

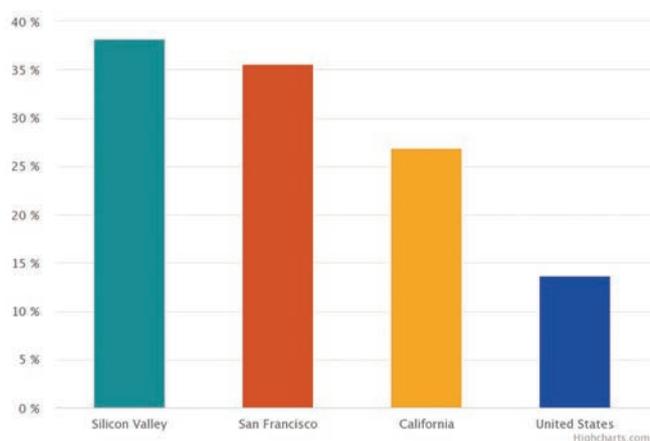
# Pressure cooker education in Silicon Valley

Sally Thorogood examines the impact on learning in a unique environment

'What is it like living in Silicon Valley?' is a question I have grown accustomed to answering since I took up a leadership position in 2012 at an international school in Menlo Park, California. The question is not just a factual one but often comes with a note of anticipation, based on Silicon Valley's reputation for being a centre of innovation and awash with high-tech companies from San Francisco to San Jose. Describing the environment is fairly straightforward, but the subsequent question: 'Do you like it?' is the more difficult to answer. Silicon Valley is a fascinating but also challenging place to live, especially for an international educator and strong proponent of the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. It would be easy on the personal side to highlight such obvious benefits as the outdoor lifestyle or such challenges as the exceptionally high cost of living, but the following are my IB-style reflections from a professional perspective on three particular aspects, having previously worked at an IB school in Europe for 15 years.

## International Community

Over a third of the Silicon Valley population was born outside the United States (Stangel, 2017). The rich diversity of cultures, languages and practices certainly enhances the everyday experience and plays an integral part in the dynamic nature of this area. Given the cosmopolitan population and the emphasis on innovation and creativity, I anticipated finding a



*Percentage of the Total Population Who Are Foreign Born Santa Clara & San Mateo Counties, San Francisco, California, and the United States | 2017*

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey*

potential hub of IB schools. In fact, the number proved more limited than expected, with only one or a maximum of two of the four IB programmes being offered by each school. Part of the reason for my relocation to Alto International School (formerly the German American International School) was the opportunity to support the strategic goal of developing a three IB programme school – and I am glad to say that this was achieved just a few months ago. Alto is now the only school in the Bay Area to be authorised to offer the IB's Primary Years, Middle Years and Diploma Programmes.

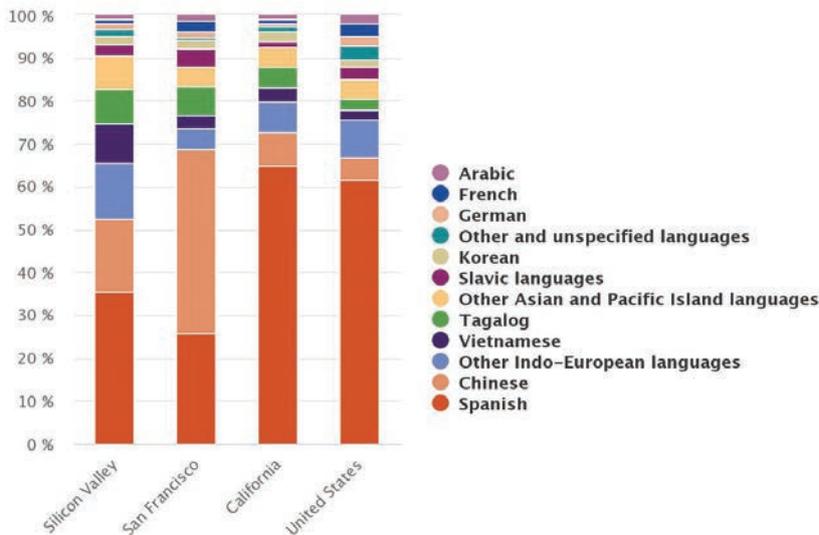
Despite the lack of IB continuum schools, there are a significant number of schools offering a bilingual education in a wide range of languages – and the number continues to grow. Most offer the relevant national curriculum or the American curriculum. Only a few offer a multilingual education and/or an internationally-focused curriculum. The Bay Area as a whole (spanning the city of San Francisco and surrounding counties) has a very wide range of new and established schools promoting education in all shapes and sizes. It has been encouraging to witness many following the lead of the IB in placing more emphasis on inquiry-based teaching, higher order thinking skills, and the development of character and personal qualities, but there is still an opportunity for a greater focus on students expanding their intercultural awareness and global perspectives.

