



## ACADEMIC SPOTLIGHT

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### Athens Academy's International Studies Program Roars Back to Life after a Three-Year Hiatus

While Athens Academy's international studies program gained prominence and momentum in 2014 with the creation of the Dr. Ward B. Lewis Center for International Studies and Cultural Exchange, the school's focus on establishing connections throughout the world and helping students to understand and appreciate issues of global importance stretches back more than three decades. In the late 80s and early 90s, Athens Academy's involvement in the German-American Teacher Exchange (GATE) and collaboration with Evangelisch Stiftisches Gymnasium (ESG), a school in Gütersloh, Germany, resulted in a long-term partnership with the Bertelsmann Foundation. In fact, the building on our campus bearing the Bertelsmann name will celebrate its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary next April. Since its founding, Athens Academy has encouraged students at all levels to think critically about issues that impact current events and world history. The school has also nurtured lasting connections with other schools, organizations, and individuals around the globe to reinforce those understandings essential for all citizens living in an increasingly interconnected world.

Following a very successful year of travel in 2019, when Athens Academy sent two groups of students (33 in all) and four faculty chaperones to Japan, COVID-19 brought nearly all travel to a standstill. In early 2020, Athens Academy's thriving international exchange program came to an obvious halt. In the early days of the pandemic, the school was forced to cancel its March 2020 trip to sister-school ESG, after successfully hosting fifteen German students and two teachers in October 2019. An attempt to return to Germany in March 2021 was unsuccessful due to continued complications caused by COVID.

A highly anticipated trip to South Africa was also abruptly put on hold, and countless behind-the-scenes negotiations by International Studies Chair Russ Hovater ensued with airlines, travel agents, tour companies, and more to ensure that the deposits and credits paid by the families of Athens Academy student travelers would not be entirely lost in the chaos. In March 2022, four Athens Academy faculty members—Stefan Billmayer, Causey Cato, Zebbie Watson, and Russ Hovater—finally made the trip to ESG in an effort to rekindle the long-standing exchange between our two schools. The trip included homestays with German faculty, and visits to Berlin, Muenster, and Essen.

As international travel restrictions have gradually eased, the program has roared back to life in the 2022-23 school year with a robust set of options, thanks in large part to Mr. Hovater's hard work, resourcefulness, and persistence. International exchange this year first included Athens Academy's hosting of seventeen Italian students and two faculty members from sister school Liceo Corso (Correggio, Italy) in September/October 2022. Conversely, seventeen Athens Academy students and three faculty members are scheduled to visit Liceo Corso in March 2023, staying with host families in Correggio, and enjoying additional trips to Venice, Florence, and areas around the Reggio-Emilia province.

Moreover, nine faculty members and administrators from ESG will visit Athens Academy in April 2023 to discuss topics such as leadership and collaborate with STEAM educators. Athens Academy plans to host students from ESG in the fall of 2023 and travel to Germany in March 2024. Finally, the long-postponed South Africa trip is rescheduled for June 2023 with sixteen students and two faculty members. The itinerary includes Johannesburg, Cape Town, and a safari!

We look forward to the months ahead and the continued development of this exciting program that promises to broaden our students' perspectives and enrich their overall experience while at Athens Academy.