

IB Historical Perspective Article

Believing in the Impossible

By Bradley Richardson, Regional Director, IB North America

"Alice laughed: 'There's no use trying,' she said; 'one can't believe impossible things.'

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'" --Alice in Wonderland

There are still a few of us around who recall IB in earlier days. Mary Enda Tookey, Tim Dugan, Orest Melnyk, Alice Johnsen, Diana Brantley, Carol Nasby, Bob Snee, Suzi Geimer, Kathy Huth, Jerry Chris, Remi Vicente, Robin Oliver, Ross Duran, Delores Ellison, David Weiss, Sadru Damji, Jamie Baumann, Carol Case, David Merkel, Connie Jean Larsen, Hillary Matts, and Linda Raasveldt. Are there others? I'm sure many of us remember just getting started with our IB programmes, phoning New York and having the pleasure of talking with a very green Brad Richardson, struggling along with them to divine the meaning of some obscure passage of the Vade Mecum. And calling back the next day, and the next, and the next, "Hi Brad, Tim Dugan here. I have another question for you..."

Back in 1985, we were 100 schools in North America, and there were four of us in the New York office. Now, in 2003, we are 652 schools offering three academic programmes, and poised to add another 80 schools by the end of the current school year. IBNA is now two offices, New York and Vancouver. And when you phone New York with a question, you have 30 people ready to help you. In 1985 we had one person organizing a week of workshops in the fall and one in the spring; today we have eight full-time staff and nine partner organizations offering over 60 workshops and seminars, training 10,000 teachers and administrators during any given year.

IBO has emerged from being a little known organization offering a little known programme to being a large family of schools offering much better known programmes. But the unique benefits of an IB education are still available only to a tiny fraction of students in North America. According to the National Center for Education Statistics and Statistics Canada, there are 119,235 schools in the US, 15,637 schools in Canada, and 19,087 schools in the Caribbean.* The total number of schools in the IBNA region is 153,959.

One can look at this growth in two ways. While we have grown six-fold in less than 20 years – an enviable rate by any measure, IB programmes are still only available to students in 0.4% of schools in our region.

If we believe in the mission of the IBO and the educational merits of our programmes, then we have an obligation to ensure that this experience is accessible to as many students, families, and teachers as possible. We are especially obliged to promote the IB in schools that serve traditionally neglected students, where the programmes can do the greatest good and affect lasting change. So get ready – both the IBO Council of Foundation and the IBNA Board of Directors agree that, in order for the organization to realize the goals embedded within its mission statement, we must strive to achieve greater impact in the world of education. That

means targeted growth, more collaboration with governments, and more experimentation with alternative methods of delivering the IB programmes.

Two worries may spring to mind. First, can we really grow at the current or even an accelerated rate and still maintain the quality of our curriculum, assessment and support services? Second, does this growth become an end in itself and compromise IB's standards?

Here, like Alice's Red Queen, is where we get to practice believing impossible things. Can IB continue to grow? Absolutely! Do we want it to? Absolutely! Imagine all the teachers and students who can benefit from IB. But in order to grow responsibly, we have to position the organization so that we are not only able to accommodate growth, we are able to anticipate it. IBNA is in the midst of reorganizing itself so that it can support the emerging IB strategic plan that asks us to consider how we grow – to be proactive.

For us at IBNA it means more collaboration with governments, universities, professional associations, partners, and the many volunteers who support us year after year. It is really their voices describing their experiences with IB that persuade policy makers. It means a careful review of procedures and processes and adjustments to balance the demands of quality with the availability of resources. It means enhancing training for site visitors, programme evaluators, workshop leaders, consultants, and others. It means enhancing our services to member schools in every stage of their programmes' development. And it means setting up listening posts throughout the region so that we at IBNA can continually monitor quality and respond to concerns as they arise.

To the second worry, I would relate the experience of the past decade. Ten years ago about 20 new schools were being authorized in IBNA each year. Today, that number is approaching 100 new schools a year. But the hundred schools want the same things for their students and faculties that the 20 schools wanted – the same opportunities for students, the same rich curricula, the same advantages of IB's professional development and online support for teachers, and the same interest in broadening their global perspective. Growth is not about lowering standards. It is about increasing access. Many more students can handle IB work than currently have the chance. Many more faculties would thrive as part of the worldwide community of IB teachers than currently have the chance. With each new school that joins the IB family, we are all enriched and renewed.

Please send comments to ibnafeedback@ibo.org.

* Number does not include territories; only countries in the Caribbean

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