



THE TRANSFORMATION OF RAINIER BEACH HIGH SCHOOL

In 2011, the graduation rate at Rainier Beach High School was 53 percent. Then the school was authorized to offer the Diploma Programme—which it made available to all juniors and seniors—for the 2013-2014 school year. In 2016, it reported a graduation rate of 81.5 percent.

Rainier Beach High School in south Seattle, Washington, was built to accommodate 1,200 students. In 2011, about 300 students—mostly African American, Asian and Hispanic—were attending the school, and roughly half the senior class graduated on time. The Seattle school district was considering closing Rainier Beach down.

Instead, however, the school community successfully argued for bringing in the Diploma Programme as an opportunity for all juniors and seniors. The idea was to use it as a tool to motivate and challenge students.

Now, about 700 students—still mostly from minority backgrounds—attend Rainier Beach, and its graduation rate for 2015 was 84 percent. But numbers do not tell the whole story.

A number of obstacles stood in the way of implementing the programme, says DP coordinator Colin Pierce, who helped start up the DP at the school and had experience as a coordinator. Many adults and students had preconceptions of what DP students looked like, Pierce says, and that image did not include low-income students and those who had recently learned English. As a result, Pierce says, Rainier Beach had to get adults, including teachers and parents, to understand any biases they might have that would make them think certain groups of students were incapable of succeeding in DP courses. The school also had to help students believe in themselves.

Financial resources were another issue. The programme costs more than the school district provides, so Rainier Beach has had to look for grants and donors. The school's parent-teacher-student association doesn't have deep pockets, and the alumni foundation is fairly new.

To get the participation ball rolling, Pierce and his colleagues focused on getting parents and community members involved and educated on what was different and challenging about the DP. "We wanted to help eliminate the anxiety about participating and show the benefits," Pierce says.

Rainier Beach High School (public):
Grades 9-12

First offered the Diploma Programme (DP):
2013

Total number of students:
700

DP coordinator:
Colin Pierce

Principal:
Keith Smith

“
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”

— COLIN PIERCE, DP
COORDINATOR, RAINIER BEACH
HIGH SCHOOL

So they went to churches, mosques and community centers to make presentations that included sample DP lessons and partnered with Rainier Beach's community organization. While coordinators at some schools choose to focus on the programme's ability to help students eventually earn college credits, Pierce says it is more important to emphasize the benefits that happen while the students are in high school, such as increased confidence in their role as a knower and someone who has valuable thoughts and information to offer the world.

Training teachers was—and is—important. The majority of the staff went to IB workshops, and the school began to model 9th- and 10th-grade assessments on IB assessments. The idea, Pierce explains, was to make those classes look like IB classes. Students thus could be told, "You're already doing IB work. There's no reason to be intimidated by this."

In addition, Pierce and his DP colleagues began going into the sophomore classes regularly to answer questions. They talk with parents and "make sure we're present and known."

While the school already had a student body that reflected many cultures, "the IB allowed us to bring into the classroom a sense of identity and cohesion," Pierce says. "The structure and vocabulary speak across grade levels and disciplines. The learning opportunities are aligned with one another and coherent with one another." The school's sense of its abilities to educate students has been boosted, he says, and teachers are excited.

The school's progress has earned attention from the local NPR affiliate in the form of an hour-long show, a PBS NewsHour segment and write-ups in publications such as the Washington Post and Seattle Times. Low-income schools and communities often are neglected, Pierce says, but such publicity makes it harder to ignore Rainier Beach.

"In many low-income schools, the perception is that students don't measure up to higher-income students. But these kids are just as capable as their more affluent peers," Pierce says. He gives an example: The community coalition sponsored the attendance

of several students at a recent IB World Student Conference, and they felt right at home there.

All of the general education students at Rainier Beach take at least one DP course before graduating. Often that course is English language and literature in their junior year, as that is the only English course offered for that level. About 20 percent of this year's senior class and about 30 percent of the junior class is doing the full Diploma. Classes for the freshman and sophomore years in all departments are structured so that students automatically qualify for DP courses in their junior year.

Planning contributes to the students' preparation and support in other ways, too. "How we plan our lessons and units is the biggest support we can provide," Pierce says. Teachers collaborate in planning lessons both across each grade level and looking ahead to the next level. To identify students who are struggling, each grade level team meets after school every day. Tutors and other forms of academic support are made available. And "struggling is not a bad thing," Pierce says. "It's a sign that you're doing things right" by challenging students.

Students tell Pierce that the program is hard in a way they had not anticipated: The type of thinking they have to do challenges them. Then, after going to university and coming back to visit, they tell him, "This is easy. I am prepared for this." A number of Rainier Beach graduates go to the University of Washington, where most students attended more affluent schools. Rainier Beach students easily could feel at a disadvantage and worry about being stereotyped, Pierce says, but instead they feel confident.

At the same time, parents are excited about how their children are learning in a way that is different from the way they did and that honors who their child is, Pierce says. Teachers like the structure of the DP, he adds. They appreciate taking on the role of a facilitator who draws students out and puts students at the center of learning.

Here is how Rainier Beach High School describes the Diploma Programme in the student planner, handed out to all students: "All Rainier Beach students can participate in the [IB] during their junior and senior years. The [IB] is open to any student who is willing to do the course work. It is not a 'test in' program and is appropriate for all types of learners. An IB education encourages students to ask questions, learn to think critically, and take their time exploring subjects in depth, skills we expect all graduates of Rainier Beach to acquire.

"RBHS is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School, which means that RBHS students have an incredible opportunity to access a world-class education. IB is internationally recognized as the highest quality secondary curriculum available. This program provides excellent college preparation and a well-rounded education. IB helps students explore their strengths and obtain

the academic training they need for success in college and in life. The IB program at Rainier Beach High School is an inclusive, challenging, and flexible program."

That description reflects the school's philosophy that everyone should be able to take Diploma Programme classes. Rainier Beach DP coordinator Colin Pierce is aware of a common concern about opening up the programme to all students. "Oftentimes educators and parents say, 'We don't want to water down the curriculum because kids aren't capable,'" he says. "Students should be prepared to make that choice—if a school is doing its job, every student should be able to make that choice based on preference rather than ability."

