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# Revising the Myth of Normal:

Creating a sustainable academic  
curriculum predicated on  
learning diversity

A CCT Capstone Project by Sara Kaplan

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# Context

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# **My stakeholders:**

Students

Faculty

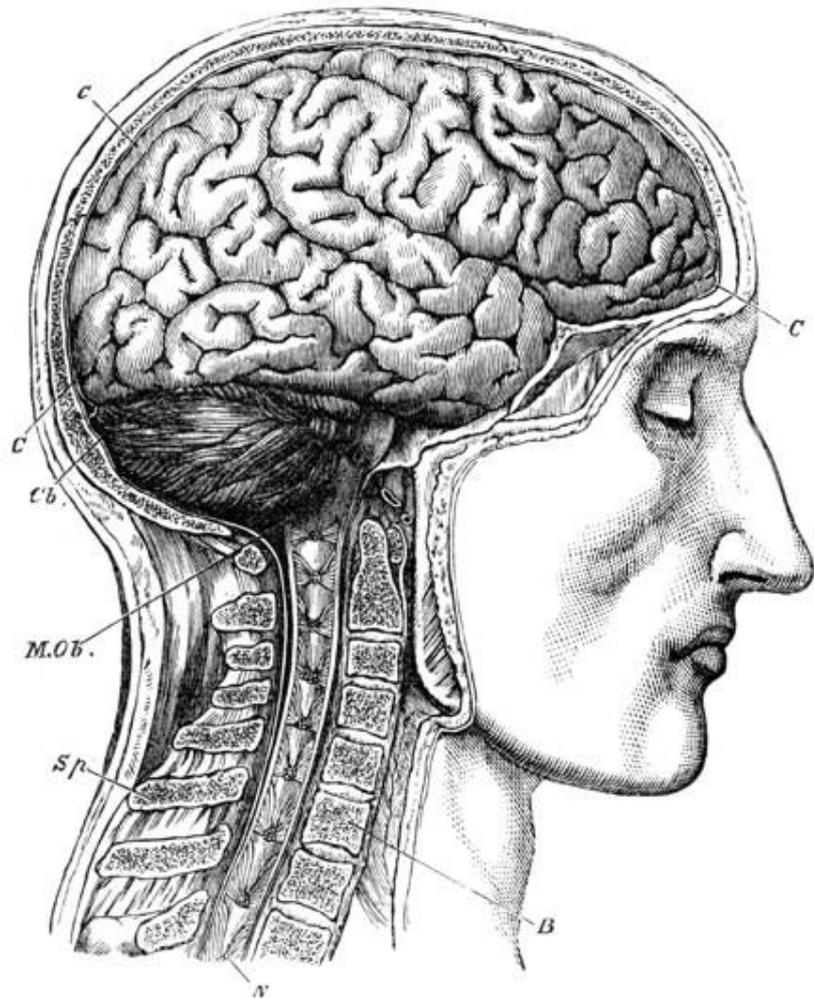
Administration

Parents

Educational Consultants

Potential Families

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Convolutions of the Brain.

## Neurodiversity:

The diversity of human brains and minds; the infinite variation of neurocognitive functioning within our species.

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# Building a curriculum around learning diversity

**Classifying** an individual into an ontological category based on their cognitive profile is a disservice to them as a developing learner.

→ **The school**

An independent school that celebrates individual abilities and supports students' academic and social growth.

→ **My role**

I am a learning specialist working to develop a program that meets the needs of neurodiverse learners.

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# Comorbidity

existing simultaneously with and usually independently  
of another medical condition

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Dsxieyla.

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# Dyslexia + ADHD

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# Dyslexia + ADHD + Asperger's Disorder

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# My stakeholders learn differently:

