



BALANCED

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL SETS STANDARD

By Charlee Beasor

It's all about balance at the International School of Indiana (ISI).

You know an idea is ingrained into a culture when you hear the same key word or phrase from people throughout an organization. From the principal of the school's youngest children to a graduating high school senior, the word one hears over and over: "balance."

Approaching its 25th year in Indianapolis, ISI was founded in 1994 to fill a need in the state's international business landscape: offering an international education option for foreign executives and families. But the school has grown to much more over the years, delivering one of the most rigorous academic programs in the state.

Here is a look at just a few accolades:

- The high school has a 100% graduation rate and a 100% college acceptance rate
- Last year's graduating class of 42 students was offered \$6 million in merit scholarships from colleges and universities
- Students can graduate as bilingual or trilingual (ISI is the only school in the Midwest with a trilingual option). Students can study French, Spanish, Mandarin and English, starting in pre-kindergarten
- The school is a full International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum program
- ISI was ranked the most challenging high school in Indianapolis, second most challenging in the state, fifth in the Midwest and 73rd most challenging in the nation in the 2017 *Washington Post* High School Challenge Index

But accomplishments aside, the key to success is back to that word: balance.

Natalie Wolfe, director of admissions for the Upper School (grades six through 12) and International Student Services, puts it another way. Students are learning with both "breadth and depth."

International School of Indiana students (from left): Paige Feyock, Jaichen Zhu, Dilanya Moonesinghe, Sophia Leonard, Maya Caldwell, Yongqi (Kelly) Yang, Philip Bauwens, Tendela Tellas and Mawich Kachjaani.



EXCELLENCE

“We are preparing kids to be world citizens, to be confident leaders, to really stand above and be ready for a world much different than we were prepared for,” she says.

Three C’s

The IB diploma is an internationally-acclaimed curriculum. The school’s programs are recognized by the French Ministry, the Spanish Ministry, the Confucius Classroom and other international schools throughout the world.

“We blend all of those curricular standards, so we fulfill the promise to parents that they have one of the strongest academic skills and benchmarks curriculum that’s out there,” Wolfe adds.

She gives an example.

“Let’s say you’re a family that’s an international service employee; you come here and you only come here for two years. You’re worried that a typical school setting might not have as high of standards as where you might go next in the world,” Wolfe notes. “That can be put to rest. This internationally-recognized curriculum fulfills that promise and checks that box. They’re going to have everything they need, plus some.”

Other considerations are community and culture.

There are 54 nationalities represented at ISI. While the initial founding of the school was to satisfy a need for foreign executives, locally-settled families (Indiana-based or those from other countries who have made Indiana their home) make up about 70% of the school population, according to Head of School David Garner.

“(The ratio) changes all the time. . . . We often talk about what passport nationality you are. Our kids tend to have more complex identities,” he notes.

Garner adds that it’s a bonus for the city to have a school where students can learn three other languages besides English.

“You’ll find (international schools) in major cities around the world; they’re often the only English-speaking school overseas. Here we flip that



The International School of Indiana’s motto is “Ready for the World Stage”.



Students at the pre-kindergarten and elementary levels learn a second language (choices are English, French, Mandarin and Spanish) through classroom immersion.



model a bit. Yeah, we work in English, but our elementary school kids work mainly in French, Spanish and Mandarin to develop a fluency,” he outlines.

“We have those schools to facilitate that international mobility and offer local families a chance to have an education which is rather different from what they would get in the local, rather traditional schools.”

Fully immersed

Walking into a pre-kindergarten classroom at the ISI Lower School (ages three to fifth grade) transports you to another country. Teachers use language immersion – meaning they only speak the target language inside the classroom. Students pick up the language over time.

In one classroom, a young girl exclaims to her teacher in English that she can’t see the book the teacher is reading in Mandarin. In another classroom, older children learn how to fill out checks in Mandarin. The library is approved English language time.

Kate Lock, director of admissions in the Lower School, has a unique perspective as she started her journey as a parent. Her family moved to Indiana to be near Eli Lilly & Co., and she heard of the school by word of mouth.

“I only speak English and just realized what a disadvantage I was at. I’m from Canada and career-wise I was limited, socially I was limited by just speaking English,” she maintains. “When you have

multiple languages, it’s a differentiator. Our objective is to prepare these kids for the world stage.”

Though you’ll hear a variety of languages spoken, the energy of the students and the love of learning is the same as in any elementary school. Lock calls it a “joyful” place to work.

“It’s really cool as well because we have families from all different nationalities and ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds ... (what) links us all together is that global mindedness. It creates that sense of community,” she adds.

The Lower School is housed in a 1940s schoolhouse leased from Butler University. It’s a few minutes’ drive from the main campus on Michigan Road, where the middle school and high school buildings are located.

Trina Haygaru, principal of ISI’s Lower School, has taught or been a school administrator in Thailand, Egypt, Mozambique and Nigeria. She says the Lower School’s teachers represent 20 different countries.

“They each have their own unique perspective on the world and their culture and they bring that to school with them and share it with everybody,” she mentions.

For instance, second grade students recently worked on a unit about habitats. They transformed one classroom into a savannah with tall grass.

