

East Grand Rapids High School

An International Baccalaureate World School

Dr. Alex Schukow, Principal

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To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Tad VandenBrink and I teach at East Grand Rapids High School. I am writing this letter on behalf of Catherine Schellhammer, who is applying for your institution's scholarship.

I had the pleasure of working with Catherine during her junior year in my International Baccalaureate (IB) Higher Level (HL) History class. I will have the opportunity to continue working with her in year two of the course her senior year. As a member of our IB Diploma Program (DP), I also have worked with Catherine in my capacity as the Extended Essay (EE) coordinator, instructing her and other IBDP candidates on the EE and being her supervisor, as she chose to write her EE in the subject area of history. In these capacities I have seen a young woman who has been resilient while persevering through learning challenges, and a student who is driven by her natural curiosity, allowing her to become a scholar and inquirer.

Catherine, at an early age, was identified as having dyslexia and dysgraphia. In elementary school this greatly impacted her self-confidence in her intellectual abilities. So much so her parents decided to home-school her through middle school to build up her confidence and find remedies that would allow her to be successful. As she entered high school she had a challenging freshman year, yet through her participation on our cross country and track teams, she found a community that supported her, and she continued to dedicate extensive time and energy to overcoming her challenges. This, she did in an impressive way.

First, as a sophomore she participated in our nationally recognized We the People team. Her interest in this was driven by her natural curiosity and desire to learn more about how our political system works. As a rare underclassmen in this course, she competed successfully at both the local and state level, receiving high accolades with her unit. Also during her sophomore year she chose to enroll in the IBDP. As part of a cohort of about 20 students, she took the risk in pursuing this more internationally minded and rigorous pathway for her junior and senior year. As someone who sees her every day in class, and has had the pleasure of advising her as she's worked on her EE, Catherine has thrived, finding her "stride" in the program, which fits her and the type of learner she is (re: the IB learner profile and the characteristics of being curious, open minded, a thinker, etc).

Within the context of the EE, Catherine has blossomed and demonstrated the type of student she is, and why she is such a valuable candidate for this scholarship. In having a cottage in Northern Michigan, where there is a significant history of shipwrecks on Lake Michigan, Catherine was interested in pursuing a topic that fused shipwreck history with its cultural and economic impacts on Michigan. In pursuing this research she began to seek more unique opportunities, which include a visit to the Shipwreck Museum in the Upper Peninsula, and a visit to the Leelanau Historical Society and Museum near her cottage. She also discovered the North American Society for Oceanic History, where she was able to present some of her initial EE research at their conference in Natchez, Mississippi in March of 2025. She recently presented again at a conference in Michigan. Through this EE work Catherine has overcome her challenge of dyslexia by doing an extensive amount of reading and research, as well as demonstrated how her interest in a topic drove her to seek outside of school opportunities to grow as a learner, all of which was driven by her curiosity.

When you combine this EE experience, with her active involvement in class conversations, the lessons she's learned as the oldest of 5 kids and an active athlete, such as responsibility and discipline, and her plan to study classics and pursue medical school, you will find a student who will make your institution proud as the recipient of this scholarship. It is for these reasons that I highly recommend Catherine as an outstanding candidate.

Regards,
Tad VandenBrink