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page 22

'Our Best Year Yet'

Archmere Academy applies lessons learned from the pandemic to foster brighter days and better ways to nourish students in mind, body, and spirit.

by **JENNY GRAHAM** photography by **ALISON DUNLAP**

"Positive change comes from disruption."

So says Katie Eissler Thiel, principal at Archmere Academy, a private, Catholic college preparatory high school in Claymont, Delaware.

Archmere has been a haven for young learners since 1932, when it was founded by the Norbertine Fathers, offering a rigorous academic program for students in grades nine to 12. Among Archmere's best-known assets is its college-like campus, wherein students grow through personalized attention and support. Though disrupted by the pandemic, the school adapted in ways that enable it to look toward the future with hope and optimism.

"Coming off the pandemic, we needed to respond to the needs we've seen and felt in our community regarding social and emotional learning," says Thiel, who also teaches AP French. "We were forced into rethinking our practices. This year we believe we really can have our best year yet because we've taken the opportunity to rethink and prioritize issues that rise to the surface."

To gain insight, Archmere surveyed students, staff, parents, and other members of the community to ask directly how the school could best provide support so students could be "their best selves."

"We're maintaining academic rigor while programming time into the day for students to share interests or academic pursuits, helping them to feel as normal as they possibly can or would during this period," says Tim Dougherty, Director of Academics. "Archmere invests to help families find out how their son or daughter learns best."

The new schedule offers academic programming that is strong and rigorous in college preparation. At the same time, the schedule provides students with ample time and opportunity to socialize on campus with peers and prepare for the next phase of their education.

Class sizes remain small—approximately 15 students per class, according to Dougherty—to facilitate personalized instruction, with an eight-class model that has students attending only six periods on any given day.

"We don't confuse rigor with volume," Dougherty says. "We want students to have a manageable and fair workload."

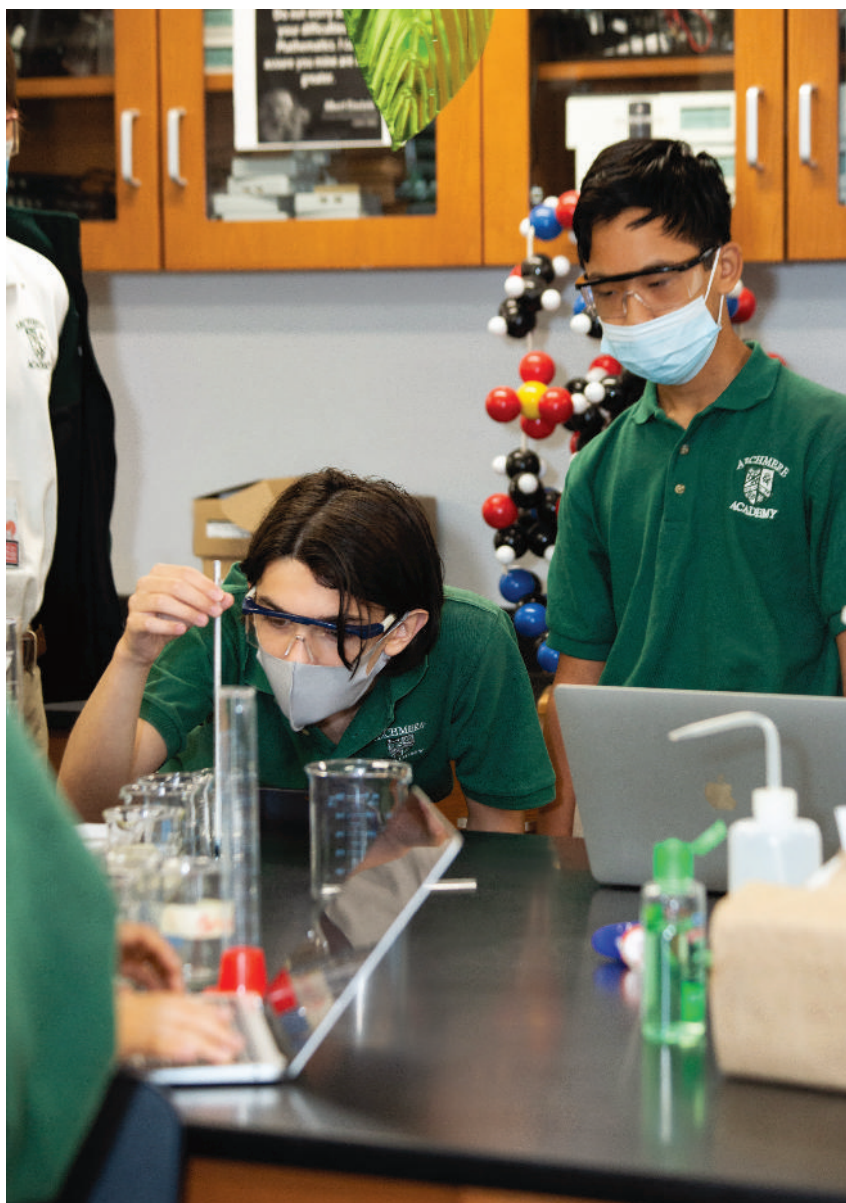
In line with this, students now benefit from a dedicated work period within their daily schedule, which helps them keep up with, or get ahead on, schoolwork.