Auditory Processing Disorders

Dyspraxia

Dyscalculia

Executive Dysfunction

Dyslexia

Anxiety

Language Processing Disorders

Depression

Nonverbal Learning Disabilities

Visual Processing Disorders

Visual Perception and Motor Deficits

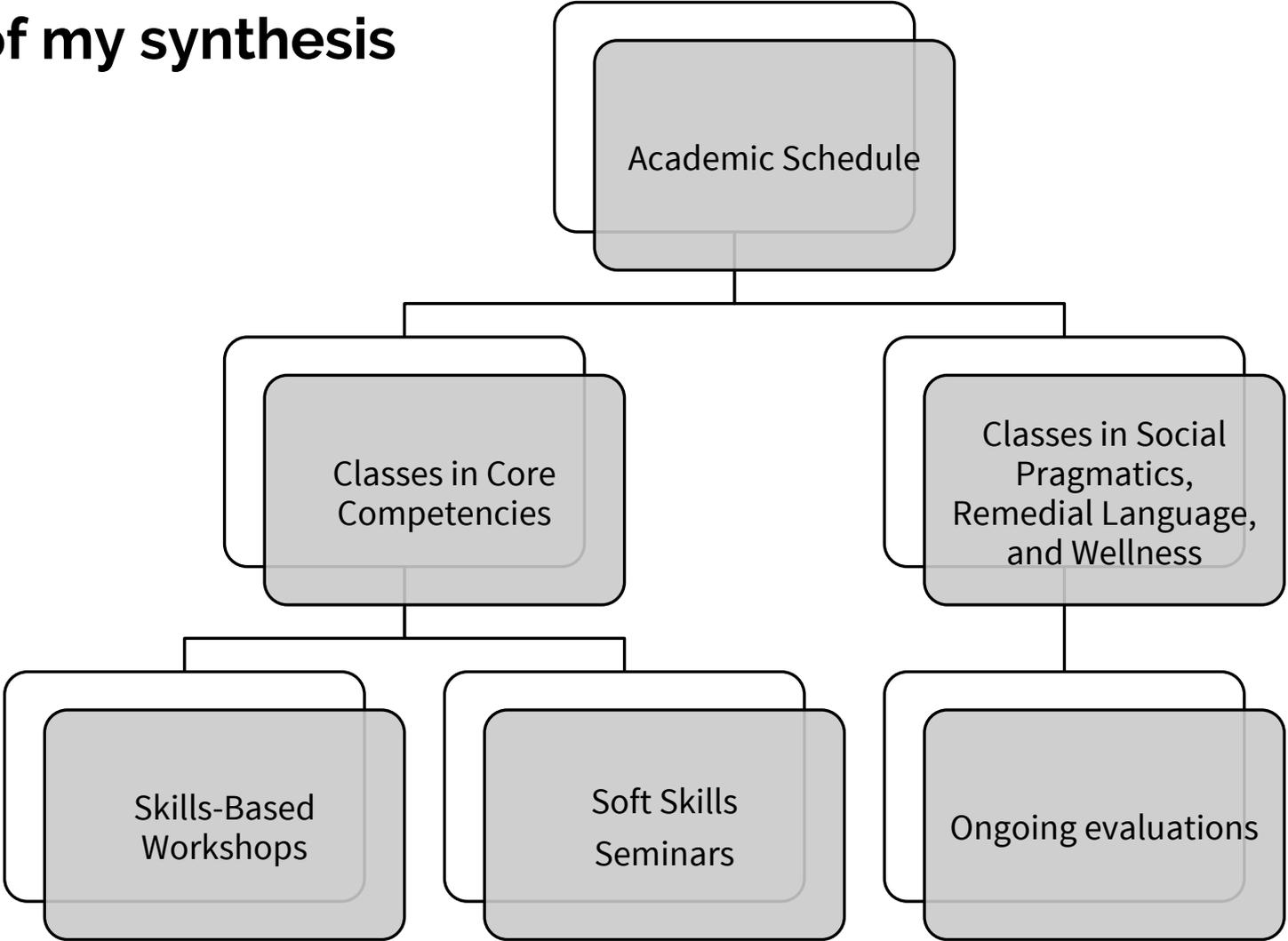
Asperger's Disorders

ADHD

Disorders of Written Expression

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# Goals of my synthesis

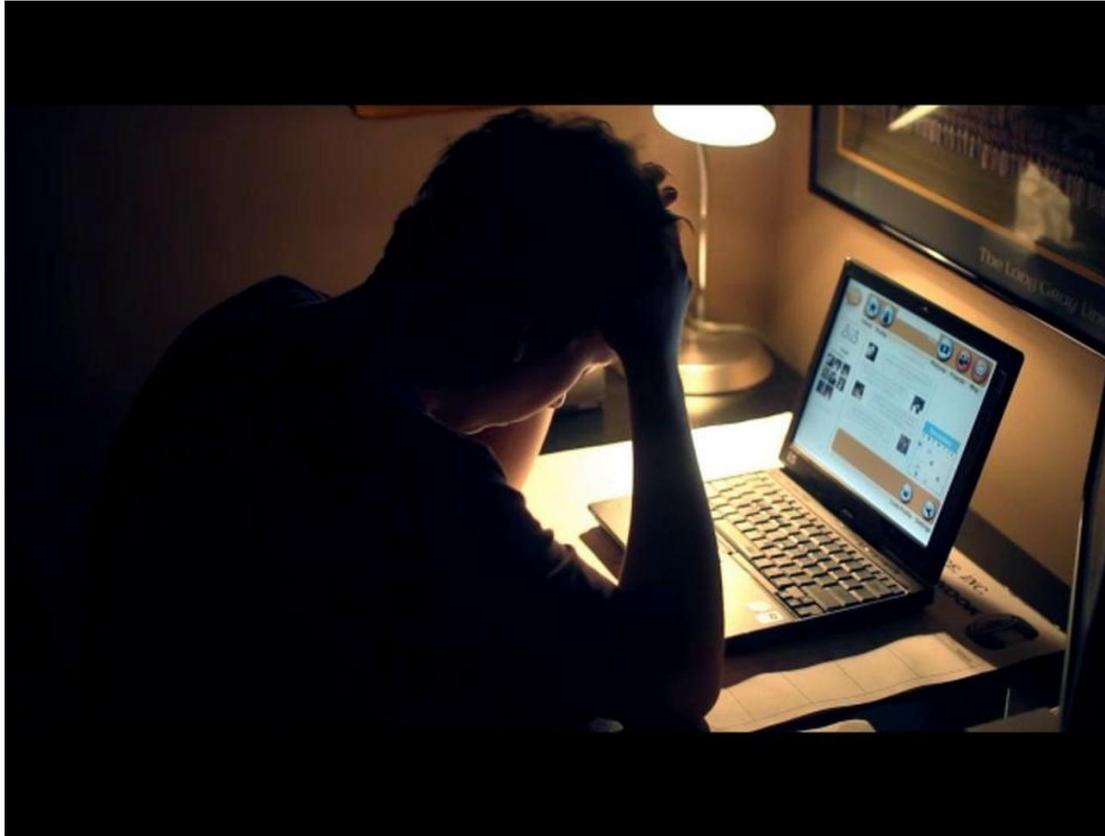


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68%

The percentage of high school students with diagnosed learning disabilities who are able to graduate high school.

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Plus, they are teenagers.

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# Motivating Students

From Tony Wagner's *The Global Achievement Gap*:

- Accustomed to instant gratification and “always-on” connection
  - Use the web for 1) extending friendships, 2) interest- driven, self-directed learning, and 3) as a tool for self- expression
