The District Role
In International Baccalaureate

Supported by the
U.S. Department of Education,
API Initiative

October 2008
The District Role in IB

Introduction

Since its founding in 1968 as a “programme for internationally mobile students preparing for university,” the International Baccalaureate has developed a strong reputation for a rigorous curriculum and assessment system, and for an IB Diploma now recognized by universities around the world as a “gold standard” in college preparation. It has grown to serve more than 600,000 students in 2,300 schools across 127 countries. While many of its early adopters were private schools, now more than half of the IB schools world-wide, and 90% of IB schools in the U.S. are public schools.

Adoption and implementation of IB programs, both the original Diploma Programme and the newer Middle Years (grades 6 to 10) and Primary Years Programmes, have traditionally occurred at the level of the school. It has been to or through individual schools that the IB organization provides services including curriculum and assessment for students, publications and professional development for teachers, and support for schools through application and authorization processes and in periodic reviews. As the IB website proclaims: “IB World schools are our customers.”

Now, however, there is increasing interest in adopting IB as a strategy for district reform, in a concerted effort to improve academic performance and educational opportunities across multiple schools. According to 2008 reports, IB is now working with more than 500 districts in the U.S., and while many (55%) follow the traditional pattern of sponsoring a single site, some are adopting more than 10 IB programs. Indeed, 79% of IB World schools in the U.S. are now in districts with more than one program.

What is, or could be, the role of the district in the adoption and implementation of IB? When the majority of IB schools in the U.S. are public schools, many of which according to our recent studies (Siskin, 2008), struggle with reconciling the demands of IB with differing district procedures and policies, the question of district role is a relevant one. At a time when an increasing number of districts are contemplating introducing IB as part of a larger reform strategy, the question is particularly timely.

To explore that question, researchers from the Institute for Education and Social Policy at NYU selected one site that has earned a reputation success in both participation levels and performance in its school programs, and as a leader for its role—as a district—in the expansion and support of those programs. They have been engaged in IB work for many years and through multiple administrations; they have expanded IB to eight high schools, extended IB offerings to provide MYP in middle schools, and evolved from two individual “school-based” programs to a set of programs, with district strategies, policies, and personnel in place. Our questions focused on why they made that choice and how they went about implementing it, where they created new structures or supports for schools, and what evidence they point to as markers of success (or pitfalls to avoid). Our hope was to learn by studying what they have learned by doing, and to share what they have learned with other districts and schools.
A Case Study of District Strategy

IB began, in this District, the way it begins in most places-- with a few individual people who brought the idea into an individual school--or in this case two schools. These schools began offering the Diploma Programme back in 1994, and while they had support from the Superintendent and a strong advocate on the school board, IB was very much understood as a “school-based” program.

Some fifteen years later, IB has **expanded** dramatically in the District. There are now eight high schools offering IB. Last year, they gave more than 5400 exams (with 76.9% scored at 4 or above) and awarded 277 Diplomas. Moreover, they have expanded access within schools, so that now enrollment in IB is now likely to reflect the demographics of enrollment in the school. They have **extended** the programs as well: four of these high schools are now ‘teamed’ with five middle schools to offer MYP in grades 6 to 10, so that more students will know about and be prepared for the Diploma Programme. Moreover, IB has also **evolved**, from two individual “school-based” and “stand-alone” programs to a set of programs, with **district** strategies, **district** policies, and **district** personnel in place for their expansion, support, and coherence.

Both the spread of IB and the success of its students, whether measured by enrollments, exams passed, or Diplomas awarded, make IB in this district quite distinctive. But what is most distinctive is this evolutionary shift, from school-based program to district strategy. When the large majority of IB World schools in the U.S. are public schools, and when the interest from districts in adopting IB as part of a strategy of educational reform and school improvement is increasing, the question of district role particularly relevant and timely. What is, and can be, the role of the district? How does that role evolve? Does their increased involvement benefit students and schools? What do they do? What have they learned? What are they still working on?

