



Mount Madonna Goes To Washington

By Ward Mailliard



We know that the “explicit” curriculum, or content of the classes taught in school is important. It is measured constantly. The “implicit” curriculum, which is much harder to measure and less heralded, needs more attention, as it is central to the development of our future citizens. The implicit curriculum has to do with the processes employed in teaching our subjects, and the relationships formed within the learning environment. These two aspects are central to the formation of the kind of human being who will one day emerge from school and use the knowledge gained in the classroom according to their sense of values about how human beings should act.

The biannual Washington, D.C. learning journey taken by Mount Madonna School juniors and seniors is part of their two-year social studies class, Values in World Thought. This journey addresses both explicit and implicit learning. Cognitive skills such as research, writing and inquiry are developed, while “soft” skills are also required as students work collaboratively on many levels, from discussing questions that will spark interest, to filming, preparing meals and cleaning up after ourselves. We all share in the successes, failures, joys and challenges. Each student chooses how he or she will engage, and then sees the direct results. Students experience effective processes for accomplishing collective goals. They learn to be aware of how they affect, and are affected by, each other. They learn firsthand the importance of relationship in building success.

At the end of the journey students are asked to share with the community what they have learned. Here are a few examples of what they had to say about their experience.

“It was the late nights, copious amounts of tea and heavy discussions that occurred after we shut down our computers. There was a feeling of pure intrigue and satisfaction when a question that we had spent hours poring over, and tweaking the words so they were just right, was understood perfectly. I couldn’t get enough.” – Renata Massion, 11th

“Of the people we interviewed, a few really impacted me. One was Susannah Welford, president and founder of Running Start. Her interview started a conversation about failure and the judgment we often fear will come from admitting our mistakes. This led to more questions in later interviews about the subject. I found this interesting as I often have trouble admitting my failures because of the judgment that I fear from my parents and teachers. What I learned, is that often admitting your failures will give less push back than letting them be revealed.” – Jenny Turk, 12th

“We discussed the ability to take risks and not be afraid of failure. This was a very relevant piece of advice for me personally, because I tend to get caught up in the idea of perfection, when in reality, failure is the key to producing growth.” – Cassie Caborn, 11th

“Mr. [Dan] Tangherlini, administrator of the General Services Administration, left me feeling like if I could be anywhere near as humble and cooperative as that guy, I could succeed anywhere. I could do

anything. Congressman [George] Miller had a dedication for service that I want to emulate. If I could find that drive to help other people to the extent that he does, goodness knows what I could get done. And if I did it with the integrity and moral groundedness that Hardin Lang, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, has, I’d probably be able to save the world.” – Roger Hooker, 12th

“In D.C., we met with people who are taking on some of the most crucial, complex and difficult issues, and they are changing the world day by day. They recognize their own fortune and are using it to empower others. They made this work and these issues tangible, and helped me realize that, yes, there is an unimaginable amount of suffering all over the world, and no single person could ever dream of fixing it all. But there is always work to be done, and every life that is saved, every positive change made, positively affects us all.” – Talia Speaker, 12th

This journey focused on content, process and relationship and allowed for unpredictable outcomes. Students learned through experience and learned what they were ready to learn. When the processes of our classrooms are aligned with the goals, and we are in positive relationship with each other, the learning is exponential. It confirms that the implicit curriculum is worth greater attention if we want to produce caring, empathetic and creative citizens.