

Fine-tuning Instructional Practices

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As parents, we are often at risk for assessing our children's academic achievement through the quantitative outcomes of their classroom exams. In the Middle School, our faculty strives to frame learning in a larger context based on student development of the essential habits of successful learners. Student cognition accelerates when classroom instruction directly impacts and determines assessment which then provides the basis for subsequent educational experiences. In that ongoing process, the knowledge, skills and strategies taught by our faculty transcend the scope of an individual assessment and provide a foundation for current and future academic success.

Robert Marzano's research and publications provide a framework by which to consider instructional practices considered effective for improving student learning. Marzano, in *Classroom Instruction That Works*, discusses nine categories of evidence-based instructional strategies. I want to discuss several of those strategies in more detail within the context of our Middle School.

1. Identifying similarities and differences — Students need to learn the explicit structures of comparing, classifying, creating metaphors and creating analogies. Our faculty teach not only the logic involved in these activities, but also teach how to use graphic representations to develop these understandings.
2. Summarizing and note-taking — The teaching of active reading skills is a particular focus of our teachers throughout the Middle School across all disciplines. Particularly in our English classes, writing margin notes focused on identifying and analyzing specific literary elements leads students to develop the higher order cognitive skill of synthesis.
3. Reinforcing effort and providing recognition — Whether through one-on-one conversations between an advisor and a student or within the context of reflecting on a classroom learning activity, students are making connections between the amount of effort they put into an assignment and the outcome. Our faculty excel, as well, in striking the right chord in using effective praise that focuses students on valuing their task-related behavior and problem solving.
4. Homework and Practice — From Marzano, "Research on homework tells us ... parents should be minimally involved in their children's homework ... teachers should communicate the purpose of homework and comment on it ... when learning a skill, students need a great deal of practice in order to achieve mastery." For students to develop a positive mindset regarding homework requires teachers, parents and students understanding the purpose and expectations of the homework assigned. Homework also provides an additional opportunity to demonstrate independence as a learner. While students may need some guidance in completing homework, allowing students to be solely responsible for solving problems will develop the confidence needed to become independent.

Marzano also highlights the importance of representing knowledge, utilizing learning groups, setting objectives and providing feedback, generating/testing hypotheses, and using cues, questions, and advance organizers. Daily, our faculty are engaged in processes that capitalize on the best practice approach highlighted in Marzano's synthesis of related educational research. It is one of the many reasons I am proud to be associated with the highly qualified and gifted teachers we are blessed to have in our Middle School.