

James Newman, Ph.D., Head of School

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Dear Academy Families and Friends,

**"Deep learning?"** I'm glad there were questions about the concept after I mentioned it in my All-School Letter last month. Deep learning is at the heart of original and creative research conducted by our students, culminating in Upper School research papers and in the Extended Essay of IB Diploma Candidates. Some of their research includes how bipolar disorder affects creativity, whether the government of Saudi Arabia treats women as they are portrayed in the Qur'an, the concept of truth and certainty in René Descartes' "Meditations I and II," and the correlations of market dynamics during and after the United States real estate market of 2005 through 2007.

Let me explain. In contrast to superficial learning or rote memorization, deep learning focuses on complex understandings — underlying meanings, relationships between disparate information — and their synthesis with previous learning. In short, deep learning is reflective, integrated, and requires greater higher-order thinking. And in every division at Harrisburg Academy, our faculty promotes it daily.

Our Lower and Middle School teachers, with support from our technology integration specialist, Marlynn Meyer, help students use "concept-mapping" software to graphically organize their ideas, and therefore, think more analytically. Students learn to use software such as Inspiration®, and subsequently, are able to identify patterns and relationships among their ideas. As you can imagine, integrating this kind of graphic organizer into their work makes a marked difference for Academy students' ability to categorize, and later to articulate, their ideas orally and in written form. According to Marlynn, 21<sup>st</sup> century students are facing many new life challenges created by the infusion of technology in every aspect of their lives. Concept-mapping is one of many skills Academy students use to hone their analytical thinking for the future.

Similarly, Heather Jorgensen uses concept-mapping software in her *Current Global Issues* course to introduce 8<sup>th</sup> grade students to complex topics such as trade tariffs, ecological sustainability, education in developing nations, and genetically modified foods. Students conduct library research, host lively debates, and develop their own ideas and ideals about multi-faceted issues in our current world. As you might imagine, in a passion-filled Middle School classroom, no idea goes unchallenged and therefore, the deep learning is authentic and engaging.

Our focus on promoting deep learning continues in our Upper School, where research papers — such as the Extended Essay, required of all International Baccalaureate Diploma candidates —

Challenging our students in an environment that nurtures and inspires.

are an essential expression of this concept. Students select their topics, such as those listed at the beginning of my letter and others\* with guidance from their faculty mentors and Cindy St. John, our Upper School librarian. Academy Upper School students are well-prepared to complete research that is investigated thoroughly, well-organized, and clearly articulated. Ultimately, our focus on deep thinking prepares our graduates for highly successful college-level learning, a critical essential skill for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In closing, I'd like to remind you to join in the conversations about deep learning, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and strategic initiatives at the Academy. Our *Challenge 2013* strategic plan review meeting has been rescheduled for Wednesday, Feb. 9 at 7 p.m. in the Meeting Room. Tom Schmidt, president of our Board of Trustees, and I will lead the conversation about our school's progress this year. Immediately following at 7:30 p.m., Tom Banks, Steve Fry, and I will present information about the International Baccalaureate *Middle Years Program* and will continue the discussion with you about the possibility of integrating it into the Academy's 6<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> grade curricula. We look forward to your insights as we continue to explore new means of supporting deep learning opportunities for our students.

With warm regards,

Jim

\*Some of the other exciting topics Harrisburg Academy students have explored in their Extended Essays include "An Apple a Day Kept Paradise Away: Defining Good and Evil in *Paradise Lost*," "How Did the Civil War Help Progress Railroad Technology and Value?" "How was Catalanian and the Usage of the Catalan Language Affected in the Ten Years Following Francisco Franco's Regime in Spain?" Race and Racism in the 1939 Film 'The Wizard of Oz,'" and "See Spots Run: The Dilution of Colors in Modern Show Horses."