

A Study of the Principal Factors to Consider in the Implementation of an International Baccalaureate Program

In today's educational climate, public school districts must continue to innovate and diversify their programs if they are to retain (and possibly increase) their current student populations. International Baccalaureate (IB) is an enriched academic program that targets the type of students that are often overlooked in the public system. It has long been recognized that all students deserve access to educational opportunities that will allow them to fulfill their potential – high ability students have as much right to this opportunity as those with learning difficulties.

With recent legislation permitting students to move to neighboring school districts, parents have more educational options than ever before. Magnet programs in public school districts could allow governments to provide these options within the public school system, preventing any further loss to the private sector. Such programs could meet the needs of specific students while still ensuring that candidates from all walks of life have access – an area where independent schools have not had much success (Poppel and Hague, 2001). A magnet program like IB could increase enrollment, diversify student and teacher populations, as well as improve the image of the school.

Magnet programs are characterized by 1) a thematic curriculum or unique method of instructions, 2) admissions criteria, and 3) access to pupils beyond neighborhood attendance zones (Hausman and Goldring, 2000). Different aspects to each of these three components were researched with the goal of clearly identifying the key factors necessary when implementing a K-12 IB Program. Initially, a review of the current literature was conducted on the topics of new program implementation, the change process, and the mechanisms of school choice. Afterward, the data collection was carried out in School District #44 (North Vancouver) in the winter of 2005. 78 questionnaires were collected from teachers and parents; additionally, follow-up teacher interviews and parent focus groups were conducted. The results of the study indicated that there is indeed support for the IB Program in North Vancouver School District, with the majority of students and parents believing IB to be a worthwhile educational program.

Research Methods:

Table 1: Breakdown of Data Collection

| <u>Stakeholders</u> | <u>Quantitative Data</u> | <u>Qualitative Data</u> | <u>Methods of Data Collection</u> |
|---------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Parents | Questionnaires (23 in total) | Focus Groups (24 parents in total) | PAC (Parent Advisory Council) meetings at Carson Graham Secondary and Westview Elementary |
| Teachers | Questionnaires (55 in total) | Interviews (13 in total) | Staff meeting at Carson Graham Secondary, Westview Elementary and Lonsdale Elementary |

Perhaps the most obvious strength of the data collection was the combination of instruments used. The quantitative data allowed a larger number of stakeholders to be reached, which allowed trends to be spotted and findings to be extrapolated. The qualitative data provided the opportunity for personal interaction and an immediate view of the parent and teacher perspective. Recording the views of both teachers and parents allowed for a more holistic outlook.

One aspect of the data districts will find especially interesting is that the questionnaire and focus groups were conducted at the likely implementation sites of the IB Program. Therefore, far from being a random sample of parents and teachers, the results reveal receptivity of the program at the potential IB schools and give an intimate glimpse at the factors of implementation related to the culture of the school community.

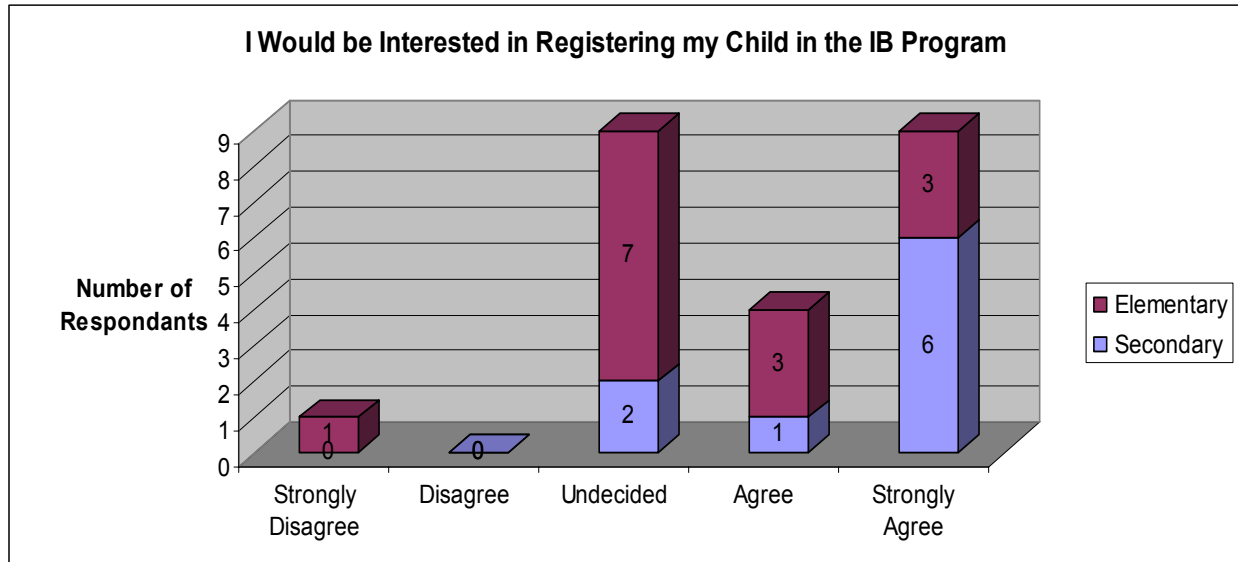
Although the sample was taken directly from the schools being considered for the program, the sample sizes are rather small. It would be a risk to proceed with any serious implementation on the presumption that the results of a limited number of stakeholders are representative of the entire district. For the purpose of this particular study, the intention was to field test the legitimacy of the data collection instruments before using them for a larger scale study. An additional weakness of the study was the fact that the sample was a product of self-selection. Teacher interviewees were chosen based on interest indicated on their questionnaire, while the parents for the focus groups were taken from PAC meetings with the IB Program on the agenda. It was a challenge to access a true cross-section of parents or teachers; therefore, the data seems to exaggerate the support for an IB Program.

