

News From the Head

Joel Bicknell Head of the Middle School

Two years ago, Rick Wormeli, a national consultant on education with significant middle school experience, visited Holland Hall and met with several constituent groups, including Middle School faculty. Wormeli addressed strategies for reaching all learners and healthy homework practices. His perspective promotes best practices in the classroom and school that increase the engagement of middle school students in their learning. In this month's issue of *Educational Leadership*, Wormeli discusses five mindsets for educators that support successful transitions throughout the middle school experience. They include:

- Understanding Students' Concern about Belonging
- Empathizing with Students
- Understanding the Characteristics of the Age Group
- Focusing on the Positive
- Building Hope

As discussed throughout the year in these articles, these mindsets are accomplished on a daily basis in the relationships forged in our classrooms, hallways, and gyms. We can gauge our success even more by considering principles that constitute the middle school concept. The middle school concept is defined by the following principles.

- Flexible scheduling model
- Integrated and thematic subject organization
- Strong advisor-advisee relationships
- Exploratory curriculum providing experiences for all
- Interdisciplinary teams of teams that are student-centered
- Instruction that promotes discovery and development of study skills
- Inclusive athletic program

What we are doing at Holland Hall to honor these middle school principles? To answer that question, we can detail some of the work that has been accomplished by our faculty over the past year.

Daily Schedule – This year, faculty engaged in a reflective process considering the adjustments to the academic schedule. We asked ourselves how best to use the time we have with students. As a result, all five grade levels will be adopting some changes to the academic day. Specifically, in sixth, seventh and eighth grades, students will experience what is called a “mixed block schedule.” This model increases the flexibility teachers have in lesson planning and collaborating with other teachers and will naturally manage homework load for students.

Yearly Schedule – Next year, the Middle School will transition to a trimester system. In doing so, we will be lengthening the marking periods. This allows teachers a larger body of work to consider from each student before writing comments and assigning benchmark scores and grades. At the core of our educational philosophy, we believe this move is consistent with de-emphasizing grades and highlighting student learning.

Curriculum – We have many reasons to be proud of our faculty. At the top of that list is the work they've accomplished in curriculum alignment. With the leadership of our Curriculum Coordinator and Department Chairs, faculty members have begun a multi-year process of fine-tuning their curricula. Middle School teachers have focused on essential questions, identified areas for integrated, thematic instruction, and graduated skill sets to ensure students are being challenged appropriately at each grade level.

Daily fine arts instruction from highly qualified teachers, athletic programs that emphasize skill and character development, and advisory programs that place caring faculty as advocates for our children remain key elements of the balanced program we expect from a Holland Hall education.

As always, nothing we do at Holland Hall can be accomplished without a strong partnership between home and school. Within an ethic of service, our teachers/advisors, staff and administration aim to provide timely, direct and compassionate feedback on your child's performance and overall experience. Whether it is through informal conversations, parent/student/teacher conferences, or Parent Council meetings, we value your perspective as the experts on your children. Please never hesitate to let us know if there's anything we can do to support your family throughout your Middle School experience.