To explore those questions, researchers from the Institute for Education and Social Policy at NYU spent several days in the District in late spring of 2008, visiting schools and central offices, and gathering data on school, student, and district level participation and performance in IB and on standard assessments. We interviewed district and school-level staff involved with the oversight and implementation of IB programmes (both DP and MYP). Our conversations focused on implementation of IB as a **district strategy**, on its history and the particular policies and practices in place to make the district function cohesively as an IB district, the issues and obstacles they encountered along the way and the ways they worked to overcome them. Additionally, we were interested in what they see as continuing challenges yet to be resolved. Across the district and within the schools, staff were willing to spend time with us, generous and gracious with their insights, and eager to offer help to colleagues in other districts considering or undertaking similar work.
The District Context

The District is one of the 15 largest in the country, with an area of almost 400 square miles and a population of more than one million. It serves almost 170,000 students in 196 schools and centers, with 137 elementary schools, 22 middle schools, and 25 high schools, as well as a number of alternative options. Indeed, it offers a vast and diverse array of programs, including career and tech academies, focus schools, immersion programs, G&T programs, and an academic magnet school.

The district is “extremely diverse” in terms of its students as well, according to its Superintendent. There are high numbers of immigrant students, who come from “more than two hundred countries and speak more than one hundred languages,” with particularly high enrollments of Hispanic, Korean, Chinese and Indian students, and approximately 13% of the District’s students are classified as English Language Learners (ELL). As with any large district, however, those ‘average’ percentages are not evenly distributed across neighborhoods or schools: the District’s ethnic group report shows overall figures of 48% White, 11% African American, and 17% Hispanic, but individual schools range from 27 to 74% White; from 1.4 to 34% African American; from 3.3 to 39% Hispanic—and in all cases, the schools with the highest percentages of students of color are IB schools. Students are diverse economically as well, with approximately 20% qualifying for Free or Reduced Lunch (FRL) across the District, but again with marked differences among schools. In one school half the students qualify for FRL and ELL, and there is talk of “gangs” and “gun violence;” in another a teacher talks of having the “mansions along the river” and the “apartments along the highway” with little in the middle; others skew heavily toward middle and upper middle class. Those disparities have lead to long held tensions in the district, and early discussions about adopting IB centered around “targeting” schools with relatively high needs: high percentages of low-income families, and low percentages of high scores. The two schools that originally adopted IB certainly fit those criteria, and advocates hoped that IB’s rigor and reputation would bring a “boost” to both academic performance and local reputations in schools that needed it most.

What all schools here do have in common is being in a District with a “tradition of excellence” – a reputation for their commitment to academics, and a strong articulation of the importance of student success, even as they struggle with performance issues that all large districts face. Administrators point out that more than 90% of seniors graduate, and 91% of graduates go on for post secondary education (although about ¼ of the ninth graders do not make it to 12th grade). Local newspapers give considerable coverage to test scores, and to schools that make their AYP ‘targets’ under a state accountability system that requires all students to pass exams in Reading and Writing, English, Math, History, Science in order to graduate. They point out with pride that their students “outperform” the state and the nation on average SAT scores (with the largest gains in 2007 scores coming from IB high schools). The District has been recognized by the College Board for its “commitment to student achievement” and for “maintaining rigorous instruction for a diverse population of students;” it has been cited in
Newsweek for its “challenging” high schools, evidenced in part by the participation and performance of students in IB and AP.

Initial conditions and the adoption of IB

The initial impetus for adopting IB began, as people we talked with recall, at the level of the District. There was a Board member who knew about IB and was an advocate for adoption, a Superintendent who agreed with the need, and then the hiring of an Assistant Superintendent who knew the program well from prior experience in another district. While there may have been a “tradition of excellence” across the district, they recognized that students in some neighborhoods and schools had more excellent opportunities than others. They saw IB as a potential catalyst for improving opportunities for students and professional development for faculty, and even, as one administrator recalled, “in part as a move to slow white flight or middle class flight” in some neighborhoods. The District did not mandate adoption of IB, but they did steer the suggestion toward particular “target” schools where they saw greater need: “The targeted schools tended to be in higher poverty areas, [and had] greater diversity.”

The decision to adopt IB, however, was understood as a school decision, and two schools took up the invitation, adopting the Diploma Programme in 1994. Implementation and delivery of the Programme, then, were largely seen as school responsibility. Staff who were at the schools at that time talk of being excited about the possibilities, but also of times when they “struggled” and sometimes even “floundered” as they attempted to do something new and different, or to keep momentum going through a period of administrative turnover. The District sent teachers to IB trainings, who came back with confidence about the content, but concerns about “how to teach this to our students.” They were concerned, too, about how to attract students into the Diploma Programme, and how to ensure that enrollment was not restricted to the academic or economic elite.

