

# 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.

## **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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Workshop participants at last year's conference in Lake Placid. Photo taken by Brian Sherman, NYSMSA Region X Director and principal of Indian River Middle School, Philadelphia, NY.



## A few thoughts from the President...

Jeannette Stern, Ed.D.



Welcome back to a new school year. It is the hope of all of us at NYSMSA that this coming year will be filled with those exciting experiences that only middle-school

students can provide!

If you spent your summer “out of touch,” so to speak, you might have missed the August 8<sup>th</sup> issue of *Time*. If you did, it might be worthwhile to stop by your local library and peruse it. After reading about NASA, Al Gore, and the pope, the magazine devotes the rest of the issue to young adolescents and has a variety of information worth looking at.

Interestingly, there were four different covers created for that week’s issue, each with a different picture of a unique “teen.” The article, “Being 13,” looks at the results of online surveys (only 501 in the sample) that gathered information on how today’s teens think about relationships, school, parents, dating, and outlook. Some of the results will concern, but not surprise, you.

Some of the other articles on Internet bullying, the push to be perfect, and keeping secrets are quite good, but, in the midst of these well-researched articles is one entitled *Is Middle School Bad for Kids?* Here, based on superficial visits to a large urban middle school, Claudia Wallis determines that all

students would be better served in the nurturing structure of a K-8 building. While her point that many large cities are looking at K-8 structures as opposed to 6-8, it is not because middle schools have been a failure, but because of the PROGRAMS that can be offered in the different buildings. Her failure to separate the grade configuration from the program and culture of a building makes the article most frustrating to read. Although she quotes Sue Swain of NMSA and Tony Jackson, one of the authors of *Turning Points 2000*, somehow she misses the point.

But the news isn’t all gloomy. We begin the year with new regulations that reinforce the need for a comprehensive middle-level program, a new policy that gives credence to the need for academic excellence as well as positive youth development, our 25<sup>th</sup> annual conference coming up in Rochester in October, and our first Schools to Watch applications due in mid-October. Additional information is in this issue.

While middle-level students continue to raise the levels of concern of all who deal with them, they also provide the most energized, life-altering experiences available. If you need a good laugh, find the August 16<sup>th</sup> issue of *The New York Times*, and read page D5 in the Health and Fitness section. The article is entitled “When Body Clock Strikes 13, It’s Time for the Truth.” The title says it all!

Welcome back!

# The Executive Director's Message

Dennis M. Tosetto



I am taking this opportunity to thank everyone who participated in making our third annual NYSMSA/CMoG Middle-Level Institute a great success. As unbelievable as it sounds, we have yet to experience any negative

comment about any aspect of the program. Literally, everyone who has attended has indicated great satisfaction with the experience and with the breadth and depth of what they have learned.

What's the secret? Outstanding presenters, very small workshop groups, and hands-on instruction that presents cutting-edge methods and skills are combined together in an ultra-modern facility. And it doesn't end there. The folks at the Corning Museum of Glass are educators who work hard to support us in order to make the experience exceptional. The facilities are spacious and instructional equipment is plentiful. Additionally, everyone involved in the Institute was provided opportunities to work with glass themselves (and proudly take their products home), see experts create works of art, and participate in other high-quality social/educational activities that followed the in-depth, topic-related instructional sessions. For example, in addition to participating in a variety of experiences in the Corning Museum of Glass, everyone was invited to the Rockwell Museum

of Western Art for a tour that was followed by a get-together complete with complimentary food and drinks. This and other events provided time for everyone to socialize and network.

Over the years, we have found that those who participate develop collegial friendships that endure long after the Institute ends. Because attendees are actively involved together in small instructional groups over three days, they tend to learn from each other as well as from the instructors. Following the Institute, it is only natural for them to maintain contact and share ideas. I believe that it is also fair to say that the Institute attracts educators who are motivated to be the best at what they do and that it provides a great opportunity to make connections with other similar educators from across the state. Participants soon come to understand that through the Institute they are truly broadening their professional perspective, understanding, and support base.

In closing, I would like to point out that one of the reasons this is an exceptional program is that the Institute is completely organized each year by a small group of your middle-level colleagues from across the state who do so as unpaid volunteers. The quality of the Institute is the direct result of twelve months of work and a lot of dedication to the profession by a handful of educators who only receive, as a result of their labor, the satisfaction of a job well done.

**Join us for the 4th Annual  
Middle-Level Institute at  
The Corning Museum of Glass  
June 26-28, 2006  
For details visit [www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org)**



# Research at a Glance

Jeff Craig, NYSMSA Director of Research and Technology

## Retention and Social Promotion: The Implications for Standards- Focused, Middle-Level Schools and Programs

### The Era of Accountability

The era of higher standards and increased testing in middle-level schools and programs has refueled the debate between the seemingly incongruous practices of retention and social promotion. “Accountability” has become the mantra of policy makers and the mainstream media. Middle schools are now being held more accountable than ever for the success of students and middle schools are now being publicly labeled via accountability systems and rating scales. Indeed, newspapers regularly report charts that compare local schools using test scores. The State Education Department annually issues School Report Cards that compare certain indices among schools. Schools and districts are now labeled “in need of improvement.” The pressure is on all schools to meet the minimums on the accountability indices and to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for total populations and disaggregated subgroups (minorities, economically disadvantaged, and special education subgroups). If a single disaggregated subgroup does not meet the expected levels, then the entire school (and school district) is labeled. The accountability spotlight is shining brighter now on our middle schools than ever before.

This movement toward “accountability” in public education has reached inside the schools and touched individual students. Students must “be accountable” for earning credits and passing

an ever-increasing amount of standardized assessments. Students must be “held accountable” for their learning, typically as measured on high stakes exams. In a standards-based environment, in which meeting a standard is the goal, students are frequently being “held accountable” by being retained until they have met particular grade-level or assessment requirements. Demands that students be held accountable can be heard from many corners. Bill Clinton called for it in more than one State of the Union Address (Thomas, 2000). George Bush made similar statements as Governor of Texas, statements that were then codified into the No Child Left Behind Act (Holmes & Saturday, 2000).

Because standardized test scores have become synonymous for the standards themselves, test scores become the sole measure for determining whether a student is meeting expectations and standards (Wheelock, 2000). In many cases, whether a student is promoted to the next grade becomes dependent on a score on a standardized test. It used to be that the decision whether to promote a student solely based on a test score was in the hands of the school. Now many states are legislating that promotion to the next grade level be dependent on a test score (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). As the number of tests that students must take increases year after year, greater numbers of students are not scoring at the levels set as minimums for grade promotion.

The fact that more and more students are not scoring high enough on standardized tests has focused attention on the retention versus social promotion argument. The number of students in

this predicament is considerable: hundreds of thousands of students are being retained due to insufficient test scores (Wheelock, 2000).

There is a certain face-validity to the idea that the repetition of a grade level in school will result in greater achievement, the mastery of unmastered material, and higher test scores. This is the argument that is often heard in the media and the legislatures (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Thus, the retention versus social promotion argument is as clamorous as ever. This is not a new argument; references to the argument stretch back through the past century (Anderson, et al, 2002). This is another occasion for the metaphor of the swinging pendulum to be used. During the 1970's, social promotion was the generally-accepted practice, which was supported by the converging research of the 1980's that argued against retention (Thompson & Kolb, 1999). In the 1990's, however, public sentiment shifted against social promotion and toward the retention of students (Wheelock, 2000). Now, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the public cry for accountability is weighing in on the issue. The sides in this debate do not seem to be drawn between educators and the public; the argument rages within the education world itself. In fact, "Perhaps no topic in public education suffers from a greater divide between the views of researchers and the view of practitioners and the public" (Jimerson & Kaufman). So, what are the arguments?

### **Holding Students Accountable Means Ending Social Promotion**

On the surface, it's hard to argue that students who have not yet learned material should be passed on to the next grade level where new and probably more complex and difficult material will be encountered. Promoting students who are not prepared just doesn't make sense, argue the critics of social promotion. Students must be held back (retained) until they have proved themselves ready for the increased rigor of subsequent years. Social-promotion disclaim-

ers state that social promotion not only hides individual failure, it hides the failures of schools to properly educate their students. According to Sharing Success (2004), a litany of problems is identified by critics of social promotion:

- ◆ Students learn that achievement isn't important.
- ◆ Parents are misled about their child's academic progress and preparation.
- ◆ Business and colleges must spend millions of dollars to teach skills that should have been learned in high school.
- ◆ Society includes an increasing number of citizens unprepared to lead productive lives.

