

2016-2017

Spotlight on MSC's Grade 7/8 Teaching Team

Encouraging Independent Thinkers

A wise old sage once said: "Education is what remains when all that has been learned has been forgotten." Most adults would be hard pressed to recall many of the facts learned or the specific lessons experienced during middle school or even high school — yet no one can deny that the educational journey we all experience during those formative years clearly shapes the adults we become, and impacts our lives in countless tangible and intangible ways.

In 7th and 8th Grade at Manhattan School for Children (MSC; P.S. 333), the teachers across all subject areas work to help students to become more accountable for themselves and their work. The goal is not to cram their heads full of facts — it's to develop the critical skills they will need to succeed in high school, college and beyond. These critical capabilities include the ability to develop good time-management skills and study habits, the ability to take detailed notes, to know your assignments and due dates, to conduct meaningful research, formulate a solid argument and articulate it appropriately in both written and spoken format. Equally important, all of the academic offerings stress the ability to read and understand complex materials and concepts, and to use rigorous evidence to demonstrate your understanding and support your arguments.

Throughout the upper grades at MSC, there is an emphasis on pushing students to internalize a greater sense of self-reliance and responsibility, to become independent thinkers who can synthesize information and concepts and carry out deeper analysis in the quest for knowledge. All of MSC's middle school teachers work to have students really embrace the concept that the drive for education must come from within.

"We strive to create a relaxed and comfortable learning environment, where students can do their best work," says teacher Samantha Friedman.

"I have very fond memories of my years in middle school, and I value the size and philosophy of MSC, as well as the emphasis the teachers place on consistency, building study skills, coping skills, and accountability. We really try to make our students look forward to coming to school," adds teacher Wyatt Knaster.

Adolescence brings change

The 7th and 8th Grade years can be an awkward age for many students, and 12- and 13-year-olds everywhere are going through so many physical and emotional change that uncertainty and self-doubt are



MATTHEW LYONS

Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from Columbia University; Master's degree in Education from City College of New York. 5 years of full-time teaching experience, plus 4 years teaching experience as a floating K-8 substitute teacher at MSC.



ERIN MOUGHON-SMITH

Bachelor's degree in Theater and Creative Writing from Columbia University; Master's degree in math education from City College of New York; Master's degree in playwriting with additional courses in science education from Columbia University. 11 years of teaching experience.

absolutely emblematic of students in this age group. As parents and educators know, tweens often overcompensate with a sense of false bravado, making them seem loud, self-absorbed and even a bit cynical in the hallways. Despite appearances, “middle school students still benefit from support, empathy and even a healthy dose of self-deprecating humor from teachers — perhaps even more so that younger students,” says teacher Nichole Makarius.

“Kids in 6th, 7th and 8th grade are all coming of age, and we routinely see an interesting duality in their behavior,” says teacher Erin Moughon-Smith. “These students are asserting their individuality and they demand to be respected and treated like adults, but they still want to horse around and act childish, and they still appreciate receiving kudos from their teachers.”

This duality plays out in other ways, too. For instance, while middle schoolers everywhere may appear to be more narcissistic than they were as younger children, they are also becoming more socially aware of larger issues and more opinionated about global issues related to fairness and equity — taking interest in such topics as environmental responsibility, racism, civil rights, gay rights, bullying and tolerance, and kindness toward children and animals.

“It is important when working with students in this age group to encourage them to recognize the consequences of all of their choices, so they consistently make good decisions,” adds teacher Nicki Peters.

“It’s true that these kids are still 12 and 13 and 14 years old — and sometimes they act in childish ways as they are finding their footing, but MSC’s middle school students are among the kindest, most warm-

hearted and empathetic kids I’ve every seen,” says Samantha Friedman. “They are a really grounded, well-rounded group of students, and it’s great to work with them as they grow through 7th and 8th Grade and move on to high school.”

Thanks to the relatively small size of MSC’s Middle School (fewer than 70 students each in Grades 6, 7 and 8), the 7th and 8th Grade teachers are able to create a safe, supportive learning environment, and foster a real sense of community and cohesion among classmates. This helps students to feel more comfortable taking risks, exploring different ways in which they might learn best, refining their characters as they mature, and being accountable for their education and behavior.

