



Vista Newsletter #6
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Vista Academy - Features and Benefits

Recently, I hosted a Middle School Question and Answer Lunch for current fifth graders. As students munched on sandwiches and sipped drinks, I asked them what they were looking for in a middle school. Hands shot up around the room, and many responses were greeted with nods of affirmation as I compiled the list. The fifth graders shared academic wishes, as such strong science and math, challenging lessons, and meaningful homework that “didn’t take forever to finish.” They also cited good teachers who valued their opinion and made classes engaging and fun. Relevant and frequent use of technology was an important component, as was active physical education, sports, and outdoor education programs. Further, students wanted a healthy social scene where they had space to hang out; a place where people were nice and respected each other.

Shifting gears, I asked about any aspects of middle school that they were worried about. Again, the room was a sea of raised hands and mouths full of food, with students eager to share some of their trepidations. The fifth graders voiced concerns about bullies and “mean kids”, lazy teachers who didn’t care, too much homework, large class sizes, and being taught things they already know.

I was impressed with the level of openness and candor the students displayed, and their responses reaffirmed my belief that Vista Academy’s program and philosophy be shaped and guided by student interests and concerns.

Vista Academy students will experience a middle school unlike any other. Programmatic features include –

- Daily laboratory science, where students cultivate their scientific thinking
- Exceptional depth and challenge in math and science
- Weekly off-campus experiences to research centers, museums, engineering and architectural firms, and other unique partnerships
- Block scheduling, allowing students to dig deeper and go further during these extended class periods
- Raising the curricular floor and eliminating the ceiling, so students work at an appropriate level of challenge
- Frequent opportunities for increased complexity and acceleration

Additionally, Vista offers –

- A unique understanding into the needs of gifted adolescents; Vista Academy is the Eastside's only independent middle school dedicated to serving this population
- Small class sizes where every student is known, valued, and understood
- A nimble and individualized curriculum that transcends grade level boundaries
- Authentic leadership and service learning opportunities
- After school clubs and sports

Vista Academy also strives to be successful in the middle school climate we create. In 2003, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) published a position paper entitled, *This We Believe, Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*. The document states that in order for a middle school to be successful, the school's organization, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs must be based upon the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of young adolescents.

The NMSA lists 14 characteristics upon which a successful middle school is built.

The first eight are facets of school culture –

- Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so
- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- A shared vision that guides decisions
- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- High expectations for every member of the learning community
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- An adult advocate for every student
- School initiated family and community partnerships

The remaining six are programmatic characteristics that can evolve in such a culture –

- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond their diversity
- Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning
- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning
- School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Multifaceted guidance and support services

It's an ambitious list, but one that Vista has worked hard to align with. We have an opportunity to create something very special here, and building upon the rich tradition of Open Window School, we will soon be able to offer an exceptional program for gifted students through the eighth grade, and that may be the biggest feature and greatest benefit of all.

