



Case studies of International Baccalaureate Career-related Programmes that yield successful workforce pathways in the United States

Summary

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Overview and study context

The International Baccalaureate's (IB) Career-related Programme (CP) offers a rigorous pathway that integrates academic learning with career-focused preparation, expanding access to college and career opportunities in the United States. Research shows that well-designed Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs increase student engagement, improve graduation rates, and better prepare students for postsecondary education and the workforce (Alfield et al., 2013; Symonds et al., 2011). The most effective CTE programs are aligned with labor-market needs, built on partnerships with colleges and employers, and designed around the needs and experiences of learners (Advance CTE, 2021; Imperatore and Hyslop, 2018). The CP emphasizes flexibility and contextual relevance, enabling schools to tailor programming to local industry demands and student interests by combining **career-related studies** with Diploma Programme (DP) courses and the distinctive CP core.

Career-related studies, offered and awarded by schools, have a clear career focus and can prepare students for further education, internships, apprenticeships, or direct employment in a designated field. They emphasize applied learning, enabling students to develop theoretical understanding and broad-based skills through authentic, real-world contexts (International Baccalaureate, 2021).

WestEd conducted a qualitative case study examining the career-related studies of five US high schools offering the CP. Using the Success Case Method (Brinkerhoff, 2003), the study explores how career-related studies support transferable skill development, strong community partnerships and integrated instruction. Researchers conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with CP coordinators, educators, alumni, and community partners across the five case-study schools, which were selected for their geographic, demographic and programmatic diversity.

School case studies

The following five case-study vignettes illustrate successful career-related studies in diverse contexts. Each case highlights how schools integrate career-related studies with academic programming, build strong partnerships with local industries and higher education institutions, and engage stakeholders to support college- and career-ready pathways. While all follow the CP framework, the vignettes showcase distinct approaches to curriculum design, partnership development and student engagement, offering practical insights into effective and sustainable programming.

School A: A career technical education–integrated model

Context and programme structure

School A is a large public high school where the CP is embedded in a districtwide CTE academies model. The programme engages students in career exploration from 9th grade and offers **11 career-related study** options, enabling students to specialize and earn industry credentials. Within this structure, the CP functions as an extension of the district’s career pathways, supporting participation and long-term sustainability.

Partnerships and integration

A distinctive feature of School A’s CP is its integration with local industry and higher education. The Chamber of Commerce functions as a critical intermediary, ensuring employer engagement in curriculum design, internships and apprenticeships. In parallel, a technical college offers dual-credit courses taught by certified high school instructors, enabling students to earn credentials and industry-recognized certifications before graduation.

Student outcomes

School A students often graduate with early-college credits, industry credentials and clarified career interests, frequently pursuing postsecondary pathways aligned with their CP career-related studies. Employers and postsecondary partners report that graduates often return to local institutions and workplaces, suggesting that the CP can support the development of a sustainable regional workforce.

School A profile (2024–2025)

Total enrollment: approx. 1,800

CP enrollment: approx. 30

Academies (4)

- Freshman academy
- Business and computer science
- Health, education and IB leadership
- Information technology, engineering, and culinary arts

Career-related study options (11)

- Accounting
- Biomedical sciences
- Business
- Computer science
- Construction
- Culinary arts
- Education
- Engineering
- Health services
- Manufacturing
- Marketing

School B: An IB-for-all model with guaranteed internships

Context and programme structure

School B is a public charter school serving students from 6th to 12th grade. The school offers the DP and CP, with an IB-for-all approach in which every student takes at least one IB course in grades 11 and 12. Career exploration begins in the middle grades through electives across **four career-related study** options, enabling students to make informed program choices by 11th grade.

Partnerships and integration

A central feature of School B's CP is its integration with city-managed internships and national career-technical student organizations (CTSOs). Every CP student is guaranteed a paid internship through a centralized youth employment program, easing placement burdens and increasing access. Partnerships with higher education organizations provide early-college credit through portfolio assessment, while CTSOs extend career learning beyond the classroom.

Student outcomes

School B's CP provides comprehensive preparation for postsecondary education and workforce success. Students develop workplace skills, particularly in programming, problem-solving and collaboration. These skills are supported by the personal and professional skills course, and by internships and extracurricular activities that build financial literacy, time management, leadership, and communication. Most CP students enter four-year universities in high-demand fields such as computer science, engineering, health sciences, and media production.

School B profile (2024–2025)

Total enrollment: approx. 1,600

CP enrollment: approx. 90

Career-related study options (4)

- Computer science
- Engineering
- Health sciences
- Media production

School C: A career technical education integration model with strong industry alignment

Context and programme structure

School C is a large, urban high school. The CP is embedded within a district that supports more than 100 IB programmes and has strong CTE infrastructure. Drawing on **nine** long-standing, district-certified CTE pathways, the CP at School C benefits from well established, credentialed programs that predate CP introduction. Outreach begins through middle school engagement and structured guidance in 9th grade to support informed **career-related study** decisions by the end of 10th grade.

Partnerships and integration

A hallmark of School C's CP is its systematic alignment with industry partners and postsecondary institutions. A full-time CTE coordinator works with employers, unions and trade organizations on curriculum design, student mentoring and team-based challenges. Industry input informs curriculum revisions, and digital media pathways integrate tools such as artificial intelligence and portfolio development. Postsecondary partners offer dual-credit opportunities, while industry certifications strengthen students' workforce readiness. The programme also emphasizes community-oriented projects that provide students with experiential learning connected to local needs.