  - Constantly connected, creating, and multitasking in a multimedia world— everywhere except in school
  - Less fear and respect for authority—accustomed to learning from peers; want coaching, but only from adults who don't “talk down” to them
  - Want to make a difference and do interesting/worthwhile work
-

WWW.KAPLANSPLAYLIST.COM/SUBMIT - SUBMIT ART & MUSIC!!!

A = Excellent  
B = pretty good  
C = okay  
D = pretty bad  
F = awful

NO HW

METACOGNITION  
MONITORING ONE'S  
OWN STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

GOALS

- 1) Identify your learning needs
- 2) Help plan classes
- 3) Lead class discussion
- 4) Assess yr work
- 5) Assess classmates' work





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# Process/Product

a work in progress

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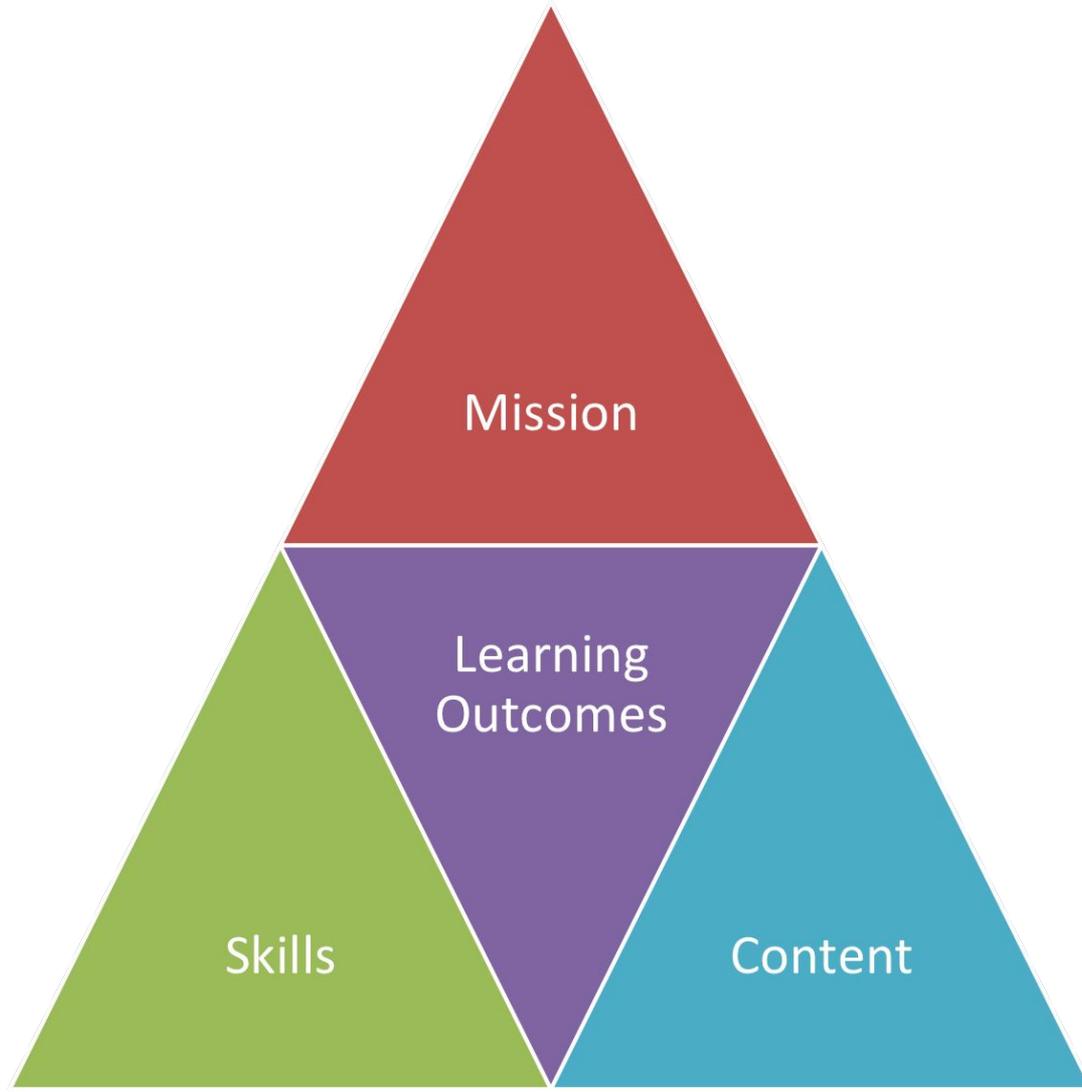
**Process:**  
**Engaging in the Research**

