

Ten Best Practices to Support and Nurture Young Scholars

1. Identify Young Scholars Early

Committees of teachers, specialists and administrators should be diligent throughout the school year to consider and identify Young Scholars beginning in kindergarten. Collaboration is key to finding ways to nurture and support advanced academic potential.

2. Participate in Ongoing Professional Development

Through various types of professional development, educators maintain a high level of knowledge about research and teaching practices in gifted education. Examples are conferences (OATAG), in-services, workshops, focus groups, coaching and mentoring programs.

3. Provide a Safe and Nurturing Learning Environment

A safe and nurturing learning environment provides opportunities for risk taking as Young Scholars explore new ways to think and pursue real-world applications of their knowledge, understandings, and skills. It also helps to develop self-efficacy as they successfully take on new challenges. When the school and classroom community employ a total collaborative effort, students understand rules and limits, identify issues and problems they want to pursue, and work together on projects that accept and encourage diverse ideas and multiple modes of learning.

4. Differentiate Instruction and Build on Student Strengths

Teachers and specialists implement research-based best practices that capitalize on and develop student strengths. Teaching practices are differentiated based on students' interests, readiness, and learning profiles. When students are encouraged to think critically and creatively, they build on their strengths, constructing products and presentations that incorporate their unique talents. Young Scholars are provided opportunities to develop and strengthen their knowledge, understanding, and skills in work challenging to their minds and meaningful to their lives.

5. Support Social and Emotional Development

As Young Scholars develop confidence in themselves, they also develop a desire to rise to new challenges and raise the bar for their achievement. Teachers, specialists, counselors, and other professionals work together to support and nurture the social and emotional growth of these young learners. Not only must teachers believe that such students can achieve at high levels, but the students must also believe they can do the work. Many also struggle with perfectionism. This becomes possible when the curriculum is organized around meaningful learning experiences that challenge students to use their strengths in ways that will support and nurture continuous academic achievement and growth.

6. Incorporate Concept-Based Instruction

Teaching concepts allows the classroom teacher to enrich the curriculum by connecting it to "big ideas" (e.g., systems, change, patterns, rules, multiple perspectives, trends, ethics, etc.) Through concept-based instruction, students make connections across subject areas and to real life situations in ways that are designed to endure.

7. Design Open-Ended Learning Opportunities

Ambiguous and open-ended learning experiences help students develop the practices and thinking habits of experts in the field. As Young Scholars explore the issues on a variety of levels from multiple perspectives, they become problem-finders as well as problem-solvers.

8. Plan Real-World Learning Opportunities

Young Scholars gain a greater understanding of and begin to appreciate their place in the world when they become active community participants. By identifying and investigating real-world problems as experts in the field, students apply higher level thinking skills and learned knowledge in a way that may impact their community and their environment.

9. Infuse a Global Perspective

As we evolve into a diverse global society, curriculum and instruction need to incorporate and reflect the changing, varied perspectives that are an integral part of today's world. When multicultural learning activities are integrated throughout the curriculum, students have the opportunity to connect new knowledge to their own life experiences. It is vital that students see their reflections in leaders that have made significant contributions to society into learning experiences, students' self-worth is increased and possibilities for the future are enhanced. It is vital that students see their reflections in leaders that have made important contributions in specific fields as they become aware of the diversity in our world. When students are given an opportunity to study a diverse group of leaders who have changed the world for the better, they are able to recognize that the traits and characteristics they possess cross all lines of color, class, and culture. Finally, it is important to create a classroom environment where all students feel accepted, valued, and respected for the contributions they make.

10. Critical Thinking Skills.

Critical and creative thinking skills are nurtured through problem-solving and problem- posing activities that challenge students to question the answers, formulate their own ideas, and seek solutions that are not ordinarily considered. When higher-level thinking skills are embedded in the total school experience, students learn to apply and use these skills in other areas of their lives as well. Critical thinking, reasoning, reflecting, discussing, and applying new ideas are essential characteristics of a climate of learning that encourages students to think on a higher level, challenge existing ideas, and entertain new possibilities for the future.