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Core Philosophies of CSPA

This year in our Visioning Class we investigated what it means to be a Preparatory High School, as well as how we can continue to align our practices in the secondary school toward the five philosophies that ground our district. We deeply examined these five philosophies, discussed how they relate to current brain research and best practices, and investigated facets of other outstanding preparatory high schools in the metro-Detroit area.

The first philosophy we explored was High Expectations. Research over the past fifty years has demonstrated that the single greatest tool a teacher possesses is having high expectations for his or her students. “You get what you expect,” is a simple yet effective way to sum up this philosophy. If we are to become a prominent preparatory secondary school in the state of Michigan, we need to increase our expectations for our students and their parents – especially considering how middle and high schools generally have extremely low expectations. Teens are portrayed extremely negatively in the media and are seen as something to be “managed,” rather than the amazing young people with incredible amounts of potential we know they are. At CSPA, we already maintain high expectations for our students. For example, their appearance alone – neatly dressed in uniform – helps express to our young adults that their role is to be *students first*, and that they are at school to learn. We expect that all of our students will master all of our curriculum, and we provide both scaffolding and learning extensions for those who need them. We also believe that our students will conduct themselves in appropriate ways, and we devote time in advisory to reviewing procedures and discussing behavior.

The second philosophy we examined is also the core philosophy at CSPA – the Developmental Approach. There are four key principles of the Developmental Approach, each with their own set of implications. First, it is important to recognize that human development is unique in that it takes us much longer to develop than other species. As teachers, we need to work with parents to protect childhood, and extend it as long as possible. Second, the connection between genetics and experience is profound. This is where the idea of fixed versus growth mindset

comes into play; intelligence should no longer be viewed as an explicitly genetic trait. We need to understand the “normal” characteristics of development in order to help our students move from one level to the next. Third, human development and brain development are deeply intertwined. Teachers should be experts in brain development, and how this affects personality and social/emotional development, particularly in adolescents. Students should understand how their own brains work, and they should use targeted strategies when being introduced to and learning new material. Finally, the developmental approach dictates the roles of parents and teachers. They should not only protect the children in their care, but also provide them an environment where they have appropriate freedoms and their needs are met. At CSPA, we are extremely familiar with pre-adolescent development. We provide students with plenty of choice in how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning, but we also have procedures and policies in place to ensure student safety.

In our third session dedicated to philosophies, we studied Continuous Progress/Mastery Learning. This philosophy is comprised of two parts: first, the idea that all students move at their own pace, and second, that we still have the high expectation that they all can master the entire curriculum. In traditional public schools, students are educated based on their age – so all 12 year-olds receive the sixth grade curriculum, whether they are prepared for it or not. Many learning disabilities arise when students are asked to tackle content before they are ready, thus creating flawed accommodations for themselves. At CSPA however, we teach students based on their readiness for the material – which is why our classrooms in the middle school are regularly comprised of 11 year-olds learning alongside 14 year-olds. We also differentiate to provide appropriate learning opportunities for all of our students, no matter the content we are covering. We believe that all children are capable of mastering all of the curriculum with at least an 80%, and that this must be done before they move on to the next unit where the content will inevitably get more difficult.

The fourth philosophy we researched was Internal Motivation. Psychology is the study of human behavior and its causes, and internal control psychology encourages our students to analyze their own behavior and figure out “what works” for them. With internal motivation, we create an environment where kids’ needs are getting met – under the adult’s conditions and while still maintaining authority. As teachers, we must allow children to make their own choices, manage

the consequences, and ultimately learn how to handle themselves. Glasser's Five Basic Needs fit perfectly with Internal Motivation. He suggests that everyone needs five things to feel fulfilled: survival (a "safe" place), fun (learning), freedom (choice), power (being in charge of ones self), and love and belonging (positive relationships). Taking this all into consideration, it means that teachers are to provide a safe, orderly environment where students are doing things without being told, behaving themselves, being engaged and making appropriate choices. At CSPA, we focus on social protocols and manners, as well as general procedures through a family-centered model. Students have incredible amounts of choice in their learning, but they ultimately respect the adults who facilitate the environment.

The final philosophy we investigated was Whole Child. This philosophy takes the role of education from purely academic to focusing on each child individually at all of his or her developmental levels, including cognitive, physical, social/emotional, and spiritual/moral. It is our duty as teachers to address these aspects of the whole child in the need-fulfilling environment we create in our classrooms. At CSPA, we have a very unique advisory program that is not traditionally found in secondary schools. As advisory teachers, we are responsible for communication with families about their child's development in each area, including student-led conferences, regular email/phone/in-person contact, weekly newsletters, and comprehensive reviews. By having our students for three years, meaningful relationships are forged between our advisory families and ourselves, which in turn allow us to better meet the needs of our students.

If we are to become a true preparatory academy, I believe we need to continue to expect academic excellence while understanding that adolescent development is very different from that of elementary children. We need to hold our students to not just high scholastic standards, but also to high moral and behavioral standards. It is difficult to maintain such integrity when so many other public institutions continue to lower their expectations, and especially when our students are very aware of these discrepancies. It is essential that our expectations and goals remain transparent for not just our students, but also their families. As teachers, we require continued support with professional development that meets our needs, and most importantly, the *time* to devote ourselves fully to carrying out our shared vision.