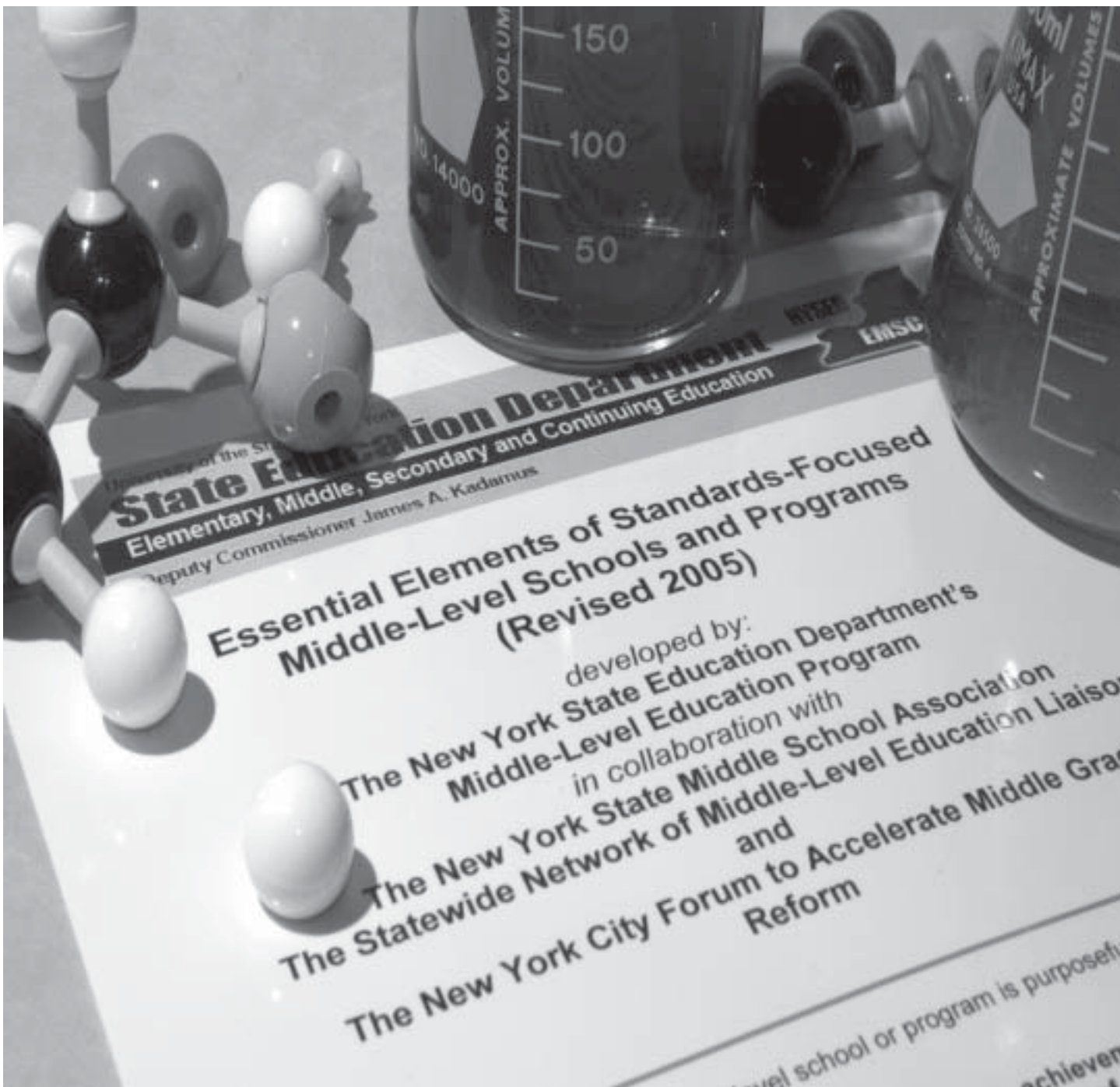


# IN Transition

Journal of the New York State Middle School Association



# 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.

## **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.

## **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.

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Original photo by Brian Sherman, NYSMSA Region X Director and principal of Indian River Middle School, Philadelphia, NY.

# NYSMSA / CMoG Middle-Level Institute

Sunday, June 26- Tuesday, June 28, 2005

Brochure and registration materials now available at [www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org)  
Just press the Institute button on the home page.

You are invited to join your middle-level colleagues from across New York State at the third annual NYSMSA/CMoG Middle-Level Institute.

The registration fee is \$330. Registrations will be accepted on a "first come, first served" basis in order to prevent over-subscription to individual sessions.

## Institute Workshop Offerings

(10 hours of intensive hands-on instruction in the workshop of your choice plus other education-related activities.)

**Session A** — Jeff Craig

*Standards-Based Middle-Level Leadership*

**Session B** — Janie Fitzgerald & Jim McIntyre

*Square Pegs and Round Holes: Ways to Make Today's Curriculum Fit Today's Adolescent*

**Session C** — Dr. Paul Vermette & Cindy Kline

*Collaborative Constructivism in Middle-Level Classrooms: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards with Cooperative Learning*

**Session D** — Jennifer Borgioli

*Teacher-Driven Data Analysis of the New York State Assessments: Facilitating a Protocol for Improving Instruction*

**Session E** — Karen Adams

*6 Traits of Writing: Strategies and Assessments for Improved Writing*

**Session F** — Carolyn & Kim Loucks

*MORE Serious Fun in the Middle-Level Classroom*

The highly acclaimed NYSMSA / CMoG Middle-Level Institute will be held at the Corning Museum of Glass from Sunday, June 26 through Tuesday, June 28. This year, the Institute features six workshops conducted by outstanding practitioners who are recognized for both their high level of expertise and their presentation skills. Attendees select one workshop in which they will participate for ten hours over three days. Each of the hands-on workshops is limited to 20-25 participants. A variety of other interesting, education-related activities are also included as part of the program.

The three days of the Institute will be filled with workshops, collegial activities, glass work, and social events. Evaluations of the past two years have been outstanding. This is your opportunity to meet new colleagues from across the state, update your middle-level skills and knowledge base, and return to work with practical, fresh, and exciting new ways to improve instruction in your school. Bring a colleague or — better yet — your whole team, as this will allow you to share as you learn and plan activities for the new school year. For more information and registration materials, please go to [www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org).

We look forward to seeing you at the Institute!

# A few thoughts from the President...

Jeannette Stern, Ed.D.



*“If a doctor, lawyer, or dentist had 40 people in his office at one time, all of whom had different needs, and some of whom didn’t want to be there and were*

*causing trouble, and the doctor, lawyer, or dentist, without assistance, had to treat them all with professional excellence for nine months, then he might have some conception of the classroom teacher’s job.”*

*— Donald D. Quinn*

I have seen this quotation often on the Internet lately. I believe it has become so popular because it is spring. For most people in New York (non-educators, I might add), spring is a time of renewal, of flowers, of rebirth, growth and happiness. People enjoy taking walks or driving around seeing the vibrant colors of spring flowers as the world seems to wake up from a winter sleep. For those in education, however, it is also a time of state aid formulas, local budget votes, annual reviews in special education, public meetings on school report card results, and the bulk of the intermediate assessments. This year, it also means more information from our State Education Department on how to implement the Regents policy statement at the middle level. Information on these “three models” is included in this issue and will be

highlighted on the NYSMSA website ([www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org)).

In this issue of *In Transition* are a number of articles providing a wealth of information on various aspects of education “in the middle.” Connie Evelyn details the difficulties in creating Staley Middle School, literally from the ground up, and coming out with a building and program to be proud of. Kathleen Rein of Driver Middle School explains how Project Success unites parents, teachers, and students to raise student success in seventh grade. Mimi Wolff of South Seneca explains the value of the teacher mentor program in her school. Lea’s Lessons explains how important it is for teachers to understand brain-based research in order to create learning experiences that will challenge students to become lifelong learners. Chris Reed, principal of Glens Falls Middle School, details plans that need to be in place before emergencies arise.

