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Aiming for the Middle

A new International Baccalaureate program is raising the game in middle school

By Jay Mathews
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The letter published in the Reston Connection four years ago said the program at [Langston Hughes](#) Middle School promoted "socialism, disarmament, radical environmentalism, and moral relativism, while attempting to undermine Christian religious values and national sovereignty."

The Middle Years Program, part of the International Baccalaureate system, was just getting started at Langston Hughes, and it wasn't the first time an IB program had been slapped around in [Fairfax County](#), W.T. Woodson High School had thrown out its IB courses in 1999, in part because some parents and teachers thought they were too global and played down American history. Syndicated columnist Thomas Sowell reported in 2004 that [Fairfax](#) parents were in revolt against IB. It was an exaggeration, but there was enough of a fight to raise concern about the program's future in the Washington area's biggest school district.

Some parents and teachers at Langston Hughes, and next door at South Lakes High School, where the MYP continued for ninth- and 10th-graders, distrusted a program invented in [Switzerland](#) and alien to what they remembered of their own more traditional middle school days. Other parents and teachers thought the MYP was wonderfully rigorous, with its commitment to global awareness, foreign languages and writing. The differences of opinion appeared to reflect tension between Americans who thought the country was too soft and those who thought the country was too dumb.

Who won? A visit to Langston Hughes this fall reveals that the people favoring smarter students have beaten those fearing foreign influence to an apparently invisible pulp. It is hard to find anyone who even remembers when the school's unusual curriculum was considered a threat to American values. Instead, past and present Langston Hughes parents are greeting an unexpected jump in SAT scores at South Lakes -- the biggest this year in Fairfax County -- as proof that they were right to go with the MYP, perhaps the most challenging middle school program in America for non-magnet schools.

It can't be proved that the MYP helped SAT scores go up. But the fact that all Langston Hughes students are in the MYP, and that the MYP emphasizes skills tested on the SAT, is enough for many parents. Lou Ann Armstrong, who has had two children go through Langston Hughes, says she loves how the program has enhanced her children's critical-thinking ability. Her daughter Sophia, now a South Lakes junior, agrees that the MYP "definitely made us think, and not through rote knowledge, but making connections to the rest of the world."

The Middle Years Program differs from standard middle school fare in several ways. It is a systematic way of teaching that links subjects, relates in-school learning to the outside world and develops an appreciation

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of world cultures. Writing is stressed in all courses. Seventy-five percent of Langston Hughes students -- all except those needing remedial English -- take foreign languages, compared with the 25 to 45 percent in Fairfax County middle schools without the MYP.

James Albright and Janet Croon, the teachers who run the IBMYP program at Langston Hughes and South Lakes, say their program still gets lots of criticism -- not from parents but from the MYP and IB system itself. Each year, they and their teachers must submit sample student work and grades to MYP moderators and wait anxiously to be told what they are doing wrong.

This happens to MYP teachers all over the world. The program for seventh- through 10th-graders does not have the five-hour exams, written and graded by outside experts, that the IB diploma program for 11th- and 12th-graders has. But it insists on critiquing the projects and tests that MYP teachers are giving, and telling them each year in great detail where they need to get tough.

This year, the moderators informed MYP teachers at Langston Hughes and South Lakes, who work together in the program, that one task they submitted was "an interesting but superficial assignment." As a result, the moderators reduced the number of points even the best students could get for that assignment. One of the South Lakes MYP essay tests was panned. A failure to indicate how another task was assessed brought sharp comment. The moderators were also ill-tempered about the Langston Hughes and South Lakes MYP teachers' submission of group work and work based on oral presentations, which made it difficult to assess individual students. The process can be painful, Croon said, but it "guides teachers toward an international standard of rigor."

American middle schools have suffered from wavering standards and stagnant achievement in the past three decades. As everyone knows, middle school grades do not usually count for college, so even parents don't worry about them much. Many middle school educators embrace the idea that this age group should be allowed to sample a number of skills and concepts, but not be required to master them.

That makes the MYP a very provocative addition to American public education. It is expensive, particularly with the optional moderators, about \$104,000 a year, or \$65 per MYP student at Langston Hughes/South Lakes, all paid for by the school district. [Montgomery](#), [Prince William](#) and [Arlington](#) counties also have the MYP in some schools; [Prince George's](#) will have some MYP schools next year; and other local districts are considering the MYP. Even parents worried about the program's foreign origins likely will be impressed with the fact that the other two Fairfax County high schools with the biggest SAT gains this year were [Mount Vernon](#), whose students come from Whitman Middle School, and J.E.B. Stuart, whose students come from Glasgow Middle School. Both of them have the Middle Years Program.

Jay Mathews covers schools for The Post. He can be reached at mathewsj@washpost.com.

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