But there was also considerable evidence of success. At one school, for example, the Programme began with a small number of students and a small percentage (about 10%) were students of color. They took 74 exams, and 68% scored at 4 or above, with average scores in IB Physics at 3.5, and Biology at 3.69. The Programme grew quickly—giving 250 exams the next year—and scores rose as well. By 2003, almost half of the 11th grade English classes were IB, and the 103 students taking that exam averaged 4.45, with no score below 3. Classes grew more diverse, too, so that approximately 1/3 of the IB students were African American (like the school) and about 14% were Hispanic (slightly under the school’s 19%). And while causal claims might be difficult to support statistically, the staff and community were convinced that IB was improving their academic performance overall, contributing to gains on college entry and state tests.

That evidence of success worked not only to keep staff within the school committed to IB, but also to attract the attention of other schools across the District. According to both district and school staff, the early spread of IB beyond those ‘target schools’ came not from District
initiative, but from school interest: “Here, other high schools wanted to add it as they became aware of IB.” As more schools expressed interest in seeing IB at work, and then in adopting IB in their own sites, the District began to take on a more active role in terms of the costs, coordination, and coherence of IB programs.

Commitment to fiscal support

From the initial adoption discussions, the District understood that it needed to make a commitment to cover the standard costs of the program, and that those costs were considerable. One administrator explained that “IB’s an expensive program, especially if you’re going for moderation [in MYP]... The tests are expensive. The fees are expensive.” Another suggested that any district contemplating adoption should carefully consider those costs: “I think they should go with full knowledge of what the costs are going to be.” But compared to the costs for struggling schools and students if they did nothing, District officials uniformly did, and still do, consider the programs well worth the expense:

“It is more expensive than doing nothing...but you need to say, ‘no, this is something that’s important.’ So you need to have that commitment for the coordinator and the other kinds of activities that are associated with it and then the training that goes with it...You have to promote into the base budget and say it’s there now and let’s use it. So that’s one [lesson].”

Promoting the program into the base budget gave a clear signal of its importance to the District, and helped to maintain the priority of funding IB even through changes in Superintendents and Board members, and despite changing economic conditions. District administrators see that long-term commitment as essential to their success: “You really do need commitment high up in the organization over multiple years to change the culture and support the training.” As another administrator explained,

“I think it really does need a lot of central support, because initially, particularly, there is a small percentage of the faculty [where] there is a tremendous resistance. And if the principal is out there alone without the support of the district- - first of all, they can’t pay all that money for the training. They’re not going to be able to pay for their own coordinator. . . . The support has to be obvious and visible from someone from the district level.”

Another consequential and highly visible commitment to central financial support came in 1998, when the District decided to pay the exam fees for any student taking AP or IB tests. They were concerned that “the costs keep kids from taking the test,” but since they wanted to encourage IB as a reform strategy in low income ‘target’ schools, and to encourage ‘open access’ so that all students would have that opportunity, they chose to make sure “no one had that excuse.” And they connected that commitment to an expectation that all students who enroll in IB courses would take the test: “That’s the expectation we lay out for the kids, so it’s a complete package.” At the Board meeting to discuss 2009 budget projections, there was
discussion of charging some form of student fee for the exams, but they were able to reject that option, at least for this year.

What the District has done, in part as an effort to keep the costs of that “complete package” under control, is to insist that each high school choose IB or AP—but not both.

Preserving School and Student Choice

In part as an issue of containing costs, but also for academic, practical, and political reasons, the District moved to make IB an attractive choice for schools, but not to mandate the program. Instead, all 25 district high schools “were allowed to choose to be IB or AP.” Administrators explain this in part as a district-level decision about academics, “since those are the only two [programs] of a real national viability, of a high stature, and high recognition.” But they also understood the importance of preserving school-level decisions and commitment: “I think that you do have to have the support of the principal. If the principal is not supportive, I think they either need to not implement that program, or they need to move that principal to another school, if this is a school that wants to do it.”

Moving the decision of which program to the school level also helped to ensure the support of the staff, and to offer the possibility of exit to those who did not support the choice. Eight high schools have committed to “be IB.” Resistant teachers—and there were resistant teachers in the beginning—had the option to move to another high school in the same district, which several did. Students and families, too, have that option, though relatively few take advantage of it. While students typically attend the high school within their local attendance zone, district policy allows them to apply for transfer for a number of reasons, including “program coherence,” which allows them to “opt out”, or in, to either AP or IB. Those policies provide a kind of “release valve” as well as a sense of local choice and commitment; the Superintendent later wrote to a group of concerned community members that "this [policy] ensures we don't force anyone into either program, but allow students and families the choice of what best fits their needs."