None of these articles deal with the curriculum tested on state assessments. Yet all contain information critical to success for educators. Each of these articles speaks to the human aspect of education, the interaction that occurs in the classroom, daily if you are lucky, that is long remembered after isolated facts are long forgotten. In the book, *Living a Life that Matters*, Harold Kushner reminds the reader of the importance of helping adolescents feel they are important. “I have known many an adolescent, myself among them, who was redeemed from self-doubt by hearing...from a...teacher: You are a good person despite some of the things you’ve

done, and you can grow up to be somebody who matters.” In the same book, Kushner relates that when successful men and women who have overcome extraordinary circumstances are asked how they were able to manage this feat, they often begin their answer with the words: “There was this teacher...”

As the quote at the beginning of this message so aptly shows, the level of complexity involved in teaching has increased each year. Challenges inside and outside the classroom have hastened the retirement of some and kept others from entering the field. For those of us who teach at the middle, spring should be a time to stop and reflect on the growth of the past year and of the interactions that we have enjoyed. Teaching is not for everyone. In April, after his death, it was noted that Frank Purdue (of chicken fame) had gone to the State Teachers’ College (now

Salisbury State) to become a teacher, but decided not to finish since he didn’t want to spend his life grading papers and never making any money. Maybe that is the link to the expression that teaching isn’t for the chicken-hearted?

Teaching at the middle, or at any level, is more than grading papers and state assessments, or discussions of budgets and money, and this issue of *In Transition* supports that statement. Take some time, take a chair into the sun, listen to the birds, smell the flowers, and feel renewed as you read what others have shared. Then, if the mood strikes, take the time to share what you have been doing to create magic in your classroom and send it to us at [editor@nysmsa.org](mailto:editor@nysmsa.org) to be included in our fall edition.

Enjoy the summer and remember that you do what many can’t. You influence the future!

## Nominations for Fall 2005 Election

NYSMSA is governed by a Board of Directors elected by its membership. Nominations are needed for the following positions:

- **President**
- **Vice President**
- **Director of Region V**
- **Director of Region X**

Officers serve for a period of two (2) years. Candidates for President and Vice President must have served on the NYSMSA Board of Directors for a minimum of two (2) years immediately prior to running for office.

Regional Directors serve for a period of three (3) years and must work in the regions they represent.

The Board, along with other association personnel, meets approximately six times a year to direct the course of our professional organization.

You may nominate an individual or self-nominate for any of the open positions. Please provide the following information:

- Name
- Current Work Position
- Place and Address of Employment
- Work and Home Telephone Numbers
- Work Fax Number
- E-Mail Address
- Position being sought by nominee

In addition, please include a photograph and a paragraph discussing your reasons for seeking this position. All nominations must be postmarked no later than **July 29, 2005**.

**Mail to:** NYSMSA, P.O. Box 53, Pleasantville, NY 10570.

Ballots will be mailed to the membership in late August. Election results will be announced at the October 2005 conference.

# The Executive Director's Message

Dennis M. Tosetto



By now, every middle-level educator in New York State should be aware that the Board of Regents recently adopted the *State Education Department's Strategy to Implement the Regents Policy on Middle Level Education* (Janu-

ary 2005). Considerable information is available about the new *SED Strategy* on the NYSMSA and SED websites and elsewhere, so I will use this space to discuss the implementation of the strategy rather than detail what it includes.

I will begin by saying that the *SED Middle-Level Strategy* sets a positive, clear direction that is developmentally appropriate, educationally sound, and includes unambiguous outcomes. As a document, it is inclusive and provides for an equitable, quality education for each of the state's young adolescents.

Will this middle-level strategy be implemented with fidelity across New York State? As of this writing, I believe that it is too soon to tell. Certainly, SED has stated it intends to implement appropriate checks and balances at the local and state levels to ensue compliance. However, for a variety of reasons, many educators are concerned that this may not happen effectively. If we don't learn from the past are we bound to repeat it? The 1989 *Regents Policy Statement on Middle Level*

*Education* was an excellent document that stated in precise terms how best to teach young adolescents, but never made its way, as a holistic practice, into many of the state's middle-level schools. In fact, more than ten years after its adoption, numbers of the state's middle-level practitioners had never heard of this policy. Moreover, no one can speak to the level of implementation of any part of that policy because neither baseline nor current statistical data have ever been collected.

Educators working in the non-tested areas are greatly concerned that Models B and C, as identified in the strategy, will be used in some school districts not as a tool to improve the quality of instruction as intended, but to resolve budget problems by wiping out entire programs, including teachers, in targeted schools. We know that there are districts where this type of decision-making occurs and that without suitable external checks and balances, this type of abuse will likely extend, in one degree or another, to the local implementation of Models B and C.

How can we ensure that the new *SED Middle-Level Strategy* is implemented with fidelity across the state? To succeed, it needs the active, knowledgeable support of educators and parents. The State Education Department can have the best of intentions, but their ranks have been greatly reduced over the past several years, and it is doubtful that they can effectively move the strategy forward alone. Regardless of how instruction is to be delivered in a particular school, the regulations require that instruction be provided to all students in all twenty-eight *NYS Learning Standards*. Before program changes are made,

the school community should be informed as to how this will be accomplished and by whom. If subjects such as art, music, or home and careers skills are eliminated in a school, then according to the *SED Middle-Level Strategy*, *NYS Learning Standards* that were covered in those subjects will have to be embedded and evaluated in other subjects such as English, math, or science.

To be effective, teachers and parents must be knowledgeable regarding the revised *Regents Policy Statement on Middle Level Education* and know exactly what the *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs* and the *Intermediate Learning Standards* require. They should all understand the basic concepts relating to the *SED Middle-Level Strategy* and know where to go for additional information when it is needed. It seems to me that educators would do well to do their best to ensure that their respective communities understand what is quality middle-level education, what the state says we are to be doing, and how educators are working to meet the *Essential Elements*.

Over the past few months, collegial conversations about the *SED Middle-Level Strategy* seem to focus primarily on Models B and C and how they should or should not be implemented. It is crucial that the *Middle-Level Essential Elements* and the *Intermediate Learning Standards*, both of which are featured in the strategy, become the centerpiece of any discussion regarding the *SED Middle-Level Strategy*.

To be successful, the spotlight must be on ensuring quality instruction in all middle-level classrooms across the state. If we focus the statewide discussion on the *Essential Elements* and more effective teaching, instead of on how to gain more time during the school day to remediate the results of less effective practices, then a host of potential problems can be resolved and our middle-level students will benefit greatly. I remain hopeful that, for the sake of our students, we will have the professional pride, ambition, and perseverance to finish what we started in 1989.

Do you have a colleague who has promoted good middle-level practice in your school, area, or region?

Is there a business partner or non-educator who helps you create the best opportunities for students in the middle?

Honor that person with one of NYSMSA's special awards:

- Connie Toepfer Award for Leadership
- Ross M. Burkhardt Educator Award
- Business & Community Partnership Award

Go to [www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org) and click on Awards Nomination on the home page menu for further information and nomination forms.

# Three Models: Three Paths to Middle-Level Excellence



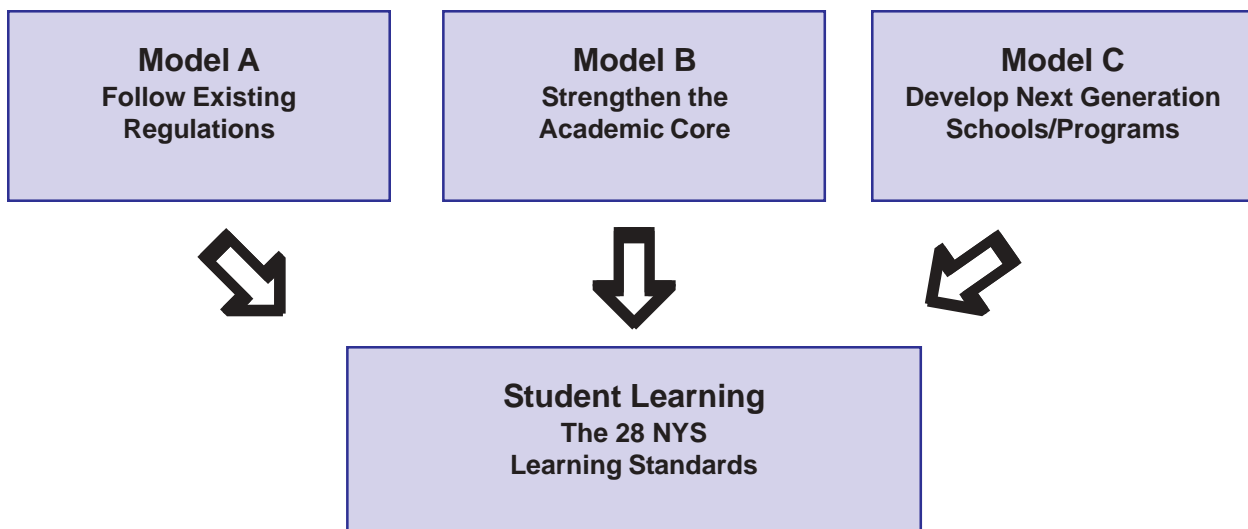
The Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York recently adopted a new approach to the implementation of the *Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education*. This approach is built on a strategy that includes three different models that middle-level schools can operate within, depending on individual building or district needs or situations: the strategy is called the *Three-Model Strategy*. The thinking behind the *Three-Model Strategy* is that there are multiple paths a middle school can take toward implementation of the Regents Policy.

