

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

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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.

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 as 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.

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Comments

Contributed by: Student on 4/2/2014

Hi I'm a 10th grader in high school and I'm making my schedule next year. At first I didn't know whether I should take the ib diploma or just AP classes. Now that I have read your article and my mom motivated me to be the best

I can, I have chosen to take the IB diploma. My goal in life is to learn as much as I can. There are so many classes to take that interest me but there is so little time. Anyway, thank you.

Contributed by: Other on 10/25/2013

Hello all :D I was in the IB program and received my IB diploma in 2006. I will make this short and sweet; IB is tough, however, I felt more prepared than my classmates when it came to college. As a college freshmen, I was performing better than college seniors in my upper level lit classes (and my professors adored me). My parents did not have a college education, so when we had difficulties making the decision of AP vs IB. We chose IB, because we had heard the transition from high school to college (in terms of work, rigor, time management, etc) was almost nonexistent, because the program prepares you. Welp, they were right :D Now I'm a happy little teacher and I LOVE teaching my students the biological wonders of the world.

Contributed by: Student on 6/18/2013

I am currently a diploma student and all I can say is that I feel IB is a pain, a big pain. However, the reason I stayed was not for the diploma (although it played a huge role), the reason I stayed was because of the other students. When you're in the IB program you know that every single student you are studying with is going to get somewhere in life and you will all be successful. At the end of the day it is up to the student to become successful and doctors, engineers, etc., and I feel that many successful people did not take the IB to become successful - they all had passion and motivation.

Contributed by: Student on 5/27/2013

I'm not sure about AP (I've never taken an AP class), but I know that IB teachers all have to be trained through IB in order to teach any IB class. So from my experience, I've never had a bad IB teacher. All of my junior year teacher's have been great!

Contributed by: Educator on 4/12/2013

Jay, I disagree with you. Most of the "best schools" make reference to students' being prepared for AP tests. Not IB tests, because their students aren't allowed to take IB tests, unless they have been enrolled in IB courses. Why, if you've taken AP courses, or been home-schooled, can't you take IB tests? On the 4000-word IB essay, I did these, working up from 3000 words in 6th grade. I doubt that the pre-IB programme does this. IB (public) lets kids take 3 college-creditible HL courses. IB private, 4. Why the difference? AP lets kids take, 5, 6, 8, 12 college-creditible courses. More importantly, non-IB schools let their most brilliant students take 12th grade linear algebra, diff EQ, third-semester physics, organic chemistry, and other second-year SS and humanities college courses, on campus, or through concurrent enrollment in local colleges, in 12th or even 11th grade. Impossible in the IB Programme.

Contributed by: Educator on 1/29/2013

Dear Mr. Matthews, Thank you for your article. I found it to be quite accurate. For the student who is a freshmen and is two grade levels above his peers... Most U.S. high schools that offer the Middle Years Programme (MYP) offer the 9th and 10th grades as honors and therefore are advanced, however, that is not always the case and your evaluation of MYP and Primary Years Programme (PYP) as a whole is correct. Great teaching for all students. As a H.S. Diploma Programme (DP) Coordinator AND mother of a junior DP student (by her choice), I love, and strongly believe in the DP if it is a good fit for the student and their family.

Contributed by: Student on 11/11/2012

It might be true that AP students or those teachers who are strongly supportive of AP program are having some kind of stereotype or so towards IB. However, if you are an IB student, I must say that you can't really say that

"memorization" and "exam-taking" are the only qualities to be found in AP courses. Unless you are an academically less interested student you shouldn't really feel that AP learning is a learning of "memorization" since if you are strongly inclined to learning new things you should be able to learn by yourself. Although AP do have weakpoints compared to IB in that it surely focuses simply on academic aspects of highschool life, I honestly think AP program exists not to FORCE you to MEMORIZE. People hate AP because typical education till today has had a strong focus on memorization-type learning and they hate it. Yet, if we twist some words, we can make even IB students the victims of FORCED SERVICE and FORCED EXTRACURRICULAR to LOOK FANCY. We must understand that IB and AP are apples and oranges. People can choose either, and they have rights to be honored for their choice of difficult academic subjects. However, either of the programs will survive if it can win over the test of time.

Contributed by: Student on 9/27/2012

I am currently a 12th grade student in the IB program and can attest to the rigor of the courses as well as the fostering of intellectual curiosity. You will see most, if not all AP classes "teaching to a test". That has been my experience after taking 4 AP courses (at the same time as IB classes my Sophomore and Junior years). IB tests are worth teaching to because of their open inquiry based questions. Knowledge from multiple subject areas and an advanced understanding (i.e. NOT rote memorization) of the topic at hand will gain you higher exam scores, and more college credit. AP classes for much younger students will offer the rigor required, but after entering high school I suggest IB classes for any student wishing to gain knowledge that transcends textbook learning/memorization.

Contributed by: Student on 12/20/2011

The information provided about the IB program is completely false. I am currently a student in the middle years program at grade 9, and I know for a fact that we are learning FAR beyond our age. I have been in the program since 6th grade, and we learn two grade levels above average lesson plans. Do not make assumptions if you have not experienced the IB program. IB gives college credits starting at 7th grade, and when entering the diploma program, you get to take "different routes" and take classes for the career you want to pursue. In my opinion, IB is obviously much better than AP.

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