The Middle School – REINVENTED
The People and Practices that Distinguish NA's Middle School
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A New Light

While evoking elements of our school’s nearly 250-year-old history, the new name of this magazine, Lumen, inspires a contemporary look and feel in a publication of high quality. Derived from our motto Ad Lumen — toward the light — the title reminds us that education seeks above all to enlighten students and to illuminate their paths into the future. This new name reminds us of the enduring purpose of Newark Academy: to prepare our students for the future by providing them with a first-rate education during their formative middle- and high-school years. More prosaically, the magazine aims to provide news to our extended community of alumni and friends in an appealing format.

“As we illuminate their paths forward, we know that they in turn will be the ones to shed new light on the challenges and opportunities of our future world.”
Twice each school week, at 8:05 a.m., 180 Middle School students scramble into the Newark Academy Choral Room. Although it’s difficult to make out particular conversations among the cacophonous parade of young boys and girls as they pass through the double doors, their exchanges are spirited, their mood buoyant. Only five minutes later, the morning bell rings and, as if by magic, the once cavernous room now feels cozy and the seemingly inextinguishable chitchat gives way to near silence.
In recent years, Tom, who has led the Middle School since 2006, has worked with the faculty to ensure that the entire Middle School program meets the developmental needs of students in grades six through eight. “As educators,” says Tom, “we now understand more than ever the intellectual, physical, social and emotional growth that occurs in early adolescence. Our program fosters that growth.” The program Tom and his team have designed matches the energy and natural inquisitiveness of young adolescents with bountiful opportunities for their personal and academic development in and out of the classroom.

Not surprisingly, the Newark Academy Middle School program has been recognized by parents and peer schools as particularly innovative and successful. “Our Middle School is well known in the community,” says Head of School Donald Austin, “for enabling students to explore their passions, to discover new ones, to develop the skills they will need for success in high school and beyond, and to have fun along the way.” Don notes that Middle School enrollment has increased more than 15 percent since 2006.

While it’s impossible to fully capture the richness of the Middle School program – each student’s goals, interests and course of study make for a truly unique experience – the vignettes that follow seek to highlight a small handful of the people and practices that distinguish it, that make the Middle School, as Tom says, “a wonderful place for inquisitive and kind kids to grow up.”
TELLING THEIR OWN STORIES OF LEARNING AND GROWTH

“One of the cornerstones of a Newark Academy education is nurturing self-awareness and inculcating the skill of self-assessment,” says Middle School Principal Tom Ashburn. “We want our students to build a lifelong practice of reflection.” Students begin that practice by constructing and maintaining digital portfolios, which allow them to tell their own stories of learning and growth over time.

Beginning in the fall of sixth grade and continuing through the end of eighth grade, students build a digital portfolio using the Weebly website platform. Students choose the artifacts – such as a poem written in English class or a video produced in Spanish class – to include in their portfolios. Once students add an item to their portfolio, they are asked to reflect on the process of creating that item and to indicate what it demonstrates about their growth as a learner.

Each year, students present their portfolios to their parents and advisor. For the eighth grade students, this conference is considered the culminating event of their Middle School experience. Samantha Keller ’19, who last year shared her portfolio with her parents and advisor, mathematics teacher Cathy Pursell, found the structured discussion especially meaningful. “It was a really good way to help my parents understand my standing academically, socially, and in my extra-curricular activities,” she recalls. “It also helped my parents understand what I was hoping to accomplish in the future.”

While the portfolios serve to document student learning, they are also vehicles for maturation. Tom, who introduced the portfolios five years ago, notes that, “at the end of their three-year experience, student growth and progress is not only documented and measured, but, to use a term coined by Abraham Maslow, the process has helped to self-actualize the attitude that students are capable of managing their own learning.”
A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO
STUDENT GROWTH

On a cool morning last fall, English teacher Dr. Elizabeth (Betsy) LaPadula did something unusual: she braved the smell of formaldehyde in order to observe her students dissecting a chicken leg. Earlier that day, Betsy’s students had told her about their upcoming science experiment, and she was thrilled to support them. Little did they know that she was also eager to explore how the skills taught and practiced in the science classroom – of diligently following procedures, of carefully making observations, and of writing thoughtful analyses – could apply to the English classroom as well.

“It’s important,” says Betsy, “not to get stuck in your discipline.” While teachers at Newark Academy are passionate about what they teach, they also recognize that they are teaching enduring skills that will enable their students to live rich, meaningful lives no matter the paths those lives take. This holistic approach to student growth requires teachers to prioritize the developmental needs of their students, even if that involves going far outside of the usual routines.