The three paths, or models, are described in this way:

- **Model A (Follow Existing Regulations):** Schools would continue to operate under the regulations as they exist in implementing an effective middle-level program, ensuring that all students achieve the intermediate-level state learning standards. Most schools will continue to work within the present regulatory requirements, taking full advantage

of the flexibility that is provided within the Commissioner's Regulations.

- **Model B (Strengthen the Academic Core):** Schools where students are struggling to reach proficiency in English and mathematics may need flexibility to emphasize literacy and numeracy. These schools will be able to propose a program that strengthens core academic subjects and effective Academic Intervention Services, while providing all students with instruction that addresses the NYS Learning Standards of all non-tested areas, are of high interest to students and further reinforce core academic learning. Schools may be granted regulatory relief to implement their proposals.
- **Model C (Develop Next Generation Schools/Programs):** In schools where student success has been demonstrated, there will be opportunity to propose new ideas for middle-level programs. Schools could propose to restructure the full educational program (Model C#1) or parts of the educa-



tional program (Model C#2). In either case, schools must ensure that **all** students receive opportunities to achieve **all** of the NYS Learning Standards. Schools may be granted regulatory relief to implement their proposals.

**It is important to note that all middle-level programs, no matter which operating model is implemented, must be designed so that all students meet all twenty-eight of the NYS Learning Standards.** To quote James Kadamus, Deputy Commissioner for EMSC: “The three-model strategy does NOT mean that middle-level schools can eliminate instruction in a standards area. Rather, it means a school submitting a Model B or Model C application must document alternative strategies that ensure students receive instruction in all of the State’s 28 learning standards, including those in the non-tested areas.”

In the months that follow, we can expect to see the codification of the Three-Model Strategy into Commissioner’s Regulations. We can also expect to see the application processes for Models B and C.

In anticipation of taking full advantage of the opportunities provided by the three-model strategy, what can and should middle-level schools do? As always, middle-level schools should be engaged in an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement, using the resources below as tools to engage in meaningful dialogue. Those resources include:

- *The Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle Level Schools and Programs.* The seven components of an effective middle-level program are described in these seven Essential Elements.
- *Rubrics* that accompany the Essential Elements are available that describe, in detail, the implementation of the Essential Elements. Schools can use the rubrics to study their program and identify strengths and opportunities for improvement.

- *The Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education*, updated in the summer of 2003, describes the fundamental beliefs about middle-level education and the needs of early adolescents.
- *New York State’s 28 Learning Standards* remain the expectation for all students. The Learning Standards describe what all students should know and be able to do.
- The *Three-Model Strategy*, adopted by the Board of Regents at its February 2005 meeting.
- *Part 100.3* of the Commissioner’s Regulations describes the program requirements for students in grades pre-kindergarten through six.
- *Part 100.4* of the Commissioner’s Regulations describes the program requirements for grades seven and eight.

It has long been NYSMSA’s mission to support middle-level students and those responsible for their education by supporting middle-level schools and programs in New York State. That tradition and mission continues. This collection of middle-level resources will be updated as the specific regulatory language is developed and as applications for Models B and C become available.

Just as the good middle-level classroom is differentiated based on the needs of the students, so, too, are the regulations that govern middle-level education differentiated to meet the needs of different schools. Now that the State has adopted the differentiated model, it is up to the schools in the field to capitalize on its flexibility in order to more completely meet the needs of early adolescents across our state. Middle-level schools have the responsibility to use the regulations for the benefit of their students. There are three paths from which to choose; all three paths lead to the same place: student success.

# Research at a Glance

Jeff Craig, NYSMSA Director of Research and Technology



## The Standards-Focused Middle School Schedule

Element 3 of the *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle Level Schools and Programs* (see shaded column at right and on page 8) describes the organization and structure of the standards-focused middle-level program. Of all of the items delineated within that Essential Element, few receive more attention than the building schedule. In fact, many middle schools are engaged in a never-ending search for the perfect building schedule. While most practitioners would agree that there is no perfect schedule, schools share a sense that there is always a better way. Indeed, the truly effective schedule is the Holy Grail for many schools.

The organization of time in middle-level schools and programs should be mindful of the impact a schedule can have on the teaching and learning that occurs within the school. “Few schools can overcome the barriers of ineffective schedules or restrictive environments,” declared George and Alexander in the seminal *The Exemplary Middle School* (1993). The challenge is to develop a schedule that does not impede the efforts of teachers and teams to take integrated and interdisciplinary approaches toward instruction; the schedule should be flexible in order to promote the flexible use of time. This is, of course, easier said than done. Many schools, however, have developed schedules that enable flexibility and innovation.

While there is an almost infinite number of scheduling possibilities, most middle-level schedules are either a traditional 7, 8, or 9 period day, or a block, flexible block, or modi-

### Essential Element 3: Organization and Structure

**An organization and structure that support both academic excellence and personal development.**

Standards-focused schools with middle-level grades are organized to promote academic excellence and personal development, to establish within staff and students a feeling of belonging and a sense of personal identification with the school and its purposes, and to help adolescents make a successful transition from the elementary grades to the high school grades and from childhood to adolescence.

A standards-focused school that enrolls young adolescents should:

- 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 the creative use of time.
- Contain at least three grade levels.
- Have comparatively small enrollments so that every student is viewed as an individual and receives personal attention. When the student population is large, have “houses” within schools or schools-

*(continued on page 10)*

within-schools to promote a sense of family and to reduce the feeling of anonymity and isolation among students.

- Be structured to create close, sustained relationships between students and teachers.
- Provide, for those students needing additional help to meet the State's standards, opportunities for additional time, instruction, and personal support (e.g., after school, before school, summer school, reduced class size, tutoring, pupil personnel services, etc.).
- Provide a variety of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.
- Provide opportunities for students to participate in youth service, community service and/or service learning activities.
- Encourage active parent involvement through a variety of activities.
- Establish ties with the school community that strengthen connections between school/education and career opportunities.
- Promote and encourage appropriate participation of pupils with disabilities in all curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular 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.
- Integrate technology into the educational program so that it supports student learning in a purposeful way.
- Provide a gradual transition from the more self-contained classrooms of the elementary school to the more departmentalized structure of the high school.

fied block that includes longer periods of time. The canon of educational research and best practices increasingly includes research and anecdotes about schools moving away from the traditional 7, 8, or 9 period day and toward a schedule with fewer transitions and longer periods of time. Why is this the case? An examination of the reasons makes for a compelling explanation.

The origin of the traditional 7, 8, or 9 period day is shared with the Carnegie model from high schools. High schools are organized around a departmentalized scheme that emphasizes specialization and multiple student pathways. When this model had its genesis, the tracking of students was not just present. Tracking was, in fact, intentional. Junior high schools, meant to be smaller versions of high schools, naturally adopted this scheduling practice. Many high schools are moving away from the traditional 7, 8, or 9 period day in their search for greater student achievement. More than half of all high schools in the United States are implementing some form of block scheduling (Canady & Rettig, 1996).

If middle level programs are designed to accommodate the transition from elementary school to high school, 7, 8, or 9 period days do not fit the bill. Students in elementary schools are used to long periods of time in the same room and with the same students. More and more, high schools are going to forms of block schedules in which students spend long periods of time with the same students and teacher. In these cases, it does not make sense for early adolescents to have a 7, 8, or 9 period schedule.

