

## **Educating the Whole Child**

I believe strongly in educating the whole child, and appreciate that da Vinci's arts infused curriculum affords this opportunity to all students each day. As mid-level educators, we have the privilege and the responsibility of creating a vibrant and stimulating learning environment that supports inquiry, creativity, guided practice, success and failure. Students learn individually, as team members, and as a community to consistently refine their work and citizenship as they pursue excellence. Empowering them to become voracious learners requires inspiration, patience, planning, and persistence. Our goal is preparing each student to succeed in high school, post-secondary studies and beyond. This demands they are well versed in literature, writing, historical perspective, mathematics, the scientific process, art and aesthetics.

Da Vinci students succeed because we provide structures like Core and our arts program that know them well. Students hone their skills in a safe and supportive environment, and learn to take risks that extend their intellectual and social boundaries. Students are learning constantly; in class, in the halls, on field trips, on the playground, in rehearsals, and in regular public performances or art exhibitions. At home, further learning occurs as students grapple with concepts, research, and formulate questions. Pacing is steep for 6<sup>th</sup> graders, but balances out as students move through their three-year inquiry cycle. It is our responsibility to challenge all students at their own rate and level. Classroom differentiation is critical to ensure that some students investigate deeper while others slow down and review. Within our arts focus school all students can and are supported to learn at their highest level.

### **Mixed-Age Core (Reading, Literature, Writing, and Social Studies)**

Our mixed age Core classes (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>) are a powerful learning structure. By remaining with the same Core teacher for three years, students build skill and confidence over time. Support and differentiation occur because strengths and weaknesses are revealed as teachers and students develop trust and grow together. A Core class's identity is formed as students pass from being mentored, guided, and reminded, to eventually holding their own through leading and mentoring others. This close knit classroom community is healthy, challenging, focused, and fun. Among Core teachers, curricular expectations are similar, but each teacher's approach allows for a variance of learning and teaching styles. High expectations are held for all children, and our equity work is helping make this a reality, regardless of race or background. We nurture and support each child's growth as they work to consistently produce their best work.

Reading, reading, and more reading is a da Vinci staple and one of the undergirding tenets of da Vinci's Core curriculum. As I visit Core classrooms, I enjoy questioning students about their independent reading. In every room there is impressive breadth and depth. Students read silently for 20 minutes and teachers require additional reading at home. Various age-appropriate novels and/or short stories are read aloud by teachers or peers. In many classes, students actively listen and sketch or doodle. Open-ended drawing prompts such as, "What is your art?" or, "Describe what is going on in your head" encourage students to respond artistically as well as think critically about the text.

Beyond pleasure, reading for understanding is deliberate and structured. Guiding questions frame units of study or daily assignments, and inquiry is often directed by sequential directions or a graphic organizer. Discussions prompt students to find supportive evidence and dialogue around the author's intent. Parent led book groups support this inquiry process and students learn to appreciate multiple perspectives. Highly scaffolded team projects challenge students to read, absorb, evaluate, and synthesize different texts and genres. Teachers provide compelling and relevant texts and poems that invite students to explore and push their own boundaries.

Daily writing dovetails student reading. In reading journals students summarize, respond, question or wonder. In class and homework writing assignments are organized such that students focus on a particular element. This may be a thesis statement, body paragraphs, or a conclusion of a persuasive or expository essay. Through transparent modeling, and thinking out-loud, teachers inspire and demonstrate their process. This part-to-whole approach guides students carefully through the entire writing process and gradually builds competence. Teacher, parent, and/or peer editing is usually done for a specific purpose. Formative assessment is constant, with students receiving specific and direct feedback to improve their writing. Appropriate citations are introduced, practiced, and revised. Lengthy art infused assignments often result in class presentations, individual speeches, or even a school wide Gallery Walk. For major projects like the DIG project, all Core students view and comment on their peers' work. The quality is high and exceptional work is noted in many different categories. Core teachers debrief, share best practice and tweak curriculum and expectations accordingly.

## **Mathematics**

Success in upper level high school math (Algebra 3-4) is one of the strongest indicators of a student's ability to succeed in college. That said, as a middle school, our responsibility is to ensure our students are on track for success in high school and beyond. I support the state's decision to increase the cut scores on the state wide OAKS math proficiency tests as it is critical our students learn to logically problem-solve and then explain their work. This mathematics writing process strongly supports greater mastery of the content as students must defend their thinking. We are fortunate to have three strong math teachers at da Vinci and they are collectively responsible for teaching math 6, 7, and 8 as well as Algebra and presently Geometry. Based on past performance, students are placed in leveled classes and moved sequentially through the prescribed curriculum.