Another argument that opponents of social promotion advance is that students who are retained will learn the hard lesson of life: that hard work and pain may be necessary in the short-term to realize long-term gains (Sharing Success, 2004). Students will be more frustrated in the future when they can't succeed without basic skills, the argument goes, than they feel frustrated about being held back for a year (Thompson & Kolb, 1999).

Anecdotally, this author can report that teachers in multiple schools feel that it just isn't right to advance a student who hasn't done the work. Colleagues report that it isn't fair to the students who do their work and it isn't fair to teach the failing student that she/he can just go on to the next grade without doing what was asked.

Faced with these simple and considerable arguments, why do many researchers question the practice of holding students accountable that practitioners and the media proclaim?

### **Retention: It Just Doesn't Work**

The reasons against social promotion detailed above are compelling, especially given the basic principles of fairness, hard work, and honesty that social promotion seems to eschew.

Yet a careful examination of the track record of students who have been retained does not yield information that supports the practice. In fact, the research is clear: retention does not work and might actually harm some students.

*Retention is a widespread practice.* By some estimates, more than 2.4 million students are retained each year in the United States (Anderson et al, 2002). Another measure suggests that between fifteen and nineteen percent of students are retained every year (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). This is far greater than the rates in many other countries, including Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom (Holmes & Saturday).

*Retention is expensive.* There is a cost associated with retention for schools. This cost is passed on to the community and state through the additional per pupil expenditures. Some estimates point to costs that exceed \$14 billion per year ((Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Because students who are enrolled in urban districts are more likely to be retained than their suburban counterparts, the financial burden is greater on the school districts that are already experiencing fiscal crises and underfunded budgets (Wheelock, 2000).

*Retention is strongly connected with dropout rates and, in fact, is the best single predictor of dropping out.* Studies have shown that students who have been retained are between two and eleven times more likely to drop out than promoted students (Anderson, et al). Some students have been retained more than once, and for these students the research is startling: the risk of dropping out is increased by ninety percent (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). This holds true even when retained subjects are carefully matched with low performing, promoted students.

Dozens of studies have been examined and it has been shown that retention is not only

correlated with dropping out, it has been identified as an early predictor of later dropping out from school (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Students who have been held back are more likely to drop out than underachieving students (Wheelock, 2000). Overall, retention has been identified as the single most effective predictor of dropping out (Jimerson & Kaufman).

*Retention is applied unfairly.* Additionally, the students who have been shown to benefit the least from retention are the very students to whom the practice is applied. Boys are retained more frequently than girls and minority students are retained more often than white students (Anderson et al, 2002). African American boys are more likely to be retained than their Caucasian American classmates. When one considers that African American males score lower than any minority group on standardized tests, the connection is easy to see (Rodney & Crafter, 1999).

*Retention is tough on those who are retained.* Although a few studies have found that students who have been retained feel better about themselves (Thompson & Kolb, 1999), most studies have shown that students who have been retained suffer lower self-esteem and lower rates of attendance (Anderson et al, 2002). Even the threat of being retained is harmful to students. Surveys that were originally conducted during the 1980's and were later repeated in 2001 showed that the fear of being retained is a significant fear of sixth graders, greater even than the fear of losing a parent or going blind (Anderson et al, 2002).

Being retained has been shown to send negative messages to students, including a message of failure or being unwanted (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). Students might feel frustrated and become disinterested in their education and discouraged about their future when retained (Holmes & Saturday). While this

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frustration might manifest itself in the dropout rate (see above discussion), it also has implications for those who remain in school and on the students who share their classrooms with them. It has been shown that older students are seventy percent more likely to be extreme behavior problems in school (Holmes & Saturday). The misbehavior and lower motivation impacts the students who share the schools with the retained students, resulting in an environment of depressed expectations for all (Wheelock, 2000).

*Retention is ineffective.* If the practice of retention helped students in the long run, despite all of the negative consequences outlined above, perhaps it could be supported as an effective practice in our nation's schools. Such is not the case, however. Students who are retained do worse than similar, low-achieving students who are promoted (Wheelock, 2000). Repeated meta-analyses have shown that retention negatively impacts achievement (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). Holmes & Saturday, in response to critics who argued that the research on retention was poorly done, revisited studies on retention and academic achievement and included only the well-matched studies. In the studies with the matched pairs, retained students were shown to do even more poorly than the earlier, whole-group research had shown (Holmes & Saturday).

While some reluctant retention advocates once conceded that the practice of retention could be effective when applied to younger children, recent research contradicts this argument and actually suggests that being retained at a lower grade level is actually worse than later retention (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). First graders who have been retained did not read better than low-performers who had been promoted to second grade (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). Students who were retained in first grade do worse, academically and emotionally, than their peers (Thompson & Kolb, 1999). This has been shown to be true for kindergarteners, also (Thompson & Kolb).

Some research has shown that standardized test scores in school do improve when the practice of retention is applied. The research that does point to a positive impact is based on district and system-wide scores – and students who are retained do not sit for subsequent standardized tests (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). So, this kind of research shows that retention can have a positive impact on the scores of a school; it does not show that retention has a positive impact on individuals.

### Yet the Debate Rages On

It seems paradoxical that the practice of retention should remain so widespread in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Even the rare, favorable studies about retention identify a positive impact that disappears after a year or two. Retention is costly, ineffective, and potentially harmful. Yet millions of students are retained every year. What is a good middle-level program or school to do? The best answer is that neither retention nor social promotion is preferred. A third option, perhaps a well-developed AIS continuum, must emerge in middle schools and be proved successful before the debate will die down. The research is clear about retention, though: it doesn't work and often harms students. The practice of retention should be discontinued.

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For more information, contact: Dr. James Tobin  
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[tobin@nysmsa.org](mailto:tobin@nysmsa.org).



# Becoming Data Savvy: The Partnership between the Middle-Level Teacher and Data

Jennifer A. Borgioli



## Sound Familiar?

*The students have barely begun working when Mrs. Carter hears the sounds of Terrance making his morning entrance. By the sheer volume of his locker slamming and the mumbling she can hear through the open door, it is obvious things didn't go well with his brother the night before. From her position in the back of the room, Mrs. Carter surveys her class. All of the groups are hard at work on the morning tasks, some more than others. (Haley has to share the update on her sister's prom date with her group before they can get to work.). After weighing her options, Mrs. Carter decides to switch Terrance's seat assignment. Vanessa is working at the table next to Derrick (happy as a lark, having understood all of his homework and been named the MVP of the previous day's intramural baseball game). Mrs. Carter asks Vanessa to move to the front group, explains to Derrick's group that Terrance will be joining them, and reassigns Derrick to be the group moderator while they work. By the time Vanessa is settled with her new group, Terrance is at the door and Mrs. Carter is there to meet him with a smile. That afternoon, Mrs. Carter reviews the agenda for the faculty meeting and when she sees the item "Review of State Assessment Data" grumbles to the teacher beside her, "I hate data! It never makes sense to me!"*

The irony of this all-too-familiar anecdote is that Mrs. Carter easily makes hundreds of decisions based on data throughout the course of her day. When Bridget furrowed her brow while working on a fraction problem, Mrs.

Carter made sure to spend a few extra minutes with her to confirm she had mastered the skill. Steven's furrowed brow meant he had finished the task and was thinking of something to do to entertain himself. A quick redirection towards a classroom task refocused Steven's energy. Every student provides Mrs. Carter with data that she uses to make instructional decisions. She gives daily assessments, provides chapter tests, and is constantly checking for student understanding in a variety of ways. These morsels of data come fast and furious at Mrs. Carter. She must filter out what's important, what's useful, what's useless, and ask the questions necessary to find out what she needs to do to meet her students' learning needs. Sometimes she checks her conclusions against those of other teachers, clarifies her understanding by asking parents questions, and often challenges the students to analyze their own performance and effort throughout the day.

Those same strengths are what her principal is relying on for the analysis of the state assessments. Instead of using her skills and making decisions for her students based on data, just like she has all day, Mrs. Carter mentally pushes back from the table and begins to make her grocery list. What is the difference between the data she worked with all day and the data now in front of her? To Mrs. Carter, there appear to be many: bar graphs, pie charts, subgroups, scores, and worst of all, numbers. If there are numbers, there is going to be math, and wouldn't you know it, Mrs. Carter left her calculator in her classroom. However, by seeing the overlap between the data analysis skills that teachers

use every day with qualitative data<sup>1</sup> and the skills needed to analyze the quantitative data<sup>2</sup> that NCLB mandates, teachers (even those who hate math) can become data savvy.

