

REVIEW OF PRIVATE MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAMS SERVING GIFTED STUDENTS IN LOUDOUN COUNTY, VIRGINIA

*Prepared by
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Loudoun County Parents of Gifted Students*



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ABOUT LOUDOUN COUNTY PARENTS OF GIFTED STUDENTS

Loudoun County Parents of Gifted Students (LoCoPOGS) is an independent nonprofit organization that serves families with gifted* children who attend private, public or home schools in Loudoun County, VA.

“Our group’s mission is to support the next generation of innovators and problem-solvers by educating parents on how best to address the special needs of their children,” - Chris Croll, LoCoPOGS Founder & Executive Director

LoCoPOGS was founded in October of 2012 and, today, has over 350 families who participate in meetings, social media channels and children’s social clubs. All LoCoPOGS meetings are free of charge and are open to the public.

*In the United States, the word "gifted" is generally used to describe the population of children and adults who have an IQ of 130 or higher. Loudoun County Parents of Gifted Students intentionally does *not* define what ‘gifted’ means other than to say that our children are exceptional from their same-age peers in some way (intellectually, artistically, athletically, in leadership, etc.) and our children experience *asynchronous* development. Asynchronous development, more prevalent in high-IQ children, means that a child has advanced skills in one area (for example a seven year old who reads at a 10th grade reading level) but has age-appropriate or even lower-than-average abilities in other areas.

Thank you for your interest in Loudoun County Parents of Gifted Students. More information can be found at <http://www.locopogs.org>.



ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report contains information from personal interviews, school visits and online research about several private middle schools in Loudoun County, Virginia.

This report is not meant to be a critical review of these schools but rather a factual presentation, with a few personal observations added in, of how each of these schools approach educating gifted 6th, 7th and 8th grade students.

Disclaimer and Disclosure: Despite the author's best efforts to describe these middle school programs objectively, some of the information included in this report may be subjective or outdated. It is always best to contact school Admissions teams and web sites for the most up to date information about tuition rates, student/teacher ratios and other pertinent facts about a school.

LoCoPOGS leaders and members did not benefit in any way from the schools reviewed in this report and the author has no current affiliation with any of these schools with the exception of Loudoun School for the Gifted (LSG). LSG is working with the author on the development of a social media marketing course for its high school students. Also, the author's children attended Nysmith School for the Gifted and Loudoun Country Day School several years ago at the elementary level. None of these relationships have any bearing on the findings contained herein.

This report was prepared without any compensation to the author or to LoCoPOGS and was written as a service to the LoCoPOGS community. LoCoPOGS Members and leaders at the schools reviewed in this report may share this information with others.

Comments about this report and its contents may be directed to: Chris@LoCoPOGS.org

A PERSONAL NOTE TO PARENTS

I believe all of the schools reviewed in this report offer excellent education programs. Each of these schools has Administrators who care passionately about honoring their school's mission, teachers who do incredible work in their classroom and students who love coming to school every day.

The schools reviewed were selected by LoCoPOGS members from a list of accredited middle schools that serve children in Loudoun County. A complete list of private middle schools is located at the end of this report.

Each of the schools reviewed has its own unique philosophy, culture and approach to educating students. As parents of gifted students already know, there is no one school that best suits every student. Each of the schools I visited was the *right* school for some gifted students. None of the schools I visited is the right school for *every* gifted student. Your child's needs are unique. Your family's values are unique. Your financial and geographical situation is unique. You are the only one who can match a school's philosophy, culture, location and price tag with your family's set of needs.

As you explore the middle school programs reviewed in this report, I encourage you to ask yourself these questions...

1 – Do I want to send my child to a middle school where he/she will further develop the areas where he/she is strong so as to encourage mastery or would I prefer to find a program that helps bolster my child in the areas where he/she is less strong (e.g. socially)?

2 – Some of these schools have a more relaxed culture, some have a culture of highly motivated students, some have a more nurturing culture. What is the right culture match for my child (and how important is that to his/her education experience)?

3 – How far am I willing to drive (really)? How much am I willing to pay (really)?

4 – How might my child's needs change next year and the year after?

5 – How do I choose a school for more than one child when my children have totally different personalities, strengths and needs?

Choosing a middle school for a gifted child is a daunting task. I hope you find the profiles on the following pages helpful in your process.

Thank You,

Chris Croll



Loudoun Country Day School

20600 Red Cedar Drive, Leesburg, VA, 20175

www.lcds.org

Contact: Mrs. Marty Hope, Middle School Director, marty.hope@lcds.org

Total Number Middle School Students: 79 (total 300+ students)

Accreditation: Virginia Association of Independent Schools and National Association of Independent Schools.

Definition of "Gifted": Above average IQ or students who have an average IQ but who work very hard (high achievers).

Where do Students Attend High School from this Middle School? About half of LCDS grads attend public school, including honors programs at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology and LCPS' Academy of Science. Another 50% of grads attend private high schools in Fairfax County or Washington D.C., including a small percentage of graduates who attend boarding schools like Episcopal High School, Mercersburg Academy and The Madiera School.

Student Profile: LCDS takes a 'whole child' approach to educating students. Middle schoolers are taught to be proficient at academics, athletics, music, language and fine arts. The school also emphasizes community service. In the past year, LCDS has moved aggressively forward with a curriculum that includes more STEM initiatives to prepare students for careers related to these disciplines. LCDS emphasizes character development and the culture of the school is one of traditional values. A formal "character counts" program reinforces the values most important to the success of the school community. The school's website reads, "Our whole child approach fosters critical and creative thinking, develops an appreciation for service to others and prepares our students to be caring, compassionate leaders, and global citizens. Our program fosters the whole child approach through including strong academics in the core subjects, robust art programs, technology, foreign language, an array of enriching field trip experiences, community service, student government, and character education."