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# Why is this important?

**Goal:** I want *you* to understand the steps that an individual could take to develop and institute a framework integrating **creative** and **critical thinking** skills into a college-preparatory school for neurodiverse learners, by relying on **empathy** and **innovation**.



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# Departments

English

Wellness & Fitness

Mathematics

Social Pragmatics

History

Remedial Language Tutorial

Science

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# Revising Course Descriptions

*“Perspectives is an advanced History elective unique to Middlebridge School, which is focused on an in-depth analysis of historical events and current global issues...The course emphasizes supporting opinions with facts, articulating ideas clearly to others, questioning frames of reference, and taking new perspectives.”*

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# MIDDLEBRIDGE SCHOOL

## Sample\_Student

Middlebridge Generalized Learning Objectives	English	Math	History	Wellness	Science	Pragmatics
Metacognition	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating
Demonstrates an awareness of targeted processes to reach a goal	6	4	6	6	2	4
Assesses own adherence to targeted processes to reach a goal	6	2	6	6	4	2
Chooses appropriate strategies for assigned tasks	4	2	8	8	4	4
Implements appropriate strategies for assigned tasks	6	2	8	8	2	6
Can apply the above strategies to identify and achieve collaborative goals	6	2	4	8	4	4
Average	5.6	2.4	6.4	7.2	3.2	4

Executive Functioning	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating
Is prepared with appropriate and necessary tools and materials	8	6	8	10	8	10
Keeps materials and personal environment in order	8	6	8	10	6	10
Transitions appropriately between tasks and activities and school environments.	6	6	8	10	8	6
Accurately estimates time to complete tasks	4	4	8	8	4	4
Allots time relative to long, medium, and short-range tasks	6	4	8	8	6	4
Average	6.4	5.2	8	9.2	6.4	6.8

Expressive Language	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating
Recognizes conventions of nonverbal communication	8	6	4	10	8	8
Employs language appropriate to the situation	6	4	8	8	8	10
Employs vocabulary relative to the context	8	2	8	8	6	10
Asks and answers questions clearly	6	2	8	4	2	8
Participates as a speaker	4	2	4	2	2	6
Average	6.4	3.2	6.4	6.4	5.2	8.4

Receptive Language	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating
Demonstrates nonverbal listening behaviors	6	6	6	8	2	8
Listens and communicates with a purpose	6	6	6	6	2	8
Asks questions for clarification during a discussion	4	2	8	2	2	8
Synthesizes information gained from listening	6	2	8	6	2	6
Demonstrates understanding	6	2	6	6	2	6
Average	5.6	3.6	6.8	5.6	2	7.2

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# Process: Ambiguities



# Project X

In addition to the curriculum guide and learning objectives, I have begun designing a program that is currently referred to as Project X. Based on extensive research for this Capstone work, this program will ideally scaffold for students how to develop intellectual curiosity.

→ **What**

Six weekly seminars and workshops spaced throughout the year, run by school administrators.

→ **Who**

All 78 students will participate in weekly cycles.



