

## **Cultivating Self-Awareness in Middle School Students**

As parents and educators, we recognize the middle school years as ones that challenge our students with many transitions. As their brains' chemistry changes, students' experience changes in academic, social, and emotional demands. Pre-adolescents and adolescents engage in activities during these formative years that set them on a path that will either develop successful habits of mind...or not.

Our Middle School program is purposeful in its design providing opportunities for students to acquire a foundation for healthy, balanced, and respectful decision-making. Last month, I discussed how we develop our students' intellects. This month, I want to discuss how we develop our students' self-awareness.

We recognize that becoming self-aware is a life-long endeavor. As adults, we can struggle with this. In the Middle School, we continue what Holland Hall faculty begin in the Primary School - directing our students' attention to being reflective about their approach to learning and social interactions. In addition to assessing students' academic progress, we assess their progress in the area of school skills. These skills include both study and life skills. We expect students to

- Engage actively and respectfully in class activities,
- Complete assignments thoroughly and on-time,
- Collaborate effectively with peers and teachers,
- Work well independently and use resources appropriately,
- Come to class with required materials, and
- Demonstrate empathy, resiliency, and a strong sense of self.

At the end of the first and third quarter, students reflect on their progress on these benchmarks as they write goals. In the conversations taking place with teachers and advisors, students are developing their self-awareness. Focusing students on identifying successful behaviors, we keep them practicing their growth mindset. Success is not solely defined by a grade. Rather, demonstrating perseverance, hard work, and resiliency in achieving academic and school skill benchmarks defines success.

Our balanced program provides opportunities in academics, arts, and athletics to work with peers to accomplish challenging goals. When a strategy doesn't work, students are guided to try a different strategy. Encouraging this resiliency promotes the growth mindset we want and allows our students to experience both success and safe-failure. Whether it's identifying a better way to approach studying for a test, the correct way to hold your bow in playing the cello, or the right technique in tackling a running back, our faculty and coaches are gifted in leading our students to develop this self-discipline.

Our faculty regularly engages in teachable moments with students outside the classroom. In less formal moments, we mentor students in their decision-making to be more

empathic. Our media literacy and wellness curriculums engage students in learning opportunities that develop their sensibilities about topics that support healthy minds, bodies, and spirits.

Our approach to discipline also leads students to developing self-awareness. Discipline in the Middle School is a conversation, not merely a reaction. When negative behaviors must be addressed, students are asked to take responsibility for their decisions and correct situations when they can. Often the question is asked, “At what point could you have made a different decision?” This awareness allows students to preview future situations so that they learn from their mistakes. We expect students to make mistakes. We accept their mistakes. We also expect that they will be able to avoid some mistakes as their self-awareness develops.

Patience, love, resiliency, high expectations, and purposeful design define our Middle School faculty and program as exemplars in cultivating this essential quality.