



**Thomson Elementary  
School, Washington**

IB WORLD SCHOOL SINCE  
**2010**

NUMBER OF STUDENTS  
**270**

IB COORDINATOR  
**Maria Sparkman**

## Embracing diversity: providing children with the tools for future success

Thomson Elementary School, based in Washington, is an American school that has delivered the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP) early years since it became an authorized IB World School in 2010. The school, which teaches students from Preschool (3-4 years) to Fifth Grade, is a rigorous and multicultural environment where students grow into global citizens possessing a sense of inquiry, values, and a desire for high academic achievement.

The school forms part of the District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) system and is renowned for its diversity and academic support to address the needs of all learners. Through making steady performance gains over the last five years, Thomson was proud to be the first DCPS elementary school to become an IB World School.

It prepares students to be active participants in a lifelong journey of learning, utilizing its long-serving and diverse staff to work with families and the wider community to provide an academic program

that prepares students for their future success both inside and outside of the classroom.

### Recognising diversity

The IB's commitment to celebrating diversity and providing a curriculum that allows educators the flexibility to support its diverse student population is an aspect of the PYP early years that is crucial to Thomson Elementary School. "We're a very diverse school," says Maria Sparkman, the school's IB Coordinator. "Thanks to the diversity of the local area, and our prominent location in Downtown Washington, our students are 37% Black, 40% Hispanic and Latino, 8% White, 8% Asian and then the rest are mixed race. That immersion and exposure in a rich multilingual and multicultural environment at an early age is a great way for our early years students to learn and develop in an international setting."

"We believe in the merits of the IB and its focus on students being globally-minded and international citizens, and so it's important for all our students to have that



experience. The flexibility of the PYP early years programme enables our early years staff to encourage and explore diverse perspectives and to be critical and creative thinkers,” Sparkman continued.

The school’s multicultural demographic means that 45% of students are English Language Learners (ELLs) with predominant spoken languages including Spanish, Mandarin, Amharic, and Arabic, with a large number of native Latin American dialects too. “Our staff play a pivotal role in the success of the programme thanks to the range of cultural and pedagogical backgrounds we have on board. 30% of our teachers can speak Spanish or Mandarin which helps us to integrate both students and their families seamlessly into our classrooms.”

The PYP early years provides Thomson Elementary the opportunity to level up students’ academic skills through a framework that promotes creativity and inquiry through play. The universal applications of play-based learning permit the school’s diverse student population space to explore their independence and agency by exploring global themes and connections, regardless of their background, to advance inquisitive minds and take action confidently.

“The PYP early years offers our students the chance to engage with an innovative, flexible curriculum that transcends conventional subjects and teaching approaches. It enables us to foster a cohesive educational environment, characterized by a shared language of learning and a collective commitment to preparing future global citizens,” Sparkman says.

### Elevating the public provision

Although an IB World School, Thomson Elementary School remains part of the DC Public School System (DCPS), meaning that any student from the District of Columbia can apply for a position in school. The school itself is also classified as a Title I school, utilizing the federal education program that supports low-income students throughout the nation, as determined by the number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Its status within the local state education system puts Thomson Elementary School in a truly unique position to have a lasting, positive impact on the students it provides for.

Sparkman said: “Being guided by the IB learner profile and flexible curriculum, the IB affords us the time to go above and beyond the traditional curriculum that DCPS offers. We’re able to advance an educational program that builds creative thinkers who have the agency not to just think critically, but to ask thoughtful and impactful questions too. The depth of understanding across multiple disciplines within the classroom encourages students to make meaningful connections and helps us to promote the idea of being lifelong, reflective learners who have agency in this increasingly interconnected world.”

“It’s important for us, however, to still be part of the public school system that is offered to any child in the district, offering them an alternative provision to what is typical in the area. Especially in our early years provision, the IB enables us to offer more significant experiences where students can be active participants in their learning and explore through a variety of modalities. For example, we’ve

explored with students how we express ourselves through clothing, utilizing play-based learning in a farm play space to understand how clothes are produced, or practicing with dyes in science to see how colors interact. As we get to see them explore transdisciplinary themes from Pre-K through to Fifth Grade, we witness their progress as they begin to explore and understand larger conceptual themes and doing so critically and confidently.”

The PYP early years framework, deployed from Pre-K through to Grade Five at Thomson Elementary School, ensures students’ familiarity with their surroundings and style of learning, supporting teachers in their ability to deliver a unique learning experience.



“It’s the continuity across age groups and competency that makes all the difference to us. It would not be possible without the PYP framework. Students don’t learn on a perfect slope. Sometimes their ability plateaus, spikes, or regresses, which is normal for early years education, but the flexibility and breadth of the PYP allows our teachers to be agile to student needs. Through adaptation, we can ensure that every child has a method of demonstrating their understanding and learning in a positive manner,” Sparkman commented.

### Long-term educators

The success of the school’s provision to date is in part to the low staff turnover rate, demonstrating a level of continuity, commitment and understanding that is reflected in the quality of provision that students receive every single day.

The global recognition of IB’s quality, combined with the PYP’s inclusive and accessible framework, provides staff a platform to explore ideas, themes and methods of learning which elevate the learner experience. “What our teachers enjoy most is the level of control they have over what they teach. Through working closely with DCPS, teachers have agency over their curriculum scope while still meeting the standardized testing requirements of the local system. They can tweak and adjust their units of inquiry to suit the needs of their class, changing methods and styles week-to-week, and not follow a strict framework that state schools may provide,” Sparkman said.

“Our staff work extremely hard because they get so much more out of the transdisciplinary themes, learner profile, and units that the

PYP provides. As we are part of the DCPS, there are times when the central shifts and changes in local state provision could be at odds with what we’re doing as an IB school, but our teachers are experts in taking a curriculum and framework and developing a program of learning that inspires and excites.”



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**MARIA SPARKMAN**

*IB COORDINATOR*