



## Portrait of a USM Learner

At University School of Milwaukee, students grow to understand learning as a journey of curiosity, resilience, and discovery. From their first day of school to their final walk across the Commencement stage, they are encouraged to see themselves not just as students, but as lifelong learners. They explore the rich diversity of human knowledge and skills, ranging from the humanities to the sciences, eventually weaving together threads from each to arrive at a deep understanding of the world enriched by multiple disciplines and informed by their own passions and interests.

Learning at USM is dynamic and meaningful, extending beyond textbooks and traditional classrooms. Our faculty, renowned for their expertise and dedication, fosters an environment where students are invited to ask challenging questions, take risks, and engage in hands-on experiences. Through these experiences, USM students learn to think critically, communicate effectively, and approach problems from multiple perspectives. They embrace both the rigor of academic pursuit and the joy of discovery, knowing that real growth often comes from moments of curiosity and exploration.

Learning is a collaborative endeavor at USM, enriched by our connections to both local and global communities. Supported by teachers, peers, and parents, our students understand that their successes and challenges contribute to their collective growth as a community of learners. They come to see learning as an ongoing, shared endeavor—one that equips them with the skills, habits, and character to thrive in an interconnected world.

As they grow through their experiences in our Preschool, Lower School, Middle School, and Upper School, USM students gain a deeper awareness of their own interests and aspirations, discovering not only what they want to achieve, but also who they want to become. Read on to see what learning means at USM across each of our divisions.



# Portrait of a Learner: Preschool

## USM Preschool students learn ...

- text and numbers provide a way of both describing and understanding the world.
- problems and questions have component parts, which require different tools and strategies.
- there are developmentally and situationally appropriate ways to communicate.
- they are individuals, with similarities and differences from others, and they are also part of a community.
- the joy and excitement of learning itself, and the sense of pride that accompanies developing new skills.

## USM Preschool students practice ...

- building foundational skills for written and oral communication, as they develop comfort with expression and find their voice.
- observing and interacting with the world in which they live.
- asking questions as they come to understand what captures their curiosity and that of others.
- collaborating with others in order to develop their social skills and enhance their learning.
- engaging with rich sources of learning with wonder and delight.

## USM Preschool students experience ...

- play and purpose across varied environments.
- joyful and loving relationships with their friends and teachers, who model care for others and passion for learning.
- free-choice time, in which they can dive into activities they love, interact positively with peers, and learn to monitor their own actions and behaviors.
- an integrated, experience-rich curriculum that fosters curiosity, cultural awareness, physical development, and a love of learning through outdoor exploration, world languages, music, movement, literacy, and real-world connections.



# Portrait of a Learner: Lower School

## USM Lower School students learn ...

- the pleasure of immersing themselves in a book, a project, a performance, and a wide range of other meaningful learning opportunities.
- big ideas are interconnected, and they can seek and identify connections across and between many contexts.
- different tools can be applied to different questions, and problem-solvers must use discernment when choosing a strategy.
- challenging work often requires strong effort and multiple attempts, and they can learn by tinkering, analyzing, and developing understanding over time.
- listening to others—those with whom we agree, and those with whom we disagree—is a powerful way to learn and show respect and care.
- classes, teams, ensembles, and other groups can learn and achieve more than an individual can alone.

## USM Lower School students practice ...

- communicating purposefully, with exposure to various writing and speaking conventions and styles.
- persevering as part of the design and problem-solving process, across subject areas and spaces.
- taking risks, and seeing both successes and mistakes as instructive.
- allowing their natural curiosity to guide their interests and their learning.
- asking questions—especially “why?” and “how?”—to enhance their understanding of the world.
- reading, hearing, and learning from different people and about different perspectives.
- being a good friend, and the responsibilities and fulfillment that come with maintaining positive peer relationships.