Can Students Transfer in for Middle School? Yes, but most LCDS middle school students come through the elementary program. Last year 10 students transferred in at the 6th grade level, 4 transferred in for 7th grade and 1 student came in to the 8th grade class.

Do Students take Standardized Tests? Yes, students take ERB exams and in 8th grade they take the SSAT exam. In 5th grade, they take a math placement exam that emphasizes math reasoning to determine which math track they will take in Middle school.

Student/Teacher Ratio: 16:1 is the maximum for middle school but some advanced classes have a 4:1 ratio. Small class sizes is one of LCDS primary differentiators in the Loudoun market.

Curricula Notes: In addition to the school's core curriculum, LCDS middle school curriculum includes many field trips and other enrichment programs. In 6th grade, the students do a unit on Egyptian culture where they create a museum and act as docents. Students create a poster (with a cutout for their faces) on a Greek God or Goddess which they present. In 7th and 8th grade many of the classes follow a discussion format and students are expected to speak at weekly assemblies about their clubs and activities in front of the student body. Public speaking is a big part of the LCDS curriculum and even Pre-Kindergarten students are taught how to perform and speak in front of large crowds. In 8th grade, students participate in the VA State Slam Poetry competition (Def Poetry Jam) where they perform poetry live. One highlight of the middle school curriculum are the 8th grade civics debates which culminate into two nights of presentations in front of faculty, parents and fellow students. Teams choose their own topics, work with 3 other classmates to research the issue, develop counter responses and then engage in respectful debates moderated by the school's Administrators. In 8th grade, students design and deliver a PowerPoint presentation about current events in Modern World class.

"The middle school emphasizes authentic assignments where students are challenged to use critical thinking while looking at real world situations," – Marty Hope, LCDS Middle School Director

Students are expected to use a higher level of evaluative skills in middle school. One recent assignment was, "Write a paper explaining why the US Holocaust Museum is important to current society." Then the class visited the museum itself.

At the end of each year of Middle school, students take a cumulative exam which can positively or negatively impact their final grade.

One of the areas where LCDS is investing heavily is a technology program. LCDS Technology lead Vicki Knickerbocker says, "[Our program] is designed to prepare students for future

academic/professional pursuits and fosters innovation, critical thinking and problem solving skills through a variety of hands-on, creativity-driven projects.”

Here are a few projects she mentioned in an email to me...

- 6th graders walk through the design/build process to conceive, build, program and present original Lego NXT robotic designs to address real-world needs
- 6th graders relate their "Oceans" science unit to building and customizing remote operated aquatic vehicles to perform tasks related to cleaning up a simulated oil spill
- 7th graders explore the world of computer coding and application design with HTML, JavaScript and Java
- 7th graders communicate ideas and share information through website design projects for science and history
- 8th graders become documentary film writers, directors and editors for the National History Day competition
- 8th graders step into the shoes of broadcast journalists while walking through the process of creating a video newscast

The school rolled out a BYOD (bring your own device) initiative last year and is engaging students in a number of technology programs and enrichment opportunities. The school's web site says, “Students use their devices to complete work as assigned by their classroom teachers such as Internet research, note taking, creating and collaborating on documents with Google Apps for Education, using online curriculum resources and keeping track of assignments.”

LCDS publishes its entire middle school curriculum on the school's web site (under the "Academics" tab).

How are Critical Thinking Skills Taught? In the LCDS Middle school, classroom teachers consider themselves guides and students are expected to direct their own learning. Homework deadlines are non-negotiable and if students do not deliver as expected, teachers enforce consequences. Unannounced locker-checks and notebook-checks are not uncommon. LCDS Administrators want students to leave the school with the skills they need to be successful at rigorous high school programs and beyond.

"Parents are expected to be less engaged in their child's schoolwork by middle school. More responsibility is placed on students," – Marty Hope, LCDS Middle School Director.

Parents are asked to sign test results and large writing projects once they are graded to ensure that they don't become too disconnected with their student's work.

Differentiation: In 6th grade, students are divided into three tracks for math, with the highest level studying Algebra in 7th grade and high school-level Geometry in 8th grade. Foreign languages are also tracked based on ability.

In addition to academic differentiation, the school offers two tiers of athletic teams (Blue and Green), a Leadership Academy and other opportunities for students who may be gifted in areas outside of academics.

How are Study Habits Taught? Because the school emphasizes ‘the whole child,’ LCDS middle school teachers take time every day to help students to develop strong executive functioning skills. Daily planners, Week-At-A-Glance calendars and text highlighting skills are taught every year in middle school and student work is expected to be neat, on time and should reflect a student’s best effort. Students are also taught how to research a topic using credible sources, how to outline a report prior to writing and how to create effective presentations, including how to produce original videos. For students requiring extra help, teachers provide reminders about upcoming assignments via Google Docs. If students have questions, they are expected to ask their peers first and then to communicate directly with teachers (no mom or dad emailing the teacher!)

Motivation: LCDS students appear to love school. Their motivation is supported by a strong school community which enables student success. Because many students go on to attend private high schools, LCDS students tend to be highly motivated to excel in academics at the middle school level.