Results from Parents:

Parents generally supported the IB Program, with 87% believing their child would benefit from a challenging, academically enriched program. The comments that came out of the focus groups revealed the specific drawing factors, such as “smaller class sizes”, “more motivated teachers,” and a greater amount of resources. However, as displayed by Figure

1, support was slightly more subdued when it came to actually registering a child in the program

Figure 1 – Parental Interest in IB



As shown, the most favourable response came from secondary parents, while elementary parents were more undecided. In the focus groups, several elementary parents emphasized that there should be “more information out there” (which could account for the elementary parents’ indecisiveness).

There were some concerns regarding the programs’ implementation, one of the largest being the potential segregation of the student population. Unfortunately, such segregation is often the price of a magnet program, which is by its nature self-selecting (Hausman and Goldring, 2000). Somewhat surprisingly, the issues of user fees and program location were less of a concern (only 20% parents were unprepared to pay a fee and all but 23% were willing to change schools). However, some Carson Graham parents were quite vocal about their school as the site for the Middle Years and Diploma Programmes. Some other concerns included whether other programs would suffer due to diverted funding and that program fees may prevent some families from participating. As an aside, 7/12 elementary parents had more than one child they would consider registering in the program. Therefore, the Primary Years Program could have a significant market if the concerns of elementary parents are addressed.

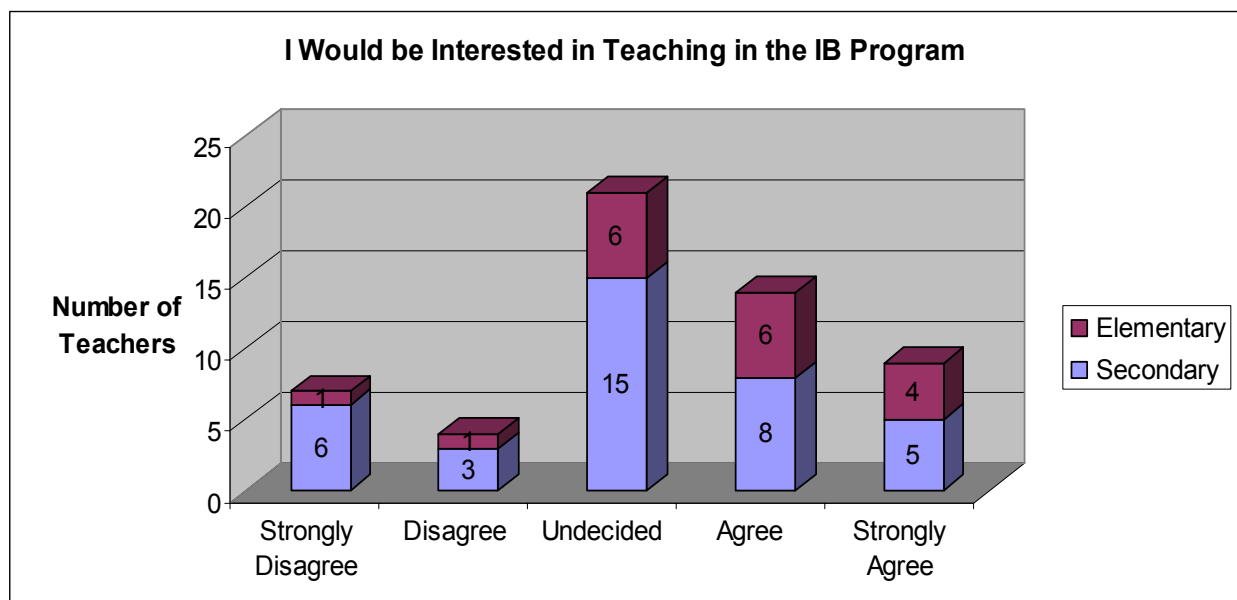
While some parents favoured implementation of the program component that most applied to them, most parents took a comprehensive view of the program’s implementation. In the parental questionnaires, the Primary Years, Middle Years, and Diploma Programmes all received approximately equal endorsement. Additionally, 65% of parents in the focus groups supported implementing all three components simultaneously. One parent made the representative comment, “do it all at once, but do it well.” Regarding entrance to the program, parents endorsed using a variety of criteria

(such as past grades, teacher references and extra-curricular involvement). Interestingly, elementary parents seemed to have substantially more trust in teacher references than any other measure (it being the only criteria that all 11 parents supported).