There are numerous resources for helping a school, district, or community use data more effectively and efficiently (see resources at the end of this article). The purpose of this article is to help the individual classroom teacher become more comfortable and familiar with the wide world of data and all that it entails. For some teachers, quantitative and accountability data make immediate sense. They can look at numbers in any form or style and understand what is meant by the data, draw meaningful conclusions, and know where to look for additional data. For the rest of us mortals, there are strategies and perspectives a teacher can adopt to move away from “data paranoid” toward “data guru.” These include embracing your inner geek, talking the talk while you walk the walk, and demanding multiple measures.

### **Step 1: Embrace Your Inner Geek (aka: Become a Discriminating Consumer of Data)**

Be assured, pocket protectors and black-framed glasses are entirely optional. What it means, however, to embrace your inner geek is that you accept that learning can be quantified; there is a science to education, as well as an art. Consider the last time you made a large ticket purchase. When going shopping for a washing machine, consumers have a pretty good idea of what they want. They are looking for a specific price, certain characteristics, and a good match to their needs. The same rules apply to data analysis. Not all data are

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as “Information that is difficult to measure, count, or express in numerical terms.” (EPA)

<sup>2</sup> Defined as “Information that can be expressed in numerical terms, counted, or compared on a scale.” (EPA)

good data and not all data views work for all educators. Be assured that data analysis should be a two-way street from the data provider to the educators consuming the data. Data may be provided by curriculum coordinators, principals, outside consultants, other teachers, newspaper editors...really by any one who has some numbers that can be put down on a sheet of paper. The sources of data in New York State are many, but regardless of the source, there are constants that all data providers should follow, and they have an obligation and a responsibility to provide these components. As an outside professional developer, I accept this accountability every time I work with teachers around data. I would rather have an embarrassing moment as a professional developer because I forgot to include a label and need to apologize to an astute data-user than to have a single teacher feel as if the data we worked with were irrelevant. If key aspects of the data are missing, it only benefits the educator to be an informed consumer and ask the data provider to fill in the blanks.

When presented with data, an inner geek or discriminating data-consumer should be able to answer readily the following questions. If the answers are not apparent on the document or screen, ask the provider.

- Source – From where were the data pulled?
- Timeliness – When were the data gathered? What time frame do the data cover?
- Accuracy – Were the data pulled directly from an electronic source (i.e. data warehouse) or were they manipulated in another program (i.e. Excel)? Manipulation, or prettying-up the data, increases the opportunity for human error. What steps were taken to ensure accuracy? If percentages are used, is the “n” (number of students in a group) provided? Keep in mind that once a group gets below 30, percentages can become misleading.

- Clarity – If the data are presented in a graph, is there a key or legend? If colors or shading were used to differentiate between different groups, can you clearly distinguish the different data points? If the data are presented in a table, are the rows and columns adequately labeled? Do all of the lines, data points, or graphs on the page make sense?
- Usefulness – Do the data have meaning? Meaning is not limited to a teacher’s content area or grade level. A district’s performance on the Regents has plenty of meaning to the grade 8 teacher as the conversation around the data may indicate a gap in the curriculum. Sometimes the provider will create the meaning for the teachers. (i.e. “These data are useful because they relate to the school’s focus on improving critical thinking skills.”) Other times, it falls to teachers to clarify the meaning of the data by asking questions.
- Time – How much time will the consumers have to discuss, chew over, analyze, debate, and scrutinize the data?

Time for analysis is perhaps the most important feature your inner geek will crave. Without having time to discuss data, teachers often fall victim to the “Mailbox Syndrome.” The Mailbox Syndrome is usually preceded by a data provider discovering something interesting in data and wanting to share with the data consumers. This sharing usually results in the provider photocopying the data, putting it in the teachers’ mailboxes with a note that says “Take a look at this and tell me what you think” or “Look what the data tells us! Use this to plan your instruction.” It wouldn’t take Mrs. Carter long to file those data in her circular file or under a stack on her desk. If time is not provided by the data provider, the newly freed inner geek will need to make time to analyze the data and construct meaning with colleagues.

One of the most powerful questions a data consumer can ask is *Tell me what you see when you look at these data?* and then compare the response to his or her own. Without the conversation, all you have are pretty pictures or numbers on a page. As it is with almost all aspects of educational change, it is the conversation that has meaning, not the numbers themselves. A critical look at the presentation of the data can often go a long way toward reducing teacher frustration and anxiety during the conversations about instruction inspired by the data.

## Step 2: Talking the Talk While Walking the Walk

Talking the talk does not require that teachers retake Education Statistics 101. It does, however, require some teachers to expand their lexicon. At the classroom level, this means understanding the difference between quantitative and qualitative data, between assessment and evaluation, and the use of summative, formative, and diagnostic assessments. On a larger level, it means understanding the New York State Accountability System under No Child Left Behind. There are a variety of sources available to help teachers understand the system but the best way may be to sit down and review a school’s report card. The most recent versions are located at: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reprcd2004/home.shtml>. Each report card contains detailed explanations of the accountability measures and what targets a school must meet.

An easy strategy to use when beginning to talk the talk, is to consider the following question whenever a colleague makes (or you hear yourself make) a comment that that is perceptual, opinionated, or qualitative in nature: What quantitative data do I have to support my statement? For example, Mrs. Carter reports that Terrance is doing better in school and a colleague asks questions that

uncover how Mrs. Carter knows he's doing better. *Has his number of violent outbursts decreased? Has his mastery on unit tests increased? Has there been a decrease in the number of times his group has needed outside mediation to complete their task?* A statement like "We've got a rough group of students this year" is fairly common in faculty rooms. When you talk the talk and walk the walk, you'll want to know what draws the speaker to that conclusion. *What evidence does he have that this year's class behaves any worse than last year's?* What is often exciting about this new perspective toward data is that teachers discover what they took as truth, is actually perception. This year's class may behave just as well as last year's class. However, one or two students stand out in the teacher's mind and have painted the rest of the class with a "misbehaving" brush. The one or two students could have changed the expectations for all teachers without an ounce of data being reviewed.

Talking the talk while walking the walk may mean carrying the experience collected in front of students all the way to Albany. As participants in a system we had little or no control over creating, it often seems as if the only voice we have is in the faculty room or in union newsletters. However, the New York State Education Department is constantly putting a call out for educators to provide feedback on assessments, standards, and resources. The "Call for Expertise" is available for any teacher in New York and can be found at <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/call.htm>. When a teacher is able to speak the language of data and accountability, their message is that much more powerful.

Finally, when a teacher or a group of teachers have embraced the language and the attitude of data analysis, they will not be tempted to give the data back to the provider and say: *Just tell me what it means. Tell me what I need to do.* Once teachers have the

language, the time, and the tools, the ownership of the data is evident. They belong to the teachers, the school, the students who generated the data—not the provider. It no longer makes sense to ask someone else to analyze data that has meaning for the very teachers who work with the students represented by the numbers. There is a time and a place for having outside providers analyze data, but if the goal is instructional planning and change, those changes will most readily occur if teachers are able to construct their own meaning with their own words.

### Step 3: Demand Multiple Measures

Imagine a future teacher's philosophy of education that reads: *I believe the purpose of education is to get high test scores.* Would you want that teacher teaching your child? This philosophy of education is laughable simply because people do not devote themselves to five years of education so they can be responsible for high test scores. Teachers become teachers for myriad reasons: to change the future, to expose children to the joy of learning, to inspire creativity and investigation. In addition to any reasons for becoming teachers, educators are charged with helping students master the New York State Learning Standards.

There are a multitude of strategies teachers can pull from to assess whether their teaching strategies are being successful. Authentic assessments, essays, quizzes, presentations, posters, dioramas—the list goes on. However, every middle-level teacher in the state of New York will be assessing their students with the same tool beginning in 2005-2006. This dissonance between multiple means of assessment and the mandated state assessments is the primary reason why teachers must demand multiple measures of themselves and their school.

To rely on an assessment given once a year to determine how well your students are

learning is akin to checking a map once during a cross-country drive. The odds are that once you realize you're off course, it's too late. If a school is using parallel assessments for diagnostic assessments, are they truly parallel or simply mirrors of the state assessments format? Again, there are numerous high-quality resources on the topic of multiple measures but an immediate response can be listening for decisions made based on a small sliver of the data pie. If a teacher suggests reconfiguring the grade 8 curriculum because most of the students got the questions about author's purpose wrong, investigate if it is a true instructional gap. *When the new eighth graders are given similar tasks, do the same gaps appear? Was there something especially challenging about items on the state assessment?* Using multiple measures is a way to avoid the trap of making bad decisions based on bad data.

