***Becoming Stronger Teachers***
Goal: To write a curriculum that builds stronger teachers.

How Our Curriculum Works
At High Rocks, curriculum is a living, evolving thing—a starting point for ideas, adaptations, and expansion—not a definitive set of instructions. Any curriculum “comes alive” (or doesn’t) because of the person teaching it. Good curriculum is a form of teacher development—a guide that helps a teacher, new or experienced, learn by doing. A curriculum, in that sense, serves a similar purpose (or enhances the effectiveness) of a teaching mentor, helping each teacher who uses it to think through their goals, troubleshoot their ideas, and create ways of doing things that use their own unique strengths and passions.

Curriculum sections are not primarily prescriptive, detailed activities with a focus on materials lists, logistics, and steps. Instead, the curriculum itself is focused on *process*, providing the teacher with a clear idea of the goals of the lesson or activity, ideas to spark their own creativity, and suggestions of techniques or ways to approach the activity. After reading the curriculum, the teacher should have a clear idea of the process by which they can approach the lesson and what a successful lesson would look like, in terms of fulfilling objectives. This may not, in most cases, be the same thing as having a clear idea of the product they will have at the end or the exact steps they will take. The teacher must still actively engage in the planning process in order to develop and customize the lesson for their own use.

Why do it this way?
Is it more work to approach curriculum this way, rather than laying out clear steps and detailed directions? Yes. But even really good curriculum won’t work if the person trying to teach it doesn’t understand it in context, know the ideas behind it, and feel invested in it and excited about it. Good teachers know how to make curricula work for them, because they choose curricula that they trust the source of, and they feel confident in adapting what’s written to their particular space, group, and style. They’ve usually thought about it ahead of time, practiced the lesson, and changed it or expanded it. Less experienced teachers are much more likely to follow a curriculum to the letter, without thinking too deeply into it or feeling empowered to change it to suit their needs.

Our goal is to write curriculum that encourages all teachers to approach curriculum like experienced teachers. This curriculum not only invites the person doing it to analyze and personalize the lessons, but in fact requires it. We believe that the process of thinking beyond “what you do” to “how you do it” and “why you do it” is one of the hallmarks of a great teacher. Our curriculum is designed as a tool that walks teachers through this thought process in the course of designing activities, while at the same time supporting and guiding them to design high-quality activities and lessons based on theory, context, and the experience of teachers who’ve come before. Though the process of reading the curriculum—including working through the suggested resources and supplemental material—designing their own unique plan based on and informed by it, trying it out, and evaluating it (including both their own insights and feedback from students), both the curriculum itself and the person teaching it will grow.

In other words: it’s a method, not a recipe. This means that not only are those teaching  the curriculum required to actively engage on a deep level in order to implement it, but also that what they discover and learn from that engagement  about how to teach has applications beyond the particular activity represented in the lesson plan. This mirrors our own relationships to teaching, in that we are always thinking critically about our methods--adapting and changing based on what we learn from our experience.

***Objective-Based Planning: Mapping the Road Trip***

At High Rocks, we recognize that we have never had an experience where we take a prescribed curriculum, follow the instructions exactly, and are satisfied with the results.  We are always adapting, changing, evolving curriculum as we adapt, evolve and grow as educators and change-makers.
We don’t expect that this curriculum will be something that you can follow, step-by-step.  Instead, we have tried to capture the core of the learning, both for teacher and for students.  Each program has clear objectives.  Within a program, each lesson or core activity has clear objectives.  It is your goal as an emerging master teacher to use, refine, and create curriculum that comes alive each time you use it.

These objectives are the core things that you are building in your students and in yourself.  Each objective can be taught through a variety of approaches.  For example, how can you use creative writing, an arts activity, a science experiment or an organizing social justice project to achieve the same goal?  It is important to draw on your own strengths as a teacher, your own experience, your own passions. Each lesson should offer you, as a teacher, at least a couple of different suggestions using different disciplines to get at the same core.  Feel free to use any of them..or none of them.

As you customize the lesson, be sure to add any original ideas you’ve created to the original lesson.  It’s also helpful to write up a case study of your own experience for people who use this lesson in the future.  As you grow as a teacher, you will find yourself reading the curriculum for ideas, and then adding your own suggestion of an approach, a subject content, a creative project.  Add it to the lesson.

Even as we customize disciplines and content to ourselves as teacher, we also innovate in partnership with the specific students in any one of our specific programs or projects.  Look to your students to tell you where their curiosity naturally leads.  Follow their instincts as well, as you customize your plans.

