



Vista Newsletter – Vol. 2, Issue 4
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Vista Academy – Hitting the Ground Running

“I just want to say that when I graduate from Vista in 8th grade, I will have tears of joy and sadness. I will have joy because Vista will have done great things for me, but sorrow for the fact that the experience is over and that I’m leaving.”

- a sixth grade student from our Visions for Vista writing activity

Unique and innovative. We hear these labels applied liberally to everything from shampoo to the latest high tech gadget. I’m a big fan of both adjectives, but beyond the implicit meanings we associate with these words, what do “unique” and “innovative” look like? How do you transfer “unique” from the brochure to the classroom? “Innovative” sounds wonderful in a parent presentation, but what forms does it take during student activities? In this article, I will share some of the defining characteristics of our middle school program, proudly through the lens of our students.

September 5th, 2007 was a historic day for Open Window School. The opening of our middle school division, Vista Academy, had finally arrived. We had an ambitious and eventful opening month of school planned. A look at the September calendar called attention to events like a trip to Mount Saint Helen’s, an overnight retreat, the Vista opening ceremony, summer project presentations, a day at a challenge/teambuilding course, and the start of our on-campus residency programs. The eleven pioneering members of our inaugural sixth grade class were ready to embark on their middle school journey.

Vista Academy is the only private middle school on the Eastside dedicated to the needs of gifted adolescents. While that statement on the surface means little to our students, consider these reflections from two sixth graders new to our school. One young man sadly became disillusioned with school in fifth grade, and with motivation waning and enthusiasm low, his parents sought other options. After a few days at Vista, the report from home was, “Mom and Dad, I didn’t know school could be like this!” Another student had difficulty fitting in and finding classmates he could relate to. I’m happy to share that he has assimilated nicely into our class and has forged several close friendships.

It has been most rewarding to watch the vision for Vista unfold into practice. We’ve worked hard to establish a middle school identity, and the students and staff have embraced both the responsibility and excitement of being our very first middle school class. From ping-pong in the lounge and basketball in the commons, to sophisticated science experiments in the lab and multifaceted writing exercises in the humanities classroom, there exists a spirit of pride and satisfaction in all that we do.

Painting the Vista landscape with a broad stroke, our program is:

- ▶ Greatly attuned to the complexities of the middle school child
- ▶ Small in size, allowing students to experience a nimble and stimulating curriculum, with ample off campus experiences
- ▶ Encouraging of students’ digging deeper and exploring further, making connections and solving problems
- ▶ “Raising Floors and Eliminating Ceilings” - our curriculum provides countless opportunities for students to extend their learning while meeting their needs at an appropriate level of challenge
- ▶ A small setting where every student is truly known, valued, and understood
- ▶ A well rounded academic program, with particular emphasis on mathematical and scientific thinking and processes
- ▶ A place where students will be in the company of intellectual peers
- ▶ Providing extraordinary depth and challenge in math and science
- ▶ Offering challenging and complex math beginning with pre-algebra concepts in sixth grade
- ▶ Providing extensive and sophisticated writing opportunities across the curriculum
- ▶ Built on the strong tradition of educational excellence of Open Window School

From a more practical, in the trenches perspective, Vista Academy can be defined as a remarkable group of committed faculty and exceptional students, who discover, learn, create, laugh, adapt, analyze, question, and have fun each and every day. We believe that a deep understanding of the needs and passions of gifted adolescents is vital for fostering a spirit of inquiry and sense of personal responsibility. Our weekly off-campus experiences and on-campus residencies afford students invaluable opportunities to tap into the expertise of musicians and scientists, professors and actors. Our differentiated approach to instruction reflects our belief that to treat everyone the same is to treat them unequally. Our program empowers students to pursue their passions and make important connections through problem-centered, interdisciplinary study and investigation.

Thank you for allowing me to share insights into the kinds of projects and activities that make our school, how should I say it, unique and innovative.

If you'd like to learn more, I invite you and your 4th or 5th grader to our Open House on Saturday, October 27th from 1:00 – 3:00.

Tim Costello
Middle School Head