

RESEARCH SUMMARY

International Baccalaureate implementation study: Examination of district-wide implementation in the US



Summary developed by the IB Research department based on a report prepared by

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Background

In 2013, three programmes of the International Baccalaureate (IB)¹ were adopted and implemented district-wide in three school districts in the United States (US). This study explores IB implementation in two of the three districts, with a focus on outcomes in the Diploma Programme (DP). Specifically, this study examines teaching pedagogies, learner experiences and factors critical to the sustainability of district-wide implementation.

District A: District A is a large district composed of seven elementary schools, three middle schools and one high school. District A is a public school district located in an urban area.

District B: District B includes six elementary schools, one middle school and two high schools. District B is a public district located in a rural area.

Research design

An exploratory, mixed methods, multiple case study design was used to understand district-wide implementation of the Diploma Programme in two school districts in the US.

Quantitative data included IB exam results, diploma award rates and average diploma points awarded, SAT/ACT scores, student grades and other measures of academic success, including attendance levels, student retention, graduation rates and college admission rates. To assess non-academic student outcomes, a variety of survey instruments were administered.

Qualitative case study methods were used to: (a) understand the role of the adoption and implementation of the IB programme on social change within the schools; and (b) provide insight into the roles that districts

play in the adoption and implementation of the IB programme. Data was collected via a combination of methods, including direct observations, individual interviews and focus groups. In-depth interviews were conducted with two school administrators at each school and two district administrators in each district. Finally, four focus groups with teachers and students were conducted (one teacher focus group and one student focus group at each site).

Findings

Quantitative results

Student performance

District A's high school DP subject grades compare favourably with the worldwide average subject scores. District B's high school DP subject grades compare reasonably well with the worldwide average subject scores, although in many cases its yearly average was slightly lower, and in other years its average was higher. District A and District B high schools' diploma award rate and total number of diploma points almost always exceeded the worldwide DP average. Both schools' average student grade point average (GPA) (for all students, not just DP students) far exceeded the national GPA. Both District A and District B high schools have higher SAT and/or ACT scores than the US national average as well as higher than average graduation and college admission rates. Because pre-implementation data was not available, it cannot be determined if the IB programme itself is responsible for the schools' excellent outcome data. Alternative explanations could include student level variables such as ability, motivation and socio-economic status as well as school level variables such as resources and teacher quality.

¹ Primary Years Programme, Middle Years Programme and Diploma Programme

Student survey data

Data suggests that DP students are at least comparable to but frequently rate higher than available norm data on the kinds of non-academic student outcomes expected to be impacted by implementation of the IB, including student engagement, global competence and cultural awareness, study habits, motivation and college readiness. Furthermore, DP students surveyed have a greater love of learning, engagement in classes, and curiosity when compared with available norm data. For example, in response to the question “Why do you go to school?” DP students in the two schools (69% in District A and 66% in District B) were more likely to select “Because of what I learn in class” than other students (39% of students in public schools and 59% of students in independent schools). Additionally, 92% in District A and 90% in District B either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “I am motivated by a desire to learn” in comparison with 68% of students in public schools and 79% of students in independent schools.

For survey questions related to student perceptions of the DP, the total sample mean was significantly above the midpoint for each question. Results indicate that students find value in the DP and feel that the IB has facilitated their engagement in school, global awareness, cultural competency, understanding of the connections between disciplines and has prepared them for college. While the students expressed their appreciation of the programme and its many benefits, a number of students also indicated that it can be challenging and stressful, as the below quotes illustrate:

“The DP is extremely challenging and satisfies my desire for rigorous classes. My knowledge has immensely increased compared to previous years of schooling. I love the IB programme because it encourages students to be a part of their communities and learn more about the world around them. I feel accomplished with my achievements in the DP/IB programme and I hope to graduate with the DP diploma and earn credits for college.”

“I believe that the IB programme has made me a better student and more aware of international events and cultures. It has also made me more prepared for college. However, I do believe I am far more stressed out than a high school senior should be.”

Qualitative results

Classroom observations

Three IB classes were observed in each district, for four hours each. In each classroom students were seated in rows in a semi-circle around the instructor and media

equipment. Classroom organization seemed to facilitate eye contact between the teacher and students as well as students’ ability to work in groups. Each instructor actively prompted students, verbally encouraged them and elicited other students’ input when a student had difficulty responding to a question. In both districts, portions of each class were interactive. Students demonstrated respect for each other and the instructor listened intently and asked questions.

School administrator interviews

Four school administrators were interviewed (two in each district). All school administrators expressed that IB district-wide implementation has provided a common language, structure and curriculum across the district. According to the administrators, district-wide IB implementation has increased “horizontal communication” (communication and coordination among teachers within a school). School administrators also commented that instruction is more student-focused, and there is “vertical alignment” across elementary, middle and high schools within the district.

School administrators discussed several difficulties with IB district-wide implementation. They noted that the IB requirements and grading rubrics often do not align with state-required assessment processes and that IB standards conflict with state-required evaluation procedures for teachers. School administrators find it challenging to maintain a full staff of teachers who are properly trained in IB curriculum and instruction. In addition, school administrators highlighted the fiscal challenges of providing required ongoing professional development for IB teachers and not having enough time to ensure that all facets of the IB framework are fully implemented.

