

Developing the Intellect of a Middle School Child

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When we make the choice to send our children to Holland Hall, we expect an educational experience that will prepare them for college and give them a leg up in life. “College Preparatory” and “Life-long learning” are catch phrases you will find in most independent school mission statements. So, in the area of intellectual development, what differentiates the Holland Hall Middle School experience?

After going through our program, we expect students leaving the Middle School to be well on their way to consistently demonstrating

- the ability to think critically and communicate effectively;
- an intellectual curiosity and an enthusiasm for learning;
- a knowledge and skill foundation for academic success in the Upper School; and
- an appreciation for and experience in the arts.

From the minute students enter fourth grade, our students engage in activities constructed to focus their attention on communicating their critical thinking. This focus extends as well to activities designed to develop their meta-cognitive awareness. Our students understand the behaviors that lead to success through test analysis, over-learning written communication skills, rating themselves on class benchmarks, and writing and tracking goals throughout the school year. Within each discipline, specific critical thinking skills taught include

- Identifying similarities and differences
- Summarizing and note-taking
- Representing concepts non-linguistically
- Generating and testing hypotheses

Research from the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning tells us that focusing on these skills increases student achievement across all content areas and grade levels. Through curricular alignment within the Middle School and with the Primary and Upper Schools, we are able to leverage the use of common language and teaching practices to accelerate student achievement as well.

Identifying how to inspire intellectual curiosity and an enthusiasm for learning can be more challenging and often can be found in the artistry of the teacher. However, in creating varied, developmentally responsive learning environments, both in and out of the classroom, our faculty provides opportunities for our students to exercise their curiosity. Cross-age activities between divisions catch the imagination of our students placing them in the role of teacher. Capitalizing on the 162 acres of campus allows our students to experience and explore concepts taught in the classroom. I often hear students saying variations of, “That was hard ... and so much fun!”

We are blessed to be able to provide our students a comprehensive Fine Arts experience. Students explore their creativity every day in a Fine Arts class. Dr. James Zull, in his article *Arts, Neuroscience, and Learning*, states, “Brain research tells us that the brain physically changes when we learn. And that change is most extensive and powerful when emotion is part of the learning.” Zull points out how emotion and dopamine play an important role in the creative process. When we create, our brains reward us with a release of dopamine. That release creates a sense of enthusiasm. The more we can allow our students to create in Fine Arts classes and the more we can make connections across disciplinary boundaries to the arts, the more student achievement will accelerate.

We are blessed at Holland Hall to have a faculty that is versed in the current brain-research. We capitalize on that knowledge to create an academic program that prepares our students to be successful, life-long “intellectuals”.