

COLUMN: At George Walton Academy, academics are only the beginning

By Dan Dolan | Posted: Saturday, April 22, 2017 12:00 am

When a new headmaster arrives, everyone always has questions for the “new guy.”

This scenario was particularly true of George Walton Academy, as Mr. Billy Nicholson had provided such steady leadership over his 27-year tenure. Though I won't be able to anticipate and address every question in this column today, I do think it's important that I share what has so impressed me about GWA in the short time since my arrival.

George Walton Academy is a special place — that was clear to me long before I started in my new position. What makes GWA so special? It's easy to point to things like our college admissions record.

This year alone 40 percent of the senior class was accepted to the University of Georgia, and 60 percent of those who applied to Georgia Tech were admitted. Seniors also received acceptances to the U.S. Naval Academy, Harvard, Georgetown and Emory, among other institutions. But GWA is more than a list of our students' scholarly accomplishments, which, frankly, is probably too long to list here.

At GWA, students are individuals, and our faculty and staff work hard to treat them as such. I learned early in my teaching career that one size does not fit all, from educational philosophies to curricular choices to learning assessments. Students are individuals with diverse backgrounds, personalities, interests and experiences that interact to shape their unique understanding of the world.

GWA teachers work hard to uncover and appreciate the distinct perspectives and preconceptions of their students before they can help them meaningfully understand new concepts. This perspective not only informs the content of a lesson but also reinforces the value of teaching using multiple approaches.

GWA families also recognize that educators are not solely responsible for students' learning. Parents and the broader community are crucial partners in a GWA education, and that's a very powerful combination. With this approach, students become active participants in their own learning by exploring, manipulating, testing and questioning. Students are encouraged to discover their interests and strengths, recognize their weaknesses and develop skills to address their own set of challenges.

We also understand that if students are to become life-long learners, they need to be encouraged to take ownership of their education and ask questions of themselves and others. I recently read about a Nobel laureate in physics who credited his success to his mom's twist on a familiar after-school conversation. Instead of asking, “What did you learn in school today?” she would ask, “What was the best question you asked today?” We appreciate that fostering students' capacity for introspection and developing their ability to ask good questions are critical to their engagement in their own learning.

A GWA education not only surpasses the boundaries of a traditional approach, but it also pushes past the four walls of the typical classroom. No school has all the resources it needs to fully engage the whole child and fuel a natural wonder and curiosity, but every community does.

Whether by a well-planned and well-integrated field trip, a journey across the country or the globe, or taking classes overseas with one of our international partner schools, lessons have an opportunity to come alive and provide a rich context for both experiential learning and personal reflection.

As students grow and their ability to synthesize ideas and experiences matures, so, too, must their out-of-classroom experiences. Educators at GWA capitalize on these opportunities through actual and virtual community partnerships throughout the year. These relationships serve as an extension of the classroom and are a rich medium for helping students better understand their role in their local and global communities.

Further, just as classrooms should be an integrated part of a learning community, “subjects” such as math, science, language arts and social studies should be integrated to provide interdisciplinary, real-world learning experiences — and that is certainly the case at GWA.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, GWA parents are their child’s earliest and most influential teachers. Our faculty are privileged to reinforce and build upon the foundation that has already been laid at home.

Through regular, candid and free-flowing communication, George Walton Academy parents, teachers and students are teammates who work in concert to facilitate a child reaching his or her fullest potential.

As we continue to reflect on, pursue and find strength in our school mission, we couldn’t ask for more.

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