

The ACADEMIC CURRICULUM at *NEW VISTAS SCHOOL*

Overall Philosophy

Each child has a right to an appropriate education. This fact is the keystone of all instruction at New Vistas School.

As the NVS Mission states, we provide an individualized approach to teaching students grounded in the most recent research in Learning Disabilities, OHI, Emotional Disability, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Asperger's Syndrome. Experienced and well-trained faculty hone their knowledge and skills through in-service sessions, coursework, and conference attendance.

Certain well-researched-guidelines lead us as we teach; most specifically, the Orton-Gillingham approach incorporating individualized, structured, interactive, multisensory, and hierarchical development is at the center of our instruction. Students learn with their eyes, ears, sense of touch, and muscles, and what is taught is practiced and learned to automaticity. Small class size affords teachers the time and freedom from distraction to assure that each child is taught and evaluated appropriately on a regular basis.

Young people with learning challenges often have not learned the strategies to enable them to progress through education successfully. Even when they have acquired skills, they sometimes cannot implement them in the classroom. Instruction at NVS incorporates not only content but evidence-based strategy instruction as well. Focus, organization, critical thinking, and problem solving are directly taught during the structured school day.

All young people benefit from adult guidance regarding social skills, civic responsibilities, and service to the wider community. These are integrated into the NVS daily coursework.

Instruction is indissolubly linked to assessment and student progress. Standardized tests are administered twice annually to each child, providing objective measurement of gains and ongoing needs. Each academic class schedules daily homework and regular quizzes, tests, and progress measures to determine learning and continued learning needs. Reports of progress (academic and achievement) go out at nine-week intervals.

Many of our students come to NVS "turned off" to learning. Our goal is to renew their optimism and enthusiasm for learning, and to awaken their intelligence and talents for use throughout their lives. To this end, we prepare students to transition back to traditional schools, to enter college, and/or to prepare for career/job opportunities, according to their individual goals.

Academic Curriculum Placement/Sequence

Each student entering New Vistas School is administered a Wechsler Individual Achievement Test-III, a standardized test that reflects a current snapshot of skill achievement in reading, spelling, writing, and mathematics. KeyMath III is also administered. While a student who has earned credit for a certain grade level in the former school is placed accordingly, skill levels may determine which section of a course the student is assigned. Skill placement takes into account this testing as well as an analysis of the complete school record and current psychological report.

Advisors prepare an SEP (Student Education Plan) for each student, to guide teachers in instructional strategies, individual needs, and accommodations. Those students placed at NVS by an LEA (Local Education Agency) keep their public IEP in place, and the school implements it and reports on progress every nine weeks as required by law. Staffings of each student and weekly Unit Meetings assure that each student's SEP/IEP goals, objectives, and accommodations are in place.

Elementary School offers class placement from TE through 5th grade. Transitional Elementary (TE) is for that child whose skill deficits are so severe that an exact grade determination by either age or prior schooling is inadvisable. Elementary students are divided predominantly by age/grade, but may move from teacher to teacher according to needs in reading, math, or writing.

An Active Reading Process is taught and used throughout the school for comprehension development and vocabulary enrichment. Strategies for independent learning and executive functioning are taught and emphasized at every level.

Middle School students are placed in at least two language courses, one basically for reading, the other predominantly for writing. A variety of courses address individual student needs: Wilson Reading for basic decoding; Foundations of Communication for the most basic writing; Reading Comprehension for those able to "announce" the words but unable, yet, to gain meaning independently; and Language Arts for those who are ready to take a more traditional English course. Math students are divided based on skill, as well, with placement dependent on testing and prior performance. Science rotates for three years: Life Science, Physical Science, and General Science. Social studies, likewise, is a more traditional academic course taught in a manner so that student intellect and not reading and writing skills are used both for instruction and assessment. Virginia standards underpin these courses, but content is not constrained by the SOLs.

For those Middle School students who enter NVS with severe deficits in math and reading, a special Immersion Curriculum is implemented.

Middle School students ready for more advanced study may take an Upper School course for credit.

