

CASE STUDY: CANADA

Creating an Internationally Minded Community

The IB Primary Years Programme at Sunnybrook School

OVERVIEW: In the late 1990's, the leaders of Sunnybrook School, a small, private elementary school in Toronto, were looking for an academic program that would encompass every aspect of school life, bringing with it an innovative global philosophy and internationally minded pedagogy. Further investigation convinced them that the IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) was the ideal tool for their school improvement project, and school leaders became excited about the range of possibilities the program would offer their students.

As a result, Sunnybrook School was authorized in 2002. The program has provided growth and strength and has actively engaged and involved parents in the teaching and learning process.

"The focus on a global curriculum has enriched the experience of all members of the school," says Irene Davy, Sunnybrook's principal and director. "The PYP has served as the catalyst for a successful and meaningful school improvement process that has helped Sunnybrook become a stronger community with a wider scope."

Situation

In 1999, Sunnybrook began its search for an academic programme that would revitalize the school, bringing its students and teachers into the 21st century. Because the school already had high-performing students, school leaders took their search to the next level by aiming for a program that would instill enthusiasm, a joy of learning, and dedicated teacher-student collaboration. When they heard about the International Baccalaureate, a program known for its holistic approach to curriculum and pedagogy, they knew they had found what they were looking for.

To begin the IB journey, Davy first met with teachers to explain the results of the schools' research and feasibility study and to seek parental feedback. The next step was meeting with the parent association to review the IB Primary Years Programme and the reasons for seeking authorization. The feedback from both of these sessions was positive – parents were enthusiastic and supportive from the get-go.

Working towards authorization as an IB World School and armed with parent and school community support, Sunnybrook now faced the challenge of implementing a whole school PYP and providing professional development and training for its teachers.

Solution

Sunnybrook's program of study was a solid one, so the school's leaders decided to combine its established curriculum with the incoming PYP.

They opted to adapt the existing curriculum to the PYP framework, enthusiastically building a customized curriculum from the ground up.

Teacher-training wheels were set in motion back in 1999, when school leaders first decided to pursue the PYP. Because the IB requires candidate schools to undergo training before they are authorized as IB World Schools, teachers were sent to workshops in diverse cities such as Montreal, Frankfurt, Bucharest, and New Orleans. To ensure that all teachers would engage in PYP implementation with a strong sense of common purpose, school-wide workshops were conducted. Over the years, five staff members have been trained as workshop leaders. These leaders continue to spearhead the planning of activities for designated professional development weeks every June and August.

In addition, Sunnybrook created more collaborative and after-hours time for the team activity of developing PYP planners. Due to the school's small size, its particular challenge was ensuring that the PYP planners were the result of a collaborative effort. This required a great deal of planning time because it needed to involve a mix of grades and specialist teachers. Since there is only one teacher per grade level, teams that meet on a regular basis are integrated vertically and include one formed by specialist teachers. The school has also developed a shared reading process whereby the school buys a professional practice book, such as *Understanding by Design*, that is read by all staff members according to a pre-set framework.

Further parent involvement came in the form of "Home Talk," where students take home a topic or article related to the unit being studied in class to discuss with their parents. This method ensures that students bring inquiry-learning into the household and provides students with helpful hooks designed to acquire knowledge and opinions from parents and be better equipped to discuss these topics at school with fresh, new perspectives.

Benefits

The implementation of the PYP has changed Sunnybrook School in many significant ways. "We have definitely become more internationally minded as a community," says Davy, describing the many important roles that Sunnybrook staff community members are playing in provincial, regional, and international IB organizations.

In addition, collegiality and professional practice have been enhanced. Both external and on-site professional development activities are focused on enriching the school's PYP and go hand in hand with continuous curriculum review and revision. This spirit of working together extends to all members of the community: parents, students, and teachers alike.

Sunnybrook's main ongoing project continues to be renewing and refreshing the PYP. "It is a complex program that requires tweaking and fine-tuning," says Davy. "It is important to pay consistent attention to the PYP's components, such as Programme of Inquiry, internationalism, and concept-based learning."

The PYP has affected all aspects of school life and has had a positive effect on students' skills and attitudes. Sunnybrook students do very well due to small class sizes and high teacher retention rates.

Davy says that, as an IB community, "We have a larger, more complete outlook on the education of our

students and on our expectations of them as well as of ourselves.”

In the classroom, both teachers and students are engaging in a more meaningful curriculum, one that has more relevance, is more global in scope, and has opened up new worlds for the students as well as the entire school community. This global awareness led to a partnership with a school in Sri Lanka through the IB Schools to Schools program, a relationship that school leaders say “has brought our community together in a new and wonderful way.”

Important Lessons

- The foundation for a successful PYP is laid during in-school training sessions as well as IB workshops for school administrators and teachers.
- A professional development program focused on implementing and enriching a school’s PYP is a powerful tool for school improvement.
- The time that teachers spend developing the PYP Programme of Inquiry and planners helps to create a strong collaborative atmosphere in the school.
- Processes that engage parents as full members of the learning community are essential to a successful PYP.
- Involvement in the PYP provides teachers the opportunity and support to become curriculum leaders.
- The PYP encourages all members of the school community to see themselves as world citizens.