

# IN Transition

Journal of the New York State Middle School Association



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# NYSMSA GOALS

The New York State Middle School Association (NYSMSA), representing the interests of those who serve the educational needs of young adolescents, recognized the uniqueness of middle-level students. NYSMSA is committed to helping to create and support educational programs in which all young adolescents can develop their natural capabilities to their fullest extent, building upon personal strengths and the richness of our state's culturally diverse population. The Association encourages both middle-level educators and community stakeholders to work collaboratively to meet the needs of emerging adolescents in developmentally-appropriate programs founded in academic rigor, but dealing with the intellectual, physical, emotional, and social needs of students of this age.

NYSMSA's goals are listed below. Taking into consideration current research and available resources, these goals will assist the Association in fostering the creation of new curricula in support of the NYS learning standards and, in general, supporting the improvement of instruction for middle-level students in New York State.

## **AWARENESS AND RESPONSIVENESS**

NYSMSA believes that we must:

- Promote a climate of acceptance and understanding of young adolescents;
- Stimulate and promote the development of the middle level as a distinct educational structure for young adolescents;
- Promote middle-level education and be a significant advocate for the appropriate education of young adolescents;
- Offer a variety of professional development activities that positively impact the attitudes, performances, and practices of middle-level educators.
- Compile, maintain, and respond to current research and development initiatives.

## **SUPPORT**

NYSMSA believes that we must:

- Be a significant source of information and resources on young adolescents and their schooling;
- Offer consultant support to schools and districts in refining and strengthening their middle-level programs;
- Provide a variety of resources (video, publication, teleconferences, position papers, etc.) in support of appropriate programs for young adolescents;
- Seek, secure, and provide grants and other financial resources to support planing and implementation of effective middle-level practices;
- Provide, throughout the year, member services to public and non-public urban, suburban, and rural schools;
- Engage regional directors who provide, assist, and support regional and state activities;
- Support the ongoing importance of communication and interaction between State Education Department personnel and members of the Association.

## **CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, & ASSESSMENT**

NYSMSA believes that we must:

- Influence the quality and content of pre-service and in-service education for prospective and practicing middle-level educators;
- Support teachers, schools, and districts in refining and strengthening their middle-level programs;
- Work with constituent groups to identify effective models for curricular, instructional, and assessment issues;
- Disseminate position papers that provide guidance on appropriate curricula, instruction, and assessment issues;
- Monitor the implementation of the NYS learning standards at the intermediate level, promoting programs with strong academic rigor within the framework of good middle-level practice;
- Monitor the intermediate assessment results, seeking to ensure the results measure good middle-level practice and are developmentally appropriate in scope, content, and administration.

## **COLLABORATION**

NYSMSA believes that we must:

- Work with other associations in sponsoring professional development activities;
- Implement a collaborative relationship with universities, departments of higher education, SED, SMSA, parent-teacher organizations, and other groups that impact on the lives of young adolescents;
- Develop and expand cooperative ventures and relationships with corporations and businesses;
- Create networks of educators, parents, and others involved in the lives of young adolescents;
- Serve on the boards of supportive organizations;
- Engage in continuous planning through participation and shared decision-making;
- Provide for internal assessment of all major Association functions with provisions for external audit where appropriate.

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These two middle school students personify what it's like to be "in transition."

Photo courtesy of Brian Sherman, Region X Director and Assistant Principal of Indian River Middle School, Philadelphia, NY.



# From the Editor's Desk

Peter T. Johnson



Since reading my first issue of *In Transition* many years ago, I have always been intrigued by the title of the NYSMSA journal. The phrase “in transition” so

appropriately describes not only the life of kids “in the middle”, but also those of us who work with them. With this issue, it also most aptly describes the current state of this publication.

This issue marks the transition in editor from Michael Johnson to Peter Johnson. While we are not related, Michael and I share (with our readership) a deep and abiding commitment to middle level education and the folks who labor, learn, and live there. That is the single focus of this publication, and that focus will continue through the transition period, even as we challenge ourselves to improve the manner and medium through which we deliver our message.

As Michael has written so many times, this is *your* journal, *your* voice, *your* channel to share your thoughts, experiences, issues and concerns, and we will continue our commitment to provide a quality forum for practitioners of middle level education.

As Michael has done throughout his tenure as editor of the journal, I continue to encourage you (as practitioners of middle level education) to write articles about your experiences. No one knows better than the people “in the trenches” what works (and what doesn't) with middle level kids. Please continue to send us your success stories.

One of the changes during this transition period is the manner in which we will accept manuscripts for publication. One of the major changes is that all future submissions will be handled electronically, via e-mail. We believe that this will simplify and streamline the process of receiving manuscripts and preparing them for publication. Please refer to the “Submission of Articles” section on the inside back cover for specific details.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize Michael for his contributions to middle level education over the past fifteen years. Through his efforts as editor of this journal and publications director of NYSMSA, he has provided opportunities for growth (personal and professional) and a forum for the voices “in the middle”. Congratulations on a job well done, Michael!

Just as middle schoolers are works in progress, so, too, is this journal. Please be patient with us as we undergo a few growing pains. Change is never easy, and we seldom get it right the first time. Let us know what you think of our efforts on these pages: What would you like to see more of? Less of? What features and focuses are important to you? Send me an e-mail at [PTJohnson@stny.rr.com](mailto:PTJohnson@stny.rr.com) and let me know what's on your mind. I look forward to hearing from you.

Remember that all of us “in the middle” are *In Transition*.

# A few thoughts from the President...

Jeannette Stern, Ed.D.



“Good leaders make people feel that they’re at the very heart of things, not at the periphery. Everyone feels that he or she makes a difference to the success of the organization. When that happens people feel centered and that gives their work meaning.”

—Warren Bennis

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If we learned nothing else from last year, we learned that together, we can make an incredible difference. It doesn’t matter whether the “we” consists of people on a plane, people gathering supplies, people helping people, or people teaching others or learning from them. Just look at the number of American flags still waving proudly and the fact that there will soon be building where there were ruins a few short months ago, and it becomes clear that when people have a purpose, good things happen.

The same is true with middle-level education. Our students are learning...our teachers are teaching...our programs are succeeding, and even our test scores are rising. While test scores are not and should not be more than on measure of success, even then have seen gains. Our students are mastering skills that were never expected to be taught at this level before and these changes are occurring at an astounding pace. This is the first year that there have been comparisons of student achievement in ELA at grades 8 and 11. The results — our first group of

tested eighth graders are achieving at the commencement level, as we knew they would! Results in math show the same results. Middle level programs that are in support of the state’s *Essential Elements* do result in greater student achievement and positive personal development.

This year, *In Transition* welcomes a new editor, Peter Johnson. While no relation to Michael Johnson, our editor of many years, we look forward to the same level of professional stature from this publication as we have in the past. Peter needs the support of each of you. This year, we are focusing on the Essential Elements and are looking for articles describing programs that are working well in schools across the state. We are our own best resource for best practices. I hope that each of you will take some time to share the fine things that are occurring each day in our middle-level classrooms, so that colleagues from Buffalo to Riverhead and Plattsburgh to Jamestown can benefit.

On behalf of the officers and the Board of Directors, we wish you the best year yet.





# A Partnership for Academic Achievement — The Library Media Specialist-Principal

Dr. Kenneth Mitchell, NYSMSA Director of Research

## The Case for a Strong Information Literacy Program

There is extensive research indicating that quality library media programs positively affect student achievement. Dr. Gary Hartzell, a professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, describes the library as “an investment rather than a cost.” Ironically, the library is often the component of the school’s budget that is the first to be reduced during lean budgetary years. Hartzell, an advocate of a strong librarian-principal relationship, cites over fifty years of research to support his position.