Core Curriculum in 7th and 8th Grades

MSC follows New York’s Common Core Standards in 7th and 8th Grade, across all core subject areas. But as a progressive school, MSC’s educators also supplement the curriculum in interesting and inventive ways, to keep students engaged.

As in 6th Grade at MSC, detailed rubrics are used to grade many assignments and projects assigned throughout the 7th and 8th Grade, across all subject areas. The rubric for any specific assignment gives students a detailed checklist of what the final piece must include. The goal of the rubric is to spell out the precise requirements and expectations for each project, and to remind everyone that teachers don’t “give” grades — rather, the students earn them.

The use of rubrics also helps all teachers to grade project-based work more uniformly and transparently, which is especially important when



NICKI PETERS

Bachelor’s degree, double major, in Secondary Education and History, from Seton Hall University; Master’s degree in Education from the University of Scranton. 9 years of teaching experience (in both middle school and high school); 1 year as a Special Education Coordinator for non-public schools in Washington, D.C.



NICHOLE MAKARIUS

Bachelor’s degree in Quad-Inclusive Education with a concentration in Math from Nazareth College, Master’s degree in Adolescent Education, with an Annotation in Severe and Multiple Disabilities, from St. Joseph’s College. 6 years of teaching experience (middle school and high school special education).



SAMANTHA FRIEDMAN

Bachelor’s degree in Elementary and Special Education, with a secondary focus on Middle School History from the University of Delaware; Master’s degree in Literacy (from birth to 8th Grade) from New York University. 4 years of teaching experience.

students are given a choice of the final format. For instance, similar to how it is in 6th Grade, for many assignments given in 7th and 8th Grade, students are often given the option to present their final work as a written report, a poster, a video, or an oral/Powerpoint presentation.

Meet the teachers

Within the upper grades, the core subjects look like this:

7th Grade

7th Gr Math — taught by Wyatt Knaster, and Nichole Makarius

7th Gr English Language Arts (ELA) — taught by Matthew Lyons and Samantha Friedman

7th Gr History — taught by Nicki Peters and Samantha Friedman

7th Gr Science — taught by Sharifa Bacchus

8th Grade

8th Gr Regents Math — taught by Erin Moughon-Smith, Wyatt Knaster, and Nichole Makarius

8th Grade ELA — taught by Stephanie Douglas and Samantha Friedman

8th Grade History — taught by Nicki Peters and Samantha Friedman

8th Grade Regents Living Environments (Science) — taught by Sharifa Bacchus

7th and 8th Grade ICT support for Math and Science — provided by Nichole Makarius

7th and 8th Grade ICT support for ELA and History — provided by Samantha Friedman

Several of the teachers also teach interdisciplinary Module courses, which are discussed below.

MSC's 7th and 8th Grade teaching team works closely with students who have individual education plans (IEPs) and other physical or learning challenges, one-to-one and in small groups, to modify lessons, quizzes and homework, and to provide other forms of highly individualized support, as needed. Says Nichole: We routinely collaborate with each other to help find entry points for all students, to ensure that each and every child is pushed to his or her highest potential in all of their studies, we acknowledge students for their abilities — not their disabilities.”

Math. The math curriculum in 7th and 8th Grade includes Geometry and Algebra, focusing on problem solving and critical thinking that enables an in-depth exploration of all topics at hand. Throughout 7th and 8th Grade, the curriculum moves through concepts of integrated algebra and geometry, including number systems, equations and expressions (with linear graphing), geometry, statistics and probability (to handle bivariate data). By 8th Grade, MSC students use a 9th Grade level Integrated Algebra textbook.

“In middle school in particular, it’s really important for teachers to build a great rapport with the students,” says Wyatt. “And with our rich Geometry and Algebra content, it’s both a challenge and an opportunity to meet all of students where they are, and to tailor each lesson and activity in ways that make it most impactful.”

At MSC, 8th Grade students take the Regents Integrated Algebra class and are eligible to take the New York State Common Core Algebra I Regents Exam in June. Over the past several years, nearly



STEPHANIE DOUGLAS

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theater from Syracuse University, Masters degree in the Science of Teaching from The New School for Social Research, and Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Leadership from The College of St. Rose. 15 years of experience (8 years teaching middle school ELA and Humanities, 1 year teaching high school history, 4 years as a literacy coach, 2 years in a professional-development laboratory school).