Our teachers have distinct styles, communicate well, and collaborate as an efficient team. Struggling students are identified early and encouraged to get additional support—up to four days a week in Math/Science Lab directly after school. Tutors are there to help students do homework, clarify content, and/or monitor student retests.

With the exception of Special Education students, who receive support per their Individual Education Plan (IEP) in Study Skills, we are not able to offer second or remedial math classes. Our math team is currently deciding how to ensure that all 8<sup>th</sup> graders receive the first four chapters of Algebra before they enter high school. I have full confidence that within the guidelines set by the district, they will devise the best approach for our students.

## Science

In mixed-age classes students take a full year of earth, physical, or life science until they complete the cycle. In each class, students are exposed to the scientific process through hands-on individual, or team inquiry. Salient information is recorded in science Notebooks and students present their learning in different formats. In Earth science, students use rubrics to produce models of different concepts. The design and building of their team project encourages strong group work, accuracy, and craftsmanship. In Physical science students learn about and explore their physical world. They learn how to develop a hypothesis, safely gather and interpret accurate data, and draw conclusions from their findings. In Life science, a rich pilot curriculum is constantly having students investigate, develop and analyze data tables, and draw conclusions. After reading about historical figures, groups of students produced skits portraying different scientists and their contributions. I appreciate this balanced approach where our students learn about the world in different settings.

With pollution, global warming, disease, and dwindling natural resources challenging our planet, scientists are seeking cutting edge solutions. Providing a baseline for students to explore, and question global issues of economic dominance, exploitation of natural resources, and local and global sustainability are all essential learning elements. To lead tomorrow, our students must be poised to question, reflect, and seek the solutions for the greater good. Seeing the big picture, and demonstrating successful technical Lab write-ups are fundamentals. I agree with Howard Gardner's assertion in his book *The Disciplined Mind*. Mr. Gardner argues that all students should understand their world as a historian, a scientist, and an artist. Inclusive of literature and math, helping our students glean the best information through multiple perspectives best supports them for our fast paced, information rich, and ever changing interdependent global society.

## Visual and Performing Arts

Why art? At da Vinci art matters, and appears in different forms as part of our school fabric. Words and images regularly enhance our halls and our auditorium transforms from one production to the next. The notion in the National Art Standards that describes the arts as what connects us as human beings over time plays out each day at da Vinci. Whether through drawing, painting, song, drama, instruments or dance, students are creating and refining. This occurs individually, in groups, or as an ensemble. Like oxygen, art feeds our intellect and our souls. As an arts community we celebrate learning, creating, life, reflection, and wondering. Through different media, students learn design, line, texture, color, perspective, energy, spacing, musicality, timbre, spontaneity, phrasing, ensemble, editing, aesthetics, and the wondrous excitement of art openings and public performance.

An 8<sup>th</sup> grader recently shared, art makes it easier for her to learn. Because of this ownership, she pushes herself farther. Regardless of the discipline, research indicates, "*...when the arts are integrated carefully into the core curricula, overall academic achievement is affected positively (Burnsed, 1993).*" Intensity and results vary from student to student but da Vinci data supports this assertion. Our OAKS state assessments rank us near the top of Portland Public middle schools and nearly across the board, our students score at or above state and district benchmarks. While interviewing two student co-

directors about their show, they realized they had very different strengths and that without the other's expertise "the show would have imploded." This practical and inspired learning resulted from the opportunity to direct a full length annual 6<sup>th</sup> grade show. Imbued with trust, they took risks in a highly supportive after school environment. Teacher guidance, inspiration, and courage to work through the rough spots ensured the entire cast had fun moving well beyond potential failure to unqualified success! The show rocked—a typical and expected da Vinci outcome.

Patti Jones, a gifted dance teacher and friend, reminded dance students in the beginning of the year that "practice makes permanent, and only perfect practice makes perfect." In the dance world, performance hair, no jewelry, clean shirts and shoes all matter. The fun and challenge of teaching students to make a choreographic statement through elegant, bold, or visceral movement is a life lesson. With passion and intensity the refined process of warm-up, steps, turns, jumps and leaps to music or a sound score is freeing. Whether individually or as an ensemble, helping students cleanly execute a movement phrase, idea, or emotion is what makes dance come alive. As Martha Graham says in her autobiography *Blood Memory*, "That tension, that intensification of a body in its stillness and in its movement, I feel reflected in our studio...It is another world and we accept it as a gift...I love the idea of life pulsing through people, blood and movement." (1991).