The evidence indicating that student scores increase when the information literacy program is strong also transcends socio-economics. Students in lower-socioeconomic schools benefit as much as those in middle- and upper-socioeconomic communities when the following program characteristics are evident:

- Large, varied, and up-to-date collections.
- One or more full-time qualified librarians.
- Library support staff large enough to free certificated librarians from clerical routines.
- Free student and teacher access to the library during and beyond school day hours.
- Networked computers providing student and faculty access to catalogs, licensed databases, and the Internet.
- An adequate budget.
- Staff commitment to teaching.
- Individual student library-use well beyond scheduled class visitations.
- Information literacy instruction integrated into the curriculum.

- Librarian skilled in collaborating with classroom teachers.
- Librarian involved in curricular, organizational, and operational school leadership. (Hartzell, 2002)

## The Librarian-Principal Partnership

According to Hartzell, “...the positive effects of library media programs increase when the librarian’s traditional role is expanded to include involvement well beyond the library. One great barrier to full library utilization is a lack of awareness of what the library and librarian have to offer.” (Hartzell, 2002)

The importance of the librarian and the associated program services need to be recognized and valued by the principal. Once this occurs, the principal must work with the librarian to develop strategies to educate the staff about this often untapped potential. “Equally important is the principal’s role in creating a school environment where student library use and faculty/librarian interactions are valued and promoted.” (Hartzell, 2002; Campbell & Cordiero, 1996; Wilson & Lyders, 2001)

## Enhancing the Learning Environment

Hartzell (2002) attributes improved student achievement to school library media elements that are interactive. Such achievement is cumulative. He warns, “Even under optimum conditions, none is sufficient in itself. External leadership opportunities won’t increase faculty interaction opportunities if the library is impoverished. The most extensive collection will not produce maximal achievement results unless

qualified librarians and support staff are available to help students and teachers use it.”

## Summary

Over fifty years of research demonstrates that when the library is a component of a strong information literacy program and is managed by a skilled and dedicated librarian, academic achievement improves. This occurs in spite of socioeconomic conditions.

The researchers have also concluded that for this to occur individual student library-use must go well beyond scheduled class visitations. Information literacy instruction must be integrated into the curriculum. Furthermore, the librarian needs to be skilled in collaborating with classroom teachers as well becoming involved in curricular, organizational, and operational school leadership.

Most importantly, the school’s principal needs to not only respect but must actively promote, via the collaboration with the librarian, the information literacy program.

(See LaVerne H. Ireland’s *The Impact of School Library Services on Student Academic Achievement: An Annotated Bibliography*, Fifth Edition (2001; ERIC Document Number ED 450 807.)

## References

Campbell & Cordiero, (1996). *High school principal roles and implementation themes for mainstreaming information literacy instruction*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York City. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No ED 399 667).

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Wilson & Lyders, (2001). *Leadership for today’s school library: A handbook for the library media specialist and the school principal*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

# The Twenty-Third Annual Conference of the New York State Middle School Association October 23-25, 2003 Syracuse, New York

October 23 — Pre-conference Sessions; Site Visitations;  
Reception and Banquet

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Come join us in Syracuse!

The Regents Policy Statement issued in 1989 set the framework for many of the middle-level programs currently in place around the state. In 2000, the Board of Regents issued the *Essential Elements* which further delineated and clarified what should be present for success at the middle level. This year, the Board of Regents is revising its policy statement from 1989. Drafts of the new statement will be presented at public forums around the state to allow for input and suggestions. In addition, the new statement will be available on the NYSMSA website, enabling you to read the policy even if you miss one of the regional forums.

Your input is critical since the people in the field have the best first-hand knowledge about what is important for a successful and meaningful program. Please watch for the release of the draft. In the meantime, please read the original found below.

## Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and Schools with Middle-Level Grades (March 1989)

### Middle-Level Education and Schools with Middle-Level Grades

The New York State Board of Regents is committed to better beginnings and stronger completions for all elementary and secondary school students. Better beginnings prepare students to take full advantage of their educational opportunities; stronger completions enable students to take full advantage of their potential after high school. Linking better beginnings and stronger completions is that experience called middle-level education. As such, middle-level education is a priority of the Regents, because, without an effective middle-level educational experience, the advantages of better beginnings will dissipate and the possibility of stronger completions will fade.

The Regents believe that middle-level education is different from education in the elementary grades and education in the high school. It is different in that its students are experiencing a unique life phase, the change from childhood to adolescence. In addition, middle-level education provides the transition between the self-contained classroom of the elementary school and the departmentalized structure of the high school. This is not to imply that there are not commonalities among the three levels of schooling. Rather, it means that what is provided in the elementary or high school grades is not necessarily appropriate for children in the middle-level grades. Schools should not simply impose an elementary or high school orientation and structure on middle-level students, but should look carefully at the needs of middle-level students and the organization of middle-level education.

The student in the middle-level grades, typically between the ages of 10 and 14, undergoes profound transformations—physically, emotionally, socially, psychologically, and intellectually—that are unique in the individual's life. Also, middle-level education must accommodate educationally handicapped students who must go through this same process but have a more difficult time doing so due to their disabilities. Child development experts indicate that the transition from childhood to adolescence is one of the most crucial and least understood phases of personal growth.

A challenge to middle-level education is to make the transition from childhood to adolescence a positive period of development for the young, one from which they emerge with high hopes and the will to achieve to the best of their abilities. There are, however, some youngsters from all levels of society for whom emerging adolescence is a time of anguish and distress, a time where the negative outcomes include poor self-esteem, lowered expectations, difficulty in coping with peer pressures, alienation

from school and society, and educational failure. These personal difficulties may be exacerbated in cases where either the home or the community in which the young person lives is economically depressed with limited opportunities for positive role models, employment, and a satisfying lifestyle. For these young people, their future appears grim, their challenges overwhelming, and their will to succeed diminished.

Traditionally, the family, peer group, community, faith institutions, and school served as the supports for young adolescents. However, changes within the home and society have left many early adolescents extremely vulnerable, without the support systems which they sorely need. Educators, families, and communities must recognize that they need to work together, and that they need each other, to assist students in a changing society. The need exists for educators to recognize and assume responsibility not only for their students' intellectual and educational development but also for their students' personal and social development. In many cases, students with special needs requiring enhanced support, such as those who have limited English proficiency, special talents or handicapping conditions, will actually receive less than other students, because such support is assumed to be adequately provided through their special services and programs. The entire school community must share ownership and responsibility for all students and provide the education, support, and guidance required by each student.

Schools with middle-level grades have a unique function. In order to educate their students effectively, they must help students through the transition from childhood to adolescence. The success of students in the middle-level grades often is the forerunner of success in high school and in later life, for these students, middle-level education is a springboard to future accomplishments and life-long achievements. Failure in the middle-level grades often results in students dropping out of school, defeated, disaffected and consigned to lives with little future and limited opportunities. For these students there is little hope they will complete their high school education or achieve their full potential. There is a pressing need to assure high quality instruction, course content, and support and other services in the middle-level grades and to promote high expectations regardless of handicapping condition, limited English proficiency, religion, sex, color, race, or national origin.

## The Transition from Childhood to Adolescence

All students experience the transition from child to adolescent as a natural and predictable life phase. What makes the transformation unique for each individual is the diversity in the onset of changes, the rate of changes, and the ability to cope with changes. No two people experience the transition in exactly the same way. The changes that emerging adolescents experience and the resulting behaviors include:

- Accelerated physical growth marked by the development of secondary sex characteristics, by hormonal changes, and by increases in weight, height, and muscular strength.
- Increasing importance of the peer group.
- Need for frequent affirmation and heightened sensitivity to comment about personal attributes.
- Desire and need for direction and regulation as well as for independence and autonomy, exemplified by testing limits of acceptable behavior.
- Array of intellectual skills and abilities ranging from concrete thought to more complex and abstract thinking processes.
- Preference for active in contrast to passive learning activities.
- Inconsistency in behavior.
- Desire to explore, to try new things, to experiment, to learn, to grow.