Student outcomes

School C's CP cultivates transferable skills, career adaptability and long-term employability. Its rigorous workload builds time management skills and accountability, while projects and reflective practice enhance communication and confidence. Some students graduate with certifications and enter technical careers directly, and others pursue postsecondary study, reflecting the programme's dual focus on workforce readiness and preparation for college.

School C profile (2024–2025)

Total enrollment: approx. 1,200

CP enrollment: approx. 60

Career-related study options (9)

- Automotive technology
- Carpentry
- Culinary arts
- Digital media
- Electricity
- Game programming
- Heating, ventilation and air conditioning
- Modern machine technology
- Welding

School D: An IB-for-all model with apprenticeship-style learning

Context and programme structure

School D is a large, public IB-for-all high school, where all students begin in the Middle Years Programme before selecting the DP or CP in 10th grade. At School D, CP students choose from **10 career-related study** pathways, across a range of fields. This inclusive and flexible design supports students with varied academic profiles and postsecondary aspirations, reinforcing the CP's role as both a rigorous and adaptable pathway.

Partnerships and integration

School D features an apprenticeship-in-the-classroom model, in which CTE instructors from various industries provide hands-on instruction. Partnerships with local employers offer recurring internships, many of which lead to future employment opportunities. A dedicated internship coordinator manages these relationships to ensure placements are meaningful and aligned with students' career pathways. In addition, a local college provides dual-enrollment courses at the high school, expanding access to college-level coursework linked to CTE pathways.

Student outcomes

School D's CP emphasizes credential attainment, professionalism and confidence-building. Students can earn stackable industry certifications for immediate employment or continued training. They also apply learning through internships that often lead to job offers, and develop professional behaviors such as punctuality, communication and workplace etiquette. Many graduates continue into two- or four-year postsecondary institutions aligned with their pathways, reflecting the CP's dual role in fostering career clarity and postsecondary readiness.

School D profile (2024–2025)

Total enrollment: approx. 2,200

CP enrollment: approx. 90

Career-related study options (10)

- Automotive technology
- Child development
- Construction management and architecture
- Business administration and career development
- Criminal justice and law enforcement
- Healthcare professions
- Hospitality and tourism management
- Information technology and cybersecurity
- Naval junior reserve officers' training corps
- Engineering

School E: A service-learning model in a college-going culture

Context and programme structure

School E is a suburban public high school that situates its CP within a strong college-going culture, with programming designed to prepare students for four-year postsecondary institutions. Staff emphasize holistic student development, highlighting agency, relevance, and civic responsibility. Students choose from **five career-related study** options and also design and implement a service-learning project under structured faculty mentorship.

Partnerships and integration

School E maintains a large network of more than 100 non-profit partners that anchors its experiential learning model, giving students opportunities to lead projects such as fundraisers, donation drives and public awareness campaigns. Parents also support professional skill-building by participating in mock interviews and offering feedback on professionalism and presentation skills. Rather than emphasizing dual-credit options or industry certifications, the school centers applied learning in service-based partnerships that connect students with community needs.

Student outcomes

The CP at School E develops transferable professional skills and a strong civic orientation, with project-based learning fostering communication, self-management, teamwork, and leadership. Informal tracking suggests that students graduate with competitive résumés, confidence in professional settings and the ability to articulate their experiences, with some returning to partner organizations as interns or pursuing non-profit and human-services careers. Overall, outcomes center on postsecondary readiness and civic engagement rather than immediate job placement or certifications.

School E profile (2024–2025)

Total enrollment: approx. 1,000

CP enrollment: approx. 70

Career-related study options (5)

- Business
- Life and health sciences
- Political science and law
- Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
- Visual and performing arts

Cross-case analysis

Challenges in career-related study delivery

Across the case-study schools, recurring challenges affected the provision of career-related studies. Schools commonly face scheduling pressures, staffing shortages and limited numbers of IB-trained or dual-credit-certified instructors. These factors constrain career-related study delivery. While partnerships are central to career-related studies, shifting labor-market conditions and growing student participation can strain internship capacity, highlighting the need for strong intermediary partners to sustain high-quality, equitable opportunities.

Enablers of effective career-related studies

Analysis across the five case-study sites revealed **three interrelated success factors** that seem to underpin **successful career-related studies**. Lessons from the five case-study schools highlight the following practices that support successful career-related studies.

1. Cultivating postsecondary readiness and career pathways

- Schools intentionally develop transferable professional skills such as communication, adaptability and time management.
- Programmes provide clear, structured pathways to postsecondary opportunities through dual credit, industry certifications and aligned college programming.
- Early career exploration helps students clarify goals and make informed postsecondary and career decisions.

2. Building enduring community and workforce partnerships

- Schools sustain collaboration with employers, higher education institutions and community organizations to provide authentic work-based learning experiences.
- Programmes strategically align with local labor-market needs through employer engagement, apprenticeships and internships.
- Strong, shared commitment from school and community stakeholders supports the long-term success of career-related studies.

3. Career-integrated learning and teaching

- Schools implement coordinated instructional models with clearly defined staffing structures and roles.
- Industry-experienced educators incorporate “apprenticeship in the classroom” approaches into daily instruction.
- Where available, schools integrate the CP with existing CTE infrastructure to strengthen programme coherence.

Conclusion

Successful career-related studies emerge from the combination of cultivating postsecondary readiness, building strong community and workforce partnerships, and embedding career-focused learning into daily instruction. These elements help to create sustainable pathways that align with local labor-market needs and provide authentic, work-based learning experiences. In this way, career-related studies equip students with transferable skills and clear pathways to further education, training or employment in their field of interest.

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This summary was developed by Emily VanderKamp. A copy of the full report is available at: www.ibo.org/en/research/. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

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