Schools make decisions, as well, about not just whether to do IB but also how to do IB: about how widely to offer the programs (whole school or part), about staffing, and about particular curriculum. Principals have the “latitude to staff their building as they see fit” and to define the Coordinator role and release time: “that would be the school’s choice. We are not at all directing that to occur or suggesting that that occur.” Curricular options like language, too, are matters of individual school choice: IB requires a 2nd language, but the particular language is a school decision, taking advantage of student interest, faculty expertise, or external resources. IB electives, too, reflect school-level rather than district-wide choices: Chinese B, English A2, and World Religions are each offered at only one high school.

The limitations of that strategy, however, became clear when the District and high schools began plans to extend IB into the lower grades, and middle schools to offer IB through the
Middle Years Program. When an IB high school could ‘choose’ Spanish while its middle school ‘feeder partner’ was choosing Arabic, even those who were protective of school autonomy began to see the potential advantages of stronger district coordination, and the District began to take on new functions and responsibilities.

Adding MYP

As interest in IB grew, and as people began to talk of ways to extend the program to more sites and to more students, both District and schools started to talk about bringing in MYP to build a stronger ‘bridge’ to prepare more students for the Diploma. That decision, as one Coordinator observed, “forced some changes.” In building that bridge, the need for the District to take on a more active role became quickly apparent: “There was recognition at the District level, that MYP needed to be understood as district effort, and as Professional Development support,” she explained. As with the initial adoption of the Diploma Programmes, the decision was not for the District to mandate the new program, but rather to identify “targets,” extend “invitations,” and facilitate conversations—considering needs and capacity while preserving school choice. Criteria included where schools were having academic struggles that MYP might help, where there was a connection with an IB high school, and also where there was the local will and capacity for leadership. That meant they looked for not only “principals who were ready” for IB but also staff who were ready for collaboration, because they understood that “these schools must work with one another.”

Having two or more schools “work with one another” and having high schools work with middle schools were (and are) both understood as formidable challenges—as they are for many MYP programs. To some degree that was made easier by existing District feeder patterns that group elementary and middle schools into “pyramids” leading up to a single high school. There may be more than one middle school in the pyramid, but each middle school aims toward only one high school: “We have enough of a pure feeder or pyramid system so that virtually 100% of a middle school goes on to [the same] high school. They don’t split. Now occasionally, that’s not the case. And so it’s easy to support a Middle Years IB Programme at the middle school that feeds into the IB high school, because it’s like you do 100% of the kids. As I say, not always, but it’s pretty close.”

At the time of our interviews, MYP was being phased in at five middle schools within four IB high school pyramids. While MYP is still “moving up” through the high school grades, District administrators were quick to see positive benefits: “What we have seen by way of data in those schools where we intentionally put in the Middle Years IB Program, [among] the first cohort of kids coming into the high school, we saw a dramatic increase in participation in the IB courses and the IB Diplomas” and drew the conclusion that “it’s working.” Another administrator made similar claims: “And seeing when we started to do that in [one]’s middle school program and you can get the kids into the culture of IB, if you will, [then] you increase the number of IB diplomas. So I think backward mapping that into the middle school has been helpful, as we found.” Indeed, there is now increasing interest in expanding IB even further, in bringing the Primary Years Programme into elementary schools “so that kids have that kind of experience
and expectations and culture built from the time they’re in kindergarten on through middle school.” That success has also involved help from the District in changing the experience, expectations, and culture of teachers through professional connections and professional development.

Connecting buildings and building connections:

In the first years of the first Diploma Programmes at the first two high schools, a few teachers had built connections with colleagues teaching the same course in the other school: two Social Studies teachers, for example, had found each other, found time to talk together about their common courses and concerns, and found that ongoing conversation tremendously helpful. But that finding depended on chance, and on the voluntary efforts of individual teachers taking on extra tasks. As more schools began to adopt IB, there was the sense that staff and schools could provide good resources for each other, if the District could help build and maintain those connections. The District supports coordination between schools offering IB not only by facilitating such exchanges but also through a clearly articulated expectation that these exchanges will occur: “You set the expectation and then you also ask a cluster assistant superintendent to monitor and support and nourish those kinds of environments with our principals, so those people, you know, build it into the expectations. That usually works with the principals in my experience.”