# Topics

Critical thinking and Problem Solving

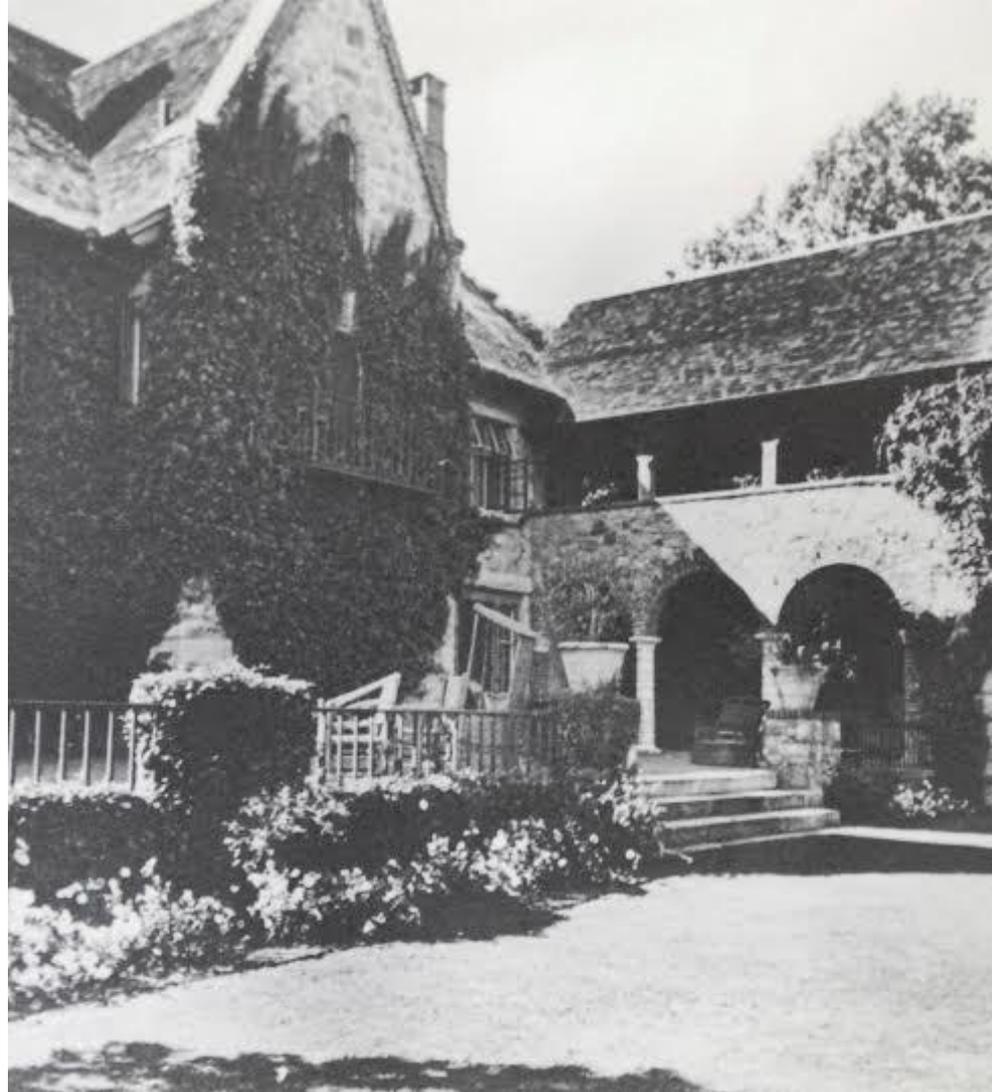
Collaboration and Leadership

Initiative and Entrepreneurship

Assessing and Analyzing Information

# Seminars

Week-long seminars will be inquiry-based and taught by school administrators. They will focus on critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and leadership, and initiative and entrepreneurship. All seminars are predicated on promoting self-efficacy.



# Workshops

Additionally, workshops will be integrated into the Project X program. Workshops will be broken into four parts. They will **introduce** a study skills strategy related to assessing and analyzing information, **describe** how it works, **generalize** and **contextualize** the skill, and **provide practice opportunities** for students to engage in.



# What teachers are saying

**It keeps students active and aware of their own progress.**

History Teacher

**I want to underline the importance of metacognition and students taking on the responsibility of their own learning.**

Math Teacher

**It reinforces the tenet that we, as a community, work collectively to support the student.**

Remedial Language Specialist

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# Product: The Curriculum Guide

I have created a forty-six page curriculum guide and academic framework that incorporates **metacognition, executive functioning, expressive language, receptive language, and critical thinking skills** into each of our content-area disciplines.





