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So, you want to be an International Baccalaureate School, eh?

So, you think you want an International Baccalaureate Programme at your school? You are not alone. Many school districts around the world are considering the adoption of K-12 International Baccalaureate Programmes. Clearly, when looking at changes of this magnitude, it is useful to evaluate other schools and school districts that have implemented similar programs. What exactly are the strengths and weaknesses of a K-12 International Baccalaureate Programme? As teachers, we wanted to know how IB could affect us and our schools. So we undertook a study to determine the academic, economic, political, cultural, and physical impact an International Baccalaureate programme has on a school. In general, we liked what we found.

In January of 2005 we began our investigations into the world of the International Baccalaureate. Our research adventure started with a review of current research literature related to the International Baccalaureate Programme. From this search we found that the enterprise of the International Baccalaureate Programmes grew out of the practical and educational concerns of international schools as they endeavored to meet the needs of university bound students. Originally, international school authorities recognized a dilemma faced by their university bound students as they prepared for regional exams and requirements while also preparing for entrance exams from the worlds leading universities. Mobile international students were often at a disadvantage due to inconsistencies and discrepancies in the diverse programmes offered by various international schools. The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) was founded in an attempt to address these and other needs related to a mobile, international community of students. The process has been referred to as “an interesting experiment in international education” that has grown to an established and widely recognized university entrance qualification (Bagnal, 1997, pg. 18).

It quickly became quite evident that the International Baccalaureate Programme opens new academic avenues for students and is a programme of considerable interest to many public schools. Do International Baccalaureate Programs meet the academic needs of students and are they really as good as we think they are? Are International Baccalaureate Programmes worth the inevitable student, teacher, and budgetary stress that accompany a programme of this magnitude? In our effort to shed some light on these questions, we examined the International Baccalaureate Programmes at Britannia Secondary Community School and Sir Winston Churchill Secondary School. We interviewed and surveyed the administrators, teachers, and parents involved in the IB programme and we observed a significant amount of enthusiasm for the IB program at these schools. The findings of our research study demonstrated that International Baccalaureate Programs do, in fact, meets the needs of those exceptional students who require a more challenging curriculum and are self-motivated to succeed. The programme definitely meets the academic needs of students. It meets and or exceeds local

requirements for promotion and provides a more than adequate preparation for entrance into leading universities. The programme offers equal opportunity to all self-motivated and academically capable students. In fact, one hundred percent of the teachers surveyed agreed that the programme meets the local requirements for promotion and provides solid preparation for university entrance.

Despite the emerging evidence that the International Baccalaureate Programme is a positive element for a host school, we found a significant lack of understanding about the impact, potential benefits, and potential pitfalls of the programme among key stakeholders. Many respondents to our study were unclear of the academic requirements for International Baccalaureate students. There was considerable discrepancy between answers to similar questions regarding the needs and requirements of IB schools and students. Participants were uncertain if the programme better met the needs of students than other programs such as Advanced Placement (AP). While all participants were very positive and confident that the programme was a good one, they often had a difficult time articulating why.

The impact of the International Baccalaureate programme on the students, staff, and school was multifaceted. The findings of our project indicated that there is evidence of strong leadership, motivation, competitiveness, and cliques among students in the International Baccalaureate Programme. It also showed that students who are currently involved in the programme express evidence of a vested, strong interest in it. Similarly, the findings showed that there is strong interest from other students in the school about the International Baccalaureate Programme. Currently at the study schools (Britannia Secondary Community School and Sir Winston Churchill Secondary School), pre-IB programmes are offered for grade 10 students with an interest in the programme. This practice appears to attract interested students to the school. The findings clearly indicated that the atmosphere in schools with International Baccalaureate Programmes is positive and learning based; that teachers teaching in the International Baccalaureate Programme are enthusiastic about the courses and the International Baccalaureate Programme in general and have a strong belief that the programme addresses the needs of students who desire an academic challenge. Teachers felt that the programme is of benefit to the general population of the school as well, in setting high expectations and standards, and instilling an academic based focus in the school. Overall, we reached the following conclusions about the International Baccalaureate Programme.

International Baccalaureate Programmes meet local aims of education.

The British Columbia Ministry of Education states that the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy (www.bced.gov.bc.ca/mission.htm, April 28, 2005). The International Baccalaureate Programme fits within this provincial goal. It is a complete and rigorous curriculum designed to prepare students for entrance into the world's leading universities. International Baccalaureate students are being accepted into post-secondary institutions at a much higher rate than non-IB students. The principal purpose of the programme is to provide students with a balanced, integrated curriculum that focuses on all academic areas (IBO and the College Board, 2002). Our results

showed that parents (97%) and teachers (100%) agree that the programme provides a challenging curriculum.

Parents (75%) and teachers (67%) also agree that courses in the programme require university level work that meets and surpasses the requirements of their local school boards of education and the Provincial Curriculum. In order to receive an International Baccalaureate Diploma, students must take and pass world standard exams in six subject areas, fulfill a community service requirement, submit an extended essay, and follow an interdisciplinary course in Theory of Knowledge.

The Primary Years Program and the Middle Years Programme are early in their development and, as a result, have few definitive studies of evaluation to support them. The limited literature suggests that both programmes adequately meet the academic needs of students (Singh, 2002, p.1).

