

## Tips for Parents: AP vs. IB - Which is best for my kid?

*This Tips for Parents article is from a seminar hosted by Jay Mathews, who compares Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes in relation to gifted students. Davidson Institute for Talent Development 2011*

Much of the discussion on the Davidson site took me in different directions than I am used to going. Many of the parents were concerned about students who were working far above grade level and trying to figure out how to keep them engaged without being forced to enroll them in college at age 12.

My most important point was that for families needing the maximum flexibility, AP was much better than IB. Students can take the AP courses online. Anyone can sign up to take the exams in May. (I took them at age 52, as a reporter covering AP, to give myself some insights and some street cred.) IB is rooted in a system for 11th and 12th graders. Unless you want to promote your child to those grades right away, you won't be allowed into IB. The IB programs for younger children---the Primary Years Program and the Middle Years Program---are smart and engaging, but do not provide much acceleration beyond their grade levels.

HOWEVER, and I capitalize that word for a reason, if your student is an 11th or 12th grader and you are choosing between AP and IB, in my mind IB is the better program. The principal reason is that it has significantly more emphasis on writing than AP. The IB exams, unlike AP, rarely have multiple choice questions. Students must answer in essay form and their answers graded by human beings. (Usually about half of AP exam questions are essays graded by human beings, but a good grade on that section can get the student a final top grade of 5 on the exam even if he misses most of the multiple choice questions.)

A student who goes for the IB diploma, which requires the equivalent of six two-year courses, must also write a 4,000-word extended essay, often a research paper on some topic. Most of the former IB students I know say the extended essay was the most satisfying and challenging thing they did in high school, and prepared them well for college research. Let me put this next sentence also in all capitals: IN THE UNITED STATES, ONLY THE IB PROGRAM AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS CONSISTENTLY REQUIRE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT TO WRITE MAJOR RESEARCH PAPERS. The failure to emphasize writing in that way is a scandal. But it is true.

That was pretty much the extent of my argument on choosing between AP and IB. Here are the important ways in which they are the same: College admissions officers love both fervently and equally. If you have taken 5 IB exams but not done the full diploma, you are still going to be regarded

an identical, at least in that dimension, to the student who has taken 5 AP exams.

Many parents were interested in how many AP or IB courses and exams their children should take. The answer, based on conversations with many admissions offices of the most selective colleges, is three to five. Three is fine, particularly if the scores are good. Five is also good, but not much more so. If you take 6, 7, 8 courses and exams and on up in anticipation of the colleges giving more respect to those applicants who take the most AP or IB exams, you will be wrong. It is fine to take that many if the student enjoys them and thinks her time is better spent with them than other available courses but it will do nothing to improve her chances of getting into Harvard. She will be put in the same maybe pile with students who have taken just three APs, and the decision will be made on other factors---GPA and test scores relative to others in her high school's senior class, recommendations and activities.

I advised families to note that a student who is taking 12 APs may not have enough time to show the deep and passionate involvement in activities that the colleges seek. That would be bad. Be careful NOT to fill the activities box with several different enterprises. The student should put a lot of effort into only a few activities, no more than two, and one is enough if the student has reached a high level, like running a local assemblyman's campaign or winning the state lacrosse championship.

There is a problem at the moment at most colleges with getting course credit for one-year Standard Level IB course final exams. You can easily get credit for a good grade on a one-year AP course exam. You often cannot get similar credit for a good grade on a one-year IB course exam. This is the colleges' fault. They have been slow to see that they are discriminating against IB. But it is changing. Virginia's legislature has outlawed the double standard, and other states are thinking about doing the same.

An IB student who completes the full diploma will not have a problem, since he will have taken several Higher Level two-year IB courses that do receive college credit.

The most important point is that IB and AP courses are only as good as their teachers, so check with parents of children older than yours on the quality of instruction, then select whichever program works best for you.