

Communicating with Parents and Students

SUMMARY: Parents can be your most passionate advocates. It is essential to keep them well informed and to include them as often as possible in the success of the program. There are several ways to effectively reach out to parents and include them in the decision-making processes surrounding their children's education.

- Be available to personally answer parents' questions and concerns
- Invite parents to formal meetings and consider holding regular informal meetings with parents
- Encourage the creation and maintenance of IB parent and/or student organizations
- Create an email mailing list to disseminate information, curriculum announcements, and education issues
- Encourage IB alumni to keep in contact

Be Available

Whether it is the principal, the IB coordinator, or a staff educator, someone of authority within the school must be available to field questions from parents. This person's contact information, such as a phone number or an email address, should be available to the public, and he or she should respond to queries in a timely manner. International Academy principal Bert Okma says he sometimes spent more than an hour on a single phone conversation with a concerned parent when his school was undergoing the process for IB authorization. While the calls were time-consuming, Mr. Okma says that his patience and willingness to answer questions was key in winning widespread support for his school and the Diploma Programme in the community.

Formal and Informal Meetings

Try to encourage parent involvement whenever possible. Some schools have been successful at including parents in the following ways:

- Inviting parents to public meetings where funding, curriculum, and other issues are discussed, such as school board meetings or IB meetings.
- Listening to concerns and being prepared to answer questions on the IB philosophy, the value of the IB program, the concerns regarding funding for the program, and how IB compares with other academic programs.
- Preparing materials that address common questions and include the contact information of the appropriate person to whom further questions should be addressed.

Some principals host monthly meetings with parents. An informal setting makes parents feel more like participants and less like visitors, and allows for greater and more personal communication opportunities.

Encourage IB Organizations

Many IB schools now have IB groups within the school comprised of educators, students, and parents. The groups work to make sure all of the stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process. In some cases, these groups have administered surveys on the program to students, assisted with program evaluation, and helped to build support for the program in the community, in addition to other activities.

There are now more than one hundred IB parent organizations nationwide. They have raised money for teacher training, hosted study sessions for students, and created scholarships for IB graduates, in addition to other achievements. Schools can support the formation of successful parent groups by giving them access to administrators and information and updates on the IB program. Not only will such organizations foster communication and an exchange of ideas, but they can also be indefatigable allies for the success of your IB students and your IB program.

Upon my entrance to the IB program, I had visions of heaps of books cluttering my desk and countless papers littering the floor of my room....But what I did not know was that the IB would increase my understanding to the world, open my mind, and open my heart with an appreciation of others.

**Korey Kantanga
Fort Myers High School,
Class of 2006**

Newsletters and Mailing Lists

One way to create community is to circulate an IB newsletter. This newsletter, whether via mail or email, is a great vehicle for sharing information, such as curriculum updates, meeting announcements, educational issues in the local or national press, and so on. You should be sure to ask parents for their permission to include them in the mailing list -- permission gathering being a step that absolutely must not be omitted. If your school has a website, allow parents to sign up for or opt out of the mailing list online.

Alumni

Does your school have a method of tracking graduates? Consider keeping track of your alumni and encourage them to write in with their location, contact information, and goings-on. Not only will you have valuable information on the success that many of your graduates have attained, but you will also have a ready-made list of vocal cheerleaders of your school should you ever need them.