



Touchstones

Touchstones:

1) a fundamental or quintessential part or feature

2) a test or criterion for determining the quality or genuineness of a thing (Miriam Webster)

Rationale:

Our mission, vision, the philosophy statements and the Helios learning outcomes have guided Helios in its evolution since it was founded in 2007. The school's distinctive, vibrant culture must continue to evolve, and as it does so, we expect the following touchstones to be tangible parts of the daily life of the school.

A Curriculum Designed for Gifted Children

Our curriculum will look and feel different from the curriculum at most other schools. It is an education fashioned in the century-old tradition of progressive education, and it has been adapted to the needs of gifted children. Helios students learn by doing, and own their learning. Their teachers start where the students are and are confident that, given a rich curriculum, their students will master complex concepts. Students spend a semester studying one topic in **Theme**, looking at it from different angles and perspectives, through the lens of the humanities and sciences. **Fieldwork** – actual academic work done out in the field (be it the city or the forest) – is a crucial part of their learning. **Math** and **Literacy** are taught separately from Theme, allowing children to be placed in a class where they can be challenged all year. **Passion projects** are an opportunity to do authentic research on a topic students care about, and as they get older, apply it to the outside world.

Assessment

The students receive continual feedback on their work, but it's in the form of comments on their work, encouragement to dig deeper, reflect, and, where there is a more formal test, an emphasis on understanding areas that need further work. We take the children

seriously, respecting their ideas, delighted by their original thoughts. By avoiding letter grades we encourage the students's internal motivation and focus their energy on understanding. The end of each semester is an opportunity for a Celebration of Learning: a chance to proudly share what they have learned with the rest of the school, their families and friends and outside experts.

Experiential Education

Semi-annual camping trips bookend the students' academic years. The trips get longer as the students get older and they are increasingly in charge of the itineraries, food and activities. The time away at the start of the year helps the classes bond, and the time together at the end of the year gives them time to reflect on all that they have learned. The time spent in nature is a valuable complement to their everyday lives. It is also an opportunity to practice the skill of "getting comfortable being uncomfortable." Students recognize that a complex math problem and a collapsed tent both provoke the same feeling in their body, and both are solvable. Having the Wilderness Village and garden on campus provides daily opportunities to develop and maintain these skills.

School Structure

The school is designed as a blend of supportive small classes and opportunities to mix with larger groups, such as the community meeting. The "bird" gradebands mix grade levels, using our students' asynchrony to provide more chances to learn with a peer who is on the same level. This system also develops a three-year span of friendships. By eighth grade our students understand their strengths and challenges and are ready to matriculate to a high school that meets their needs, not one that they must struggle to adapt to.

Social Emotional Learning

Helios recognizes that for gifted students, all learning is both social and emotional. Helios students have a drive to learn and make connections and that their learning may not always happen on a convenient timetable. We expect our students to have intensities and asynchrony, and we lean into the challenges that fact brings to their day to day life. We want them to connect socially and academically and we work with them and their families to help that happen.

A Distinctive Education

These touchstones fit together and allow a structure that liberates our teachers to challenge, provoke and nurture the students. Parents and faculty know it's remarkable, but for our students, it's just their school, the school where they fit in, where the other children are like them, and where their drive to learn and connect is valued.