My Observations:

- The LCDS community of parents is very strong and a lot of the school’s success hinges on parent involvement in programs and events. LCDS is a place where everyone not only knows your child’s name but his/her sibling and parents' names as well. During our time there, I often felt it was my child's "home away from home." This tight-knit community feel is one of the school's greatest attributes.
- I did not have an opportunity to observe any middle school classes in session but from my experience with the elementary school, LCDS students tend to be very well-rounded and the school climate is traditional and conservative - akin to that of a parochial school.
- LCDS is not a good fit for noncompliant children. Rules and respect for self/others are strictly enforced and there is a high bar set for what constitutes appropriate behavior.
- Twice-exceptional students might do well in the LCDS middle school but Administrators say they do not have the resources to effectively support students with major learning disabilities, impulse control issues and any type of serious behavior issues. (To give you an idea of how compliant LCDS students are, after-school detention is mainly given for dress-code violations and other such minor offenses.)

- Boys are expected to wear ties on Mondays and all students in the school wear uniforms every day.

Costs: \$23,650 for K-8 with a sliding discount for siblings. Bus service and before/after care are also offered for additional fees.

Financial Aid Offered? Yes, need-based aid is offered for families that qualify through a third-party evaluation process and, "If the school has sufficient funds to allocate," according to the LCDS web site.

Scholarships Offered? The school participates in an Emerging Scholars program where some aid may be available for culturally-disadvantaged and/or minority students. Other scholarships such as the Gabriella Miller Memorial Scholarship may also be available.

Will They Build a High School? The school owns enough land to build a high school and the master plan does call for the addition of a high school, an aquatics center and other facilities. However, the school has no immediate plans to fund the building of a high school.

Common Criticisms Addressed:

Q: "I hear that LCDS expects parents to participate in a lot of fundraisers, in addition to tuition expenses."

A: "The Board of Trustees and the Parents' Association at LCDS are actively working to manage the fundraising requests presented to parents at the school. Years ago, various classes, groups and organizations each held their own bake sales, wrapping paper fundraisers, holiday drives and other campaigns which, in total, became a lot for parents to absorb. The school's Annual Fund is the main fundraiser, as is typical for independent schools not only in Virginia but across the country. The Parents' Association (PA) hosts numerous events throughout the school year where the primary objective is to build community and create fun experiences for students. The Fall Fun Fair and Bingo Night are enjoyable activities. Funds raised at these events are meant to cover expenses. The PA's major annual event is an Auction/Gala, the purpose of which is both social celebration as a community and fundraising. Among many items in each auction or gala, class projects and student/teacher experiences are auctioned off to enthusiastic parents who bid with gusto for these items. Demonstrating tremendous support for the LCDS faculty and administration, the Parents' Association also sponsors an entire week of appreciation activities and events, including a grand luncheon that is a perennial favorite among teachers, administrators, and staff." - Dr. Randy Hollister, LCDS Head of School



Loudoun School for the Gifted

44675 Cape Court, Unit 105, Ashburn, VA 20147

www.loudoungifted.org

Contact: Ms. Susan Talbott, Executive Director, stalbott@idealschools.org

Total Number Middle School Students: 15 (40 in school)

Accreditation: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

Definition of "Gifted": "100% of students at the school are curious, driven to learn and excel in at least two academic areas," says Susan Talbott, LSG Executive Director.

Where do Students Attend High School from this Middle School? The majority of LSG students stay at Loudoun School for the Gifted to attend high school.

Student Profile: Loudoun School for the Gifted was founded in 2008 as The Ideal School, a high school for curious and advanced students. In 2012, a middle school was added and the school changed its name to Loudoun School for the Gifted or LSG for short.

LSG is primarily for intellectually gifted students who otherwise might be bored in class or have to accelerate grades to find challenging coursework. Some students choose LSG to, "Avoid the typical traps of pre-teen and teen social environments," says Susan.

"Our program focuses on academics, the emotional health of our students and the development of each student's confidence," – Susan Talbott, LSG Executive Director

Most of the students at LSG come into the school having done professional testing to quantify their IQ scores.

Can Students Transfer in for Middle School? Yes.

Do Students take Standardized Tests? Yes, the PSAT in the Fall.

Student/Teacher Ratio: 5:1 (LSG say they have studied the numbers and have determined that, on average, LSG students receive about 4x more instructional team with their teachers than they would at a traditional school).

Curricula Notes: LSG teachers have all earned PhD's or engineering degrees and classes are modeled after graduate school courses. Students meet around conference tables and instructors facilitate discussions about the topic at hand.

“Students at LSG are treated like junior colleagues by their teachers which is more akin to a graduate school model than a typical middle or high school environment,” – Dr. Deep Sran, LSG Founder

Every day, the entire student body (high school and middle school) convenes in the Palazzo (main space) for Advisory which is run by LSG Founder Dr. Deep Sran. Deep asks pointed questions to the students to elicit reactions. Last Spring, as college acceptances/rejections were being received by LSG high school students, Deep presented a *New York Times* article at Advisory. The article stated that not getting into a top college says more about a student unsuccessfully playing the game of college admissions than it says about a student's academic performance. A lively discussion between students and faculty ensued about whether or not it's important to 'play the game' in life.

The curriculum at LSG is structured but flexible. I sat in on a high-school level Algebra 2 class which had several middle school students in it. A discussion about exponents, roots and radicals led to a discussion about mathematical formulas. This led to a discussion about chemical formulas and finally a discussion about why formulas are important at all! The teacher was able to facilitate this tangential discussion that allowed students to make connections across disciplines, which is how many gifted kids think. After they exhausted the topic of formulas, the teacher went back to explaining exponents, roots and radicals.

