



# Making Hard Work Pay Off: Chicago Public Schools and the International Baccalaureate

Brian Spittle

Center for Access and  
Attainment, DePaul University

One of the more intriguing access initiatives in this country over the past decade has been the establishment of a dozen or so International Baccalaureate programmes in Chicago Public Schools. The schools don't exactly fit the usual American IB profile in that they serve predominantly low-income communities. And yet the programmes have been pretty successful in improving the education of the students enrolled in them and, by extension, expanding the postsecondary opportunities available. As a result, while less than 5% of CPS graduates each year have taken the IB, their story has larger implications. It's a story on the face of it that might be seen as little more than a subplot in the larger saga of school reform in the city. For more than twenty years, the schools in Chicago have been in a state of almost permanent revolution – the local term is 'transformation' – with a highly centralized and patronage-ridden system giving way, in the face of demographic change and financial crisis, to one driven by the twin imperatives of contemporary school reform: choice and accountability. Chicago schools may still be in financial crisis – there is talk of a possible billion dollar deficit in 2011 – but that may be where the continuity ends. The mayor's 'Renaissance 2010' plan launched in 2004, called for the creation of 100 new schools (and the closure of underperforming schools) but the new schools don't look much like the old. There are now over 150 public high schools in Chicago, but 29 are charter schools (much like the UK Academies), and a miscellany of contract schools, small schools, magnet schools and even military schools account for much of the remainder. It is not yet clear whether all this reform is working. What counts as improvement tends to

be narrowly defined and is in any case pretty uneven. But one of the things we can say for sure is that the schools are becoming more stratified. At the top stand eight selective admission high schools which dominate the system in resources, quality, visibility and results. There is enormous pressure to get into these schools – 13,000 applications for about 3,000 places last year – and not surprisingly they account for a disproportionate share of the subsequent college enrollment of CPS graduates. The International Baccalaureate, then, is one of the choices open to CPS students, though it is often the second choice. This is not how we are accustomed to thinking about IB, but such is the level of competition to get into the selective high schools that in many cases IB becomes the fall-back option. While the programs are also selective, they are by no means as difficult to get into as the selective high schools. By the same token, they tend to be more representative of the CPS population as a whole which is overwhelmingly low-income and minority.

The initial impetus for IB in Chicago is a matter of some debate. Certainly, it was seen as part of the wider quality enhancing effort in CPS. IB has been growing rapidly in the US and indeed there had already been a very successful IB school in Chicago for some years. The general idea was to extend the model to other neighbourhoods of the city many of which were underserved in terms of quality high school options. Some have claimed that the motivation had as much to do with gentrification – keeping middle class families in the city – as education. Be that as it may, the fact remains that the majority of students in the new IB programs were and are drawn from low-income communities and

households. What then are we learning? To date there have been essentially two efforts to gather information about the profile and performance of IB students in Chicago: a large-scale longitudinal project by the Consortium on Chicago School Research and, second, ongoing efforts at DePaul University to track the performance of IB students at the university. While the studies differ in terms of focus and scale they essentially reinforce each other.

The Consortium's initial findings were summarized in a 2009 report: *From High School to the Future: Making Hard work Pay Off*.<sup>\*</sup> The study showed that IB programs (along with other kinds of advanced coursework) seemed to be filling an important gap in the neighbourhood schools and that students were graduating with "substantially higher" levels of academic performance than the average CPS student. More telling by far, however, was the finding that IB students seemed to be making bigger educational gains than students in the selective high schools; they often started off somewhat behind the selective school students but generally caught up and even surpassed them by the time they graduated. The authors of the Consortium's report are careful not to over-claim. They note that they are comparing a relatively small number of students in cohort programs with a much larger pool of students in the selective schools. And there could be many factors contributing to the gains, not least the possibly greater levels of teacher and peer support in the IB programmes. But the gains are there to see and in a population again with fewer family and community resources. True, the report sounds a warning note that too many well-qualified IB students are either setting their college sights too low or falling foul of the college search and enrollment process in some way. But the overall news coming out of the IB schools is very encouraging.

The DePaul research to date points to a parallel conclusion. At the college-level too, we are finding that Chicago's IB students tend to outperform their economic, social and academic profile. CPS students are central to DePaul's access strategy; the university enrolls far more CPS graduates than any other selective, private university. But with eight selective high schools driving so much of the college progression in the city, the university has also sought to build pathway programs for underserved students in the neighborhood schools. In fact, with the university facing its own tug-of-war between a growing reputation on the one hand and an historic commitment to student access on the other, the emergence of IB in the city became something of a strategic opportunity. In Chicago at least, it represented one of those few educational moments where student access and 'quality' seemed to intersect.

Nowhere do they intersect more clearly than in the admission process. DePaul's enhanced reputation has fueled

increased student demand which has in turn led to increased admission selectivity. The problem, of course, is that many of the measures we tend to rely on to make admission decisions – particularly standardized college admission test scores – reflect socioeconomic profile as much as academic ability or potential. Indeed, Chicago's IB students tend not to do particularly well on such measures. But first observation and then research told us that in fact they were performing quite well once they got to the university.

Indeed, we have been tracking the performance of Chicago's IB students at DePaul for about eight years now. The numbers were fairly small in the early days but remarkably consistent in what they told us. IB students were more likely to be drawn from low-income families, more likely to be students of color and more likely to score below the university average on standardized test scores for college admission; yet they were more likely to be retained than other students from CPS and indeed other students at DePaul more generally. With larger numbers of Chicago IB students enrolling in more recent years – thanks to a long-term relationship building strategy with IB programs, DePaul now attracts almost 1 in 10 of all IB students from CPS – the data are starting to become more robust. Indeed, we are now embarking on a more in-depth case study of Chicago's IB students at the university. But to date at least we have found no reason to reassess our optimism about this particular aspect of school reform in Chicago.

It's a simple and yet seemingly counter-intuitive idea this notion of providing a high-quality education to students in some of our poorest communities. But that's the radical idea driving IB in Chicago. It certainly challenges the current conventional wisdom here with its emphasis on measurements and accountability. And it refocuses attention back on the classroom, curriculum and learning at a time when so much of the reform effort is directed elsewhere; on school choice, turnarounds, merit pay for teachers and so on. And it seems scalable. Certainly IB (and other programs for advanced high school curricula such as the College Board's Advanced Placement program) cost more to implement than regular curricula, though in the Chicago context probably not as much per capita as the selective high schools. And, of course, it's not for everyone. But the IB experiment in Chicago seems to be working. And as we are seeing in Texas, California and elsewhere, schools in other low-income communities are starting to implement the IB.

### **Will it catch on, I wonder?**

\*The report can be accessed through the following link:  
<http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/Making%20Hard%20Work%20Pay%20Off.pdf>