Mrs. Carter has the amazing ability to look at room full of children and know who needs extra attention, who needs more space, whose work shows an understanding of the content, and whose work shows they are still struggling. Sometimes, though, even Mrs. Carter needs additional data to confirm or adjust her perceptions. Through thoughtful conversations with colleagues, careful consideration of data presented, self-reflection and self-advocacy, understanding the language of data analysis, and taking an active role in seeking out multiple measures, it is possible for any middle-level teacher to become data savvy.

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## Membership and Publication Information

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## Rochester, New York

Thursday, October 20

### Middle School Visitations

Arrange for visits to area schools to see best practices in action. Morning and afternoon visitations will be available.

### Full-Day Pre-Conference Workshops, 9 AM-3 PM

Pre-conference sessions are offered on a first-come, first-served basis with limited registration for each session. Scheduled sessions are:

- **Family Contact: Connecting Kids and Kin through the Curriculum** with Ross Burkhardt examines the importance of school-initiated family partnerships and offers activities to connect young adolescents with their families.
- **Teacher-Driven Data Analysis of the New York State Assessments: Facilitating a Protocol for Improving Instruction** with Jennifer Borgioli and Lisa Sanders will make intermediate assessment data your friend, not your foe.
- **Implementing New Middle School Regulations** with Elliot Merenbloom explores the different options for middle-level programs that will improve academic achievement and offer a comprehensive exploratory curriculum.
- **Numeracy: Increasing Expectations** with Nanci Smith “unpacks” the new math standards—looking at what content needs to be taught at each grade level and the best ways to reach the process standards.
- **A Celebration of Strategies: Teacher-Tested Tools for Differentiating Instruction for All Learners** with Linda Tilton offers a whole toolbox of highly practical and proven strategies that promote high expectations while meeting individual needs.

### Banquet with Keynote Address, 7-10 PM

**“The Importance of Belonging” — Joel Sonnenberg**

At the age of two, Joel Sonnenberg suffered burns over 85% of his body when a truck smashed into his family’s car. Having learned to accept his circumstances and excel beyond all expectations, he proves that the extraordinary is within everyone’s grasp.

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# Annual Conference

October 20-22, 2005

## Friday, October 21

### Trade Exhibit, 7 AM-3 PM

Pick up some new ideas, and maybe a sample or two, from the vendors in the Exhibit Hall. And be sure to turn in your completed Scavenger Hunt entry for a chance at a door prize! Among this year's vendors are:

- AGS Publishing
- Alcoholics Anonymous
- Audio Enhancement
- Cape Cod Sea Camps
- Capt. John Boats
- Corwin Press
- Curriculum Associates
- Delta Education
- Educators Publishing Service
- Glencoe/McGraw Hill
- Great Source
- Holt Rinehart & Winston (Harcourt)
- Kaplan K12 Learning Services
- McDougal Littell
- Minnie's Best
- N&N Publishing
- NY Newspaper Publishers Association
- Options Publishing
- Peoples Publishing Group
- Perma-Bound Books
- Premier Agendas
- Rand McNally Education
- Recorded Books
- Remedia Publications
- Renaissance Learning
- Rosen Classroom Books
- Saxon Publishers
- School Mate
- Steck Vaughn
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Admin.
- Teachers' Insurance Plan
- Texas Instruments
- Ward's Natural Science
- Washington Workshops Foundation
- Wright Group/McGraw Hill
- WRS Group
- and more

### Practitioner Workshops, 7:15 AM-3:30 PM

General Assembly with Keynote, 8:30-10 AM

"Reputations, Cliques, and Popularity" — Shanterra McBride

#### Featured Presentations

Nationally-known experts share their expertise via featured presentations scheduled throughout the day, including Ross Burkhardt, Shanterra McBride, Elliot Merenbloom, and Nanci Smith.

## Saturday, October 22

### Breakfast with Champions, 8:30 AM-12 Noon

Keynote: "Establishing Professional Learning Communities at the Middle Level" — Dr. Giselle Martin-Kniep

#### Break-out Sessions





## Cooperative Learning and the Gifted Middle School Student: A Miss or a Match?

Dr. John A. Huss

When I spoke recently on the topic of cooperative learning in the middle school with teachers who work with gifted students, I got the distinct impression tomato-throwing was imminent. The experience certainly reinforced the discord that seems to exist between proponents of cooperative learning and those who advocate for the gifted and talented. At best, educators of the gifted have been cautioned to approach the cooperative learning bandwagon with “caution.” Is this trepidation warranted? Are the goals of cooperative learning inconsistent with the needs of gifted students? Is cooperative learning simply misunderstand or truly a mismatch?

As I progressed through my middle-grades teaching-preparation program in the mid-1990’s, I was indoctrinated with cooperative learning as a mainstay in my instructional arsenal. After all, cooperative learning has been shown to promote academic achievement, increase retention, and vastly improve student self-esteem and communication. When I began my teaching career, I was caught unaware when I encountered rumblings of dissent from gifted preteens and their parents, after employing cooperative learning techniques in my classroom. It was, quite frankly, a harbinger of things to come, and not unlike the reaction I received in my aforementioned conference chat with gifted and talented teachers.

### **Grouping: Heterogeneous versus Homogeneous**

To arrive at common ground, one must first isolate those areas of difference between the two camps. In short, it begins with the

notion of heterogeneous versus homogeneous grouping. The “middle school” as an entity is a staunch adherent of mixed ability groups, thereby making cooperative learning a desirable strategy. The backgrounds and experiences of all students are important for enriching learning in the classroom. As preparation for life *beyond* the classroom, it is essential to provide middle-level students with opportunities in multiple contexts to understand and interact with diverse perspectives. Cooperative learning tasks replicate in the classroom the kinds of activities that characterize adult social, economic, and political life. A wealth of research certainly supports this conviction.

Johnson, Johnson & Smith (1991); Kagan (1992); and Millis & Cottell (1998) encourage heterogeneous groups, reflecting varied learning abilities, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and a mixture of the sexes. Likewise, Spear (1992) supports grouping practices that allow for “broad peer interactions to allow students to socialize with, model, and adjust to a variety of peer influences” (p. 257). Perceived benefits to low and middle ability students are often a motivation for implementing the practice. Indeed, most cooperative learning “teams” suggest a composition of one low ability student, two medium ability students, and one high achieving student. The buzz phrase that “we remember 95% of what we teach to others” provides a cornerstone for the use of high ability students to act as “mini-teachers” to those with lesser aptitudes. Further, research by the Massachusetts Advocacy Center (1990) suggests that cooperative learning may be particularly beneficial for African-American and Hispanic students. So,

in its sincere quest for equity, the middle school has embraced cooperative learning as a vehicle for creating small communities of learning to encourage critical exploration of ideas. There is, however, another side to the story.

The work of Feldhusen (1989); Kulik and Kulik (1990); Allan (1991); Rogers (1993); and Fiedler, Lange, & Winebrenner (1993) confirms what gifted educators have proclaimed for years: gifted students benefit cognitively and affectively from working with other gifted students. For many teachers, having gifted students perform the role of “pint-sized professor” in a mixed cooperative group is not the best avenue for helping these youngsters reach maximum capacity. If gifted students are consistently “teaching” or “explaining” material to other children, they are not using allocated time for high-end pursuits of their own. Heterogeneous grouping typically fails to inspire or advance most gifted students, leaving them bored, frustrated, and even anxious. Advocates also charge gifted learners typically receive less individual attention than special education or remedial students and less of the scarce educational resources. So, the proverbial line in the sand is drawn.

As we grasp for resolution, I would aver that well-intentioned teachers frequently *misuse* cooperative learning. Their approach focuses on basic, lower-level skills at the exclusion of enrichment, problem solving, and judging propositions. “Engaging curricula” and “differentiation” do not always convert into practice. What we find are cooperative groups—led by gifted students—occupied with unsophisticated tasks, spurred by didactic teaching. Perhaps we can compromise.

