

# Harmony in Education

The Journey of Middle School Science Maestro, Callie Bambenek



## Hitting All the Right Notes

When **Middle School Science Teacher Callie Bambenek** began teaching, she consistently gave her first student a failing grade. “Growing up, our family had a piano. I would ‘teach’ my dad how to play, and I would flunk him so he would stay on as a student. I was afraid I wouldn’t have anyone left to teach if he became too good of a piano player. Now, as an adult, I’m sure he was playing awful on purpose, even though he swears he tried his best. I also quickly learned that once you’re my student, you’re always my student,” she laughed.

In her eleventh year at MICDS, Bambenek clearly remembers those core, pivotal piano teaching moments, and she piled on more positive imprints through each teacher she had while growing up. “I never really had a bad teacher. In fifth grade, I was so enamored with all my teachers that I asked my mom if she got to pick my teachers. The answer was obviously no. I was just that lucky to be surrounded by people who loved teaching,” she said.

She was sold after seeing a film about teaching in urban environments in sixth grade. A vital element of the film that Bambenek carries with her and infuses into the classroom daily is ensuring all students’ basic needs are met. She said, “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs drives my desire for social-emotional awareness in the classroom.”

## Tuning Hearts and Minds

Bambenek deeply believes that a positive culture breeds positive academic growth. People who work with her know this is her motto. To create a passionate academic community, she first establishes a safe culture built on empathy, equity, trust, and service. Then, she surrounds that with a commitment to the social and emotional growth of not only her students but also herself. With caring words of high expectations, moments of compassion and understanding, and gestures of encouragement and acknowledgment, relationships form and matter.



“In a world of how fast can we understand something, make gains, or get to the next level, there’s always a ‘what’s next’ mentality. It’s really important to slow down and sit with it. Be okay with showing someone a strategy to figure things out. Visible thinking strategies are super important to create an environment where students feel safe. Many learners take risks in their learning environment because they feel safe before doing it.

**Former MICDS Learning Specialist Mead Ploszay** was a great thought partner on mental strategies, especially how to make your thinking ‘visible,’” she shared.

Partnering with a cohort of other Middle School teachers and spaces on campus has given Bambenek and the team opportunities to deliver more non-traditional assessments and project-based learning options as well. She enjoys the challenge and gets excited about processing instruction and content in a different capacity.

### Chords of Impact

Teaching middle school is arguably one of the toughest arenas. Students are on a bridge from elementary to high school, changing rapidly with puberty and the formation of personalities. Yet, this is the sweet spot for Bambenek. She shared, “Middle school was when I really started liking science. Mike Tiffany at Ferguson Middle School was a phenomenal teacher and so energetic. He somehow got us excited about metric conversions. That’s when I knew I wanted to teach middle school. Years later, as an adult, I saw Mr. Tiffany out in the wild, and I HAD to tell him how much he had impacted me. I thanked him and told him I now teach metric conversions to a Ludacris rap song because he indirectly taught me to make connections to student interests.”

Bambenek added, “Upper school is a beautiful, magical balance of several pressures, and middle school is like the road to discovery. Middle schoolers are so eager all

the time. They want to feel noticed. They’re curious. They want to think that they’re discovering something and want to know you’re right there next to them,” she said. Bambenek wholeheartedly believes in the F.A.I.L. acronym, First Attempt In Learning, and holds herself to the same standard. She even encourages students to tally her mistakes on a whiteboard. She was at 34 errors at press time, with the most recorded in a year at 72.

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To add to the middle school challenge, she teaches science, a rapidly changing field. Educators have no choice but to adapt, especially with pre-teen and teenage brains. “When I started teaching science, the high point of tech in the classroom was PowerPoint,” she said. “Now, we are using microbits and coding with Arduino, and these students are teaching ME to use TinkerCAD. Even with our weather and climate unit, the water on our planet is changing, so we have to teach it differently. I get schooled and humbled every day, I learn new slang, and it keeps me young.”