District administrator interviews

Four district administrators were interviewed (two in each district). District administrators noted having to allocate more staffing and financial resources to IB district-wide implementation. Additional resources have included adding positions at the district administration level to support IB implementation and developing and funding training for teachers. Administrators discussed the fiscal challenges associated with the costs of these additional resources. Administrators also raised concerns that IB requirements and assessments frequently conflict with state-required assessment measures and practices. While administrators were in agreement that the IB district-wide administration allows all students an exceptional opportunity for learning, they also felt that IB requirements often do not leave room for students to explore the visual or performing arts.

Teacher focus groups

Two teacher focus groups with DP teachers, one in District A and one in District B, were conducted. Teachers believed that district-wide IB implementation promotes increased collaboration among teachers, provides a common language across schools and “vertically aligns” their school district.

Due to IB implementation, teachers have also had to “re-think” their teaching style to be more inquiring and collaborative. Teachers reported incorporating learner profile attributes into their teaching. Additionally, while IB implementation has reduced the quantity of material teachers present in class, it has increased the depth of focus. As one teacher explained:

“Yes, it’s been largely a philosophical shift for the people in my circle of co-workers. We’ve definitely seen a reduction in the quantity of material that we’re covering and trying to do a little bit more in-depth.”

Overall, teachers reported being happy and engaged in their schools and classrooms; however, time requirements and meeting both IB programme requirements and state-mandated assessments are challenges.

Student focus groups

One student focus group was held in each district. Students reported that participation in the IB has improved their research and critical thinking skills and has increased the depth of their relationship with teachers. Learner profile attributes were described as becoming implicit factors driving their thinking and learning. Additionally, the IB programme’s promotion of international-mindedness has increased students’ knowledge and understanding of their own culture as well as other cultures.

The two student focus groups also expressed some conflicting opinions. Students in one group viewed the IB’s rigorous requirements as promoting time management skills, while the other group noted that these requirements interfered with living a balanced life. In one group, students also viewed the DP as detracting from student culture due to less interaction with non-DP students.

Benefits and challenges of the IB

District and school administrators, teachers and students identified several benefits to district-wide IB implementation. These include:

- the IB provides a better education for all students in the district
- the IB fosters international-mindedness among students, teachers and administrators

- the IB provides a consistent programme framework and common practice to align the schools in the district
- the IB better prepares students for the rigour of university-level studies
- the IB offers great programmes and opportunities that go beyond school (for example, community service)
- the IB helps to develop study skills and a work ethic among students
- the district-wide adoption of the IB programme has drawn students from other districts or back from private schools.

Study participants identified two common challenges associated with implementation: the cost of the IB and limited funding, and the alignment of IB requirements with state standards. One district administrator highlighted the challenge of meeting both state and IB requirements:

“I think one of the classic challenges, and I hear this from other colleagues who have IB schools, is the alignment of IB with all of the plethora of initiatives from the states. And teachers feeling like they can do both well and have them well integrated.”

District support for IB implementation

Administrators, teachers and students were asked about the support provided by the district for IB programme implementation. Administrators and teachers reported that the district provided support for professional development and training. Themes derived from student comments included ensuring that students have well-prepared teachers and principals, encouraging mentoring and offering curriculum support and resources.

Recommendations

For district administrators:

- **Alignment:** The IB should provide district and school administrators with guidance on how to better align the IB standards and requirements with the state standards and requirements for students and teachers.
- **Cost:** The IB should assist district administrators to balance the costs of running the IB programme with providing professional development and running other programs in their district. School districts should provide additional resources for financially maintaining the IB programme in the future. Finally, additional resources should be offered to help students to manage the costs for assessments.

For school administrators:

- **Guidance on planning:** School administrators reported that it took time to make sure that all of the pieces of implementation were in place and that it was challenging to keep up with all of the changes. To assist with these challenges, it may be helpful for the IB to provide school administrators with further guidance on planning and the time commitment required for district-wide implementation.
- **Parent buy-in:** District and school administrators should hold community sessions to educate the community about the IB programme and costs of the programme and to allow parents to vocalize and address their concerns. In addition, it may be helpful to provide parents with informational packets regarding the IB programme and plans for implementation to assist with “buy-in” from the community.

For teachers:

- **Time management:** One of the key issues noted by teachers is that the amount of time needed to complete their responsibilities (such as planning, curriculum development and implementing a unit) is extensive. The IB should assess teachers’ perceptions regarding the amount of time they need to plan, develop curriculum, grade, provide instruction to students and meet any other responsibilities in order to help them identify ways to efficiently use their time.

For students:

- **Balance:** One important point mentioned by students is the need for balance between academic and personal/social life. Schools should offer an orientation session or seminar to teach students time management, study skills and self-care techniques. In addition, future research may investigate the amount of homework students are assigned and their responsibilities in order to help students feel more balance in their lives.
- **Connection with other students:** Students in both districts noted that they feel separated from other students (non-IB students). Helping IB students to feel more connected to other students through joint activities may be beneficial.

For a complete list of recommendations, please see the full report.

This summary was developed by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at <http://ibo.org/en/about-the-ib/research/>. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

To cite the full report, please use the following:

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