

IB's PYP:

One Alphabet Soup
Elementary Schools
Can Spoon Up

By Jean Director Knudsen

The sky is not falling but the world is shrinking. More and more parents of young children want their kids to be cognizant of and active in the world around them.

Elementary schools want what the parents want. An increasing number of schools are responding to these needs via the Primary Years Programme (PYP), the International Baccalaureate (IB) Organization's program for kids in preschool through elementary school.

More well-known is Diploma, the International Baccalaureate's rigorous academic program aimed at high-achieving high school students. Diploma requires specific classes, projects and tests in the same vein as Advanced Placement courses and exams.

Launched in 1968, since 1994 IB has offered the Middle Years Programme (MYP) for middle schools and, since 1997, the Primary Years Programme (PYP) for children as young as 3.

Less prescribed than the high school version, MYP and, within the last five years, PYP, for many reasons are gaining ground across the nation and here at home. In 2000, there were six PYP schools nationwide; today there are 150. A handful of Oregon elementary schools, most of them in Portland, are vying to become authorized PYP schools.

Locally, The International School, a private school, and Bonny Slope, Skyline and Ridgewood, all public elementary schools, are "candidate" Primary Years Programme schools. The private Portland Jewish Academy (PJA) is the only PYP candidate school that educates students through the eighth grade.

PYP is quite new to these Portland-area schools; it's been part of the curriculum for at most two years. It takes schools roughly two years to become an "authorized IB World School." For more details, go to www.portlandfamily.com and click on *Online Only Features*.

The crux of the PYP methodology is emphasis on inquiry-based, child-initiated learning about the self and kids' place in and effect upon their culture and local community, state, country and world.

Why introduce such lofty concepts and ideas to the youngest students?

For PJA, "We were looking for something for the next level...to grow the base we already have," said Head of School, Patricia Schwartz, who's been at PJA for 12 years.

Schwartz and many PJA faculty and parents agreed that integrating the PYP into the school's extant Jewish and general studies curriculum would greatly enhance kids' education. Specifically, PYP's curriculum framework would deepen students' understanding of their budding Jewish identities and what being Jewish means outside the community of 220 students in transitional kindergarten through eighth-grade.

For example, every PJA fifth grader reads Natalie Babbitt's "Tuck Everlasting" and grapples with the work's central issue of how "mortality affects the way we value and think about life," Schwartz explained, referring to teachers' PYP materials.

PJA this year folded into the six-week "unit of inquiry" more probing concepts and projects than in years past. All at the behest of the Primary Years Programme. The teachers received training, for instance, on how to guide their 10- and 11-year-old students through placing the book into personal, Jewish and international contexts. And they teased out Jewish and universal themes.

Throughout the years, the students are charged with writing assignments — essays, poems, autobiographies — to strengthen not only writing skills, but also their powers of analysis and expression.

At PJA since 1995, Holly Litwin teaches fifth graders Hebrew and Jewish studies. She at first was skeptical about PYP, wondering, "How's this going to enhance what I do already anyway?" Now a year and a half into it, she believes it has profound benefits for teacher and student alike.



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"PYP gives us a template...of this really meaningful and successful integration of the subject matter itself and reflection (on it)." Litwin continued, "I really appreciate that their learning is no longer compartmentalized. It shows Jewish studies has broader implications in kids' lives."

Other IB tenets include "learning leads to action" and "a peaceful world can be achieved through understanding." Schwartz said these ideals are in lock-step with the Jewish concept of tikkun olam, or repairing the world.

Michelle Rosenbloom, parent of three PJA students, ages 6 to 13, credits PYP with her daughters' burgeoning knowledge of global awareness. Referring to lessons about recycling, she said, "I can't throw anything away without being questioned. It's wonderful to have the kids so aware of the planet and our effect on it."

The International School, too, believed PYP's core concepts would fit perfectly into the immersion school's established academic program and value system for its 394 pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students, said Erika Kohn, curriculum coordinator.