Several days after observing the dissection, Betsy found herself referring to the experiment in her English class. “Tools used appropriately are incredibly powerful,” she told her students, “whether the tools are words or fine instruments. The scientist’s ability to manipulate muscle movement via the tendon, for example, is similar to the poet’s ability to manipulate emotions via word choice.” The metaphor, she recalls, worked surprisingly well. “I wanted my students to understand their power as creators and discoverers,” says Betsy, “no matter the subject.”
“So, would you take the case?” Jacqueline Jones-Peace, a current parent and an attorney with the Equal Justice Initiative asked the eighth-grade students this winter. Jacqueline had tasked the students with evaluating the credibility of evidence against Walter McMillian, an African-American man who was wrongfully convicted in Alabama in the late 1980s. The students quickly became captivated by Jacqueline’s question and the challenges the McMillian case study presented.

**CREATING OPPORTUNITIES TO DISCUSS TOUGH ISSUES**

Mathematics teacher and Director of Equity and Inclusion Amanda Addison ’06 invited Jacqueline to speak with the eighth-grade students for the second time this year not only because the case of McMillian offers students the opportunity to explore the relationship between race and the United States criminal justice system, but also because McMillian was prosecuted in Monroeville, Alabama, the home of Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a novel taught in the eighth grade.

“In the Middle School, we’re trying to create opportunities to discuss tough and sometimes uncomfortable issues,” says Amanda. “One effective way of doing that is to find a bridge between contemporary issues and our curriculum.” Several years ago, as discussions of racial disparities in the criminal justice system became more pronounced nationally, Amanda sought to help students contextualize and explore some of the limitations of Lee’s book, which, Amanda notes, paints a rather one-sided picture of race and class in a fictional Alabama town. Jacqueline’s visit is an important part of that exploration.

“We’re working with intention to help our students develop the skills they will need to tackle difficult issues as individuals and as citizens,” says Amanda. “Making the Middle School a truly inclusive place will take work and time, and my colleagues and I are undertaking that work eagerly.”

**We’re trying to create opportunities to discuss tough and sometimes uncomfortable issues.**
The Middle School Common Room, you will undoubtedly find some students studying, others hanging out with friends, still others rolling around a football. Oversized cubbies line two of the walls – providing storage for backpacks, coats and laptops – and a long wooden bench lines another; comfortable chairs and tables are regularly reconfigured as groups of students redesign the space. “It’s always a boisterous area,” says math teacher Scott Johnson, “and it’s a great place for kids to bond, whether they are relaxing or getting work done.”

Because the Common Room sits across a hallway from the Middle School Office, teachers can see and hear what goes on inside, yet students feel that the space is their own. “A sense of autonomy,” says Middle School Principal Tom Ashburn, “is vitally important for social and emotional growth.” The Common Room, then, is as much the go-to hangout for students as it is a physical manifestation of Tom’s philosophy of adolescent development. “Our kids need to believe that we trust them,” he explains. “They need some freedom to learn how to develop into mature and independent young adults.”

Not surprisingly, one of the greatest challenges middle school students face is in learning how to make good use of that freedom. “Developing the skills of self-sufficiency and a sense of personal responsibility,” says science teacher and Sixth Grade Team Leader Debra Tavares, “begins at the very start of sixth grade.” Debra and her colleagues support students by providing structure and by offering guidance. Ultimately, however, adolescents need to develop their own mechanisms for self-regulation. “Growth is often uneven,” explains Deb, “but we are there to help kids learn from mistakes and to make better choices so they can succeed now and long into the future.”
THE SIXTH GRADE PROGRAM:
NURTURING ENTHUSIASM FOR MATH

“Every skill you learn is a tool that, once mastered, will help in solving new, unfamiliar problems.”

“My students have learned how to think like mathematicians when they can apply the skills they’re learning in the classroom to real-world situations,” observes Mathematics teacher Rob Rezvani. “Every skill you learn is a tool,” Rob tells his students, “that, once mastered, will help in solving new, unfamiliar problems.”

Each winter, Rob, whose pedagogical approach emphasizes project-based learning, asks his sixth-grade students to put their arithmetic and pre-algebra skills to use by engaging in a month-long investment simulation. The first part of the simulation involves a formal study of investing: how equity markets work; how stocks are valued and profitably traded in both bull and bear markets; and how individuals can become educated investors. Each student is then tasked with investing $100,000 in the global public equity markets. During the simulation, students can buy and sell as they wish, but they must support each trade with at least three pieces of research, such as news articles, analysts’ reports, and company financial data.

“When I first tell students about the project, they immediately think the objective is to make the most money,” says Rob. Students discover, however, how difficult it is to make quick gains. “My students slowly come to realize,” he notes, “that the way to enduring profits requires solid research and a long-term time horizon.”