SHARIFA BACCHUS

Bachelor’s degree in Biology with a concentration in Neuroscience from City College of New York; Master’s degree in Secondary Science Education (Biology (Grades 7–12)) from City College of New York; Master Teacher for New York State’s Math-Science Partnership; Learning Partner (Science Facilitator) for the Department of Education. 5 years of teaching experience in middle and high school (8th grade science and Living Environment)



WYATT KNASTER

Bachelor’s degree in Film from Hunter College; Master’s degree from City College Secondary Mathematics Education; Teaching Fellow (cohort 8). Substitute teacher for one year in K-5. 13th year of full-time experience teaching Math in Grades 6–8.



100% of the MSC 8th Graders who opted to take the voluntary Algebra Regents exam at the end of their 8th Grade year passed the test.

Math teachers in all of MSC's upper grades (6th, 7th and 8th Grade) place great emphasis on group work, so that

students learn not just how to solve math problems, but how to articulate the process they used to get the results, and how to troubleshoot any difficulties that may emerge. "MSC is able to accomplish two equally important goals – to help students to prepare for the state-level Math test and Algebra Regents exam, but still cultivate a really engaging, progressive environment that allows us to bring more creativity to the teaching process," says Wyatt.

The inquiry-based approach to presenting all course materials at MSC are supplemented by SmartBoards in every classroom. "With this capability, the teachers can provide engaging, interactive math lessons, rather than relying on one-sided lectures that can be dull for many students," says Nichole.

All of the math teachers at MSC work hard to interject writing into the math classroom and projects, as students' ability to explain where your answers came from, and how you got there, is essential to truly demonstrating your mastery of the subject.

"The New York State Common Core Math Curriculum is problem-centered. This means that the students will investigate mathematical ideas within the context of a realistic problem – as opposed to looking only at traditional math work sheets," says Erin. "Some problems involve real-world applications or unusual scenarios, while others are purely mathematical. Having this broader context gives students the avenues for understanding and remembering," adds Nichole.

Science. In Science, the 7th Grade curriculum starts with a unit of Earth science (covering various geology concepts), and then moves on to a unit of physical science (covering forces and motion on Earth), a chemistry unit (which looks at the interactions between matter and energy), and a weather-related unit (which satisfies the earth science component of the Core Standards).

In 8th Grade, students get the Living Environment Regents Science curriculum. It covers concepts of Ecology, Cells, Genetics, Evolution, The Human Body, and Microorganisms, plants and animals. Students get more than 12-14 labs (to meet the Regents mandate for 1,200 minutes of lab time) and take the New York State Living Environment Regents exam in June, having had lots of mock exam practice leading up to it, says Sharifa.

Throughout all of the science lessons, MSC stresses inquiry-based lessons, assignments and labs, and teachers work to bring the outside world into the classroom as much as possible, to really engage the students and give them a hands-on feeling for science. Similarly, MSC stresses the importance of building science literacy through a combination of traditional and progressive methods (mini-lessons, workshops, labs, and more) and learning how to write solid, scientific lab reports – so that students are able to adequately demonstrate their understanding and articulate their findings (a skill that is essential throughout high school, college and adult life), says Sharifa.

History. The history curriculum in MSC's middle school covers pre-exploration America through the Reconstruction after the Civil War, and 8th Grade history covers from 1877 (the Gilded Age) through the present day, covering World War I, World





War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the cultural wars (including, for instance, the impact of the Beatniks, feminism, and the counterculture movement during the 1960s). “Students will be working to analyze and interpret not just key world events, but the cultural trends that accompanied them,” says teacher Nicki Peters. “While we work on written tests and test-taking skills, the hands-on, project-based assignments help to bring the subjects to life and to let students demonstrate their mastery of other skills. In many cases, the students also present their work in class to others, to build their public speaking capabilities.” In Spring 2015, Nicki received a 2015 New York Family Magazine “Blackboard Award” for Excellence in Teaching.

ELA. Teacher Matthew Lyons covers 7th Grade ELA and teacher Stephanie Douglas teaches 8th Grade ELA. Both follow the Teachers College curriculum for ELA, and augment that with additional offerings to draw the students in. The consistent goal of ELA across both grades is to help students to become more passionate readers and stronger writers.

Units include Investigative Journalism, Fantasy and Dystopian Fiction, Literary Essay, Critical Nonfiction, Poetry, Position Papers, and Reading for High School.