The District acts to facilitate these collegial interactions and exchanges in a variety of ways by building not only expectations but also concrete connections. Feeder patterns of pyramids help connect buildings; coordinated meetings help build connections among staff. New MYP teachers, for example, at the “teamed” middle and high school go through IB orientation together, and come back from trainings to an “expectation” that their conversations will continue both informally and formally, through a series of joint meetings: “Like, the math departments from the middle schools will meet with the math department of the high schools - vertical articulation. Those decisions are almost all made at the school program level.” That means lots of meetings, but teachers who spoke with us showed little resentment. Instead they appear to welcome the opportunity to coordinate, to collaborate, and to share a sense of being part of a common enterprise because, as one teacher put it, “the meetings are meaningful.”

The meetings and exchanges are particularly meaningful to IB Coordinators, who take on responsibility for so much of the day-to-day operation of the IB programs. As the number of IB schools grew, or as turnover has occurred, the existence of a group of experienced colleagues a new Coordinator can turn to for information, support, or even just sympathy has been invaluable. One new Coordinator talked of the “lifelines” that have kept him from feeling totally overwhelmed: he has the former Coordinator (now an AP) down the hall, but also has an email group of Coordinators across the District, who are in almost constant contact: “We do have meetings – about 6 times a year – there are 8 of us, and we’re always emailing each other, sending questions to the group.” Another spoke of the support of her colleagues, and of the role of the central office in building those connections: “So I’ve got the support centrally also.
They’re the ones that across the whole division bring all the MYP and all the Diploma Programme leaders together for monthly meetings and all that.” Teachers and Coordinators are strikingly consistent in talking of these meetings not as increased demands on their time, but as support for their work.

Creating structures and staffing positions

The “ones” who bring leaders together and create structures to maintain those connections are primarily two District directors charged with support and coordination of IB and MYP. While these positions are not exclusively devoted to IB—they serve other advanced academic programs as well—they are now staffed by two people who know and care about IB. Their contribution to building connections and to supporting schools in their IB programs has by all accounts been considerable. Their official position and responsibilities allow them to formalize the processes, to broker relationships, to provide supervision and support, and to promote a professional culture that embraces both high standards and wide access. Teachers and Coordinators speak highly of these directors and turn to them often for information or resources. In a District of this size and complexity, the distance between teachers and central office is considerable, something one Coordinator talked of as “not lack of support but size and delegation,” where she has “little contact with the Superintendent” whose office she likens to “the Crystal Palace, like Oz.”

These two directors serve to bridge that distance, to provide a sense of connection between IB programmes and District “Palace.” They arrange meetings, bring in consultants, support teachers in taking on new responsibilities like designing MYP assessments, find funding to send IB teachers to regional meetings, and deal with day to day crises. They also work on the District side of the bridge, making sure that administrators there are more aware of both the potential and the needs of IB. In one particularly telling example, both specialists and school staff talked of how they convened a meeting and “worked with the [district] Instructional Specialists, did an introduction to IB for all of them. They tied IB into the district Subject Guides, and made some quick converts.” The directors were able to demonstrate how IB curriculum, standards, and assessments would “map onto” state and district demands, and to discuss how district curriculum policy might inadvertently conflict with IB practices. They were also able to see, and to show the curriculum specialists, how useful the particular strengths and tools of IB would be for their own work, given that “the big new buzz here is ‘assessment for learning.’” Making district personnel, especially these content area specialists, aware of and engaged in IB was a critical District strategy; having District personnel who could both recognize the need and initiate action was crucial to its success.

Professional Development and Support

While connecting content specialists and linking teachers and coordinators provide considerable support for ongoing professional development, the District also plays a major role in providing professional development through more traditional channels. They provide
funding for IB teachers to go to trainings and for Coordinators to attend in workshops and regional meetings, facilitate arrangements, and work to foster encouragement for participation. In this District most IB teachers teach non-IB classes as well, so IB is not the segregated preserve of a few specialized teachers, but distributed across large numbers of faculty. That has the advantage of reducing the sense of “us versus them,” and with some middle schools moving to whole-school MYP, the question of who gets to teach IB is becoming even less of a political issue. The trade off is the increasing logistical issue: large numbers of staff who need training and support in IB, and high costs of travel and training. What this District has been able to do is to mitigate those costs by capitalizing on the strategic advantage of district level size and space.

