biology course and does not excel in it, he explains, the student still learns what biology is about and discerns which courses to take in the future.

"The reason our approach receives the support it does is due to the fact that students hear from our graduates that the hard work was worth it," Murphy says. "They hit the ground running in college. We don't ever hear students come back and tell us they were unprepared." According to Murphy, however, the real secret to the success of the DP for all students at South Side is that the IB is not a testing service. Instead, "if you wanted to create a script for everything you wanted students to leave secondary school with, the IB Diploma Programme is it," Murphy says.

## Structural supports put principles into action

To build a school culture based on offering the DP for all students, supports and structures are necessary. At SSHA, 7:30 to 8am is designated as a zero period, during which every teacher is in his or her classroom to help students. Additionally, support classes are offered for most courses every other day, and homework helpers are available after school.

In addition, Hofstra University's Liberty Partnership provides SSHA students from families with limited financial means with mentors and support. Those mentors are teachers. Counselors also play a vital role in helping students. "They are deeply versed in the IB, special education and ESOL," Murphy says. Beginning in January of eighth grade, students meet with and get to know their counselors. The counselors meet with administration and support staff each month to discuss and plan intervention services for at-risk students.

The school also makes a point of encouraging collaborative teaching, which is central to the design of the DP. Teachers accomplish this using a range of tactics. One tactic is to have teachers from the science and math departments analyze assessment data from the previous year and then form small, interdisciplinary teams to discuss common approaches to problem solving. They also use the IB command terms, a shared glossary of key action verbs such as "evaluate" and "discuss," ensuring that all teachers use the important terminology in the same way. Another tactic is to observe each other teaching. "Teachers work collaboratively throughout the year," Murphy says. "It is a labor-intensive process, but the benefits speak for themselves."

South Side keeps track of participation in the full DP because that rate is an indication of accommodating as many students as possible. One way to accomplish that kind of accommodation is to offer as many course options as possible. Three years ago, students indicated interest in the DP business and management course, so the school began to offer the course. The first group of students sat for the exam in May 2018.

Listening to students' voices empowers them to take ownership of their learning. "It is no coincidence that there will be almost over 150 Diploma candidates in the senior class this year," Murphy says. "We are constantly investigating and improving."