



Dear Arbutus Families,

Parents, students, new teachers and support staff, and even community members often ask me about “middle school”. *What is middle school and how is it different from elementary or high school, or the old “junior high” model? How is middle school organized? What are its main features?* To answer questions of this nature, I’ve prepared the following overview of the **key structures of the MIDDLE SCHOOL MODEL** and description of how these structures are implemented at Arbutus Global Middle School:

Advisory: Every middle school student belongs to an Advisory Class with an advisory teacher. This structure is a key aspect of middle school that is most similar to elementary school, in that every student has one main class with one main teacher to which they belong (or sometimes two advisory teachers partnering their classes to similar effect). The advisory teacher is most parents’ main point of school contact throughout the school year, and we strongly encourage ongoing communication between parents and their child’s advisory teacher around their learning as well as parental involvement in special classroom events and activities. Along with the *structure* of advisory, there’s also advisory *time* every day – a small amount of time set aside at the start of every day for the teacher and students to step back from the subject specific curriculum to focus on school-wide announcements as well as the community of the classroom and navigating together the unique challenges of adolescence. Within the larger community of the school, the smaller community of the Advisory Class aims to provide each student with a sense-of-belonging as well as an advisory teacher who provides each student with guidance, support, and connection that goes well beyond just their subject-specific learning.

Teaming: Middle school students not only belong within an individual advisory class (see above), but their advisory class is also part of a larger team within the English or French Immersion track, within which team teachers – in partners (or in triads when necessary) – instruct their students’ core (academic and physical/health education) courses. Through this team structure, students form a sense of belonging and connection to a wider community of students and teachers beyond their advisory class. At Arbutus, students and their advisory teachers belong to one of the following teams:

Blizzard Glacier Arctic Ice Storm Hail

These teams, each comprised of 3 to 4 advisory classes, often organize their own special team-wide events and fieldtrips. Through this combination of advisory and team structures, students belong to an expanding community – that is, the community of their advisory class, within the community of their team, within the community of the school-at-large. Moreover, through this team-based structure of middle school, our advisory teachers also belong to a smaller professional learning community with whom they have common preparation time in order to: plan and problem-solve together; discuss student needs and support structures; develop cross-curricular inquiry projects; and organize team-wide fieldtrips and special events.

This team format also provides an opportunity for our educators to support and learn from one another as instructional practices evolve and, along with our students, our educators continue to be life-long learners.

Programs - Exploratory, Enrichment, Music, Library, Athletics, Clubs, Student Leadership & More:

While retaining a structure somewhat akin to elementary school (of students belonging to one main class led by one or two generalist teachers, middle school also provides expert subject specific teachers and facilities more akin to high school electives – that is, through our Exploratory Program, we have specialist teachers and facilities for Art, Cooking, Design, Drama, Environmental/Global Action, Outdoor Education, Wellness, Woodworking, and more! Unlike high school during which students “elect” to take the courses of particular interest to them, our students “explore” all of these areas throughout their middle years, developing a well-rounded foundation aimed at finding their passions into which they can dive deeper during high school. In addition, we have a school-wide Enrichment Program through which students choose to participate in Concert Band or various Mini-Exploratory activities. In addition to these Concert Bands, our renowned Music Program (perennial champions of National Youth Music Program Contests!) features an extensive array of other Music Classes – from a briefer series of Music Exploratory classes (including learning to play ukulele and guitar) to more intensive Choir, Strings, and Advanced Jazz Bands! Moreover, our school Library serves as a learning hub for the entire school, featuring a wide array of special activities – from deep dives into the world of fiction and non-fiction and cultures around the world, to our annual Living Library, to tending to the Indigenous plants and chickens in the adjacent courtyard! Finally, we encourage students to participate in our extensive extra-curricular Athletics Program as well as wide array of Interest-Based Clubs and Student Leadership opportunities, through which they can find and expand their passions and forge deeper connections with students holding common interests.

Flexible Scheduling & Global Education: Another key feature of the middle school model is that, unlike the subject specialization of the junior high model, our core academic teachers instruct multiple subject areas to just one or two (sometimes three) main classes of students rather than teaching one or two main subjects to anywhere 4 to 7 different classes of students. Not only does this middle school structure give teachers the opportunity to better know and support the needs of a much smaller number of students (and engage in more regular communication with their parents), it also provides them with a somewhat more flexible schedule. During a given day or week, teachers have some flexibility to alter their block schedule to take students deeper into a particular topic or integrate multiple subjects under overarching cross-curricular themes. Moreover, at Arbutus we are fortunate to be surrounded by a remarkable natural environment and, along with larger fieldtrips to cultural institutions and recreational facilities within the community and further afield, the more flexible scheduling of the middle school model enables teachers to more frequently extend their classes beyond a single regularly scheduled time-period so they can take their students beyond the school-grounds, walking to nearby forests and seashores to explore the local ecosystems in which we live. Nurturing students’ sense of connection to the natural world, as well as their understanding of human impacts on the environment as well as inequities between peoples and cultures – and exploring through a hopeful lens how we can co-create a more inclusive, just, and sustainable world – is of such importance to us at Arbutus that we not only weave global education into our academic, exploratory, and enrichment programs as well as various extra-curricular opportunities, but we also added the term “Global” into our school’s name!

Student Support Meetings: Finally, within the middle school model, we have a built-in student support structure through which each team of advisory teachers meets regularly throughout the school year with their colleagues on our School Based Team – Learning Support Teachers, Counselors, and Administrators – to plan and problem-solve together. These meetings provide an opportunity for our faculty to look more closely as a team at students with extraordinary learning and/or social-emotional needs, so we can adapt

our approaches and supports on an ongoing basis to better meet their changing needs. At Arbutus, we also have scheduled times for our Learning Support Teachers to work directly with students in each class – where possible, bringing the supports to the students within their regular classes – which helps inform their collaborative work with core teachers (and where relevant, with educational assistants) aimed at helping each student, especially those with extraordinary needs, further develop their confidence & skills to become increasingly independent learners through their middle years.

School Community & Culture: While the above key structures of the middle school model provide our students with a nurturing environment in which to grow and thrive in their middle years, all the structures in the world are only as effective as the culture into which they are embedded. With that in mind, we foster a school culture that promotes a sense-of-community to which all students belong, valuing and celebrating diversity within our school community. Moreover, we encourage our students to be enthusiastic learners who dive into a broad array of learning opportunities and embrace the challenges of adolescence in a safe and responsive environment where they can learn from their mistakes while developing their resilience and independence. Our students aren't just influenced by this school culture, but rather they play a key role in its creation. We encourage Arbutus students to constructively contribute to our school culture, developing their skills and attitudes as caring, creative, and collaborative youth, making a positive difference in our school community and beyond!

I hope the above provides you with a better sense of the middle school model.
Welcome to Arbutus Global!

Ken Andrews

Principal