

February 22, 2020

Dear Hawthorne Valley School Community:

I am happy to be writing you to share exciting news about organizational changes in our Middle School planned for the coming academic year, 2020-2021.

What capacities will best help our Middle School-age children meet the challenges of today's world and successfully navigate adolescence and high school with confidence and strength?

This question looms large as we as educators prepare to face our classes and deliver inspired lessons each day to the children under our care. During the past couple years, the teachers at Hawthorne Valley Waldorf School have devoted focused time in faculty meetings and retreats to codify our *All-School Learning Goals*, a list of core values that inform our teaching at all levels from Early Childhood through High School. As part of this full-faculty work, we have renewed our identity as a Waldorf School, and our commitment to deliver an experienced-based curriculum that might inspire our students to take an active role in their education. It is our intention to provide our students with opportunities that foster the development of self-awareness, encourage social competency and empathy, hone practical skills, encourage creative expression and foster critical thinking skills.

With this in mind, a core group of LS teachers have spent time recently working with our All-School Learning Goals in order to explore organizational changes in the context of our Middle School Curriculum, with consideration for the developmental age of our students, and in recognition of the new challenges brought about by our contemporary age. While the specific details of our new Middle School plan are still being worked out in consultation with all Lower School faculty, the Council of Teachers has made a commitment to a structural change in our Elementary Grades.

While the students in our younger grades (1-5) will continue to be anchored by a traditional class-teacher model in which one teacher provides all the main-lesson content for the class, starting next year, our students in grades 6-8 will enter a more formalized Middle School. This change will allow teachers who specialize in Middle School academic subjects to inspire our students in these grades to take on more rigorous academic study. This has already been the case with our Physics, Chemistry, and Physiology lesson blocks but will be expanded into humanities and math as well. We hope to improve consistency in the experiences offered during the Middle School years, to better prepare our students for high school and to improve our support for our young people entering the tumultuous years of early adolescence. Another goal of this restructuring is to provide more opportunities for Middle School students to spend time together across grade-level as a social unit in order to widen social experiences. Finally, we plan to offer more elective choices to these older students, in recognition of individual interests.

This change in organizational structure opens up the possibility for class teachers to either move up into the middle school grades and join a team of colleagues in supporting all three Middle School classes or to choose to loop back to grade 1 at the end of grade 5, should they feel their gifts in teaching are better suited to the younger grades. The Middle School at HVS will be anchored by Andrew Sansone, who will serve as chair. Mr. Sansone will uphold consistency in homework expectations, behavior plans, cell phone policies, dress code and other typically Middle-School related issues. Each grade will have a homeroom teacher and each child will be given a personal advisor to oversee their progression through Middle School, help with specific learning plans when needed, and advise them on elective choices.

We plan to begin our days together as a Middle School participating on a hike, singing together, or joining in a group movement activity before breaking into grade level for main lesson. While some fine arts and practical arts classes will continue to be required, we hope to offer some electives to each grade. Our goal in offering electives is to provide more opportunity for students to develop self-awareness and individual interests, to allow these older students to experience a variety of teaching styles, and to mix with students from the other grades who share their interests. Among the electives under consideration are: Rocketry, Advanced Drawing and Painting, Chess and Game strategy, Cooking, Drama, Recorder ensemble, Extra Language, Fashion design/Machine sewing, Metalwork, Extra woodwork, and others. We will focus the list after we assess the level of interest among the children in different subjects. We also plan to build a Science Olympiad team in the coming year.

We realize that these changes are substantial but believe that they will develop the capacities in our students to successfully navigate their next chapters of school and life. We are confident that building up the Middle School as an organizational unit at Hawthorne Valley is the right next step for our school. It will allow us to meet your children with increased academic rigor, more predictable and consistent expectations, more opportunities to build resiliency and adapt to a variety of teaching styles, increased social opportunities, and a method to gradually take on more aspects of self-determination in one's education.

Sincerely,

Karin Almquist  
Grade 7 Class Teacher and Deputy School Director