



International Baccalaureate
Baccalauréat International
Bachillerato Internacional

A Strategic Partnership to Transform Education in Japan



Executive summary

The International Baccalaureate (IB) has been working in partnership with the government of Japan through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) department since 2011, as part of a broader strategy to reform and internationalize its education system. The government recognized the need to cultivate globally competent, critical-thinking students who could thrive in an increasingly interconnected world through both its state-funded and private schools. Since the partnership, the IB has been adopted by 121 schools, and the government, school leaders, educators, students, and parents across Japan have noted positive changes in student learning outcomes, the quality and quantity of higher education and university applications, and the professional development of staff and school leaders.

Evolving education in Japan

In 2013, following a multi-year engagement programme, the IB and the Japanese government officially commenced collaboration on an ambitious initiative called the 'IB 200 Schools Project'. After consulting the government on its education priorities, the IB recommended a structured transformation programme using its internationally recognised teaching approach to raise both standards and aspirations across the system. The aim of this transformation was to increase the number of authorised IB programmes being delivered by schools in Japan to 200 over the following five years.

Before the project commenced, the IB was partially integrated into the education system, having been delivered through authorised schools since 1979. However, the curriculum was mainly used in international schools, and the rate of new authorizations was slow. The collaboration aimed to democratise access to an IB education through engaging with Article One schools (settings which are officially recognized and regulated under Japan's School Education Law to follow the national curriculum) and working to transform their style of education from direct instruction and memorisation by rote, to focus on inquiry-based and concept-driven holistic learning.

The partnership also sought to improve English competency and teaching among students and educators to prepare them for an increasingly globalised world. This element of the collaboration was critical in ensuring that Japanese students who graduated from Article One schools had equitable access to international university study.

At the beginning of the project, there were several long-standing educational challenges in the country context that required innovative solutions. Japan's lowered birthrate has led to a shrinking student population, creating a shortage of educator roles and forcing school closures, particularly in rural areas. Japan also struggled with teacher recruitment as teaching was perceived as a less popular profession compared to careers in corporate business and technology development. Most critically, Japan's historically inward-looking approach to education had limited the variety and breadth of global perspectives in classrooms, constraining students' preparation for the globally interconnected world of work that awaited them after graduation.

Recognizing these challenges as opportunities for transformation, the IB developed a comprehensive partnership strategy with MEXT, with an approach that centred on building deep relationships, establishing trust, and providing tailored support that addressed Japan's unique educational landscape. A representative from MEXT's International Division notes: "We chose the IB as a partner because we wanted to address key challenges and create schools that could directly develop future skills and prepare students for globalization. The IB is also aligned and compatible with the independent and inquiry-based learning that is emphasized in current Japanese education policy."



A solution fit for the future: implementing the IB

The initial focus for implementation of the IB methodology was through its globally renowned Diploma Programme (DP) for 16-19 year olds, with the project later expanding to include adoption of the Middle Years Programme (MYP) for 11-16 year olds, and the Primary Years Programme (PYP) for 3-11 year olds.

To become authorized to offer the IB, schools must complete a supported candidacy phase requiring fundamental shifts in educational practice. This process facilitates educators' transition from traditional teacher-centred approaches to inquiry-based learning methodologies. They are required to develop interdisciplinary curriculum connections and master new assessment strategies that emphasize both formative and summative evaluation. Educators must also cultivate skills in fostering international-mindedness while adapting to the IB's requirement for multilingual instruction and global perspectives, which was particularly challenging in Japan's historically monolingual education environment.

Through the partnership, the Article One schools in the project undertook this authorization process at an unprecedented pace. This acceleration required intensive professional development programmes, with teachers participating in specialized IB workshops, peer observations, and collaborative planning sessions. Schools had to rapidly establish new organizational structures, including implementing the IB's learner profile across all subjects, creating extended essay supervision systems, and developing creativity, activity, service (CAS) programmes that connected students with their communities through service learning.

Despite this accelerated adoption and the inherent challenges of transforming deeply rooted educational practices, schools handled the authorization process exceptionally well. By 2016, many schools in Japan were authorized to offer the DP, with many achieving authorization on their first attempt.

