

IB programs on the rise in Westchester



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In the last 10 years, seven schools in the county began offering authorized IB programs, up from just two a decade before that.



(Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

Sixth-grade students in Maria Buckley's science class at Pelham Middle School couldn't get their hands in the air fast enough to take part in a discussion about a pretty mundane item: paper towels.

The students had researched the history and various uses of paper towels in different countries, tested five brands for absorbency, measured the results and jotted down the findings in groups.

Buckley's taught the lesson before, but this time was different. Pelham implemented a new program this year for its sixth- through 10th-grade students called the [International Baccalaureate](#) ([/story/news/education/2014/09/09/newsweek-blind-brook-top-high-schools/15343359/](http://story/news/education/2014/09/09/newsweek-blind-brook-top-high-schools/15343359/)) (IB) Middle Years Program. The strategy emphasizes learning and instruction that combines hands-on work with additional

research to make real-world connections.

"I've never extended (the lesson) to the children doing research, finding companies that provide alternatives to paper towels," Buckley said. "Those connections wouldn't have been made and I think they're important — they're the 'why' behind the learning."

Pelham is considered a candidate school and is not expected to be eligible for full authorization until 2019, said Sean Llewellyn, Pelham's IB coordinator.

The International Baccalaureate Organization is a nonprofit that since 1968 has developed four educational programs, which differ by age group. A combination of those programs have been adopted by 94 schools in New York, [including five districts in Westchester County that have been approved: \(http://soundshore.lohudblogs.com/2011/03/17/harrison-high-school-to-get-international-baccalaureate-program/\)](#) Harrison, Dobbs Ferry, Greenburgh, Yonkers and Port Chester.

The Primary Years program is for students ages 3-12 and works to develop independent learners. The Middle Years program builds on that idea for all of its students, ages 11-16, and incorporates small group learning and a long-term service project.

For students ages 16-19, they can choose [whether to participate in IB at their school \(/story/news/education/2014/09/09/newsweek-blind-brook-top-high-schools/15343359/\)](#) (if it's offered), and there are two options: the Diploma program and a Career-Related Certificate program. The first offers specific courses — similar to college-level Advanced Placement (AP) classes — for students in 11th and 12th grades who want to take more challenging coursework. If diploma students take enough IB courses, they are eligible to receive college credit and an IB diploma, in addition to the Regents diploma, when they graduate high school.

Career-related program students are eligible for an IB diploma, but have a different set of courses designed to prepare them for an internship, apprenticeship or a position in their field of interest.

The nonprofit requires all teachers and most administrators to participate in regular training, the program's representatives make site visits every five years to schools with IB, and schools have to earn authorization with IB to offer an official program.

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Sixth-graders Annabelle Hochberg, 11, left, Sasha Fair, 11, and Luke Gravitz, 10, conduct an experiment on which paper towel is the most absorbent in a science class at Pelham Middle School. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

'21st century' learning

IB ensures students are on their feet working on projects, incorporating a variety of subjects in one lesson, and applying what they're learning to their life, as opposed to a traditional classroom setting where children sit in rows and take notes, Llewellyn said.

"It's a question of moving our school and education in general into the 21st century and we're relying on, in some ways, still 19th century models of education for kids who are going into a world where it's not really relevant," he said.

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Pelham Middle School Principal Rob Roelle, left, looks on as IB Coordinator Sean Llewellyn talks. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

Teachers attend training — both online and in workshops — to learn about the IB philosophy in general and in their respective subjects to develop strategies to incorporate it in their classrooms.

District educators are required by IB to attend these workshops on a regular basis, which was a selling point for Pelham, Llewellyn said.

"What we were looking for with the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program is to bring about change where this was going to be the work that we were going to do every day, every month, every year for not just the near future, but for the future," he said.

Lawrence Paska, director of Southern Westchester BOCES' Center for Professional Development & Curriculum, said the center offered its first round of IB teacher training this year because so many schools inquired about it.

Before SWBOCES started offering workshops, districts like Dobbs Ferry — the first in Westchester to offer an authorized IB program in 1998 — often had to fly staff to cities around the country for training.

"Because of the number of schools locally and in New York who are interested in IB, a lot of the training is now available online and it's available more locally than it used to be," said Dobbs Ferry Superintendent Lisa Brady. "That has been helpful."

'A natural progression'

In Dobbs, the district offers an authorized IB Diploma Program and is in the process of getting its Middle Years Program approved, which is expected to happen this school year, Brady said.

When IB was implemented in the district in the early 1990s, Brady — who wasn't superintendent at the time — said "there was a desire to offer a program to what the district or parents in the district and board considered to be our high-performing students."

When Brady came into the district, she said she wanted to give as many students as possible exposure to this "rigorous and challenging" program.

"It was a natural progression for the district to move away from the idea that this is a program for elite kids and instead work with every student that attends Dobbs Ferry Schools to get an IB experience," she said.

Dobbs has also eliminated all but two of its AP classes — a move that Brady said was hard to get the community behind.

Brady wanted to move away from AP because she said "it's about cramming of information" to later regurgitate on a test. IB seeks to assess students' knowledge using exams, but also through projects, essays and oral presentations, which she said offers more life skills than test-taking.

"There has always been this sort of community question: Why do we have this IB program because everybody else has AP," Brady said. "We began to really change the focus for the (school) board and for the community in understanding that the fact that we were an IB Diploma school was a tremendous asset."



**Pelham School Superintendent
Peter Giarrizzo.** (Photo: Tania
Savayan/The Journal News)

Pelham is not interested at this time in eliminating AP classes or offering the diploma program. Last year, 300 Pelham students took about 800 AP exams with the average score being 3.8 out of 5, said Superintendent Peter Giarrizzo.

"We've put a lot of resources into that program, it's very successful," he said.

For Giarrizzo, the hope is that by having the Middle Years Program, those students will be more prepared if they decide to sign up for AP courses as upperclassmen.

"The more kids we get involved in this rich coursework, the better they all end up," he said.

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