The environment of a school with many periods is often more fragmented and impersonal than that of a school with fewer transitions and longer periods of time. Moving from room to room within a 7, 8, or 9 period day reflects an assembly line approach that does not reflect the caring, nurturing, and supportive environment that is expected of middle schools in New York

State (New York State Education Department, 2003).

Many discipline problems occur during passing time. Going to longer periods of time reduces the frequency of trips to hallways where most disciplinary problems occur. Noise and stress result when hundreds of students are dismissed into the less-supervised areas of the schools such as hallways. Reducing such opportunities for trouble is another reason why schools have gone to longer chunks of time in their school schedule (Canady & Rettig, 1996).

An emphasis on attendance in many short periods of time is incongruent with the standards-based environment in which we now operate. Rather than focusing on teaching, we are now emphasizing student learning. If all students are expected to reach the standards, then time must become a variable (Reeves, 2002). Some students can reach the standards in shorter periods of time, other students take longer. Shorter, rigid periods of time just aren't suited to a flexible approach toward time and grouping.

In addition, one reason that any schools are moving away from the 7, 8, or 9 period day is because of student achievement. There is an ever-increasing body of research that suggests that student achievement is greater in schools that are organized in longer time periods. Attendance is better, as are grades, graduation rates, and the number of students taking advanced courses (Robbins, Gregory & Herndon, 2000). There is also research that suggests that there is no difference between achievement in block schedules and traditional periods and that the instruction within the classroom is the key variable (Flynn, Lawrenz & Schultz, 2005). The conclusion that could be made is that student learning depends more on what goes on during the class period than on the actual length of the period. By its very nature, longer periods of time expand the possibilities for a wider array of instructional strategies to occur. There is a distinct lack of research identifies achievement

gains as a result of short periods of time. In fact, this research has not come across any research that suggests shorter and rigid periods of time are better for student learning than longer and flexible periods of time.

The reasons for switching to a schedule that increases flexibility, reduces transitions, and promotes sustained learning opportunities are compelling. It is little wonder that so many schools are making the switch from the tradition 7, 8, or 9 period day.

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# Lea's Lessons

Lea Macdonald

## Teaching with the Brain in Mind: What's in It for Teachers and Students

*If learning is what we value, then we ought to value the process of learning as well as the results of learning...Humans have survived by trying out new things, not by always getting the "right" tried and true answer.*

—Eric Jenson, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*

As we work to implement New York State's *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs*, we need to revisit the importance and effectiveness of a brain-compatible classroom. After several years of hearing and using the terms "brain-based instruction" and "brain-compatible" classrooms, perhaps it's time to step back and clarify exactly what brain-based instruction is and what are the benefits of brain-based approaches in teaching our young adolescents and meeting New York State's *Essential Elements* as well as its 28 Learning Standards.

### What do we know from brain research about how we learn?

Brain-based instruction began with Plato, who describes seminars in which posing questions and inducing thoughtful responses was considered the most effective strategy of the teacher to engage the students. The computer age, however, accelerated things. By the 1990's scientists were able to study the brain as humans performed problem-solving tasks, or engaged in reading, writing, playing music or sleeping. This

"Decade of the Brain" opened up the door for scientists and educators to talk to one another and to apply the knowledge and experience of one group and the inquiries and concerns of the other.

There are certain essential understandings that are critical in designing and maintaining a brain-compatible classroom. These are a few of the most important:

- Every single brain is unique; accept the fact that IQ is not set at birth. Neural pathways generate from new and repeated experiences. The brain is elastic.
- Impact of stress or threat can alter and impair learning.
- Emotions are critical to learning and they drive our memory.
- The brain stores information about the same topic in different areas. It stores information by similarities, retrieves information by differences.
- The brain is meaning-driven. Meaning is more important to the brain than information.
- Patterns and programs drive our understanding. Intelligence is the ability to elicit and to construct useful patterns.

### What does a brain-compatible classroom look like?

The findings from neuroscience research are validating many of the instructional strategies being advocated in educational reform efforts. For example, cooperative learning, addressing multiple intelligences and learning styles,

implementing differentiated instruction, and creating a student centered classroom are research-based ways to benefit the students in the classroom. Brain-based instruction (BBI) can benefit students in the following ways:

- In a BBI classroom, teachers are more likely to consider the different learning styles of students in a way that makes it possible to reach more of the students a greater amount of time.
- BBI approaches emphasize experiences; problems, projects, questions, and hands-on learning are more likely to benefit diverse learners and channel the phenomenal potential of students who use both their physical and cognitive energies simultaneously.
- Students are more likely to have an emotional connection with learning in this manner, and are more likely to store what they learn into long-term memory.
- Emotionally-charged learning tends to promote curiosity, engagement, and positive life-long learner attitudes.

### Tips for Teachers: How to Make Your Teaching More Brain-Compatible

Old paradigm: *How do I motivate my students?* New paradigm: *How do students motivate themselves?*

1. Typically, in brain-compatible classrooms there are a variety of activities going on simultaneously, each student working in ways best-suited to interests, talents, readiness levels, and learning styles.
2. There are few obvious barriers between subjects and much of the work is interdisciplinary.
3. Students talk with each other about their work and often work together. Their learning is often a cooperative effort and marked by dialogue.
4. The absolute best feedback is immediate, positive, and dramatic.

5. Teach the important material first, the second most important material last, and the least important material in the middle of a lesson. Don't use the last ten minutes of the class for free time. Use exit slips — *what I learned today!* — for closure.
6. Lecture produces the lowest degree of retention. Do what it takes to achieve the highest degree of retention. Socratic seminars, literature circles, reading buddies, the jigsaw method of cooperative learning, discovery stations, and the use of manipulatives will promote a higher level of retention.
7. If you want the information to go to long-term memory storage, the information has to **make sense** and it has to **be meaningful**.
8. Increase complexity, not difficulty.
9. Increase wait times.
10. Provide frequent and prompt feedback/assessment over one major unit test.

It's imperative that we, as New York State educators, remember the middle-school philosophy: to engage and motivate all young adolescents to become lifelong learners. We can't afford to leave one child behind in this age of standardized testing. Understanding how the brain works and what we can do in the classroom to meet the needs of all learners could make a difference for more than one child. This is my hope for the future.

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# Implementation of a District-Based Teacher Mentor Program

Mimi Wolff

Supporting and retaining effective teachers is essential in order to provide the best educational opportunity for students. This is the driving force behind South Seneca Central School's Mentoring Program. As of February 2, 2004, New York State certification requirements now mandate a first-year mentored experience for teachers with initial or transitional certification. As a result, many districts are in the process of implementing mentoring programs. Because of the vision of teachers and administrators in our district, South Seneca Central School has been fortunate to be able to offer mentoring support to new and veteran teachers for the past ten years. Although South Seneca's Mentoring Program was designed to meet the specific needs of our district, it incorporates best practices that may be implemented in other districts as well.

## A Brief History

South Seneca is a small, rural school district in the Finger Lakes region of Central New York. In the early 1990's, the South Seneca Teachers' Association began a dialogue with the administration regarding ways to provide additional support to new teachers in the district. Between the summers of 1992 and 1994, the South Seneca Professional Development Committee drafted a mentoring program proposal. During the 1994-95 academic year, a mentoring Selection Committee was formed, and the proposal was presented to the Board of Education. During the following school year, South Seneca implemented its mentoring pilot program. Since that time, the Mentoring Program has supported sixty-eight new and veteran teachers in the district. As a

result of an annual evaluation process, the program has evolved and the document has been revised to adapt to the changing needs of teachers. During the spring and summer of 2003, the committee aligned the Mentoring Document with New York State's mentoring requirements. It is now included in the district's Professional Development Plan.

## Program Components

### Goals and Philosophy

Although the initial goal of South Seneca's Mentoring Program was to provide support for new teachers to the district, this focus was extended to include other teachers as well. One way our district's mentoring program differs from others is that veteran teachers may also request mentors. While it is true that most mentor pairings involve new teachers, several experienced teachers have also benefited from having mentors to help them transition to new positions. It is for this reason that we refer to individuals paired with mentors as "participants" rather than "new teachers".