Technology is used as a learning tool for teachers and students at LSG. In a US Judicial Systems middle school course I attended, the teacher used her laptop to play an audio file of the court proceedings in a case involving the Westboro Baptist Church. The students, who were all using devices/laptops of their own to take notes, were reading together the most recent news about the *Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby* case (which at that time had not yet been decided). The teacher went around the table and each student was asked to imagine being the judge in the case and to give their decision. I was amazed at the variety of responses in the group, each reflective of that student's ideals. Just as I had settled on my own opinion, a student would make a compelling argument for the opposite position and I became convinced they were right! The depth of

knowledge and ability to analyze detail in real-time sets these students apart from what you would find in a typical classroom.

On a video on LSG's web site, Deep says, "A key part of our academic program is connecting what you do in school with what is out in the world." Field trips are a big part of the LSG curriculum with students taking 2-4 trips every month. Each spring, the school takes an International trip to a destination that has been in the news and which the students themselves select. In 2013, the school went to China and Hong Kong. In previous years they visited different countries in Europe. In 2014, the school was slated to visit Russia but had to change plans when the Crimean political issues began. Instead, they visited Austria and Italy.

Students leave the LSG campus for Physical Education, Art and Music to a fitness training facility, art studio and music conservatory respectively. Often, students go to lunch at nearby restaurants with their teachers, which further fosters a sense of collegueship between teachers and students.

How are Critical Thinking Skills Taught? The teachers at the school play the role of "provocateur" in the classroom...they present situations, circumstances, articles, research, statements and data meant to provoke students into using their critical thinking skills. LSG students are encouraged to challenge their teachers...to correct them...to prove them wrong! This is done in a playful and respectful way which helps gifted students to feel comfortable about sharing all that they know.

"Multiple choice questions and rote memory lessons are a rarity at LSG," - Susan Talbott, LSG Executive Director

Differentiation: When a student is accepted to LSG, they complete a writing and math assessment which determines the courses they will take. One of LSG's advantages is that there is a high school on campus so middle school students can take advanced classes. 80% of middle school students take at least one high school course and some middle school students even take Advanced Placement (college) courses.

How are Study Habits Taught? Students each work with an academic advisor. Study hall periods can be offered for students who need a little extra time to get organized/prepared. Plans are in the works at LSG for a more structured program that focuses on developing study habits and executive functioning skills.

Motivation: LSG's students are all gifted and are only accepted into the school if they have a voracious appetite to learn. Students come to class with high expectations because they are self-motivated, well-read and ready to engage. LSG students learn as much from each other as they do from their teachers.

My Observations:

- LSG is comprised of many individuals, both student and staff, who are starkly different from one another but who appear to happily coexist in the school community. LSG may be a good choice for students who would languish (out of boredom, shyness, disengagement, ostracism, etc.) in a traditional school environment. The school is too small for cliques, bullying, dismissive teachers or checked-out students. Looking around the table in LSG classes, you get the distinct feeling that you are looking at people who are going to change the world one day. These kids are intimidatingly smart.
- During my time at LSG, I observed 5-6 classes in session and met several of the faculty members for informal discussions. Some of the teachers struck me as being the ‘mad scientist’ type (I use that term affectionately) – geniuses themselves, masters in their fields, all having an intense desire to bring out the best in their students.
- The students I observed at LSG appeared to not only respect their schoolmates but also their teachers and their Administrators. In fact, my meeting with Susan for this report was interrupted by a knock at the door because a student wanted to show Susan something she wrote in class that day. Susan took the time to read the paper and commend the student’s ingenuity. “Respect for others” appears to be an underlying current that binds the school culture together.
- Many of LSG’s classes are held in informal spaces and some are even held out of doors. The LSG space feels more like a tech startup or college academic building than a middle school. Students look relaxed, engaged and were friendly when I approached them.
- The school has many high-functioning twice-exceptional students who do very well at both the middle and high school levels. LSG has a team of professionals, including executive functioning coaches, psychologists and others who the school recommends for students who need extra support in these areas (typically at the parents’ expense).

Costs: \$22,150 which includes all fees. Discounts are offered for siblings and families where at least one parent is a police officer, firefighter, school teacher or members of the military.

Note: The international field trip expense is not included in tuition.

Financial Aid Offered? No

Scholarships Offered? No

Will They Build a High School? LSG has a high school today.

Common Criticisms Addressed:

Q: "Isn't this school for 'alternative' (read quirky) genius kids?"

A: "We tend to attract exceptionally bright students to our school and if they come with quirks, we celebrate their quirks! Two years ago we modified our Admissions process to focus exclusively on accepting highly and profoundly gifted students so it's likely that every LSG student has quirks. But every bright and successful adult has quirks too. Part of what we teach is tolerance for others' differences. We have students battling Lyme Disease, we have students who hail from different countries, we have students who are extremely shy...everyone is different. We respect each student's individuality. Students love being a part of our community because they feel comfortable and safe expressing their true selves." – Susan Talbott, LSG Executive Director

Q: "I've been to LSG and the school has a slightly "disheveled" look to it with papers, backpacks and student work strewn about. My child needs order and structure in order to work effectively."

A: "The open construct and relaxed atmosphere at LSG result in some students treating their work spaces like a home away from home which is great for creating a comfortable work environment but not great if the students are messy at home! We are exploring alternatives to open-table work spaces that allow for more privacy and neatness but that don't impede collaboration." – Susan Talbott, LSG Executive Director

Q: "This school is located in an industrial park...it doesn't look like a school."