Not surprisingly, students greatly enjoy taking on the role of investor. “It was interesting to see my money grow and shrink,” says Stella Gilbert ’22. “I did surprisingly well in the market, but more important, my classmates and I learned how math can be vital in the real world.” Nurturing enthusiasm for the discipline, says Rob, is one of the most important aspects of teaching mathematics in the Middle School. It’s also one of the many ways in which the investment simulation profits his students.
In order to help his students to develop the skill of critical analysis – which, he notes, is useful not only in navigating museums but in many other contexts – Garrett decided to ask his seventh-grade students to take on the difficult and fascinating work of museum design as part of their study of the Cold War. Specifically, he tasks them, in groups of four or five, to develop a detailed proposal for a future Cold War Museum.

The task requires students to employ many of the skills they have developed throughout the year – research, writing, source analysis, public speaking, and team work. Each group’s proposal must include a written plan as well as a physical model of the museum, and both of these should reflect and support thoughtful interpretive choices about how to share the history of the Cold War with the general public. The groups then present their proposals to a mock Smithsonian Institute Board of Directors. “Every student has a role to play,” says Garrett, “but they all need to help each other out. The project is an enormous undertaking, and I’m always wowed by what the students come up with.”

Year after year, the students take on the challenge with enthusiasm. Vikram Bala ’20 enjoyed the project because, as he explains, “we learned to employ creativity and use facts at the same time.” Vikram reports that he’s now a more thoughtful museum visitor and “can really see how much effort it takes to create something as complex as a museum.”
“When Aidan Orr ’20 first learned that he was tasked with identifying a phenomenon and then designing and carrying out an experiment to study it, he was unsure of what he wanted to explore. “My partners and I thought of a bunch of ideas,” recalls Aidan. “There were so many different options. It was hard to choose.” Aidan and his two partners ultimately decided to study the impact of verbal encouragement on pain tolerance. They then developed an experiment, carried it out, analyzed the data they collected, and ultimately shared their findings with the school community at the eighth grade Science Fair earlier this school year.

THE EIGHTH GRADE PROGRAM:
STUDENT-DIRECTED INQUIRIES

An important component of the eighth-grade science curriculum – which was redesigned three years ago to focus on student-directed inquiry, the careful collection and analysis of data, and the communication of scientific ideas – the Science Fair allows students to pursue scientific knowledge through a truly authentic investigation. “I give students a framework for their investigation,” says Science teacher Rachael Reeves, “but they determine what to study and how to study it.”

This inquiry-based approach, notes Science Department Chair Nancy Celente, goes a long way in preparing students for future success in the Upper School and particularly in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. “The IB science courses require students to create and carry out their own design labs,” says Nancy. “Many of the same skills introduced to students in the eighth grade are employed in the eleventh and twelfth grades.”

At this year’s Science Fair, the range of student-generated investigations on display reflected broad interests and tremendous inventiveness. One student explored the relationship between sleep and memory. Another studied how diet influences behavior in hamsters. Still another used plastic tubing to model heart disease. “The students,” notes Rachael, “were so proud to share their research. They loved being asked questions about their methods and findings, and they answered the questions confidently.”
“Every September, I’m always surprised by my students’ vocal talents,” says Director of Choral Music Viraj Lal. “Vocal changes that naturally occur during early adolescence – as well as the arrival of new students – make it difficult for me to predict the abilities of the students in my seventh-grade class.” After Viraj gets to know the personalities, interests and skills of each new group, he begins the process of choosing a fall musical that will highlight the strengths of that year’s ensemble.

This year, Viraj chose *Getting to Know Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella*, an adaptation of the classic fairy tale for youth performers. “It’s a lighthearted, kid-friendly musical,” says Viraj, “and it allowed students to engage with quirky and colorful characters.” All seventh-grade students take a music course – either instrumental or vocal – for the entire school year, in addition to taking other arts courses in rotation. The fall musical performance is a highlight for the vocal students.

Three years ago, Viraj introduced the performance of a musical into the seventh-grade curriculum in order to help students develop the breadth of their choral performance skills. “While choral performance often takes place in a traditional concert setting,” says Arts Department Chair Elaine Brodie, “the seventh-grade musical allows students to integrate theatrical, choral and dance experiences.”

Performing a musical together also requires the seventh-grade students to practice working hard individually and as a team. “It’s always a thrill to see the students work together on stage,” reflects Middle School Principal Tom Ashburn. “Through the rehearsal and production process, they come to understand that the success of the musical requires all hands on deck and that each person has a role to play.”
Lisa's values-driven approach to coaching perfectly reflects Director of Athletics Ted Gilbreath’s goals for middle school sports. “Coach Mulligan is known for having high standards,” says Ted. “She expects her players to have a good attitude, to give a great effort, and, above all else, to respect themselves, their teammates, their competitors and the officials. That’s how you build a lifelong appreciation for healthy competition.”