The philosophy behind South Seneca's Mentoring Program is based on a non-evaluative, cognitive coaching model that goes well beyond a traditional "buddy" system. This model is based on the work of Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston (Costa & Garmston, 2002). The premise behind cognitive coaching is that mentors can employ communication and conferencing strategies to mediate a teacher's thinking, which in turn, influence a teacher's behavior. Ultimately, the teacher's behavior affects student learning. Change in a teacher's thinking is effective when a coach

taps into the participant's belief system. Therefore, mentors do not offer instructional solutions. Rather, they encourage teachers to find their own belief-system-based solutions. Good coaches do not work to change overt teacher behaviors. The behaviors change as a result of refined perceptions and cognitive processes on the part of the participant. When change comes from within, the effect is positive, long-lasting, and far reaching.

### **Mentor's Role**

Mentors in our district are exemplary teachers who support new teachers and colleagues in an empathetic and non-evaluative way. The primary goal of mentors is to enhance teacher growth by facilitating the development of self-reflection. Establishing and maintaining trust is essential in meeting this goal. An important expectation is that the mentor maintains a code of confidentiality. As a result, a significant portion of the cognitive coaching training focuses on building trust and rapport in an effort to maintain confidentiality. Mentors also strive to facilitate mutual learning. They are trained to encourage and support individuals as they move beyond present capacities into new behaviors and skills.

### **Training**

Mentors are required to take an 18-hour course in cognitive coaching to prepare for mentoring. This training provides the mentor with tools to facilitate the process of reflective thinking on the part of the participant. This coaching approach is not a supervisory model. That is, the mentor does not take the role of an expert. Rather, the mentor learns to guide an individual in a process of thinking about what she or he would like to see happen in the classroom and how to make that come about. The participant is empowered to find solutions and make decisions that are consistent with his or her own belief system and core values. That is not to say that the mentor

cannot provide direct answers to some questions. For example, questions about policy and procedures are examples of those that require straightforward responses.

Participants also receive training that includes an overview of the Mentoring Program, including the philosophy behind cognitive coaching. We have found that participants are more open to the cognitive coaching model when they have a background regarding the philosophy of the program. In addition, administrators new to the district attend an orientation to the program. This helps to clarify the administrator's role and ensures confidentiality between mentors and participants.

### **Observations/Visitations**

At least once a month, a roving substitute is hired to provide coverage for mentors to observe participants and for participants to observe other teachers. Observations of participants by their mentors are strictly non-evaluative in nature and follow a pre-conference, observation, post-conference structure. In these situations, the participant is responsible for defining the mentor's role. During the observation, the mentor collects only that data requested by the participant. In the post-conference, the participant is asked to reflect on the lesson. During this time, the mentor's role is to facilitate analysis of what the participant deems most important. The power is always placed in the hands of the participant rather than the mentor.

Because South Seneca is relatively small, opportunities to observe other teachers in the same content area may not be possible. Therefore, participants are also encouraged to observe teachers in other districts when appropriate. Outside observations also enable participants to establish professional networking connections beyond the district level.

## **Selection Committee**

The Selection Committee is composed of faculty and administrators. This committee is responsible for choosing the Program Coordinator, conducting the application process, and pairing mentors with participants. When appropriate, the Selection Committee may reassign mentors when original pairings need to be adjusted. In May and June of each year, the Selection Committee also conducts a program evaluation. Suggestions and recommendations are made, and if necessary, the mentoring document is amended.

## **Program Coordinator**

The Program Coordinator serves on the Selection Committee and is responsible for facilitating communication between groups and individuals associated with the Mentoring Program. This includes keeping records, scheduling substitutes for visitations, and facilitating support meetings for mentors and participants. The Program Coordinator also serves as a liaison between mentor pairs and the administration.

## **Budget Committee**

The Budget Committee is comprised of an administrator, the Program Coordinator, and a member of the Board of Education. In January of each year, program projections for the following school year are discussed with the Selection Committee. The Budget Committee then develops and submits a budget in February. The budget includes items such as substitute pay for observation and visitation days, training for new mentors, reference materials, and stipends for the Program Coordinator, mentors, and participants.

## **Administration's Role**

The role of administrators is clearly defined in the mentoring document. Administrators serve on the Selection Committee as well as the Budget Committee. They are respon-

sible for keeping copies of the time logs submitted by mentors and participants. In addition, they supervise and evaluate new teachers. In order to maintain the confidential nature of the mentor/participant relationship, administrators may not communicate with mentors regarding the participants with whom they work. For this reason, participants are encouraged to share their administrative observations and evaluations with their mentors. This practice supports the participant in meeting administrative criteria.

## **Closing Remarks**

South Seneca's Mentoring Program was developed in order to provide an opportunity for teachers to experience supportive collegiality and to offer a forum for professional development to both new and veteran teachers. Being a part of the mentoring program impacts teachers beyond the scheduled mentoring experience. Teachers often develop lasting relationships that result in continued mutual learning experiences.

Each year, participants express appreciation for the support of their mentors. They state that the Mentoring Program helps them to feel welcomed to the district and builds trusting relationships with valued colleagues. These relationships help new teachers to feel comfortable and enable them to utilize district resources more efficiently. Participants also report an increase in confidence and skills development.

Mentors also describe advantages of participating in the Mentoring Program. Many express respect and admiration for the participants with whom they work. They benefit from observing these teachers and gain an increased awareness of what is expected of students across disciplines. Mentors also feel that the program gives them the opportunity to reflect on their own instruction. They view coaching as a mutual learning experience that

enables them to improve their own teaching and interpersonal skills.

Maintaining an effective program requires flexibility and ongoing assessment. Through the dedication of teachers, administrators, and the Board of Education, South Seneca's Mentoring Program continues to evolve in order to meet the needs of the district. As past participants apply to become mentors, a continuum of support is reinforced for the next generation of teachers.

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# How to Deal with a School Emergency at the Middle Level

Chris Reed

In New York State, every school district must have an articulated plan to deal with the ever-possible building emergency or crisis (Commissioner's Regulation 155.17). Such a plan is to be written in a manner that is flexible enough to address the anticipated death of a student or faculty member (due to illness), the sudden death of someone from the school community (due to suicide or murder), or a facility emergency such as the collapse of a roof, an airplane crash, or a severe weather event.

## Crisis Plan

The in-house crisis plan for each building must deal with a multitude of potential emergencies and must be designed to accommodate the very special needs of the middle school student. While the middle-school-age child is arguably beyond the regimentation and relative compliance of an elementary student, he/she is not yet at the independent and more self-assured level of the high school student. Consequently, any crisis plan for a middle school should incorporate a healthy affective component in its design. It is incumbent upon administrators and teachers to design a crisis plan that emphasizes not only what to do in the event of an emergency, but also articulates a detailed plan of primary and secondary preventions. Briefly, I will elaborate some of the major considerations.

## Primary Prevention

Primary Prevention incorporates the notion of "disaster proofing" and disaster preparedness as the essentials of prevention. This includes:

- Ensuring proper facility maintenance and security

- Providing pre-disaster training, practice and developing mechanisms to handle parental and media notifications
- Creating a warm and safe building climate and culture
- Conveying a zero tolerance for bullying
- Designing and implementing effective after-school programs
- Developing a peer mediation program
- Employing a cadre of highly competent and sensitive crisis response staff (psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurse, etc.)

## Secondary Prevention

Secondary Prevention/Intervention presupposes organized responses to school emergencies. The Crisis Team should have:

- A small discretionary account to make necessary emergency purchases
- Guidelines for immediate identification of high-risk students
- A directory of resources (counselors, hospices, etc.)
- Protocols that have been designated and well-rehearsed for "go home" directives
- A communication and media management plan
- A plan for the dissemination of children after an emergency (medical facilities, reuniting with parents, etc.) and associated record keeping

## The Crisis Response Team

The Crisis Response Team performs 1:1 and group crisis interventions. Additionally, they

should provide written material for distribution, provide telephone consultations and often interface with aggrieved families. The Team will need to develop and implement a debriefing process for themselves at the end of each day. One of the challenges of dealing with middle-school-age students is that their reaction to a crisis often depends on how much destruction they see during and after the disaster. Additionally, a child's age affects how he or she will respond. Very young children may show their concerns by refusing to attend school, whereas middle school students may minimize their concerns but argue more with parents and show a decline in school performance. Experts caution that it is vital that we speak in words that the target population can understand. Finally, Crisis Response Teams must be constantly aware of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is psychological damage that can result from experiencing, witnessing or participating in an overwhelmingly traumatic (frightening) event.