Approximately eighty percent of our students who are required to take SOLs by their placing agency (if a public LEA is paying for placement) pass them. This is a dramatically higher rate than any of the local agencies experience for their students with special needs.

Upper School, also, offers a range of skill courses, with academic courses taught in such a fashion that they are available, intellectually, to the students. A more basic Pre-Algebra and/or Math Fundamentals Course is offered to those students whose skill levels do not predict success in Algebra I in ninth grade. At present, Algebra I is a two-year course, with Algebra II, Geometry, and Trigonometry offered thereafter, depending on preparatory skills.

Foundations of Communication I provides for the most basic writing needs, beginning with the two-word sentence; it is offered as a Life Skills or elective course, typically, not as an alternative to the more traditional English curriculum. Foundations II develops communication skills with a focus on reading, writing, speaking, listening, and using/interpreting non-verbal cues. It may replace English 11 for select students. A student begins Foundations at the level indicated by standardized testing and prior school records.

For the IEP diploma, math and English courses are designed to satisfy the goals of the IEP and prepare students for life, career, and/or community college.

Other Upper School Academic courses are taught on a pass/fail basis (criteria provided in Faculty Handbook as well as Parent/Student Handbook). A student prepared for more advanced work may take a dual enrollment class at the local community college (Central Virginia Community College) for high school/college credit. This is offered on an individualized basis in response to curricula needs, teacher recommendation, as well as standardized measurement of skill.

Most NVS students graduate with a standard diploma accepted by the Virginia Department of Education. On a rare occasion, a student with a severe math disability may receive a modified diploma. This, of course, is parentally approved ahead of time and is an aspect of the IEP/SEP. A third diploma option, the IEP diploma, has been instituted beginning with the graduating class of 2014.

At present New Vistas School does not offer two years of Spanish instruction. This is an aspect of our curriculum we would like to include again in the future. Those students needing two years of a foreign language typically take them as dual enrollment classes at CVCC.

For a full description of the philosophy and methodology of instruction, evaluation, and assessment, please refer to the New Vistas School Parent/Student Handbook, available online.

LANGUAGE ARTS

PHILOSOPHY

“The writings of the wise are the only riches our posterity cannot squander” Walter Savage Landor

At New Vistas School, we believe that students must be prepared to participate fully as literate citizens having a command of the English language, to include reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Reading and writing instruction are differentiated to meet the individual needs of students in elementary through high school using a researched-based, multi-sensory approach. Because language difficulties and “gaps” are at the center of the learning problems for many of our students, as well as severe vocabulary deficits, many NVS young people come to us with a negative attitude toward these modes of human expression. Therefore, it is imperative that we differentiate strategies, materials, as well as activities to build in initial success and confidence in order to progress toward competence and future independence.

Orton-Gillingham methodology is at the center of all of our language instruction. Modifications might include varying reading selections based on individual reading levels, using experiential writing, offering alternate assignments or assignment choices. In addition, within a classroom, students might use different learning strategies according to their preferred learning modality. For example, one student might illustrate the parts of a story while another might fill in a story map. Because we support the Standards of Learning developed by the Virginia Department of Education, our language curriculum, kindergarten through twelfth grade, is standards-based. We provide a progression of skills based upon developmentally appropriate instruction. This scope includes phonics, listening skills, oral comprehension, and written expression advancing to more complex skills such as responding to and analyzing modern readings and classic literature and incorporating research into argument.

We acknowledge that reading material should include a wide variety of genre which appeals to the diversity of interests in the school population. Emphasis is placed on those selections which expose students to both classic and contemporary writers and their works. These materials are chosen to enhance the students’ understanding of universal themes, cultural differences, and the distinction between good literature and great literature. We feel that the most effective reading comprehension instruction is based upon teaching strategies for independent readers, including but not limited to the Active Reading Process and a middle school and upper school vocabulary program which emphasizes the fundamental components of Greek and Latin etymology.

