



## GSA PROGRAM

### Overview

What is at the core of GSA, what makes us who we are as a learning community? Although there are aspects of our programs that are particular to us (and are elaborated on below), what is most distinctive is how we think about and relate to our students. **We believe students learn best and most lastingly when they feel safe, supported, accepted, and known as individuals, with individual needs, strengths, challenges, and aspirations.** So we work hard to know each student for who they are and who they wish to be, and this commitment to treating our students as individuals informs everything we do. For this reason, every aspect of GSA is designed to meet students where they are, and then encourage them to grow as learners, citizens, and people. **Some schools ask students to adapt to them; we seek to adapt to our students, because we believe they learn best when this is the case.**

This commitment to our students flows directly out of our long-standing commitment as a town academy to welcoming all students from the seven surrounding “tuitioning towns.” We are here to be a high school for all of our towns’ children, regardless of their needs, and we have the breadth and variety of classes and programs to do so. So we offer a comprehensive program that meets *every* learner where they are today and prepares them for where they hope to be tomorrow. *We* expect a lot from our students, but it matters just as much that we meet *their* expectations. We strive to be the kind of school that works hard and works well for every student, so each is prepared for whatever is next for them, whether it be any college or university in the world, or the workforce, or something else.

**By choice we are a school for the entire community, not some subset composed only of students on their way to four-year colleges, say, or interested in the arts, or in a particular trade.** The “real world” is composed of all sorts of people. We believe it is good for young people to go to school with them all.

### Some highlights and distinctions

**Academic variety:** GSA’s program is designed to provide every student with a challenging, comprehensive academic and experiential program. We offer a wide variety of courses at different levels: foundation (for the academically most challenged students), college-prep (for the middle 50% or so), and honors and AP (for the academically most able) to meet our students’ diverse needs and interests. Many are traditional academic courses that build our students’ knowledge bases, both shared and individual, and encourage them to reflect on what they have learned and how it relates to their lives and the lives of others. Many go beyond traditional academics and engage students in more integrated, practical, or hands-on ways to meet their individual needs.

**Using our location:** Many of our courses explicitly take advantage of, connect to, and celebrate our location on **the coast of Maine**. (See the more comprehensive overview of academics, and our full Program of Studies, both linked to below.)

**Student Support:** We support students in other ways: through an **Advisor Program**, where students in small groups work with a teacher on academic matters and adolescent development issues; a

**Learning Center**, where any student can get academic assistance; our **Student Support Team**, which meets weekly to identify and then make plans to assist students who are struggling for any reason; and in the **ways we respond to student conduct issues**, making certain they are tailored to the specific student's needs and situation, so the response is effective in changing behavior permanently, and making restitution where appropriate.

**College and Career Counseling:** How we help students prepare for their post-GSA life is very individualized, because we have a dedicated person who does only this, and the size of our grades is relatively small, compared to many other schools. Guidance counselors at many schools have large caseloads, and handle mental health as well as post-secondary counseling. Our college and career counselor is able to meet with each student multiple times to help them through the process of whatever is next for them, whether it be college, the workforce, the military, a gap year, or something else. He also has evening programs for parents on planning for next steps (whatever they may be), applying for financial aid, and dealing with other issues related to their children's post-GSA life.

**Opportunities for individual study:** We deliberately enable students to set their own paths and follow their interests. A notable example of this is our **Independent Study** program in which every junior and senior spends at least two weeks each winter doing a self-designed project. Students study things that interest them as they think about a possible college major, or explore possible careers, or undertake creative projects in the arts and engineering, or travel to study elsewhere. Each student has an advisor and must produce an exhibition at the end. **Another example is the Alternative Course, a way for students to create their own courses** to study something not in our curriculum.

**Preparing students for the rest of life:** Another distinctive feature of our program is our **Practical Life Skills Curriculum**, where four times a year students learn important life skills not covered in traditional classes, for example, how to balance a checkbook, how insurance works, ways to make a good living in this part of Maine (local tradespeople and business owners visit campus to talk with students about their work), adolescent development issues such as healthy relationships and stress management, the workings of local government, and the like. (This program was started in the 2019-20 school year, was paused during the pandemic last year, and has now resumed.)

### **Details on Academic Programs**

*Sometimes we learn because it satisfies our curiosity, or is self-fulfilling, or expands who we are. Sometimes we learn because it prepares us for later education, or for a career, or to be good citizens of our community. All of these aspects of learning are found at GSA.* – David Stearns, Dean of Curriculum and Instruction

To learn much more about academic departments and courses, hands-on programs, self-designed opportunities, college and career counseling, and more, visit [georgestevensacademy.org/academics](http://georgestevensacademy.org/academics).