### Interventions

Some Crisis Team interventions are, at their heart, just good counseling strategies. The following suggestions are not inclusive, but rather are suggestions of things that may be especially effective for the middle school population.

- Oral story telling
- Free play
- Have toys, paper, markers, craft supplies for cards and memorials
- Discussions from photos, videos, books, newspaper articles etc.
- Creative art – drawing, painting, clay
- Sentence completion/writing; e.g. “My happiest memory of \_\_\_\_\_ is...”
- Role playing, enactments
- Music — listening and playing
- Pet intervention (therapy dogs)
- Gardening — plant a tree
- Prayer

### Additional Notes

In the chaos of the emergency, it is critical not to forget to help the school staff members, who may also be in crisis (group or private crisis intervention). Consider having an Intervention Team member at a wake and/or funeral to help students who are in distress. Be aware of anniversaries and acknowledge them, but try to strike a balance between an interrupted school day and the “normal” routine. In truth, it is difficult remembering exactly what you should do and when you should do it in the event of a building emergency or disaster. It is critical, then, to take the time to think through a scenario or protocol and discern what eventual effect a particular action may have. In the event of a suicide, for example, here are some suggestions outlined by the American Association of Suicidology (AAS):

- Don't dismiss school or encourage funeral attendance during school hours.
- Don't dedicate a memorial to the deceased.
- Don't have a large school assembly.
- Don't give the facts to the students.
- Do emphasize prevention and everyone's role.
- Do provide individual and group counseling.
- Do emphasize that no one is to blame for the suicide.
- Do emphasize that help is available and that there are alternatives to suicide.
- Do contact the family of the deceased.

### Evaluation

At the conclusion of an “emergency event,” it is critical to get the Crisis Team together to debrief while the memories are still clear. Someone should be responsible for writing detailed notes of what was done by whom and what may have deviated from the original plans, as written plans and implementations may sometimes have to differ. A list of recommended changes or “try to think about” things that were

not identified prior to an event is also valuable. We always learn from experiences and this process must remain fluid as the participants and type of event may change.

### Conclusion

Every emergency situation in a middle school will be different. All too often, schools must deal with the death of a student or staff member. One set of possible responses is evoked by an effective Crisis Plan. In the event of natural or man-made disasters, however, it may be necessary to invoke a completely separate set of contingencies. A well-written and flexible Crisis Response Plan will ensure that this will happen.

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# Student Council: Creating a Sense of Leadership in the Middle School

Jennifer Martina and Vanessa Messina



## Introduction

The *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle Level Schools and Programs* tell middle schools that the philosophy, mission, and vision of a school are important. Many schools have mission statements and vision statements that describe how a school should act in order to be developmentally appropriate and standards-focused. A couple of questions are begged, however: What does this look like in action? How do we ensure that the traditional programs in our schools reflect the current thinking and best practices that the Essential Elements attempt to codify?

In this article, we describe for you one example of how one middle school is working to make sure that a common, traditional program of middle schools remains current and vibrant. At Jamesville-DeWitt Middle School, our student council had long been an opportunity for students to ask questions of their school and sometimes student opinions were sought. The vision of our school, however, included a more prominent voice and role for students in the life of their school. Therefore, we took a fresh look at our student council and it has now evolved into what can more accurately be called a student leadership program.

## Rationale

Student council is a program that is designed to give students a voice in the school. Giving students a voice by allowing them to participate in student government enables them to experience both the process and purpose of government, as well as to build a stronger community within the school. As a result,

students become more proactive and take ownership of their learning as they prepare to become active participants in society as a whole.

Middle school is a time when students are beginning to become more aware of their role in society. A student council program helps them to see that they can have a tremendous impact on decisions made within the school and community. We also want to prepare our students for the opportunities they will have at the high school in the arena of student leadership. More importantly, student council helps to prepare students for their role as young adults who will be making choices and decisions that will dramatically affect their lives. Teaching students the importance of becoming invested shows them that they can not only have an impact on their own lives, but on the lives of others. As a middle school it is our job to give students an opportunity to learn about their role in society both as leaders and participants. It is also our job to teach them how to make good decisions. One way that this can be accomplished is by preparing and facilitating a student leadership day where students explore good decision making skills and learn what it takes to be a good leader.

## Planning

Shortly after the year began, all of the social studies teachers at our school explained the purpose of student council to their classes. Students were then nominated to represent their class. Each class elected one representative and one alternate. Teachers then met to discuss results as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of the current student council

program at the school. Historically, our student council consisted of elected representatives who periodically met with administration and took on occasional projects. Based on student response as a whole, teachers agreed that our program could be improved. Student council representatives then met by grade level to informally discuss the possibility of changing the purpose and design of the program. Student surveys were distributed in order to assess the student vision of what they wanted student council to be.

Teachers (and one administrator) who wanted to work on this issue formed a planning committee. The first step for the planning committee was to consider the results of meetings we held with the student council representatives. Across the grade levels (5-8 at Jamesville-DeWitt Middle School), all of the students agreed that they wanted to explore opportunities and ways to get more involved in both the school and community. So, it was clear that the adults and the students wanted to enact a change in our student

### Student Leadership Day Agenda

**8:15-8:30 Transport to Hall of Languages at Syracuse University**

**8:30-9:00 Introductions and Program Overview**

**9:00-9:25 Icebreaker.** This is a warm-up that introduces students to each other and the day. Will do “The Last Couple to Stoop” and “Do You Like Your Neighbor” activities.

**9:25-9:40 Choose to Lead Video.** Excerpts from a Mark Scharenbroict video will be shown to students. These excerpts are from addresses Mark made to other student leaders. Included is the introduction of the 20 lb project.

**9:40-10:00 Activity: What Does a Leader Look Like?** Draw a schematic poster of what a leader looks like. *Students are put into heterogeneous groups and create a drawing of a leader. What does a leader look like? If they think a leader is a good listener, for example, then they might draw a person with big ears. The students are asked to select a spokesperson to present their poster to other groups. During the sharing, we list the many different qualities of leaders on a poster. At the conclusion of the activity the students discuss the qualities and determine that leadership comes in many different forms.*

**10:00-10:20 Mission Statement.** Use a sticky note process to identify what the mission of the student leadership group is. Will look at some famous examples of mission statements as exemplars.

**10:20-10:40 Biography Chairs.** *Each participant is seated in a chair in one large circle. One person is standing in the middle of the circle and approaches one seated student. The students introduce themselves to each other and the standing student asks the other student to introduce the students sitting next to them. Then the standing student asks if there is anything they would like to know about the group. The sitting student will ask for information, such as who has a dog. Each student who has a dog must move to another seat at least two from the seat they just left. The standing student must also find a seat and one student will be left standing. The game continues with students asking question about family, music, hobbies, eye color, siblings, and so on for about 20 minutes.*

**10:40-11:10 Leader and School Spirit.** Brainstorm and narrow a list of school spirit activities the group could tackle during the second semester. Teach brainstorming and then use sticky dots to narrow.

**11:10-11:40 Team Building Activity.** “Give me Shelter” team building activity

**11:40-1:00 Lunch**

**1:00-1:30 Leaders and Problem Solving.** Brainstorm and narrow a list of school “problems” that group could tackle during the second semester. Use brainstorming and then use sticky dots to narrow.

council program. We wanted to make a transition from representational meetings to a proactive leadership development program.

The planning committee then met several times throughout the next few months to discuss both teacher and student expectations. The committee decided that what we essentially wanted was for students to learn how to be involved and become leaders within the school. As previously stated, we knew we had to teach them how to be leaders before we could allow them to take on the responsibility of becoming a leader for their peers. We decided that the best way to do this was to find a location off campus for an all-day training session where we could incorporate the different aspects for our vision of student council. Our school district has a partnership with Syracuse University; they were gracious enough to provide a location on their campus for us to use. We found that the off campus location was very effective because it allowed the students to separate themselves from the rest of the student body and begin to see themselves as leaders.

We sketched together a plan for the day that got students to know each other, work with each other, and set the stage for future work. We included icebreakers at the onset in order to break down barriers between different age students. We tried to inspire the students. We tapped prior knowledge about leadership. We had the students problem-solve. We asked the students to identify opportunities around our school and in our community for service learning and community service. Lastly, we had the students organize themselves into work committees that would start to tackle the identified issues. We ended the day with the committees because we wanted to have work ready for the students beyond the day-long training session. We didn't want to lose out on any momentum that was developed that day; if students had projects that were already

underway, they would be more likely to sustain the effort.