"We seemed to be a classic example of an IB World School," she said, adding that PYP methodology further bolsters concepts of global citizenship and lifelong learning among the students who choose fluency in Spanish, Japanese or Chinese.

"We see a stream-of-cultural awareness," Kohn said of her school. "It's not just flags and festivals."

Nancy Louie Lee, parent of two International School students, ages 8 and 7, said she believes PYP emphasizes a depth of learning not previously available.

"I was recently struck by how my third-grader was building knowledge and connecting concepts she has learned," Lee said of facts her daughter gleaned from a unit connecting slavery and earning disparities today between African-Americans and white Oregonians.

PYP schools' core values stress the more rote trivium of being safe, respectful and responsible, according to Kohn and other schools' administrators and educators. Rather, PYP schools integrate 10 "learner profiles" into daily lessons in all subjects as part of students' character education.

Perhaps awkward at first, the learner profiles — including Risk Taker, Thinker and Communicator — represent the 10 pieces that make a whole PYP student. Each pupil from the earliest grade is taught to think like, if not become, a Risk Taker or Balanced.

At Bonny Slope Elementary School, a now kindergarten-through-fifth grade public school with 459 students, Principal Kim Haskins says she hears in direct conversations and hallway chatter students employing the sophisticated learner-profile vocabulary.

"I had a student the other day talk about how she's being principled," said an impressed Haskins, referring to the PYP's fifth learner profile and her school's focus in January on that concept.

Upon further reflection, Haskins said it's no wonder her school's young charges are demonstrating otherwise heady notions of learning and behavior: Teachers are trained to constantly use and model the 10 learner profiles buttressed by loads of written work.

"The integration and naturalness of learner-profile language is really starting to show," she said.

Studies have shown IB kids fare better overall throughout their primary, middle, high school and on into their college years. And yet, IB's Primary Years Programme for the youngest students is not the end-all, be-all for every school. IB itself is "viewed as a reform tool" for schools, explained Sandra M. Croyle, IB's marketing and communications manager for the Americas.

Elementary schools, in their bid to differentiate themselves, often believe PYP's focus on the whole child in the context of a global society is the ticket.

"PYP is a great program, but there are lots of great programs out there. This is one," said Andrea Morgan, education specialist with the Oregon Department of Education in Salem.

"We see a lot of elementary schools very interested in IB," she confirmed, "until they see the price tag. ... I think what you have to be aware of is the needs of the community." For some districts or school communities, they simply don't have the money to become even a candidate PYP school. The two-part application alone costs \$14,000 and there are additional fees into the thousands for teacher training, annual dues and other requirements.



Local PYP schools' representatives were giddy over their commitment to becoming authorized IB World Schools and the positive differences they already see in their students.

They are realistic, too, about the prerequisites money, time and resources to gain the desired status. Said Haskins, the Bonny Slope principal: "There is a lot of work – an incredible amount of work – that goes along with (PYP authorization)." For example, an important requirement among teachers is consistent collaboration to foster among the educators learning, sharing of ideas and team work. Eking out the time for this additional work has been a big challenge, Haskins said.

"I feel we still need more training, and it is sometimes hard because the school has already a calendar with events that we have to follow," said Pilar Ariza, a second-grade Spanish immersion instructor at The International School, who nonetheless is very enthusiastic about PYP.

Bonny Slope in the Beaverton School District has money just for the core requirements, no extras, such as paying teachers for additional planning periods. "But this is our focus, and the teachers are excited about it," as is the district led by Superintendent Jerome (Jerry) Coleman, Haskins said.

Erika Kohn, the International School's curriculum coordinator, said a fourth-grade student recently told her how much she'd learned from a research project. As the PYP curriculum framework dictated, the student took charge of her research; her teacher didn't feed her facts.

Said Kohn: "That's a great little snapshot of what we're trying to achieve through PYP."

With a master's degree in journalism from UC Berkeley, Jenni Director Knausen of Southwest Portland focuses largely on human-interest features, religion, health and issues of importance to parents. She has two young daughters.

