

CONCISE RESEARCH SUMMARY

The District Role in the International Baccalaureate

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Abstract

In order to provide insights into the nature of the district's role in adopting and implementing the IB, the evolution of that role, and whether increased involvement can ultimately benefit students and schools, this study analyses one site where the district has played a key role in the successful expansion of IB programmes. In this large and extremely diverse district with a reputation for academic excellence, the IB has evolved from two "stand-alone" programs to a cohesive set of programs governed and administered with active district strategies, policies and personnel. District support for the IB initially combined solid financial backing for the Diploma Programme (DP) with a flexible stance which did not mandate the programme. The district took on a more active role when the Middle Years Programme (MYP) was introduced, by building formal mechanisms to connect those involved with IB across schools, taking advantage of economies of scale, and creating two director-level positions to coordinate IB, among other measures. The relationship between this district and the IB has become so strong that the district's new set of goals for all students mirror the goals and philosophy of IB programmes. There is evidence to show that when the district takes on an active role in this way, student IB participation and performance increases, schools benefit, and the district itself is also strengthened. The district indicated that scores have risen particularly rapidly on state assessments and SATs in IB schools.

Summary

In the US, 90% of IB World Schools are public, which broadens access but also poses a series of policy dilemmas for schools that must reconcile the demands of the IB with local district policies and procedures. At the same time, although the adoption of IB programmes has traditionally occurred at the school level, there is increasing interest in adopting the IB as a strategy for district-wide reform. Given this scenario, it is both timely and relevant to analyse the role of the district in the adoption and implementation of the IB, a task undertaken by researchers from the Institute for Education and Social Policy (IESP) at New York University (NYU).

In order to provide insights into the nature of the district's role in adopting the IB, the evolution of that role, and whether this increased involvement ultimately benefits students and schools, IESP researchers studied one site where the district has played a key role in the successful expansion of the IB programme adoptions and increased student access and performance. In this study, questions focused on why district administrators decided to support the IB, how they went about doing so, where they created new areas of support for schools, what they consider to be their successes, what obstacles they encountered, and what they see as continuing challenges. To answer these questions, researchers gathered data on school, student, and district-level participation and performance in the IB and on standard assessments, and conducted interviews with district and school-level staff.

The district chosen for this case study is one of the 15 largest in the country, with an extremely diverse student population, both in terms of ethnic and socioeconomic background. Although this district struggles with performance issues in some areas, as all large districts do, it has an overall reputation for excellence, with higher average student SAT scores than those of the state or of the nation, and recognition from the College Board and *Newsweek* for its “challenging” high schools. The IB has expanded dramatically in this district, both in terms of schools implementing programmes (currently eight) and in terms of broader access to them within each school. It has also been extended to five middle schools that offer the MYP. Most notably, for the purposes of this study, the IB has evolved from two “stand-alone” programmes to a cohesive set of programmes governed and administered by district strategies, policies, and personnel.

Initial District Support for the IB Implementation

The IB Diploma Programme (DP) was initially introduced into two schools in 1994 as a result of expressions of interest and support from a district board member and both the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent. The IB was seen as a potential way to boost poor performance and slow “middle class” flight from some of the district's neighborhoods, and the two schools that initially adopted the IB had high percentages of lower-income students and were academically low-performing. In this initial stage, implementation and delivery of the DP were primarily considered the responsibility of the two individual schools that decided to adopt it. As the programme's success in turning around these schools slowly became evident, however, other schools expressed interest in implementing the IB.

The district's initial support for IB implementation made it an attractive choice for schools, because it combined solid financial backing with a flexible stance which did not mandate the programme, but rather allowed schools to decide whether to adopt IB or AP, and how to do so. The district made a strong commitment to cover the standard costs of IB programmes, including these costs in base budget calculations. By 1998, it also decided to cover all students' exam fees, in order to boost access for those from lower-income families. At the same time, it offered teachers and students the option of transferring to other schools if they did not wish to be part of their school's IB programme, and left curricular decisions such as language and IB electives to each school.

Expansion of the District Role

As both schools and the district began contemplating the possibility of preparing more students for the DP by implementing the MYP at middle schools feeding into the IB high schools, it became evident that the district must take on a more active coordinating role. It did so by building and maintaining formal mechanisms to connect middle and high school staff involved in implementing IB programmes, such as coordinated meetings between subject area departments, which have been positively received by teachers. The district has also created two director-level positions to support and coordinate the DP and MYP, as well as other advanced academic programs. These directors have helped to formalize cooperation between teachers, to provide a bridge between IB schools and the district administration, and to expand knowledge about the IB to other areas. They have, for example, facilitated meetings demonstrating to district subject area specialists how IB curriculum, standards and assessments function and interact with state and district demands.

The district has also played a key role in providing professional development support to IB teachers, by funding their training sessions. It has been able to capitalize on its size and location as well, sending groups of teachers to training sessions, who can then act as resources for other teachers, or hosting IB trainings locally rather than spending the travel costs to go elsewhere. The district now benefits from a partnership with a local university, which provides a Certificate in Advanced IB Studies for practicing teachers and prepares students for IBO's Level I Award.

Gaining public support from the local community has been a long process, and resistance to the IB programmes has occurred periodically, due to a lingering perception that the IB was meant only for elevating low-performing schools, to a view held by a small but intense group of critics that the programme is "un-American," and to the fact that some colleges don't give the same credit for one-year courses in IB as they do for AP. Today, however, the programme has moved "well beyond" the need to win over parents, according to the Superintendent, due to the success of the programmes themselves, favourable press coverage, and the district's public engagement activity, which includes strategies such as providing brochures and hosting open house nights for parents.

Benefits of the IB as an Integral Part of District Policies

The relationship between this district and the IB has become so strong that the district's new set of goals for all students mirror the goals and philosophy of the IB programmes, although they do not specifically name the IB. These goals include being able to communicate in two languages, understanding the interdependence of countries and cultures, developing essential life skills such as critical thinking and lifelong learning, and contributing to the community at the local, national, and global levels. The IB is thus no longer an "add-on" programme, or merely a positive force in improving particular schools, but also an important piece of the district's general reform efforts and an integral way to achieve its goals. District staff looked at IB enrollment and the earning of IB certificates or diplomas as the most significant measure of success and make note of how quickly state assessment and SAT scores have risen at IB schools.

This case study illustrates how considerable progress in supporting the IB programmes can be made when the district has a high level of coherence in reform policy, develops strong connections across schools and staff, supports professional development, and makes solid financial and personnel commitments. There is evidence to show that when the district takes on an active role in this way, student IB participation increases, and performance both in the IB and other assessments improves. Schools also benefit from increased district involvement, as they are provided with financial, political, and professional support to build their programmes and create more positive learning climates. Finally, the benefits of a more active role also return to the district, enhancing overall academic performance, reducing costs, and increasing efficiency and revitalizing the professional community.

This summary was developed by the IB Research Department. For more information about IB research, e-mail the IB Research Department at ibru@ibo.org.