The student in transition from childhood to adolescence is driven by natural forces that he or she may neither understand nor predict. Contemporary societal views and expectations of adolescents, the pres-

tures and demands of society on youngsters aged 10 to 14, and the rapid changes within society (including technological change and increasing cultural diversity) with which youngsters must cope may also affect the ease or difficulty with which these students deal with changes associated with the transformation from child to adolescent. These societal factors, while they influence all students in varying degrees, may have an especially profound effect upon those youngsters about to enter adolescence. They have the potential for compounding the ease or difficulty with which youngsters make the transition from childhood to adolescence.

Middle-level educators need to realize that these natural changes are inevitable and are often influenced by societal factors, and they need to provide educational experiences consistent with the needs and characteristics of the student in transition.

## Philosophy and Mission

Middle-level education is not just a link between the elementary school and the high school; it has a purpose all its own. Middle-level educational programs that are most successful capitalize on the unique characteristics and needs of middle-level students and serve two purposes: academic excellence and personal/social development. The philosophy and mission of middle-level education:

- Acknowledge the importance of the school in assisting the student in his or her transition from childhood to adolescence. Middle-level education acts as a stabilizing force in the lives of early adolescents.
- Affirm the school's responsibility to assist the student in his or her transition from the self-contained classroom of the elementary school to the departmentalized structure of the high school. Middle-level education equips students with the necessary academic and personal/social knowledge, skills and attitudes to succeed in the middle-level grades, high school, and beyond.
- Reflect an ethos of respect, caring, and support for the student. Middle-level grades serve as special places for students—a refuge and a support during a time of dramatic change.
- Recognize the importance of the individual. Middle-level education establishes in students a connection with school and with its purposes and never allows a student to become anonymous.
- Stress the development of the whole child, including his or her self-esteem and sense of personal identity. Middle-level education instills in students a sense of positive self-worth, self-respect, and self-confidence and a belief that each can succeed.
- Emphasize the balance between academic and personal/social growth. Middle-level education provides opportunities for self-exploration, self-definition, and self-development in the cognitive, affective, and physical domains.
- Affirm the importance of school and home connections and school and community connections in the education of middle-level students. Schools with middle-level grades seek and encourage educational partnerships with the family, community, and other human services agencies necessary for the effective education of middle-level students.
- Promote in emerging adolescents a feeling of personal efficacy and a sense of responsibility for themselves and others. Middle-level education provides opportunities and experiences for students to develop and practice responsible personal behavior, individual accountability and initiative, and a respect for others.

Successful middle-level educational programs focus on and promote both the intellectual and personal development of the early adolescent.

## Educational Program

The middle-level educational program should be outcomes-based. These outcomes should reflect the 10 Regents Goals for Elementary and Secondary School Students approved in 1984 and the attendant learning objectives contained in the various State syllabi for the middle-level grades. The educational program should emphasize and promote: the requisite academic knowledge and skills needed to succeed in school—both middle-level and high school—and in later life; positive self-concept and emerging sense of self; social and interpersonal skills; a broadened experiential base; critical learning skills including information-gathering skills, study skills, decision-making skills, and thinking skills; life skills; a sense of academic purpose; a positive attitude toward school and learning; and an appreciation of and respect for cultural diversity.

The middle-level educational program should include instruction leading to the attainment of the learning objectives contained in the State syllabi for art, health and health-related issues including family life education, home and careers skills, language arts, library skills, mathematics, music, physical education science, second language, social studies, and technology. However, this alone is not sufficient to meet the needs of the early adolescent. Middle-level students also need opportunities within the school program to develop as individuals. They need to develop the skill to explore new subject areas; learn to: examine alternatives, pursue personal interests, investigate potential futures and careers; and develop useful social, interpersonal, and life skills.

## Organization and Structure

Schools with middle-level grades are organized to promote academic excellence and to establish within staff and students a feeling of belonging and a sense of personal identification with the school and with its purposes. Each student and each staff member needs to feel a productive part of the organization. Schools enrolling middle-level students should:

- Contain at least three grade levels. Schools with fewer grades may have difficulty fostering a feeling of belonging as there is no permanence—students are either entering or leaving; they are never “just there”.
- Have comparatively small student enrollments so that every student is viewed as an individual and receives personal attention.
- Where the total student population is large, have “houses” within schools or schools-within-schools to promote a feeling of family and to reduce the feeling of anonymity among students.
- Have established procedures such as multi-year assignment of advisor-teachers, classroom teacher(s) or teams of teachers for the same students designed to develop long-term personal relationships.
- Use student grouping strategies that maintain heterogeneous classes but group for specific purposes and for brief periods.
- Have teacher teams sharing responsibility for the education and personal development of a common group of students.
- Have common planning time for those teachers and teacher teams sharing responsibility for a common group of students.
- Have schedules with flexible time assignments within blocks of time to encourage interdisciplinary programs and creative time use.
- Provide a gradual transition from the more self-contained classrooms of the elementary school to the more departmentalized structure of the high school.
- Provide a variety of cocurricular and extracurricular activities.

- Promote and encourage appropriate participation of pupils with handicapping conditions in all curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular activities.
- Have students with disabilities or other special needs, as well as their programs and services, integrated throughout the school building rather than clustered in a separate area.
- Provide support services such as guidance, counseling, and health-related services to all students.

Schools with middle-level students have an organization and structure that promote academic excellence and personal/social development.

## Classroom Instruction

Teachers in middle-level classrooms understand and appreciate the changes that are occurring within their students and recognize the behaviors manifested by these changes. They use instructional techniques and processes that capitalize on the unique developmental characteristics and individual needs of early adolescents. Successful middle-level teachers:

- Involve students in their learning, encouraging them to take risks, to explore, to question, to experience, to learn, to grow.
- Vary activities to maintain student interest.
- Use flexible grouping based upon student needs and interests to help students achieve program purposes, with students changing groups often depending upon individual needs and program objectives.
- Use a variety of teaching strategies to match instruction to the varied learning styles of individual students.
- Use interdisciplinary approaches to help students integrate their studies.
- Use cooperative learning groups and peer tutoring opportunities to develop social and interpersonal skills in addition to academic proficiency.
- Consult with each other and with other school personnel. Teachers with regular education assignments and those assigned to programs for students with special needs work closely together.
- Inform and involve parents of middle-level students in their children's education by helping them understand the instructional program, their children's progress, and how to help their children at home with schoolwork, school decisions, and successful development through early adolescence.

Administration in successful schools with middle-level grades actively encourage and support classroom activities and instruction that foster the dual purposes of middle-level education—academic excellence and personal/social development.

## Student Support

All middle-level students, and especially “at risk” students, need personal support in the school, in the home, and in the community as they experience the changes associated with the transition from childhood to adolescence. They need:

- Adults and older youth to provide them positive role models and constant affirmation and recognition.
- Respect and caring to engender a feeling of self-worth, self-confidence, and personal efficacy.
- Opportunities to examine, explore, discuss, and understand the changes associated with early adolescence.
- Counseling and guidance services to assist them in making life, career, and educational choices.

- A network of trained professionals, special programs, and community resources available to assist those who have extraordinary needs and require additional services to cope with the changes of early adolescence and/or the academic demands of middle-level education.

Schools need to collaborate and cooperate with other human service agencies in the community. Schools with middle-level grades assure, either formally through a teacher/student advisor/advisee program or informally through a school culture of caring where teachers or other adults assume responsibility for individual students, that every middle-level student has an adult mentor in addition to a guidance counselor.

## Professional Training and Staff Development

Teachers, administrators, and other school staff need to know the characteristics of the middle-level student and the instructional program and processes that are best for these students. Personnel working in schools with middle-level students also need to understand not only the philosophy and mission of middle-level education but also the philosophy and mission of the elementary school and the high school. Middle-level staff need to be up-to-date concerning the course content and curriculum outcomes for the middle-level grades. All this information should be included in the preservice training of middle-level teachers and administrators or, for certified personnel now working with middle-level students, provided through a systematic and comprehensive in-service staff development program.

## Conclusion

The Regents believe that the middle-level grades are a vital link in the education of youth, a unique period of education, and an educational priority. Until schools with middle-level grades attend to the twin purposes of academic preparation and individual self-development for all students in these years, the goals of better beginnings and stronger completions for all will not be realized.

### Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs

(Adopted by NYS Education Department: December 1999)

- Essential Element 1: A philosophy and mission that reflect the intellectual and developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents.
- Essential Element 2: An educational program that is comprehensive, challenging, purposeful, integrated, and standards-based.
- Essential Element 3: An organization and structure that support both academic excellence and personal development.
- Essential Element 4: Classroom instruction appropriate to the needs and characteristics of young adolescents provided by skilled and knowledgeable teachers.
- Essential Element 5: Strong educational leadership and a building administration that encourages, facilitates, and sustains involvement, participation, and partnerships.
- Essential Element 6: A network of academic and personal support available for students.
- Essential Element 7: Professional training and staff development that are ongoing, planned, purposeful, and collaborated.



## Interdisciplinary Magic in the Middle

Lea Macdonald and Janie Fitzgerald  
Region VI Co-Directors

*“Youngsters in the middle grades enthusiastically embrace opportunities for first-hand exploration of the world beyond the classroom where astute teachers can help them make kinds of connections between experiential learning and more conventional scholarship. They hunger how to learn in ways that transcend traditional classroom routines confined to textbooks, workbooks, and recitations about discipline specific content usually unrelated to their interests and questions.”*

—Chris Stevenson

Interdisciplinary teaching gives teachers unique opportunities to meet the developmental needs of young adolescent learners while addressing the state and national standards. To create lifelong learners, curriculum must connect students to the disciplines and real life. When students collaborate and are actively engaged in creating real products, they problem solve through team inquiry and investigation. Middle school is the ideal time for young adolescents to be immersed in authentic tasks that involve them in active learning and provide student ownership in both processes and products. This kind of immersion creates magic in the middle, which students will never forget.

Such magic happened in our classrooms. For six weeks, all seventh grade students participated in an interdisciplinary performance-based project bringing the Civil War to life. In social studies, student teams researched key events, battles, issues, and most importantly how war affected all Americans and created Confederate and Union news magazines. In English, literature circle teams read and discussed one of six historical novels focusing on life during the war

and created collaborative scrapbooks. In math, students researched statistics from the Civil War and produced different kinds of graphs. In science, students learned about surgery, medicine, and the environmental impact of the war. In home skills, students fashioned a replica of a hot air balloon modeled after the spy balloon created from Confederate dresses. Also, they prepared authentic food from both the North and the South. In physical education, students learned such dances as the Virginia Reel and the Patti Cake Polka. In music, students learned to play and sing songs from the Civil War. Finally, in technology, students learned how to type and format news articles, and with the help of a multimedia designer an interactive CD-ROM was created documenting both the processes and the products.

*The Civil War Living Museum Night* was the culmination of this unit where the students shared the depth of their learning with the community. Everyone had the opportunity to browse through the exhibits highlighting the Civil War magazines, the literature circle scrapbooks, the hot air balloon, the graphs using Civil War data, the independent student projects, and the sample food from the time period. The audience enjoyed, “Voices From the Civil War,” a stage performance of music, dance, drama, and oral interpretation of literature including original prose and poetry from students. This interdisciplinary discovery project grew from the original social studies and English project, which we began our first year together.

Imagine a social studies classroom where students assume real life roles as reporters, editors, proofreaders, technology and layout design coordinators. Students were involved in

brainstorming using the KWL pre-assessment strategy, what they wanted to know about the Civil War. They formed essential questions. Imagine students actively engaged in researching a topic that they want to learn more about and writing news articles for a commemorative magazine looking back at one year of the Civil War. During this project students learned to collaborate and create a real product. They learned the art of putting together a magazine, meeting the deadline of “going to press,” and becoming experts on one aspect of the Civil War and sharing their knowledge with peers, friends and parents at the culminating night, *The Civil War Living Museum Night*.

In addition, each student was responsible for an independent project, which would be part of the exhibit at the museum. Students chose their focus area and project idea. Then, they worked alone or with a partner in the seventh grade to create a model of battles, replicas of the cotton gin, pinhole camera, a map of the Underground Railroad route through Westchester County, original dresses from the time period, and many other original ideas. Interdisciplinary instruction created a meaningful and loving learning atmosphere for our students. They learned to question, argue, inquire, design, fail, succeed and learn to love learning. This approach is one of the most effective ways of making magic happen in your class.

Imagine an English classroom where students discovered that literature mirrors real life as they delved into one of six historical novels showing different points of view on the Civil War. They recorded their thoughts and reactions to the story in individual reader’s response journal entries. Each student identified important information that the historical fiction author sprinkled throughout the story by keeping an ongoing chart of historical facts such as people, places, and battles. Each student learned about

the time period by generating an ongoing chart of interesting showing details of what life was like back then encompassing food, clothing, transportation, the roles of men and women, and communication. Also, ongoing vocabulary lists were generated from the book. Connections grew stronger as they read and discussed poetry, speeches, news articles, and other primary sources.

Within each six-week literature circle team, students learned the real meaning of collaboration. They discussed the historical novel in meaningful ways and learned the skills of real readers while fulfilling the roles of discussion director, literary luminary, travel tracer, illustrator, and connector. Sometimes, they used observations in their reader’s response entries as

springboards for literature circle discussions. Each literature circle team created a collaborative scrapbook. In the beginning, they identified the talents and multiple intelligences of each team member, and then each student selected pages to create. These included a time line, a map, a poem, a letter, a dear journal entry, a picture, a character graphic organizer, and an artifact page.

The students took responsibility for their own learning. All of their work for the literature circles was kept in a team folder. They signed up for tasks and scrapbook pages and kept track of their progress with team record sheets for both team and individual accountability. The scrapbooks were graded using a student-generated rubric. Each bulletin board in the room became a showcase for a different Civil War era book, and students took ownership of the bulletin boards by displaying scrapbook pages that they were proud of. A cross-germination of ideas occurred where students shared insights with other classes through these interactive and rotating bulletin board displays and posted notes. Finally, each literature circle team selected several scrapbook pages to share, and

**“start small  
and  
dream big”**

they created a class presentation. Many teams used their natural flair for drama and acted out skits and puppet shows.

On a special discovery station day, students traveled through learning stations in the classroom, which made the harsh realities of slavery very clear. At the listening station, “Slaves Remember: Listen to Their Words,” they listened to a real slave and a dramatic reading by Tonea Stewart telling slave stories. Then, they took notes, filled out a graphic organizer, and wrote a short response modeled after the listening section of the English Language Arts Assessment. At the historical fiction station, “Two Glimpses of a Slave Ship,” they read short excerpts from *The Slave Dancer* and *Hang a Thousand Trees with Ribbons: The Story of Phyllis Wheatley*. Then, they listed their observations, wrote a reaction, and completed a compare and contrast graphic organizer. At the visual station, “Slavery in America: Photograph Analysis” students examined each part of a photograph, recorded their observations, made inferences, and wrote a reaction. At the advertisement station, “Slave Auction” they listed what they saw in the advertisement, identified which senses it appealed to, made inferences about the persuasion in the advertisement, rewrote the headline for the ad, and made some conclusions.

All the students’ learning was further enriched through two special activities towards the end of the project. Civil War expert and collector Richard Ricca brought a hands-on Civil War museum to the school for a presentation. Students tried on Confederate and Union jackets and caps, they held an original copy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, they examined the world through an ancient spyglass, they read authentic letters from soldiers, and they touched canteens and other equipment from the battlefield that was over 130 years old! When the students visited West Point they walked the same paths that General Lee and General Grant walked as cadets together so many moons ago. They learned that

generals who had been friends and classmates fought on both sides of this war. They did a museum scavenger hunt and located artifacts and displays that illustrated important aspects of the Civil War.

Middle school teams across the country work hard to forge interdisciplinary connections, but they struggle with finding effective teaching strategies, materials, time, and support from their colleagues to make their projects meaningful and engaging. We found the following plan to be helpful in creating an interdisciplinary discovery project, and we want to share the outline with you.

