



Vista Newsletter #2
July, 2006

I hope many of you have had an opportunity to visit our new website, www.vistaacademy.org. The process of developing the site helped our middle school team give shape and structure to Vista. We were able to craft our identity and transform Vista from an ambitious concept to an exciting middle school option for area families. Please look to the website for frequent updates as more elements of our program crystallize in the coming months.

Vista's Approach to Curriculum

Vista's curriculum will take on a dynamic, inquiry-based approach. The process of selecting appropriate curricular materials which compliment this approach involves a multi-faceted investigation consisting of -

1. researching best instructional practices for working with a gifted adolescent population
2. previewing curricular materials from a range of publishers
3. visiting peer institutions who currently implement programs of interest to Vista
4. consulting with leading gifted education organizations about curriculum recommendations

This past year, I chaired a curriculum task force which looked at many of these issues. Now it is time for us to take our findings and recommendations and make informed curricular decisions which support Vista's mission and philosophy, and best meet the needs of our students.

What does this look like? In the area of science, for example, our adopted program will need to allow students to enhance their content knowledge through authentic inquiry and, from this experience, better

help them design and develop their own scientific investigations. Further, students should be able to critically analyze the data they gather, and engage in thoughtful scientific discourse around the data and their interpretation. In short, Vista's curricular decisions need to be made through the lens of the young scientist, mathematician, author, historian, and scholar.

Yet, we must never forget who we are teaching, and that the gifted adolescent brings along a range of exceptionalities, complexities, and challenges uniquely their own. A recent edition of *Educational Leadership* dedicated its entire issue to "Teaching the Tweens", those children of middle school age. A common theme throughout the dozen or so articles focused on the critical relationship between school and adolescent, spelling out seven conditions that young adolescents crave. Nimble and individualized, Vista Academy's size and structure will provide students myriad opportunities for –

- ▶ *Competence and Achievement*
- ▶ *Self-definition*
- ▶ *Creative Expression*
- ▶ *Physical Activity*
- ▶ *Positive Social Interactions with Adults and Peers*
- ▶ *Structure and Clear Limits*
- ▶ *Meaningful participation in family, school, and community*

*Seven Conditions that Young Adolescents Crave
From Educational Leadership, April, 2006*

Further, we believe that early adolescence should not be defined as only a time of turmoil; it can also be a period of tremendous resilience, productivity, cognitive growth, generosity, and increasing involvement in school and community. To this end, students need choices in school projects, and they need opportunities to discover their own learning styles.

We believe that adolescent learning tends to be more multi-layered and episodic than linear, and that students learn more when teachers take off the evaluation hat and hold up a mirror, helping them analyze their performance and compare it with stated expectations.

Curriculum evaluation and selection require significant planning and research, taking into consideration the quality of activities,

instructional strategies, assessment procedures, extension ideas, role of technology, and essential features for high ability learners. You can be assured that Vista Academy's curriculum will be comprehensive in scope, thoroughly grounded in research, and ignite learning within our students.

Vista Academy – Frequently Asked Questions

Last month, we discussed math levels and writing skills. This edition of Vista FAQ's will focus on experiences beyond the core subjects.

What types of enrichment offerings in the Arts will be available?

The Arts includes music, dance, theatre, visual arts, and drama. We are currently investigating Arts opportunities both as potential Residencies (where an Arts organization partners with Vista and their personnel comes to the school) and as off-campus experiences. We are looking into formats which can be designed collaboratively to fit our situation, and tailored to best integrate with our curriculum.

What role will Physical Education and Athletics play?

Vista recognizes the importance of frequent physical activity as part of the middle school experience. We are looking into partnerships with local recreation centers and hope to join an area athletic league for the 2007-2008 school year.

On the Vista home page, it says “raising floors, eliminating ceilings?” What do you mean by this?

With a curriculum that transcends grade level boundaries, Vista students are empowered to pursue their passions and to make important connections through problem-centered, interdisciplinary study and investigation. By intentionally raising the academic “floor” and eliminating the “ceiling,” Vista students can achieve at an appropriate level of challenge without being encumbered by the scope of a textbook or the structure of the school.

I look forward to sharing with you more about Vista Academy at our Open House on October 28th and during our Parent Information Sessions. Please visit the website for more information.

Tim Costello
Middle School Head