To build an effective foundation for the transformation, the IB adapted its services and resources to enable their delivery in Japanese. Prior to the partnership, all the IB's learning and teaching materials and the professional development training programmes and materials were available in English, French or Spanish, all of which were inaccessible to the majority of the educators engaged in the project. This created a need to resource the schools with bilingual educators, examiners, and consultants to ensure the effective delivery of the programmes. Each school was assigned its own dedicated IB consultant, educational specialists who possessed both deep IB expertise and a nuanced understanding of Japanese educational culture. These consultants provided personalized mentoring during the candidacy phase, empowering the schools to succeed through the process. They facilitated regular site visits, conducted mock authorization evaluations, and provided real-time feedback on curriculum development and pedagogical approaches. Following authorization, these same consultants continued supporting schools through ongoing professional development, ensuring sustainable implementation and continuous improvement of IB programmes.

Most of the educators in the candidate schools were from rural areas where English language skills were low, and therefore, materials and content needed to be translated and adapted to work in both local and national contexts. Ayako Kurokawa, Business Development

and Recognition Associate Manager, Japan at the IB explains: "Compared to business, finance or technology, teaching is not a popular profession in Japan and we simply do not have enough teachers. Because of this, we have to prioritize recruiting locally rather than hiring from other countries or regions of the world."

At the beginning of the project, the plan was to deliver the DP only in English, but following a feedback process with the schools, MEXT, and the IB understood that to achieve the expansion of the programme they were aiming for, a different approach was needed. To address this, the IB created a dual-language version of the DP, offering the core subjects in Japanese, which was introduced in 2013. Creating this programme was a strategic decision to enhance the dissemination of the DP curriculum, as well as its pedagogy and learning outcomes in a way that was accessible for the Article One schools.

To further ensure successful adoption, the IB also closely collaborated with MEXT to deliver 'The MEXT Consortium for Promotion of IB Education' for schools, which provided information, workshops, seminars, and training on the IB's programmes. This helped to engage and connect educators with bilingual and international peers to support them in building their own IB peer networks, enabling international collaboration and knowledge transfer across the IB's globally connected community.

Creating positive learning outcomes

Following implementation, participating project schools noted that the establishment of the dual-language DP was key in driving their decision to become a candidate school, as it made the IB authorization process much more accessible for them.

Prior to the project, the DP was offered in independent schools and five Article One schools in Japan. Now, there are more Article One schools offering the DP, with 79 schools as of 2025. Uptake in the PYP has also grown significantly as a result of the project, with 81 authorised PYP schools and 34 candidate PYP schools now offering the IB across the region.

The project also increased awareness of the DP among Japanese universities. In a recent survey, 72% of universities responded that they understood the DP and had enough knowledge to accept DP students through their admissions criteria. In the same survey, just 4% of universities said that they had little or no knowledge about the DP.

In the new IB schools, the student-centred, inquiry-based approach of the programmes has had a significant, positive impact on students' academic and personal development. At Saitama Municipal Omiya International Secondary School, as a direct result of IB implementation, educators report that students are developing 21st century skills, such as the ability to independently learn throughout their lives, think critically and appreciate and understand internationally diverse perspectives.

Embedded into each IB programme is the development of 10 characteristics – the IB learner profile – that go beyond academic attainment and prepare students for success outside of the classroom. Through implicit and explicit learning, students become balanced, caring, open-minded, knowledgeable, reflective, and principled inquirers, risk-takers, and communicators. Educators who took part in the programme and work in an IB school report that students, as a direct result of the IB learner profile, regularly reflect on their learning and develop as rounded and resilient individuals. Bradley Semans is the DP Coordinator at Saitama Municipal Omiya International Secondary School in Japan, which means that he is responsible for both pedagogical and administrative leadership within the programme.

“THE IB LEARNER PROFILE MEANS THAT OUR STUDENTS ARE CONSTANTLY ASKING THEMSELVES AM I MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE? AM I MORE CARING? AM I MORE OF AN INQUIRER? THIS CONSTANT REFLECTION HAS BEEN HUGELY BENEFICIAL TO LEARNING AND MEANS THAT OUR STUDENTS ARE MORE ROUNDED AND RESILIENT INDIVIDUALS.”