In any classroom, we believe that every student should be challenged.  We know that every student is unique, and is in their own unique journey in their education and their empowerment.  What are the students in your class?  Who is a strong writer that is ready for a longer, more challenging assignment?  Who is strong in analytical thinking?  How can you, as a teacher, be prepared to offer different, level-appropriate challenging projects for the different students in your class.  Each discipline example will include at least a few suggestions for differentiated instruction.

In summary:
1.       Define the core thing it is students are learning
2.       Challenge yourself as a teacher.  Make it your goal to grow.
3.       Explore different academic/artistic disciplines
4.       Incorporate differentiated levels of instruction/project parameters
5.       Evaluate, incorporate, capture your learning and experience in the written lesson.  Take responsibility for writing the cannon.

***Case Studies and Ethnography***

**History of the High Rocks Way**
High Rocks was born in 1995 as an experiment in helping 13 year old girls make the transition to High School.  Our goal was to have them walk in the door as confident, smart, beautiful, young women who had found their own voice but were part of a supportive and diverse group—a different kind of peer group than they would otherwise fall in to based on status and fear of not having a place.  Our goal was to have this group of girls grow to be a nucleus for social change in our region.

This led us to think specifically about what girls needed for the foundation of a good education.  Research about how girls learn the best, their needs for a connection between intellectually and emotional learning, their insecurities and need for acceptance from a group. Their need to be compassionate and brave. This research came from our experiences with middle and high school girls in Pocahontas, Nicholas, and Greenbrier County.

Many of the driving ideas underlying our continual work with girls were from Adlerian psychology.  The ideas that identity as a process based on becoming who we want to be rather than past experiences, and that our identity changes with the groups we belong to.  Our groups start with our family, then develop as we get older.  Particularly for girls, this group identity is powerful and emotional. This led us to intentionally start creating new groupings of girls where they could understand and support each other as thinkers, not just emoters, and begin got support each other instead of degrade each other.

We started a two week summer camp for girls in a wilderness area.  We designed it to teach math, science, writing, speaking, and intuition in new ways.  We tied this together with a daily girls’ group to think through their issues and ground them in theory and “venting.”

Some of our continuing themes over the years have been motivation, respect, creativity, problem-solving, and leadership development.  The continuing development of the High Rocks project has led to experimenting with project-based learning, social-emotional learning, the Tribes model of group facilitation, and creativity education to name a few.  These methods of learning and teaching have come, over the years, to be called the “High Rocks Way” of teaching.

***The Case Study Model***

Sharing the “High Rocks Way” with incoming staff has been always been somewhat of a challenge for High Rocks.  Any staff member who has ever worked at High Rocks has heard “after you’re here for a year, then you will *get it*,” or for interns, “after you’ve worked one summer, then you’ll *get it*.”  This method places a heavy emphasis on the act of participant observation and learning, participant observation being the act of learning by way of both participating in the activity as well as observing the various things that are happening all around you.  This has been a great model that has effectively trained a host of teachers and facilitators that have come through High Rocks over the years, especially if one plans to stay for more than a year.  It has allowed incoming staff the experience of learning from master teachers, experiencing what it means to be in a group led by an expert facilitator, talented writers and musicians, and learning from a place-based oral tradition.

However, the need to share the “High Rocks Way” in a timespan of less than a year full of participant observation has become increasingly apparent upon expanding our work off of the High Rocks mountain.  We are concerned with training people to help us expand our reach in continuing to achieve the goal of helping a community of women to be the nucleus of social change.

***What should be in a case study:***
What are the big ideas that allows for a successful program?

***Examples:***
Interest polling/gauging, Don’t leave it too wide open.
Recruiting kids based on interest in a specific project (intentional recruiting).
Framing of a successful, doable project
Youth personal engagement, community involvement in youth leadership, building a group with a High Rocks identity.
Making things both emotionally and intellectually challenging.
Ways of giving girls/kids tools they need to become who they want to be.
Creative thinking (divergent and convergent—brainstorming, groups’ best thinking…tribes model)
Developing respect and power in group. (Grounding learning in the personal, not the theoretical)
Taking ownership of project—having a product and an audience.
Evaluation and reflective practices.