The sheer numbers of teachers and schools involved with IB give this District capacity to deal with professional development in different ways: “We typically have such capacity because of our size that we can self initiate and create that which we need to” explained the Superintendent. First, they can send groups of teachers rather than individuals to trainings, and “a cadre of people that attend the annual conference every year.” Those groups can then act as professional resources to each other. In their early years, they had tried sending individuals to go to the trainings and return to “turnkey” what they had learned to their faculty. That strategy they found ineffective—teachers had neither the time nor the skills to deliver the lessons at the level they wanted. “Cadres,” on the other hand, can continue the conversation they started at the workshops and sustain learning over time and across larger groups.

Second, along with size, the District has been able to take advantage of place, to avoid some of the problems that many schools have reported in managing the logistical issues and costs of travel and time for trainings. Instead of always trying to send individuals away to trainings, they have been able to bring the trainings to them. As an Assistant Superintendent told us, “I’ll make the decision if, after talking with the coordinators and liaisons [asking] ‘What do you need?’ then I can support finding someone to provide that kind of training. That’s why we brought [a consultant] in.” As a district, they have been able to negotiate different services: hosting a level 1 workshop onsite, for example, for which they did pay a leader’s fee ($1500 in 2007) and the per capita costs for participants, but they saved the travel costs, which can be formidable.

Third, and most unusual, is the relationship that this District has been able to establish with a local university that prepares many of their teachers. Additional training, including pre-service training, will now be offered with that university: “We have a great partnership with [them]. . . I just found out a few days ago that it was announced that [that university] was granted approval for offering the IB training.” That program will now provide both a Certificate in Advanced IB Studies for practicing teachers, and a capstone course in their Elementary Education Program that, combined with a year of teaching internship in an IB school, prepares candidates for IBO’s Level I Award. The savings to the District of being able to hire new teachers who arrive with IB training and certification in hand would be considerable.

Using the District’s strategic advantages of size and space, and their capacity for building bridges, they have been able to create new connections across school needs, IB training, and
pre-service preparation. That allows them to make professional development more available and more affordable, and to tailor it more closely to their own needs and objectives.

Public Support and Community Engagement

The District has worked not only to bring the local college into a strong and supportive relationship with its IB programs, but also the local community. Here, again, their size and scale offer an advantage they’ve been able to capitalize on in terms of the power of the press, and local newspapers provide frequent and favorable coverage of the IB programmes. The District, primarily through its specialists, works toward public engagement by providing information, brochures, and personal contact, and by visiting schools and hosting open house nights for parents in October to talk about Advanced Programs, including both IB and AP. The superintendent reports that now they have moved “well beyond” the need to win over parents, and that community support for IB is strong: “When you walk around to other IB schools, kids love it. The parents love it. The community loves it. So we’re well beyond marketing or sales or anything like that. What we do now is try to make sure that we maintain high quality and have even more kids engage in the process.” That effort to “have even more kids engage” is expanding IB participation in dramatic ways: in 2008, for example, one high school saw roughly half of its seniors graduate with at least one IB certificate.

While they may have moved “well beyond marketing” or responding to community resistance, that movement was neither easy nor rapid. One high school, in 1999, withdrew from IB amid much public controversy and conflict. That controversy emerged again several years later, when the Board redrew attendance boundaries and announced the impending shift of a large number of students from their “home” school to a new one, from an AP school to an IB one. In the resistance that resulted, conflicts clustered around three issues. IB had originally been brought in to ‘target’ schools that were struggling with high levels of poverty and low performance—an association that lingers in public perception: “IB’s become known as the ‘lesser than’ – while AP is for the elite, affluent schools.” A second issue fueled a very small but very intense group of critics who wrote letters to the editor attacking the nature of International Baccalaureate itself, which they feared was “un-American,” would introduce “socialism, disarmament, radical environmentalism and moral relativism” and posed “a threat to Christian religious values and national sovereignty.” The third, and still problematic issue was a more practical one: critics argue that colleges don’t give the same credit for one-year courses in IB as they do for AP. As a Coordinator who had been through the conflicts observed, when it comes to “credits, IB can’t compete on that.” What the District has been doing to compete on that is to make their case to local colleges, more of whom are now accepting IB credits, and to repeatedly make the argument that IB, and education in general, are about more than just accumulating credits.

