

Gauging a Healthy Middle School

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Educators have been actively promoting middle grades education for the past thirty-five to forty years. Over the past ten years, with developing brain research, the amount of literature on what constitutes a healthy Middle School has expanded. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) published in 2003 a position paper called *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* that capitalizes on research and empirical evidence. Still relevant, their essential attributes of educating young adolescents present a gauge by which to consider the health of our Middle School.

As identified by the NMSA, an education for young adolescents should be the following:

Developmentally responsive

Holland Hall's Middle School faculty excel at being responsive to the developmental needs of our students. From attuning instruction to capitalizing on teachable moments outside the classroom, our faculty create learning opportunities that accelerate all of our students' moral and intellectual growth.

Challenging

Our curriculum, with increasing expectations as you move from fourth to eighth grade, challenges our students to think critically while analyzing content material and problem solving. From the Reading and Writing program in fourth and fifth, to hands-on problem solving in our Science classrooms, to our Humanities-based approach — all that we do in the Middle School prepares our students to be successful in our Upper School program.

Empowering

Through our extra-curricular programs, including Student Leadership, our students apply their problem solving skills outside of the classroom. They develop the confidence to independently address the intellectual, social, and emotional challenges they are presented.

Equitable

Our Middle School provides relevant learning opportunities for every child. While there will be challenges and, potentially, struggles in the Middle School years, our caring faculty, as advocates for their students, nurture them to develop a strong sense of who they are as a learner and individual. Through strong faculty/student and faculty/parent connections, we mentor students through the sometimes turbulent years of middle school.

Developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable are hallmarks of our program. As we head into the final quarter of the school year, my attention is drawn to the events both in and out of the classroom that make Holland Hall's Middle School unique in how we achieve these attributes. From the Fourth Grade American celebration to Eighth Grade School-Out-Of-Doors, our students are engaged in learning activities that differentiate our program as an exemplar in middle grades education. What brings a smile to my face is that our students are having fun accomplishing the challenges presented them. And that's where the real magic occurs, when students enjoy the challenge because they are empowered to face the challenge head-on.