

The International Baccalaureate Curriculum

Selected Articles

Why schools love the International Baccalaureate

The International Baccalaureate is highly prized by university admissions officers and gives students skills they can use all their lives

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By Sophie Morris, Thursday, 10 September 2009

It is a rare thing indeed for teachers, pupils and university lecturers to agree, but representatives from all three groups are big fans of the International Baccalaureate (IB). From a standing start as a niche sixth-form qualification for a privileged few in the Seventies, the IB is now available at 190 schools across the UK.

Recent research carried out by ACS International Schools, whose schools have taught the IB for more than 30 years, reveals an IB diploma is the most respected post-16 qualification among university admissions officers. Though few of them wish to see A-levels phased out, 62 per cent praise the IB for the way it encourages pupils to manage their own timetable, 78 per cent say it is harder to achieve a top IB grade than a top A-level grade, and 73 per cent would like to see it offered in more state schools.

IB students do a broader range of subjects than typical A-level students, taking six subjects – three at standard level, three at higher level – which means they are less limited when it comes to choosing what to pursue at university level.

However, it is not the assessments of the core subjects but the additional components that stand out in the IB programme, and receive praise from pupils, teachers and universities. These include an extended essay of 4,000 words, and "creativity, action, service" (CAS), which requires students (above) to take part in artistic, sporting and community pursuits throughout the study period. The latter element is intended to foster awareness of life outside the academic arena.

Monika Howick, the principal of ACS Hillingdon International School, says the extended essay really prepares students for university. "They appreciate that we do a lot of essay writing," she says. CAS equips students with skills that they will use for the rest of their lives, she says. "Being involved in the community consistently over a period of two years is a really important aspect of the IB. Universities are also looking for soft skills, and it shows they have the balance between studying hard and having the time and energy for other things," says Howick.

A third requirement, theory of knowledge, runs across the chosen subjects and is designed to help the students think laterally about learning and to gain an appreciation of other cultural perspectives.

Liam Howlett is about to begin the second year of his music, theatre and entertainment management course at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, having done the IB at Warminster School. He can't say if having an IB score of 29 (the top mark is 45) helped him win the place, but during his first year he has had positive feedback from his tutors on how the IB has prepared him for the jump from school to degree level. "They all say they really love the IB," he says.

In particular, Howlett is sure that completing the extended essay has helped him through his first year, thanks to the experience of researching and annotating a long piece of writing.

Universities laud the independent thinking and creativity the IB encourages in students – skills which last beyond university and into the world of work – that are invaluable, but very difficult to teach in a classroom.

Plenty of schools are pleased with their foray into the IB. Warminster received its first results in 2008 and ended up ranked 21st in the country; this year, one student achieved 44 points. Felsted School in Essex has also just received its second year of results, and its director of studies, John Shaw, says most IB students have won a place at their first choice of university. When Gresham's School in north Norfolk got a new headmaster, Philip John, he brought with him the IB, which he had introduced at King William's College on the Isle of Man. Gresham's, too, is very happy with its first crop of results. The average score of 35 is equivalent to four A grades at A-level.

Most schools run the IB and A-levels concurrently. The Manchester Grammar School will get its first IB results next year, and has avoided separating the two groups of learners by placing them in mixed IB and A-level form groups.

Yet because the IB is compared to taking five or six A-levels, less capable and confident students might be put off. When Howlett chose the IB, most of his friends stuck with A-levels, unsure about the new qualification. He is keen to point out that the IB is "not just for clever people", despite its reputation for rigour. "I'm an all-rounder, but don't excel in any subject. The physics was really hard, but the fact that I managed it shows that anyone can," he says.

The International Baccalaureate: 'Cadillac' of College-Prep Programs

By John Gehring

If senior year is for slacking off, counting down until Beach Week, and reveling in the long-awaited privileges that come with reigning atop the high school food chain, somebody forgot to tell Gabe Mandujano.

An 18-year-old senior at Richard Montgomery High School in Montgomery County, Md., Mr. Mandujano is taking a differential-equations calculus course, writing a 4,000-word history paper on communications between President Lincoln and Gen. George B. McClellan during the Civil War, and stocking up college credit.

In his spare time, he plays trombone for classical and jazz ensembles, hosts an exchange student from Hong Kong, and volunteers for a legal-advocacy group representing the homeless.

So much for a senior slide.

"I wanted to continue to be challenged and be in an environment where everyone else wanted to be challenged," said Mr. Mandujano, who has turned down an offer from Harvard University and will instead pursue a dual-degree program in international studies and economics at the University of Pennsylvania.

Along with a growing number of other students in the United States and around the world, he found that challenge in high school through the International Baccalaureate program. For three decades, the Geneva-based program has combined an exacting curriculum with a holistic philosophy of education that promotes intercultural understanding in 946 schools in 102 countries.

Richard Montgomery High School went through the complicated application process to become an IB school 16 years ago. Like other applicants, the magnet school had to submit a detailed application to the International Baccalaureate Organization, have its teachers specially trained, and undergo multiple site visits.

