International School of Düsseldorf (private): Diploma Programme, Middle Years Programme, Primary Years Programme

First offered the DP: 1977

Total number of students: 1,080

DP coordinator: Barry O’Farrell

Head of school: Simon Head

The DP treats young people like individuals, not recipients of knowledge.

— BARRY O’FARRELL, DP COORDINATOR, INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF DÜSSELDORF
At ISD, O’Farrell recognizes that DP students appreciate having some choice about the classes they take and what they do within those classes. “They like being part of those decisions,” he says, “and enjoy the range of subjects.” They also like the way the DP is structured in terms of bigger projects rather than having assessments every few weeks. And even students who may struggle a bit with the discipline it requires end up liking the challenge of the programme, he adds.

Also appealing to students are the community service options at ISD. Projects are available locally, elsewhere in Europe, and in Africa and Asia. With thousands of refugees pouring into Germany, some come to Düsseldorf. ISD students help care for children while their parents sort out official paperwork. The school also arranges for students to work with Habitat for Humanity in Eastern Europe. At ISD’s sister school In Tanzania, ISD students run a summer school program for students preparing for local exams. The ISD students not only teach but do fundraising for school supplies and medicine. Another community service project focuses on support for an orphanage in Laos. “It’s not tourism,” O’Farrell notes. “The whole point is that others benefit.”

In addition to supporting community service options for students, ISD provides financial support to DP teachers who want to attend an International Baccalaureate (IB) conference or take professional development courses online. Knowing that teachers benefit from being IB examiners, the school encourages that and other ways to grow professionally by funding opportunities for professional development for one-third of them each year. Last year, more than 15 teachers were IB examiners. Among them is O’Farrell, who is a principal examiner for biology extended essays in addition to teaching biology, chemistry, and Theory of Knowledge.

Having good colleagues who are willing to go the extra mile, whether it’s being an examiner or making things happen as they’re supposed to, O’Farrell says, is essential to growing the DP. He also points out that the school has a university counseling department that helps students with university applications. Those counselors are critically important, he says, as are the counselors who help students when they run into academic, social, or emotional difficulties. Backing all of them, he adds, are good administrators who understand the programme and the need to keep families well-informed.

As at most schools, some International School of Düsseldorf students find they need a little extra academic support. “We identify students who are at risk, based on in house assessments, and we assign these students to the study skills course,” says Diploma Programme coordinator Barry O’Farrell.

The skills course focuses on time management, how to effectively take notes, how to revise written work, and how to prepare well for exams. It is currently offered in the 11th and 12th grades (Year 12 and 13); the school is also looking for ways to expand this offering.

Students may stay in the skills course for the full year or, if they make enough progress, only one semester. Any student who asks to take the course is allowed to enroll. “The study skills program is really important,” O’Farrell says. “We have had it for a couple of years, and it is bearing fruit quite well.”

Everyone at the school believes in the Diploma Programme, O’Farrell says. “We strongly believe that success in the Diploma is not just a matter of how many points you get”—regardless of that number, the Diploma prepares you well.