Expanding District goals and aligning with IB

This District, like districts across the country, has been under considerable pressure to focus on
NCLB and AYP, on test scores and targets. Recently, however, they recognized that this narrowed set of objectives does not fully reflect what the District, and the community, see as a sound education, as what they want their students to learn and to become. As they have rethought and expanded their goals, IB is occupying an expanding role in their plans.

First, as education reform has moved toward preparation of students toward 21st century demands, and toward a goal of college readiness for all, having students take advanced academic courses has become an increasingly important imperative, and IB courses meet that need. As the Superintendent explained:

“The level of sophistication that is required of graduates now is higher than it’s ever been, and we need to make sure all of our graduates are there. So we would like to have, for example, every one of our high school graduates take at least a couple of either AP, IB, or dual-credit courses, so that’s an overarching expectation that we have that comes in and drives both the IB participation as well as AP participation.”

Second, the District recently adopted a new set of goals for students and the curriculum, an expanded and ambitious rethinking of what it is that they should provide for their students—including, but not limited to, academic skills. Although they were not designed with IB in mind, these new goals have pronounced parallels to IB. They consist of three overarching goals, in the areas of 1) Academics, 2) Essential Life Skills, and 3) Responsibility to the Community:

1. All students will obtain, understand, analyze, communicate, and apply knowledge and skills to achieve success in school and in life, including
   1.2. Communicate in at least two languages.
   1.4. Understand the interrelationship and interdependence of the countries and cultures of the world.
2. All students will demonstrate the aptitude, attitude, and skills to lead responsible, fulfilling, and respectful lives.
3. All students will understand and model the important attributes that people must have to contribute to an effective and productive community and the common good of all.
   Students will:
   3.2 Be respectful and contributing participants in their community, country, and world.

While those goals do not specifically name IB, administrators see striking similarity to the IB learner profile. When they describe the goals in their own terms, the parallels become even clearer:

“[The] first is being able to be conversant in two or more languages, technology skills, knowledge of other cultures of the world—not just knowledge of, but a deeper, richer understanding of cultures of the world. The second goal is essential life skills, which includes problem solving, critical thinking, financial literacy, taking responsibility for your own learning, your own actions, and then the third goal area has to do with
responsibility to the community and giving back to the community and volunteerism and those kinds of things.”

Indeed, District staff recall being at the Board meeting and experiencing an “a-ha” moment when those goals were introduced, because they so closely mapped to IB: “So the IB high schools and middle schools and elementary schools, they’re already set up if they’re following the IB Program. It’s the AP schools that need to tweak, if you will, some of the expectations to gain greater alignment for 100% of their students as they walk out the door to achieve these goals.”

While most schools adopting IB as a “school-based,” “stand alone” program receive district policies well after they are passed, and have to figure out how to reconcile district demands with IB design, here there were District staff at the table during the discussion and deliberations—people who are well informed and involved in IB implementation. They were in a position to be able both to see the parallels, and to say them aloud during the conversation. As an Assistant Superintendent recalled, “I made the effort to show how IB and MYP dovetail totally with the Board’s new goals for global citizenship, learning two languages, being able to speak two languages by the time they leave high school.”

From the position of the District Superintendent, too, seeing the “fit” and the increasing value of IB as a way to achieve District goals provided confirmation of the Board’s continuing commitment to IB: “Overall, I think the Board sees IB as—they came up with new goals, and [IB] fits the goals of the school board tremendously.” No longer seen as isolated, add-on programs, IB is increasingly seen as central to the very core of the District’s mission.

To be IB . . . as a District

Overall, across the District and among the schools, the sense of IB as both an important piece of the Districts general reform efforts, and as a “positive” force in improving particular schools is pervasive. When asked about lessons he could share with other districts considering adopting IB, the Superintendent was highly encouraging:

“I also think that they need to know that it’s going to be a program that will have a tremendous positive effect on the entire school, the school climate, the school’s focus on learning, use of time, rigor, especially if you do it the Middle Years Programme for all students. It changes the whole dynamic of teaching and learning in that it’s more interactive, more higher-level thinking. So even though I think they should go ahead with knowing these things [about the costs], to me, the challenges of keeping it paid for are driven by the positive changes of the school in the program.”

