

Your PREMIER Community Magazine™

COMPLIMENTARY

In Our
12th Year

NORTH HILLS

MONTHLY

OCTOBER 2012

**Shady Side
Academy
Middle School
Provides
Opportunities
for Students to
Explore, Engage
and Excel**

EDUCATION

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TECHNOLOGY

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NORTH HILLS MONTHLY

Your PREMIER Community Magazine™

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Our mission . . . To provide informative, educational and upbeat information that will have a positive impact on our readers. Our focus is on community events, community resources, contemporary parenting, health and fitness, recreation, North Hills & southwest Butler County area perspectives, people profiles and community worship.

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on the cover

(L-R): Shady Side Academy eighth-grader Jordan Rabner, eighth-grader Knox Coulter and science teacher Bonnie Maxwell.

COVER ART PROVIDED BY SHADY SIDE ACADEMY





Shady Side Academy Middle School Provides Opportunities for Students to Explore, Engage and Excel

BY VANESSA ORR

It used to be that school was all about reading, writing and arithmetic. But at Shady Side Academy, students have opportunities like never before to explore new fields of study, engage with instructors and other students for a more comprehensive learning experience, and excel in areas far beyond what typical schools offer.

At Shady Side Academy Middle School, for example, students can take advantage of a Flex Language Program that provides them with the opportunity to explore the Chinese, Latin and Spanish languages before choosing one to pursue. An advanced math curriculum allows students who excel in the subject to participate in ninth and tenth grade level math classes, and a broad arts curriculum opens the door for those who love music, art and theater to follow their passion. Numerous extracurricular activities, ranging from Science Olympiad, MATHCOUNTS, rocketry and robotics teams to science and engineering

fairs also give middle schoolers the chance to explore their interests after school and off-site.

"There are so many things that make Shady Side Academy Middle School unique, but first and foremost, it's the kids," explained Amy Nixon, head of the middle school. "They are just really bright, full of energy and incredibly focused. They have so many interests and want to try so many new things that they are fun to teach; their level of competence and industry is remarkable.

"The adults who work here are also fabulous; I am constantly in awe of them," she added. "They keep so many balls in the air—

any middle school teacher has to be able to do that—but it's even more of a challenge when you're dealing with children who have such intense levels of curiosity."

At the heart of the Shady Side Academy Middle School experience is the teacher/coach/mentor model, in which teachers not only educate students, but serve as advisors, mentors, and athletic and academic team coaches. "One of the advantages to this model is that you see kids in a different light; you get to see their strengths in different areas," explained science teacher Matt Brunner, who coaches the



Shady Side Academy Middle School

seventh and eighth grade soccer and track teams as well as the robotics and rocketry teams. “And they get to see that their teachers have more than one interest; that we are more than just the subject we teach.”

“From a teacher’s perspective, it is incredibly rewarding to see these kids let their guards down—to see them in a different setting where they are more relaxed,” added world languages teacher Rhett Jenkins, who coaches boys’ basketball and girls’ softball. “You get to see their approach to teamwork, competitiveness and integrity outside the classroom, and they get to see you having a great time coaching. It’s an integral part of the relationship, providing personalized, individualized education outside an academic setting.”

This desire to personalize the educational experience has led Shady Side to create some very innovative programming at the middle school. The Flex Language Program, for example, allows sixth graders to take one trimester each of Chinese, Latin and Spanish. “Each of these languages reaches a different type of learner,” said Nixon.

“The Flex Language Program is a great way for each child to figure out what he or she is most interested in,” said Jenkins. “Each language is quite different: the Spanish culture and language are, relatively speaking, fairly similar to our own; Chinese feels pretty foreign, with cultural elements that don’t necessarily correspond to our culture; and Latin is an ancient culture in

which the grammar is similar, but it requires an analytical approach.”

After experiencing all three of the languages in sixth grade, students can choose the one that they want to pursue in seventh and eighth grades. “At that point, it becomes a full academic course that they take five days a week, which gives them a really solid background in language study,” said Jenkins.

Students who excel in math can also take advantage of an advanced math curriculum. “The math program is designed to allow students to be productive at their highest level of ability—if a child excels in math, we want to challenge that student appropriately. Pushing too fast can be counterproductive, but you don’t want to hold them back either,” said Nixon.

Children who show an aptitude for math are able to move beyond the standard curriculum of Algebra 1 in the eighth grade year to take geometry and even high school level math starting in sixth grade. “If a child’s abilities are off the chart, they also have an opportunity to work independently,” said Nixon.

Students are also encouraged to participate in extracurricular math and science activities, of which there are many. “A lot of these programs are almost engineering-based,” said Brunner. “Students get the chance to work through real-world problems.” Extracurricular opportunities include a Science Olympiad Team, which won the 2012 state championship; a MATHCOUNTS team, which competes with other schools; the FIRST

LEGO League Robotics Team, in which students build robots to complete pre-designed missions; and the Team America Rocketry Challenge Team, in which students design, build and fly model rockets in the world’s largest rocket contest. Students also have the chance to participate in the Pennsylvania Junior Academy of Science (PJAS) and Pittsburgh Regional Science and Engineering Fair (PRSEF).

Students who prefer the arts can participate in one of the school’s five musical ensembles, as well as a fall play, winter musical and studio art. “Seventy-six percent of our students participate in one of our performance ensembles, which include band, choir, a keyboard and strings ensemble, a jazz band and a core choir of elite singers,” explained music and theatre teacher Jeff Gross. “Our arts programs give students the chance to be expressive and to learn things about themselves. It is very rewarding as a teacher to work with these students and watch them thrive.”

And Shady Side Academy Middle School students are definitely thriving. “At age 12, it’s hard to know what’s appealing to you until you try it,” summarized Nixon of the Middle School’s approach to engaging students. “Our goal is to expose students to a lot of different things, let them dabble in it, and hope they find their passion.”

For more information on Shady Side Academy, visit www.shadysideacademy.org. ■