

International Studies Action Research

In an effort to better explore the potential value of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in the Division, the IB Project team is proposing an action research project. The project will use a common set of institutional needs as a foundation for the work and provide three prongs to the research. Each prong represents a level of school, elementary, middle, and high, that will be engaged in international studies education.

Justifications

Working toward the goals of the strategic plan, an International Studies Project Team was formed to investigate the merits of an International Studies program. The charge of the Project Team is to consider whether international education would be an effective way of accomplishing Strategic Goal 1 (prepare all students to succeed as members of a global community and in a global economy). Additional outcomes of implementing an international studies program could be furthering Strategic Goals 2 and 4 (eliminating the achievement gap and gaining recognition as a world-class educational system, respectively).

For elementary students, participating globally will be increasingly important in their lifetime. As technology expands, the distance around the world decreases and the Division's students will have to become students of the world. IB programs in elementary school are designed to expose students at the youngest ages to different perspectives and cultures, as well as the types of character attributes, academic knowledge, and applicable skills that will make them successful in a global economy.

There is a growing concern in education about the disparity of performance between student populations identified by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The score differential between these groups is referred to as the Achievement Gap.

In Albemarle County Public Schools the achievement gap has been slowly shrinking, but it is still prominent in middle school. The achievement gap is primarily localized to middle school math and is most extreme in sixth and seventh grades. Although the achievement gap in middle school reading, science, and social studies courses is less profound, there are still vestiges of inexplicable disparities in achievement. For these reasons, the project team chose to investigate the achievement gains possible when an international studies program is implemented.

Using access to high-level coursework has been proven to be successful at the high school level where minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged students are increasingly likely to enroll in advanced and AP courses. An IB Degree Program in the Division's high schools could have similar achievement results, improve student awareness of 21st century learning skills, and garner world-class recognition for the Division as the degree program is widely accepted at colleges and universities as advanced credit toward an undergraduate degree.

Foundations of International Education

After a thorough review of international education in the United States, a few foundational premises emerge as being the building blocks of any good international studies program.

International Studies:

- incorporates cultural perspectives into learning;
- infuses language and culture into all instruction;
- builds students' efficacy and ownership of learning through individual growth plans and larger projects that incorporate other perspectives;

- engages students with authentic, product-focused inquiry and problem solving work;
- encourages children to make international and interdisciplinary connections in their learning and social milieu;
- uses technology to learn, communicate about, and share their learning with others.

These tenets of international education encompass many of the hallmarks of education in Albemarle County, which is why the project team is proposing to conduct an action research project. The action research will attempt to determine the differences between what the Division would be able to accomplish by implementing IB for a cohort of students and what the Division would be able to do with a more complete implementation of the Framework for Quality Learning (FQL) and Professional Learning Community (PLC) process.

The Primary Years Program

Methodology

This portion of the action research will focus on qualitative methods to determine the effects that implementing a Primary Years Program (PYP) would have on two elementary schools in the Division. Given that it is qualitative research, the schools will be implementing the changes to curriculum and instruction and monitor the attendant changes in students, faculty, community, and learning.

Sampling & Timeline

PYP is implemented whole school, so both schools that participate, Meriwether Lewis and Agnor-Hurt, will be implementing the program for all students in their school. These schools were selected because they have been working on becoming IB schools and they are representative of many of the elementary schools in the division.

Implementation of the PYP would begin in the spring of 2009 and would include training for administrators at each school site to prepare them for leading their school into this transition. Later in the spring, and additional five teachers from each school, representing different grade levels, will attend teacher-specific PYP training.

During the summer of 2009, the administrator and teachers who attended training will work with consultants to train the entire school staff and begin the work of re-aligning curriculum and instruction to the PYP model. Full implementation of the PYP model is expected to begin with the 2009-10 school year.

Outcome Measures

The Primary Years Program has not been shown to have an appreciable impact on student achievement. For this reason, the action research project is not going to rely heavily on absolute outcome measures, such as SOLs, and will instead focus on achievement gains, using MAP assessments. Student learning plans will be used as evidence of students' sense of efficacy and ownership of their learning.