# MIDDLEBRIDGE SCHOOL

## CURRICULUM GUIDE

### ACADEMIC YEAR 2016-2017



## WEEKLY SCHEDULE

6:50 AM - 8:00 AM	Wake-up and House Job
8:00 AM - 8:30 AM	Breakfast
8:40 AM - 9:20 AM	Period 1
9:25 AM - 10:05 AM	Period 2
10:05 AM - 10:20 AM	Break
10:20 AM - 11:00 AM	Period 3
11:05 AM - 11:45 AM	Period 4
11:50 AM - 12:30 PM	Period 5
12:30 PM - 1:05 PM	Lunch
1:10 PM - 1:40 PM	Language Skills Lab
1:45 PM - 2:25 PM	Period 6
2:30 PM - 3:10 PM	Period 7
3:10 PM - 3:20 PM	Break
3:20 PM - 4:05 PM	Student Study Hall
4:05 PM - 4:15 PM	Prepare For Electives
4:15 PM - 5:30 PM	Electives
5:30 PM - 6:30 PM	Dinner
6:30 PM - 7:45 PM	Residential Curriculum/Laundry/Community Activities
7:45 PM - 8:30 PM	Residential Check-Ins/1:1 Meetings
8:00 PM - 9:00 PM	Social Time
9:00 PM	Dormitory Curfew
9:00 PM - 9:30 PM	In Dormitory
9:30 PM - 10:00 PM	Prep for Bed/Turn in Electronics/In Room/Quiet Time
10:00 PM	Lights Out

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# BIENNIAL GRID OF LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In addition to Middlebridge's academic reports that families can expect to receive toward the end of January and the middle of June, families will receive the biennial Middlebridge Learning Objectives for each of our five core content areas: English, Math, Social Studies, Science, Social Pragmatics, and Wellness.

The MBS Objectives Grid is broken into five strategic categories that are thoughtfully designed to target specific aspects of our students' learning profiles. The grids allow instructors to tangibly track student progress and challenges within the following areas: metacognition, executive functioning, expressive language, receptive language, and critical thinking. These grids are utilized as a framework throughout the academic program in accordance with our philosophy and mission.

The categories are designed with the intention of ensuring that each student is addressing areas that will aid them in becoming more independent and self-aware learners who are prepared for success within a post-secondary setting.

The MBS Grid of Learning Objectives is as follows:

## Metacognition

- Demonstrates an awareness of targeted processes to reach a goal
- Assesses own adherence to targeted processes to reach a goal
- Chooses appropriate strategies for assigned tasks
- Implements appropriate strategies for assigned tasks
- Can apply the above strategies to identify and achieve collaborative goals

## Executive Functioning

- Is prepared with appropriate and necessary tools and materials
- Keeps materials and personal environment in order
- Transitions appropriately from tasks and activities and school environments
- Accurately estimates time to complete tasks
- Allots time relative to long, medium, and short-range tasks

## Expressive Language

- Recognizes conventions of nonverbal language
- Employs language relevant to the situation
- Employs vocabulary relative to the context
- Asks and answers questions clearly
- Participates as a speaker

## Receptive Language

- Demonstrates nonverbal listening behaviors
- Listens and communicates with a purpose
- Asks questions for clarification during a discussion
- Synthesizes information gained from listening
- Demonstrates understanding

## Critical Thinking

- Recognizes that all thinking has a purpose, objective, goal or function
- Analyzes and assesses the use of questions in others' thinking
- Accurately identifies their own assumptions, as well as those of others
- Accurately represents viewpoints with which they disagree
- Enters empathically into points of view with which they disagree

# SOCIAL PRAGMATICS

Social skill development is an integral part of the Middlebridge curriculum. We pride ourselves on being a relationship-based school and want all of our students to feel a sense of belonging to our school community and to the school at large. Social Pragmatics is a daily academic class for all Middlebridge students. Our Social Pragmatics specialists help students understand complex social interactions and give them the tools they need to successfully navigate social relationships. Each student has different social strengths and challenges. The Social Pragmatics curriculum is highly individualized, with consideration for a student's overall maturity, age, and sense of readiness to explore a variety of curriculum topics.

The Social Pragmatics curriculum covers students' social interactions, self-awareness, and self-advocacy. Classes utilize real-time feedback, role-playing, and self-reflection in order to improve students' social interactions, including both informal interactions with peers or adults and formal interactions with supervisors or professors. Students also work to increase their experience and insight into their own behaviors in postgraduate environments by exploring areas of interest, strengths, and challenges.

All Middlebridge School students are enrolled in at least one Social Pragmatics class per year. Unlike the other core academic classes, the Social Pragmatics curriculum is not set prior to the school year beginning. Social Pragmatic instructors work closely with the Academic and Residential Dean's Office to constantly assess and evaluate student's social skill development, their needs, and themes that may be developing on campus. Collaboratively as a school and with the student's family, new Social Pragmatic curriculum goals will be implemented on a 4-6 week basis. Each unit is designed to give students a supportive space in which to practice their communication development, understand and label feelings and emotions, and foster positive self-esteem. With instructor guidance, students will practice appropriately labeling and expressing their emotions, communicating effectively with their peers and adults, and understanding and identifying verbal and nonverbal expressions.