A: "This is actually by design. LSG is a somewhat futuristic model of education so the school intentionally subverts many of today's education paradigms, including design. While we may look more like a tech startup than a school, there is a lot of real world learning going on in and around the LSG suites. Classes are small and designed to encourage dialogue among teachers and peers. The setting is comfortable and the workload is reasonable. We believe this environment allows students to be and do their best. Being located in Ashburn, VA makes the school accessible for families located at points East and West." – Susan Talbott, LSG Executive Director



Nysmith School for the Gifted

13625 EDS Drive, Herndon, VA 20171

www.nysmith.com

Contact: Ms. Nora Webb, Middle School Director, nwebb@nysmith.com

Total Number Middle School Students: 250 (590 total students)

Accreditation: National Independent Private Schools Association, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation

Definition of "Gifted": Scoring in the Superior/Very Superior range on outside standardized IQ tests.

Where do Students Attend High School from this Middle School? One third of Nysmith students attend Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJ), one third attend private high schools and one third attend public high schools.

Student Profile: Most Nysmith students are globally gifted and all classes taught at the school are honors-level classes. Some advanced high school level math and language classes are offered for extraordinarily gifted students.

Can Students Transfer in for Middle School? Yes, some do attend Nysmith beginning at 6th grade, and occasionally students transfer in at the 7th/8th grade level but the majority of students at the middle school attended Nysmith for elementary school as well.

Do Students take Standardized Tests? Yes, students take the IOWA Tests (ITBS) in 4th and 6th grade.

Student/Teacher Ratio: 9:1. There are two teachers in every Nysmith class.

Curricula Notes: In addition to challenging even the most gifted of students in all subject areas, Nysmith's middle school curriculum marries the theoretical with the practical. Almost all of the lessons in core subject areas (language arts, math, science, etc.) have a "real life" practicum where students can apply the concepts they are learning. During an economics unit, for example, students "get a job." They choose a profession, research the salary they would earn in their first year in the job and they budget living expenses based on their income. They make purchase

decisions such as whether to buy a car or to take the metro and they calculate how much it will cost to rent an apartment in different parts of town. In math, students study the Pythagorean Theorem and then go outside into the hallways to measure out shapes on the floor to prove the theorem. In Technology class, students learn Photoshop and Illustrator and then use those skills to produce the school's yearbook. In Science class, the students dissect frogs in 6th grade and then they create paper frogs with individual paper organs for each part of the frog. After a unit on trees, students plant their own trees in the school's arboretum. When the students study Shakespeare, they act out scenes of Hamlet against a student-created theatrical backdrop. In History class, students study Ellis Island and then take a class trip to New York City to visit the Immigration Museum. They also create Genealogy Scrapbooks that outline their own family's history. All students study Latin in 6th grade and then they can choose between Latin and Spanish for 7th and 8th grade. Each summer the school sponsors a three-week language immersion trip to France and Spain where students can practice the skills they learned that year in class (for an extra fee).

The program emphasizes deep understanding of each subject area rather than rote memorization. It is assumed that students are self-taught and well read on many of these subjects. Teachers focus on helping students to make connections between course content and real-world applications.

**"We are not preparing these kids for high school, we are preparing them for college." -
Nysmith Technology Teacher**

How are Critical Thinking Skills Taught? Each grade has an overarching theme for that year. All subject areas relate back to that theme. For 6th grade, the theme is "Quest for Identity." Students are encouraged to develop their sense of self while they read autobiographies and discuss the concept of one's identity. In 7th grade, the theme is "Community" and students study foundational myths that encourage them to identify how they fit into a broader community. In 8th grade, the theme is "Moral Decision-Making" and students are challenged to think about how morality has played a role in the arts, history, science and other subject areas - and how morality continues to play a role in current events today.

Differentiation: If a student is exceptionally advanced in history, language arts, science or speaks Spanish natively, in-classroom differentiation and self-directed enrichment projects are offered. There are no pullout programs at Nysmith and the only subject that is "telescoped" is math. In math, students are grouped by ability as early as 4th grade and remain on math tracks through 8th grade. Very advanced math students leave Nysmith having completed Pre-Calculus.

How are Study Habits Taught? In fourth grade students begin to learn how to organize their time. Tools like daily planners, color coded organizational systems and project logs are

introduced. By middle school, it is expected that students have already mastered these skills and are good at managing their time. Students have flexibility between classes to chat with friends in the common areas, eat a snack or meet with a teacher.

Motivation: In addition to being very bright, students at Nysmith are expected to be highly motivated to learn.

"We are not big believers in a lot of homework," –

Nora Webb, Nysmith Middle School Director

My Observations:

- The demographics of the middle school student body at Nysmith are more diverse than the general population in Fairfax or Loudoun County. I observed a fairly large percentage of Indian and Asian students during my brief tour.
- Teachers were well prepared to talk about their class work and curricula. It must be common for them to be pulled out of classrooms to speak with visiting families, prospects and dignitaries. Nora introduced me to 9-10 different teachers and each of them engaged me in a substantive discussion about their subject area on cue, almost as if they do this every day (which they might). All of the teachers were attentive and respectful about answering my questions. I was very impressed with the caliber of teachers at the school; not only were they passionate about their subject areas but they came across as being very *kind, compassionate and patient* people. As parents of quirky gifted kids know, these personality traits are important when dealing with intense children. I guess when the students are exceedingly bright and highly motivated to learn, there is no reason for a teacher to develop a "hard-nosed" attitude like we see at other schools.
- In addition to being respectful of me and the students, it was evident that the teachers love the subjects they are teaching. The math teacher spoke at length about how she encourages the students to share ideas and problem solve together. She said "It's more important that students understand concepts than it is that they memorize formulas." When I asked her about how the kids on the 'slower' math track feel about that, since they are all so bright, she said "I tell them some children are not developmentally ready - their brains have not grown that way yet - for advanced math...and it doesn't mean that they aren't extremely bright. It also doesn't mean that they can't become astrophysicists one day. Their brains are just not developed enough to grasp some of the more complex concepts."
- The Technology teacher emphasized that in his programming classes, he's looking to see maximum effort, even when concepts are too advanced for some students to fully understand. "70% of the grade in my class is based on a student's effort," he said. "Not every student is going to intuitively understand C++ but if I see them really trying, that's all I want. At some point down the road, it will all click for them."