## Balance and Well-being

The second aspect that perhaps shouldn't have surprised me as much was the 'intensity' of Silicon Valley; the emphasis on success, achievement and performing at a consistently high level. This is a necessary driver of innovation, but the culture can have a negative influence on the broader community, as witnessed by the significant number of student suicides in the past 10 years. The most recent cluster of suicides, in 2015, resulted in much soul-searching as reported in a New York Times article by Matt Richtel (2015): *'Push, don't crush, the students'*. Many schools in the area took a fresh look at their curricular focus and their messaging, and a greater emphasis has since been placed on student well-being and developing qualities such as resilience. This has been mirrored in many other parts of the world, but long after it became an integral part of the IB, as Anthony Seldon points out in his recent article (2018) about the benefits of an IB education.

A programme developed at Stanford University Graduate School of Education has also gained widespread prominence

## Features



*Languages Other Than English Spoken at Home for the Population 5-Years and Over  
Santa Clara & San Mateo Counties, San Francisco, California and the United States | 2017  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey*

in recent years. *Challenge Success* was established by experts in child and adolescent well-being to support families and schools in developing 'alternative success models' and avoid an overemphasis on grades. They have identified a common issue, also described by Matt Richtel, in that many parents and even school administrators state their desire for the students to be happy and healthy, but continue to focus their attention on grades and achievements. I experienced this for myself at an Open House when a prospective parent approached me after the presentation to say that he truly valued the IB's philosophy and the more holistic, balanced approach, but 'can you still guarantee that my child will get into Stanford?!' A prominent quote on the Challenge Success website ([www.challengesuccess.org](http://www.challengesuccess.org)) is 'success is measured over the course of a lifetime, not at the end of a semester'. The need to promote this sort of messaging is familiar to educators the world over, but seems particularly pertinent in the Bay Area.

### Entrepreneurial Spirit

There is no doubt that Silicon Valley is an exciting place to live, and it is all too easy to find yourself caught up in the high energy and fast pace of life. In the space of one year at Alto, we launched the High School, rebranded, completed the IB Diploma Programme authorisation application and successfully completed a re-accreditation process. Crazy – but somehow indicative of the culture. The following year we (wisely) focused on consolidation!

It is also easy to become blasé about witnessing the unusual and innovative on an everyday basis, whether sharing the road with prototype autonomous vehicles, passing a robotic security guard patrolling the local mall, or driving past multiple state-of-the-art buildings belonging to world-renowned companies. Students are afforded access to amazing resources and authentic learning experiences courtesy of many of these companies, and through Stanford University. The entrepreneurial spirit supports many aspects of an IB philosophy as they witness inquiry, creativity, risk taking and reflective practices at a new level.

The entrepreneurial approach also reflects the ever-popular subject of a growth mindset; in the land of the start-up company the pervading view is that failure teaches a person more than success, and recruiting is influenced by this fact.

However, this culture also fosters high turnover; companies are quick to let people go and employees are equally quick to move on when a better offer emerges. In practical terms, this is facilitated by California's at-will contracts where little notice is required. Having been immersed in the field of education where a strong sense of vocation is common, and commitment and professionalism are highly valued, it was disturbing to find that this lack of loyalty could extend to teachers handing in their notice just a few weeks before the beginning of the school year!

### Conclusion

There are certainly many aspects of life in Silicon Valley that make it an attractive place to live. As an educator, however, I have found myself particularly concerned for the young people growing up in this 'pressure cooker'. I hope the fact that more schools in the area are following the IB's lead, in recognising that it is possible to offer a rigorous curriculum without compromising the necessary focus on social-emotional competency and well-being, is a cause for optimism. If the students attending these schools can be supported both by educators and by their families in harnessing Silicon Valley's spirit of innovation and diversity of opportunities, while maintaining a balanced perspective on the true meaning of success and the importance of personal well-being, they have the potential to make an incredibly positive impact on our world.

### References

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