As students learn how to develop friendships, they will focus on accepting similarities and differences in others, as well as techniques related to emotional regulation. Additionally, through the process of self-exploration and career planning, students will learn how to match personal needs and expectations with satisfying career options.

## The Social Pragmatics Program Addresses:

**Emotions:** Understanding their own and others' emotions; managing anger and stress; and developing empathy and self-esteem.

**Communication:** Improving conversational skills, including active listening skills; understanding body language, facial expressions, context and setting; and encouraging self-disclosure.

**Self-Advocacy:** Recognizing a need for help, learning to ask for help, and building awareness of academic and social support.

**Learning Style:** Understanding multiple intelligences, identifying learning styles, and recognizing academic and social impact of learning differences.

**Relationships:** Making friends and maintaining friendships; understanding boundaries and relationships; engaging in appropriate conversations; developing trust; and learning healthy dating behavior.

**Social Media:** Setting boundaries, understanding need for personal security, identifying appropriate use of social media, and determining whom to trust when sharing information, understanding cause and effect of posting personal information online.

**Career Awareness and Exploration:** Through the process of self-exploration and career planning and awareness activities, students will learn how to match personal values, interests, skill sets, and expectations with satisfying career options

**The Post-Secondary Transition Process:** Designed for seniors and/or Postgraduate students to help guide, support, and prepare them for post secondary placement. For more information, please refer to the Transition aspects of this handbook.

*For more information regarding possible topics to be covered within the Social Pragmatics curriculum, please contact the Academic Dean.*

## GRADUATION



### Graduation

Graduation is a time for parents/guardians, families, students, and seniors to celebrate and acknowledge all of their successes and accomplishments. The Senior Class will be announced once the school year commences, and graduation information and the schedule of events will be distributed to parents/guardians in a timely manner.

### Postgraduate Placement and Advising

Students have a variety of options when exploring what post secondary placement may be the best for them. It is essential that students, families, and Middlebridge School staff work together throughout this process in order to determine where a student will be most successful, have access to the appropriate supports, be challenged, and most important, be happy. Parents/guardians should contact the Director of Transition Services and/or Academic Dean to discuss students' individualized plans.

## NARRATIVE REPORTING

### Semester Reports

Behind every report card is an effective assessment process. At Middlebridge, the assessment process for each student is ongoing, and reflects our commitment to nurturing the student holistically and methodically. Accordingly, as assessments are modified to meet the needs of the student, our reporting system reflects the philosophy of the school.

Twice a year, parents and guardians receive a series of detailed reports that contain a thorough description of each of their child's course curricula, as well as two narrative evaluations per class: the first discussing the individual's areas of strength within the course, and the second detailing the specific interventions that teachers used to enable the student to overcome any learning challenges that they may have encountered during the first five months of school. Readers of these narrative evaluations will find that the writing speaks to the high level of communication and consistency among faculty. The narratives will most likely contain the same themes throughout each class which detail similar strengths and interventions per student, as instructors strive to best serve the needs of the individual.

Though each student will also receive a letter grade indicating their academic progress in a course-- or a Pass/Fail in the case of Social Pragmatics-- we find immense value within the narrative evaluations; this method of assessment truly aligns with the Middlebridge mission. Narrative evaluations allow readers to understand the pedagogical decisions that underlie the progress each student is making. Readers will learn of the progress a student is making as they strive to adopt self-assessment and evaluation strategies, learn and retain concepts, and heighten self-advocacy skills. Middlebridge reports are issued biannually, toward the end of January and in the middle of June.

At Middlebridge, we understand that it is impossible to share every detail of a student's progress within a biannual report. Consequently, families are encouraged to participate in conference calls with the Academic Office periodically throughout the year.

# PROJECT X PROGRAM

Project X is a series of weekly seminars and Study Skills workshops that are held during the Language Skills Lab period throughout the duration of the academic year. Project X seminars are led by administrative staff at Middlebridge, and are designed to teach students how to develop intellectual curiosity and self-awareness knowledge that they can utilize independently within their content-area classes. Project X Study Skills workshops are led by experienced instructors, who provide skill-based guidance in the areas of time management, note-taking, organization, homework completion, textbook skills, and public speaking.

## PROJECT X SEMINARS

At Middlebridge, we celebrate our student's strengths, support their academic and personal growth, and encourage them to become self-aware and independent learners. As a community, one of the values we hold most dear is our sense of belonging and becoming. Each student's path to Middlebridge is unique. This journey often requires our students to reflect, acknowledge, and embrace who they have been, who they are, and who they want to be as they strive to take ownership over their educational process. As we work to provide instruction, opportunities, and support for students with learning differences, we also look outside of the academic classroom, as we draw on our leadership team's experience to help instill some of these foundational and higher level skills on our students.

