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This issue...

The International Baccalaureate:
A good choice for America's Schools?

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Understanding the IB

The International Baccalaureate (IB) is a “transnational” educational program that has met with controversy in a number of American school districts. Heated discussions often obscure facts that must be considered in order to make the critical decision whether traditional American education should be supplanted by the IB Programme. This article summarizes components of the IB and addresses some of the concerns about its transformational philosophy and efficacy.

What is the IB?

The International Baccalaureate Programme was developed in the mid-1960's for children whose parents were serving in the diplomatic corps. It was designed to ensure this mobile student population would have access to a consistent college-prep course of study.

The original IB Programme has expanded so that three levels are now available to students around the world aged 3 to 19 years.

1. **Diploma Programme (DP)** – the original program developed in 1969 for students in their last two years of high school.
2. **Middle Years Programme (MYP)** - added in 1994 for ages 11-16.
3. **Primary Years Programme (PYP)** - added in 1997 for ages 3 to 12.

Diploma Programme (DP) students take three or four **High Level (HL)** classes and additional **Standard Level (SL)** classes. They must also fulfill three additional requirements:

1. **Theory of Knowledge:** a one-year course that requires students to write an essay and prepare an oral presentation from a list of topics prescribed by the IBO.
2. **Extended Essay:** a 4,000-word research paper on a topic of interest.
3. **Creativity, Action, Service (CAS)**– 150 hours of mandatory community service and extra-curricular activities.

The governing International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) is based in Geneva, Switzerland, with satellite centers dotting the globe. The IBO has authorized 1,700 schools in 120 countries to teach IB Programmes, including 600+ U.S. schools with 17 in PA. Last year, 35,000 students took IB exams worldwide.

Hard work. High expectations. International focus. These seem like positive aspects. So what causes parents, educators, and school leaders to question whether the IB should be integrated into the American education system?

The answer can be summed up in Seven C's – *Controversy, Calendar, Curriculum, Classism, Courts, College Credits, and Cost.*

The Seven “C’s”

1. Controversial Concepts – *in the IBO's own words*



In order to fully understand the IB Programme, a meaningful study of its educational philosophy and practices is essential. These can be found not only in official IBO materials, but also in writings by its administrators. The following quotes highlight some of the controversial ideas:

*“In developing an awareness of the diverse values of different cultures, it is, however, fundamental that students in each IBO programme are exposed to those human values which are recognized as universal; these are embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948.”*¹ (Emphasis added)



Although many of the enumerated universal rights stated in the U.N. Declaration seem familiar to Americans, there are basic differences critical to understanding the *Continued on p. 2*

clash between the two worldviews. The most basic disparity: **Inalienable Rights vs. Bestowed Rights.**

America's foundational documents, including the U.S. Bill of Rights, are based on the idea that **"We the People" have inalienable or inherent rights** that are "secured" or protected by the government, **not** granted by the government. Paired with that idea is another important, unique American concept: **the people grant power to the government** and therefore have the ultimate power over it, as demonstrated on Election Day.

In direct contrast, the U.N. document is based on the belief that governments or "supra-national" entities (like the U.N.) grant rights to citizens. The government or entity has all the power, and it decides what rights and freedoms will be given to or taken away from the people. Furthermore, the U.N. considers itself to be a "supra-national" power, greater than the individual member nations, as clearly indicated in Article 29 (3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: *"These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations."*

The underlying premise of the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights is antithetical to the beliefs embodied in America's founding documents.



*"The Diploma Programme and Middle Years Programme grew from a western humanist tradition, the increasing influence of non-western cultures on all three programmes is not only being acknowledged, but is becoming increasingly significant."*² (Emphasis added)

In order to understand the philosophical underpinnings of the IB, it is vital to understand what the IBO means when it states: the IB Programme is rooted in a "western humanist tradition."

The U.S. Supreme Court recognized Humanism as a religion in 1961. (*Torasco v Watkins*, 367, US488, June 19, 1961) As such, the American Humanist Association has its own religious tax exemption and its own clergy (Humanist Celebrant).³

The basic precepts of the Humanism include:

- Theological atheism
- Philosophical naturalism
- Biological spontaneous generation and evolution
- Moral relativism
- Political globalism⁴

As the IB's philosophical foundation, Humanist beliefs permeate the curriculum. For example:

- Ian Hill, IBO Deputy Director General, states his case for moral relativism: *"Values are learnt (sic), not inherited...They [values] do not exist in a vacuum and they are not immutable; circumstances can cause one's*

*beliefs to change."*⁵ With no moral absolutes, ethics are *"autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction."*⁶ Ethics therefore change with time as new scientific discoveries are made and as human needs dictate.

In the classroom, a recurring outcome throughout the social and cultural components is "tolerance for change and uncertainty." For example, the IB curriculum *"emphasizes the necessity for students to challenge existing structures and create new structures."*⁷ (Emphasis added) Students are expected to question and challenge the fixed beliefs they bring to the classroom, such as allegiance to family, church, and nation. If values conflict, students may be encouraged to relinquish those beliefs learned at home to embrace those beliefs taught in school in order to form a "consensus" for the common good.

