THADEN
SCHOOL

Middle School Course Offerings

Academic Year 2025-26

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Mission and Guiding Principles

Our mission is to provide a balanced and challenging education that ignites in our students a passion for discovery and learning, prepares them to succeed in college, and inspires them to lead lives of integrity, purpose, and responsible global citizenship.

In pursuing our mission, we are guided by these principles:

- The diversity of a school is essential to the quality of education that it provides.
- In a small school, students are better able to form close relationships with teachers that will give them a strong sense of belonging, self-confidence, and responsibility.
- There is an art in masterful teaching, which requires resources, mentorship, and recognition.
- A well-balanced curriculum empowers students:
    - To think ethically, critically, and creatively about global issues and their local manifestations;
    - To see connections among the humanities, sciences, and mathematics as integrative disciplines in the search for knowledge, meaning, and beauty;
    - To build coherent, compelling, and innovative arguments;
    - To establish their voice in the world by writing and speaking well and expressing themselves creatively;
    - To work independently and collaboratively.
- Activities outside of the classroom (such as acting in a play, competing on a team, or working on a sustainability project) give students essential opportunities to develop as leaders, volunteers, and contributors to the life and spirit of the greater community.
- A school must create a safe and healthy environment where students have time and space for reflection, freedom to make important decisions, and opportunities to learn from mistakes.
- The harmony of a school community depends on a shared commitment to honesty, compassion, and fair play.

Overview

At Thaden School, we approach the middle school years as a time to nurture agile minds and hearts through discovery, learning, and play. Early adolescents have unique intellectual, social, and emotional needs as they navigate the critically important years between elementary and high school.

Designed with a deep understanding of these needs, Thaden's Middle School curriculum ignites students' curiosity and passion for discovery while building the skills and habits they will need to thrive in our Upper School program. Giving equal emphasis to the sciences and humanities, the Middle School curriculum is designed to ensure that students build a strong and balanced foundation across all major disciplines. While our curriculum respects the boundaries of the core academic disciplines so that students understand how scientists, artists, mathematicians, historians, and others create knowledge and understand the world, the course of study within a given discipline often intersects with other disciplines in ways that help students discover larger patterns and explore broad topics and questions from multiple angles.

Our commitment to interdisciplinary problem solving also finds rich expression within the context of our three signature programs – Meals, Reels, and Wheels – where students combine multiple fields of study and engage with community partners in ways that foster a strong sense of civic responsibility. Intensives as well as Community-Based Learning (CBL) courses provide further opportunities for students to form and investigate their own questions from many perspectives.

While our curriculum committee and academic leadership oversee the development of our academic program to ensure consistency and coherence, we leverage the special interests and expertise of our nationally recruited faculty by giving them considerable discretion in the design of their courses. Our faculty use a wide range of pedagogical methods – from seminar-style discussions to community-engaged projects – that collectively enhance students' versatility as problem solvers who can work independently and collaboratively in a rapidly changing world.

By virtue of our Indexed Tuition program and small class sizes, we also offer a classroom experience in which students of many interests, aspirations, and backgrounds share and explore different points of view under the guidance of nurturing, even-handed educators. As our students discover their common ground and learn from their differences, they grow better prepared for life and citizenship in a nation founded upon a shared commitment to the value of civil debate and diversity of thought.

Our approach to the assessment of academic work is designed to foster a "growth mindset" and resilience in the face of challenge. In particular, our standards-based grading practices illuminate the path to self-improvement by helping students focus on the skills and habits essential to their success at Thaden and beyond. Given our small class sizes, we also expect faculty to provide their students with detailed written feedback and personal encouragement that will build their self-confidence and ignite a lifelong passion for learning and discovery.

Academic Policies

Grading and Assessment

Thaden School faculty use a system called standards-based grading (SBG). In this system, students are evaluated based on their proficiency in meeting clearly articulated course objectives. Instead of receiving a single overall grade, SBG breaks down subject matter into smaller "learning targets." We employ standards-based grading practices because the learning goals and ratings provide students with more specific information about their progress and deter them from developing a fixed mindset about their academic potential.

To communicate students' standards-based ratings, Thaden School opens the gradebook at the midpoint of each trimester and releases progress reports at the end of each trimester. In addition, students receive narrative comments from their teachers twice a year and a personal letter at the end of the year, written by their advisor or another member of the faculty, that reflects on their growth.