Today, the school has two years of pre-IB preparation for 9th and 10th graders before they begin the junior- and senior-year curriculum. Like IB schools worldwide, students also take a "Theory of Knowledge" course that pushes them to think more critically about the foundations of learning and their own assumptions about the world.

Every year, Richard Montgomery High ranks among the best IB schools measured by the size of its program and the more than 90 percent of students earning International Baccalaureate diplomas. This year, the school had a whopping 900 applicants for 100 seats in the program.

"There is a prestige factor," said Charlotte Boucher, who coordinates the IB program at the 1,700-student school. "Higher education is becoming more aware of IB programs. They know it is shorthand for rigor."

Rapid Growth

The International Baccalaureate remains a relatively small program and less widely known than the Advanced Placement program sponsored by the College Board. But a growing number of high-achieving students have chosen the IB route for a comprehensive approach to education that teachers, students, and principals say helps mold well-rounded students better prepared for a world that globalization shrinks more and more every day.

For years, international schools, which serve a diverse pool of students globally, had been longing for a common curriculum and a diploma that mobile students could use worldwide.

The IB diploma program began in 1968 with some half-dozen private schools, such as the United Nations International School in New York City. By the early 1980s, the program had spread and caught on in the public school system. Today, nearly 90 percent of the IB-diploma-granting schools in the United States and Canada are public schools.

High schools offering IB-diploma tracks in the United States have grown from about 50 in the early 1980s to 350 today. The program offers a diploma for high school juniors and seniors, along with more recently formed primary programs for students ages 3 to 12 and a middle-years track for students in 6th through 10th grades.

High school students who want to earn the program's diploma must pass exams in English, or their own native language, a foreign language, mathematics, science, social science, and an elective course in another social science or the arts. In addition, diploma seekers must write an extended essay on the topic of their choice and complete 150 hours of community service.

Some 3,400 IB examiners worldwide evaluate students' work. Each year, about 80 percent of the candidates earn the IB diploma.

Paul Campbell, the associate director of IB programs for the North American region, said schools looking to turn around a culture of poor achievement, as well as already-strong schools hoping to burnish their reputations, generally apply for the program. The process can sometimes take up to two years.

The International Baccalaureate combines an exacting curriculum with a holistic education.

That process became more rigorous in 1989. "Many schools were eager to have the IB name," Mr. Campbell said, "but they didn't really understand the commitment and had to drop the program. IB is not a quick fix. It doesn't fit into our instant-gratification, fast-food culture."

Popular in Florida

When the IB program began at Atlantic Community High School in Delray Beach, Fla., in 1989, about 30 students were taking the courses. Today, 94 seniors are in the program. With 41, Florida has the second-highest number of IB schools in the nation behind California, with 50, and leads the nation in the number of students graduating with IB diplomas.

One reason? A state scholarship program allows Florida students who graduate with the diploma to attend any state university for free.

David Youngman, who coordinates the IB program at the 2,800-student Atlantic Community High in the Palm Beach County system and has taught IB biology for 10 years, said the curriculum appeals to students looking for something more.

"The main benefit to students is they come out with a more complete education," Mr. Youngman said. "You are a well-rounded student. It is truly like doing college work."

At Washington-Lee High School in Arlington, Va., the IB program seems a natural fit in a school with a distinctively international flavor. Students speak 30 different languages and hail from 60 countries. Many are the sons and daughters of military personnel or diplomats stationed in Washington.

"There is a connection this program has with people's life experience here," said Marilyn Leeb, who coordinates the school's 5-year-old program. "This is the top of the line. It's the Cadillac of college-prep programs."

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Research shows that IB primary and middle-years students perform better on international assessments than their peers at non-IB schools

23/05/2012 *ibo.org*

IB Students out-perform their non-IB peers in academic area, indicating high social and emotional well-being.

Bethesda, MD, May 23, 2012-- A research study completed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), on behalf of the International Baccalaureate, examined student performance among IB and non-IB students on the International Schools' Assessment (ISA) and determined that IB Primary Years Program (PYP) and IB Middle Years Program (MYP) students, in most instances performed as well or better than their non-IB peers across all four ISA assessment domains, including math literacy, reading, narrative writing, and expository writing. Particularly strong differences were observed in grade 10, the final year of the IB MYP. The study, conducted with data collected from 2009-11, included 270 schools—117 with the PYP and 86 with the MYP—and 50,714 international students, of which 68% were IB students.

This study follows up on an earlier project undertaken by ACER to report on how PYP and MYP students, grades 3 to 10, at international schools worldwide performed on the ISA relative to non-IB students, from 2007-09. The new study analyzes more recent data, digs deeper into specific areas of study and queried students on their perceptions, attitudes, and well-being.