Other outcome measures will be increases student ownership of learning, decreases in disciplinary incidents, awareness of international perspectives, and an improved sense of community in the schools. These will be measured through observations, surveys of teachers and students, and comparing disciplinary incident prior to implementation and after. Student acquisition of a second language, Mandarin for Meriwether Lewis and Spanish for Agnor-Hurt, will also be used as an outcome measure.

Possible Outcomes

One possible outcome is that the schools participating in the PYP will show strong gains in student ownership of learning, student citizenship and character, and achievement gains within the school year. If the experimental schools show these results it would be determined that the PYP is a successful program for achieving these outcomes. At least one other elementary school has expressed interest in the PYP and would adopt it after a favorable evaluation from the first year of action research.

Another outcome is that the qualitative measures show no impact on students and student learning, which would indicate that the PYP, as implemented in this action research, is not successful for ACPS students. In this instance, PYP would not be suggested to other schools until it can be examined more closely and improved at the experimental schools.

The Middle Years Program

Methodology

Using quasi-experimental design the action research will compare the outcomes of at least two middle schools, one implementing IB with a cohort of sixth graders and one more fully implementing the Division's levers for quality learning, instruction, and collaboration, to a control group on three outcome measures.

All schools participating in the project will work independently of one another to ensure that there are no carryover effects. Additionally, all schools in an experimental condition will be carefully monitored to ensure the fidelity of implementation across multiple school sites. The control group will also be monitored to ensure that it does not add any additional educational programs that may affect their status as a control group.

Timeline, Sampling, & Cohorts

Implementing the Middle Years portion of the IB program will be the first experimental group (E_1) for the action research. While schools that participate in E_1 will be putting an IB program into place, they will not actually apply to be an IB school, nor will their participation in the action research connote a commitment to continuing the program. These schools will only implement IB for the duration of the action research.

The second experimental group (E_2) will represent a school that is fully implementing both of the division's levers for increasing student learning: the Framework for Quality Learning (FQL) and Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Teachers will collaborate to fully implement these levers; however, the expanded training provided to the E_2 schools will only be incorporated for the duration of the action research project. Participation in the study does not commit the school to continuing the services.

All schools will begin the exploration phase of the project in the spring of 2009. Simultaneously, a small group of school leaders will be operating at all experimental condition sites to set up the program at their school site. The school-based planning team will also set a high-level timeline that will include all the major development elements necessary to fully implement their international studies program. One of the components of the timeline will be to identify a time during the summer when the staff involved in the study will be able to come together for whole staff training and planning. Both experimental and control groups will start full implementation in the fall of 2009.

Concurrent with establishing the timeline, the site-specific oversight teams that will be recruiting diverse cohorts of students. Every effort will be made to achieve a representative sample for the division. For the first experimental condition, which will only have a small cohort of students participating, students will be recruited to increase the diversity and representation, instead of random selection. For the second experimental condition and control group schools, which will have all students participating, the students used for comparison will be selected to optimally match the experimental group.

Outcome Measures

To determine the relative success of either the experimental groups, both will use student portfolios, Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests, and SOL scores. These three achievement measures will demonstrate total achievement, growth in achievement, and qualitative work samples that demonstrate achievement. Using all three will allow the project team to triangulate and determine the magnitude of the effect the programs had on students. Ancillary outcomes could include: better attendance and behavior and more student ownership of learning.

The portfolios will be student designed and will include examples the students' consider to be their best work from the entire year. These portfolios will be graded based on a rubric that will measure both quality of work, as well as growth in skill and complexity of the work presented. SOL scores will also be used to measure if the cohort of students improved on pass rates against their previous results or against the other research group.

The MAP tests are designed to measure student achievement in math and reading across a uniform scale. The scale spans grades 2-11, and students in any grade can land along the entire continuum. The purpose of MAP tests is to measure student performance across an academic year to monitor student achievement growth, regardless of the students starting achievement level. MAP tests are a complement to SOLs, where students are only measured against grade-level curriculum.

For either experimental group to be deemed successful they will have to demonstrate scores significantly above those of the control group on the three outcome measures used in the research; however, improvement, or lack thereof, in a single outcome measure will not be required for success. Using this system for determining outcomes also implies that both experimental groups could be successful.