He continued his endorsement by suggesting that districts who are looking to the future, who are looking to the broad needs of educating their students for the new century, should look to the International Baccalaureate:
“I think the question to ask first is—well, I believe, we as a nation need, to begin to move toward... international expectations and connections. And maybe that’s the question you first ask the districts. What are you on that continuum? Are you still just trying to survive locally or do you believe you ought to be looking internationally or, you know, what’s your community like, your composition? Where do you think people ought to be? And I’ve just moved to the international perspective. And IB’s a big part of that.”

For this District, as they ask those critical questions and consider how to get all of their students to “where they ought to be,” IB has become a critical part of the answer.

Conclusion

While the benefits to individual students and to schools participating in IB have been well established elsewhere, what emerges from this case study is evidence that 1) those benefits can be amplified when the district plays an active role in situating and supporting IB programs, and 2) that there are benefits that return to the district as a result of that active role, as well.

The expanded District role brings benefits to students, in both participation and performance. Both District and school staff are still struggling with how to ensure that more students graduate with the IB Diploma, and how to shift from a widely held understanding that IB is for the select few to expanded access without losing the sense of what makes it special, or lowering standards. Across the district, and across roles, staff consistently describe enrollment in IB courses and the earning of IB certificates (not just Diplomas) as the most important measure of success. Their impressions, and the enrollment data, suggest that they are steadily making that shift; by that measure, the ‘amplification’ of participation since the District has become more involved has been considerable. And while Diplomas are rising more slowly, they are rising. So, too, are test scores on state assessments and the SAT, and staff point with pride to the particularly rapid rise in scores at IB schools.

The schools also benefit from the increased involvement of the District. Encouraged—but not forced—to adopt IB, they have found the financial, political, and professional support to build their programs and to build more positive climates within the schools. Adding MYP to the District strategy is helping not only to build a stronger foundation for IB academic demands for students, but also to build connections between schools, to facilitate professional conversations and curricular decisions for staff—all of which work to amplify the efforts of those in individual schools. While they are still struggling with how to strengthen those connections, all agree that they have made considerable progress.

Creating positions—at the District level— has been of critical importance to building and maintaining those connections. Staffing them with people who are informed about and invested in IB has, by all accounts, been invaluable, and they are working to find ways to involve
the District staff in communication channels with IB more directly and immediately, rather than having information funnel through the schools. Having someone at that level who can recognize policy opportunities or potential conflicts, who can encourage and engage Coordinators, who can direct resources from within the District and attract resources from other constituencies (the colleges, the regional association, the parent groups, the press) both widens the reach of the programs and solidifies their base.

Perhaps the most distinguishing, and effective, strategy of District support has been its commitment to and coordination of professional development. The District Directors’ active role, and their ability to capitalize on the distinctive district-level advantages of scale and space have allowed them to connect IB teachers and Coordinators in ongoing professional communities, to send groups (or cadres) of staff to IB professional development sessions, and to bring IB onsite, where the trainings can be targeted to local needs and the costs of travel considerably contained. This is something they are continuing to grow and develop, in terms of both content and costs.

Containing costs is, of course, an ongoing concern of the District, and one they say they are still working on in multiple ways. Coordinating and localizing professional development has been a major strategy in that effort, and with that efficiency added to the effectiveness of IB Programmes in promoting the kinds of school improvement they care about, the District remained—at least at the time of this study—convinced that the benefits outweigh the costs. They are, however, trying to find ways to provide MYP, which crosses multiple schools, without having to pay the same single school fees for each site involved.

An additional ‘cost’ savings, of both actual dollars and administrative time comes from the scale of adoption: instead of District support staff being stretched across multiple different reform efforts in multiple schools, the policy to require AP or IB means that they only have to support two different types of programs, and can support each more fully. That also brings a substantial level of coherence to educational reform policy and professional development in this District, unlike the “Christmas tree” phenomenon of so many urban districts, where so many disconnected reforms are hanging off district branches.

With that coherence, with the connections they have made across schools and staff, with the financial and personnel commitments in place, this District provides an example of what the district level role in IB can be, and evidence of the considerable progress that can result from district level involvement. Their experience points to expanded participation across schools and students, to enhanced academic performance, to increases in the efficiency and effectiveness of their programmes, to revitalized professional development and professional community. And while they see their efforts a still a work in progress, they are convinced that the collective combination of IB, schools, and district that makes this progress possible.
The Institute for Education and Social Policy is a partnership between the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development and Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.