The specific learning goals are divided into two categories:

Skills

- Factual Knowledge: accurately recalls and uses factual information and vocabulary
- Conceptual Understanding: grasps fundamental ideas, constructs, frameworks, and theories
- Procedural Technique: understands and follows disciplinary methods and processes
- Critical Thinking: effectively analyzes complex problems using factual knowledge, conceptual understandings, and procedural techniques
- Communication: clearly and/or persuasively articulates ideas and arguments with appreciation for the audience and context
- Creativity and Originality: generates and advances novel ideas, products, or points of view

Habits

- Preparation: brings relevant materials to class and effectively manages time
- Initiative and Perseverance: actively engages in the learning process and demonstrates an eagerness to improve
- Collaboration: works well in diverse groups to achieve a common goal

While students may cultivate many, if not most, of these skills and habits in each of their courses, progress reports identify and rate only the goals that a teacher deems most important in the context of a given course. A student's progress with respect to each goal is rated numerically on a four-point scale, indicating the degree to which the student has progressed in meeting grade-level expectations: (1) Beginning; (2) Approaching; (3) Meeting; (4) Exceeding. The absence of a rating next to a certain skill or habit indicates that not enough information or data has yet been collected to provide meaningful feedback.

Thaden uses a decaying average to calculate students' overarching scores in each skill and habit. The decaying average formula is a calculation method that places more weight on the most recently scored material, allowing for a better measure of growth by rewarding students for how far they have come regardless of where they started.

Upper School Credits

Thaden School grants high school credit for certain courses completed prior to Grade 9. Successful completion of the courses listed below earn Grade 8 students one credit each, which is reported on the student's transcript. In addition to skills and habits ratings, these courses are graded on a Pass/No Credit basis.

- Algebra I
- Algebra I with Additional Problem Solving
- Latin AB
- Latin B
- Mandarin AB
- Mandarin B
- Spanish AB
- Spanish B

Course Offerings

English

English 5

This year-long course centers on the theme of character, guiding students to explore and define their sense of self through the lens of personal values. Through a variety of texts—short stories, magazine articles, poetry, and fiction—students will examine what character looks like within the classroom community, particularly as they engage with the study of English. They'll reflect on their own life experiences and consider how these shape the unique traits they bring to their relationships with peers. As with all courses at Thaden School, the Grade 5 English and social studies curricula are deeply interconnected, fostering an interdisciplinary approach that encourages students to make meaningful connections between content and skills across subjects.

Required in Grade 5

English 6

This year-long course provides opportunities to develop the idea of belonging, guiding students to discover themselves as readers and writers. Students examine genres, authors, characters, and themselves via short stories, novels and excerpts, and podcasts, always with the goal of sharpening their skills as readers, researchers, discussants, and critical thinkers. Students also engage with the writing process to advance their informational, narrative, reflective, and argumentative writing. In order to become deft writers and community-minded readers, students study English as a language system and present book talks to their peers to share the joy of reading.

Required in Grade 6

English 7

This year-long course teaches students to read carefully and write powerfully as they explore the theme of place. While examining this theme across genre, context, and continents, students discover the ways in which place shapes the stories we tell. Students refine a set of strategies for effective reading, such as annotating and close reading, as they engage with classic and contemporary works like *The Outsiders*; *Inside Out and Back Again*; *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings; Animal Farm; The Giver*; and various short stories and poems. The study of literature creates the context for students to creatively experiment with their own writing, developing confidence with essays, poetry, short stories, and other forms. Students leave this course with a strong sense of the writing process, including brainstorming, drafting, exchanging feedback, and revising with purpose.

Required in Grade 7

English 8

Renowned writer and child of Arkansas Maya Angelou once said, "In diversity there is beauty and there is strength." English 8 focuses on the theme "voices of America" and is a year-long course that hones students' reading, writing, thinking, and discussion skills through the lens of America's polyphonic literary heritage. Students survey varied genres of literature: novels, short stories, poetry, and drama. In doing so, they explore the overlaps and disparities in the narratives that comprise the fabric of our nation. What shared principles emerge? What are the gaps in our knowledge regarding the American experience? Representative texts include *The Crucible, Of Mice and Men, They Called Us Enemy, The Hate U Give*, and *Dear Martin*. Students also continue to grow as writers by diving deeply into each step of the writing process; writing descriptive, expository, persuasive, and reflective pieces; and revising their work to better master their craft.

Required in Grade 8

Mathematics

Mathematical Reasoning Through Inquiry

In this year-long course, students strengthen their mathematical reasoning skills through an inquiry-based approach. They explore a variety of topics, including arithmetic, geometry, and basic algebra while developing the ability to think critically and ask questions. Students work with whole numbers, fractions, decimals, and percentages, and delve into concepts like ratios, proportions, and introductory algebraic thinking. The course focuses on reasoning through problems, using logic and trial and error to find solutions. Through collaborative group work and class discussions, students deepen their understanding by actively investigating and sharing their thinking. By the end of the course, students are better equipped to approach math with curiosity and confidence, applying what they've learned to real-world situations.