Middle-school teachers can limit the use of heterogeneous cooperative groups when the sole purpose is learning basic information or

rudimentary skills. Heterogeneous groups should be reserved for challenging, creative, open-ended, and higher-order thinking tasks. In this manner, gifted students will not be as apt to feel “put upon” to regurgitate rote material to lower ability classmates. They will not be “learning” concepts they have already mastered. The over-all emphasis on decision-making and problem-solving may, in the long run, raise the floor and eliminate the ceiling on expectations for *all* students in the classroom. Activities of a more interesting and complex nature may ultimately blur the lines between “gifted education” and “good-for-all education.” Everyone can contribute something to and benefit from tasks that are not inherently “easy” and “predictable.”

Thus, the fortuitous mishandling of cooperative learning by many middle-level teachers may prove to be at the core of the disagreement. Professional development in this area would be time well-spent. By way of quick review, let us establish that not all “group work” is “cooperative.” Well-meaning directives to “work together as a team” are insufficient. For many, the notion of “cooperative learning” goes no further than dragging desks together or augmenting the classroom with cozy tables and 4-desk “cubes”. It *looks* like cooperative learning, but so does a vice-roy butterfly look like a monarch. Fortunately, research has isolated five essential elements of cooperative learning.

## The Five Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning

### Positive Interdependence

Arguably the most critical component of cooperative learning is positive interdependence, which occurs when the gains of individuals and teams are positively correlated (Kagan, 1992). Group members must perceive they are linked to each other in such a way that one cannot succeed unless everyone

succeeds. Distributing materials so no single student has all the information (frequently the gifted “beast of burden”) is a standard tactic to this end. Another option is to assign divisions of labor within a group. A protracted deficiency in any of the roles clearly impacts the ability of the over-all group to flourish. Often, middle-school cooperative groups have no interdependence and, therefore, no legitimate reason for being!

### Face-to-Face Interaction

A second key element of cooperative learning is face-to-face interaction. There are important cognitive and interpersonal dynamics that occur only when students impart knowledge to others, orally explain how to solve problems, discuss concepts in real time, check for understanding, and connect past with present learning. If students can easily complete a “cooperative” assignment without soliciting input from fellow members, the activity may not be suitable for the structure. Creating small communities for learning can often be as simple as supplementing a lecture with brief periods of cooperative processing time.

### Individual and Group Accountability

Individual and group accountability is perhaps the tenet of cooperative learning that throws more than its share of teachers into a dither. Yes, teachers—and resistant students—must be willing to expend some effort when it comes to assessment and evaluation. While some middle-grades students may arrive with sporadic elementary experiences, most are untrained with cooperative learning and may initially pine for the anonymity and low maintenance of a “normal” class. The smaller the size of the group, the greater the individual accountability can be. It is more difficult for students to “hide” in a group of four than in a larger group. Randomly examining students orally by calling on one student to present his/her group’s progress to the teacher

or to the entire class is an effective option for monitoring student understanding, as is recording the frequency of a group member’s contribution to the overall charge.

A popular misconception is cooperative learning entails undifferentiated group grades wherein pencil/paper tests and quizzes are somehow pestilent and inconsistent with the spirit of the genre. Untrue. I maintain students learn together so they can subsequently gain greater individual competency. A teacher might utilize cooperative learning but *formally* grade only individual assignments. Much leeway is available as to how student mastery is weighted. A gifted student need not feel that he/she hand-delivers undeserved “superior scores” to languishing group members.

Asking students to anonymously “grade” fellow teammates with a rubric or scale can also produce important data. When a teacher compares student ratings with his/her own ratings, a clearer picture emerges as to how a particular member fared throughout a given activity. These ratings, combined with objective assessments, allow a teacher to evaluate not only the finished product, but also the individual strengths and weaknesses of team members.

### Interpersonal Skills

A fourth essential element of cooperative learning is the emphasis placed upon interpersonal skills. When students participate regularly in cooperative activities, they fortify leadership capabilities, develop trust in others, and sharpen their decision-making and conflict resolution skills. Failure to interact appropriately with colleagues is an oft-cited reason why many people lose employment. Rather than having students *absorb* knowledge, teachers encourage students to think through problems, conceptualize, analyze, ask questions, be questioned, and reflect on how their beliefs might impact and compare to

others. In short, all students gain enduring intellectual abilities.

### Group Processing

The final requisite element of cooperative learning is group processing. As an activity unfolds, members need to discuss how well they are achieving their goals. What actions are helpful and which hinder group success? Reflecting upon the group effort and how production can be improved is a critical and often overlooked aspect of a cooperative venture.

Used in its intended format, cooperative learning and the use of heterogeneous grouping may prove less problematic for gifted students than the version proliferated in most middle school classrooms, which often involves little more than “competition in close quarters” or “sitting together to watch *some* students work.” If gifted students are interacting with others on fresh, stimulating and exigent activities, the temptation to use these youngsters solely as junior teachers will be lessened.

### Additional Strategies

Additional strategies can act as emollients for easing the philosophical differences that may exist. Teachers, for example, can employ flexibility grouping for many activities and discussions, grouping students by level of understanding of specific topics. Allowing gifted students to work together in groups in their areas of greatest strength for at least part of the school day is likewise recommended. As a complement, some teachers have administered multiple intelligence or learner preference questionnaires within their classes and periodically grouped students in this manner, thus providing time for *all* learners to interact with intellectual peers. “Circle the Sage” takes advantage of any students with special knowledge or experiences to share. Some students have visited particular cities, know

how to make balloon animals, or understand rules to a certain game. Class members gather around these “sages” to learn from them. In this way, the “expert” is not always the gifted student.

Cluster grouping is also an option. Gifted students may be clustered in one section of any heterogeneous class, especially when there are not enough students to form an advanced section for a particular subject. Also, allowing gifted students the option of working alone on selected assignments should not be discounted. In many instances, gifted youngsters need to individually progress at a faster pace even if the curriculum has been modified to emphasize density and complexity. Striking a balance, then, between heterogeneous and homogenous grouping is a reasonable alternative.

Hopefully this revisiting of cooperative learning will provide much-needed validation to those teachers who currently believe wholeheartedly in the practice and recognize the increased cognitive, affective and interpersonal benefits to their students. Perhaps it will likewise serve as encouragement to fellow middle-grades educators who work with gifted students and are enchanted by cooperative learning, yet hesitant to remove the training wheels. By using a “situational stratagem,” teachers can meet the needs of all students in the classroom, while disserving none. They will be glad they put the “co-op” into cooperative learning.

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## Is your school a Sch I to Watch?

The New York State Essential Elements Schools-to-Watch Program seeks to recognize a small number of diverse, high-performing model middle-level schools to demonstrate what all schools with middle-level grades should be and are capable of achieving.

Schools eligible to participate must have:

- at least two of grades 6-8 **and**
- *either* a 2004-2005 performance index of 155 or higher
- *or* met all annual yearly progress (AYP) growth targets for both the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years.

All applications must be postmarked no later than Friday, October 14.

Go to [www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org) for an application and more information.

# Lea's Lessons

Lea Macdonald



## Celebrate the Wonder Years!

*“No other age level is of more importance to the future of individuals, and literally, to that of society; because these are the years when youngsters crystallize their beliefs about themselves and firm up their self-concepts, their philosophies of life and their values — the things that are the ultimate determinants of their behaviors.”*

—John H. Lounsbury

October is the **Month of the Young Adolescent**, a national collaborative effort of school, home, and community to celebrate the “kids in the middle.” This annual celebration was initiated by the National Middle School Association and brings together a variety of organizations to focus on the needs of this important time period in a child’s life. Throughout the Month of the Young Adolescent (MOYA), the focus is on young adolescents’ developmental needs and how these needs impact parenting practices and educational programs. According to the National Middle School Association, by fostering the home, school, and community connection, we can offer our 10-15 year olds the opportunity to make these challenging years a positive and enriching experience.

As we begin the school year and plan our MOYA activities, it’s important to remember the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. Based on research concerning this age group, the following generalizations can serve as guidelines for middle-level educators and parents:

- Early adolescence is a distinctive developmental stage of life.
- The accelerated physical and personal development during this period is the greatest in the human life cycle.
- During these years each child forms his/her basic values and attitudes.
- They learn best through interaction and activity.
- They are sensitive, vulnerable, and emotional.
- They are greatly influenced by their peers and the adults in their lives.
- They need challenging, relevant, and meaningful instruction.

