



CHALLENGED TO SUCCEED

Eighty-five percent of the students at Robinson Secondary School take at least one DP class. That has not always been the case. The coordinators and teachers who make that possible believe in their students and the IB philosophy—and they work hard to support both.

The international flavor at Robinson Secondary School in Fairfax, Virginia, in the United States is reflected in two ways. One is the seven languages, in addition to English, in which parents can read about the school system. The languages range from Spanish to Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean to Farsi, Arabic, and Urdu. The other way is the highly successful International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (DP).

The size of the programme alone is impressive: The senior class (year 13) has 160 students, and the junior class (year 12) has 182 students. For the most recent DP exams, approximately 800 students were registered. "Eighty-five percent of the student body takes at least one IB class," says Holly Cho, one of the school's two DP coordinators.

That has not always been the case. Wendy Vu, the other coordinator, started at Robinson in 1998, when the programme began. The first class had 28 students.

Growth from some two dozen students in the DP to hundreds does not happen by chance. "We believe that the numbers have increased in our building not only because students see their older siblings go off to university much better prepared than other students but also because the students view the courses as manageable challenges," Vu says. "There is a culture of accessibility and success in the challenge of the IB."

One reason for the culture of accessibility is the school district's open enrollment policy for the IB, which means that classes include students from a range of academic readiness levels. Robinson's DP teachers work with that scenario by having the mindset that this is going to be an IB class, and that some students are ready for rigorous work and some are not yet ready, Cho says. "Success is not necessarily a 7 or 6 or 5 for every student. A student who is nervous about the class won't be alienated and will feel he or she can do it."

Robinson Secondary School (public) 7-12

First offered the DP:
1998

Total number of students:
2,782 (2014-15 school year)

IB coordinators:
Wendy Vu and Holly Cho

Principal:
Matthew Eline



“
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— HOLLY CHO,
DP COORDINATOR, ROBINSON
SECONDARY SCHOOL

To help more students feel they can succeed in the DP, a group of 40 teachers acts as mentors for DP candidates. “What has developed is a kind of research group,” Vu says, in which a teacher may mentor several students who share research and discuss ideas. They don’t write the same paper because they all have their own take on the subject, she explains. The school compensates teachers for being mentors. “It’s a nice gesture that recognizes that they’re professionals,” Cho says.

Teachers also provide support for their DP students less formally. “A number of teachers on staff make it their goal that every student will pass,” Vu says. “They work with students individually to help them bring their papers up. Students see that teachers value what they’re doing.”

Those second-chance assessments are a schoolwide policy at Robinson. Teachers provide feedback, and students rewrite. “The end goal is that students learn that they’re not punished for what they don’t understand,” Vu explains. “We’re rewarding the intellectual process. That also helps encourage those kids who may not be at the top level at the beginning of the year.”



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— WENDY VU, DIPLOMA
PROGRAMME COORDINATOR,
ROBINSON SECONDARY SCHOOL

Another way that teachers support their DP students and increase the cohort is by becoming IB examiners. Cho notes that as more teachers in the building have become IB examiners, their teaching has become increasingly more reflective of IB teaching practices and expectations.

Information and encouragement also need to be offered to teachers, Vu and Cho point out. “We are teachers [Vu teaches English, and Cho teaches science.] in addition to being coordinators,” Cho says. “We can understand their frustrations. We have a can-do attitude that spreads.” The coordinators also help teachers become familiar with the IB’s philosophy of teaching and learning.

At the most recent December diploma ceremony, Vu says, some of the DP alumni from last year’s class talked about the reactions to being assigned a 4,000-word paper in their first year of university. While they felt confident about the assignment, they said, they noticed that many other students in the room were clearly intimidated. “The IB is a practice version of university,” Vu says. “There are no surprises. They know how to do it.”