Required in Grade 5

Patterns and Problem Solving

In this year-long course, students develop their quantitative reasoning skills as they gain exposure to a range of mathematical branches including arithmetic, geometry, and algebra, and learn to use logic and trial and error to solve problems. Students explore how to manipulate whole numbers, decimals, and fractions, while also delving into ratios and proportions, percent, plane geometry, number theory, and other introductory aspects of algebra. In the day-to-day, they frequently investigate problems in small groups before deepening their understanding through facilitated whole-class discussions.

Required in Grade 6

Pre-Algebra

In this year-long course, students continue to develop their arithmetic and their skills in algebra, problem solving, and mathematical communication. Particular emphasis is placed on teaching students to seek answers and understandings that encompass much more than the numerical result of an algorithmic process. Equally important, students learn to work individually and collaboratively and to communicate their thought processes and results clearly – verbally and in writing. Classwork and assignments are designed to help students see a broad spectrum of mathematical questions, from the abstract to the applied.

For students who seek an additional mathematical challenge and opportunity, the MathCounts Club, which meets regularly for Grades 5-8, is highly encouraged.

Required in Grade 7

Algebra I

In this year-long course, students learn the basic structure of algebra while further developing their problem-solving and critical thinking skills. With a focus on data collection and analysis, students explore key properties of functions and their corresponding tables, graphs, and equations. Students analyze data and make inferences and predictions in the pursuit of communicating mathematical ideas clearly. Beyond modeling data, students also extend the properties of exponents to exponential equations and compare and contrast linear and exponential functions. The course offers a wide array of learning opportunities that develop students' ability to communicate and reason mathematically.

For students who seek an additional mathematical challenge and opportunity, the MathCounts Club, which meets regularly for Grades 6-8, is highly encouraged.

Required in Grade 8
1 Credit

History and Social Sciences

Individuals and Systems

This year-long course explores early civilizations of the Americas, European exploration and colonization, civics and government in the Western Hemisphere, and the development of economics and modern life. Through an in-depth study of ancient cultures such as the Maya, Aztec, Olmec, and early Native American societies, students examine how geography, trade, and cultural exchange shaped these civilizations. They also explore the impact of European exploration and colonization on Indigenous societies, the evolution of government systems, and the role of economics in shaping contemporary global life. Throughout the course, students learn to analyze primary sources, engage in thoughtful discussions, and develop a deeper understanding of how history continues to influence the present.

Required in Grade 5

Ancient World History

This year-long course takes students to and through early, ancient, and pre-modern history in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe. By way of a close examination of early civilizations, students understand how geography and the trade of goods, ideas, and religion influenced the rise and fall of entire cultures and civilizations. Throughout the course, students learn to engage critically with texts, use evidence in discussion and writing, and embrace complexity.

Required in Grade 6

Human Geography

This year-long course introduces students to tools and methods that enable them to investigate how geography, culture, political and economic systems, and other factors shape the development of societies, locally and globally. Students enrich their inquiries of current events and culture with readings and video materials, such as *The New York Times' Upfront* magazine and TED Talks. Project-based and research-driven learning provide them with opportunities to apply their skills and knowledge as social scientists, while assigned readings provide opportunities to practice annotation, close reading, and critical analysis. Writing assignments focus on forming logical claims, integrating relevant sources, organizing well-structured paragraphs, and undertaking thoughtful reflection and analysis. Ultimately, this course challenges students to look at issues from multiple perspectives, appreciate the complexity of the human experience, and engage in respectful and evidence-based discussions before forming opinions and advancing solutions.

Required in Grade 7

American Studies

This year-long course introduces students to foundational skills of inquiry necessary for success in upper school history, including critical reading, note-taking, research, analytical writing, and meaningful civic discourse. Grounded in a celebration of the American diaspora and the rich cultural diversity of the United States, the course prepares students to engage effectively with a variety of perspectives in a multitude of contexts while challenging them to grapple with complex research questions of historical significance. Students explore the overarching question of what it means to be an American by reading Ronald Takaki's text *A Different Mirror* alongside supplemental primary and secondary sources central to a basic understanding of America's unique national history. Culminating in a weeklong capstone experience of a Civil Rights tour through the American South, students engage directly with the history they study in the classroom throughout the year.