***Examples of existing case studies:*** *Youth Forum: High Rocks methodology for co-educational community action projects (High School)*
*New Beginnings Horses Curricula: High Rocks Methodology for girls’ social-emotional learning teaching track (Middle School)*
*Camp Steele Girls’ Group: High Rocks methodology for girls’ social-emotional learning continued learning (High School)*
*Use Your Noodle Puppets: High Rocks methodology for after-school co-educational programming (Elementary School)*

***Learning from the Cannon of Educational Literature***

In many cases a facilitator/master teacher at High Rocks will say that running a lesson plan in a certain way or using particular methods with students is the “High Rocks way.” They are referring to a methodology that has been developed over the 15 years of the organization’s history by the many people who have contributed as facilitators and teachers. To a large degree this has been a method passed down as an oral history, through apprenticeship and individual mentorship. There is a special brand of magic felt in any educational environment created by a master High Rocks facilitator. While this indicates a mythical quality to the process of developing that space, there are foundational principles and education philosophies that deeply informed the development of “The High Rocks Way.”

Somehow, we constantly find ourselves on the cutting edge of emergent educational philosophy.  We have found ourselves using many ground-breaking methodologies before someone studied or named them in national literature.  Still, we have found that the process of identifying kindred philosophy in the cannon of educational, clinical, and philosophical literature helps us build clear language and foster new ideas for application and implementation.

These principles and philosophies are not entirely original; many have an original spin when we use them, and some are entirely our own based on our particular geographical, historical and political associations and history. The knowledge and use of the principles that come out of these philosophies are an essential part of creating the magic. This section is an attempt to help you/the reader work through so of the big picture theories that inform our practice each day. The pedagogical and psycho-social beliefs and ideas about education, human development, society, emotional learning and group work described in this section come from a distinct philosophical canon that High Rocks teaching methods have grown out of since its inception as an organization.

High Rocks pedagogy supports the idea that students learn through various mechanisms, including, dialogue and introspection, writing and speaking, active movement and silence, inquiry and problem solving, individual and group work, artistic expression and logical reasoning. A facilitator will be much better off with the theoretical backdrop we provide here when creating a space where all of these things are happening, especially with a group of students who require different instructional levels.

***In general, education at High Rocks is***:
o   *Experiential:*
o   *Transformational:*
o   *Project-based:*
o   *Academically rigorous (especially in writing, creative thinking, critical thinking, logic and reasoning skills):*
o   *Personal and self-reflective:*
o   *Community-building:*
o   *Physically active, mind-body integration:*
o   *Deep Learning/spiritual (?):*
o   *Simultaneously a safe learning environment while challenging people to step outside of their comfort zones*
o   *Involving Youth Voice and Leadership*

***How to Use this Manual***

This curriculum manual is not meant to be something you can follow word for word. In our experience as educators, we have found that giving a teacher a lesson plan that they are meant to follow precisely does not work as well as giving them lesson ideas and empowering them with the foundational knowledge to create their own pathways to successful educational experiences for students. We have had go through the process, as an organization of fitting these educational philosophies and ideas about pedagogy to work for the community of students we work with—to work in a rural community, in a non-school capacity, for varying ages simultaneously, etc. The articulation of our foundational principles creates the flexibility for the progressive growth and alteration of our own methods. We feel that in order for you to resist rigidifying the methods provided in this manual, you must have the background knowledge to enrich and alter our suggestions so they work for your individual situation.

You can use this section as an evaluation tool for yourself to see where you are lining up as you build your own lesson plans with the ideas expounded in these educational philosophies. Are you engaging multiple intelligences so that more types of learners are successful and students are engaged on more than one level of learning? Are you facilitating the group so that they are all contributing collectively to shared goals and responsibilities and building community? Are you asking your students to step up and give input about where the lesson is going? Is your lesson inquiry based and does teach problem solving skills? Are you challenging students to question their own assumptions and beliefs? Are your students having a transformational experience? These questions, among others are what we hope you ask yourself as you create lesson plans, and you can use this philosophical background to understand why we focus on these questions.

***Using The Core Training Skills***
The wise teacher knows that to really engage a class, one must have a number of tricks up one’s sleeve – methods, tools, subtle ways to encourage the learners to actively listen and participate in the lesson, and to function as a group.  These tricks have been collected from a variety of sources and applied successfully by High Rocks teachers in numerous applications over the years.  These “tricks” are necessary because, through public education, students have generally been conditioned to learn in a very inactive, non-participatory, unengaged fashion and therefore require a little magic to remind them that learning is fun, exciting, challenging (in the most positive sense), rewarding, and  self-strengthening.

Most of these tricks are based on the principle of allowing the student a voice in the classroom.  Students are provided with a safe avenue to share and discuss their opinions and ideas, even while formulating and/or revising them.  A culture of mutual respect is fostered; the teacher acts more as a guide, the students act together as the captain.  By becoming personally involved and invested in the learning process, students are inherently engaged in the lesson as a whole, and much more likely to achieve and retain core objectives.