I would like to share with you some of the activities we did at my school during the month of October over the last few years to celebrate the “kids we teach.” During advisory, students brainstormed what it means to be a young adolescent. In small groups, they discussed their fears, their dreams, their likes and dislikes. Students then worked individually to express their thoughts. Some students wrote poems, others wrote journal entries. One of my students put his thoughts into pictures and illustrated the hopes and dreams of a 12-year-old. That illustration found its way to a cover of *In Transition* a few years ago. One grade level created a mural with visuals, phrases, and poems to express what it means to be in middle school. The local newspaper featured an article highlighting the program at our school. Students responded to these activities with enthusiasm and excitement.

A recent addition to our MOYA celebration has been the *Walk in My Shoes* program, sponsored and facilitated by members of the school's PTA. This program helps to create an awareness of special needs and involves the students, teachers, and parents. Seventh-grade students spent the day visiting different learning centers where they participated in activities that simulate various disabilities that can impair a child's ability to learn at the same rate as another student. The light bulbs were blinking that day for everyone! Our seventh-graders celebrated each and every student that day, regardless of readiness level or learning style. This program would not be possible without the support of our parents.

Education is about building community and connecting school and home to the child. All adults should be advocates for young

adolescents. The Month of the Young Adolescent will provide opportunities to achieve that goal. There are information and resources available to you on the NMSA Web site ([www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org)). Please visit it for the philosophy, the strategies, and community activities that can be readily implemented in your school. The Month of the Young Adolescent will make a real difference in the climate of your school. Please join us in this year's celebration of the kids we teach.

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# Medieval Movies and More: An Interdisciplinary Journey through the Middle Ages

Janie Fitzgerald



The school year is closing fast, the spring heat is draining us, and there is one more interdisciplinary unit to teach before summer. This is the Popham 6 Team's last stop on our journey through ancient civilizations. How do we shake the dust out of the books to make the Middle Ages come alive and seem real, relevant, and connected for our sixth grade students?

Lights, camera, action! Our students acted in and produced their own movies as they immersed themselves in the Middle Ages during our Medieval Movies and More interdisciplinary discovery project. For five weeks, students traveled back in time to live in castles and fiefs. This project culminated with our Medieval Fest, where our students demonstrated all they had learned during the year in technology, research, writing, literary and historical analysis, mathematics, science, and performance. It was a wonderful ending to an enriching year!

As a team, we have always made smaller connections during other units. However, this project enabled us to create deeper and richer connections between English, social studies, science, math, computer technology, and family and consumer sciences. The Popham 6 teachers wrote for a \$1000 mini-grant from the Scarsdale Teachers Institute for books and materials to begin this project. The English and social studies teachers took two iMovie classes and a book-making class from the Scarsdale Teachers Institute to prepare for the project. Then, the team spent numerous planning periods, lunches, and time after school creating introductory materials, discovery stations, calendars, activities, and lessons. Each teammate highlighted aspects of the Middle Ages that related to his or

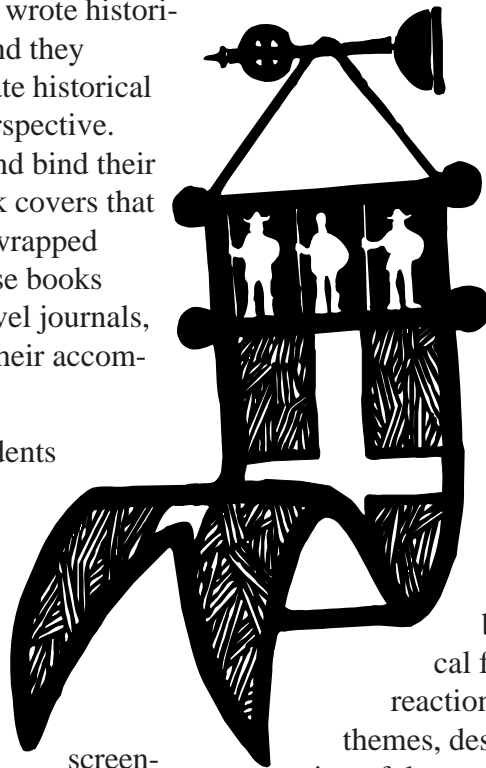
her subject area, and as a result the students saw the real and relevant connections.

The discovery stations that were created collaboratively gave our students a rich and rewarding interdisciplinary day in the Middle Ages. Each student received a discovery station packet to complete during the Medieval Discovery Stations Day. The activities allowed students to use their multiple intelligences in a variety of tasks. Within each of the four core-area classes, teams of students journeyed to two or three different stations. Some stations required collaboration and some stations involved individual work. They learned how to play the medieval game, *The Nine Men of Morris*; create a stained glass window; calculate the Fibonacci sequence; unearth the history of great women of the time; uncover the mystery behind the crime at Canterbury; listen to and react to a Canterbury Tale; produce a medieval menu; illuminate a manuscript; read and react to an historical fiction excerpt on leeching and learn about other medieval medicine; delve into the history of the moveable type printing press; and build and test a catapult.

In social studies, students demonstrated their understanding of life in the Middle Ages by creating travel logs from the point of view of a medieval person. The historical fiction picture book, *Castle Dairy: The Journal of Tobias Burgess, Page*, was used as a whole class read-aloud and model for formatting. Students glimpsed the life of a page as he trained to become a squire. Afterwards, each student chose to walk in the shoes of a knight, squire, lady, lord, troubadour, page, peasant, or serf and wrote his or her own travel journal. Within these

journals they focused on at least four aspects of medieval life including food, clothing, housing, religion, roles of men and women, education, knighthood, hunting, crime, crusades, feasts, fairs, and jesters. They used Internet links provided by the librarians and books on the Middle Ages to aid in their research. This newfound information was shared by creating artwork, poetry, artifacts, maps, letters, diagrams, and journal entries. They wrote historical fiction in a journal format, and they knew that they must have accurate historical information and an authentic perspective. Students learned how to make and bind their own books with handsome, thick covers that were clasped shut with a string wrapped around a decorative button. These books resembled genuine medieval travel journals, and the students were proud of their accomplishments.

In English, each team of students selected a King Arthur or Robin Hood legend to study and bring to life on the big screen. This appealed to them as young adolescents because of their dramatic flair and love of technology; consequently, they learned first-hand about adapted screen-plays. We used *DK Classics: King Arthur* and *DK Classics: Robin Hood* because of their clear and concise storytelling of the legends, vivid illustrations, historical margin notes, and special background pages. Student volunteers created murals and props for all teams to use during the filming. First, each team read and discussed the legend. Second, they completed a legend information sheet, sharing their reactions to the story and the illustrations, identifying historical background and fictional embellishment, discovering themes, distinguishing vivid language, constructing cultural connections, and making inferences about the social hierarchy of the Middle Ages. Third, they wrote a script including stage directions, props, and settings. Fourth,



on a laptop, they created a digital storyboard using the storyboarding program available at [www.atomiclearning.com](http://www.atomiclearning.com). This storyboard contained shot types and descriptions, transitions, effects, and other important information needed to plan out a movie. Fifth, they videotaped their performance in the classroom, hallway, courtyard, field, or wooded section of the school grounds. Sixth, they used iMovie to import video, edit clips, import soundtracks and still pictures, and use transitions and effects to create an original iMovie. For the iMovie evaluation, all classes helped create a student-generated rubric. This gave them ownership in both the process and the product. At the end of the project, they wrote a self-reflection, sharing what they had learned. For English homework during the unit, each student read a medieval historical fiction book and completed an information sheet. This contained an original book jacket blurb, a list of historical facts, details gleaned from the text, reactions to the story, explanations of themes, descriptions of settings, identification of the strongest conflict, and a statement of how s/he would feel walking around in the character's shoes.

In math, through research and class activities, students connected the Fibonacci sequence to everyday life and the natural world around us. Students discovered and examined the relationship between the Fibonacci sequence and the "golden ratio" and real world connections were further explored. They created Fibonacci projects that were displayed in the math classroom, hallway, and our Medieval Hall during the Medieval Fest. In addition, students examined various units of medieval measurement during a "Medieval Math Olympics."

In science, students investigated weaponry and warfare in the Middle Ages as it related to machines and technology. Students created and tested catapults to determine their effectiveness as a siege weapon. Also, they learned about the invention of the moveable type printing press and how it changed the world.

In family and consumer sciences, students learned about medieval clothing. This helped them design their own costumes and props for the iMovies and the culminating Medieval Fest.

