

Featured IB World School

The reinvention of a school: Ponce and the MYP

By Lillian Mila, Language Arts Department Chairperson, Ponce de Leon Community Middle School, Coral Gables, Florida, USA



Ponce de Leon Community Middle School (Ponce) is located in Coral Gables, Florida, USA. The City of Coral Gables serves as the headquarters for a multitude of international corporations and consulates. Prior to obtaining authorization from the International Baccalaureate (IB), Ponce had great difficulty recruiting students throughout Miami-Dade County, in spite of the many positive attributes of being situated in Coral Gables. Cognizant of the challenge and committed to improving Ponce, Miami-Dade County Public School officials collaborated with stakeholders to find a solution. The IB Middle Years Programme was the perfect answer. Through the vision and annual financial commitment of the Miami-Dade Public School leadership, Ponce has become a model for other schools in the nation.

Before the (IB) Middle Years Programme was implemented, however, things were very different at Ponce. In 1999, as a result of standardized testing, the state of Florida rated Ponce a “D” school. This low rating exacerbated the poor reputation held by Ponce in the community, resulting in low enrollment and challenges to recruit into the magnet program. Consequently, Ponce began to reorganize in order to

become authorized to offer the MYP. In 2005, the year that Ponce officially applied to offer the MYP, Ponce jumped two state rating levels, going from a “C” to an “A.” Ponce continues to maintain its “A” rating from the state of Florida to the present day. This is no small accomplishment for a designated Title I school in which over 78% of the student population is on free or reduced lunch and 89% are part of the minority population. In 2001, Ponce received 47 applications for the magnet program. In 2011, Ponce received 997 applications for the magnet program. That is an increase in applicants of over 2,000%.

A stroll through present day Ponce now reveals a most unique site: a vegetable garden. How many schools have a thriving garden that grows tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, and herbs, among other edible plants? This organic edible garden is part of the annual Fairchild Garden Challenge organized by science teacher, Deepali Verma. Even more amazing, however, is that the garden is nurtured and maintained through the initiative and hard work of students school-wide and has existed for the past three years.

For the past few years, Ponce has maintained an ongoing monthly donation initiative with the Camillus House, a local centre for the poor and homeless. The entire school donates casseroles, clothes and boxed food. The students in Ann Lee’s humanities class have taken this project one step further. Students administer the casserole project. Students collect, record, and organize the monthly casserole donations. The entire school is aware of and works towards meeting the needs of Camillus House. All of this would not be possible without the thriving sense of community that permeates the walls of Ponce Middle.

During a visit to Ponce, it would also not be unusual to see students recycling. A team of students under the supervision of both Eugenio Machado, environments area of interaction leader, and Christopher Marsh, science teacher, regularly collaborate in an ongoing project to salvage reusable materials. Teams of students promote conservation and recycling in the community through the recycling project and other ongoing activities such as the “Dream in Green” initiative.

The 2012 World Languages Competition is further proof that change is in the air. Dr. Corinne L’Hermitte, Madame Patricia Bauer-Riquelm, both language B instructors, Anay Alvarez, Italian instructor, and Ponce’s new principal, Martha Chang, cheered students to victory in an unprecedented win over many other middle schools in the county. For the first time, students from Ponce de Leon Middle School won first place in this annual French competition sponsored by the Association of Foreign Language Teachers of Dade County Florida. Ponce students also won 4th place in the annual Italian competition.

All of these examples demonstrate the vitality of a school that is bursting with life by integrating the IB Middle Years Programme into the existing curriculum. Ponce continues to reap the rewards of integrating IB standards and philosophy into the curriculum. Magnet Schools of America has honored Ponce de Leon Middle School with the 2011 Magnet School of Distinction Award. Magnet Schools of America gives this award annually to magnet schools dedicated to maintaining the highest academic standards through creative educational strategies. In 2004, as the Ponce curriculum was being restructured to meet IB requirements, Ponce garnered the 2004 Magnet School of Excellence Merit Award—the top distinction given by Magnet Schools of America. In addition, Ponce earned an enormous distinction when it was honored by the Florida Department of Education with the 2010–2011 Five Star School Award, which is given to schools that have demonstrated excellence in achieving community participation.

Even though it is gratifying to see Ponce's success being publicly recognized, students are the priority. Students continue to grow both academically and personally. As a result of the IB Middle Years Programme being brought to Ponce, students have a wider vision of the world and are more proactive participants in the greater community as a result of this incredibly dynamic programme.

2012 IB World Student Conferences challenge students to address global issues

The IB recently held a series of World Student Conferences bringing together Diploma Programme students from around the world to discuss how to tackle important challenges facing today's changing society.

Segovia, Spain, and Vancouver, Canada were the destinations for this year's IB World Student Conferences. At IE University in Segovia, students dealt with the theme of *Global Engagement through Social Entrepreneurship*, while at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, students engaged with the theme of *The New Sustainability: Making Things Better, Not Just "Less Bad"*. Each conference was attended by several hundred students. Over 40 countries were represented including 13 countries in the Americas: Argentina, Bermuda, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru, the United States and Venezuela.

Daily plenary speakers inspired students before they divided into Global Action Teams (GATs) to work on plans for executing activities related to the conference theme. The final presentation will form the basis of the student's individual creativity, action, service (CAS) projects. In addition to the daily GAT session, students spent the five days of the conference taking part in enriching activities to expand their understanding of social entrepreneurship and sustainability. "I met so many wonderful people from all over the world and each one inspired me in a very different way," Sydney from the United States, said. "The speakers were the same way. They opened me up to the shocking truth about our planet and sustainability."

Ultimately, students walked away from the conferences having learned something new about themselves, "As the days go on, I am beginning to learn more about myself and the world I live in," Itzel from the United States said. "Every speaker, every GAT and concurrent sessions have given us ideas of improvement and inspired us to become the voices of the future."

As the conferences drew to a close, it became apparent that the students had formed close bonds with one another—"I can't help but realize the fact that I have been touched by hearts from around the world," Adam from Canada said.



Students at work on their GAT projects, which culminated in whole-group presentations

“One of the most vital connections for me was with my Global Action Team,” Iwani from Swaziland, said. “There were about 20 of us and every day we would get together for an hour to work and discuss what we had learned. Who knew these strangers from all around the world would make such an impact and leave such a huge impression on me?”

The World Student Conference at UBC was recently featured on a Voice of America radio broadcast, which you can listen to here: [IB Program Aims to Form 'Students of the World'](#).

To read more about the students’ experiences at the World Student Conferences, read some the official conference blogs:

UBC: <http://blogs.ibo.org/worldstudentconferences-vancouver/>

IE University: <http://blogs.ibo.org/worldstudentconferences-segovia/>

The IB Global Recognition team is currently planning for the 2013 IB World Student Conferences. For more information, email us at recognition@ibo.org or visit the website at www.ibo.org/wsc/.