In order to reinforce a character-building, process-oriented approach to middle school athletics, Ted instituted a grading rubric three years ago. At the end of every sports season, each student is evaluated on five criteria: presence, effort, skills acquisition, team play and sportsmanship. Middle School students are required to participate in three seasons of athletics each year. Those students who give their best effort on a daily basis - no matter how skilled they are at any particular sport - will earn a passing grade. “Assigning students a ‘grade’ for sports,” says Middle School Principal Tom Ashburn, “reflects what we’ve long believed: participation in athletic endeavors is a critical part of the development of young people.” Watching Lisa in action on the court proves as much. As she directs her players through an underhand layup drill, it’s clear that these boys are learning more than how to improve their shots.

“People often think sports are about winning,” says Middle School boys basketball coach Lisa Mulligan, “but it’s really about developing strong character.” Lisa, who also works as the Director of Annual Giving & Parent Relations in the Newark Academy Office of Institutional Advancement, has been coaching basketball at the middle and high school level for 30 years. “Winning is certainly nice, but it’s secondary.”

Coach Mulligan expects her players... to respect themselves, their teammates, their competitors and the officials.”
“It should be no surprise that our students end the year with joy,” says Middle School Principal Tom Ashburn when asked about the Capstone Experience – a program of intensive on- and off-campus learning that takes place during the final two weeks of each school year. “During Capstone, students put into practice the skills of risk-taking and of thoughtful exploration that we emphasize throughout the year,” says Tom. “They also have a lot of fun.”

ENDINGS:
THE CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE

Each year, the first week of Capstone begins on the Tuesday after Memorial Day weekend. During the week each grade spends time on campus or on local field trips. This year, sixth-grade students will explore applications of real-life skills related to their English, humanities, math and science courses; seventh-grade students will partake in activities that support the key themes of their character-building curriculum: leadership, respect, and resilience; and eighth-grade students will spend the first part of their week reflecting on their growth in Middle School and the second part enjoying their final days together before welcoming new classmates in September.

During the second week of Capstone, each grade embarks on an extended overnight trip. This year, sixth-grade students will travel to Philadelphia in order to engage in team building activities and to reflect on their first year together as Newark Academy’s Class of 2022. Seventh- and eighth-grade students will travel to Boston and Washington, D.C., respectively, where they will explore aspects of those cities related to key themes discussed in their humanities, science and English classes throughout the year.

“The experiences shared during Capstone provide significant opportunities for students to acquire foundational skills that will guide them throughout their lives,” says Tom. “They also help our students to develop a keener sense of themselves as social beings.” Not surprisingly, students speak enthusiastically about the social aspects of Capstone. “I had so much fun with my friends every year of Capstone,” recalls Aman Patil ’17. “I can’t imagine a more fun and meaningful way to end the year.”
This spring, construction crews broke ground on what will rise to be a two-story, nearly 22,000-square-foot Middle School building. When finished, it will contain 10 new classrooms, three new science laboratories, a new faculty office space, an assembly and performance hall, as well as student lockers and common areas. The new building will be connected to the existing Newark Academy building by way of an indoor hallway to the Elizabeth B. McGraw Arts Center. In this way, the new building will enhance the singularity of the Middle School yet preserve the one-school feel of Newark Academy.

Middle School Principal Tom Ashburn and several members of the Middle School faculty have been intimately involved in the design of the new building. “The layout of the interior spaces reflects the developmental needs of middle school-aged students,” says Tom. The seventh- and eighth-grade commons area, for example, is separated from the faculty office by a glass wall. “Middle School students need a sense of independence, and this design offers them an appropriate space for growth and a way for them to feel connected to the faculty.”

In addition to providing the existing Middle School program with the space it needs to thrive, the new building will enable shifts in program that will enhance the student experience. Larger classroom spaces, for example, will allow for more student-centered instruction and project-based learning, while maintaining small class sizes. New science labs will enable the Academy’s youngest scientists to engage in more complex experiments. And a dedicated building will allow Tom and his faculty to craft a class schedule that specifically meets the needs of early adolescents.

The new building is scheduled to open by the start of the 2017-18 school year, and anticipation is already high. “A brand new space will be an exciting next step for the Middle School. We can’t wait to move in.” says Spanish Teacher and Eighth Grade Team Leader Luis Gomez, who has been teaching at Newark Academy since 1992. “We can’t wait to move in.”

When the Trustees of Newark Academy set out to construct a dedicated facility for the Middle School, they aspired to build a lasting space specifically designed for the needs of students in grades six through eight. “We felt that our students and faculty deserved a best-in-class facility,” says Board Chairman David D. McGraw ’77, “but we also realized that our innovative and successful program needed a home that would enhance teaching and learning for decades. We sought to make a multi-generational investment in the Newark Academy campus, and I’m so pleased that it is now becoming a reality.”
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