## USM Lower School students experience ...

- curriculum that highlights different cultures and time periods, so that they can develop an understanding of the richness and vastness of the human experience and situate themselves within it.
- culminating projects through which students exercise agency over topics, learn research and presentation skills, and share learning with a wide audience.
- opportunities in USM’s makerspace to learn safe and effective use of various tools, turning ideas from concept to prototype to reality.
- the meaningful impact of contributing within the USM community and engaging in service learning across the greater Milwaukee region.



# Portrait of a Learner: Middle School

## USM Middle School students learn ...

- intellectual and creative pursuits are worthwhile not only because of the growth and learning they foster, but because of the fulfillment, connection, and pleasure they provide.
- the tools of analysis and critique, and how to apply those to a range of contexts, from a historical argument, to a work of art, to a math problem.
- understanding of a topic is enriched and enhanced when it is explored through multiple lenses and diverse perspectives.
- beliefs and opinions are informed by data, logical argument, or other evidence, and should evolve accordingly in response.
- expansive inquiry leads to more questions.
- there are often multiple approaches to problem-solving; flexible learners can choose strategies and adapt them to suit the problem or their preferences.
- academics, athletics, and the arts are human endeavors that connect people across cultures and time periods.

## USM Middle School students practice ...

- communicating with precision, by attending to conventions such as grammar and structures such as the scientific process.
- metacognition and reflection, as they think about their learning, integrate feedback, and iterate to deepen understanding or improve a piece of work.
- persistence, perseverance, and patience, as they confront greater challenges in and outside of the classroom and learn to manage their responses to them.
- achieving meaningful and lofty goals through intentional planning and organization.
- asking more sophisticated and purposeful questions in order to deepen and clarify learning.
- discerning the reliability of sources, as they learn to recognize bias and consume data critically.
- developing emotional intelligence, through deep listening and empathetic curiosity about others.
- learning by doing—through games, play, exploration, and other creative activities—all of which continue to effectively support rigorous learning as students mature.

## USM Middle School students experience ...

- a strong balance of collaborative and independent work.
- ample opportunities to engage in high-level classroom discourse.
- a variety of ways to communicate their learning, from podcasts to essays to visual presentations and more.
- a safe environment for taking intellectual risks and trying new things.
- meaningful support from peers and adults, both in and outside the classroom.



# Portrait of a Learner: Upper School

## USM Upper School students learn ...

- discernment and appreciation of the inherent beauty across disciplines—from recognizing an elegant mathematical proof to admiring an eloquent poem.
- the importance of balancing listening and speaking, as they endeavor to understand a variety of perspectives while seeking to refine and articulate their own unique point of view.
- different subject areas offer different lenses for understanding the world, and that developing proficiency across diverse disciplines enriches one's intellectual landscape and broadens one's worldview.
- critical thinking, along with acquired content knowledge, allows one to successfully engage in the problem-solving process.
- different fields of study use different frameworks for evidence to measure the strength of arguments or claims.
- reflection is a critical phase of learning that allows for editing, revision, and synthesis.
- all individuals have unique gifts, which they can use to strengthen themselves and their communities.

## USM Upper School students practice ...

- demonstrating their learning in a variety of mastered modes, including performance, writing, speaking and developing creative projects.
- expressing themselves, trying new things, and recovering from missteps with confidence and courage.
- honing research skills, integrating a variety of resources, interrogating media, and learning from experts when pursuing scholarship.
- producing original work and ideas, by applying their own unique analysis and thought to the large and diverse body of content they have studied.
- taking responsibility for themselves and their learning, often working through productive struggle, as they become progressively more independent.
- exploring their passions—whether intellectual, creative, athletic, civic, or grounded in any number of other domains—through a variety of academic and extracurricular opportunities.

## USM Upper School students experience ...

- chances to realize what matters to them, and what values and ethical frameworks they wish to employ as they navigate their worlds.
- a phone-free environment that emphasizes emotional intelligence and face-to-face human connection.
- rigorous study underpinned by strong support from adults who know, value, and engage with them meaningfully.
- an academic program that trusts them with, rather than shields them from, the complexity and nuance of the world.