

Christa Hazel's report from last night's International Baccalaureate program discussion:

I attended the community chat with the school board officials last night at Fernan Elementary. There was a large turnout and the meeting was set up in the gym instead of the library to accommodate more folks. Board Chair Wanda Quinn sat on the gym floor next to Assistant Superintendent Matt Handelman. While the meeting is a chat and any topic can be discussed, the only topic for discussion was the advanced learning curriculum of International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP). I would estimate 2/3 of the bleachers consisted of those parents, students and staff that are supportive of IB/AP. Dianne Zipperer sat in this area. The other roughly 1/3 of the bleachers consisted of parents, community members and activists that are not supportive of the IB portion of advanced learning classes. Terri Seymour and Tom Hamilton sat in this area. Included in the audience were city council candidates, Dan Gookin and Adam Graves. Larry Spencer appeared around the sidelines of the discussion during the evening.

The meeting began with signing your name on a list if you wanted to speak. There were many people who spoke up early about the virtues of these two programs. Katie Kladar, mom of 5 from Hayden, spoke about the true costs of IB actually being .001 percent of the district budget. High school teacher Mike Ruskovich spoke about "the elephant in the room" which is that this controversy has nothing to do with money but that he suspected it has to do with politics. Several students stood up to speak about why they chose IB over AP classes, the differences as to both, and how it is helping them apply to colleges like Harvard and Princeton. These students spoke to how these classes help them compete when applying to rigorous colleges that are out-of-state and typically difficult to get accepted. A few parents spoke about how their children are doing as a result of these classes. The parents also stated that they chose our public schools because of these programs that are offered over sending kids to private schools in Spokane or elsewhere.

Duncan Koler spoke at length about facts and figures in data that was provided by the school district. He gave reasons why it was wrong, poorly reported, and/or misleading. He questioned at times the motivations of the district to hide information or not track certain data. At one point, he mentioned that the district does the bare minimum with this program and doesn't support IB as much as it should if we truly are going to embrace the program. This was met with some cheers to "spend more money" and support IB the way it should be supported.

Other speakers of note includes Debbie Morris who questioned the district and seemed intent to play Gotcha Q&A. She was not well received by the parents and students in the crowd after she inquired as to which kid had their IB fees paid for with state scholarship money. Parents and staff responded this was private information.

Overall, the meeting was eye opening. I am disappointed that there are so many community members not ashamed to be openly rude and it seemed to fall on one side. Some people barked at the speakers when they couldn't hear or the speakers were too

loud. One older man interrupted a lady who was speaking about IB teachers like Mr. Ruskovich and asked why Mr. Ruskovich sends his kids to Charter Academy. Mr. Ruskovich, from the audience, re-directed the attention by stating, "Why don't you ask me that question, Sir."

As an audience member, it was difficult to hear all of the speakers because of the side conversations in the audience. One man kept muttering "this is bull****" and kept raising his hand as though he wanted to question each speaker. Two older couples in the audience kept muttering to each other like Statler and Waldorf in the upper balcony from the Muppets. It was distracting and they didn't care. I would be so embarrassed if my grandparents acted that way: no regard for others trying to listen, barking at speakers about voice level, and sometimes outright heckling.

The part that saddened me the most was when the students, 17 - 18 year old kids, would speak. They would get up, face this emotionally charged group and speak so clearly and passionately about their programs. They cared enough to get involved by courageously speaking in public on a gym floor facing that crowd. Whether I agreed with them or not, I respected their courage. I applauded each and every one of them. 1/3 of the gym consistently did not clap for those students and I don't understand why.

One anti-IB speaker did more for a closing argument in support of IB than could have been scripted. He had been muttering all evening. He got up to speak about how this was all "bull****". He apologized for being so blunt but said he had to "take a piss." He rambled at the students about what they were learning that wasn't too coherent. He then questioned why we are ignoring the rest of the student population because they need to learn too because "the Japs are building two nuke sites south of Dallas." A couple of audience members quietly stood up in respectful protest.

My one suggestion: Next time a community chat is in a large gymnasium, the trustees should sit together. The trustees are supposed to not represent any one group. It sends the wrong message to sit with your supporters in a venue like that, while one trustee is in a chair in the middle of the floor.