### **Phase I: Exploration**

- Brainstorm with team members to discover a common theme, issue, concept, or topic that connects naturally to each discipline.
- Create a graphic organizer or a web outlining the connections between the disciplines. A starburst graphic organizer or the computer program Inspiration works well.
- Each teacher involved needs to research and access the necessary materials (books, films, primary documents, literature, music, guest speakers, CD-ROMS, etc.) to make the connections.
- Establish the group process. Maintain open lines of communication between teachers, students, administration, and parents.
  - Set aside special team planning time before and during the project.
  - Assign roles and responsibilities.
  - Develop procedures, schedules, and deadlines.
  - Discover and design instructional strategies to make the connections.

### **Phase II: Production**

- In-depth planning by individual teachers.
- Create a team calendar for this discovery project that will be shared with students and parents.
- Write a parent letter informing parents of activities, deadlines, and the culminating

performance. Invite their participation. Teachers request confirmation that the parent or guardian has read the letter with a signature.

- Students are introduced to the project tasks, calendar, deadlines, assessments, and the culminating activity.
- On-going process and product checks as students are actively engaged in the discovery project.

### Phase III: Culmination

- Teachers, students, and parents work together to finalize the culminating activity.
- Student and teacher assessment of the project through self-evaluations, team assessments, and teacher and student generated rubrics.

Collaboration on this project opened many doors for our team of teachers; we worked to achieve a common goal rather than working in isolation. By making intentional connections between English, social studies, math, science,

home skills, physical education, and music our students were immersed in a new learning experience. Students were constantly making prudent choices within this project, and pride and effort were evidenced in the superior quality of their products.

Although you might not teach the Civil War, this model can be adapted to any interdisciplinary discovery project. Already, it has been successfully metamorphosed into an Ancient Egyptian Interdisciplinary Project. This model could work well for other historical units such as the Middle Ages, the Colonial Period, the Revolutionary War, the Roaring Twenties, and the Holocaust. In addition, it could be used in a thematic unit such as freedom, tolerance, change, or the future. The most important point to remember when embarking on an interdisciplinary discovery project is to start small and dream big. Your connections can grow every year. Now, is the time for you to collaborate and make your own magic in the middle!

## Lea's Lessons

Lea Macdonald  
Region VI Co-Director



### Building A Community of Learners The Tolerant Cooperative Classroom

*“The best kind of learning is learning all together, in little groups or big groups; it’s a really good way to teach kids. Learn with each other, not just alone. Kids who don’t learn this way are really missing out.”*

Julia D. Lewis, 6<sup>th</sup> grader  
John M. Tobin School  
Cambridge, MA

As I traveled the state and country this summer working with middle level teachers, one question was universal; how can we create classrooms where all students can learn, feel

safe, and be respected? In light of the push for high stakes testing and accountability, I was amazed and excited to hear teachers going beyond the “test” and talking to the heart of the matter. In *Turning Points 2000*, there is a chapter devoted to the importance of relationships in the school community. When middle level students feel that they belong to the group and are accepted by their teachers and their peers, motivation and performance increases. Belonging within a supportive web of relationships motivates young adolescents to take the risks necessary to ensure academic success.

Teaching young adolescents in an interactive and engaging way necessitate creating a coop-

erative, tolerant classroom. In this environment, students will learn to share ideas, to work together collaboratively, to tolerate differences, and to create a place where all students feel valued and respected. In order for meaningful engaged learning to take place the foundation must be laid in the beginning of the year to develop a sense of community in the classroom. Teachers must be willing to invest time to develop collaborative skills that will yield greater learning throughout the year. . Your investment will yield powerful results:

- The class develops a sense of community and trust.
- All students feel respected and valued
- Students interact more freely because they are safe from ridicule
- Students learn to tolerate differences and respect others ideas
- Classroom management is proactive and consistent

In this first article on creating a community of learners, I would like to focus on building the foundation of a cooperative tolerant classroom. There are three premises that will guide us on this journey:

1. Students have different learning styles, interests, and intelligences.
2. Cooperative interaction increases learning and social skill.
3. All students can learn.

In the beginning of the year I involve my students in orientation activities to break social tension and build rapport. During advisory the first week of school the students are engaged in an ice-breaking activity, “Know Your Neighbor.” Each student must get the signature of another student who has seen the same movie as them, wears the same size shoe, etc. It immediately breaks the ice that first scary day of school.

Secondly, I have my students bring in an item from home that is of value or special importance to them. In small groups students share their items and then take turns introducing

each student to the whole class as well as sharing the importance of each item. One year a shy new student shared his signed Yankee baseball and won many admiring new friends. Also, during the first week of school, I have my students take a self-assessment of their learning styles, a multiple intelligence survey and complete an interest inquiry form. They record their dominant modalities, intelligences and interests on a 3x5 card that I keep on file and use for forming teams throughout the year. To end this class period, students are actively engaged in a “Human Intelligence Hunt” to discover the many talents that their class has brought to 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies this year.

In order to build a sense of shared decision-making, students work in teams to brainstorm the class rules for the year. As each team presents their list on chart paper, the whole class votes on the top ten rules for the class. Students working together, making decisions, taking ownership of their learning has already begun before the textbooks have been removed from the shelf.

Lastly, before beginning a cooperative lesson based on content, students work to build team identity and recognize each person’s contribution to the team by participating in one of many team- building activities. For example, I have students work in teams of three, one team member is blindfolded while the other two members of the team help the blindfolded person to put a picture puzzle together. Students learn how important each member is to the team and solving the problem or task.

Collaborative small group activity has been shown to be an especially effective mode for school learning and increased achievement; however, group work requires teaching students the rationale and techniques that will ensure group and individual success. Begin early in the year to lay the foundation of collaboration. It’s worth the effort!

# What to Expect and How to Prepare for the Assistant Principalship in Middle Level Schools: A Brief Overview

Timothy P. Martin, Ed.D.



## Introduction

It seems that no matter what educational leadership articles we read these days, we can be certain of one commonality: within the text there will be the mention of the shortage of administrators within the next few years. In *Vanguard* magazine (2001), Gaffney noted that, by 2006, approximately 57 percent of all superintendents in New York State intend to retire. Approximately 55 percent of all principals in New York State intend to retire by 2007. This scenario is not indicative to New York, but to the nation. In the June 2002 issue of the *NAASP Bulletin*, a national study revealed that more than half of the middle level school principals intend to leave their positions in the next three to five years (Clark, Hackman et al, 2002). This being stated, as the domino effect begins, each position will need to be filled by administrators aspiring for the next level. Vacancies will occur in the assistant principal positions as the higher positions are pursued. There will be a demand for well-prepared, newly credentialed assistant principals.

I recently completed a study on Long Island of assistant principals in middle level schools: “The Perception of Middle Level School Assistant Principals on the Tasks They Perform and Their Administrative Preparation”). This study focused on the preparation of middle level school assistant principals, their tasks, the importance they assigned these tasks and the quality of preparation that they assigned to perform these tasks. I will provide an abbreviated outline of the study with some of the major findings in an effort to provide recommendations and guidance for those aspiring to be future administrators of middle level schools

(keeping in mind that the first administrative position is usually the assistant principalship).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine on which tasks middle level school assistant principals in Nassau and Suffolk Counties spend the majority of their time. This study further intended to identify the assistant principal’s views of the importance of those tasks to the mission of the school and the degree to which their certification program prepared them for their duties.

The middle level schools were selected because of the unique student population they serve. Galletti (2000) stated, “Middle level students, the 11- to 14-year-olds who attend grades 5-8, experience unique physical, psychological, social, intellectual, moral and ethical developmental characteristics” (p. 10). “During the developmental period of early adolescents, there is a strong need for intimacy, autonomy, cognitive challenge and feelings of competence” (Schoffner and Williamson, 2000, p. 48). Schoffner and Williamson emphasized the need for administrators and faculty to recognize and understand the characteristics of young adolescents.

Middle level schools require a school climate that involves an increased administrative role because of the adolescent students’ need for careful nurturing and supervision while the curriculum presents many academic demands on the students and teachers (Kindred, et al, 1984; Lounsbury and Vars, 1978).

## Literature Review

The literature review had three major components. The first component presented the history and role of the middle level school. The next component introduced the history and role of the assistant principal. Lastly, past and present training techniques for assistant principals were outlined.

The middle level school has evolved greatly since the turn of the twentieth century. What started out as a few junior highs in Ohio has evolved into more than 14,000 middle level schools nationally (Clark, 2002; Manning, 2000). No matter if the school is labeled a junior high school or middle school, the students they service have endured the test of time and still seem to have the same characteristics. Some of the trademark characteristics of middle age children include: growth patterns up to one foot in three years, increased appetites and fluctuating sleep patterns (Doda, 2000). These students develop emotionally and physically at a pace that is greater than any other school age population (Lounsbury and Vars, 1978; NMSA, 1992; Manning, 2000).

Middle schools were developed after World War II in an effort to better serve the middle-aged children, those between the ages of ten and fourteen. These children were thought to share more commonalities within their age group than with the age groups just below and above them in respect to their physical and emotional makeup. Middle schools were designed to focus on the individual child, and to offer a flexible curriculum that would accommodate the needs of the young adolescents in academic, social and emotional areas. Middle schools were not intended to be as nurturing or as child centered as elementary schools, nor were they to be as complex and structured as high schools. They were designed to serve the children in the middle age groups (Eichorn, 1968; George and Oldaker, 1985; NMSA, 1992).

Like the middle level school, the assistant principalship, for all grade levels, has been evolving since the turn of the twentieth century as well. What started out as a dual role position for a teacher has become a position that occasionally employs multiple administrators for one grade level.

The tasks that middle level school assistant principals attend to have changed slightly, but there are many that have withstood the test of time. Some of those tasks include: discipline, attendance, meetings, teacher evaluation, supervision of co-curricular activities, individual projects, group projects, general supervision and a myriad of other assignments (Carr, 2000; Cooley and Shen, 1999).

Having outlined the population middle level school assistant principals will oversee and the tasks they are most likely to participate in, it seems reasonable to believe that training on this position would be available and provided for aspiring administrators, thus ensuring that a well prepared administrator is ready for the role.

There are a number of ways for aspiring school administrators to prepare for their future career path. Universities throughout the United States use a multitude of management training techniques to include non-traditional programs to develop the skills needed to fulfill the role. Internships, shadowing, problem-based learning, reflective practice, cohorts, portfolio assessments, multimedia communication and case studies are all methods embraced by the universities in their administration preparation programs (Hughes, 1997; Kraus, 1996; Meadows and Dyal, 1999; Nagel, 1991; Shackelford, 1998).

Induction programs, leadership academies, coaching and mentoring are programs and techniques provided to administrators to support them once they have assumed the administrative position (Gold, 1990; Rogus and Drury, 1988; White, 1997).

In New York State, rigorous training curricula are required for all administrators. There is no categorical difference in the training of elementary, junior high, senior high, middle school assistant principals or central office personnel; but there are vast differences in the student populations at each level of responsibility. Assistant principals of junior high and middle schools in New York State are not required to obtain specific training pertinent to their role and are certified as general building-level administrators.

With all the information available to prepare new administrators, it was puzzling to find that administrators reported that their preparation programs were inadequate. Casavant and Cherkowski (2001) revealed that effective school leadership relied on effective leadership development. They found that traditional educational leadership programs were not meeting the needs of new administrators. In their study, they reported that school leaders did not possess the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors required for their jobs.

## Findings

All one hundred forty-six middle school and junior high school assistant principals in Nassau and Suffolk Counties received a questionnaire packet. The overall response rate was 68.7 percent. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents worked in middle school while the others worked in junior high buildings. Sixty-six percent of the schools encompassed grades 6–8.

At the time of this study (2001-2002), the assistant principals who responded to the survey were 46 percent female and 54 percent male. The highest academic degree achieved (by almost 90 percent of the respondents) was the Professional Diploma. The majority (66 percent) of assistant principals reported completing the administrative requirements prior to 1996. Seventy-two percent of the respondents went to Long Island colleges for their administrator credentials.

The data revealed that there were a variety of years of experience, with 54 percent reporting between zero and five years. The assistant principal position, in the majority (87 percent) of cases, was the first administrative position for many educators. Slightly over 50 percent of the respondents stated that their pre-assistant principal position was either teacher or guidance counselor.

There were 20 task statements for the assistant principals to respond which incorporated a Likert response. There were also three questions that utilized the open response method. Nine tasks (of the 20 Likert and three open-response questions) were revealed by the assistant principals to be time consuming and important, and should be included in administrator preparation programs. They were: general administration, teacher observations, administering assessments, master scheduling, student discipline, meeting students, meeting parents, campus safety and communication/interpersonal skills. Notably, not one of the nine tasks did the majority of assistant principals report they had received any significant preparatory training.

Over 60 percent of the assistant principals received their training through the lecture and discussion format. Only 2.5 percent of the assistant principals reported that their internship (540 hours for New York State graduates) was the majority of the course work. No assistant principal reported utilizing multimedia communication as an instructional learning tool for the course work in their preparation programs. The data revealed that a significant majority of the assistant principals (84 percent) reported no additional support once they were in the position.

## Recommendations

Aspiring middle level school assistant principals should be cognizant of the student population and their unique needs. There is current literature and conferences readily available in reference to young adolescents and “hot

topics” in the middle level schools sponsored by organizations such as NYSMSA and NMSA. The majority (88 percent) of respondents were employed by middle schools. The importance of continuous reading and participation in reference to the “middle school philosophy” can not be stressed enough.

When possible, candidates should seek out universities that can provide an administrative preparation program that emphasizes the nine most common tasks that middle level school assistant principals perform. If this is not available, aspiring administrators can research these tasks via workshops, conferences, mentors and literature. It is important to remember that the vast majority of the respondents reported no significant training on these tasks, yet it was greatly desired. Additionally, the professional diploma is typically the highest academic achievement by most assistant principals, yet the course work is geared, in most cases, for the principalship.

Since the assistant principal position is the first administrative placement for the majority, aspiring administrators should fulfill the required internship with an experience that will have a lasting, positive impression. It is up to the candidate to pursue a placement that is relevant to her or his aspirations. Internships will most likely be in progress at a time that lacks any convenience for the candidate. This should be realized at the onset, so that the importance of a potentially well structured experience is not minimized.

The literature suggested that assistant principals should have been provided with or pursued additional training after they assumed the position. This is not only essential for new administrators, but veteran administrators as well. Leadership academies are becoming more readily available for aspiring and practicing administrators. These should be sought after, in addition to collegial circles, mentors and professional associations with an effort to remain

current and in the loop in relevant leadership methods and philosophies.

## Summary

The assistant principal has a complex job description, and it is intensified if the position is in a middle level school. The majority of middle level school assistant principals reported that they were dissatisfied with their preparation, and learned about the job on the job. The preparation can be greatly enhanced if candidates are persistent and seek out the resources relevant to the role they wish to fulfill. This should occur while the candidate is in the professional development program so that the knowledge and skills are obtained prior to graduating from the program.

The near future will provide many opportunities for aspiring administrators, as leaders of the future are prepared today. While educational and societal demands are forever evolving, future leaders need to embrace these facts and consistently invest in the systems that will provide them with the knowledge and skills that coincide with the demands.

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# Climbing Walls to Leadership

Sid Germain



“On belay?”

“Belay on!”

“Climbing.”

“Climb!”

If you recognize the above dialogue, you probably are aware of the importance of physical education curriculum and leadership development. If these words do not look familiar and you are interested in developing leadership skills in students, then this just might be for you.

