

The rigorous International Baccalaureate is rapidly growing in popularity in schools across the country.

A GLOBAL TEST GAINS GROUND

By Pat Wingert

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When People conjure up an image of Hyannis Mass., they think: wealthy seaside resort town, home of the Kennedy compound, and they assume the local public schools are filled with rich kids. But the people who reside in the fancy houses come only in the summer. The families who live here all year long tend to be ordinary, middle-class people, many of them in service industries. The test scores coming out of area schools tend to be pretty ordinary, too.

But when the townspeople started looking for a way to pull those scores up, they took their inspiration from some of the most elite private schools in the country, and then gave it a populist twist. They opened a public charter school offering the International Baccalaureate program to any student interested in pursuing it, an approach that's called IB for All.

Generally considered one of the most rigorous high-school curricula in the world, IB was designed after World War II for the children of diplomats who sought an internationally recognized diploma, high-school seniors must pass written college-level exams (each five hours long) in six core subjects, including at least one foreign language, covering the material they've learned over the past two years. To ensure fairness, the tests are scored by outside graders. In addition, the degree requires students to write a 4,000-word thesis and complete lessons in philosophy.

Growth of IB schools around the world has been steady over the past 40 years, but it's been fastest in the United States, where it is now in 758 schools. The pace has been particularly brisk since 2000, when more U.S. schools began using it to spur higher achievement. Because IB requires high school students to do college-level work, many schools continue to restrict access to their most capable students. Others offer IB for All, but have school admissions standards that winnow out weak students. Hyannis's Strugis Charter is one of only two IB for All schools that are open to all students. It fills its classes via public lottery. We don't screen out students with low grades or test scores or those who write poorly," says Eric Hieser, executive director of the school. "If they want to challenge themselves, we tell them to give it a go." Not every student at Strugis earns the full IB diploma, but Hieser argues that it's still a major accomplishment to pass an IB class. "Everyone here develops the kind of mind and skills that will ensure their success in college," he says.

Senior Taylor Finkelstein, 18, is a case in point. The second youngest of five children, she thought of herself as "just a nice, quiet girl who never raised her hand. I never pushed myself." When IB was introduced at the start of her sophomore year, she felt intimidated. But the combination of small classes and challenging work helped her gain confidence. This spring, she amazed herself by sitting for exams in sciences, English, history and art. "I thought they'd be really hard," she says. "But when I sat down to take them, I felt really prepared. I've become more of a student than I ever thought I could be."

Despite its successes, IB is not without its detractors. Some critics complain about the cost. IB charges every school \$8,000 a year as a base fee, no matter its size. There are extra costs for the exams and teacher training. In a few places, like Upper St. Clair, Pa., there is unease by some conservatives about the global-rather than strictly American-focus of the program. Supporters note that IB gets funding from the conservative Bush administration. Despite that assurance, the conservative majority of Upper St. Clair's school board voted last year to end its IB program, setting off a local firestorm. Parents who support the program filed suit and got politically active. Last Tuesday, school-board elections were held, and a new pro-IB majority was voted in.

That's the kind of passion driving IB's popularity. Brad Richardson, the regional director of IB in North America, says that in the last few years, IB name recognition has increased substantially. With it will come more growth, he says. "We may now be at the tipping point."