- In education, "naturalism" means that children should learn naturally and that teachers should not interfere with this process. This philosophy is central to IB teaching strategies in which teachers are "facilitators" so children can construct their own knowledge. As a result, there are often no right and wrong answers and students, even very young students, become their own self-referential decision makers.

The success of the transformational nature of the IB Programme is apparent in the comments made by an IB student on a website:

"Why shouldn't politics be discussed in the classroom where the setting is neutral, rather than being indoctrinated by one's parents at home?" (Emphasis added)

This student has been successfully disconnected from his existing family beliefs.



*"What is acknowledged... is that education for world citizenship needs to begin early... The development of world citizenship must take place at every age."*⁸ (Emphasis added)

The IB Programmes begin developing *world citizens* with children as young as three. The IB's School's Guide to the Primary Years Programme states:

- *"The philosophy of the PYP, as it directly affects the child, is expressed in a series of desired attributes and traits that characterize students with an **international perspective**."* (p. 4) (Emphasis added)
- The elementary students spend time *"exploring themes which have **global relevance** and importance."* (p. 6) (Emphasis added)
- *"The IBO is unapologetically idealistic in believing that education can foster...future generations to live more peacefully."* (p. 7) (Emphasis added)

But what do *world citizenship, international perspective, and globalism* mean? Do they suggest a dual citizenship? Are they compatible with *American citizenship*?

Ian Hill, again, provides an important answer: “*The **global outlook** does not deny national or local imperatives; on the contrary, the **supranational perspective** is a construction of all nations which contribute to it.*”⁹ In other words, nationalism becomes a vehicle to teach the idea that a transnational or supranational entity is essential for world peace. And Hill notes that the U.N. and its agencies exemplify this “national collaboration.” He further explains that for supranational entities to exist, nations must be willing to negotiate, compromise, and form a consensus. The end result: nationalism is subservient to supranationalism. The controversial creation of the supranational European Union embodies this globalist goal. Neutrality to one’s nation is an acceptable IB outcome.



“*Each programme gives central focus to the students as ‘the knower,’ **constructing meaning from existing knowledge and personal experience through active inquiry.***”¹⁰
(Emphasis added)

Traditional education is grounded in the transmission of a body of knowledge from the teacher to the students. The teacher is the adult, the “knower” and the “expert” who teaches the students employing various teaching strategies, including direct instruction. Students are required to memorize math algorithms, historical and scientific facts, and other basics that form an enduring foundational framework for further learning.

In contrast, constructivist educational practices are child-centered. The child is the “knower” and the teacher’s role is one of “facilitator” or “guide on the side.” The IB discourages traditional teaching practices while students explore, inquire, and often struggle to “discover” a concept on their own. IB “teacher training” is therefore needed to ensure constructivist teaching practices.



“*Each programme promotes the education of the **whole child, emphasizing intellectual, personal, emotional, and social growth.***”¹¹
(Emphasis added)

The “whole child” means just that - the whole personhood of the child. The academic process is expanded to include formation of the child’s psychological, social, emotional, political, intellectual, and spiritual orientation from which his or her beliefs and values emanate. In contrast, American parents have relied on schools to educate their children while respecting and supporting parental values, not eroding or supplanting them.

When speaking at a U.N. Disarmament Forum, Ian Hill, IBO Deputy Director General, stated: “*We [the IBO] are concerned with **forming attitudes and beliefs.***”¹² (Emphasis added)

George Walker, recently retired IBO Director General, explains how the teaching of attitudes, values, and beliefs is accomplished: “*The curriculum of a school can be divided roughly into three elements. There is the compulsory [curriculum]..., extra- or co-curriculum..., and **hidden curriculum, the informal but influential rules, beliefs and attitudes that determine the transmission of norms and values.***”¹³ (Emphasis added)

Strong attempts to influence a student’s personal beliefs and attitudes reach deep into the personality of the individual to mold and move that student toward a specific end. Ian Hill suggests one such end: “*The world’s moral order is in some disarray...The IBO, alongside many other NGO’s and organized bodies, is promulgating humanitarian and ecological values through education.*”¹⁴

This kind of “transformational” education goes well beyond the imparting of knowledge as it attempts to construct certain beliefs and attitudes within the students.



2. Calendar - *IB scheduling controls the school’s Master Schedule*

- IB classes must be offered, regardless of student enrollment numbers. The non-IB courses are scheduled around IB courses.
- IB students must be scheduled first to ensure completion of required classes.
- IB classes have fewer students (sometimes one or two), therefore non-IB classes are often larger than average.
- Students who miss the IB exams at the end of the school year are not permitted to take any make-up exams.
- Electives take a back seat to required IB classes.