Results from Teachers:

While the overwhelming majority of teachers supported the program, there were considerably fewer interested in teaching IB. As shown in Figure 2, a substantially higher proportion of elementary teachers (56%) were willing to participate in the program than secondary teachers (37%).

Figure 2 – Teacher Interest in Teaching IB



Generally, interested teachers were prepared to undergo professional development. However, secondary teachers appeared to view this training as more necessary than elementary teachers (32% of secondary teachers were ready to commit to the full 5 day IB workshop, while only 27% of elementary teachers were willing to do so). In an interesting twist, elementary teachers were more primed to take on additional duties beyond the classroom (63% of elementary compared to 24% of secondary).

In the interviews, one common teacher concern was that a possibly elitist perception of the IB Program would result in segregation of both teachers and students. Another anxiety was the consequence of removing the top students from regular classes. Although this move would result in better teaching conditions in the program, the regular classes would lose significantly. As one teacher stated, “it would be nice to have these top students as role models who demonstrate intellectual curiosity.”

Besides the benefit of improved teaching conditions, the intellectual challenge also appealed to teachers (both items accounting for 86% of the questionnaire responses). However, some respondents believed these benefits could be compromised by an increased workload (37% of questionnaire responses). Teachers seconded the findings of the literature, confirming that adequate funding must be provided by the district for implementation of a new program to occur (Fullan, 1991).

Table 2 – Conclusions and Recommendations

| CONCLUSIONS | RECOMMENDATIONS |
|--|--|
| There is demand for magnet programs like IB which would present more options to parents and students. | a) Districts should give consideration to implementing the PYP and DP simultaneously. b) The NVSD should consider a fast timeline of implementation. c) An annual fee could make the IB Program more cost-effective. |
| Financial factors affect which families have access to an IB Program in North Vancouver. These factors include transportation and funding (Wamba and Ascher, 2003). | If the NVSD selects a site school for the magnet program in a relatively low-income area, then transportation will become less of an issue for many disadvantaged students. |
| Elementary parents and teachers are generally less informed about IB than secondary parents and teachers. | a) The NVSD should provide opportunities for elementary parents to become more familiar with the program. b) The NVSD should provide information sessions for elementary teachers when recruiting staff for the Primary Years Program. |
| Clear and open communication between and among school and district staff is essential for successful implementation of IB. | a) Districts should ensure that collaboration time between colleagues be built into the schedule (Fullan, 1991). b) Districts should consider creating a specific position of IB coordinator to act as a liaison between the school and the district office. |
| A perceived consequence of a magnet program (like IB) within a school is the segregation of teachers and students in the program from the rest of the school population. | Districts should put specific strategies in place to facilitate assimilation of teachers and students in the IB Program with the regular school population within the host school. |
| Inadequate funding and a lack of control over hiring could significantly hinder the IB Program's success. | a) A working relationship with the Teacher's Union must be established for the district to gain greater control over hiring (Steiner, 2000). b) To ensure that sufficient funds are available for the IB Program, all possible costs must be anticipated and the program must be an agreed-upon district priority (Fullan, 1991). |

While this study represents the very initial step in the implementation process, it does indicate parental demand for an academic magnet program like IB in North Vancouver (as well as imply a pool of interested teachers). In addition, this study has produced universal suggestions for making an IB Program sustainable in any school district.

References

- Fullan, Michael. (1991). *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2nd ed.). Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Hausman, C.S., & Goldring, E. B. (2000). School Community in Different Magnet Program Structures. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 11 (1), 80-102.
- International Baccalaureate Organization. (2004). www.ibo.org
- North Vancouver School District. (2004). Retrieved October 14, 2004 from the World Wide Web: www.nvsd44.bc.ca
- North Vancouver School District. (2005). Retrieved April 10, 2005 from the World Wide Web: www.nvsd44.bc.ca
- Poppell, J.B., & Hague, S.A. (2001, April). *Examining Indicators to Assess the Overall Effectiveness of Magnet Schools: A Study of Magnet Schools in Jacksonville, Florida*. Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, Wa.
- Steiner, Lucy. (2000). A Review of the Research Literature on Scaling Up in Education Retrieved November 1, 2004 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.ncrel.org/csri/resources/scaling/review.htm>
- Wamba, N.G., & Ascher, C. (2003). An Examination of Charter School Equity. *Education and Urban Society* 35 (4), 462-476.

About the Authors:

Mara Brkich is the English Department Head at Burnaby Central Secondary in Burnaby, Nina Dharsee is the Department Head of Modern Languages at Burnaby Central Secondary in Burnaby, Meredith Fenton is an elementary teacher at University Hill in Vancouver, and Michael Field is the Science Department Head at St. Thomas Aquinas High School in North Vancouver.

marbrkich@yahoo.com
ndharsee@lycos.com
mfenton4@telus.net
mikefield@shaw.ca

This article is based on Mara Brkich, Nina Dharsee, Meredith Fenton and Michael Field's (2005) *What are the Principal Factors to Consider in the Implementation of an International Baccalaureate Program?* Unpublished Graduating Paper, Educational Administration and Leadership Program, Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. 88 pp. An electronic copy is available from any of the authors.

