Leading From the Middle

While many changes at Newark Academy over the last five years are associated with the Upper School, the Middle School has steadily evolved as a center of excellence and innovation, with its own unique character and signature programs. Much of the success of that division can be attributed to Middle School Principal Tom Ashburn and our outstanding Middle School faculty, who have worked hard to improve a program that is already strong.

Deliberate shifts in our Middle School have strengthened the distinctive identity of the division and built a program that better serves our youngest students. Within our instructional framework, we have increased direct learning opportunities, such as Capstone Experiences and project-based learning. Our view is that students learn better through direct experience, and they tend to be more engaged when they can apply what they have learned in class to real-life situations. One such example is the Grade 6 pond study unit. Working in small groups, students take measurements of the water (science, teamwork), make calculations about their findings (science, math), and discuss the broader implications of clean water (sustainability, the role of government regulation). Our young citizen/scientists benefit from being active, and they enjoy the change of pace of working outdoors after a long winter in the laboratory.

Newark Academy’s Middle School teachers have moved away from content that tends to be department-specific to a blend of skills and content

FROM DONALD M. AUSTIN, HEAD OF SCHOOL
class. In the Middle School, students study in the Theory of Knowledge Baccalaureate program that Upper School is a key element of the International. That metacognition, incidentally, is adaptable because they know how they learn best. That metacognition, incidentally, is a key element of the International Baccalaureate program that Upper School students study in the Theory of Knowledge class. In the Middle School, students demonstrate their acquisition of skills in the end-of-year, student-led parent conferences.

The Middle School parent-advisor conferences are a great example of repurposing a traditional reporting tool to enhance student learning. In a standard conference, the advisor reports to parents what the student has achieved and summarizes assessments of that student by his/her teachers. In this traditional model, students may not even be present during the conference, and if they are, their role is passive. In the Newark Academy model, a student works with the help of an advisor to assemble a representative portfolio of the student’s work from all classes over a full year. At the parent-student conference in the spring, the student leads a discussion about the work and provides an analysis of how the work was done, the skills required, and the challenges met and overcome. In this redesigned Newark Academy Middle School student-parent conference, the student has moved from the back seat to the driver’s seat. Students proudly share what they have achieved. Parents are frequently impressed not only by the work produced by their children, but also by their maturity and insights about their own learning.

These significant changes in pedagogy are the direct result of the leadership of grade-based teams of teachers. At each of the three grade levels, teachers meet weekly to discuss students, update each other on what is going on in their respective classes, and plan the use of common periods. In the past, many Newark Academy Middle School teachers were primarily Upper School teachers, and the division functioned more as a junior high school than as a distinctive middle school. Today, most teachers in the division are middle school specialists; they design and deliver lessons that are suited to this age group. Our Middle School teachers model the teamwork and collaboration that we seek to inspire in our students.

The creation of an exemplary middle division program prompted the decision to construct a dedicated building for the Newark Academy Middle School. The new building will allow for some increase in enrollment, a desirable expansion that offers programmatic and social advantages. Enrollment is currently at 176, reflecting modest increases over the last five years. Our long-term goal, once the new building is complete, is to have the capacity to enlarge the division to as many as 200 students. The benefits of a larger division include more diversity in the student population, the expansion of extracurricular activities and athletics offerings, and the opportunity to build a schedule designed to meet the needs of Middle School students. Middle School teachers believe that slightly larger cohorts in Grades 7 and 8 will help alleviate social challenges that can arise in a small group whose membership has been static for several years. Importantly, however, the growth in the division is not intended to increase average class size. On the contrary, the average size of our Middle School classes has dropped slightly in recent years even as the division has grown.

The level of excitement about the Middle School is palpable. Both teachers and students are fully engaged with the program, proud of how far we have come, and poised to take full advantage of the new building. The Newark Academy Middle School is coming into its own as a strong and distinguished division with the students, faculty, and facilities that are worthy of a best-in-class designation.