

The "Other" Advanced Program

International Baccalaureate offers a cross-cultural alternative to Advanced Placement.

By Ron Schachter

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The International Baccalaureate may sound like it involves some sort of foreign exchange and a college graduation ceremony. But the IB is actually a comprehensive, demanding, and increasingly popular diploma program for high school juniors and seniors, with a strong academic focus on the world around them

While the IB was created 40 years ago by a Geneva-based educational organization to provide a standardized, high-level curriculum for the children of itinerant diplomats-and while it can be found in 125 countries today-U.S. schools have become the program's biggest consumers by far. As of last November, they comprised 556 of the almost 1,300 schools worldwide offering the two-year IB diploma, and their numbers are increasing by about 10 percent annually.

At the heart of the curriculum is a course in the theory of knowledge, which examines different ways of knowing, the role of knowledge in culture, and the connection of knowledge to responsible action.

The diploma requires the study of two foreign languages, advanced courses in everything from history to social sciences to the arts, a 4,000 word essay, 150 hours of community service, and a battery of five-hour exams in each subject-graded by an international panel-at the end of the school year. (The program also fulfills regular high school graduation requirements.) Along the way, the IB helps to open doors for college admittance and provides an alternative to traditional AP courses.

"As more and more word gets out, it piques attention, and other schools say, 'What can it do for us?' " observes Brad Richardson, the International Baccalaureate Organization's regional director for North America (www.ibo.org/offices/regions/ibna). To hear satisfied IB customers tell it, the IB is doing plenty.

"We looked at it as bringing together best practices, not just in the country, but in the world," says John Murphy, the associate principal and IB coordinator at South Side High School in Rockville Centre, N.Y., which became one of the nation's earliest IB schools in 1981. "The bellwether came in 1997, when all 30 students in the program earned diplomas and then came back telling the underclassmen how successful they had been in college." This year, 125 seniors and 169 juniors are working toward the diploma at South Side High, which houses a total of 1,150 students evenly divided among four grades.

"It's not so much the curriculum per se. It's what the curriculum forces students to figure out through in-depth and rigorous thinking," adds Ellen Linky, the assistant superintendent for the Office of Accelerated Learning in Philadelphia, which-along with Chicago-is one of the largest districts to adopt the program. Five Philadelphia high schools have been offering the IB diploma over the past two years.

The increased rigor of the IB diploma appeals to Doug Nelson, the superintendent of Oregon's Bend-LaPine Schools, which embarked last fall on the two-year approval process to incorporate IB into Bend High School. "One of the things we've been looking to do over the last seven or eight years is increase aspirations and expectations," explains Nelson, whose district is also expanding its menu of AP courses. "Our graduates will be competing in a much more global society. We want them on the same footing with others not just from Seattle and Portland, but from China, Singapore, Korea and India."

An International Education

What also sets the IB program apart, its adherents say, is its deliberate worldview. "Our mission is to make a better world through intercultural learning," emphasizes IB's Richardson. Instead of standard American history, for instance, IB schools teach History of the Americas. (Students at some IB schools can take European or East Asian history as well.)

At South Side High, "the international component of the IB program asks students to place their own historical and literary heritage in context," says Murphy, and the social studies offerings include Information Technology in a Global Society. Even the community service options, such as a recent drive to collect soccer balls for students in the Middle East, frequently cross territorial borders.

Lawyer Chapman, assistant superintendent for elementary education for Cherry Hill (N.J.) Public Schools, who helped start an IB diploma program there during the 1990s, says it has provided more than context. "We were able to show that we had a global society and that our children were going to have to compete with others around the world," he says.

IB teachers, meanwhile, get an education of their own, starting with required summer workshops at IB training sites, followed by occasional weekends away during the school year. The gatherings focus on standards, pedagogical practices, and assessments in line with those of other IB teachers around the globe. For instance, at several internationally

staffed, three-day IB boot camps at Rice University in Houston next month, teachers will develop course outlines and assessment strategies built around greater international awareness-including connections to IB learning communities in other regions of the world-high-end thinking skills, and interdisciplinary approaches. Seminar topics at the IB workshops range from integrating the essay requirement into chemistry to incorporating the service component into math courses to teaching romanticism from the perspectives of English, history, music and art.

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"When you look at the exposure the IB teachers are getting at these workshops compared to what they did before, the difference is night and day," says Chapman. "When we first started it, there were no official formative and summative assessments. IB demanded them before the district did," Chapman adds. "And in terms of collaborative time for teachers to talk about student work and progress, IB was the first to demand that in our schools." An alternative to AP IB school officials agree that the program yields results. Valerie Caveney, the IB coordinator for Mount Vernon High School in Alexandria, Va., sees a positive difference in the school's IB graduates. "They have a lot more confidence when they go to college," she says, "and a lot of them say the college classes are easier than high school."

"It really takes dedicated students who are willing to put in two to three hours a night. And because they're learning such high-level skills, they'll sit for AP exams and pass them," says Catherine Fleegeer, the assistant superintendent for secondary curriculum at Pinellas County (Fla.) Schools, which offers the IB diploma at two high schools.

At South Side High, the year-end IB exams have become the college placement test of choice for many juniors and seniors, a shift facilitated by the opportunity to take individual IB courses rather than the entire diploma program.

