



ACADEMIC SPOTLIGHT

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Building Blocks of Success: Helping Athens Academy Students Develop Executive Functioning Skills

This month's Academic Spotlight comes from two Athens Academy faculty members who have spent a significant amount of time over the last year or more to help more of our students achieve both academic and personal success.

The first goal of the school's [strategic plan](#) deals directly with the current definition of college preparation:

Defining, as a school community, what college preparation currently entails, what academic and personal skills and traits are essential for lifelong learning, and how/when/where Athens Academy helps students to develop them at each level of their experience. Through this important work, establish and share foundational goals for each division of the school.

To reach these goals, Athens Academy continues to provide a variety of opportunities for faculty and staff to engage in special projects and ongoing professional development focused on developing these skills among students and helping their colleagues learn about promoting them with their students as well.

Wendy Hines, now in her fifth year at Athens Academy's Learning Interventions and Foundations Team (LIFT), is the 2022 recipient of the annual John W. Robinson, Jr. Family Award for Excellence in Teaching provided in support of a significant, research-based educational project. Nikki Chester, now in her nineteenth year at Athens Academy as an Upper School science teacher and Capstone Program and advisory coordinator, was the recipient of one of four Summer Curriculum Development Program stipends this year. Their objective is to promote the development of these essential skills such as organization, prioritizing, and preparation so that our students are not only well prepared for college, but also in their daily lives both before and after college.

Wendy Hines / Middle School:

In the fall of 2020, Wendy Hines created Learning to Learn, a class that teaches sixth graders how to be active learners and make meaningful connections to new material. In order to accomplish this, students learn and practice metacognition—meaning students think purposefully about their thinking. Being purposeful helps to empower students and allows them to understand their learning. Along with metacognition, students also learn key Executive Functioning strategies. Executive Function (EF) is defined as the complex processes in our mind that help us to be flexible and goal directed. In other words, EF skills are the actions that we can take today to help our future selves. Specific EF skills include organizing, self-checking, remembering/working memory, goal setting, and shifting flexibly. EF skills are essential for all students; we know that students with strong EF skills are problem solvers and goal oriented.

As we look to strengthen and grow the EF curriculum at Athens Academy, eighth graders will soon complete a survey called MetaCog Online which is based on the material from the Learning to Learn class. The goal of the survey is to highlight EF strengths and challenges to allow for individualized, targeted coaching and improvement. Therefore, students will continue to build their "toolbox" to hone EF skills as they prepare for Upper School.

Nikki Chester / Upper School:

Athens Academy's mission to seek excellence with honor in the educational and personal experience of each student manifests itself in many ways in the Upper School experience. We continue to grow, evolve, and expand our programming tailored to the individualized needs of our students. A couple of ways in which we are evolving to meet current needs are through the development of an academic coaching program and the addition of a Capstone Program for Upper School students. The foundation of executive functioning currently being provided in Middle School is sure to provide additional momentum for these efforts in the years ahead.

The academic coaching program provides opportunities for a student-coach partnership with the primary focus of enhancing the learning process. The goal of academic coaching is to help students develop a strong sense of academic ownership and promote the study skills necessary to empower academic success and achievement. Just as students work outside of the classroom with coaches, sponsors, and mentors in areas of the arts, service and athletics, an academic coach can be a student advocate to encourage and train students to maximize academic success. Consistent work with an academic coach will help students develop stronger academic self-discipline, enhance study and organizational skills, improve time management, and work to identify challenges associated with motivation and procrastination. Academic coaching will be highly beneficial for students who are ready and willing to take the initiative to get help and then engage in their own learning and academic growth. Julie Boyd and Nikki Chester are serving as academic coaches for the 2022-2023 academic year.

In addition to the implementation of academic coaching services, Athens Academy is expanding its advisory and seminar program by adding a Capstone Program for Upper School students. Advisory has always been a hallmark of the Upper School experience. Students work through curricula covering a variety of social-emotional learning topics that help them build the life skills needed to become successful adults. Students also continue their work in the development of metacognitive skills that help them achieve their potential in and out of the classroom. Work in advisory and seminar helps our students grow and mature and helps give them the foundation they need to reach their goals.

The Capstone Program offers upperclassmen the opportunity to engage in a culminating project that will demonstrate their knowledge, learning and growth through the completion of a collaborative and multifaceted project. Upperclassmen who choose to complete this program will work closely with Capstone Coordinator Nikki Chester to identify a project, track progress towards completion and ultimately, present and defend their project to the Capstone Advisory Committee. Defense of the Capstone Project will occur during the senior year in high school. A successful defense will represent a substantial body of work, will be a highlight for the collegiate application process and will most importantly be a personal point of achievement and pride.