

## Q&A with Jeff Beard, director of International Baccalaureate

**J**eff Beard, the director general of the International Baccalaureate program, lives in Geneva, Switzerland. But the person charged with building and improving one of the world's largest and most-respected K–12 academic curricula is actually an American who grew up in the Midwest, graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, and served on a school board for several years.

Beard, who served on Iowa's West Des Moines school board from 1985 to 1992, now oversees a program that is in 44 of 50 states in the U.S. and in 126 countries around the world. IB, as the program is known, was founded in 1968 and today has more than 500,000 students in more than 2,000 schools.

During Beard's recent visit to Washington, D.C., Editor-in-Chief Glenn Cook participated in a roundtable session with other reporters to ask questions about IB's growth in the primary and middle grades and the program's increased outreach to students from low-income homes.

But first, let's address the bigger question: Did serving on a school board help Beard in his current position?

"Yes," he said. "We were going through similar types of growth challenges that we are going through with our program today. Being on the school board helped me understand some of the funding issues that districts face, and how teachers and administrators are trying to make a difference in kids' lives.

"We were a very active board," he continued, "and we spent a lot of time in schools, so I talked to teachers quite a bit. ... My father was a teacher, and my brother and wife are teachers, too. So all of this helped me understand the actual working environment of a school dis-

trict and some of the challenges that schools face."

On other topics:

### **On IB's rapid growth:**

"We are growing at a rate that is resulting in our doubling the size of the organization every five years, so we are no longer the best-kept secret in the world. ... At the same time, we're having to make some major investments in infrastructure. The parent organization is designed for a smaller service. If you look at how we do things today, it's not going to work in 2020. We're already overwhelmed by the numbers."

### **On the program's approach:**

"We do more than prepare students in some of the basics. We prepare students for life. We teach them how to think. We teach them about their roles in society and how they need to behave in society. It's quite a unique program."

### **On extending the program to lower grades:**

"The middle year and primary programs are growing faster than the diploma program. In fact, the primary program is our fastest-growing program. What we're doing is working to link the programs together in a more cohesive fashion. If students haven't taken the right courses, they need to take pre-IB courses. The standards in the middle and primary programs exceed any state standards that are in place, so as a result, any student who is successful in these programs should have no problem taking the requisite national test."



### **On how IB chooses schools:**

"Schools come to us. We authorize a school, and the school then runs the program. It has its own administration, its own governance, and its own policies. The school will set the criteria for who gets into the program. We ask schools what their goals are and what they intend to do with the program. We are turning schools down that are pushing to serve only the elite students."

### **On criticisms that IB is elitist:**

"Schools that have the IB program should have an open enrollment policy. And we're doing a lot of things to encourage that. We now have a scholarship fund to open doors and expand access to the program."

### **On opening up the program to more students:**

"We are really promoting access. We want to reach out and include as many students as possible. In the United States, much of our focus is aimed at Title I schools. In our primary program in the U.S., over half of our schools are Title I eligible, and a quarter of the diploma schools are Title I eligible. We are looking at more and more students who have different challenges." ■

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