

CREATING A NEW TRADITION

Founded in 1950, the High School Affiliated to Renmin University just began offering the Diploma Programme in 2012. Yet the cohort already has increased to the point that the biggest barrier to more growth is simply space.

Chinese schools typically take a traditional approach to education. The Diploma Programme (DP) focuses on not only the intellectual growth of students but their social, emotional, and physical well-being. So how does a Chinese state school attract students to a program of learning that is essentially different?

All students in the DP at the High School Affiliated to Renmin University, a state school in Beijing, are Chinese. Their education before high school was in a very traditional system, says DP coordinator Randall Crismond, so the independent work that the DP requires is not something parents have experienced themselves and they ask why it is a good idea. While they have bought into this different system that will prepare their children for university abroad, Crismond adds, they need to have the new approach explained. Education is important to them.

Crismond sees two main draws attracting students to the DP. One is the rigor of the programme. "It is appreciated by many students," he says. "They believe that working towards a diploma will be good training for their university lives (and our first batch of alumni recently came back to speak to our pre-IB students about just that) Secondly, our more artistically inclined students prefer the IB – both the music and visual arts offerings are seen as more flexible (and more fun) than the alternatives."

Most of the credit for the number of students participating in the DP—the cohort has increased to 98 this year from 30 in 2012—goes to word of mouth among students. "There was initial hesitation when the program was implemented," Crismond says, "but the success of the classes being run and the good university placement of our first two cohorts has solidified the DP's reputation."

Word of mouth also has been shared among parents. Many of the larger international schools in Beijing now offer the DP, which parents are discussing online, Crismond says. "The DP is gaining a very strong

High School Affiliated to Renmin University (state): grades 10-12 (foreign curriculum section)

First offered the DP:
2012

Total number of students (foreign curriculum section):
800

IB coordinator:
Randall Crismond

Head of school:
Pengzhi Liu

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— RANDALL CRISMOND, DP COORDINATOR, HIGH SCHOOL AFFILIATED TO RENMIN UNIVERSITY

reputation in China, and most international schools have made the switch over to the DP. Chinese students who wish to study abroad (and their parents) know this and would like to follow suit.”

Space limitations and a little hesitation on the part of teachers had to be overcome early on. Finding room for DP students to do their physics, chemistry, and biology lab work wasn't easy, but it was accomplished. At the same time, some teachers were concerned about the extra amount of time they thought the DP might require of them. Crismond credits “brave, trailblazing teachers” with committing to the programme and showing how it worked.

Even teachers who are not teaching DP classes have helped the cohort grow. Like many other Chinese schools, the High School Affiliated to Renmin University uses the traditional Chinese system for homeroom. Homeroom teachers have a very holistic view of their students, Crismond says, because they interact with the students, their parents, and their other teachers. “They do an amazing job at explaining the various requirements of the DP to parents,” he says. “They also have the best overview of where every DP student stands in their journey – if a student is slipping in a single course, or falling behind with CAS, they can help keep the students on track.”

Another resource supporting the programme's growth has been a course that offers what Crismond calls “a taste of the IB” in the 10th grade. Students reflect on ethical dilemmas and recognize informal fallacies in everyday life; they also write a research paper on a topic that they choose. “It's not Theory of Knowledge (TOK) and it's not an extended essay, but it's TOKish and extended essayish,” Crismond says.

The class meets once a week and is taught by Crismond (who also teaches English) and three other teachers. Students who like this class and thrive in it are encouraged to think about choosing the DP.

In addition to offering a taste of the DP, the school holds informational meetings about the programme for both parents and students. Given that the school is fairly selective and the students who attend are already academically advanced, Crismond's presentations emphasize the importance of self-management as key to success in the DP and later in life. Students need the ability to work on their own and meet deadlines, he says. He often refers to Aesop's fable about the rabbit and the turtle. “I need kids who can work slow and steady,” he tells parents.

Homeroom teachers, Crismond notes, “do a fantastic job with one-to-one questions with these students as well; our previous DP coordinator made sure that [the homeroom teachers] were well-trained in the philosophy and requirements of the DP.”

Next year Crismond expects to have almost 120 students in the DP, about four times what his school had four years ago. He believes that students and parents are thinking about an education that prepares them for more than tests, “a major achievement in such an assessment-driven culture.”

“I often hear both students and parents discussing how the DP can help develop a student's skills and how they know that this will not just get them into a good university,” he says, “but is developing them into independent young men and women who will be successful when they get there, and beyond.”