International Baccalaureate programs meet the academic needs of students.

Our research study agrees with current literature and suggests that International Baccalaureate Programmes at the high school level do indeed meet the academic requirements of students (Bagnal, 1997, Pajak 2000, and Osborn, 1999). Parents responded with 80% agreement and teachers responded overwhelmingly with 99% that the International Baccalaureate Programme meets the academic needs of students

The International Baccalaureate Programme offers a credible and strong alternative for students.

Our Results revealed a consensus among the teacher participants on the ability of the International Baccalaureate to offer challenging coursework, specialized courses, a focus on skill development, and an opportunity for university credit. All of these areas can be characterized as good educational practice (Pajak, 2000). Furthermore, our interview respondents from both Britannia Secondary and Churchill Secondary favorably described the International Baccalaureate programme. The programme offers an additional choice for students looking to pursue a more rigorous academic curriculum that would better prepare them for post secondary education.

There are many levels of accountability in an International Baccalaureate.

The primary objective of the International Baccalaureate Programme is to provide students with a balanced, integrated curriculum in all academic areas. Students who excel in the International Baccalaureate Programme demonstrate a strong commitment to learning and develop the discipline necessary to succeed later in life. Students in the International Baccalaureate Programme are responsible for making a commitment to the programme, developing international understanding and demonstrating responsible citizenship. Students in the programme are personally accountable for their studies and success in the programme.

Teachers working in the International Baccalaureate Programme are accountable on two different levels. First, they are responsible for taking additional courses, workshops and professional development provided by the International Baccalaureate Organization. This training allows the teachers to become knowledgeable about the expectations, curriculum, and methodology prescribed by the International Baccalaureate Organization. Second, teachers are accountable for teaching the curriculum laid out by the IBO, and adequately preparing their students for the International Baccalaureate exams in each of the six subject areas.

At the school level, the IB team is accountable on many different levels. The team is accountable for student admissions, scheduling of courses, hiring staff, teacher training, and the daily running of the programme. In addition they are responsible for ensuring the internal assessment of student work, liaising with parent and community, and the proper preparation of students for exams.

International Baccalaureate Programmes worldwide are also accountable to the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO). The IBO provides International Baccalaureate schools with detailed curriculum guidelines for each programme and subject area. They also provide teacher training workshops. In addition, the IBO completes external assessment of diploma students' work, and procedures for school-based (internal) assessment of student work. The IBO is also responsible for the administration and grading of IBO examinations. The grading system for the exams is criterion-referenced. This means that each student's performance is measured against well-defined levels of achievement. Top grades reflect knowledge and skills relative to set standards applied equally to all schools. Responsibility for all academic judgments about the quality of students' work rests with over 5,000 examiners worldwide, led by chief examiners with international authority in their fields. At another level the IBO works closely with schools throughout the initial authorization process by offering introductory workshops and supplying schools with application forms. During the process of implementing an International Baccalaureate Programme, which is required for authorization, the IBO advises schools on the materials that they will need and offer teacher training workshops and conferences (IBO, 2004).

IB Programmes can co-exist in a school with the provincial curriculum.

Our research project confirmed that there is a definite impact upon the students and the school by the International Baccalaureate Programme. The host schools were affected with an increased overall academic achievement and increased resources.

When considering the effects of student segregation due to the International Baccalaureate, our findings suggested 70% of teachers disagreed that this was the case while parents were undecided. There were numerous opportunities for International Baccalaureate students to participate in school wide leadership opportunities and to be involved with the daily activities of the general student population. The curriculum provides avenues for students to become involved and play major roles in areas like student council. Parents were undecided on this matter while the limited literature suggested that there was no policy that would actually create a segregated type of setting.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

Our research questions were all answered with with positive responses regarding the International Baccalaureate Programme. Based upon our analysis, we support the idea of implementing the International Baccalaureate programme. However, there are some important considerations to make before making a commitment to the implementation of the programme.

The majority of individuals involved in International Baccalaureate Programmes in the two schools studied are strong supporters of the programme. Clearly, the International Baccalaureate is a good option for the gifted population. It meets the academic needs of an underserved segment of the student population, but it is not a program for all students or teachers. Interested districts should conduct further research in the Primary and Middle Years Programmes, International Baccalaureate Programmes in other districts, and other academic programmes like Advanced Placement before making a final decision.

Districts considering an International Baccalaureate Programme should conduct an in depth study on the actual classroom needs of an International Baccalaureate Programme. It would be valuable to schools to have access to a specific list of teacher, student, and building requirements prior to beginning the process of becoming an International Baccalaureate school. Additionally, a comparison of an International Baccalaureate classroom and a provincially examinable classroom should be conducted. Through this comparison, schools could look at whether the teaching styles differ greatly from one classroom to the next. This examination would allow schools and districts to come to a conclusion about whether or not the training for International Baccalaureate teachers is helpful and a worthwhile expenditure.

Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Programmes ought to be compared. This additional study would determine if one program is better to local implementation and marketing than the other. A combined study of International Baccalaureate graduates and individuals who have dropped out or withdrawn from the programme ought to be performed. As a result, the effect of stress and burnout on International Baccalaureate participants could possibly be determined.

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