I offer you dance, as it was and is my direct experience. I am just as moved by the actor's raised eyebrow or slight shift before delivering a seminal retort, or the exquisite shape, tone, or texture of a ceramic piece, or the concluding chorus, phrase, or riff of a musical offering. At da Vinci we learn to make art and give back. This can be humorous, serious, historical, comedic, somber, improvisational or joyous, but all in the spirit of communicating with clarity and precision. Art is the glue or connective soft tissue that binds our arts focus learning community. To sustain and improve this collective work I rely heavily on the input and expertise of our teachers and guest artists.

### **Staff Leadership**

I am blessed with a talented and dedicated faculty who commit to making these learning opportunities a daily routine. To thrive this is a necessity, and willingly teachers consistently go above and beyond. Whether artists themselves, or art appreciators, their collective talents bring out the best in our students in all content areas. To ensure our full arts calendar of public events comes off seamlessly, we meet to improve pedagogy across the board. As a staff, we are absorbing equity issues and how to best support our students of color. We are committed to ensuring that all da Vinci students are learning at their full potential.

Peter Senge state's clearly that as a learning organization "you never arrive." To improve our work we meet by departments, committees, and as a whole staff. Together, we are asking hard questions, defining systemic thinking, and using Glenn Singletons Four Agreements (Stay Engaged; Speak your Truth; Experience Discomfort, and Expect/Accept Non-Closure) as we address the forest and the trees. "Colors training" helps us honor our differences, and equity work is pushing us to grow individually around issues of race. We are developing trust by handling the cognitive dissonance needed to hone our

shared vision. Over time, what structures and pedagogy best support our students to thrive? Will we ever arrive? No. Are we evolving and growing? Yes. Positive, thoughtful, discourse will carry us forward.

### **Student Voice**

Deborah Meier, in her book *The Power of Their Ideas*, regards staff sitting around a table and hashing out sticky issues as essential fodder for healthy and robust schools. Equally, she speaks of the importance of listening to student voices; “It’s critical to keep these voices, in all their variants, always in our heads as we think about what *could* be for all children under all circumstances.” Listening and honoring student voice at da Vinci is deliberate.

In September, school started with staff modeling and all students creating a six-word biography. Posted in the hall, I still read them four months later. Between Thanksgiving and Winter Break our halls became filled with student questions from a Core class. The insight and depth was refreshing. Illustrated and written work regularly is posted in and outside of classrooms. Just before break, Core teachers incorporated a monthly acknowledgement of outstanding writers to our Talent Show Arts Awards. In her book, Ms. Meier’s was intent on listening to everyday dialogue at Central Park East. As I travel from class to class different voices provide a rich range of perspectives. Engaging dialogue and reflection are staples. We encourage every voice.

### **Community**

In conclusion, the da Vinci motto, “*Creative Minds for Challenging Times*” says it best. As Public educators we are being asked to do more with less and yet the overall quality of da Vinci remains outstanding. Community Liaison and School Founder Connie Cheifetz and others’ vision for da Vinci thrive because leadership includes students, staff, parents, and community members. This ownership is not unique to da Vinci, but the extent to which teachers work to improve their practice, and parents commit to setting aside time to make a difference keeps da Vinci humming. This gift of positive time and energy is hard to quantify, but it is what makes da Vinci a wonderful place to learn, grow, and teach.

My motivation to serve as da Vinci’s Interim principal and hopefully permanent principal stems from my desire to give back. I have long admired da Vinci as it afforded my step daughter and daughter an outstanding middle school experience. In service, I do the same for all students present and future. I have been fortunate to have learned from many gifted teachers, artists, and educators who willingly shared their expertise and wonder. Their questions and counsel have helped shape my path. In the words of Parker Palmer, I have found my calling.

A love of teaching and learning brings our disparate voices together in service to da Vinci students. We care deeply that as a community, all our students strengthen their aspirations and skills. Our words and actions define us, and as adults we must model the expectations we wish our students to emulate. As Nancy and Ted Sizer suggest in their book *The Students are Watching; Schools and the Moral Contract (1999)*, that we do this work in partnership, relying on the expertise and leadership throughout the school is essential. A shared mission is critical if da Vinci is to remain a school of the highest caliber.

Learning is a personal and professional journey that demands reflection, owning and learning from our failures, and raising the roof in celebration.

Da Vinci students, and students the world over, deserve our best. If we have done our work well, our students will leave us with an inquiring, creative, and discerning mind that values art and loves the challenge of learning in an arts infused environment. If we have done our work well, they will have wings that are tested, and the courage to fly. Our hope is that they will return often, helping us refine our practice, celebrate their success, and continue to learn and live with passion.

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