Writing as a process is introduced and practiced in elementary school. Peer responding, enhancing listening skills as well as comprehension and appreciation, is taught and incorporated from the earliest grades. In middle school there is increased attention to format, composition skills, style, and acceptable mechanics. Writing focus shifts in high

school to include an emphasis on the analysis of the writing of professionals and peers. From simple narratives, explanations, and research reports in the lower school to well-documented research papers, correspondence and in-depth expository documents in the Upper School, New Vistas faculty seek to develop the skills which will enable students to write clearly, effectively, and independently.

Aware that technology use will be essential for communication and research in the twenty-first century, all of the language courses include components of instruction in the opportunities, ethical issues, and changing dynamics of electronic equipment usage. Across the curriculum technology is used for the presentation of writing, the enhancement of instruction, and the extension of research. Emphasis is on the computer (and its contemporary iterations, such as I-Pods and I-Pads) as a primary tool, but SmartPens and programs for voice assistance with editing are also incorporated.

SOCIAL STUDIES

PHILOSOPHY

Social Studies at New Vistas School offers a broad scope and context for instruction that builds on strengths and addresses weaknesses for the individual student with learning differences. We seek to encourage student problem solving, organization of ideas, and independent thinking in interpreting the cause and effect of historical and current events, geographic themes, and political processes.

Learning takes place in a safe and nurturing environment where positive self-esteem, creativity, and confidence can flourish. Social Studies provides a perspective in which students will understand the rights of individuals and responsibilities of citizens to become productive members in a democratic society.

The flexible Social Studies curriculum at New Vistas allows for small group and differentiated instruction. This includes attention to multiple learning modalities, student choice, and alternative testing when needed. The curriculum follows much of the current SOL standards, but is not limited to this structure. This encourages the transfer of academic skills to other scholastic environments. Instructional strategies used in the classroom enhance individualization and multisensory learning, and reflect the developmental level of the student within the elementary, middle, and high school areas.

SCIENCE

PHILOSOPHY

The Mission of New Vistas School is to provide an individualized instructional program for students with learning and emotional differences. The Science Department at New Vistas School follows this model by using the inquiry method of instruction in the classroom. The inquiry method of instruction engages students in a form of active learning that emphasizes questioning, data analysis, and critical thinking. The use of this model of differentiated instruction allows educators to address the strengths and weaknesses of all students in the class.

All of these skills are addressed using four levels of inquiry which can be used simultaneously in the science classroom. This method allows students to build independence in conducting laboratory experiments and forming scientific concepts. The four levels of inquiry are confirmation, structured, guided, and open.

- **Confirmation Inquiry:** Students confirm a principle through an activity in which the results are known in advance. For example, “in this investigation you will confirm that the rate of chemical reaction increases as the temperature of the reacting materials increases. You will use effervescent antacid tablets to verify this principle. Using the following procedure, record the results as indicated, and answer the questions at the end of the activity.”

- **Structured Inquiry:** Students investigate a teacher-presented question through a prescribed procedure. For example, “In this investigation you will determine the relationship between temperature and the reaction rate of effervescent antacid tablets and water. You will use effervescent antacid tablets and water of varying temperatures. Using the following procedure, record the results as indicated, and answer the questions at the end of the activity.”

- **Guided Inquiry:** Students investigate a teacher-presented question using student designed/selected procedures. For example, “Design and investigation to answer the question: What effect will water temperature have on the rate at which an effervescent antacid tablet will react? Develop each component of the investigation including a hypothesis, procedures, data analysis, and conclusions. Implement your procedure only when it has been approved by your teacher.”

- **Open Inquiry:** Students investigate topic-related questions that are student formulated through student designed/selected procedures. For example, “Design an investigation to explore and research a chemistry topic related to the concepts we have been studying during the current unit on chemical reactions. Implement your procedure only when it has been approved by your teacher.” The inquiry method also allows students to participate in individual or collaborative learning opportunities. The inquiry method of instruction supports the Science Department’s use of multisensory approaches in all areas of science in order to teach to the learning modalities of all students.

Each science class begins with a review of the safety rules necessary for experiments as well as a review of the laboratory equipment that is used in class.

MATHEMATICS

PHILOSOPHY

*“Do not worry about your difficulties in mathematics;
I can assure you that mine are still greater.”* Albert Einstein

At New Vistas School, the mathematics teachers believe that today's students should be equipped with an array of skills that enable them to be logical problem solvers and to apply math skills to real-life situations as well as responsible, self-disciplined and respectful of others.