BRADLEY SEMANS

DP COORDINATOR, SAITAMA MUNICIPAL OMIYA INTERNATIONAL SECONDARY SCHOOL, JAPAN



The IB's transformative impact in Japan also extends far beyond traditional academic learning, reaching through its schools into the community through its emphasis on community engagement and social responsibility. Through the IB's service-learning components, service as action in the MYP, and creativity, activity, service (CAS) in the DP, IB students develop into caring community members who actively work to improve their local environments and address societal challenges. This approach represents a significant cultural shift in Japanese education, moving from a primarily academic focus to developing civic-minded citizens who understand their role in creating positive change in their communities. Bradley continues: “This type of service-led learning goes beyond academic study, with students learning the value of community participation and gaining a deeper understanding of the issues facing their immediate surroundings. Through this, students benefit many other people around them, which is incredibly rewarding to see. I am confident that these projects put students one step ahead of their peers and enable them to become more employable in today's globalized world.”

The IB's service-learning framework has empowered Japanese students to tackle issues in their communities. Students gain practical experience in identifying problems, developing solutions, and implementing sustainable initiatives that benefit society. This experiential learning approach, embedded within the IB's educational philosophy, has created a generation of Japanese students who are not only academically prepared but also socially conscious and equipped to address the complex challenges facing their communities and the world.

The widespread rollout of the IB in Japan has also led to more Japanese students applying to universities overseas because of its global reputation. To illustrate,

researchers from Osaka University and Nara University of Education developed a questionnaire to measure and establish student data, which was administered to DP and non-DP students. The results show statistically significant differences between the IB and non-IB cohorts. Only 2% of non-IB Japanese students surveyed said they were planning to go to an international university, whereas 25% of IB students planned to apply for higher education overseas. In the same cohort, when asked to provide self-assessments on a range of competencies, IB students also gave higher ratings for being: “internationally-minded”, able to “use English effectively”, and “able to make use of information and communication technology effectively”. In other parts of the student questionnaire, major differences between IB and non-IB students centred around global competencies, such as open-mindedness and critical thinking, with these rated more highly by IB students.

Schools that took part in the project have reported that their graduating class has secured university places at prestigious destinations, including The University of Tokyo, Tsukuba, and Kyoto University domestically, and the University of Amsterdam, the University of Toronto, and Santa Clara University and Berkeley in California internationally. In addition, Okayama University was the first national university in Japan to recognize the IB, and IB students at this setting adjusted quickly to university life compared to their non-IB peers. This is supported by research from the UK, which found that DP students are three times more likely to enrol in a top 20 university compared to their peers, 40 per cent more likely to obtain an honours degree, and 38 per cent more likely to be involved in further education.

A lasting legacy through professional development

The IB’s comprehensive professional development framework ensures that educators don’t just adopt new curricula, they transform their entire pedagogical approach. Quincy Kameda is an IB Educator Network (IBEN) Consultant and supported Japanese schools at the beginning of the project. He notes: “At the beginning of the authorization process, some educators were sceptical and had little time to dedicate to IB planning and professional development due to the additional

workload. However, with specialist support, and after witnessing positive student outcomes, their outlook transformed.”

Through rigorous training requirements and this ongoing support, the IB equips teachers with the tools and mindset needed to implement internationally recognized best practice in their approach to learning and teaching. This transformation extends beyond individual classrooms as educators join the IB’s global network of educational professionals, accessing a wealth of shared expertise and innovative teaching methodologies from around the world. This network and commitment to best practice still thrives in Japan as a result of the project, with teachers who took part in the programme, crediting the IB’s emphasis on reflective practices, collaborative learning, and innovative pedagogy with revolutionizing their approach to education.

Achieving systemic change

Japan’s success in transforming its ambitious vision into reality, achieving over 200 IB programmes across the country, demonstrates what becomes possible through strategic partnership. This collaboration transcended typical vendor relationships, with the IB working hand-in-hand with MEXT to overcome systemic challenges and pioneer groundbreaking solutions, including the dual-language IB Diploma Programme.

The partnership’s impact extends far beyond Japan’s borders. The innovative approaches developed through this collaboration, from culturally responsive curriculum adaptations to scalable implementation strategies, now serve as a proven blueprint for other nations seeking to elevate their educational standards. The IB’s flexible, relationship-driven methodology has shown that international excellence doesn’t require abandoning national identity; instead, it enhances local educational systems while maintaining the highest global standards.

For government officials considering similar transformations, Japan’s experience offers compelling evidence that a strategic partnership with the IB can deliver enduring educational change that prepares students for a globally connected future while respecting local contexts and values.

With thanks to our partners:

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology