

# CountyLine

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## The International Baccalaureate Program at South Forsyth High School

Carrie Paulson, Kevin Denney, Matthew Thompson



There are nearly 1,800 International Baccalaureate schools in the United States, providing programs for students in elementary through high school. Just over 1,000 U.S. high schools offer an IB program, with 29 of those in Georgia. South Forsyth High School (SFHS) is the only Forsyth County school to offer IB, giving juniors and seniors the opportunity to complete one of two programs: the IB Diploma Program or the IB Career-related Program.

"The IB Program at South Forsyth High School offers a unique opportunity for students seeking a more global educational experience. Students develop the intellectual, personal, emotional, and social skills needed to live, learn, and work in a rapidly globalizing world. While IB is a cornerstone at South Forsyth, students from all over the district are welcome to participate and experience the benefits of IB," said Laura Wilson, SFHS principal. Each year, information sessions are held at the school to provide an overview of the program and application process. SFHS offers more than two dozen IB courses, and they are open to all students at the school, not just those enrolled in one of the IB programs.

The IB Diploma Program, which currently includes 76 students, requires five IB courses covering core subjects: English, world language, social science, science, and mathematics, as well as one elective. IB Diploma students also enroll in a Theory of Knowledge course, which is taught over the two years of the program. In this course, students learn to compare, synthesize and evaluate the methods of learning acquired in their other IB classes and develop critical thinking skills. Students focus their

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IB studies in a humanities or science pathway, and write an Extended Essay in a subject of their choice. Students enrolled in the IB Diploma program must also complete a program called CAS (Creativity, Action, Service), which emphasizes the importance of life outside the classroom, asking students to reflect on how they are part of their community, how to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and how they measure personal growth. Over the two-year period, students log 140 extracurricular hours engaged in activities such as volunteering in community organizations, organizing a fundraiser, serving on yearbook staff, participating in performing arts, or competing on a school sports team. They then prepare a capstone presentation before graduation.

The IB Career-related Program, which was introduced at SFHS in 2011 and is one of only 10 in the state, incorporates the educational principles of IB into a unique offering that addresses the needs

of students engaged in career-related education. In this program, students complete one of the school's career pathways (business, computer science, culinary arts, engineering, hospitality, marketing, manufacturing, or teaching as a profession), along with two IB-level courses in any subject area. They also take a Personal & Professional Skills course over the two years that teaches soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, and professional ethics. Students must also complete 50 hours of world language development (Spanish, German, French, or Latin), 50 hours of community service, and deliver a reflective project in their career pathway that studies an ethical or cultural problem within the field.

There is no testing requirement to participate in the IB program, and teachers emphasize that students enroll by choice, seeking a unique educational experience. Kevin Denney, IB Program Director at SFHS, explained, "A willingness to work is the most important predictor of success in this program." Carrie Paulson, who teaches IB math concurred, "Students who can take feedback and grow from it are the most successful. Those whose emphasis is on grades, not growth, may have a harder time."

The IB programs provide students with not only excellent academic preparation for college, but with life skills that help them to succeed in college and beyond. "There are a lot of choices to be made in IB, and choice can create stress for students," Matthew shared. "The Theory of Knowledge and Personal & Professional Skills courses help students learn to process information and make judgments from disparate pieces of information." Jack Slatton, a senior IB student, acknowledged the value of the program this way, "IB is a good introduction to the liberal arts education style presented in college. You can choose your classes with a focus in science, literature, etc. in order to pursue things that you are passionate about. It also introduces you to the way that college papers are written and college classes are formatted in order to prepare you for your first years of college."

Student assessments include exams, papers, and projects, which are graded either internally by teachers or externally by graders in the larger IB organization. IB courses can provide college credit, depending on the university, and like Advanced Placement courses, students receive quality points for their grade point average, so a B in an IB class counts as an A for GPA computation. Ninety percent of the SFHS students who begin the IB Diploma program earn passing scores, as compared to a 64% worldwide pass rate. "Even those students who enroll but, for some reason, do not finish the program get a great experience. I wish more students would try it." Kevin said.

Students meet regularly with teachers to review their progress, and Matthew noted that teachers connect deeply with students. "We teach differently and students learn differently in this program. We work collaboratively, and teachers function more

like a coach. They know I'm on their side, that I'm supporting them." Kevin continued, "In this program, there are a lot of conversations between students and teachers, and that fosters a close relationship." In addition to regular meetings with IB students throughout the school year, Kevin holds a monthly meeting with the parents who make up the IB Booster Club to communicate about upcoming extracurricular events, test schedules, ways to support the students, and to answer parent questions.

Student development beyond the classroom is a key component of the IB program, and teachers, along with a dedicated group of parent volunteers, coordinate activities and events to foster camaraderie among students. Each fall, IB students, teachers, and parent chaperones attend a two-day retreat in the mountains where the group enjoys whitewater rafting, rappelling, playing paintball, games, and camp fires. At the end of the first semester, the group holds a winter break party and they celebrate the end of the school year with a picnic.

Samantha Smy, whose son, Ryan, graduated with an IB Diploma in 2016 and is a student at the University of Georgia, said the IB students function like a team. "It's a group of students that support each other and help each other. My son now shares an apartment with one of his IB 'team mates' and regularly meets up with many others." Jack agreed. "I think the most important thing it does is establish a tight community of like-minded, success-driven people that will help you later in life," he said. Sam's daughter, Izzy, is currently an IB student and Sam explained that the program's international recognition is appealing to students who may be looking at colleges outside of the United States. "With the international recognition, the program attracts multi-cultural students, which enables an amazing exchange of ideas and learning experiences in the classrooms," she continued.

South Forsyth High School's mission is to provide a world-class education for the 21st century learner. Living out that mission, the International Baccalaureate programs provide a unique "school within a school" offering that helps to prepare the whole student not only for college, but for the world that awaits them beyond.