## Conclusion

Student feedback about the leadership day was overwhelmingly positive. The students were enthusiastic about implementing the strategies that they learned. The student committees met individually shortly after the leadership day and began working the issues particular to their committees. Although the committees have only met a few times since the leadership day, a lot of action has been taken. There has been a new attitude towards student leadership within the school and several student issues have been addressed. Students in general are much more proactive and apt to bring concerns/ideas to faculty and/or administration about ways to improve the school and the school community.

We believe that in the days and months ahead, our students will feel more and more involved in their school community. Jamesville-DeWitt Middle School has a longstanding reputation of providing a wide array of opportunities for students, including clubs, intramurals, music, drama, etc. We do a lot *for* students. Through the new focus on student leadership development and involvement, we hope to do more *with* students. We believe this is an example of how Essential Element #1, Philosophy and Mission, impacts students.

If you'd like a more detailed copy of our agenda, don't hesitate to contact us.

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**Jennifer Martina** ([jmartina@jd.cnyric.org](mailto:jmartina@jd.cnyric.org)) and **Vanessa Messina** ([vmessina@jd.cnyric.org](mailto:vmessina@jd.cnyric.org)) are teachers at Jamesville-DeWitt Middle School; 6280 Randall Road, Jamesville NY 13078.

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Shanterra McBride, Deputy Executive Director of the Empower Program, is a national speaker on such youth issues as reputations, cliques, and popularity and how they relate to gender violence.

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# Project Success: A Success Story

Kathleen Rein



As we all know, the middle-school years are challenging for all students, both physically and mentally. We also know that some students are better equipped to deal with these challenges than others. There are many difficult transitions during this period, but at Driver Middle School, which includes grades four through eight, the most trying is the transition from 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade. At this level of middle school the expectations change, but all students are not capable of meeting these new expectations. To help meet the needs of these students, Driver has developed an innovative program that provides the extra support needed to be successful. Project Success is a program intended to lead high-risk, academically-challenged students to success. Now in its second year, Project Success offers a collaborative approach involving the students, the family, and the school working together to help a select group of 7<sup>th</sup> graders be successful.

## Overview of the Program

Project Success is a program designed to help encourage 7<sup>th</sup> grade students to achieve academic success. While these students are still expected to meet the regular course requirements, their schedules are developed around a framework that allows the appropriate remediation, including AIS (academic intervention services) for math, English, and social studies. This coordination of services facilitates a comprehensive academic program with continuous monitoring of student performance to encourage academic achievement. These additional supports give the students

the extra assistance they need to be successful.

## Goals of Project Success

Designed to meet the specific needs of the population of students it serves, Project Success serves its purpose by meeting the following goals:

- Students will complete all 7<sup>th</sup> grade course requirements successfully.
- Students will develop skills that will enable them to self-direct their learning.
- Students will continue to build on their organizational and study skills to ensure their academic success.
- Students will work toward mastery of higher order reasoning, thinking, and comprehension skills.
- Students will show improved self-esteem and attitude toward school, resulting from regular and supportive interaction with adults.
- As a result of their positive academic achievement, students will gain confidence and make better decisions regarding their academic future.
- The school will provide continual contact with students' families, encouraging parental involvement.

## Selecting Students for the Program

This program was initiated due to an increase in the number of students failing 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Alarmed by this, teachers and administrators came together and decided that for a select group of 6<sup>th</sup> graders, a safety net was

necessary in order for them to meet with success in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Project Success provides that safety net for students who exhibit one or more of the following characteristics:

- Underachievement academically, despite average intellectual ability.
- Difficulty with academic subjects due to below average academic skills.
- Lack of motivation toward school and academics, including inability to complete work, to come consistently prepared, and to follow directions.
- Poor self-image and/or self-esteem.
- Lack of organizational skills to be successful in school.
- Social/emotional immaturity.
- Student is beyond the grade level by one or two grades.
- Student lacks appropriate transitioning skills.

### **Academic Programming**

Students selected for Project Success receive a combination of services, including AIS (academic intervention services) in English, social studies, and math; small class instruction in English; and the opportunity to stay for help after school every day of the week. It is this combination of services that provides the extra support needed for students to be successful.

One of the most unique aspects of this program is the participation of each student in AIS for three of the four core subjects. In addition to smaller class sizes in English, students will take an English AIS class every other day directly before their 8<sup>th</sup> period English class. This allows the English teacher a double period of intensive ELA instruction, thereby giving students a block of time to develop strong language skills. Opposite the ELA AIS classes is the math AIS class, taught by a special-education teacher. This class

reinforces the concepts being taught in math and gives students the extra guided practice and additional instruction most of them need to grasp the material. Also required is AIS in social studies, a common area of weakness for struggling students. This class is also taught by a special education teacher.

While there is a team of teachers working with this population of students, the math AIS and English teachers team up, supporting each other when it is not their day to teach. This offers both students and teachers consistency and familiarity, key factors in providing individualized, quality instruction. These teachers, along with an aide who is assigned to the room, are also available every day after school for additional support and help with homework.

### **Monitoring Project Success Students**

Another part of the safety net offered to these select students is monitoring of course work. Much of this monitoring is achieved through the use of the student's agenda. While agendas are not new to middle-school students, Project Success students receive daily feedback on the important role of agendas in organizing and completing homework assignments. Each day in AIS, students get their agendas checked for completeness. At home, parents are asked to check each assignment and to sign the agendas when they have seen that all homework was brought to completion.

While the team of teachers for these students offer feedback on a weekly basis, AIS teachers also spend a good deal of time reviewing assignments for the week and discussing students' progress. It is this constant feedback that helps students understand not only how they are performing but also what they need to do to improve. The team is also prepared to meet with parents as needed to help the students achieve success.

In addition to the team of teachers, the school's guidance counselor plays a key role in helping guide students to success. Students are asked to attend a bi-weekly lunch group the first semester of school, where they discuss goals and reinforce those skills that are necessary to successfully transition into the upper middle grades. The counselor is also available for individual counseling with students and acts as a facilitator in parent meetings.

### **A Success Story**

While only in its second year at Driver Middle School, Project Success has already proven to play a key role in the success of many struggling students. In its first year, the

program helped eight of the eleven students enrolled move successfully on to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This year, ten of the eleven enrolled students are successfully completing their courses. Without the safety net offered by the program, most of these students would find the adjustment to 7<sup>th</sup> grade overwhelmingly difficult, if not impossible. This program works because it involves collaboration between the student, the family, and the school to help the child meet with success.

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## **Membership and Publication Information**

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# The Restructuring of Staley Middle School: A Commitment to Excellence

Connie Evelyn

Rick DuFour and Robert Eaker remind us in their book, *Professional Learning Communities*, that the history of educational reform points to our failure to appreciate and attend to the change process. Change as an ongoing process is the diet characteristic of professional learning communities. In order to develop and maintain this atmosphere, we must practice a team approach. While we recognized that our school was transitioning for many reasons, the full extent of the challenges Staley would face can only be termed a metamorphosis that would far surpass our expectations.

In the 2002-2003 school year, Staley Middle School was closed for major renovation. The ramifications of this closure included the shuffling of teachers and students to the junior high school building across town. Additionally, as the new principal, I was asked to create a middle school program using facilities that needed a complete change. The building had been left in complete disarray, including old materials and supplies left behind by teachers who were currently working at the other junior high school. The development of this new school and program faced insurmountable odds: a divided community unsure of whether the building should even be re-opened; no walls (literally no walls to the building); a new grade configuration and educational philosophy; the middle school concept itself; enabling all students to feel at home, as every student entering the building was doing so for the first time; beginning classes with construction not complete (i.e., no kitchen for the first marking period due to unfinished construction), etc., etc. The list of hurdles seemed endless; however, Staley Middle School

was able to meet them and achieve many successes.

The call to change was spurred on not only by the dilapidated condition of the building, but by a history of depressed New York testing scores in both English language arts and math, a past riddled with stories about violent student behavior and, generally speaking, the perception of a negative reputation among the larger school community.

