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American High Schools Try the International Baccalaureate Program

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The prestigious International Baccalaureate program is quickly becoming a fixture at many U.S. high schools as the demand for more students with global skills grows. Take, for example, the International Academy, a public high school outside Detroit, which ranks No. 6 in *U.S. News's* America's Best High Schools list. Bert Okma, a high school history and economics teacher, founded the school in 1996 with the goal of preparing every student for the jobs of the 21st century. He decided that the best way to do that was through the International Baccalaureate curriculum, a rigorous academic, cultural, and linguistic program that was relatively unknown then.

"I saw what was happening to our world and the impact of international integration," Okma says. "I just felt that if the world was being so transformed by this experience that there was a clear need for a high school experience that would prepare students for that new world."

Today, with the nation's economy in a recession, Okma feels even more strongly about giving students an internationally competitive education and is steadfast about using the IB program. Okma is not alone in his thinking. Being successful in the IB program can give students a leg up in college admissions. "We do find that colleges look very favorably upon the students who come through the IB program," says William Kresse, the principal of No. 35-ranked City Honors School at Fosdick Masten Park, a magnet high school in Buffalo, N.Y. "There is a sense that IB students are very well rounded and balanced human beings."

IB courses are rigorous, and usually, only the most dedicated students complete all of the requirements for an IB diploma. (At City Honors School, some students opt only for Advanced Placement courses, which are offered in addition to the IB program.) To earn an IB diploma, students must successfully pass examinations in literature, a foreign language, social studies, mathematics, experimental sciences, and the arts. They also must write a 4,000-word essay, complete a theory course that hones critical thinking skills, and perform more than 100 hours of community service. The exams are graded by teachers across the globe and compared against the results of thousands of students in 131 countries.

Across the country, IB programs are blooming. California leads all states with 68 programs,

followed by Florida with 49, and then New York and Virginia, which each have 35. The program remains smaller than the Advanced Placement college-prep program. In all, there are 534 U.S. schools offering IB programs.

Achievement data show that students who complete IB diplomas are more likely to graduate from colleges on time. According to the International Baccalaureate Organization, 80 percent of students who earn an IB diploma in high school graduate from a four-year university within six years, compared with 58 percent of the general college student population. A separate study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a think tank in Washington, describes the IB program and its assessments as "rigorous, fair and intellectually richer than almost any state standard and exam for high school that we've seen."

Becoming an International Baccalaureate School is not easy or cheap. It took Okma four years to open the International Academy in 1996. The school had to raise thousands of dollars from the community to cover the initial membership fees and to train teachers. At the time, Okma says, there were many families from Britain and Germany with ties to the automotive industry who were looking to send their kids to an IB school. IB credentials are accepted at high schools and universities worldwide.

Today, with the state's bad economy, there may be fewer international families moving to Detroit, but the demand from local families is higher than ever, Okma says. In recent years, the school has opened two other campuses to accommodate more students. The student body now totals 1,000, which is more students than most IB high schools serve. Yet the school continues to post impressive results. Last year, 97 percent of graduates earned an IB diploma, an impressive figure considering the 80 percent diploma pass rate at most other schools. When former students return, Okma says, they often report having an easier time in college classes than their non-IB peers. "IB students are very reflective," he says. "They see meaning that goes well beyond the immediate needs of quizzes, papers, and exams."

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