

# Report: AP, IB are models for state standards, assessments

By Erin Uy

Despite some needed improvements in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs' teacher development and curriculum, the high-rigor programs should serve as a national standard for states to emulate, or as proof that students have met high school exit expectations, according to a recent report.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute released *Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate: Do They Deserve Gold Star Status?* last week, adding another voice among education stakeholders and policymakers advocating for states to align and enhance their standards with a national benchmark. The report qualifies AP and IB overall as "gold alloyed," with some room for improvements.

The report, written by U.S. academics, backs conventional wisdom that the rigor and college-prep curriculum of AP and IB exceed any state standard or exam the Fordham Institute has studied in recent years.

"It's difficult to understand why more states don't emulate these programs, rather than paying twice: once to develop their own standards and assessments that don't function effectively, and again to fund these independent programs because they do a better job," the report stated.

Both programs are expanding in the United States, already setting the trend for what Fordham suggests. The number of AP test takers has increased by more than 8 percent since 2000, and IB predicts it will double the number of schools providing its programs every five years, according to recent reports.

## Mutual shortcomings

Despite overall praise for the programs' rigor, the report found room for curriculum improvements, particularly in history. AP's U.S. history course lacked "actual historical events" and IB's world history course could allow students to "miss exposure to almost all core U.S. History content."

That criticism may be unwarranted for a globally-focused program like IB, said Bradley Richardson, IB North America regional director. Instead of offering country-specific courses, IB provides teachers the flexibility to focus on a select area of study within its world history class. A course that focused heavily on one country would counter IB's internationally minded approach, Richardson said.

The report went further to express concerns that AP planned to redesign its history and science offerings, potentially diluting content by reducing focus on content knowledge.

Trevor Packer, executive director of AP, said AP has not made any announcements regarding such a redesign.

IB and AP received criticism for their overuse of calculators during math tests, but both groups defended their policies. AP contends calculator use saves students from doing busy work and allows them to focus on more analytical problems. IB made revisions to its policy in 2006, and now allows students to take one of two sections with a calculator and the other without.

## Recommendation for AP

Quality assurance should be an ongoing concern for AP, according to the report. AP's audit system does not "supply convincing evidence by itself that the teacher knows the material or is up to the challenge of teaching it." AP requires teachers to submit syllabi for College Board approval, but does not impose a "quality check" once the syllabus is approved, the report said.

Packer said AP testing outcomes and teacher credentials indicate quality teaching and course offerings. Students' average AP test scores have not declined over the past 10 years, he noted. Further, all AP teachers hold a bachelor of arts degree, and about 76 percent of AP teachers hold master's or doctorate degrees. Only about 50 percent of non-AP teachers hold a bachelor of arts degree, he said.

AP's grading policy is administered by college instructors who impose college-level standards. "One of the reasons colleges place so much value in AP is that grading is done by colleges themselves, and not by students' teachers," Packer said.

## IB recommendations

Impressed with IB's curriculum, the report suggests the program should expand by allowing schools to offer more individual classes apart from the Diploma Programme. Smaller schools lack the resources to implement the detailed, two-year program, according to the report.

Schools may offer select IB classes, but "the meaning of what we think is a valid international education is lost" if overdone, Richardson said. "The meaning of a program is only really understood once you get the diploma."

IB's educational mission includes a holistic approach to education that encompasses college readiness and the development of a global consciousness that the Diploma Programme packages for students, Richardson said.

AP and IB program leaders "appreciated" the report's positive remarks, but said some recommendations targeted the programs' traits that made them unique and effective.