Required in Grade 8

Science

Scientific Explorations

Scientific Explorations introduces students to the world of science through hands-on investigations and engaging topics that encourage creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. This course fosters curiosity as students explore the scientific method, learning to ask questions, make predictions, and test ideas through experiments. They dive into technology and design, gaining experience with coding and robotics, and discovering how these tools solve real-world problems. Students investigate organisms and ecosystems, exploring the connections between living things and their environments. The course covers Earth and space systems, where students learn about our planet, the solar system, and forces that shape the universe. They study structures from molecules to organisms, understanding how tiny building blocks create complex systems in nature. Finally, students explore the properties of matter, learning how substances behave and interact. Throughout the course, students combine scientific inquiry with creative expression, preparing for future scientific adventures.

Required in Grade 5

Scientific Foundations

Science Foundations focuses on cultivating the mindsets necessary for science literacy – wonder and curiosity, and creativity and tinkering – in addition to the knowledge and tools necessary for success in the sciences, such as root words, experimental design, data collection/analysis, and article annotation. Students blend these mindsets and tools together for a hands-on exploration of energy and its interactions with matter. Specifically, students learn broadly about the electromagnetic spectrum; how energy manifests in multiple ways such as sound, motion, and light; and how energy can be modeled as the motion and configuration of particles. Students explore how this flow of energy impacts their surroundings. The course also includes a nature journal component, designed to help students connect science with the outdoors; quietly recharge in the fresh air; and document findings, weather data, and wonders.

Required in Grade 6

Scientific Systems and Cycles

This year-long integrated science course explores topics in geology, ecology, and life science. Because the natural world is complex – too vast and intricate to comprehend in its entirety – we use a systems approach. Whether investigating plate tectonics, food webs, climate change, or the four-chambered mammalian heart, students analyze and model systems in terms of their component parts and interactions, as well as the inputs, outputs, and processes that influence how systems function.

This way of thinking positions students to more readily comprehend any system, in any field, because of the broadly applicable framework. Further, this approach introduces students to complexity in a manageable way. Thus, students not only learn foundational scientific concepts, but

develop an organized, systematic approach to learning that hones their powers of observation, analysis, questioning, and problem solving.

Required in Grade 7

Physical Sciences and Engineering

In this year-long course, students investigate the fundamentals of physical science (motion and kinematics, dynamics, and chemistry), while learning about solar energy, computer hardware, circuitry, and the magic of electricity. Students design and undertake experiments, indoors and outdoors, that deepen their grasp of Newton's laws of motion. Given that math is the language of physics, students also have abundant opportunities to develop their graphing and algebra skills in kinematics and dynamics.

Required in Grade 8

World Languages

Spanish 5 and 6

This exploratory course introduces students to the basics of the Spanish language while fostering cultural appreciation through engaging, hands-on experiences. Students develop foundational comprehension and speaking skills through dynamic activities that blend art, science, and storytelling. The course focuses on practical communication, including introductions, describing likes and dislikes, personal descriptions, weather, numbers, and asking and answering simple questions. In addition, students explore cultural elements and customs from Spanish-speaking countries around the world. The course makes interdisciplinary connections with social studies courses, allowing students to examine the impact of ancient civilizations in the Americas on modern-day North and South American societies. Through engaging scenarios and cultural exploration, students expand their vocabulary and gain an understanding of how language reflects traditions and daily life in Spanish-speaking communities. This course nurtures curiosity, creativity, and global awareness, providing a strong foundation for future language learning.

Required in Grades 5 and 6

Latin A and B

Using *Lingua Latina per se Illustrata* by Hans Ørberg, this two-year course sequence (Latin A in Grade 7, Latin B in Grade 8) prepares students to enroll in Latin II in the Upper School. Focusing on the life and events of a second-century CE Roman family as a portal into Roman culture, customs, history, and religion, this course aims to instill confidence in students so they feel increasingly comfortable expressing themselves in Latin. Students may participate in nationally recognized exams sponsored by the American Classical League, namely the National Mythology Exam and the National Latin Exam.

Open to Grades 7 and 8
1 Upper School Credit for Latin B

Mandarin A and B

This two-year course sequence (Mandarin A in Grade 7, Mandarin B in Grade 8) prepares students to enroll in Mandarin II in the Upper School. While learning about the culture of China, students acquire and develop basic grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension through Chinese characters. Pronunciation and the four tones are emphasized through the Pīnyīn system and relevant speaking and listening exercises. Students are introduced to the reading and writing of Chinese characters through short dialogues and elementary patterns of Chinese grammar.

Open to Grades 7 and 8
1 Upper School Credit for Mandarin B

Spanish A and B

While advancing students' understanding of basic grammar, this two-year course sequence (Spanish A in Grade 7, Spanish B in Grade 8) prepares students to enroll in Spanish II in the Upper School. Students learn to speak about themselves, ask questions, provide information about people, objects, and places, and share their likes and dislikes. Students also learn to share feelings, opinions, and comparisons, discuss time and daily activities, and express present obligations and needs along with plans for the future. Students explore popular culture, customs, and traditions from the Spanish-speaking world.

