



Vista Newsletter – Vol. 2, Issue 1
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Creating a Middle School Identity

Twelve months ago, I composed Vista's first newsletter. Entitled *The Vista Academy Graduate*, the article introduced readers to nine unique, outcome-based traits upon which our program would be created. Developed by our Education Committee in 2005-2006, these characteristics of a Vista graduate embraced the wide-ranging talents of our students, while supporting our mission and philosophy. As we prepare for our opening in September, this is a good opportunity to revisit these qualities as a lens through which to further articulate Vista's middle school identity.

A Vista Academy Graduate...

Explores subject matter in depth and breadth, and identifies areas of talent and passion as a basis for further study and potential career paths

Makes astute and insightful connections among ideas and concepts, and translates knowledge within the context of real world applications

Possesses organizational skills and habits, demonstrated in planning, time management, and prioritizing of responsibilities

Solves problems independently, using a variety of strategies to evaluate choices and make sound decisions

Exhibits positive social and interpersonal skills, allowing for effective collaboration, communication, and conflict resolution

Engages in meaningful leadership opportunities

Values the enriching qualities of a diverse community, and appreciates the perspectives of others who hold divergent views

Is developing a realistic awareness of self and an acceptance of personal strengths and weaknesses

Is well prepared for success in high school, equipped with the habits and advanced academic skills of confident and committed students

These characteristics promote both higher-level thinking and skills for life-long learning. In order for these traits to be successfully cultivated however, Vista's structure and environment need to be both academically nurturing and in tune with adolescents' developmental needs.

To that end, a top priority for this year was to create a unique middle school identity within an established elementary school setting. It was of paramount importance that a student's middle school experience not simply be an extension of the elementary years. Tangible evidence of this was visible early on, with the unveiling of a new name, logo, website and Vista signage and sweatshirts. These steps were just the initial phase in a series of projects designed to create a vibrant and innovative middle school program within the confines of an elementary school campus. In other words, we sought to create a school within a school.

Here are some of the ways we have worked to define our middle school program. Many of these have already taken place, and this summer we will finalize the other initiatives.

- Developed class themes for the middle school grades -
 - 6th – Adaptation, 7th – Cultivation, 8th – Responsibility
- Designed a unique schedule featuring –
 - Daily laboratory science
 - Unique block scheduling, allowing larger chunks of time (75 minutes or more) for subject integration and more in-depth investigation.
 - Four hours of Spanish instruction per week

- An Advisory program (this program fosters student-teacher relationships and provides a healthy social exchange and peer recognition in a safe and trusting environment)
 - Time allocated each week for integrated studies and passion development projects
- Our Specialist program will take the form of unique off-campus partnerships and on-campus Residencies each week. Examples in place for next year include staff from Stone Soup Theatre helping students act out Greek myths, utilizing the studio at the Jack Straw Audio Club to record This I Believe essays, and partnering with a bioengineering professor at UW on her work with prosthetics. We have secured a flexible bus contract for travel to our off-campus excursions.
- The current science lab will take on more a math/science classroom feel with significant upgrades in science equipment
- Creation of an innovative after school program which includes study hall Monday through Thursday as well as a range of after school activities with a math, science, and technology focus.
- Implementation of a laptop program; all Vista students and teachers will have a laptop to use during the school-day. Wireless access points will be installed in spots where middle school students convene.
- Installing Smartboards and mounted projectors in all middle school classrooms
- Creation of a natural outdoor classroom area on Vista Hill. This space will be enhanced by close to a dozen rocks and a stage like area analogous to an ancient amphitheatre.
- Articulation of a middle school wing -
 - For 2007-2008, Vista Academy will share the downstairs area of the Intermediate Building with the fifth graders. We will occupy two classrooms, with one being a humanities room, and the other an all-purpose room. This additional room gives Vista students a space for on-going projects, independent and group work, and after school activities, not to mention a place to play ping-pong during break.
 - The hallway area outside the classrooms will house our Vista Lounge
- Establishment of a Vista Commons area between the farmhouse and Intermediate Building. This space will include two outdoor tables with bench seating, two basketball hoops, and a fenced in area along the south side of the parking lot

This is just the beginning. As Vista becomes more established and our enrollment grows, there will be even more opportunities to strengthen our middle school identity, making our whole school a better place for all of our students.

Tim Costello
Middle School Head