The technology connection was an integral part of this project. The social studies and English teachers met with the computer teachers during the initial planning stage to determine the amount of technology support the project would require. The head computer teacher, who is an Apple Distinguished Educator and had also taught the teachers iMovie, introduced iMovie to the students and taught them video and editing skills in English class. These lessons were augmented by the tutorials available on iMovie through [www.atomiclearning.com](http://www.atomiclearning.com) and quick mini-lessons taught each day by the English teacher. Students explored the tutorials as homework to learn more about this powerful video production software. Throughout the project, the computer teachers provided technical support. Also, they facilitated the use of the video cameras, laptops, and projection system. A Middle Ages Web page was created and linked to the Scarsdale Middle School Web site. Students used this Web page to access research links and keep track of due dates and activities using the posted calendar for May and June.

The culminating activity for this project was the Medieval Fest held in the auditorium. Students and teachers came dressed in medieval costumes. The entrance to the auditorium was transformed into a Medieval Hall, decorated with coats of arms and stained glass windows created by the students during the discovery stations and social studies classes. The Fibonacci projects and the travel logs were exhib-

ited for students to browse through. Students viewed a screening of each iMovie on the huge screen in the auditorium with an intermission for refreshments. It was a day for celebration and pageantry.

This project was extremely successful. Students were immersed in the Middle Ages in all subjects; therefore, they were able to synthesize all they had learned and take their learning to the next level. The large scope of the project required students to effectively use all of their organizational, research, and writing skills to create polished products. They expressed their creativity and originality while creating both their iMovie scripts and their travel journals. Students were incredibly invested in their learning and were proud to share their iMovies and other projects. They worked very closely in teams and successfully dealt with the issues that using technology under deadline pressure creates. This was a unique melding of modern technology and information about the ancient world that our students will never forget.

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# The Year of Languages

Gloria Hoffer

Last fall, while attending the New York State Foreign Language Conference (NYSFLT) in Rochester, New York, I was first made aware of the fact that 2005 had been designated “The Year of Languages” in the United States. Since I am a foreign language teacher, this concept was intriguing and I attended both the morning and afternoon sessions dealing with this topic. I was surprised to learn that while 2005 was the Year of Languages in our country, it had been so in Europe in 2001 and will be in China next year.

This designation presents an opportunity to focus America’s attention on the academic, social and economic benefits of studying other languages and cultures from around the world. This initiative seeks to positively influence the full range of language programs in U.S. schools and communities and the students these programs are designed to serve. Although the concept of celebrating languages all year was very exciting, it was made clear throughout the sessions that a great deal of work had to be done in order to present programs worthy of celebrating this event. Throughout the two sessions on this topic all the participants brainstormed ideas on how to “get the ball rolling” and find creative ways to make this a special and eventful year.

At Merton Williams Middle School in Hilton, New York, we have created a special program to commemorate this special year. Our students will participate in a cultural diversity day on September 30, 2005. On this day, the majority of teachers throughout the school will be offering cultural lessons, activities, cooking demonstrations, sign language, salsa dancing, origami lessons, and much more celebrating the languages and culture of people from around the world. Our school is divided into six teams, and

each team will offer six to seven activities. Each student on the team will select three activities from the team’s offerings. The students will then rotate among their chosen activities throughout the morning. They will have hands-on experiences learning about different cultures and languages. The teachers began planning for this day last May and also spent an afternoon’s curriculum time in June to finalize plans for the event.

The Merton Williams Middle School’s LOTE department has also been engaging in activities to advertise the Year of Languages and engender enthusiasm both in the school and in the local community at large. Members of the department supervised the creation of cultural decorations from various countries that have decorated the town’s library. The department’s language clubs decorated the school with posters and balloons and local stores have been contacted to help promote the study of languages as well. The LOTE teachers are also re-writing their proposal to implement language learning in the elementary levels because the goal of the Year of Languages is to advance the concept that every American should develop proficiency not only in English, but in other languages as well.

All of us here at Merton Williams have been enjoying our celebration thus far and look forward to finishing out 2005, the Year of Languages, with a true international flair.

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# The Day that Francesca Didn't Like School Anymore: A Children's Story for Adults

Barbara Adams



Last year I had so much fun in Mrs. Baker's sixth grade class. She was the *best* teacher ever! She was like a teacher and a mom all rolled into one.

Every morning when I walked into our classroom, Mrs. Baker would look up and give me a big smile and say, "Good morning Francesca. I've been looking forward to seeing you today." Or she'd say, "Hi, Francesca. Glad that you're here." With a twinkle in her eye, Mrs. Baker would say stuff like that to all the kids, even Joey who couldn't learn arithmetic, and Carmen who said things like "Lithen to me," instead of, "Listen to me." And even though I was a slow reader, Mrs. Baker's kind face always let me know that it was OK.

Mrs. Baker made learning fun and she didn't scare kids or make them feel embarrassed or anything. One day when she was teaching long division, Joey really got confused and he kept erasing and erasing the numbers on his paper. He erased so much that he put a hole in his paper. Then, with his fist, he pounded on his desk. Everybody looked at Joey and then we looked at Mrs. Baker. In her *Mrs.-Baker-way* she quietly walked over to Joey, leaned down really close to him, and then put her arm around him. She whispered something that made Joey laugh. None of us kids ever knew what she said. Next, Mrs. Baker wrote something on Joey's paper. Pretty soon, Joey wiped the tears off his face and then he wrote something on his paper. Mrs. Baker jumped up and said, "That's it, Joey. You got it. See how smart you are!"

Everybody in the class started clapping and Joey smiled so big that you could see the place in his mouth where his front tooth used to be. "I got it!" he said.

Another day during social studies time, Mrs. Baker put us in little groups so that we could make up a play about the medieval times. Carmen was in my group and some of the kids in our class used to make fun of the way Carmen talked. I felt bad when they did this so I asked Carmen to come and sit next to me. Well, Carmen got a really good idea that he couldn't wait to tell the other kids in our group about. "Hey, you know what, you *guyths*?" Carmen said. "Me and *Francethca* are gonna pretend to be *knightth* and we're gonna ride *hortheth*, and..."

Two of the boys in our group started laughing and making fun of the way Carmen was speaking. Carmen just stood there and his face got bright red and he looked very sad, but he didn't cry. He just stood real still. Mrs. Baker came over and put her arm around Carmen. She asked him if he would please bring a note that she had in her hand to Mr. Johnson in the classroom next door, and then said, "Carmen, please wait for Mr. Johnson to answer before you bring the note back."

When Carmen walked out of the room, Mrs. Baker sat down with everyone in my little group. She didn't yell at anyone. She just turned to the two boys who were making fun of Carmen and asked them this question: "Nathan and LaVaughn, please tell me how making fun of Carmen helped him to feel good about himself." The boys didn't answer Mrs. Baker. They just dropped their heads and

looked at the floor. In a really quiet voice, Mrs. Baker said, "I'd like an answer, please." She wasn't smiling.

"I don't know," said Nathan. LaVaughn just shrugged his shoulders.

"Well what I'm wondering is this: You both have little brothers, right?"

"Yes, ma'm," they said at the same time.

"If someone bullied your little brother the way you just bullied Carmen, how do you think your little brother would feel?"

"He'd feel sad," said LeVaughn

"Yeah, my little brother would cry," Nathan added.

"Well," said Mrs. Baker, "Carmen is coming back into the room right now. What do you think you might want to say to him?"

"Hey, Carmen," LeVaughn and Nathan called out together. "C'mon over so we can work on our play. We want you and Francesca to be the knights!"

I wish I could have read books as fast as Chrissy or Tyquonda, but I couldn't. Sometimes when I was reading a book, the letters would get all mixed up. Like, sometimes a *b* looked like a *d*, and a *p* looked like a *q*. It took me a long time to figure out the words. Lots of times the words looked like they were *shivering* and when I got to the end of a sentence, I couldn't remember what it said, so I'd have to start all over again. I used to think that everybody in my class finished their reading before I did, so I pretended that I was done when they were. But then, I never knew what the story was about.

Well, Mrs. Baker knew that I read slowly, but she didn't care. One day after we were finished with our reading groups and I was by myself feeding the fish, she came over and

said to me, "You know what, Francesca, everyone is good at something, but I don't know *one person* who's good at everything. The important things are this: Enjoy the things that you're good at, and teach them to others who want to learn. And then, work hard at what you're not as good at, and let someone teach you how to get better!"



I loved that idea, 'cause Mrs. Baker asked me to make a list of all the things that I was good at, and the list was really long. I had twenty-three things on that list! Then Mrs. Baker said, "Now Francesca, make a list of the things that you want to get better at."

So, I wrote down two things: *swimming* and *reading*.