Open to Grades 7 and 8
1 Upper School Credit for Spanish B or AB

Signature Programs

Meals

Throughout their time in Middle School, students study food through hands-on lessons in Thaden School's teaching kitchen and garden. Students develop their ability to grow fresh produce and to prepare a wide variety of foods. In addition, they deepen their connection to Northwest Arkansas by growing, preparing, and tasting food with roots in the history and culture of the region. Areas of focus include understanding where food comes from; the scientific and cultural processes essential to food production; connections between climate, soil, and seasonality of produce; and the food culture of our local community as well as those of other regions of the world.

Signature Programs Rotation required in Grades 6 and 8

Reels

Students learn the fundamental components of new media (video production and editing, graphic and web design, and social media) and examine what aspects of storytelling and composition are essential to effective and persuasive communication in the Middle School Reels program. In addition to gaining technical skills, such as treatment writing, cast selection, directing, producing, lighting, camera work, and editing, students also grow stronger and more responsible as producers and consumers of stories (visual and otherwise) that address a variety of issues.

Signature Programs Rotation required in Grades 6 and 8

Wheels

In the Middle School Wheels program, students learn about riding, wrenching, and reimagining communities. The goal of this model is to offer unique and meaningful learning opportunities for all students, no matter their experience or background, as they explore the dynamics, culture, and procedures of working in a shop and heading out for community bike rides. While in the shop, students learn to operate hand tools and gain familiarity with universal mechanical aptitude through bicycle assembly, maintenance, and repair. Problem solving and tinkering are integral to the program.

Signature Programs Rotation required in Grades 6 and 8

Visual and Performing Arts

Arts Rotation

In these rotations of three one-trimester courses, students are introduced to music, theater, and visual art as ways to interpret and make meaning out of our complex world. At Thaden, the arts help students explore, experiment, and take risks in expressing themselves both individually and in the context of ensembles. Each course provides them with opportunities to practice medium-specific activities, such as exploring digital music through GarageBand, rehearsing and staging short theatrical scenes, and developing and presenting drawing and painting projects. Students regularly engage in dynamic hands-on learning exercises. They are encouraged to adopt a growth mindset as they practice new techniques, apply fundamental concepts, and engage in creative risk-taking. Additionally, they learn to develop their critical artistic eye and acquire the language necessary to constructively communicate their critiques of their own work and that of others.

Required in Grades 5 and 7

Wellness and Physical Education

Physical Education 5/6

In physical education courses at Thaden, students learn a variety of sports at their own level. Physical education is a critical component of student development and the overall school curriculum. Through different games and sports, students develop their hand-eye coordination skills. Representative units include ultimate frisbee, flag football, basketball, kickball, and wiffleball. Classes may include rock climbing, mountain biking, tennis, dance, and yoga. The PE program is designed so that our students feel comfortable with physical activity and grow to see it as integral to a healthy lifestyle.

Required in Grades 5 and 6

Lifetime Fitness 7/8

In this year-long course, students focus on building the skills and knowledge necessary to incorporate fitness into a lifelong commitment to health and wellness. Through a variety of activities, students learn how to create personalized fitness routines, set achievable goals, and understand the importance of balanced physical and mental well-being. The course emphasizes the development of cardiovascular endurance, strength, flexibility, and functional movement, while also promoting healthy habits that support long-term wellness. Students explore various forms of exercise, including aerobic, strength training, cooperative games, yoga, and mindfulness practices, equipping them with the tools to stay active and healthy throughout their lives. The program aims to inspire a positive, sustainable relationship with fitness, empowering students to make physical activity a regular and enjoyable part of their everyday routine.

This course is required for Grades 7 and 8 students who do not play on a Thaden Athletics team.

Team Sports 7/8

In this year-long course, students engage in a diverse range of team sports, honing both their athletic skills and their ability to collaborate effectively as part of a team. Emphasis is placed on personal growth, encouraging students to challenge themselves physically and mentally as they develop into well-rounded Thaden athletes. Physical education plays a vital role in student development and complements the broader academic curriculum. Key units include cross country, cycling, volleyball, basketball, track and field, and strength training, offering students opportunities to build competence and confidence in a variety of Thaden sports. The program is designed to foster a positive relationship with physical activity and competitive sports, empowering students to see it as an essential component of a healthy and active lifestyle.

This course is required for Grades 7 and 8 students who play on any Thaden Athletics team.