

VISTA: Magnet middle school seeks 'international' status

Campus working on acclaimed International Baccalaureate program

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For more than two years, educators at Vista Magnet Middle School have worked to implement a rigorous international academic program that has attracted parents and students to the downtown Vista campus and upped its reputation for success.

That hard work could be officially recognized in November, when officials with the international nonprofit foundation that oversees the program visit the school to determine whether it has met all the necessary criteria to be an authorized International Baccalaureate middle school.

Only one other campus in North County ---- Guajome Park Academy in Vista ---- offers an authorized International Baccalaureate program for middle schoolers.

At Vista Magnet Middle, all students and teachers are involved with the program, which focuses on helping students become critical thinkers and better understanding the world around them.

"We ask more questions about why and how instead of what and who," said Emily Garcia, an eighth grader at the school.

Principal Jose Villarreal said he think the program has helped students succeed there. However, he said he doesn't think it's a "magic bullet" that would work for all schools.

Having the International Baccalaureate curriculum at the school can help motivate parents to enroll their children in the school, said Gardie Lueders, the mother of an eighth-grader there.

"It's just another feather in the cap for this school," she said. "We love it."

Magnet schools such as Vista Magnet Middle don't draw students from within specific boundaries, but instead rely on unique curriculum to entice students to enroll.

International Baccalaureate ---- often referred to as IB ---- began in Switzerland in 1968 as a high school diploma program. It was created by a group of teachers at the International School of Geneva and started out in a handful of private schools around the world.

The curriculum includes an emphasis on lessons that can be taught around the globe.

"They try to make us think about the world around us," said Orlando Corcuera, an eighth-grader at Vista Magnet Middle School. "They try to make us think beyond what a normal middle school student would think about."

It also has a strong community service component, which helps extent learning beyond the classroom, said Jennifer Eckle, who teaches seventh-grade at the school.

A group of students said they agreed about the importance of community service in reinforcing what they're learning in the classroom.

"When we have these emotional connections to our work, it helps us understand it so much better," said Ellie Lueders, Gardie Lueders' daughter.

International Baccalaureate is more of an educational philosophy than a prepackaged program, said Nancy Pace-Skinner, the IB coordinator at the school.

Since it started, the IB movement has grown to include programs for students ages 3 to 19 at 2,840 public and private schools around the world.

Guajome Park Academy, a sixth- through 12th-grade charter school in Vista, has the program for middle and high school students. Rancho Buena Vista and Vista high schools have the program for juniors and seniors. The only other school in North County officially using the program is Jefferson Elementary School in Carlsbad.

Teachers at Vista's two main high schools are working with educators at Vista Magnet Middle School to help bridge the gap between eighth grade and 11th.

The high schools don't have an International Baccalaureate program for freshmen or sophomores, but will offer a similar program for students in those grades starting next year, said Jeff Green, an honors coordinator at Vista High, which nearly 40 years ago became the first school west of the Mississippi to have the program.

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