

An Inside Look: A Year Long Inquiry

Anne Andersen, MVE Principal

What do we mean by a comprehensive instructional framework? What should it include? How should an education framework reflect the values of the Methow Valley? How can it meet the needs of our diverse group of students?

These were the kinds of questions that came up in district discussions a year ago, when Superintendent Tom Venable published the findings of his months-long, entry plan process. It was during this process that he heard from many valley residents that they would like to see more cohesion across K-12 grade levels, even higher standards for all students and support for teachers to provide the highest quality instruction possible. There are very few educational frameworks that provide this combination of cohesion, high standards and teacher support. One that the district decided to explore was the International Baccalaureate (IB), a framework that is being used with good results in an increasing number of schools, both public and private. District staff and leadership embarked on an exploration of this framework last spring.

At the beginning of the exploration process, staff was asked to come up with questions, such as the ones above, that would guide the exploration, and then to identify ways in which they would like to get those questions answered. These included school visits, talking to IB teachers, looking at online resources and going to IB workshops. Throughout the last year, most staff and some parents have had a chance to do all of these things. Visits were made to elementary and middle level IB schools in Seattle, Tacoma and Bellingham, including Wade King School, one of the “Top 100 Schools to Watch” in the country. Teachers and administrators were invited to come to the Methow Valley on several occasions to speak about their experiences and answer questions. Last summer, 17 middle school teachers attended introductory level workshops in Vancouver, B.C., and by the end of this school year, 12 elementary teachers will have attended workshops as well.

Throughout these experiences, teachers continually asked themselves whether the IB model met all of the criteria brought up by community members in Supt. Venable’s entry process discussions. In December, teachers at both Liberty Bell and Methow Valley Elementary School agreed that the IB framework seemed to be a good fit in many ways for their Methow Valley students. They decided to take the next step in the exploration process, which was to apply to be a candidate school. The candidacy period does not commit schools to become authorized IB schools, but it does provide them with additional resources and support as they begin to implement the framework. Candidacy can last 2-3 years, at which point schools can decide whether to move further toward becoming authorized IB schools.

Visits to IB schools in our region gave teachers and some parents a glimpse of what they might expect if our schools continue to pursue the IB framework. They saw an important set of character attributes, (a “Learner Profile”) being emphasized across all grades and all subjects. They also saw students engaged in inquiry activities where their questions guided instruction about meaningful concepts. They saw purposeful skills lessons embedded in rich, interdisciplinary units of study. And they saw students applying reading, writing and math across all of their studies. They saw how the curriculum was communicated with families so that families could be involved and they saw students of all abilities and interests working together to learn things that really mattered to them.

The district’s exploration of the IB framework took an exciting new step when parents were invited to a Parent Information Night on February 11th. Nearly 100 participants, MVSD staff, parents and community members, worked together in the MVE multi-purpose room on several activities that gave them a flavor of what an IB classroom might be like. There were excellent questions at the end of the evening, which will continue to be answered at future parent forums. There is great hope that the inquiry into an instructional framework that could benefit and excite both students and teachers will excite community members as well, and that we will continue our inquiry together.