This dialogue takes place between rock climbers and their belayers to insure, in part, the focus of the belayer. Many of us think of rock climbing as an activity common to a small group of extreme sport participants who are fortunate to experience not only the freshness, beauty, and challenge of the outdoors, but also to experience the outcomes of such an activity. Outcomes like cooperation, teamwork, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, and a physical workout unmatched by most traditional sport activities are all part of the experience. Well, it seems we need to rethink this view of rock climbing.

In our middle school, we brought the climbing experience to our students. Through the cooperative efforts of our dedicated and visionary principal and a Parent-Teacher Organization determined to continue to improve our school, we built a real rock wall at one end of our newly expanded gymnasium. Physical education curriculum has, as a result, changed in our middle school. A rock wall unit three weeks in length (approximately nine 40-minute periods) has been

established with basic knot tying, bouldering, climbing, and belaying skills taught.

What a breath of fresh air! Imagine a physical education class of 20-30 students at stations in the gym surrounding the wall. Students “boulder” (move horizontally on the wall no higher than seven feet above the floor, practicing a variety of grips and foot-work), tie basic knots with lifelong uses (figure-eight follow through and stopper knots), climb a variety of seven courses (with increasing levels of difficulty), and belay other students.

What? You are thinking that having students belaying other students is too risky. Not so! There is more here than one might think at first glance. Think about a physical education class with students busy, involved, and responsible for teaching each other, structured yet loose, with something for everyone. Sounds unlikely, but that is exactly what is happening. One might think that the novelty is what drives these classes. Not true! It is the activity and organization. The rock wall provides an opportunity for all students to participate at their own level of interest and ability. Kids love to climb. In a sense, the wall levels the playing field for all students. Many of the above-mentioned outcomes provide opportunities for unlikely students to emerge as solid climbers and, more importantly, as helpful leaders.

An outcome of the climbing wall unit is the increased responsibility Adventure Club members assume during physical education classes. First, the Adventure Club is for any interested students in grades six through eight

who want to be involved in non-traditional activities like rock wall climbing, roller skating, and winter camping. Second, the members are trained to set up, climb, belay, and take down. Some meetings are spent teaching members to be responsible belayers. Adventure Club members who have passed the belaying test are allowed to belay other students during physical education classes. Imagine the feelings of pride and self-confidence (both desirable leadership qualities) of students who are belayers in class. Can you imagine the trust and confidence student climbers must have in student belayers? Climbers must thank their belayers after being safely lowered to the ground, and it is easy to imagine the new dialogue that takes place. The increased self-confidence, self-esteem, and sense of responsibility that belayers have are outcomes available to all students. Leadership comes naturally to these physical education students. It seems that their attitude toward class, their relationships with other students, and their ability to serve as appropriate role models for their peers, all improve as a result of developing these new skills.

As Adventure Club members and other students in the class emerge as leaders, the class takes on a student-centered atmosphere in place of the traditional teacher-centered model. Motivated learners teach other students their own methods of knot tying to achieve the same final result – a perfect knot that is both safe and easy to untie! The concept of kids teaching other kids is not new, but it is often difficult to achieve. In this case, it is easy to step back as teacher and watch these students take over their own destiny in this class and learn in an atmosphere of mutual respect, with most classes at a 100 percent participation level.

So, what do you think? Does “climbing walls to leadership” sound like an appealing way to develop these skills? If so, remember

those few simple words that encourage leaders to emerge, words that form such an important dialogue:

“On belay?”

“Belay on!”

“Climbing.”

“Climb!”

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## Guiding Students from Literal to Conceptual Levels of Cognition

Richard J. Marchesani, Ed.D.

*The hand of the 8<sup>th</sup> grader shoots into the air as he fires an excited question: “Why did the Soviet Union fall apart?” The student teacher halts, looks puzzled, and then quickly retorts: “Because they didn’t want to be communists any more.” (Student teacher’s lesson during internship)*

### Lessons Lacking Depth

The question and frail answer came amid a lesson on the fall of communism in Europe. The questions, gleaned from the weekly Scholastic newsletter, were set up in a competition with half of the students holding cards with terms, and the other half holding ones with matching definitions. The object was for each student to pair up with the appropriate partner and thus form a “bond” of information. Prior to the competition, no explanation was given, nor was there background information on Russian history, or explanation of concepts such as capitalism, global markets, defense spending patterns, or political and nationalistic goals. Hence, with few exceptions, the questions were constructed on the literal level and, therefore, geared to elicit one word, knowledge-level, answers.

In fairness to the teacher, the nature of such lessons finds root in the overwhelming breadth of material needed to be covered, leaving little room for depth. For example, in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the Global Studies teacher must take her students from the Paleolithic Age to the Age of Exploration. The pressure to cover more contradicts theory and research advising that studying fewer concepts in depth promotes comprehension and long-term retention (Caine, 1997). The “Jeopardy” type of lesson is popular with stu-

dents and teachers alike, as it facilitates the “covering of the material,” but subverts comprehension and dissolves good lessons into a competition where the focus is the winning of the prize.

### Theorists Back Cognitive Connections

Howard Gardner believes that a more thorough investigation of key concept through such techniques as reciprocal teaching/learning can greatly improve actual comprehension of the material (Gardner, 1991). This type of instruction engages the student by encouraging a critical approach to the topic. In the case of the fall of communism, this would entail reading a few articles or newspapers reports on the events surrounding the fall, followed by a teacher-led discussion utilizing probing questions, for example: Why do you think the Soviet army didn’t arrest the people protesting in the streets? What do we know about the Soviet economy prior to the fall? Students trained in asking questions of analysis would automatically wonder about the “why” and “what-for” of the event. The youngster’s question had a genuine desire for cognitive closure. He had moved to the analytic while the student teacher was focusing on the knowledge level of retention.

Instruction geared for comprehension must reach beyond the literal level of cognition. Identifying names, dates, and places is necessary towards the understanding of history, but it is *not* understanding history itself. Through a dialogue among and between the learners, the teacher and the text, a beginning of comprehension takes place. Students who find real world connections to material presented in class will have greater understanding and retention. The

brain retains information that has been sequenced and built around natural conversational language (Sylvester, 1995). In class, dialogue that stretches from literal to conceptual levels of thinking should be conducted within the informal language of the middle schooler.

Discussion and dialogue, when enacted through student experience, is one answer. Vygotsky tells us that concept and language formation complement one another as the child develops cognitively (Vygotsky, 1938). As linguistic ability becomes complex, it enables the learner to assemble more concepts which, in turn, contributes toward the building of broader linguistic articulation. At the root of this process, however, is the student's awareness of relationships and connectivity of terms and concepts. The teacher facilitates the student's growth by creating the learning environment and nourishes it with challenges that will stimulate these connections and relationships.

### Moving from Literal to Conceptual Levels of Cognition

Making lesson plans that move smoothly through the cognitive levels of comprehension is best accomplished through modules of inquiry (Suchman, 1962). No doubt, we all remember our college professor grilling us about Bloom's

levels of abstraction. As we develop our lesson plans, we should be leading our students from the knowledge level to the evaluation level of cognitive comprehension. Experienced teachers often do this as a matter of natural transition from leading questions to formulating conclusions and making predictions. For many teachers new to the classroom, this exercise in cognitive branching may take some thought and planning. Sadly, some experienced teachers avoid it as being "too much work".

Facts, dates, persons and events delivered on the literal level can find meaning and potential for greater cognitive understanding if they are presented within a context of connectivity. Teachers who continually ask "what?" of a topic, and seldom ask "why?" are missing chances to make those connections. Furthermore, the teacher who reaches out to form relationships of ideas within the personal world of each of her students is one who will, no doubt, see genuine student interest in the topic at hand.

Moving through these levels of cognition can become routine in a teacher's instructional style. Whether it is math, science, English, foreign language, social studies, or any form of the unified arts, evoking student response along three levels of cognition may simply be a matter of organization. Table 1 provides an example of

**Table 1**

Topic	Activity	Literal	Interpretive	Conceptual
Star patterns and constellations	Mapping sky patterns through film presentations and actual student observations.	What is the definition? What are its origins? Where is it? Who is involved?	How does it work? How is it organized?	Why does it exist? How can it be applied? What is its value? What does it teach us?
<b>Curriculum Strain</b> Astronomy	<b>NYS Standard</b> Science Standard 1 - Scientific Inquiry - formulating questions about natural phenomena	What are the names and shapes of star groups?	Mapping the organization of stars. Finding relationships between stars and star groups.	Reasons for identifying star groups. Application for fiction or space travel. Considering the ontology of the universe.