“It’s important for all students to write in a way that helps them to justify their thinking, so we work on developing good note-taking skills, strengthening their reading and analysis capabilities, and honing their powers of conceptualization, articulation and persuasion,” says Matthew, who notes that these skills certainly carry over into history, science and math, as well.

“A primary goal is to help students to create authentic, individualized reading

lives that they can sustain beyond 8th Grade,” adds Stephanie. “We want students to be able to navigate, analyze, learn from, and enjoy a spectrum of texts, including books, digital texts, newspapers and magazines.” Both Matthew and Stephanie note that it is easier for students to become voracious readers and build stamina when they are able to find books they really love, so both teachers explore many genres that students may not naturally reach for.

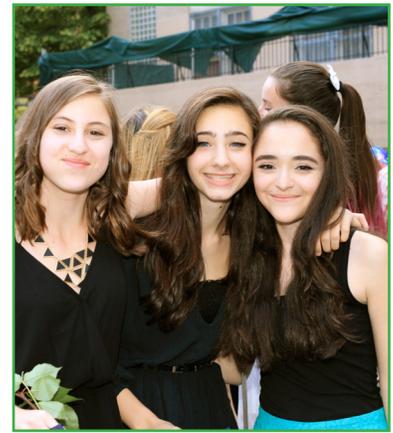
The Common Core Standards across all subject areas also place great emphasis on being able to read and understand non-fiction texts, says Matthew, so the 7th and 8th Grade English teachers help their students to analyze the different parts of the text, to understand the point of view of the author, and to compare that to their own point of view.

With regard to writing, “our primary goal is to help students become familiar with the structures and features of different genres, so that they are able to flexibly and thoughtfully write for varying purpose,” says Stephanie.

Multi-disciplinary ‘Modules’

Among the many hallmarks of MSC’s Middle School program are the elective academic courses known as Modules — developed by MSC’s upper grade teachers — which are offered during 7th and 8th Grade. These multi-disciplinary, college-style academic courses address real-world challenges that have broad global and local implications. Each Module class lasts for a quarter. Each student takes 4 Modules per year in 7th and 8th Grade.





Irrespective of the topic area, each of MSC's Module courses has been designed to provide a multi-modality learning experience that blends concepts and skills related to history and ELA (in terms of articulation and communication), math (for data presentation) and science (in terms of analysis and reasoning). And the curriculum for each Module has been designed to help students to develop solid research skills, push their capabilities for intellectual synthesis, strengthen their writing and oral presentation skills, foster collaboration and teamwork, and leverage multi-media technologies.

This year's Module courses include:

- **“We the Pupils”** — taught by Stephanie Douglas. This module helps students to understand how government systems and the democratic process work in the U.S. Students explore and debate various aspects of local and federal government systems, analyze what it means to be a citizen, and learn how to make their voices heard in a democratic society.

- **“Hydroponic Games”** — taught by Sharifa Bacchus. This Module helps students to understand the concepts of vertical hydroponic gardening processes (working in MSC's rooftop Greenhouse). Working in teams, the students design and build their own working hydroponics system, growing fruit and vegetable plants in demonstration-sized system designs they build and operate inside of various MSC classrooms, as a way to demonstrate whether their novel, proposed models will work as a viable method for producing food in an urban setting.

- **“Mission Sociology: Changing Nation”** — taught by Nicki Peters. This Module examines society from four different sociological perspectives, and is designed to help students to become much more aware and sophisticated, socially and culturally.



Throughout the course, students engage in lively discussions and debates as a group, taking a critical look at our society, celebrating its triumphs and examining its flaws.

- **“Ethics”** — taught by Nicki Peters. This module focuses on how philosophers make decisions, interpret societal phenomenon, and justify actions (or not).

- **“Writing the High School Application Essay”** — taught by Matthew Lyons. Unlike most other locations, middle school students growing up in



New York City are forced to experience the anxiety of applying to high school with a complex process, in a highly competitive environment.

Many sought-after high schools have rigorous application requirements, involving essays and interviews, among other things. This Module supports students in their effort to develop compelling application essays. The essential question for this Module is: How can we tell our stories in such a way that we convey something important about ourselves (both explicitly and implicitly), and tailor our narratives for specific audiences and purposes.

