

A Blueprint for Action

Parental Persistence Brings the IB to Thunder Bay

by Deborah deBakker

In March, 1993, Lori Paterson had a feeling that things weren't quite right with the education her children were receiving in Thunder Bay. But instead of lying down and waiting for the feeling to pass, Lori did something — she organized a grassroots parents' group.

As individuals, we had all joined school councils and volunteered in our children's schools, but we had found that we could do little about many of the issues we cared about. Under Lori's leadership, we began meeting regularly to study and share information. We decided to join OQE, to become part of a larger movement for reform and choice in education.

Because we couldn't fight on all fronts at once, we decided to focus our energies in one area: providing greater academic challenge and choice for our children. One of our members, Suzan Labine, had told us about the International Baccalaureate (IB), a rigorous pre-university program which meets the needs of highly motivated high school students around the world. Other members did research into the alternative school movement.

In June 1995, we held a public meeting to present information about alternative schools and the International Baccalaureate program. With the feedback we received at this meeting, we became convinced that the establishment of an International Baccalaureate program was our best hope.

We did further study. We found out that the IB is a diploma program for students in the final two years of secondary school. The IB is taught in 630 schools in 84 countries. In Ontario, the IB was already offered at three public high schools in southern Ontario and at several private schools.

The general objectives of the IB are to provide students with a balanced edu-

cation; to facilitate geographic and cultural mobility; and to promote international understanding through a shared academic experience. The program's academic standards are very high, such that IB graduates are granted admission into the second year of many university programs. An IB diploma is like the gold standard, internationally recognized.

IB students develop a strong commitment to learning, both in terms of the mastery of subject content and in the development of study skills and discipline. Diploma candidates select one subject from each of six subject groups. In addition, they must complete an extended research essay, a Theory of Knowledge course, and participate in community service as an extra-curricular activity.

In May 1996, we called a second public meeting to rally support for the IB. To our delight, support bubbled up from parents and teachers. The chair of the local OSSTF offered his enthusiastic support. Three OSSTF representatives joined with Lori Paterson and some other members of the parents' group to form a Working Committee for the IB.

With the partnership of the OSSTF, things began moving quickly! In June 1996, a delegation representing the parents and OSSTF made a presentation to the Lakehead Board. Although some trustees had misgivings, the Board ordered an IB feasibility study to look into issues of access to the program, effects on the teachers' collective agreement and costs.

Lori Paterson, as chair of the IB Committee, presented the findings to Program Committee of the Lakehead Board in November 1996. Following the November 1996 elections, the new

board ordered staff to look at the IB Committee recommendations on implementing the IB.

Beginning in January 1997, Lori and an OSSTF representative made presentations to local secondary school councils, hoping to ignite interest. The response was positive, though tempered with concerns about cost and possible elitism. Presentations made to two Rotary clubs and the Chamber of Commerce were very favourably received.

By June 1997, three high schools had expressed interest in hosting the program. In September the board announced its choice of school. The principal and two teachers went to visit three IB schools on the west coast. When they reported back in November 1997, the board formally ratified the establishment of an IB Program in Thunder Bay.

Because of a commitment not to charge fees to students, outside funding was solicited. Two local foundations stepped forward, one pledging \$30,000 for three years and a second pledging \$20,000 for four years.

All winter, the IB principal was busy promoting the program in the schools and in the media. Over 400 people have attended IB information sessions. There are already 70 students signed up for the Pre-IB grade nine, with registrations still coming in!

The IB is coming to Thunder Bay thanks to the leadership and persistence of a small group of parents who won the support of the teachers union, the Board and the community. One more note — Suzan Labine, who first brought us the idea for the IB, is now Chair of the Lakehead Board!

(Anyone wanting further information may contact Lori Paterson through OQE.)