Mrs. Baker asked me, "Who can help you to become a better swimmer, Francesca?"

"My big brother."

"And what about reading?" Mrs. Baker asked. "Who can help you to become a better reader?"

"You can, Mrs. Baker," I said with a big smile. "Can we start right now?"

## The Next September...

*Welcome Back, Students*, the sign said in the front of our Middle School. In my new pink outfit that mom bought for me at the mall last week, I was a little nervous getting off the bus on the first day of seventh grade. *What if I can't remember my schedule? What if I get lost upstairs? What if my new teachers don't like me? What if...*

Then I saw Mrs. Baker at the sixth grade door welcoming her new class. "Hi, Mrs. Baker," I yelled.

“Hi Francesca, she called back to me with a wave and a big *Mrs.-Baker-smile*.

*Oh, I wish that I could go back to Mrs. Baker’s class. Those lucky sixth graders.*

I saw Tyquonda down the hall. “Hey Tyquonda, do you know how to get to room 257? It’s my homeroom.”

“I think that it’s upstairs,” Tyquonda answered. “But I gotta go. I have to find *my* homeroom,” she said as she ran past me.

Everybody looked like they had on new clothes from the mall. Some of the girls were wearing heels and some were wearing skirts that were so short that my mom wouldn’t even let me wear them at home. A lot of the boys had on new jeans that were hanging so low that they looked like they were going to fall off. Everybody seemed excited. Everybody, that is, but me. I could hear my heart pounding. *What if...*

“Hey, Francesca!” It was Chrissy. “C’mon, our homeroom’s over here. You’re in 257, right?”

“Right, 257.”

I was so glad to see Chrissy. At least she knows where she’s going. My new shoes were already starting to hurt. *I knew that I should have gotten a bigger size.*

Homeroom only lasted ten minutes. After the Pledge and the morning announcements Mr. Peterson, our homeroom teacher, handed out our schedules and our locker assignments. He let us go out in the hall to put our stuff in our lockers. *Whew, it opened the first time. Now, I just have to remember my combination so that I can open it again before lunch. I wonder where the bathrooms are up here?*

The bell rang and we passed to first period. *Where do I go, now?* I thought as I looked down at my schedule. *Social studies... Room 321... Ms. E. Peabody. Where*

*is that? Down this way or that way?* “Hey, Carmen!” I yelled. “Are you going to social studies? Three-twenty one? Oh, good. Let’s go together.”

She was sitting at her desk when we walked into the room and she never looked up. Her hair was pulled back so tight that it made her eyes bulge. Her fingers were long and skinny and they reminded me of the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*. She wasn’t soft and squishy like Mrs. Baker. She looked more like a tall, stiff board with a pointy head. Ms. Peabody was not the Welcome Wagon lady.

“Where should we sit?” I asked Carmen.

“I don’t know. Do you think that we have *athigned theatth?*”

“Probably,” I said, “but let’s just go sit in the back of the room until she says something.”

Other kids came into the room but nobody said too much. They just sat down next to one of their friends or at the nearest empty desk. Ms. Peabody moved from writing in her grade book to filling out some sort of list. It felt like she didn’t even know that we were there. My hands were sweaty and my mouth was dry, and when I looked over at Carmen, I saw that he was just sitting there looking straight ahead. *I wonder what he’s thinking?*

By the time the four-minute late bell rang, the twenty-four desks were nearly filled. A short, blond girl and an Asian-looking boy ran into the room just before Ms. Peabody closed the door. It sounded like she said, “Humph,” when they sat down.

“Good morning, everyone,” said *the witch*. “Welcome back to school and to seventh grade social studies. My name is Ms. Peabody,” she said with voice that hurt my ears. “Please fill out this 3x5 index card by giving me the information that I have written

on the board. When you're finished, please stand up so that I can seat you alphabetically."

Seat us alphabetically? Why alphabetically? Mrs. Baker used to sit us in groups next to people we could learn things from and could teach things to. Why would Ms. Peabody just put us in rows, and when is she going to smile?

"Ladies and gentlemen," Mrs. Peabody said to the class, "we're going to be studying social studies. I expect you to listen, pay attention and answer my questions. I expect that you'll read no less than twenty pages of your textbook each night and memorize the dates and facts in each chapter. You'll take turns giving oral reports to the class from what you have read, and if it appears that you didn't learn your facts and dates, you'll explain why to all of us! You aren't babies anymore. You are seventh graders and you'll learn the way I expect seventh graders to learn. Anyone who doesn't do well will have to answer to me. Any questions?"

*Oh, no, I thought while Ms. Peabody put us in rows like a bunch of toy soldiers. Oral reports on what I read. How am I going to do this? My stomach started to hurt. I looked back at Carmen and his hands were balled up in a knot. I just wanted to go and get him so that we could run out of the room. Thoughts started rolling through my head. What are we going to do? How will we ever make it through this?*

Ms. Peabody had stacks of big social studies books sitting on the front table. Each book looked like it was fifty inches thick! Her scratchy voice broke through my nightmare. "Ladies and gentlemen. When I call your name, come up and take your textbook, write the book number on your 3x5 index card and give it back to me. Then, go back to your assigned seat and begin reading Chapter One. When I'm finished distributing the textbooks, we'll finish reading the chapter out loud, one

person at a time, up and down the rows, and then we'll begin our first set of oral reports so that I can tell what you have learned."

Carmen appeared frozen to his seat. My stomach was hurting so much that I thought I was going to throw up. *I've got to start reading. I've got to concentrate. Oh no, the words are shivering again. Oh, please somebody, help me!*

"Ms. Peabody," I said as I raised my hand. "I don't feel so good. May I please go to the nurse?"

"The nurse? On the first day of school? Nonsense, young lady," Ms. Peabody said in a sarcastic voice. "Put your hand down and start reading like I told you and everyone else to do. And do it now!"

The pounding behind my eyes felt like someone was beating my brain with a hammer. Carmen whispered my name as if he was trying to reach his hand out to me. "Francethca, are you all right?" I nodded.

"Mr. *What's-your-name?*" Ms. Peabody called over to Carmen. "If you have so much to say, why don't you read the first paragraph to us? C'mon, young man. Begin and speak up so we can all hear you!"

Carmen looked at me with pleading eyes as if he was saying, "Please, help me, Francesca." I was helpless. I didn't know what to do. Soon, I began to hear Carmen's voice. "*Thothial sthudieth ith* another term for learning about eventth in hithtory," Carmen said softly.

"Speak up young man and say the words correctly," demanded Ms. Peabody. "Continue."

Kids sitting near Carmen began to laugh at him, and Carmen's face got all red. I could see that he was holding back tears, but instead of crying, Carmen started to read aloud again. "From the beginning of time, man hath

theached for wayth to record the eventth of hith life.”

Now more kids were laughing and Ms. Peabody wasn't doing anything about it. She just let them make fun of Carmen. I couldn't stand it. I hated it. I felt like screaming.

“Stop it,” I yelled.

“Young lady,” Ms. Peabody said with her eyes wide open. “Watch yourself. You're disrupting my classroom and I won't stand for it. I'm warning you. Another sound out of you and I'll send you to the principal's office.”

“I hate this school,” I heard myself screaming. “I hate this school and I hate you!”

\*\*\*\*\*

Even though Ms. Peabody gave me after-school detention for yelling out in class and “disrupting *her* classroom,” Carmen and I survived that first day and every other day in Ms. Peabody's class that year. I don't know how, but we did. And, I guess *survive* is the right word, because every day was like trying

not to drown. All that we could think about was about *not* getting called on. Neither one of us can remember one thing about history, other than that we hated it and that we used to watch the clock and wait for the bell to ring so that we could get out of there. We didn't really hate Ms. Peabody, but we sure didn't like her and we don't ever want to study history again. And Carmen and I both said that we don't like school so much anymore, 'cause there are too many Ms. Peabodys and not enough Mrs. Bakers.

©Barbara Franco Adams

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*Your region is determined by your school's BOCES; for retirees and businesses, it is based on place of residence or business location.*

# NYSMSA is your source for Middle-Level Staff Development

## “TODAY”:

- 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference  
Riverside Convention Center, Rochester NY  
October 20-22, 2005

## and “TOMORROW”:

- 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Middle-Level Institute  
Corning Museum of Glass, Corning NY  
June 26-28, 2006
- 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference  
The Conference Center, Niagara Falls NY  
October 19-21, 2006
- Middle-Level Academy  
LOCATION and DATES determined by YOU

Information available at  
[www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org)



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