On a related note, each Fall semester, several Advisory periods (discussed below) are set aside for intensive Mock Interview Workshops, which are carried out to help all 8th Graders to feel more prepared for potential high school interviews. Parent volunteers from MSC's entire K-8 school community, who bring a huge range of professional experience and different perspectives, support these small-group, hands-on, workshops.

The iZone at MSC

This is the 5th year that MSC's middle school has been privileged to be part of the NYC Dept. of Education (DOE) Initiative called the Innovation Zone (iZone) Program. With SmartBoards in every MSC classroom, and Mac laptops available for every 6th, 7th and 8th Grade student (for use in class every day), the iZone Program gives students and teachers access to multi-media sources of information. This gives students a variety of ways to become more engaged in their learning.

Students have access to an online teaching platform called iLearn, through which they view lessons and homework assignments and grades, access research materials and other resources, work on projects and complete online homework assignments and communicate with their teachers electronically. Through the platform, students are also routinely asked to participate with classmates in threaded online discussions about relevant topics.

"Laptops provide a useful modality for learning, and 21st Century learners are digital learners, so the more we can harness the technology options and iLearn resources and use them for real, academic purposes, the better," adds Nicki Peters. It's another way to keep the learning engaging and attractive for this generation of students."

Advisory and Elective create a richer school week

Several times each week, MSC's 7th and 8th Graders meet in small groups (roughly a dozen students) for Advisory with one designated educator. Advisory gives all of MSC's upper grade students a small, intimate group setting where they can discuss anything that's on their minds — academic issues, social, emotional or personal concerns or observations. "The Advisor not only facilitates the discussions, but serves as a single point of contact for parents and can help students initiate tough conversations with other students, teachers or school administrators, as needed," says Stephanie. "This small group setting helps students to build their self-confidence in both academic and social areas, boosts MSC's sense of community in a less-structured setting," adds Matthew.



"Many schools push the extras aside, but MSC places great importance on helping kids to grow into whole, well-rounded individuals, and giving them a chance to explore some of their interests outside the classroom," says Samantha.

Toward that end, as in the lower grades, MSC's 7th and 8th Graders also have a variety of opportunities for enrichment, including electives in Art, Drama, Dance, Spanish (through an online course option), Percussion, Glee Club, and MSC's middle school still builds in time for recess. In 7th and 8th



a variety of ways during MSC's bi-monthly "Town Hall" meetings (community-building events held in the Auditorium, involving the entire K-8 student body). And MSC's middle

school students have a variety of sports team options, including Girls Volleyball, Co-Ed Track and Field, and Boys Basketball.

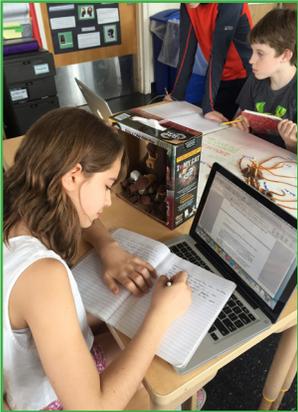
At the end of each school year, 7th and 8th Graders who have met certain national criteria — related to scholarship, service, citizenship and character — are eligible to be inducted into the nationwide National Junior Honor Society (NJHS; Washington, D.C.).

Similarly, MSC's 6th, 7th and 8th Graders are also eligible to join a theater honor society — Junior International Thespian Society (the middle school equivalent of the International Thespian Society for high schoolers). "Students earn points participating in different theatrical activities, from acting in a scene in class to running sound for MSC's annual Spring Musical theater production, to writing a play," says Erin, who is MSC's liaison for this program. Erin also offers an elective called, "Producing a Play" for MSC Middle Schoolers and produces MSC's Spring musical with others. She notes that in the Spring, participants in the Thespian Society are invited to a conference with high school students and theatrical professionals, to take workshops, do a tech challenges and perform for a panel of professionals to get feedback.

Interviews conducted and text written by

Suzanne Shelley, parent of both a current MSC 8th Grader and an MSC Graduate (now a senior in high school, who was at MSC for K-8; graduating in the Class of 2013).

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Grade, students are also given the privilege of eating lunch off-campus (if they meet the stated MSC criteria), as another way to foster independence and bring some fun and freedom to the school day.

Similarly, MSC's 7th and 8th Graders are eligible to participate in Student Government, and to participate in