The two, weeklong rotating Project X learning seminars cover the following topics, and are divided into short, incremental units:

- Problem-solving and Critical Thinking
- Collaboration and Leadership
- Initiative and Entrepreneurship
- Flexibility and Self-Advocacy

Each thirty-minute seminar is predicated on a foundation of trust, positive attitude, inquiry, and evaluation. Project X Seminars are facilitated by Administrative staff and members of the Dean's Office, including the Head of School.

# MBS STUDY SKILL WORKSHOPS

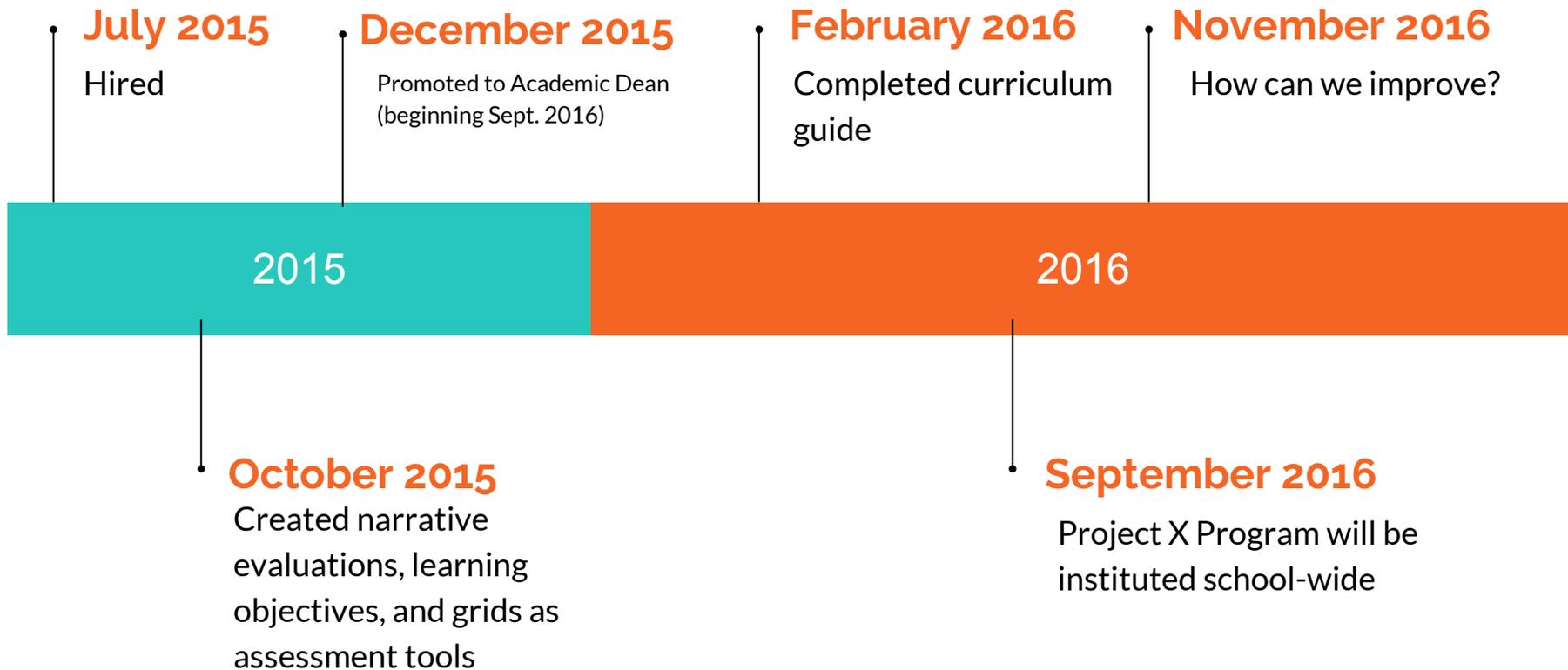
The second component of the Project X Program is our Study Skills workshops. These workshops teach students positive self-efficacy by utilizing the adaptation of self-regulatory learning within content-area disciplines. Each daily workshop will introduce a study skills strategy, describe how it works to students, generalize and contextualize the skill, and provide practice opportunities for students to engage in. By exposing students to a variety of different strategies, skills and modalities, students just be provided with an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate the skills they have learned. They will then apply these learned strategies to their academic curriculum.

Periodically throughout the school year, students will be chosen to participate in the seminars and workshops. Students will participate in seminars and workshops 4-5 times throughout the course of the school year. Dependent upon the specific focus of the session, students may be grouped by their age, cognitive profile, and/or years at Middlebridge School.

**In summary, the Project X Program was created to compliment and reinforce content, skills, and community values taught both within and out of the Middlebridge classroom.**



# Milestones



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**Taking myself  
seriously.**

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# Future paths and directions



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**Questions?**

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