- Middle school students seemed very relaxed and happy at Nysmith. I overheard students engaging in deep discussions with peers about their schoolwork. Students also seemed unusually eager to say 'hello' to Nora and to me as we walked through the halls.
- I asked about twice exceptional (2e) students and what I heard is that if your child requires a lot of extra support at school, Nysmith is likely not going to be a good fit.

Costs: \$30,850 plus some relatively nominal admissions and technology fees

Note: Tuition includes all costs except trips and after school clubs, which are extra. The school does no fundraisers except an occasional bake sale as part of a community service club.

Financial Aid Offered? Yes, need-based aid is offered for families that qualify through a third-party evaluation process.

Scholarships Offered? No.

Will They Build a High School? As the school is a private company, run by The Nysmith Family, plans for future expansion are at the discretion of the family. Nora says that it is possible that at some point down the road a high school could become part of the strategic plan for the school.

Common Criticisms Addressed: (Responses provided by school Administrators)

Q: "Why is Nysmith a for-profit entity?"

A: "The Nysmith School is a family owned and operated school. When it began 1983, Ken and Carole Nysmith were required to use their homes as the collateral for loans to fund the school. At that time, the Nysmiths decided that maintaining control of the direction of the school was a critical element to the operation of the school and they chose to pay the higher for-profit taxes. Most schools choose a non-profit status to allow them to conduct fundraising. Since the Nysmith School does not fundraise, the non-profit status is unnecessary. An additional benefit of not being a non-profit is that the decision making processes, from the budget allocation to the curriculum, is expedited and is not subject to the politics of a board. Both Carole and Ken contend that the school would not have been able to become the largest fully private school for gifted children in the country if it were governed differently." - Nora Webb, Nysmith Middle School Director

Q: "Do Montessori students do well at Nysmith middle school?"

A: "Yes, we have a few Montessori students who transfer in. However, students find that the Nysmith School is more teacher-directed and helps to prepare them for their middle and high school years." - Nora Webb, Nysmith Middle School Director



Providence Academy

835 Lee Avenue SW, #604, Leesburg, VA, 20175

www.providenceacademyva.org

Contact: Dr. Marie Miller, Head of School, mmiller@providenceacademyva.org

Total Number Middle School Students: 36 (175 total students)

Accreditation: Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) and Providence is in the process of being accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Definition of "Gifted": The top 10% of scorers in a particular grade (thus 'gifted' is defined based on achievement). Dr. Marie Miller, Head of School at Providence says, "We love advanced and intellectually gifted kids."

Where do Students Attend High School from this Middle School? The majority attend public school but some attend Gonzaga, Bishop O'Connell, Foxcroft, Flint Hill or Middleburg Academy.

Student Profile: Providence is a fairly new school with many of the staff members and families hailing from Dominion Academy which closed in 2013 due to issues between the school and its sponsoring Church. Miller (who was a staff member at Dominion at the time), quickly founded the new school in time to open in the Fall of 2013 with enrollment that exceeded forecasts. Due to its strong reputation, the school has been growing ever since.

Miller says students at Providence have average-to-above average intelligence but are all high achievers. "There are no low performing students here," she adds.

Can Students Transfer in for Middle School? Yes.

Do Students take Standardized Tests? Yes, Terra Nova 3.

Student/Teacher Ratio: 8:1

Curricula Notes: Providence Academy occupies a unique space in the private school market. It's a Christian school that, Miller says, operates more like an independent school. "We are a school first," she says, "And our program is more rigorous than a typical Christian school." The curriculum is developed by a committee comprised of parents, teachers and educators who set the goal of developing the best K-8 objectives of learning out there. The team referenced work by

Ed Hirsch, Charles Murray and Joyce Van Tassell Baska – all leading thinkers in education theory - to help develop Providence’s program.

With that said, Marie makes it clear that The Bible is at the heart of the school’s teachings. Marie says, "The Bible provides an unchanging code of conduct that provides guidance for student behavior." According to Providence’s promotional material, the middle school emphasizes spiritual growth. Bible is a required core class and service to others is a big part of the curriculum. “We want to equip students to be successful in their high school experience and share their Christian worldview eloquently and with confidence,” Providence’s literature says. Marie adds, “It’s critical for kids to learn virtue, to be critical, to be moral. We tell our students to get out there in the world and you be the light and a game-changer.”

Providence also teaches students the theory of evolution because Marie says, “The school does not see any contradiction between Christianity and science.” She referenced Dr. Ben Carson as an example of someone who holds a worldview with respect for both God and science.

Providence students are also encouraged to engage in critical discussions about the Bible and it should be noted that some students at the school are not Christian.

“We want thinking people leaving this school,”

- Marie Miller, Providence Academy Head of School

How are Critical Thinking Skills Taught? Providence teachers are well-versed in Bloom’s taxonomy and teacher prompts are used to support critical thinking at all levels of student ability.

Differentiation: Beginning in third grade, students are ability grouped in math and reading. Honors level math is offered in two tracks: Pre-Algebra/Algebra/Geometry or Math 6/Pre-Algebra/Algebra 1. Algebra 1 and Geometry courses at Providence are considered to be high school-level classes.

