If you look down the sixth grade hallway during passing period, you will see students who range from short to tall, awkward to graceful, and physically undeveloped to almost fully developed. If you follow one of them into a classroom you will hear girls chatting with each other and see boys tossing objects to each other. Stay after the bell rings for class to start and you will discover that some students have all their materials organized and others can’t find a pencil. As the teacher starts the lesson, most students will be focused and ready to engage while a few will be daydreaming.

These variations do not reflect undisciplined students, but rather, they reflect the natural differences in adolescent development. At University Middle School we know that these years are a time of great physical, emotional, and intellectual change for our 11-14 year olds. We are well aware that each child’s unique rate of development in these three crucial areas impacts the way we design the learning environment for our students.

It is not an accident that our 6th grade teachers are in the same hallway, we have an 8th grade courtyard for break time, grade specific lunches, basketball nets and benches in the sun, and a multitude of other facility and scheduling strategies in place. These are the student-centered and research-based accommodations middle school educators make to help meet the physical and social needs of adolescents.

With 460 students’ individual and unique growth rates, University School has purposefully planned a structure and a variety of strategies to help each child through the process. Here are some examples of activities specific to University School that are designed to promote your child’s growth as a happy and successful adolescent:

- **Each team of grade level teachers meets once a week** to discuss, make plans, or seek solutions regarding: Cross-curricular projects, monitoring the timing of assessments, attending to any recurring behavioral issues, sharing best practices in the classroom that work for particular students, identifying students who may need interventions for success socially, academically, or emotionally, and reviewing the character lesson to be implemented in the advisory class.

- **Teacher/student grade level meetings are held once a week** for an information that includes any changes or reminders about policies and procedures, upcoming events, student officer presentations, etc.

- **Weekly advisory meetings are conducted by each advisor with their students** in which they implement character lessons. Even when students move to new teachers from year to year, the advisor remains the same throughout the three years which allows for students to build strong and trusting relationships.

- **Leadership opportunities are provided in abundance at the Middle School.** Every advisory elects an advisory president, vice-president, and secretary. All of our 22 clubs elect officers. And, many school activities are facilitated with assistance from our Student Action Council officers.

- **Our community centered clubs expand student’s understanding of societal issues** such as diabetes, childhood cancer, pet rescue, saving the ocean, etc. while also providing them an opportunity to give back to their community by raising funds or doing community service for important causes.
• **Classroom instruction is designed to allow students to explore the “why”** in their world and not just the “what”. They do this by engaging in discussion, learning to research for answers, project and experiential based learning, interacting with peers through cooperative groups and peer coaching, to name a few.

• **Differentiated instruction in the classroom is utilized by all teachers.** Developmental growth spurts contribute to the need to be able to address the individual learning needs of each student. This is done in the instructional process as well as the assessment process. The underlying premise is children learn at different rates, in different ways, and some take more time to gain an understanding of the content. By differentiating and holding students accountable for mastering the material, we are communicating that no child has permission to give up or fail. More information will be provided about this process in a later article.

• **Technology: Keeping up with the world our children live in** mandates that we incorporate the use of technology in our classrooms. Every 7th and 8th grader has a mandatory digital device in the form of a laptop or tablet and utilizes it daily to access University School’s digital textbooks and resources. While not required, most 6th graders also have digital devices and access to digital resources, as well. The instant access to the real world outside of the classroom assists us in making instruction relevant and timely.

• **Counselors: The Middle School has two counselors** who are specifically trained and certified in school counseling. Students see their respective counselor depending on their last name, either A-K or L-Z. Sorting our students in this manner allows for counselors to get to know siblings and their families in a more comprehensive way. While many schools do not have counselors, those that do generally average about 500 students per counselor. At University School, our counselors are able to devote quality time taking care of the emotional and social needs of your child at a ratio of one to 230.

• **Additional Support Services for Students: Because we are a division of NSU,** we also have a post-doctoral school psychologist who is supervised by the Center for Psychological Studies and is shared among the University School divisions. This allows us to provide ongoing services, with parent permission, for students who feel the need for social or emotional support beyond the short-term.

Rather than an exhaustive list, this is a small sample to illustrate the careful planning that takes place at University School’s Middle School in order to engage the ever changing adolescent needs of our students. Please, stay tuned for information about other aspects of the learning environment that will provide confirmation that you have made the best choice for your children by choosing University School as a place for them to grow into happy and confident adults.

Resources and Additional Readings:

Association for Middle Level Education. *This We Believe; Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*, Westerville, Ohio, 2010 (ISBN: 978-156090-232-4)