**Table 2**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Literal</b>	<b>Interpretive</b>	<b>Conceptual</b>
Character Development	Discussion on <i>The Building Blocks</i> by C. Voight	Who are the characters? Describe them. Who is an antagonist? Protagonist?	What are the causes and effects in character action? How does structure affect outcome?	What can we conclude from the novel's actions?
<b>Curriculum Strain Literature</b>	<b>NYS Standard Language Arts Standard 2 - Language for literary response and expression - identifying specific literary elements.</b>	Who are Brann's friends? When does the story take place? What are the conditions?	What is impacting Brann's life and why? Why is this not really a fantasy? How does the author use the trick of time to develop her characters?	What does this novel say about families? How can parents influence a child's life? How does perspective affect opinion?

how a teacher might organize a lesson around the study of star groupings. The questions are geared to stimulate discussion through the strand from knowledge level to conceptual levels of comprehension. This format is easily constructed and can help the teacher to organize the week's lessons within a framework that constantly attends to cognitive challenge. Repetition of these questions throughout all topics of a particular discipline will eventually inculcate a routine of expectation among students to think globally on their own.

Table 2 is an example of a lesson in the literary strain where questioning leads the reader to a higher level of thinking beyond the characters and plot. Establishing a format that students expect as a matter of routine will generate an environment of critical thinking. Of course, English teachers routinely use questioning and discussion to explicate characters and plot, but it is essential that students are aware that there is a difference between thinking on the literal level and on the conceptual level. That awareness helps establish their commitment to the material and their investment into the learning process.

If our student teacher attempting to enlighten those 8<sup>th</sup> graders about the fall of communism had first established some connection to what is

meaningful to a young adolescent, she may have had more success. For example, Russian economy under the Soviets was noticeably sparse in providing popular market items such as jeans, CDs and walkmans. The teacher might have begun by asking her students how they would see their lives without those items. By establishing a familiar context, the next step is to focus on what is unfamiliar and bring the students to a connectivity of thought. From there, through careful questioning and response, a teacher can facilitate a lesson whereby her class is then working from an ever-expanding conceptual picture of the topic.

Middle school students are probably the greatest in need of instruction that is enhanced with cognitive challenge. It is precisely this age where Piaget's formal operational stage of cognition finds the young 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grader taking steps toward hypothetical reasoning. It is not enough to know what — they want to know why.

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## Submission of Articles

*In Transition* is now accepting manuscripts for publication consideration. Our journal is produced by the New York State Middle School Association and is dedicated to those teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and others serving the needs of students aged 10-15. *In Transition* is a juried publication; all manuscripts are reviewed and approved for publication by a panel of members from the NYSMSA Board of Directors.

Manuscripts describing successful programs, stimulating projects, exemplary teaching techniques, unique team concepts, action research, and promising practices are welcome! We are particularly interested in articles on implementing the new Standards, teaming, interdisciplinary instruction, authentic assessment, flexible scheduling, integrating technology into instructional programs, and application of the *Essential Elements*.

Please note the changes in the following format guidelines:

- LENGTH: 400-2,000 words (two to eight pages)
- FORMAT: MS Word or compatible, double space, Times New Roman 12, 1-inch margins. Citations of referenced works should follow current MLA or APA standards.
- ILLUSTRATIONS: All illustrations, tables, charts, photographs, etc. must be high quality, black and white or grayscale. Photographs must be in JPEG format and include captions identifying subjects, activity, and source or photographer. All illustrations become the property of NYSMSA.
- COVER PAGE: Each article submitted must include a cover page with the following information: Title, Author, Position, School OR Home Address (please indicate which), Telephone Number/s, E-Mail Address, AND a brief synopsis of the content of the manuscript.
- SUBMIT TO: All documents must be submitted as e-mail attachments to:  
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**Please note: Only e-mail submissions will be considered; do not send fax or paper copies of manuscripts.**
- DEADLINES: Manuscripts must be received by August 15 for the fall issue, December 15 for the winter issue, March 15 for the spring issue.



## What is Lego Robotics All About?

Dr. Martha L. Harville

A child's toy has become a new-visions learning tool for educators to develop math and problem-solving skills for youngsters 9-12 years old. Educators are hopeful that Lego toys will help students become more interested in engineering and mechanical careers. These careers need good workers in the future to develop more technological devices and systems.

My school, I.S. 227 Queens, participated in the First Lego League Tournament - a first for middle scholars. It was amazing! We received funding from Verizon and our local school district to get the Lego Dacta Robotics system and table. I was the coach/coordinator for my school. One teacher was the turnkey person for the tournament and one paraprofessional was also instrumental in assisting students to prepare for the tournament.

Teacher as Coach was a brilliant idea, and an experience that I will never forget. There were 50 students enrolled in our Lego Tournament Club. Team leaders were selected to attend the tournament and to compete for our school. The tournament was held at Polytechnic College in downtown Brooklyn. Students had to program an RCX Lego Microcomputer using the IBM PC computer. The RCX was the brain of Lego Dacta Inventions. It uses sensors to take input from its environment to process data, and to signal output motors and lamps to turn on and off.

The tournament challenge was to program the RCX Lego Microcomputer to survive and independently complete tasks in an arctic environment. There were six survival tasks for the robot to complete:

1. RCX had to remove a core of ice and take it to another location.
2. RCX had to travel across the ice platform.
3. RCX had to deliver supplies to a workstation.
4. RCX had to rescue the people without touching the bears and deliver them to safe location in the arctic environment.
5. RCX had to activate the weather station.
6. RCX had to travel back to its starting location.

The real challenges existed in the designing a robot that would be durable and capable of accomplishing all six tasks. Setting up the sequence of events for each task was problematic and a student program challenge. Teamwork was crucial at this point, and all ten tournament students help to strategically plan programs that would put the robot through all of the tasks successfully. The precision of the robot's movements was important to students as they developed instructions and planned strategies for the RCX to follow.

The Louis Armstrong Middle School, also known as I.S. 227 Queens, earned 100 points for three out of six challenge tasks. The competition was tough, and the rules were clear and reinforced for accuracy. All in all, the exposure and learning experiences for all of us was awesome and worth it all. I.S. 227 Queens has received corporate support for the 2002-2003 school year, and we eagerly await the new challenge for the Lego robot.

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*Your region is determined by  
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# Corning Middle-Level Institute

Save the dates: Sunday, June 29- Tuesday, July 1, 2003

Plan to join us for our first annual NYSMSA/CMoG Middle Level Institute to be held in Corning, NY at the Corning Museum of Glass' ultra modern facility. In addition to receiving 10 hours of intensive hands-on middle-level instruction, participants will be able to visit the glass exhibits and create their own works of glass.

There will be six workshops offered with a maximum enrollment to ensure individualized attention.

- Standards-Based Middle Level Leadership — Jeff Craig
- Magic in the Classroom: Bringing Your Curriculum to Life — Janie Fitzgerald and Lea Macdonald
- Meeting the Standards in a Middle-Level Mathematics Classroom — Nancy Sampson
- Engaging Diverse Learners in Meaningful Work: Using Collaboration to Meet the Needs of Middle Level Students — Dr. Paul Vermette and Toby Marr, Niagara University
- Using Data to Close the Gaps in Student Learning at the Middle Level— Patricia Loncto and Linda Ruest
- 6 Traits of Writing: Strategies and Assessments for Improved Writing — Karen Adams

Registration is \$300 a person and covers participation in the workshops and other events. Please see the NYSMSA website ([www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org)) for more information or watch for the mailing coming to each middle-level building in the near future.

Deadline for registration is June 2.



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