In their findings, ACER researchers Ling Tan and Yan Bibby, explain: "This research performed drill-down analysis on sub-strands of ISA assessment areas. This sub-strands analysis found that IB students performed better than non-IB students for ISA Reading in all sub-strands at all grade levels except grade 8. IB students demonstrated better performances in Mathematical Literacy in grade 6, grade 9, and grade 10. In expository writing categories, IB students outperformed non-IB students in grades 4, 9 and 10 with effect sizes ranging from very small to moderately large."

The ISA math and reading components are based on reading and mathematical literacy frameworks established by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) exams. The OECD promotes policies to improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

Other findings of note: IB students in grades 9 and 10 averaged scores significantly higher in mathematics and reading than OECD averages in the 2009 PISA. A multi-level analysis found that 'between-school variations' across IB schools were smaller than among non-IB schools in all four ISA domains, implying that IB schools were more similar to each other than the non-IB schools were, with respect to the four domains. Across all dimensions of the primary- and secondary-year student questionnaires, high proportions of agreement were observed among IB PYP and MYP students.

Full text of the research study, "Performance Comparison between IB School Students and Non-IB School Students on the International Schools' Assessment (ISA) and on the Social and Emotional Well-being Questionnaire" appears online:

 [IB ISA report November 2011](#) [PDF, 3.72MB - opens in new window]

About the IB:

The International Baccalaureate, a nonprofit foundation, offers four challenging, quality education programs for a worldwide community of students and schools. Since 1968, IB programs have prepared students to live productive lives in a globalized and interdependent society, and to assert leadership roles in creating a more peaceful, harmonious world. The IB currently operates learning programs in more than 3,340 schools in 140 countries. To learn more, visit www.ibo.org.

For more information, contact:

Nancy Light, 301-202-3144, or

research@ibo.org



Student Marc Bruno works on his laptop at the Sturgis school in Hyannis

The rigorous International Baccalaureate is rapidly growing in popularity in schools across the country.

A GLOBAL TEST GAINS GROUND

BY PAT WINGERT

WHEN PEOPLE CONJURE UP AN IMAGE OF HYANNIS, Mass., they think: wealthy seaside resort town, home of the Kennedy compound, and they assume the local public schools are filled with rich kids. But the people who reside in the fancy houses come only in the summer. The families who live here all year long tend to be ordinary, middle-class people, many of them in service industries. The test scores coming out of area schools tend to be pretty ordinary, too.

But when the townspeople started looking for a way to pull those scores up, they took their inspiration from some of the most elite private schools in the country, and then gave it a populist twist. They opened a public charter school offering the International Baccalaureate program to any student interested in pursuing it, an approach that's called IB for All.

Generally considered one of the most rigorous high-school curricula in the world, IB was designed after World War II for the children of diplomats who sought an internationally recognized diploma that would command respect around the world. To receive an IB di-

ploma, high-school seniors must pass written college-level exams (each five hours long) in six core subjects, including at least one foreign language, covering the material they've learned over the past two years. To ensure fairness, the tests are scored by outside graders. In addition, the degree requires students to write a 4,000-word thesis and complete lessons in philosophy.

Growth of IB schools around the world has been steady over the past 40 years, but it's been fastest in the United States, where it is now in 758 schools. The pace has been particularly brisk since 2000, when more U.S. schools began using it to spur higher

achievement. Because IB requires high-school students to do college-level work, many schools continue to restrict access to their most capable students. Others offer IB for All, but have school admissions standards that winnow out weak students. Hyannis's Sturgis Charter is one of only two IB for All schools that are open to all students. It fills its classes via public lottery. "We don't screen out students with low grades or test scores or those who write poorly," says Eric Hieser, executive director of the school. "If they want to challenge themselves, we tell them to give it a go." Not every student at Sturgis earns the full IB diploma, but Hieser argues that it's still a major accomplishment to pass an IB class. "Everyone here develops the kind of mind and skills that will ensure their success in college," he says.

Senior Taylor Finkelstein, 18, is a case in point. The second youngest of five children, she thought of herself as "just a nice, quiet girl who never raised her hand. I never pushed myself." When IB was introduced at the start of her sophomore year, she felt intimidated. But the combination of small classes and challenging work helped her gain confidence. This spring, she amazed herself by sitting for exams in science, English, history and art. "I thought they'd be really hard," she says. "But when I sat down to take them, I felt really prepared. I've become more of a student than I ever thought I could be."

Despite its successes, IB is not without its detractors. Some critics complain about the cost. IB charges every school \$8,000 a year as a base fee, no matter its size. There are extra costs for the exams and teacher training. In a few places, like Upper St. Clair, Pa., there is unease by some conservatives about the global—rather than strictly American—focus of the program. Supporters note that IB gets funding from the conservative Bush administration. Despite that assurance, the conservative majority of Upper St. Clair's school board voted last year to end its IB program, setting off a local firestorm. Parents who support the program filed suit and got politically active. Last Tuesday, school-board elections were held, and a new pro-IB majority was voted in.

That's the kind of passion driving IB's popularity. Brad Richardson, the regional director of IB in North America, says that in the last few years, IB name recognition has increased substantially. With it will come more growth, he says. "We may now be at the tipping point."