"It's like a traditional study hall, but more structured," Dougherty adds. "It's an effort to help protect students' school/personal life balance, so that students can spend more time with family by completing more work during school."

"We've been more intentional about content," he continues. "This way, academic programs maintain rigor, but we've reduced stress for students. Most love the schedule and say they can plan their work better. They appreciate the opportunity to manage their time efficiently."

Thiel agrees that students have been flourishing since embracing a more flexible schedule.

"Students have a great amount of autonomy, and they learn to maximize that time and craft their free period as they wish," she says. "Students can fill their free period in any



way they need for the day to nourish their mind, body, or spirit.”

Invested in Togetherness

Of course, when talking about wellness in a school community, the importance of socializing cannot be understated, and such events are being welcomed back into life at Archmere with gusto.

“We brought back our ninth-grade family barbecue, which gives families a chance to meet one another,” Thiel says. “There are lots of social events we are excited to be bringing back, including parent nights and socials. Parents are a vital part of the Archmere community as well.”

Students are looking forward to dances, including Homecoming and “Morp” (that’s “prom,” spelled backwards), along with a host of exciting homecoming activities. Sports, too, have been a welcome return to students’ lives.

“We did have a lot of normalcy in the realm of sports last year; we didn’t have many team quarantines and teams played mostly full schedules,” Thiel says. “I will say for this year I’m excited about the possibilities because the athlete rosters are so much more robust. Junior varsity and ninth-grade teams, for example, offer greater accessibility for a larger number of students.”

Much of this return to normalcy can be traced to safety measures such as masking and social distancing. These subtle but necessary adjustments have been integral in affording the Archmere community more opportunities for togetherness.

“We’ve had virtually no resistance to the standards we’re setting to be here,” Dougherty says. “Our students and staff are all invested for each other. I’ve always felt we have a remarkably resilient, polite, engaged student body. Now, more than ever, because of last year we discovered a level of trust with our students that we never had to test before. It’s remarkable. They’re all just so happy to be here and invested in continuing to be here.”



Thiel says the rest of Archmere’s faculty shares students’ enthusiasm to be back on campus.

“Being back has done wonders for faculty spirit,” she says. “Having the option to get up and leave home to go to a place of work that feels safe and comfortable has done wonders for us as well as for the students.” ■



ARCHMERE ACADEMY

3600 Philadelphia Pike

Claymont, DE 19703

(302) 798-6632

archmereacademy.com

Archmere Fast Facts

- 24 Advanced Placement courses offered
- 3 world languages (Chinese, French, Spanish)
- 1:1 MacBook Program
- 50+ clubs, activities, and student-run events
- 23 varsity sports
- 28 Global courses, programs, and travel experiences offered each year
- 9:1 Student-Teacher Ratio
- 70% of Archmere families receive tuition assistance or merit awards
- 84% of faculty hold advanced degrees
- 20% of faculty and staff are Archmere alumni
- 45+ years of combined college admissions experience is available to every Archmere student
- 38-acre collegiate style campus