"We're not an IB program in an AP school. We're an IB school that happens to offer AP courses," Murphy says, noting that the school's several AP levels in math are still very well enrolled.

Although more than 15,000 American public and private high schools offer AP classes-30 times the number of schools offering the IB-Caveney suggests that IB courses are gaining credibility as a tool for college placement and credit because they provide a richer experience. "I was in the AP program in high school and the thing that motivated me was college credit," she recalls. "But IB focuses on the whole person, and it's a lot more about community service."

The rising regard for IB diplomas is taking place at the same time that some colleges are questioning how well passing AP scores-which for 52 years have been the gold standard of high school achievement-predict students' future undergraduate success. At colleges such as Harvard, Yale and MIT, students still have to take certain introductory courses, even if they have AP credit in those subjects.

Spreading the Wealth

With all the emphasis on achievement, IB programs at some schools enroll a much wider range of students than other traditional advanced programs. More than 30 participants in South Side High's free and reduced lunch program, and more than 40 who require testing accommodations, take either the IB diploma program or individual IB courses. "Our

argument is that the best practices and diverse assessments that come with IB are good for every student, not just the advanced ones," Murphy insists.

What allows a wider range of students to enroll in the IB program than the more selective AP courses, without jeopardizing the IB's sophistication, proponents say, is that IB students need only to achieve a composite score of 24 out of 45 on the final exams. That's a comparatively lower score for passing than the AP permits.

The growth spurt of the IB program at South Side High about a decade ago coincided with a de-tracking initiative, in which lower-tracked ninth and 10th graders were steered into higher-level courses as a prelude to the diploma program.

"That was a more sustainable and much more satisfying approach," says IB's Richardson. "That says something about the range of skills we're looking for. People have understood that it's not just about the bright kids, but the motivated ones and those who have not been sufficiently challenged."

Mount Vernon High School in Alexandria, Va., has gone even further than that. "Anyone can take an IB course," IB coordinator Caveney says, a statement all the more significant since 50 percent of the students at Mount Vernon High qualify for free or reduced lunch and many are among the more than 400 in the IB program.

Of the 200 seniors who will take IB exams this spring—either for individual courses or their diploma—22 percent are black and 14 percent are Hispanic. The school steers IB candidates into preparatory honors courses in the ninth and 10th grades and also runs a two-week summer institute aimed at minority students.

The College View

Getting college admissions offices to recognize high school IB programs has taken some time. "When we first started in the mid-1980s," recalls Pinellas County's Fleeger, "I used to have to write letters to universities and colleges telling them what IB was. Now the IB is opening doors to some of the more difficult-to-enter colleges. It's a credential."

"The IB has been on the radar screen easily for more than a decade," agrees David Hawkins, director of public policy and research for the National Association for College Admissions Counseling. "Many admissions officers I've talked to hold the IB program in high esteem, at least as high as AP. They see the IB as more difficult."

Winning esteem is one thing. Getting advanced standing and college course credit is another, and it's taken longer for colleges to parse the 1 to 7 scoring system on the IB final exams. Caveney notes, for instance, that Virginia Tech gives credit in individual subjects for 4's on these tests, while the University of Virginia requires a 6. Interestingly, the two schools are not different in terms of the AP scores they credit. Both require a 4 or a 5 in practically every case.

"The biggest hurdle is that the IB is so comprehensive that colleges and universities don't understand it. They're built around the College Board's AP model," observes Michelle Sandlin, who is the admissions director at Oregon State University at Corvallis and also sits on the IB North America College and University Recognition Board. It was only five years ago that OSU became

one of the first universities in the country to offer automatic admission and a full year's credit to those with at least 30 out of the possible 45 total points on the exams for the full IB diploma. "We saw how much they were testing out of introductory courses and how high their GPAs were," Sandlin says.

The University of Minnesota also uses the 30-point threshold for letting students skip a year, and California's college system is studying OSU's IB diploma policy, which grants an additional \$2,000 to IB diploma holders every year, so long as they maintain a 3.0 average.

Costs and Concerns

Starting an IB diploma program does not come cheaply or easily. Bend-LaPine Schools has budgeted more than \$100,000 a year to get started and is paying an \$8,000 application fee and undergoing a two-year review process that includes sending almost a dozen teachers and administrators to IB workshops and hosting site visits by IB officials. The training for each teacher runs between \$1,200 and \$1,500, and there is also an \$8,000 annual fee once schools start the program. "All schools have to go through an intensive authorization process," says IB's Brad Richardson. "They need to prepare. They can't just hang out a shingle."

Future expenses for Bend-LaPine will include the yearly membership fee, a subscription to IB's online curriculum center, ongoing professional development, and \$700 in testing costs for each diploma student.

"You have to go in with your eyes open, and you have to understand the financial commitment," says Bend-LaPine superintendent Doug Nelson. "It must fit an overall district strategy for school improvement."

"You also have to have a committed staff. You've invested a lot in training them," adds Vera DaVinci, Philadelphia's IB program manager. That includes remaining in the IB program rather than transferring to a non-IB school in the district.

All of the talk about commitment suits IB's Richardson just fine. "We're not interested in trend shoppers," he says. "We want schools for the long haul." Ron Schachter is a contributing writer.

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