



The IB Diploma Programme | An Inside Look

A conversation with Mr. Jason Przpek, IB Diploma Programme Coordinator, History Department Chair, and Academic Advisor

Today, we're going to dive into the International Baccalaureate Programme at Eagle Hill School. My conversation with Jason Przpek will highlight the opportunity for students here to engage in the International Baccalaureate Programme. Jason brings a unique perspective and understanding of the program through his work as a history teacher, academic advisor, and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme Coordinator.

I know you're going to enjoy this conversation. Thanks for joining us!

Sue Cranford

Jason, it was such a pleasure to have you here today to talk with me about the IB Programme, the International Baccalaureate at Eagle Hill School. Before we get into all that, let's circle back a little bit about you. How did you come to be a history teacher at Eagle Hill School?

Jason Przpek

I studied history at Assumption College in Worcester for my undergrad, and I followed that up with graduate school at Purdue. I pursued history because those were the courses I enjoyed. After Purdue, I got a bit off on a detour, you might say. I was supposed to go to Ohio State the following year to pursue a PhD, but I had this opportunity to go to Poland. This was in 1993, shortly after the fall of the wall and all that. I took that opportunity in what was supposed to be a ten-month contract.

Well, I ended up there for seven years, and I ended up teaching there at a little school called the School of Alternative Education, which at that time was a very new thing, especially in that part of the world. I ended up there for a few years. At a certain point, it seemed like it was time to come back. I came back and I was visiting my parents. One day, my mother pointed out an ad in the paper for an English teacher at a place called Eagle Hill School in Hardwick. Now, I was familiar with Hardwick, but I had never heard of Eagle Hill.

I came for an interview. The first person I met was Dana Harbert. He walked me up the hill, and I remember an interview with Michael. And I remember Dana saying as we walked up that he had been here for twenty-five years. I just remember it was a long time. I thought this man had been here for a long time, and now I've been here even longer than he was at that.

Sue Cranford

How many years have you been here?

Jason Przypek

It's twenty-five years now. Wow. Yeah, that was the fall of 2000.

Sue Cranford

Well, I'm fascinated by your story about Poland because was that school focused on students with learning differences, or was it a different type of alternative school?

Jason Przypek

Well, that's the thing. At that time and in that place, they didn't really talk about learning disabilities. This was a private school, but it was for really any student who wasn't thriving in the public schools. From what I understand there at that time, public schools were, I guess you might say, rigid. It was all a lot of encyclopedic knowledge, memorization, things like that. But my experience there made me think that it is a rewarding experience. And the students that you meet at a school like that are a bit different, I think, than students at most public schools, most of the time in a good way.

Sue Cranford

I agree. There's a really strong relationship that you can form when you're teaching a student who also really appreciates the teaching that you're doing and the atmosphere that you have because the student is finally able to learn it in a successful way. And that, I think, forges a really strong bond.

Jason Przpek

Yeah, absolutely. I think you're right about that. And the fact that classes are smaller, you have more of an opportunity to get to know people. I think it helps tremendously.

Sue Cranford

Well, that's really cool. So you started teaching English?

Jason Przpek

Yeah, my degree is actually in history, but they needed an English teacher. And it was, I remember, it was September. So they needed somebody rather quickly. Michael, more or less, gave me the job on the spot. But he knew that I was most interested in transferring over to history. After maybe a year or two, I went over to the history department.

Sue Cranford

Okay, so that's really cool. When I arrived at Eagle Hill, I remember sitting down and talking with you. Because I think it was the first year the IB program was running because this is my eighth year.

Jason Przpek

So it must have been 2017.

Sue Cranford

I have worked at five schools, all of which were AP schools, schools that used AP. I didn't know a lot about IB. And now, having been here for eight years, I'm such a believer in the IB Programme.

When I first started working in admission, I was trying to talk with families about the IB Programme. Many of them didn't know what it was. Sometimes, people would ask me, well, why would a school that serves students with learning differences be an IB school? Maybe you could talk us through a little bit about how the idea came to be, that Eagle Hill pursued becoming an IB school, how they came to be, and just the process of getting us to that place where we can do it.

Jason Przpek

First, let me say, as far as I know, we are the only IB World School that is a specialized learning disability school. Your question makes a lot of sense. But at the same time, when you ask the

question, why would a school like ours become an IB school? The thought that popped into my head was precisely because we are the school that we are.

