

Cultivating Innovative Thinking in the Middle School

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During a recent visit to Salem, North Carolina, our President remarked, “Fifty years later, our nation’s Sputnik moment is back.” The comment focused my reflections on the responsibilities of independent school educators to embrace the freedom we have to be innovative. A decade into the 21st Century, it is clear that education must lead the way in promoting innovative thinking. Certainly, given the complexities of the problems our students will be thrust into as global citizens, we have a moral responsibility as educators to model and expect innovative thinking both in and out of the classroom.

In the Fall 2010 article, “Creating a Culture of Innovation,” Jamie Feild Baker and Lee Burns write about how they transformed their school’s culture by looking at Google – a company widely accepted as being a leader in innovative thinking. A definition of innovation emerges from their experience as informed, unbridled creativity within accepted boundaries.

In our Middle School hallways and classrooms, our students embrace the spirit of unbridled creativity. We are reminded daily by our students that anything is possible, that our worlds can be changed with a good idea and a passion to make it happen. We are blessed to share in their enthusiasm for learning. The opportunity for our middle school educators is found in thinking big in defining the boundaries for our students’ creative output. Great expectations inspire innovation.

Teaching practices at Holland Hall that promote the development of our students’ innovative thinking include engaging students in collaborative project-based learning, expanding the learning experience beyond the classroom’s four walls with technology, presenting concepts from multiple perspectives and utilizing alternative assessments to paper/pencil tests. Adults thrive in a culture that values their informed perspectives and creativity; so do our students. Incorporating opportunities for students to exercise choice in their learning expands their understanding of creativity as well. Our teachers are actively incorporating these strategies throughout their unit designs.

Baker and Burns also challenge our notions of perfection and failure. Google demonstrates how creating a culture of innovation requires a healthy perspective on failure. Failure is not the endpoint. Rather, it is an opportunity. When I hear a teacher comment on a lesson failing, as a lesson sometimes will, my question back to them is “what did you and students learn from it?” We are uncomfortable with the idea of constructive failures. We must be careful as parents and educators, though. Expecting perfection leads a child (and adults, for that matter) to not trust their creativity. Creativity is messy and, often times, non-linear. It takes patience, focus and mentoring for our students to find their ways.

The middle years are a critical time for teachers and parents to model the behaviors we

want to see in our students. Setting high expectations and supporting our students as they strive to achieve them accelerates their learning. Focusing on process (learning), not product (grades), remains at the forefront of what we can discuss with our students to promote a healthy, growth mindset. Without this mindset, we cannot expect our students to take the chance to be innovative thinkers. And without innovative thinkers, this generation cannot be expected to lead their “space-race”.