E₁ Program

Two schools have shown interest in forming a small cohort of teachers, representing the four core content areas, who will go to IB training and be the content area teachers who work with the IB program at their school. These teachers will collaborate on the curriculum and instruction provided to students in these programs, as well as coordinate with a language teacher to ensure that language and culture are infused into all IB classrooms. The whole process will be overseen by a school-based IB coordinator.

The students chosen to participate in the IB program will be recruited from all in-coming sixth grade students. Approximately 50 students will be chosen from the class and will participate in the IB program. Students will be expected to remain in the program for at least one year to ensure the sample size is large enough to show results.

The IB program at these experimental schools will operate as a school within a school to ensure the students are getting the full benefit of the IB program. All students will have the same teachers for each of their core subjects and will enroll in a Chinese language and culture class as their second language.

E₂ Program

Using the foundations of the FQL and PLC process, a new international studies program will be designed for the control schools. These schools will engage in discussion about the elements of international education that are most closely tied to the work already being done in the Division and plan the best ways to incorporate an international studies perspective into what is in progress.

In early discussion, this model may consist of teachers working on interdisciplinary teams to create complex units of instruction that span the curriculum and international perspectives, as well as incorporate various technologies to make instruction more engaging. While the E₂ schools may not operate as schools within a school, they may choose to establish small learning communities to better reach all students. Teachers will also be more student-centered to foster student efficacy and ownership of learning.

Control Group

The control group will consist of students who are receiving the same education they have received before with no alterations or additions that would alter their instruction and invalidate them as a control group. These students will be drawn from Sutherland Middle School and they will only complete the outcome measures portion of the action research to serve as an additional point of comparison.

Potential Outcomes

There are three possible outcomes for this action research and each will lead the project team to make a better informed recommendation to the Board regarding international studies in middle school.

The first possible outcome would be that neither program showed appreciable gains over what had been occurring previously in middle school; that students were showing the same outcomes they had shown before. This would suggest that the programs either had a negative impact or no impact on students' learning and achievement. These results would likely be followed by a recommendation to pursue other avenues for incorporating international education in middle school.

The second possible outcome is that only one program shows appreciable impact on students' learning and achievement, while the other program does not. If this is the outcome, the project team would be likely to advocate that whichever program showed results were explored and implemented as the international studies program for middle schools.

The final possible outcome is that both programs would have an appreciable impact on students' learning and achievement. The project team could attempt to differentiate the outcomes to make a recommendation about which program would be better to implement as an international studies program for middle school or the project team could recommend both programs as equally viable alternatives for implementing international studies in middle school.

The Degree Program

Rather than a traditional action research project, the Degree Program (DP) will be investigated through an exploratory group charged with visioning what an international studies program would encompass in Albemarle County Public Schools. Given that the DP cannot be duplicated, it is a given that some elements of DP would be incorporated into the overall international studies program.

Specifically, the exploratory team will continue development of a model academy focused on 21st century learning skills and international studies. This team will build on the earlier work of the Superintendent's Concept Development Team and focus work around:

- development of the IB degree program for students in grades nine through twelve (Pre-IB for ninth and tenth graders; Diploma Program/Certificate Program for eleventh and twelfth graders);
- a strong focus on technology and careers of the future;
- a strong emphasis on world languages and cultures, including non-Western languages and cultures.

The exploratory team should consist of teachers of core academic subject areas, business, the arts, and career/technology educators. The representatives will be culled from interested teachers, administrators, and community members from all across the division to maximize the points of view. This group will be primarily responsible for visioning what an international studies school would look like, setting a timeline for implementation, and designing a presentation to go before the Board requesting the creation of an international studies academy in the Division.

The foundations of the exploratory team's work will be grounded in the literature regarding best practices in international studies and 21st century learning skills. To assist them in their work, surveys about "Learning in the 21st Century" will be sent to parents of rising ninth graders and current ninth/tenth grade students. Follow-up focus groups will be conducted for each feeder pattern, as well as the business community. Additional avenues for input into design of an International Studies Academy will be explored as the exploratory team evolves their vision.