On the horizon at Providence are individual learning programs which Marie says will allow very bright students to participate in Duke University, Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth and other programs for advanced students. She says she is open to considering online learning if there are students who are too advanced for Providence’s courses.

How are Study Habits Taught? Providence’s small class sizes allow teachers to spend time helping students to develop strong organizational skills and study habits.

Motivation: Because they study The Bible so thoroughly, Providence students are motivated to behave in a virtuous way, in addition to being motivated to earn good grades. Students are encouraged to provide service to the class, the school and the greater community.

My Observations:

- Marie is well versed in gifted education and has been invited to speak at National Association of Gifted Children and other conferences. She is also the parent of a highly gifted son who attends Lawrenceville, a boarding high school near Princeton, NJ.
- Providence's program is pro-intellectual and when you speak with her, Marie frequently references writers, researchers and academics who are making significant contributions to education research and program development.
- Students at the school appeared happy and relaxed. Students wear uniforms and the student body is relatively homogeneous from what I observed. There is a high level of parent participation at Providence as all of the current families are "Founding Families" helping to get the school off of the ground.
- While Marie stresses that the school is more about academics than any religious dogma, the school's literature and web site clearly communicate that Christianity is at the heart of the program. Families who choose this school are likely going to be observant. If you are comfortable with that, Providence would offer gifted students an opportunity to design a highly-individual program complete with online learning for the courses where a student may be more accelerated than even the most advanced classes offered at the school.

Costs: \$10,750 which includes the Founding Family fee. Other nominal fees may also apply.

Note: Sibling discounts are available.

Financial Aid Offered? Yes

Scholarships Offered? Not currently but Marie says she is open to considering scholarships for gifted students.

Will They Build a High School? Providence is preparing to move into its own building in 2016 and there are no immediate plans to build a high school.

Common Criticisms Addressed:

Q: "How stable is this school because it's fairly new?"

A: "The school is already in the process of constructing its own independent campus on land that was donated to Providence Academy. Enrollment numbers for the school's inaugural year, 2013, and for this upcoming school year have thus far exceeded projections. Providence is poised to become one of the leading Christian-based schools in the state." – Marie Miller, Providence Academy Head of School



The Hill School

130 South Madison Street, PO Box 65, Middleburg, VA 20118

www.thehillschool.org

Contact: Mr. Treavor Lord, TLord@thehillschool.org

Total Number Middle School Students: 100 (226 students).

Accreditation: Virginia Association of Independent Schools

Definition of "Gifted": Treavor Lord, Head of School at The Hill School says, "We don't like labels or identifying children as 'gifted' or 'not gifted.' We get to know our students as individuals and we differentiate all of our class work."

Where do Students Attend High School from this Middle School? The majority of Hill students attend private high school at Foxcroft, Middleburg Academy and boarding schools. Some of Hill's more academically advanced students attend Highland School for their Honors/AP program. About 10% of Hill graduates attend public high school.

Student Profile: Hill's mission is, "To build character, self-confidence and scholarship through academic and co-curricular excellence, individualized attention and a strong sense of community."

Teachers are expected to foster engagement for all types of learners in the class, including advanced students. "The most important part of this is the human being," Treavor says. He goes on to say that he believes having students engaged in the learning process is the hallmark of a good education.

Hill's Head of School believes it's not rigor that determines a child's academic success but their level of 'engagement' with the material, with their teacher and with their peers.

In addition to being engaged in their coursework, students at Hill are expected to be, "psychologically mature, morally straight and active," says Treavor. Hill's 'whole child'

curriculum is designed to expose students to all facets of the school's program, not just the areas where students feel most comfortable. Hill parents with whom I spoke agree that this is a unique part of the Hill philosophy. Students are forced outside of their comfort zones on a regular basis. This can be unsettling for some but students receive much support from teachers and peers along the way. Hill's Annual Report reads, "We believe that confidence derives partly from experience, therefore that students should have opportunities to participate in many and varied activities – academic, artistic, social, athletic – intimately and realistically."

Can Students Transfer in for Middle School? Yes, if there are spaces. Often times there are no openings at Hill's middle school.

Do Students take Standardized Tests? Yes, ERBs in grades 4-8 and SSAT testing for grades 7 and 8 (Hill is an SSAT testing site). Treavor says most Hill students score in the "normal or typical range."

Student/Teacher Ratio: 8:1

Curricula Notes: Hill calls itself a 'community school' which leaders define as a school with a strong academic core but one that is also rich in non-academic areas. For example, theater/drama is a mandatory part of the curriculum and all students are expected to perform on stage. The same holds true for playing an instrument and for participating on athletics teams. Administrators tell of many stories where a child came into the school not having had exposure to (or a predisposition for) a particular discipline and, several years later, left the school with an interest in pursuing that discipline at the high school and even college level. The Hill School fosters an environment where students feel safe trying new things and Treavor says this translates into students becoming very aware of their own strengths and weaknesses.

The Hill School owns not only the expansive school campus but also 14 homes in Middleburg where Hill's teachers are housed. To attract top teaching talent, Hill includes housing in teacher contracts.

Before a student is accepted into Hill School, Treavor personally meets with applicants, along with his/her parents to discuss the parent-school partnership. Treavor knows every student personally and The Hill School alumni network is very strong. Some current teachers are Hill graduates themselves.

"The Hill School students are respectful, optimistic, zestful people." - Treavor Lord, The Hill School Head of School

How are Critical Thinking Skills Taught? Treavor says the school's tight-knit faculty allow Hill teachers to operate without "an education agenda driven by politics." Because students at Hill

are naturally curious, core lessons are augmented with a moral dimension where values are discussed. Hill staff emphasize the development of a sense of responsibility for students.