To explain that a little bit, we have to go back to probably around 2015. I had to do a professional development project. It's wide open for whatever you want to do for those things. Michael actually suggested it to me; he said someone had raised the possibility of us becoming an IB World School.

My project essentially became a feasibility study. Do we want to do this? When I first started, I was a little skeptical. I was like, this is a drastic change. I don't know if we're going to do all this. But the more I looked into it, the more I realized the benefits it could have and that it was very doable. But part of the idea was that there was sometimes skepticism from students themselves about the success that they were having here.

They're like, am I only successful because it's Eagle Hill? The idea was that if we could have this external standard, which the International Baccalaureate Programme offers, because it is recognized all over the world, and the exams are externally assessed, this would be a good indicator that success is genuine. We thought we should put our money where our mouths are. If we say learning differently demands teaching differently, all students can learn, so let's do it. And so far, it's worked out pretty well.

Sue Cranford

Wow. I love what you just said, because I think that you are right about students sometimes feeling, well, is it just because I have small classes, or is it just because of some other magical thing that's happening here at Eagle Hill.

But before we started the podcast, I was sharing with you about my own daughter, who came to Eagle Hill and is now off studying abroad. I think the confidence that students gain here is life-changing, and I think a lot of it comes down to that confidence.

To get a student to a point where they have the confidence to do something like the IB, maybe next, you can explain what it is. How does it work at Eagle Hill?

Jason Przpek

We offer the IB Diploma program. It's a two-year course of study starting junior year and going through senior year. Students take a two-year course, all the courses are two years long, and they correspond with your typical subject. There's English, a foreign language, art, math, and so

forth. At the end, there are exams. If a student earned a certain number of points, they get an IB diploma. If they don't make those points, they still get an Eagle Hill diploma.

It's low risk that way. I would say it's the best deal you can get. You can shoot for this, you get a great education, and there's no risk.

Sue Cranford

And students can do the full IB, or they can do all the courses of they can do a few courses here and there.

Jason Przpek

You can do one, two, or three courses or do the full thing.

Sue Cranford

Right now, this year, do you know the stats you must off the top of your head? How many students are doing the full IB versus students that are doing just one or two or three classes?

Jason Przpek

Right. So, for seniors, we have two kids doing the full IB. For juniors, there are four doing the full IB. And as far as courses, lots of kids do courses. There are probably around twenty in each of the junior and senior classes. And that's a good proportion of those classes. It's about half.

Sue Cranford

That really is. That's actually great. So then, going back to the confidence question, when I'm admitting students, say, into ninth grade, it's not often that we're talking about IB.

Jason Przpek

Right, it's a couple of years off.

Sue Cranford

Exactly. At that point. Also, when students first come into Eagle Hill, they may think that's the last thing on this Earth I would ever be able to do or want to do.

Jason Przpek

It happens all the time. I would say, usually, by somewhere around sophomore year, I start to get students who approach me saying, I think I might be interested in at least doing a couple of

courses. This is like this turning point: they've realized that they've got a bit of success under their belt, and maybe their teacher mentioned to them that they should do it.

It's a beautiful thing to see this budding confidence. We've had many, many students who, when they first came here, I think would not have dreamed of it. But like I said, by mid-sophomore year, as I said, about twenty per class, nearly half of each class is taking some IB courses. It happens all the time.

Sue Cranford

That's really cool. And to me, it seems that once a student enters into the program, it doesn't often go the other way. I don't know if too many kids enter into it and then say, Oh, no, I don't actually want to do it.

Jason Przypek

It happens occasionally. That's the beauty of our flexibility. You can try it out. If it doesn't seem fit or you're not benefiting from it, then change it. It's low risk.

Sue Cranford

It's okay. What is the curriculum in those two years? What are the kids taking?

Jason Przypek

We offer language and literature as the English course. The IB has groups of subjects. Group two is a world language, so we offer Spanish, Ab initio Spanish from the beginning. Group three is European history and 20th-century conflict. Group four is science; we offer biology. Group five is math; we offer either art or music.

Sue Cranford

Are there accommodations that Eagle Hill is able to give to students within the IB program that other IB schools wouldn't be able to give to students?

Jason Przypek

Well, I think the number one thing is we have small classes, and students have access to their teachers during office hours in the morning and in the afternoon. That's probably the most important thing. Certainly, as far as classroom instruction goes, we can offer accommodations we think will be helpful while instructing.

As far as the exams go, most accommodations have to be approved by the IB. But I can tell you, historically, I apply for those each year, and every student has always gotten additional time, use of the word processor and so forth.

