

# The International Baccalaureate Challenges High School Students

European-style education has made its way across the Atlantic to restore a rigorous academic program in American high schools.

DAVID SAVAGE

As an object for study, American high schools have recently moved into the same league as white mice. Almost everybody and every organization concerned about education has the high school under the microscope, and not because things are working well.

The criticisms that led to these studies are fairly well known. In summary, they go like this: the quality of high schools has fallen in the past decade, as evidenced by the long decline in average Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. Out of a desire to keep students interested and in school, high schools offered more electives, many of which were not academically rigorous. They tried to do too much, and in so doing, seemed to lose a sense of their distinctive role as academic institutions.

While clearly more students were staying in school through 12th grade, the academic efforts of the best students fell off. For example, the President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Education documented that students today take far fewer foreign language courses. Its report said

that such a trend was a threat to the nation's security and a "national disgrace." American instruction in math and science no longer match that offered to the best students in West Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union, according to reports from the National Science Foundation. Academically talented U.S. students, rather than being challenged by high school programs of instruction, are often bored.

Now for the good part: a solution to these problems. Well, a possibility worth considering.

Faced with quite different problems, educators in Europe set out in 1962 to create a "joint social studies examination, as the first step toward the establishment of a basic standard." The basic standard was needed in Europe so that high school students in, for example, West Germany, could be admitted to college in Sweden or France. The International Baccalaureate Office, established in Geneva in 1965, laid out a rigorous core curriculum, along with a series of examinations, to ensure that a student who completed the program would be prepared to go to college in any of the participating nations.

The concept of the IB soon jumped the Atlantic, and in 1975, a North American office was set up in New York City. For high school educators searching for a rigorous and structured academic program—one that would

challenge their best students and teachers—the IB seemed to fit the bill, and four dozen schools in the U.S. and Canada began offering it.

The IB is, in essence, a series of course descriptions and examinations designed for 11th and 12th graders. Students concentrate their study in six subject areas. The first is world literature in their native language. The second is a foreign language. Third is a "study of man": history, geography, economics, philosophy, psychology, or social anthropology. Fourth is an experimental science: biology, chemistry, physics, or a scientific study. Fifth is mathematics. Sixth is one of the following: art, music, a classical language, a second option under study of man or science, or further mathematics.

The student gains the IB diploma by passing an examination in each of the six areas. As with Advanced Placement courses, many colleges and universities will give an entering student college credit for the IB diploma—some as much as a full year.

"It's provided a lot of structure and motivation for our academically-motivated kids," said William Kritzmire, formerly associate superintendent for instruction in Southfield, Michigan, where two high schools began the IB program in 1979. "It will certainly cure the senior blahs."

Besides the obvious benefit of the program—better education for the students involved—Kritzmire sees several other pluses for the IB. "It has created great interest among parents, and has given the school a certain added prestige," he said. "The teachers have also taken to it very well. The teachers, like the kids, seem to like the challenge."

"The kids will put out the extra effort if they have something like this to shoot for," said Darlene Lee, an IB coordinator for Wausau, Wisconsin, high school. "We're giving them much better preparation for college now." Lee, like Kritzmire, said the introduction of the IB has changed other parts of the instructional program. Students as early as 7th and 8th grade are taking more advanced courses so they will be ready to enter the program at the 11th grade, Lee said. By 10th grade, the school has compiled a list of students who could succeed in the IB program and then interviews each of them, encouraging some and discouraging others.

"The interest has gone right back down the line, from 11th, to 10th, to 9th and 8th grade," said Kritzmire. Rather than coasting after 10th grade—a com-

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mon phenomenon for many high school students—prospective IB students gear up for even harder work, he said.

Others say they like having an outside review of their programs. The IB tests are prepared, administered, and graded by IB examiners located throughout the world.

What are the disadvantages? Schools have to pay an initial fee to the IB organization for the syllabuses and other materials. Plus, the school will likely purchase other extra materials like textbooks. Most schools also have a part-time IB coordinator who oversees the program.

"Once you get it in place, it doesn't cost much," Kritzmire said. "It's certainly a lot less than voc ed or special ed."

Other drawbacks? "It's a lot of work," said Lee. "It requires far more preparation out of the teachers." But, she said, the teachers remain some of the biggest supporters of the program.

Gil Nicol, executive director of the IB program for North America, believes it is growing in popularity in part because it fits the tenor of the times. Educators have talked about the need to restore a challenge to secondary education, and the IB does that. The need for more study in foreign language has been recognized of late, and the IB includes a healthy dose of foreign language instruction, including study of the culture and history of the other nation. Educators agree the high school curriculum needs more structure; the IB provides that. Academically-talented students have often been ill-served by high school; the IB helps to rectify that.

The IB is not for all schools or all students. It is a rigorous program, one that will challenge even the best students. Some schools begin by implementing a part of the program, and some students choose to enroll in only a part, rather like taking one advanced placement course.

If you walk into any high school anywhere in this country, you can find examples of hard-working students, encouraged by the staff to strive for the best performance of which they are capable. But chances are, when you find such students, you'll be looking at a sports program. There, coaches challenge students to do their best, or better, and they respond to the challenge.

Why is it absurd to suggest that that sort of intensity and sense of challenge should also extend to the academic program? It's certainly not because sports are more important to the student's later

life, considering that perhaps a couple hundred of the three million students who graduate from high school each year go on to a brief career in professional sports.

Still, the academic program can probably learn something from the athletic program. One lesson is that students can and will respond to a true challenge. They don't resent the extra work and the added demands from the instructors but instead appreciate it and respect it. Can you imagine a coach announcing: "I don't want any of you guys or girls to be

burdened by work outside of school time. So we'll hold practices to 45 minutes, and don't bother practicing after school'?"

Maybe it's time to end what has been another double standard in American high schools—expecting great things out of students in athletics while accepting mediocrity in academics. ■

For more information on the IB, contact Gil Nicol, International Baccalaureate of North America, 680 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10019.

## The IB: A Principal's View

I first learned about the International Baccalaureate at an education convention in New York in 1975. During the following year members of my staff at Francis Lewis High School in Queens and I researched the program and adapted it for our use. In September 1976 we became the first public high school in North America to offer the IB.

As principal of Francis Lewis, I was attracted to the program because I felt it offered cohesive structure to the college-level and Advanced Placement courses already offered. In addition, the program's international thrust suited our student population, which consists of some 2700 students, 28 percent of whom are black or Hispanic, the remainder coming from many different ethnic backgrounds.

About 400 of our juniors and seniors are registered for at least one of

the 14 IB classes we now offer. We do not restrict the program to full candidates; rather we encourage capable students to take courses that interest them.

If your school could benefit from a course of study that is equivalent (or superior) to a first-year college course, that has an external evaluation procedure, that has been selected by many countries as their national program, that offers an educational direction consistent with the President's Council on International Education, and that is recognized internationally as a course for all bright students, I suggest you consider the International Baccalaureate. We did at Francis Lewis, and we're pleased with our choice.

—MELVIN SERISKY, PRINCIPAL  
*Francis Lewis High School  
Flushing, New York*

## Sample IB Examination Questions

### Contemporary History:

Discuss the effects of recent events in the Middle East on the European community and the Atlantic Alliance.

### Economics:

Unemployment in virtually all industrialized countries was higher in the 1970s than in the 1960s. What factors contributed to this increase?

### Mathematics:

Differentiate with respect to  $x$ :

- (a)  $\cos^3 x$   
(b)  $e^{3x} \sin 4x$

### Art and Design:

How did the shift from anonymity to individuality transform the role of the artist in society? Was this shift inevitable and did the benefits justify the change?

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