

PERSEVERANCE PAYS OFF

The International School of Düsseldorf was one of the first schools to offer the Diploma Programme. Some 40 years later, the school continues to believe in the IB pedagogy.

When the International School of Düsseldorf (ISD) began to offer the Diploma Programme (DP) in 1977, one obstacle arose immediately: The local state government authorities did not recognize the programme as a path into German universities for German students. Fortunately, the first DP coordinator, Reiner Guertler, was willing and able to fight the necessary battles. Today, the programme is recognized, although there are requirements that DP students must meet.

Other schools might not have persevered in growing the Diploma Programme, given such a challenging start. But ISD has a “strong commitment to the ideal of the Diploma and the fact that it represents a very sound education,” says current DP coordinator Barry O’Farrell. And while the school would like to offer the programme to more students, O’Farrell says, the physical plant currently limits growth. In addition, as a private school, ISD doesn’t receive funding from the government for the diploma years.

DP students who come to ISD from all over the world—50 nations are represented in the student body—can learn a unique range of skills, O’Farrell says. The programme helps them keep their minds open, and it fosters acquiring skills and thinking strategies. “The DP treats young people like individuals, not recipients of knowledge,” he says.

Students are well prepared for university or whatever they choose to do after they leave ISD, whether they appreciate that immediately or not. When O’Farrell speaks with alumni a few years after graduation, he says, they have nothing but good things to say about the programme and how it prepared them so well for university.

Among all the elements of the DP that help students learn, the one that O’Farrell highlights is the extended essay, which he sees as preparing students for the independent research that is so important at university. The research and analysis it requires are essential.

**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

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— 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 prepping 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."



DP students at ISD's 'sister' school in Tanzania, Moringe Secondary School.



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.