



Vista Newsletter – Vol. 2, Issue 5
November/December 2007

Vista Academy – Year in Review

In preparing for this article, I spent some time reading through past newsletters, especially those written before Vista Academy opened in September, 2007. A few in particular stood out - a year a half ago, we discussed the importance of choosing a middle school for gifted adolescents, last December in these pages, we highlighted our emphasis on math and science as hallmarks of the Vista Academy experience, and in May, we wrote about partnerships enhancing the Vista program.

These articles, along with the others written between June, 2006 and August, 2007, were based largely on a vision of what we hoped Vista Academy would be. And now, as we bid farewell to 2007 and look back on our first four months in existence, it's a fitting opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and examine Vista's inaugural year through the lens of those previous writings.

John Lounsbury, author of *Understanding and Appreciating the Wonder Years*, tells us that no other age level is of more importance to the future of individuals, and to that of society than the middle school years, because these are the years when youngsters crystallize their beliefs about themselves and firm up their self-concepts, their philosophies of life and their values - the things that are the ultimate determinants of their behaviors. All middle schoolers are in a period of rapid transition. They are developing meaningful relationships, a personal and social values system, a healthy self-esteem and identity, and increasing independence from their families. All adolescents at this age need role models, supportive adults, and appropriate intellectual stimulation to ensure growth. Yet gifted adolescents have unique needs which go beyond these characteristics.

Vista is characterized by an integrated curriculum where students produce projects that demonstrate meaningful applications of the knowledge they are acquiring. Students need to be investigating the questions that they themselves

are asking about the world and their place in it. They should be solving problems, making connections, asking questions, and taking risks – everyday. These characteristics are at the heart of Vista’s curricular philosophy, and come to life daily in very exciting and varied ways.

Our remarkable sixth grade students are typically knocking on the door several minutes before the official start of the day, full of anticipation, curiosity and excitement. We might be heading out to a lab in Seattle, welcoming a new partnership to our school, presenting student projects, or programming our robots. Whatever happens to be on the agenda that day, our students and faculty approach each day with optimism and enthusiasm.

As many of you know, our weekly partnerships are a hallmark of the Vista program. One sixth grade parent recently commented to me that her child lives for Wednesdays, and literally jumps out of bed. From trips as close as Tiger Mountain to excursions down to Mount Saint Helens, students have participated in a range of extraordinary educational experiences. To date, sixth graders have, among other things –

- Analyzed DNA at a research facility at Swedish hospital
- Assembled a prosthetic leg
- Strengthened team building skills at Challenges Northwest
- Canoeed at Mercer Slough
- Witnessed bioluminescence, scaled a climbing wall, and hiked through old growth forests at Camp Colman
- Had This I Believe essays professionally recorded at Jack Straw Productions
- Played castanets while cheering on a flamenco dancer
- Experienced the science of motion capture at the VA
- Experimented in Newtonian physics with a rehabilitation engineer
- Studied rocks with a geologist
- Heard a personal account from an amputee
- Put on a reader’s theatre performance on the Greek myths
- Participated in a field study at Mount Saint Helens
- Strategized with King County’s Green Schools Program about waste reduction at our school

Vista will continue to provide students with frequent authentic, meaningful opportunities to meet and interact with leading professionals. We believe that school experiences should not be limited to the physical building. We need to tap into the very best of the Puget Sound area, and make learning come alive through partnerships with area organizations. In early 2008, we look forward to our seven week residency with Youth Theatre Northwest, guest speaker

engagements from a KCLS librarian and a UW oceanographer, and the continuing of our series on adaptations.

But Vista is much more than our partnerships. I'd like to conclude by talking about advances in our math and science programs. Did you know that we have differentiated our math instruction so that our 11 students are broken down into three specialized groups? This optimal learning environment allows our teachers to tailor instruction to best meet the needs of each student. Many of our students are immersed in high school algebra, and all are tackling sophisticated word problems and increasing both their math confidence and efficiency.

A peek into the science lab these past few months would find sixth graders donning goggles and aprons while exploring how viscous magma affects the overlying geology. Students learned about topographic maps and contour lines and built clay models of Mt. St. Helens before and after the eruption in 1980. Led by teacher Mr. Montgomery, students created model volcanoes out of flour, water, oil, and a light coating of glue. They constructed both the wide, flat shield volcanoes of Hawaii as well as the steep, conical stratovolcanoes of Washington. It was not uncommon to hear conversations on the bus and at lunch on how the viscosity of lava affects eruptions and volcanic formation.

Our intensive study of volcanoes and geology went far beyond the scope of any textbook or curricular guide. Over the course of the unit, the sixth graders quite literally became volcanologists and geologists. Professionals in these fields commented to us on how impressed they were with the level of knowledge, inquisitiveness, and maturity our students possessed. If you happen to run into a Vista student on campus, ask him and her about the igneous rock project. I think it's a pretty safe bet that our sixth graders know more about igneous rocks than the rest of us.

It's been an amazing four months, and we look forward to continuing the Vista experience in 2008.

If you'd like to keep tabs on what we're up to week to week, I invite you to visit our blog at www.vistaacademy.blogspot.com. The login is vista@ows.org and the password is vistablog. Here you can read more about igneous rocks, as well as all sorts of other exciting things happening at Vista Academy.

I wish you and your family a wonderful holiday season.

Tim Costello
Middle School Head