The students should be able to demonstrate an understanding of the various types of numbers used in society as well as the computational skills needed for each type. They should have a working knowledge of measurement and geometry. They should be able to organize and interpret statistical data displayed on a variety of levels and in a variety of formats. They should be able to recognize and expand mathematical patterns and be able to use variables to create and solve mathematical models. Students should also be able to recognize functional relationships and make predictions based on sound mathematical principles.

Many of the students attending New Vistas School have learning and attention difficulties. These difficulties can include problems with processing and discrimination, both visual and auditory, dyslexia, poor encoding and decoding skills, visual-motor integration, as well as following multi-step directions. We believe that these difficulties should in no way limit the mathematical success that students want to attain in the areas of education, vocation and their personal life skills. For that reason organization and critical thinking skills are stressed throughout the curriculum.

We believe that methods of instruction should be tailored to the needs of those individuals making up the small group of students in each class. Manipulatives and models are used when appropriate. Recitation of rules aloud is used for those students with retention problems. Graphic strategies, including color-coding, are developed to foster strengths with visualization skills. Study guides are used to reinforce algorithms presented during instruction. Near-point notes and vocabulary cards are used to help with the learning of new terms and properties. Dramatization of problems is also used with some students. Nightly assignments are given for practice on a regular basis followed by immediate feedback and timely remediation. Time restraints and assessment formats are adjusted for those students with special needs in that area. When making these adjustments, consideration is given to each student's reading ability, test anxiety, and visual acuity, as well as processing speed.

The above strategies are designed to help our students build on their strengths and use those strengths to address their weaknesses which in turn will build the student's confidence and self-esteem.

HEALTHY FOR LIFE

PHILOSOPHY

"Methinks that the moment my legs began to move, my thoughts began to flow."
Henry David Thoreau

"Play not only keeps us young but also maintains our perspective about the relative seriousness of things."

Jim Fixx

The New Vistas School Physical Education & Health curriculum, *Healthy for Life*, offers students the opportunity to learn how to be just that—healthy for life. The focus of the program is to guide students to see the connection between their physical health and the impact that has on all other areas of their lives.

Social Skills Development as well as Nutrition are important aspects of the Health component of this course.

Good sportsmanship, team work, daily exercise, and having fun are emphasized over intense competition and the development of professional athletes.

Technology

The world of technology is constantly changing and expanding. Here at NVS our technology program is constantly evolving so that our students and faculty become proficient users in this electronic age. Students are taught to understand technology, to use technology responsibly, and to respect technology on a daily basis.

Technology Instruction

Technology instruction begins at the elementary level. Elementary students are introduced to proper keyboarding skills and computer terminology. Progress is evaluated on completion of daily assignments and growth in both speed and accuracy on a Pass/Fail scale. These skills are practiced throughout elementary school and continue through middle and upper school. Word applications are introduced and applied to current classroom subjects. As elementary students progress with word applications, PowerPoint is introduced along with proper internet researching skills.

Selected middle and upper school students participate in a cognitive training class designed to improve core cognitive functions of the brain. Progress is evaluated based on growth and completion of daily assignments on a A to F scale.

Technology Use

All classrooms use technology on a daily basis for instructional purposes. This technology consists of but is not limited to the use of interactive white boards, projectors, laptop computers, desktop computers, iTouch units, SMART pens, and text to speech/speech to text software programs.

Each middle school and upper school student is assigned a school email address. The use of this address is a daily practice for students to communicate with teachers and other classmates. Middle school students are encouraged to prepare daily assignments using a desktop computer or personal laptop. Upper school students are required to bring a

personal laptop to school on a daily basis and to use it to complete daily assignments. A web-based cloud storage service is used by all upper school faculty and students for assignment distribution.

Technology Safety- Respect

Student technology use is closely monitored by faculty and staff to ensure a safe electronic world. Students annually sign a computer usage agreement; they are presented with “safe internet” practices and proper electronic communication skills. These practices are enforced daily.