

Shady Side Academy Middle School: Because "How" Matters

By Shady Side Academy

The middle school years are a time of great transition, when children grow at a rapid pace socially, emotionally and intellectually. It's a time when kids are trying to figure out who they are, searching for their strengths and voices. How can you help your child navigate this journey?

Shady Side Academy believes that *how* you educate children is as important as *what* they learn. With small class sizes, individual attention and a rigorous curriculum, Shady Side helps students develop confidence, critical-thinking and collaboration skills.

SSA's Middle School guides students through this transition by helping them gain greater independence in their academic and overall school life. Supported by a team of passionate educators, students begin to make choices, take on more responsibilities and learn to advocate for themselves in an environment that encourages intellectual risk-taking.

The Middle School enrolls 210 students in grades 6 - 8 on a 35-acre campus in Fox Chapel, which includes a gym, library, three newly renovated science labs, two computer labs, a garden and two athletic fields. Students also use athletic facilities at the nearby SSA Senior School.

"One of the things that makes our school different is the size," said Amy Nixon, head of the Middle School since 2004 and currently the Academy's interim president. "Classes are generally around 15 kids, so the adults get to know each child very well, both as a learner and as a human being."

The curriculum balances inquiry, skill development, critical thinking and subject mastery. Students develop as communicators and as scholars, gaining valuable writing skills and effective study habits. They learn to reason logically, communicate clearly and use factual information to support their ideas.

"Our job is to set the bar high, and then to help them get over it," said Nixon. "All of their peers are in the same boat, so it becomes the norm. It's fun, and it's engaging, and it increases their ability to soar."

Hands-on projects and experiential learning opportunities permeate the curriculum. The math program builds excellent problem-solving skills and offers accelerated courses. The science program utilizes a collaborative, project-based approach and offers high-school-level physics for advanced math students. Three languages are offered, including Chinese.

Each student receives an iPad through a 1:1 program, and teachers incorporate technology into classes in meaningful ways. Computer science classes introduce students to coding, robotics and program design.

A broad arts curriculum includes visual art and music classes, audition-based music ensembles and two drama productions.

At the end of each day, students participate in a required co-curricular program of athletics and activities that encourages them to try new things and uncover hidden talents. Choices include sports, drama, art, Science and Math Olympiad, a literary magazine and working in the garden.

According to parents, it's the quality of the teachers and the relationships they build with students that set SSA apart.

"I feel confident that every day my children are taught by faculty members who love their discipline," said June Navid, whose four children have all attended the Middle School. "Who ever heard of a Latin teacher being so animated during a class discussion that the class erupts in applause? Or an English teacher who encourages her students to wrestle with the idea of injustice and interview someone who has suffered from it? These experiences are just part of a regular day at SSA Middle School."

Students receive academic and social-emotional support through an advisory program, a full-time psychologist and learning specialist. Students see their faculty advisor three times a day, and a daily conference period offers time to meet with teachers for extra help, developing self-advocacy skills.

"The critical piece is always knowing what you don't know, and then, knowing how to get that information," said Nixon. "Is there any better lesson for life, let alone in school?"

With caring adults to guide them, SSA students become proficient learners and gain an understanding of how to be better citizens in an ever-changing, diverse world.

To learn more, visit www.ShadySideAcademy.org/MiddleSchool or call 412-968-3155.

An Admissions Open House is scheduled for Saturday, December 1, at 10am.

RSVP at www.ShadySideAcademy.org/Visit.



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