

Unique and Purposeful Ways

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Holland Hall's Middle School defines itself in many unique ways. Certainly, it is rare to find a Middle School that begins in 4th grade, but we are defined most by the care and skill in which our teachers interact with students on a daily basis. As students move from the self-contained classrooms of the Primary School, it is understandable that some could feel anxious as they enter the Middle School. However, by this point of the school year, I typically observe 4th graders presenting themselves as veterans of the Middle School experience – engaged, comfortable, challenged, and having fun.

One of my goals as Head of Middle School is to ease some of the concern families may feel as they transition into 4th grade. As part of that process, Ms. Jo-An Vargo, Head of Primary School, and I began a series of retreats with the 3rd and 4th grade teachers to promote a healthy discussion about our programs. We began preparing for the retreat by providing the opportunity for our teachers to observe each other's classrooms for a full day in October. Last week, at our first retreat, we shared our observations and then began identifying similarities and differences in the student experiences. It was affirming to see after our discussion that we had as many similarities as we did differences. The similar strengths of the 3rd and 4th grade programs included:

1. Teachers are actively engaging students as they address their individual learning needs.
2. Students are involved in developmentally appropriate activities that promote independent learning.
3. Both grade levels employ workshop approaches to learning.
4. Teachers present material with an awareness of the multi-sensory strengths of students.
5. Students choose how to use their structured free time. Practices in the classroom promote the development of time management skills.
6. Both grade levels emphasize the development of reading strategies and dexterity with nightly reading homework.
7. Frequent team planning facilitates the necessary conversations about the student experience.

As we continue our discussions, our focus remains to provide a seamless transition for our students from the Primary School to the Middle School. Conversations with the Upper School are taking place as well to ease the transition from 8th to 9th grade. The scope of our conversations will delve into our curricular programs – both what and how we teach. Those are important conversations as we strive to provide a developmentally appropriate learning environment for our students at all levels. In many areas, that will lead to pedagogical consistency within disciplines. In others, it will lead to an articulation of why we do what we do in the unique way we do it.