“The kids started hiding in it and were pretending to be animals. The teacher in that classroom happens to be from the Congo. He has a picture of himself as a young man, hiding in the tall grasses and

brought it to school to share with the children,” she recalls.

You’ll find students at a local pond collecting water samples to test or hosting a food drive after studying about the impact of hunger in the surrounding community.

One thing you won’t find? Textbooks.

“We use real-world experiences to learn things. If we want to learn about something, we either go out and learn about it and experience it or we bring someone in to help us learn about it. But we don’t rely on our content and the knowledge coming from the textbook,” Haygaru asserts.

While the program is rigorous, even at the Lower School level, the focus on experiential and play-based learning helps children not feel overwhelmed.

There’s that word again: balance.

“We base a lot of our decisions on the learner profile and one of the adjectives we use is ‘balanced.’ All of our students have at least two recesses every day. Some of them have three. We make sure we have time to play, really play,” she concludes.

‘I can make a difference ... ’

Tendela Tellas has been at ISI since she was a kindergartener. The 16-year-old’s family is originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa and she recalls putting her bilingual skills to practical use at age nine.

“My family from Africa came here when I was nine and I realized I could speak to them fluently in French. I realized I could do so much with my language skills and I could understand them and my entire family couldn’t because they don’t speak French,” she recollects.

“And so I realized I was translating for them and helping them and this has been such a big thing for me because I’m able to help in my community and give back through translating and through other volunteer work.”

Several ISI students share their stories about how the school has made an impact in their lives.

Mawich Kachjaani of South Sudan is a junior who’s been at the school for three years.

“The education is not as good there as it is here in America. I think ISI is preparing me for a better opportunity. If I go back one time, I can make a difference in my community. I think that’s a pretty big deal,” he contends.

For Maya Caldwell, a senior who started in the school at age three, having a rigorous education background gave her a clear pathway for determining her future plans.

“In the second semester of 10th grade, we choose our IB courses for the next two years. Because of all the opportunities that ISI has provided me, I knew exactly what I was already interested in (chemical engineering),” she says. “I knew what I was passionate about.”

Jaichen Zhu is a junior from China who just completed his first year at ISI. He, like Kachjaani and others, lives with a local host family.

“The people in the host family can teach you a lot of things about the culture of America. (When I first came here) someone said, ‘What’s up?’ and I didn’t know what that means. The culture in China and America is very different. They can teach you a lot of stuff you didn’t know before,” he affirms.

Senior Paige Feyock, who started at ISI as a freshman, had been attending other schools in Indianapolis. She



During the lunch hour at the high school, students gather for extracurricular clubs or art, theater or music groups. Tendela Tellas (bottom) leads the school’s Black Student Union.

highlights the full scholarships that many students receive.

“With colleges, a lot of people here get almost full-ride scholarships,” she says. “Like Maya said, through the IB, it’s really shown her what she wants to do later in life. ... Even though college isn’t for everyone, it’s upheld as that end goal you want to meet.”

Senior Philip Bauwens weighs in on whether or not the school is designed for “a bunch of smart kids.”

“I feel that that’s not the case at all. We all have different strengths and weaknesses, and everyone can tailor their schedule and classes toward those strengths and weaknesses,” he attests.

“That being said, you have to work really hard and it’s a big time commitment in terms of what you’ll be doing. It’s an education I think anyone is capable of pursuing and achieving.”

Future focus

The school’s first senior class had eight graduates in 2004. This year’s graduating class is the largest yet, with 47 seniors. As of this writing, they had secured \$3 million in merit scholarship offers, according to Wolfe.

“Most kids don’t even hear offers until March. We’re really proud of our kids for that,” she notes.

Tim Veale took over as principal for the Upper School in August 2017. Raising the school’s profile is one of his goals and to that end, he recently attended a recruitment fair in Boston for international teachers. It’s the first time someone representing ISI has attended such an event.

“Our school has so much potential to receive more accolades and it means a lot to me to help raise the profile of the school, not just in Indiana or the USA, but internationally. It’s a gem of a school that not enough people have heard of. I hadn’t heard of it until I saw the job posting,” he reveals.

Enrollment gains are a positive sign, leading to the possibility of needing a wait list for entrance into the schools.

“The indication right now is that the school is picking up speed in terms of growth,” Veale discloses.

Unifying the school’s campus by bringing the Lower School to the Michigan Road property are in the long-term master plan, according to Garner. Challenges include

continuing to secure funding, particularly as a young independent school.

“Some of the other schools have been around a lot longer. They have endowment funds and very importantly they have alumni who are starting to support the school as well. We’ll be 25 years old next year, but that’s still very young for a school,” he contends.

As for satisfying the school’s founding mission over two decades ago?

“What I hear is, and this predates my arrival at the school ... the economic development didn’t go quite as expected. It wasn’t the big increase in international companies that people had been hoping for,” Garner asserts.

But he believes the situation looks “promising” today, as many students are enrolling with parents who work for the same companies. Statewide economic development efforts, such as securing Indiana’s first direct international flight to Paris, also bode well.

“We’re delighted if we’re part of that, absolutely. That is the key mission of the school, to be an additional asset of the economic development of Indianapolis and central Indiana.”

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