



***“It was awesome.”***

*A student describing the Vista Open House*

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### ***Putting the Curricular Pieces in Place***

Last Saturday, we welcomed over 100 people to our Open House. The beautiful fall weather set the stage for an afternoon of exciting Vista experiences. Our guests visited centers that provided them with a sampling of the kind of learning students can expect to have in our middle school. From power walk tag to computer animation to DNA extraction, students got a taste of what life at Vista would be like. Parents were treated to a talk by Dr. Nancy Robinson on gifted students and middle school, followed by a panel discussion with members of the Vista Administration. Parents and students were very enthused about the things they did, saw and heard. We were thrilled with the turnout, and that level of interest only energizes us more to provide an extraordinary middle school program that meets the needs of your gifted student.

Significant time and energy have already gone into developing Vista’s curriculum, and now it is time to get more specific in our scope and sequence. As discussed at the Open House, curricular decisions need to be made through the lens of the student. I have spoken to many textbook representatives who insist that their program "works for

gifted children" and is "designed to stand alone." Yet pressed further about how their program accelerates, challenges, and differentiates, and the responses ring hollow. The truth is that no "one size fits all curriculum" will work for our students. It is only through offering a range of materials reflective of best practices and latest research that our school is able to truly raise floors and eliminate ceilings.

A major step in the development of our middle school was the hiring of Mike Montgomery as our math and science teacher. Mr. Montgomery has established a well deserved reputation for highly engaging and interactive lessons which ignite learning. I invite you to visit the Vista homepage for a link highlighting Mr. Montgomery's qualifications.

The core academic staffing for next year is already in place. I will be teaching language arts and social studies, and, together with Mike Montgomery, we have time to set benchmarks, develop yearly themes and units, design meaningful integration activities, and map out our curriculum. We will also collaborate on ways to cultivate school spirit and identity, articulate the advisory program, and explore after school club and athletic opportunities.

This is not easy work. Vista faculty members need to orchestrate experiences through which students can construct understanding in much the same way a professional constructs understanding. The ability of teachers to develop and guide such a curriculum requires a sophisticated knowledge about content, students, learning, and teaching. Based on the book, *The Parallel Curriculum*, our approach features ascending intellectual demand as a means of extending the intensity of challenge as students develop along a continuum toward expertise in learning.

Vista students won't just *know*, they will *understand*. Embracing the *Understanding by Design* model (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998), Vista students truly obtain understanding when they can *explain, interpret, apply, empathize*, and have *perspective* and *self-knowledge*. A complete and mature understanding ideally involves the full development of all six facets.

To conclude, I leave you with a few practical examples of differences between knowing and understanding in a middle school setting.

### *Knowing*

- A student can translate all the words but does not grasp the meaning of a Spanish sentence
- A student knows the facts of the Boston Tea Party and the Stamp Act, but not why they happened and what they led to

### *Understanding*

- Students using their knowledge of statistics to accurately project costs and needs for a middle school store
- In history class, a student provides a well-supported view of the economic and political causes of the American Revolution

When we've identified what we want students to understand and be able to do, and have measures in place to assess understanding and knowledge application, we have a curriculum which challenges and engages our students in relevant and practical ways.

This is what the Vista Experience is all about.

Tim Costello  
Middle School Head