Sturgis Charter Public School: Grades 9-12

First offered the Diploma Programme (DP): 2004

Total number of students: 838

Executive director: Paul Marble

DP coordinator: Cynthia Gallo

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—PAUL MARBLE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, STURGIS CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL
Equally important, he says, are the steps taken to make the school function well after it almost closed in 2004. The first step was bringing in a new executive director named Eric Hieser, who brought along colleagues with IB experience. “They’d seen kids grow. They’d seen nontraditional kids have a great transformation along their path,” Marble says. “Those early leaders really helped set the tone … that IB for all can work.”

From the day students walk into Sturgis, there is a clear expectation that they will participate in the DP. That may not always be an easy adjustment for them, as many students who are traditionally underrepresented in the DP and other advanced curricula often have played a passive role in the classroom, Marble says. “I think when students come into an IB for all school, at first it’s a bit jarring, a bit unsettling. They’re learning new habits, and they’re unlearning old habits. They are developing—they wouldn’t call it this—a sense of agency.”

Providing all students with academic, social and emotional, and financial support is built into the framework at Sturgis. When visitors come by during the 45-minute lunch period, they often see math teachers at the board with students and language teachers speaking one-on-one with other students in a target language. “They’re wondering whether this is compulsory,” Marble says. “No, it’s just the ethic. It’s what we do.” The school also provides a structured make-up learning time and a quiet spot in which to work. Sturgis recently doubled the number of theory of knowledge (TOK) teachers, who work with the extended essay coordinators, Creativity, activity, service (CAS) coordinators and DP coordinators as a team. “Part of their job is connecting with the kids, knowing what these 20 kids are doing in, say, their CAS program, setting up one-on-one times with them and chatting with them,” the executive director says.

The team-based approach extends to the school’s social and emotional supports. In addition to six guidance counselors for the whole school, each campus has a full-time social worker, a special education coordinator and three special education teachers who have TOK training. A student support team consisting of the principal, a guidance counselor, a nurse and teachers meets every six weeks to assess a range of student-related data and look at each student who might be struggling.

Less visible is an important type of financial support designed to remove barriers to the DP. The school pays all exam fees for all students. That policy was set by the board of trustees early in the school’s history after students from low-income households told the school that the fees were a barrier for them. Similarly, the board recently decided to pay public transportation costs or provide charter buses for students in specified areas, beginning in fall 2019. Trustees were concerned that students live as far as 35 miles away from Sturgis and saw that as another potential barrier.

Some of the school’s support is structural, Marble says. In terms of how classrooms function, study halls, counselor-to-student ratios and bringing in wellness teachers. Some of it is attitudinal. “One of the essential qualities of the IB for all that I think resonates with the kids is ‘This teacher believes that I’m able to do this.’ But each type of support is assessed against an overall goal. ‘If it’s going to help more kids embrace the IB, then we’re going to consider it.”

Once Sturgis students embrace the IB, they are transformed by it. They talk about that in the graduation speeches the school has them write, and alumni return to say the same thing to current students. The IB helps students find their voice and prepare for and get more out of their university experience. “The IB is a wonderful mechanism for growth for all students, particularly those who tend to be underrepresented in the most rigorous courses at a school,” Marble says. But it also transforms adults, and it transforms schools.”