3. Curriculum

- The IBO program affects the entire school: “*It must be made very clear that the programme does have a major role to play in the school and that **the intrinsic values espoused by the IB DP are relevant to the whole school, are firmly embraced by the published school mission statement...and will have an influential role in any sections of the school that do not have an IB Programme.***”¹⁵ (Emphasis added)

- Local school boards have little control of the IB Programme.
- Specific IB course requirements make it almost impossible to offer both the IB Programme and an extensive AP Program.
- Work done by DP students is sent away to IB centers for grading by IB officials. *“Responsibility for all academic judgments about the quality of a candidate’s work rests with examiners worldwide.”*¹⁶ The IBO also monitors grading done by classroom teachers.
- IB courses are generally not aligned with American local, state, and/or national standards.
- Mobile high school students can have problems transferring into and out of the IB since few American schools offer it.
- Concerns have been raised about the following subject areas:
 - *Literature*: The mandated reading list has been described as so multicultural that the importance of foundational Western readings is diminished.
 - *Social studies*: Strong American Civics or U.S. History and Government components are absent from IB coursework.
 - *Science*: *“A key aim of the experimental science is to ‘raise awareness of the moral/ethical, social, economic and environmental implications of using science and technology.’”*¹⁷ Traditional academic goals of science courses are diluted by societal issues and political correctness.
 - *Math*: Calculus competence, essential for higher math, is not always a strong element.
 - *Computer science*: Only one SL-Level course is offered.
 - The heavy emphasis on language limits participation by students who are weak in linguistics but strong in math and science.



4. Classism

- The IB is considered an “elite” education offered in a public school setting - often a selling point to parents.
- IB courses appeal to intelligent, highly motivated, organized students and the best academic teachers.
- Yet, most students who begin the IB Programmes do not earn the IB Diploma.
- The IB DP serves a few students at the expense of the wider student population



5. Courts

- Foreign Swiss courts adjudicate conflicts between IBO requirements and U.S. schools.



6. College admissions and college credits

- College credit is generally given only to the few students who complete the IB Diploma Programme. Those who receive IB Certificates are usually denied college credit.
- Therefore, a limited number of college credits are awarded to only a few elite IB Diploma students.



7. Costs

- Schools have estimated annual IB Programme costs to be as high as \$250,000. This amount includes direct payments to the IBO as well as other costs, such as two required administrative positions, ongoing IBO-approved professional development, curricular materials, and postage to mail student materials to IBO centers for grading.
- When few students actually graduate with the IB Diploma, the total cost per IB student is several times the cost of a non-IB student.

Finding a solution: The eighth “C” – Choices

Parents and students have valid concerns with the lack of rigor in many American schools, especially at the secondary level. In this reform era of minimum academic standards and state testing, the curriculum is often narrowed to focus on what students need to know to perform at the proficient level on assessment tests rather than including the more extensive knowledge needed to be an educated person. Many students and parents want more. They want an education program that challenges students to study, learn, and think, and enables high school students to earn college credits.

Parents and educators across the country have expressed legitimate concerns about the IB Programme, casting doubt on its efficacy for American public schools. However, school districts have other options to consider

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when developing rigorous academic curricula without the heavy emphasis on a globalist worldview. Choices include:

- **Advanced Placement (AP)** courses
- **College in High School (CHS)** classes
- **Honors** classes and **Enrichment** programs developed by the district to meet the academic needs of individual students

All of these types of classes:

- offer a rigorous curriculum that matches the American education model and standards
- attract motivated, intelligent students and dedicated, high-caliber teachers
- expect students to read and write extensively, research topics, and employ critical thinking skills.
- offer students the flexibility to select from a menu of classes instead of enrolling in a restrictive program
- enable students of wider academic abilities to enroll in challenging classes that develop their academic strengths
- incur minimal costs for students and schools

AP Courses

Under the direction of the College Board, Advanced Placement courses offer high school students the opportunity to learn college-level material and to earn college credit. AP courses in over thirty subject areas are offered in over 15,000 schools. Last year, more than 1.2 million students took more than 2.1 million AP exams.

Strengths of the AP program include:

- High AP test scores are usually accepted for college credit, even at top-tier colleges.
- Average AP scores are also accepted by many colleges and universities.
- Students may begin taking AP courses and earning college credits in grade 10.
- Students who miss AP exams for legitimate reasons may take scheduled re-tests.

College in High School

College in High School (CHS) requires partnerships between high schools and colleges or universities that offer a CHS program. High school students can earn college credit during the school day by attending college-level classes taught by their “certified” high school teachers. These rigorous classes expect the students to read, write, and think at an accelerated level. Exams are written and monitored by the college, but graded by the teacher. Students pay a nominal fee for the college credits earned and receive a college transcript. The CHS credits are usually transferable to other colleges and universities.

Advancing technology, global market places, and ease of international travel have contributed to a world hard to have imagined even twenty-five years ago. Every student graduating from school today faces a highly competitive economy that requires a rigorous, academic education.

In developing academic programs that go beyond “minimum standards,” school districts have several options, including Advanced Placement, College in High School, Honors courses, and Enrichment programs. Teachers, parents, students, school leaders, and taxpayers should be part of the development process so that the end result is a flexible, challenging program that fosters the highest academic achievement for the greatest number of students.



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