The school emphasizes ‘doing’ in addition to ‘learning.’ The Hill Annual Report reads, “A class overnight camping trip is as integral to the curriculum as is long division, care of a salamander in the science lab as germane as learning how to study for a test.”

Differentiation: Teachers have flexibility and freedom at Hill School to modify the curriculum as they see fit. If a class has several academically-advanced students, teachers accelerate the lessons for those students. The direction for teachers at Hill is for them to be predictable and supportive. Student engagement is the metric by which teachers are encouraged to evaluate their performance leading each class.

There are three math teachers per grade at Hill and students are grouped with other students who not only score at the same level but who also have similar learning styles. The curriculum is integrated so that art, science, social studies, music, drama, etc. are all focused into units.

How are Study Habits Taught? No specific mention was made in my discussions or is evident in Hill’s literature about developing good study habits. Presumably, if teachers are able to modify curricula on the fly, are predictable and supportive for students (and available to help), students with executive functioning challenges will receive the help they need at Hill in order to be successful there. One of Hill’s 2013 graduates said this during his commencement speech, “The teachers at Hill treat the students with unfathomable kindness and patience, which I and all Hill students benefit from every day. We know that, no matter what predicament we are in, we will be treated with unwavering regard and understanding.”

Motivation: Hill School only admits students who are naturally curious and who have a positive disposition. Treavor says students at Hill are excited to come to school because students, “feel a sense of belonging here.”

My Observations:

- Because every student is expected to participate in every discipline at Hill, there are times when each student shines and times when each student does not perform as well as his/her peers. The ‘it’s okay to fail or look silly’ teaching philosophy extends to the social culture of the school. Students at Hill wear uniforms and look uniform. It appears to be a very tight-knit community, even at the student level. I saw third grade boys holding the door for female classmates and I saw older students laughing and enjoying the company of younger students. The Hill School’s student body appears to be comprised of very *kind* students.
- The students I observed on the playground and in classrooms around campus were relaxed and were having fun. I get the impression that fun is a big component of the Hill teaching

philosophy. If you make it fun, the students are engaged and they will learn. The adults in the building whom I saw walking around and with whom I engaged in the lobby were also relaxed and very friendly. I had such a warm chat with the receptionist manning the front desk, we nearly exchanged phone numbers!

- Treavor says, “Community, character and competence,” in that order, when I asked how to best sum up Hill’s program. Academic performance is obviously not the only focus of the program. Hill faculty expect that students have a high level of social and emotional intelligence in addition to an academic curiosity. Gifted students might struggle socially at Hill but could find the school to be a safe place to develop such skills like effective communication, friend-making, empathy, embracing failure and others social skills.
- Because teachers have the liberty to modify Hill’s curriculum, twice-exceptional students may find a high level of support at Hill. “We want all of the kids here to *want* to be here,” Treavor said when I asked him about support for special needs students. He mentioned that sometimes the language requirement is dropped for children who have difficulty with a second language or who need extra time to complete school work. That level of flexibility is built into the Hill program.

Costs: \$21,800.

Note: Hill is offering bus service to/from Leesburg starting in Fall 2014. There will likely be an extra charge for this transportation

Financial Aid Offered? Yes. Approximately 30% of Hill students receive need-based financial aid

Scholarships Offered? No.

Will They Build a High School? There are no plans to build a high school. Treavor says the pressure for college placement is intense and high school programs must offer many services to support students that are beyond the scope of what The Hill School offers today.

Common Criticisms Addressed:

Q: “Aren’t the families at Hill all wealthy?”

A: “Hill School puts a high value on diversity including socioeconomic diversity. Approximately 30% of our families receive need-based financial aid. While we are fortunate to be located in picturesque Middleburg, the student body has a range of students and families. We value what each child and their family bring to the Hill School community.” – Treavor Lord, The Hill School Head of School

Q: “The Hill School is too far away from the Leesburg/Ashburn area for me to consider sending my children there.”

A: “We draw students from a 20 mile radius, essentially in all directions from the school. In fact, we have 56 students that come from communities in and around Leesburg and Stone Ridge. Hill’s campus is about a 20-25 minute drive from central Leesburg, a bit shorter from Stone Ridge. And beginning in the fall of 2014, The Hill School is offering morning bus service from both of these areas.” – Treavor Lord, The Hill School Head of School

INDEX OF PRIVATE MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Private Middle Schools serving students in Loudoun County. * Schools covered in this report in bold.

Independent Schools

Chesterbrook Academy

Flint Hill School (located in Fairfax County)

Loudoun Country Day School

Loudoun School for the Gifted

Nysmith School for the Gifted (located in Fairfax County)

The Boyd School

The Hill School

The Potomac School (located in Fairfax County)

The Wakefield School (located in Fauquier County)

Faith-Based Schools

Our Lady of Hope Catholic School

County Christian School

Leesburg Christian School

Providence Academy

**Schools serving very narrow audiences and schools serving only special needs children have not been included in this list*

Contacts:

1. Loudoun Country Day School, Ms. Marty Hope, Middle School Director, marty.hope@lcds.org
2. Loudoun School for the Gifted, Ms. Susan Talbott, Executive Director, stalbott@idealschools.org
3. The Nysmith School for the Gifted, Ms. Nora Webb, Middle School Director, nwebb@nysmith.com
4. Providence Academy, Dr. Marie Miller, Head of School, mmiller@providenceacademyva.org
5. The Hill School, Mr. Treavor Lord, Head of School, tlord@thehillschool.org

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