

ERIC HIESER

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, STURGIS CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL

By Terry Ward Libby

In 2004, Eric Hieser became Executive Director of the Sturgis Charter Public School in Hyannis. At the time, enrollment stood at a little more than 300 students, and there was no waiting list for new arrivals. That year, the school first received its formal authorization in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, a college prep curriculum developed in Geneva, Switzerland, during the 1960s. The program was established to provide guidelines for the education of young students living abroad. From the start, the IBDP had a global focus, which makes it especially relevant for students today, as they prepare for lives and careers in the 21st century.

Since Hieser's arrival, enrollment at Sturgis School has grown quickly. In the fall of this year, it will admit 800 students, with nearly 600 applicants for 180 ninth-grade entry slots. In the coveted U.S. News and World Report school ratings for 2013, it was named third best charter school in America, and first in Massachusetts.

Christine Hochkeppel/Cape Cod Media Group



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What is your background?

I grew up in Illinois farm country. I became a teacher and guidance counselor there. I wanted to travel internationally, so my wife and I went to Norway, where we taught at an American school, which included not only American students, but students from many countries. Later, we lived and taught in Japan for 12 years. Our daughter was born there. From there, we moved to Zurich, where I worked as an administrator and coach. After that, we taught in Brazil. When our daughter moved to Boston after college, we followed. We decided it was a good time to return home.

Why the focus on international travel and teaching?

Why not? I have always been fascinated with learning about other cultures. I think cross-cultural sensitivity is important. It helps you to be open to the views and ideas of others.

What is a "charter public" school? Who gets to attend?

Sturgis is a charter school, separate from the local school district, while it is public in that student tuition comes from the state. Admission to the school is non-selective, meaning it is determined entirely on the basis of a yearly lottery.

What is emphasized in the International Baccalaureate Programme?

It offers a broad preparation in liberal arts and sciences. It's focused on habits of mind and strategies for thinking

critically, not on memorization of lists of facts. An important course at our school is called "The Theory of Knowledge," where students learn to question the premises behind statements, beliefs and arguments. They explore issues of philosophy, ethics, perception, emotion. They become thoughtful consumers of information. We apply what we call an O, P, V, L approach to evaluating any piece of information, or for evaluating anything, really. First you look at the origin, the source. Then you ask, what is the purpose behind this? What is the source trying to achieve? What is the value of this, and what are its limitations?

Does the faculty at Sturgis School have special training? How are students evaluated?

Our teachers have degrees in the subjects they teach, and they all attend International Baccalaureate training. Many have experience teaching abroad in IBP schools. They work collaboratively, working together to see that students get the individual attention they need. There is a lot of mutual respect between students and teachers here. Virtually all assessment is done by essay writing and problem-solving. There is very little multiple choice, no 'gotcha' questions. We're interested in finding out what our students know, not what they don't know.

Sports are so integral to the high school experience. Does Sturgis have traditional sports programs?

We have 23 athletic teams that play in a league with schools of similar size.

There's soccer, cross-country, tennis, baseball. We play to win, and we hold our own, but we also play for the deeper values to be learned, like sportsmanship, teamwork, perseverance and camaraderie.

What do you hear from Sturgis School alumni? Where are they now?

I often hear, "it was hard, but it was worth it." Many former students tell me that their first two years of college were easier than their last two at Sturgis. Five former Sturgis students are now teachers at the school. Our grads hold all kinds of positions. Some are artists, one is a composer in Hollywood, another does cancer research at a joint MIT-Harvard program, another does PR for the Boston Bruins. Some go into the Coast Guard or other branches of the military.

Given the demand and long list of applicants, what does the future look like for Sturgis School?

We have expanded to two locations. Our East Campus is comprised of five separate building locations in downtown Hyannis, and we have a newly built school, our West Campus, located next to the Cape Cod Melody Tent.

I'm not sure what the future looks like, though we are always trying to determine how to serve the community in the best way we can. I'll continue to do what I've attempted to do all along—I try to hire great people, then stay out of their way. I like to say that buildings don't make schools, people make schools.