Sue Cranford

That's excellent. But then, if a student is sitting in Hardwick in a biology class, and a student is maybe sitting in London in a biology class. If I understand it, the cool thing to me is that they're essentially studying the same curriculum.

Jason Przypek

Yeah, at least broadly speaking. There is a lot of flexibility within the curriculum, but yes, there are certain things, certain content, that have to be covered. So yeah, it is essentially the same course.

Sue Cranford

This is really different to me than the AP, where I always think of the AP as a body of knowledge that the teacher is delivering and the students are memorizing and then often forgetting pretty quickly.

Jason Przypek

I'm not that familiar with AP, but my understanding is that it's your typical standardized exam at the end. Whereas a lot of the IB assessments are written out in the form of essays or short answers. There are very few exams that are filling the bubble, which allows for more creativity and flexibility, which I think is good for our students.

I really like the way the IB talks about assessments. They talk about holistic global grading. You're not ticking off things on a rubric but looking at the work as a whole. It's a very good and fair system, I think. They try hard to make it standardized throughout the world.

Sue Cranford

I would love to have you reflect on another thing I love about the culture at Eagle Hill. Now, generally speaking, the culture at Eagle Hill, I find to be very different from other schools; some of the ones have AP classes, whereas my other daughter attended a school that had AP, there was a lot of competition among the students. How many APs are you taking? Are you not taking? Why aren't you taking any APs? Also, there was a lot of pressure on the college and

what name colleges kids were getting into and applying to based on how many APs they were taking.

I don't get the sense here that students are pursuing the IB because they want to get into an X, Y, or Z-name college. I feel that they're doing it, and I really want you to tell me what you think, but more because they have this newfound sense of confidence and desire to study at a really high level. Do you think that's true?

Jason Przpek

Yeah, I would say across the board, what motivates the IB students here is a certain sense of pride. They want to test themselves. I think a typical narrative would be a student who perhaps wasn't feeling the best about their academic ability comes here and begins in their first two years to really understand that they are capable learners. And the IB is like the...

Sue Cranford

A piece of fruit.

Jason Przpek

Yeah. It's like a way they can prove even to themselves. Like, I can do this.

Sue Cranford

Yeah. I'm so glad to hear that you think that's the case.

Jason Przpek

I would say that's almost universally the case.

Sue Cranford

And isn't that just wonderful? It's not because they want some external outcome. They want something within themselves.

Jason Przpek

Yeah, I think that's right.

Sue Cranford

That's really nice. So, switching gears. I mean, college, I'm sure it does help when you're taking IB, right?

Jason Przpek

Oh, it does.

Jason Przpek

It certainly does. If you take the full IB diploma program, I gather there's a box at the top of the comment app you can just pick off that you have taken the most rigorous course and study available to you at your school.

Sue Cranford

So, of course, it doesn't hurt when you're applying to college. But then again, we want students to be going to the colleges that are most appropriate and going to be successful because I always tell families that 75% of the students who graduate matriculate at the school where they begin, which is a really incredible number, and especially when you're thinking about kids who might typically have been struggling in schools. The outcomes are really amazing. But putting the IB aside just for a second, why have you stayed at Eagle Hill for this long? It's probably not because of IB, or maybe a little bit.

Jason Przpek

Well, I mean, there's probably a whole host of reasons. It is a wonderful community, and I know we talk about that a lot about community, and the outsiders might be a little skeptical when they hear it, but it's true. There's a wonderful sense of community here. And as far as being a teacher, there's no better place to be a teacher. I mean, the support offered by the administration and the whole school is unbelievable. And the reward of working in small classes with students who appreciate the attention and the care that goes into it. It's unparalleled.

Sue Cranford

Well, that's great. Is there anything else you think that family should know about the IB program that's important?

Jason Przpek

I say this. It is, in my opinion, probably the best course study that anyone can take in their 11th and 12th grade year of high school. I am humbled when I have the seniors in my theory of knowledge class, and they know fairly advanced mathematics. They know another language. They know all about art. They know all about biology. I mean, their knowledge far exceeds my knowledge.

HILL Talks with Mr. Jason Przpek

And in many of these areas, they are just well-rounded people, already highly accomplished young scholars. And I do believe it gives confidence. The program does. It helps to cultivate good habits. It is specifically designed to enhance intellectual curiosity and to encourage students to see themselves as lifelong learners.

I think there is no better program.

Sue Cranford

Thank you, Jason, so much.

Jason Przpek

My pleasure.