## How the Staff United

One of the first lessons I learned about the staff at Staley Middle School is best described by the old cliché, “when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” It began with a science teacher who often visited me during June of 2003 in the main office of the existing junior high school, my temporary office. Nancy wasn’t just an earth science teacher; she really embodied the spirit of most of the staff at Staley in that she wanted to do all she could to ensure a smooth and successful transition of Staley’s transformation from Junior High to Middle School. She and many others shared the history of Staley’s traditions and stories about how the staff had always pulled together during hard times, because it seemed as though Staley had been plagued with many problems in the past. She described the student body as something really special and, after almost two years as principal, I couldn’t agree more.

During the summer of 2003, our staff met weekly at the building, teaming up to help clean out classrooms. This “clean-up” involved anything from moving garbage to washing desks and windows to finding and sorting through

materials/supplies, furniture and audiovisual equipment. As we continued to regroup, we kept our sense of humor and also made some time for meeting outside of school in an effort to support one another.

### **How We Made It Like a Middle School**

Rome City School District recognized the need to form a Middle School Transition Committee back in February of 2003 and we met regularly to discuss issues that we felt could not be left to question. One of the first things that the committee recognized was the need for teachers to become more comfortable with the kind of changes that Rome had only talked about for a very long time. Many of the teachers who would be helping to transform Staley Junior High School into Staley Middle School had attended the junior high version themselves. There were heartfelt nostalgic sentiments about what this would mean for their community, both past and present. Part of the preparation would include visits to other local middle schools, as well as the decision to create a teaming model that followed a flexible block schedule. Our final plan included teaching teams that share the responsibility for the education and personal development of a common group of students at every grade level. For example, at the sixth grade level, students are taught by a team of teachers who instruct them in English, social studies, math, science, and reading. These “core” classes are block scheduled to allow greater instructional flexibility, curriculum integration and planning of education strategies. Teachers within the teams have a common planning period to coordinate, plan and integrate curriculum. This time is also used to discuss student/family needs at more formal child study team meetings which involve administration, guidance, other support services, and family members.

Each grade level has its own wing at Staley Middle School. The sixth grade wing is located on the only second floor area at our school,

which has really reduced the fears associated with moving from elementary to middle school for both students and parents during their transition year.

Students with disabilities or other special needs, as well as their programs and services, are integrated throughout the school building rather than clustered in a separate area. All students have access to counseling and other health-related services.

We have also integrated technology into our education program so that it supports student learning in a purposeful way. All of our academic classrooms have computer clusters and, although we still need to make some gains in incorporating the use of these computers, we have made some advances.

### **The Delayed Opening**

In September of 2003, Murphy’s Law was in full swing. The day before our school was to be scheduled to open, although the district had the best intentions, we found out our unveiling would be delayed for three days. Needless to say, this didn’t do much for our public relations campaign. Our three-day delay ended up being a blessing in disguise for our entire staff. We spent this time getting to know one another, working on staff development initiatives, and discussing the key components for establishing our middle school. We hammered out a discipline policy and teachers felt comfortable exchanging ideas with administration about past problems and how we might work together to address issues specifically related to consistency in the future. Many experienced staff members offered their assistance to the more novice teachers and returning faculty offered cultural and historical information about Staley’s past. It’s no secret that the qualities of work relationships that exist in a school have a direct impact on that school’s ability to change and improve. Placing an emphasis on distinctly-defined goals and individual responsibility in attaining higher degrees of student achievement was shared by all mem-

bers of what was quickly becoming part of the standards set by our learning community.

### **Professional Development**

It has been said that some teachers respond to change with jaded resignation; experience has taught them that this too will pass. Fortunately, faced with the extent of the transformation that entrenched Staley, it was difficult to develop this kind of attitude. Again, it's important to note that everyone seemed excited and interested in moving forward and the critical role that these sentiments had in making our transition as seamless as possible cannot be understated.

Middle-level teachers across the district were involved in staff development initiatives, including developing learner-focused classrooms which highlighted the learning that occurred rather than the teaching. Over the summer, teachers were also involved in training that helped them design lessons that truly represented differentiated instruction for our students, as opposed to just providing a larger workload for the more able students and less to those students who are academically challenged.

### **Essential Elements**

When we looked at the history of middle-level education in New York State, we could point to some virtuous efforts that the state had made to improve the experience for all middle school students. One of the first endeavors we undertook was to develop a school improvement team, representative of a cross section of faculty, parent and community members, to collectively share goals and develop the sense of commitment that would enable us to work together with mutual accountability. We reviewed all topics relative to improving student learning and our school's overall effectiveness. We knew that it was imperative that we come together as a school community to generate the energy and interest that we would need to effectively solve problems and implement new ideas.

Finally we worked hard to develop an "Essential Elements" middle school, fashioned after the recommendations made by the state and the New York State Middle School Association.

#### *Essential Element One: Philosophy and Mission*

- Mission Statement and Associated Slogan posted around the school
- Grade level teams
- After-school Programming
- Orientation Program
- Resource Officer and Security Personnel
- Extended Character Education Programs
- Field Trips, Clubs, Sports, Chorus/Band/Orchestra

#### *Essential Element Two: Educational Program*

- Curriculum integration
- Team Approach
- Life Related Projects/Activities
- Standard Based Instruction (scores improved 21% on NYS ELA and 13% in math)

#### *Essential Element Three: Organization and Structure*

- Teams with common planning times
- 6-8 building
- Staley Community Spirit Day
- Guidance through teachers, counselors, psychologists, and administrators
- STAR Reading Program for preassessment
- Sixth Grade Wing to support gradual transition
- "Walls of Excellence" posted throughout the building

#### *Essential Element Four: Classroom Instruction*

- Attitude/Achievement Awards
- Individualized assistance for students during and after school
- Differentiated Instruction/Modified Curriculum
- Cooperative Education
- Consistent Team Expectations

- Smart Cart (Technology Tool)
- Push-In Model for Special Services

*Essential Element Five: Educational Leadership*

- School Improvement Team
- Ongoing Staff Development
- Student Council
- Library Resource Center for Teachers/Administration
- Grants/PET Projects
- Transition Services
- Parent Newsletter
- Boys and Girls Club
- YMCA
- Parent Teacher Organization
- Parent Coordinator and Volunteers
- School Spirit Week/Community Spirit Day

*Essential Element Six: Network of Support*

- Counseling and Guidance Services
- Special Programs
  - ♦ Boys and Girls Club
  - ♦ Parent Teacher Organization
  - ♦ Sports Programs
  - ♦ Clubs — Chess, Ski, Bible, Italian, Science, Guitar Ensemble, Student Council, Student Newspaper
- Character Education Program
- Thought of the Day!
- AIS Services
- SPFY — School Partnership for Youths
- Communication — District Newsletter, Student Newsletter, Progress Reports, Drop-A-Note Program, Schoolnotes.com (homework listed), PTO Newsletter, Commitment to Excellence Banners

*Essential Element Seven: Professional Learning*

- Ongoing Building/District Level Staff Development
- Team Meetings
- Analysis of State Assessment Results
- Ongoing evaluation of Student Achievement — portfolios, projects, Star Reading Program, Milestone Assessments

## A Good School Can Always Be Better

Improving schools requires change. The single most important characteristic of a good school is one that consistently and continually enables learning. Some children are the epitome of academic darkness when they come to us at the beginning of their educational careers, while others are more like the dawn. And still, there is yet another, less dawdling group that stands out and soars above the rest. As a middle school, it is our duty to respect these differences among our students and educate them nonetheless (regardless of darkness or dawn). As a school leader, it is my understanding that openness, communication and trust are the mechanics that drive school improvement. Administrators, teachers and members of the larger school community have different routines and requirements in terms of their impact on student achievement; however, all of us must be recurrently provoked to foster an environment that is committed to making our schools more effective.

The challenge for everyone involved in the education of children is commitment. Staley's staff supports the idea that we must all contribute to a common value system regarding high standards for student achievement, organizational and individual growth, and the underlying truth that a "good" school can always be better.

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## Submission of Articles

*In Transition* accepts 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 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 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; bolded items will be included as contact information.

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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 mail or fax paper copies of manuscripts.***

DEADLINES: To be considered for publication, manuscripts must be received by August 15 for the fall issue, December 15 for the winter issue, and March 15 for the spring issue.

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