

# DSS schools find middle way on curriculum

In just nine years, Direct Subsidy Scheme schools have established a distinct middle path between the international education offered in the independent sector and the one-size-fits-all approach of government and aided schools.

The 72 schools in the scheme, which are given equivalent funding per student to the average government and aided school but can also charge fees, are allowed freedom to set their own curriculum, admission rules, language policy and class sizes.

Some leading DSS schools are using this leeway to offer their own brand of international education at a fraction of the price charged by most international and private independent schools. They are setting up programmes leading to the International Baccalaureate Diploma – the predominant qualification in the independent sector – alongside the new senior secondary curriculum that is being rolled out across public-sector schools.

Two schools – Creative Secondary School and Diocesan Boys' School – will be the trailblazers in offering the dual curriculum in the new academic year.

DBS last September launched a pre-IB programme, a one-year preparatory course limbering students up for the IB

Diploma to be launched this September. Forty-one students are currently in the pre-IB stream, compared with 229 Form Four students taking the first year of the three-year senior secondary curriculum leading to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE).

Terence Chang, headmaster of DBS, said: "The IB curriculum helps nurture students' international outlook and their critical thinking by pursuing an inquiry-based learning approach." A total of 41 students had been selected for the IB programme from more than 60 candidates, most of whom were hoping to attend university overseas.

"Selection interviews were conducted to see whether an applicant was suitable for an IB education," Chang said.

"Applicants had to write an essay explaining what makes them a suitable IB candidate. As the IB puts a lot of emphasis on all-round development, applicants' records in community service and extra-curricular activities were also taken into account."

Annual tuition fees for Form Four students in the HKDSE and pre-IB streams are the same – HK\$33,000. But in Form Five, fees for the IB Diploma are HK\$58,000, compared with HK\$43,000

for the HKDSE. Despite the higher cost, Chang said the tuition fees barely covered the investment the school had made in preparing for the IB Diploma.

"We aim to break even after three years," he said. "The teacher-student ratio for an IB class is around 1:10. A bigger class size will flout IB regulations. We have to employ extra staff, most of whom are coming from abroad, who are IB curriculum specialists."

Nicholas Lam Jun-hay, 16, a DBS Form Four pre-IB student, said he was impressed with the IB curriculum.

"Instead of following textbook instructions to the letter, the teachers encourage us to test our own hypotheses in science subjects," he said.

"For example, when doing a lab project, I was asked in the past to do experiments to prove the theories spelled out in books. Now, I don't have to follow what the book says, and I set my own hypotheses and conduct experiments to bear them out. Even though my premise may turn out to be wrong in the end, I learn a lot from the process."

While DBS students have to opt for the pre-IB or the HKDSE programme after Form Three, Creative Secondary School in Tseung Kwan O has gone a step

further, by incorporating the IB into the local curriculum.

Its IB Middle Years Programme (MYP) is embedded in the structure of the local curriculum. In the first year of the new senior secondary curriculum, Form Four students complete the MYP while also pursuing the first year of the local diploma. In the second year, students' paths diverge, with some taking the IB Diploma and others the HKDSE.

Fees for the IB Diploma programme are HK\$78,000 a year, about one third more than the HKDSE, at HK\$59,000.

Principal Cheung Siu-ming said the overlapping of the curricula in subjects such as English, Chinese and maths made the special arrangement feasible.

The IB Diploma and HKDSE complemented each other in enriching students' learning experience, and schools overseas commonly offered the IB alongside another qualification.

"Many state education systems across the world welcome the presence of IB programmes within their schools. Hong Kong is but the latest to join this world trend," Cheung said.

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