Her students respond well to her teaching style. **Charlie Krieger '27** loved his science classes with “Ms. Bam.” He said, “I love Ms. Bam because if we had questions or couldn’t figure it out, she would give us other examples and different strategies to get our

understanding in line to solve the current problem on the assignment. She was really good at teaching.”

**Ava Maher '30** appreciates Bambenek’s humor and calm presence in the wilds of middle school science class. “Ms. Bam is an amazing teacher. She is very funny, calm, and a lot of fun. I like that Ms. Bam has us go through the whole day of class at the beginning of the day, and she always makes sure we have time for fun lab activities and engineering challenges. My favorite unit in Ms. Bam’s class was when we learned about hot and cold molecules. We did a lot of cool experiments in the lab area, which was so much fun,” she said.

**Ellemieke Ferguson '27** added, “Ms. Bam made every class fun and entertaining, and she had a teaching style that made it very easy to learn. I loved walking into class every day, knowing that Ms. Bam had an exciting and interactive

lesson planned. I enjoyed the unit when we learned about chemical reactions and did labs to understand them better. Ms. Bam is an amazing teacher, and she made my entire year in eighth-grade science memorable.”

### Harmonizing Success

Last year, Bambenek won the Duncan Award, a prestigious award that she said “was the coolest award to win” because students vote for it. At the award ceremony, **Head of School Jay Rainey** shared, “Ms. Bambenek understands what it means for students to be seen and heard and sets that example for everyone around her. Fostering personal growth is always her true north, and her students thrive in the comfort of the learning environment she creates and sustains.”

As the founding Director of ASAP (After School Academic Program) at MICDS, she implemented a much-



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needed support system for seventh and eighth graders who benefit from structure and guidance after school. She has since passed the baton for ASAP but is still a principal team member for the Middle School Bridge Program, which helps provide a successful transition for new students joining the middle school at MICDS. The program includes orientation to the campus, academic enrichment, organization and study skills, and socialization within the school community. Bambenek said, "Being able to offer predictability and connection to more than 90 new Middle School students is a blast. Community and connection are two of my greatest passions, so seeing many students building early relationships with their classmates and teachers is really rewarding to the Bridge Program created so many years ago."

That passion has extended into her new role as Middle School Community Coordinator. The position fosters a tighter sense of community across all grade levels in the Middle School and stretches into the Lower and Upper School divisions to extend connections further. Scaffolding this across a JK-12 school is complex, but Bambenek is up to the challenge. The directive is to build a cohesive advisory program for fifth through eighth grades, founded on the principles of L.E.A.D.: Learn with curiosity and joy, Embrace challenge, Advocate for self and community, and Demonstrate collaboration and teamwork. Through

collaboration with her peers and students, she will help design robust community programming while focusing on the "Three Ps" of middle school: play, perspective, and preparedness, and strives to create nurturing experiences for eighth graders deserving of more leadership.

Bambenek said, "I get really excited about all of it, especially when thinking about the predictability we can offer in the transitions from fourth to fifth grades and eighth to ninth. I feel so lucky to be on the sixth-grade team this year as they led the charge in implementing L.E.A.D. years prior, and I get to absorb everything they've successfully done and how it can be integrated into all grades."

## Notes of Reflection

At the heart of Bambenek's teaching philosophy is care. She shared, "I think people would be surprised how often confident people doubt themselves and say, 'Am I doing enough? Do I need to clear up that person's misconception?' And it's not just me. It's everyone here. None of us leave the day with 'I can't wait to tell everyone everything I did great today.' Instead, it's always about connection—did I forget someone, did I teach well enough, am I doing a good enough job?" Being surrounded by such like-minded people fuels Bambenek's passion.

When asked if she has a favorite time of day or year in a wildly demanding academic season, she doesn't hesitate.

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Bambenek would adamantly express that the content she teaches is beside the point and that the student-teacher relationship is paramount. Regardless of the banter and silliness that is commonplace in her classroom, she knows that she is orchestrating positive connections and creating lasting memories for her students, igniting a passion for learning.

