

Alysoun, Social Science Teacher

Mandates on Rigours

One of the most enduring topics within education is for teachers to design rigorous curricula that give students the momentum and structure to succeed. In trying to determine what is meant by “rigor” (and how to assess its presence in a classroom context) parents and educators alike may settle on the approach of increasing the amount of coursework required. Though such curriculum additions are necessary components to increasing the difficulty of a class, the quantity of content material covered does not describe the depth of experience that a truly rigorous class provides. If more work is not the answer, then the task at hand is to identify the key elements that are necessary to prepare our students for the demands of higher education and life beyond high school.

In my experience, the system of education is rife with pedagogical discussions involving an array of political, economic, cultural and ethical issues. Within schools, social conditions and personal experiences shape how students approach their class work providing further complexities to the educational process. Naturally, the debate on how to provide the best education for our students persists! The question then becomes, why leave students out of such a riveting discourse? An exceptional teaching method that encourages profound student engagement is for the teacher to draw upon the fundamental conflicts and questions that students face in their lives, and bring these issues into the classroom for consideration in conjunction with the material. Students become eager to learn when the coursework they are studying resonates clearly with their lives, when they are confident that their opinions are honored and when they see that their own work is of importance. Simplifying subject matter in the interest of covering maximum content reduces exposure to complicated issues that students need to have in order to care about what they are learning. In order to access the power of knowledge, a student must become reflective in their studies; this goes well beyond determining whether or not a concept is going to be on the upcoming test.

A classroom is a deceptively simple idea: a shared space for thorough, relevant instruction that promotes learning and

community development. In *Teaching What Matters Most: Standards and Strategies for Raising Student Achievement* by Richard W. Strong, Harvey F. Silver and Matthew J. Perini, ASCD, the authors identify “(r)igor (as) the goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and personally or emotionally challenging.” Considering this definition, some of the most critical aspects of creating rigorous classes include small numbers of students, an emphasis on critical thinking and multiple assessment techniques. Teaching in the unique environment of Monarch School embodies these criteria in many ways. Small classes are indispensable for teachers seeking to hold their students to high expectations. In this milieu, educators are involved in multiple aspects of student life, so plumbing the depths of challenging material is a matter of course. Cultivating critical thought within students is a deeply personal academic experience that many students are unused to when they arrive here. Students are distressed by ambiguity where a “right” answer cannot be immediately pointed to and they do not trust their own abilities to analyze, evaluate or offer solutions to problems. Through differentiated assessments such as oral presentations, graded class discussions, open book essay tests, traditional exams and class portfolios, students are not only expected to memorize. They are asked to form an educated opinion, articulate that opinion and defend it. A curriculum is successfully rigorous when it produces deeply reflective thinkers who seek to make a positive difference in the world.



Academic Testimonies from Monarch School Students College Preparatory Academics

The academics here at Monarch School are challenging and they are providing me with the skills I need to do well in college. I have learned valuable time management skills as well as organizational skills. I really benefit from the academics here and the way they are structured. Each academic block is ten weeks long with classes 5 to 6 days a week. This structured schedule allows me to complete more credits in a shorter period of time than most schools. The teachers at Monarch School

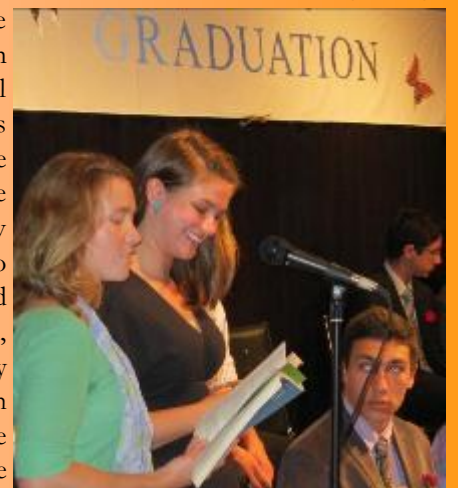
are also great. They are all very knowledgeable and I always feel comfortable asking any of them for assistance. I have great relationships with my teachers, I really look up to them and they are good role models. One class in particular I especially enjoy is U. S. Government with Alysoun. She is the most organized, responsible, and compassionate teacher I have ever had. I find her class very interesting and I am always motivated to do my best. I really enjoy the college preparatory academic program here at Monarch School.
~ *Current Student*

I came to Monarch School with very little faith in my academic ability. My academic experiences before had not been very positive and I had a lot of anxiety around coming to Monarch School, and not only having to deal with a new academic setting, but also a new social setting. I was encouraged by my Peer Leader at the time to take risks, and to take advantage of what Monarch School has to offer me in the way of art classes, music lessons, and academics. I always had a huge fear of speaking in front of people, and an even bigger fear of singing in front of people. I never believed that I could do something so vulnerable. I decided to take lessons with Winston, the voice teacher. It was a very scary beginning and I'm pretty sure I cried for the first three lessons, but Winston really helped guide me and show me a new level of confidence that I didn't even know I had in me. I have now done two or three performances in front of the school, and even though I am super scared each time I come out of the performance feeling stronger and exhilarated.

All of my life I believed Math would just be a subject that I could not do well in, no matter how hard I tried. I had failed almost every Math class I had taken until I enrolled at Monarch School, and I have had tutors since second grade. The Math teachers at Monarch School have helped me so much. I had Mason Jones for my first couple of blocks and he helped me conquer so many of my fears around working with numbers and figures. Len Taylor's class helped increase my confidence, and I ended my last high school Math class with an “A”. I was completely surprised and shocked, and even more so when I was awarded with an Academic Diligence award. I have always thought of myself as hardworking, but it was amazing to see that others could tell that I was hardworking as well. I now have complete confidence in my Mathematical abilities, and I am

planning on talking courses in college that will continue to challenge me and teach me.

The electives and Art classes offered at Monarch School are one of the reasons why my parents chose this school for me. I have always really liked art and I took lots of classes at home. I started off my first block with a drawing and calligraphy class and though it was extremely frustrating and challenging for me (I have a tendency to strive for perfectionism) I learned a lot about “not being attached to the outcome” as Kally Thurman our Art teacher (and my good friend) would say. My third block I took Drama and participated in the Ashland Oregon class which was a great but emotional experience for me. I played Lady Anne in Richard the Third, it was very scary for me to speak and act in front of other people. Our Drama teacher helped me so much though, and I was so proud and happy by the end of the production, and now I really like to perform in front of an audience. At the end of the class most of us got to go on a trip to see the Ashland, Oregon Shakespeare festival which was great. It was really funny to be able to recognize and quote the plays that we saw and that we learned so much about and acted the characters. Overall, I have come out of my experience at Monarch School a stronger, more confident and capable young-woman.



~ *Summer Graduate*