Grade 8 Curriculum Descriptions  
Fall 2015

English
We launched our year in English by reading short stories by authors Jamaica Kincaid, Kurt Vonnegut and Shirley Jackson. These stories provided a rich study of the tools authors use to structure and shape their work, create voice and texture in their writing, and tell compelling stories. Themes in our reading and discussions revolved around our year-long eighth grade exploration of social justice, and tied in closely with the students’ study of government and society in Social Studies. During this unit, students did written reading analysis, and practiced using the literary tools we studied to write two short fiction pieces inspired by the stories we read.

We also worked on essay writing by reading and analyzing a variety of pieces that offered different models for structuring the essay. Students wrote two essays during this unit, a traditionally structured persuasive/descriptive essay, and a more anecdotal personal essay.

We have started our study of Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, continuing to deepen reading and writing skills and explore themes of social justice. This will culminate in an in-depth literary essay.

We have begun our work on grammar and common mistakes. These lessons will run throughout the year.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, during the first months of school, students began a vigorous independent reading program, allowing them to read at individualized levels, according to personal tastes, and to broaden their reading range and strengthen the reading skills acquired through the study of class texts. They read both in school and at home, and tracked and reviewed their reading on The School’s independent reading site. They shared reading suggestions with each other and explored books they might want to read through a variety of activities.

Mathematics
This semester began with a project centered on the 8th grade social justice curriculum. Students analyzed data measured last spring, depicting the amount of food grades 5-8 threw away after lunch over a 5 week period. Each student devised his or her own method of extrapolating the given data to estimate how much food would be thrown away in a full school year. Students had to write about and mathematically justify their methods. They then brainstormed ideas to reduce the school’s food waste and created presentations of their findings. This project helped students to see how math can be used for social action in our school and the broader community.

The semester continued with a unit on solving multi-step equations and inequalities. Students explored how to solve equations and inequalities involving the distributive property, fractions and decimals, and absolute values. An emphasis was placed on problem solving throughout this unit. Moving forward in the semester, students will continue to explore applications of variable expressions and equations by solving distance, rate, and time problems. We will then move into a brief study of number sets and set theory, so that students will become familiar with the language of algebra, as well as various ways to represent their solutions. The
semester will finish with a study on the properties of exponents and operations with polynomials; this will include addition, subtraction, and multiplication, as well polynomial division by monomials. Students will be able to apply all of these skills to solve real-world problems and develop stronger analytical and critical thinking skills. Throughout each unit, we will continue to encourage students to explain and write about their thoughts, ideas, and processes, and to reflect on the practical applications of the content covered in class.

Performing Arts: Elective
Every fall, each student is given the unique opportunity to participate in a Performing Arts Elective. The following ensembles are offered: Instrumental Ensemble, Modern Dance, Concert Choir, Concert Band, Drama and Jazz Ensemble. Groups are comprised of students from the entire middle division, and each group will have the opportunity to perform at two evening concerts during the school year. Students are expected to participate actively with a positive and respectful attitude, be prepared with instruments or other necessary materials, take risks willingly and demonstrate that they’ve made personal progress with regard to relevant skills.

Performing Arts: Music
The music curriculum for the fall semester of 8th grade will include a mini-course selected by the students. The elective music offerings will provide the students with the experience of choosing classes that suit their interests. The Music Department will offer four choices: Music of Chance, History of Your Music, Songwriters Workshop, and World Music. Courses are hands on and experiential, ranging from research techniques to a wide variety of compositional techniques.

Science
The first semester in 8th grade science includes an investigation of basic chemistry: the study of matter. We began with an examination of the properties of matter, and considered the differences between physical and chemical properties. We focused on the physical property of density and tested our scientific skills in an investigation of the density of various substances. We determined the density of nine different materials, and used that information to predict how the objects would act when placed into a variety of liquids. We will next examine how different states of matter act and what causes matter to change from one state to another. This will be followed by an effort to classify matter into categories, which will lead to an understanding of the Periodic Table of Elements. We will also examine how and why certain atoms bond to form molecules, while others do not. When we return in January we will continue our study of matter, investigating how chemical reactions cause matter to completely alter its properties. Throughout the study, we have capitalized on the scientific inquiry skills that the students have been developing over their time at The School. Asking and testing good scientific questions is a crucial skill that is continually reinforced, as the students prepare to continue their scientific education in high school.

Social Emotional Learning
The 8th Grade Life Skills curriculum focuses on the transition to high school. The objective is to help students develop both academic and social skills necessary to navigate this transition, including how to effectively weigh risks and develop healthy strategies for dating and relationships, drug and alcohol abuse prevention, sexuality and disease prevention. Students will also learn and have the opportunity to practice stress management and communication strategies.
Social Studies
The 8th grade Social Studies curriculum starts with the concept of government. We began with the birth of our nation’s government and continued looking at governmental structures around the world. At the end of the unit, we examined a current Constitutional issue and debated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Students were able to answer questions like: How does our government work? Who holds power in our government? What rights are we entitled to? How are our rights protected?

Spanish Language/Literacy
During the first part of the school year, the Spanish Language curriculum connects students to the grade-wide study of Social Justice through an exploration of Latino immigration to the United States. Students answer questions such as “To where do Latinos immigrate and why?” “What is the American Dream and does it really exist?” and “What are some of the challenges Latino immigrants might face in this country?” Students expand their learning of Spanish by sharing and responding to each others' online blogs. Students studied the present progressive, informal commands, direct object pronouns and comparatives among other grammar concepts. Students also learned and applied new vocabulary through activities requiring advanced listening, reading and speaking skills.

Visual Arts
The eighth graders began their year in visual art with an inquiry into how art can play a role in the The Quest for Social Justice. After viewing French artist JR’s Ted Talk, students discussed how art can have an impact on social action and community. Students will be encouraged to begin thinking about their own social action project. There will then be opportunity to choose between four elective courses, each taught by one of the four art teachers. Handbuilding: Possibilities in Clay, offered by Katelin O’Hare, is a course in which students will have a chance to build sculptures with clay, utilizing techniques to combine and alter the form of a clay vessel. Lindsay Calhoun will work with students in Wire Sculpture, a class exploring the two- and three-dimensional qualities of wire using different tools and techniques to manipulate the medium. In the Digital Photography, offered by Yoshiko Maruiwa, students will learn basic skills and techniques of digital photography and explore various photographers who have played a role in increasing awareness in social issues. In the Memory Event: Collage/Construction Relief Painting class offered by Royce Howes students will brainstorm and share a memory of a traumatic event, a “peak experience”, or “a lesson learned”. They will consider point of view, sensory memory, emotional memory and how they can be expressed in corrugated cardboard, textural materials and tempera paint in the creation of a collage/construction/relief painting.

Wellness
The students began the semester working on cooperative games and continue to work on positive effective communication strategies and concentrate on working as a group or team with emphasis on the 8th grade theme of Social Justice. Next we work on fitness. During the fitness unit, students focused on the components of fitness (cardiovascular strength, muscular strength, muscular endurance and flexibility). The third unit begins our Create a game unit. As an example we study the game of Speedball. This game blends the skills and rules of basketball, football and soccer into one fast-paced activity. Students will be assessed on their knowledge throughout the year through written assignments, quizzes, self-assessments and skill tests.