

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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On The Cover

Students serve guests at the culmination of the interdisciplinary unit "Welcome to Our Table." 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.



Many schools across the state and the nation have spent untold amounts of money on increasing the technology available to the staff and students in their schools. In

addition, a great deal of money has been spent on teaching students how to use technology. Unfortunately, to rephrase an adage, no good deed goes unpunished. For many students, increased use of technology at home has taken the place of television or video games; for many parents, this has meant that students are otherwise occupied, leaving parents time for other things. What has become clear is that having students on the Internet unsupervised can lead to major safety issues.

Cyberbullying, using online opportunities to torment others, has led to problems at home and in school. Web sites have been created, using pictures taken by digital cameras or cell phones, that poke fun at others in a way that far surpasses what slam books used to do in print. After all, those books had to be passed around and read; here everyone can log on and view the page at the same time and add to it immediately.

Yet another pastime is the creation of blogs, online journals where young adolescents post their thoughts. Unfortunately, what is not always understood is that this information is available to anyone, including child predators.

Chat rooms are yet another opportunity for students to speak somewhat anonymously. However, those they speak with are also anonymous and these rooms have quickly become ways for meetings to occur between young adolescents and adults, sometimes resulting in abduction, injury or death.

Why put this information here? Even though most schools block access to these sites and teachers monitor all work done on the Internet during the school day, the results of cyberbullying often spill over into the school and some meetings arranged in chat rooms are scheduled after the school day, when students say they are staying after school. I believe it is our role as educators to educate parents on the positives and negatives of Internet use. For suggestions on how to send this information home, I suggest www.pta.org as one option. There is an excellent article on cyberbullying by Charlotte Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese, two authors who have written books for middle-level parents and have spoken at our conferences. MSNBC has some articles on online tools available to limit home access. In fact, Channel 4 News (in NYC area) has recently spent a week highlighting missing children and how the Internet may have played a part in their disappearances.

Welcome to the age of technology! As we teach our students and their parents how to negotiate the perils of pre-adolescence in many other ways, here is one more. Please help all of us ensure that our students use the Internet for all of the right reasons.

The Executive Director's Message

Dennis M. Tosetto



New York State Education Commissioner Richard Mills was invited to speak at a recent New York State Council of Educational Organizations meeting. With over forty education-related organizations represented, the

Commissioner was provided an opportunity to directly convey his thinking regarding the state of education and where we need to move in order to meet current challenges.

His recent trip to China became central to the conversation and the perspective gained from the trip became a central theme for what he had to say. Commissioner Mills appreciates the impact that China is having on the United States and on our way of life. He understands that the progress of China's development is only beginning to impact us and the challenges for the United States are significant. Moreover, these challenges directly apply to our schools and our responsibilities as educators in preparing our youth for the challenges of tomorrow.

I will not try to directly present the Commissioner's message, as he has already written and distributed a report on this topic to the Board of Regents and superintendents across New York State. My intention is to build upon the theme that was presented by Commissioner Mills, based upon my month-

long trip to China this past spring. During my journey across that country, I was in constant contact with Chinese citizens from all walks of life. My trip included five traveling companions and involved five in-country flights, three boat trips, and a twenty-five mile bicycle ride around rice paddies, wandering water buffalo, and farm workers. The large cities that I visited were alive, new, and vibrant. Urban renewal occurred in these cities with a broad stroke.

Entire sections of Beijing and Shanghai were recently cleared and rebuilt, so that now little of the old remains. It is apparent that replacement buildings are purposely constructed using very modern architecture with a hint of the old. For example, in Hong Kong, *feng shui* is used in the construction of ultra-modern sky scrapers to ensure harmony with nature and to maintain a path for the dragon to pass to the sea. Main streets consist of numerous lanes in each direction and are generally crowded with new cars. Only five years ago very few cars were available, whereas now many people own them. In fact, there are so many cars in Shanghai that you must get on a waiting list to receive a permit just to have a car in the city.

China is a country of contrasts. It is historic, yet new; many of the people seemed to be very superstitious, without a belief in a higher being; there are the very wealthy and the very poor; and it seems very capitalistic for a communist country. The rent for a nice home on the hill in Hong Kong will likely run upwards of \$120,000 a year, while many workers in the city would be pleased if they

could earn \$120 for a week's work. On rivers you can see workers in new sport coats sculling skiffs around as they scoop floating debris from the water.

In China industry is booming, and the smog is thick and gritty because pollution controls are not a priority on cars or on factory equipment. In fact, each day you can see three-wheeled bicycle carts delivering round compressed coal blocks for use in apartments in the cities. For the most part, everyone is dressed well and people appear cheerful as the price of good clothing is only a fraction of what it would cost in the United States and jobs seem to be plentiful for those who need work.

So, what does this have to do with educating middle-level students in New York State? To paraphrase an old saying, if we don't learn from the past, then we are bound to repeat it. When we review the history of the Romans, the Dutch, the French, and the British, it becomes apparent that when a lead nation doesn't change in ways that meet current challenges, then it loses its leadership role. Currently much is being written in the United States about unfair competition, job losses, and the inundation of our markets with cheap goods. Some seem to think that more regulations, including tariffs, will return our industrial base to where it was a few decades ago. I don't believe that these are realistic solutions.

Countries such as China and India are developing and will continue to sell their products world-wide in direct competition with the United States regardless of our internal policies and social needs. The United States cannot maintain its competitive edge without strong trade beyond its borders. Moreover, we must find ways to compete globally in ways that maintain our standard of living or it will be diminished. Today, workers in developing countries produce quality goods in factories for pay that is less than \$100 a week. While those of us living in the United

States may find it inconceivable for even one person to live on such a low wage, in other parts of the world \$100 a week not only supports an entire family, but is viewed as a great improvement over living conditions of only a few years ago. Prosperity is truly in the eye of the beholder.

Logically, our ability to compete globally in the future depends on today's youth. As middle-level educators, we understand that this requires the development of skills and knowledge in at least two important areas. Simply stated, we need to do the best job possible meeting both the academic and affective needs of young adolescents if we are to ensure our nation's future economic success. Both of these areas are acknowledged in the triad of recently approved SED middle-level documents - - the *Regents Policy Statement*, the *Essential Elements*, and the *New York State Intermediate Learning Standards*.

Most frequently, the media and others in our communities focus on test scores and academic achievement. However, during the NYSCEA discussion with the Commissioner, an educator astutely noted that young people first have to be motivated to learn and must have the self discipline needed to compete and achieve academically. Many present at the meeting rightfully saw student motivation as a significant problem in our schools. I believe we all understood that it was a problem easy to identify and infinitely more difficult to resolve. Perhaps this problem is exacerbated in a land of plenty - - in a place where most of us have little concern about day-to-day needs that are truly basic to our well being.

From birth, the vast majority of Americans have reason to expect that their basic needs will be met and that opportunities for an education and employment will always be there. As a people, we believe in giving individuals multiple chances to succeed. Life is very different in countries like China. In a developing country with 1.3 billion people,

you may have only one chance to get it right. Mediocrity does not allow one to move forward. In many – if not most – cases, failure at school or on the job is not tolerated and simply results in an opportunity for someone else. There is little room for forgiveness and second chances, as there are many qualified individuals available for limited educational and work-related advancement opportunities.

Successful global economic competition requires that a country have a highly qualified work force. That means its workers are motivated, have an exceptional work ethic, and have the ability to think and problem solve at all levels of operation. Competitive world-class industries require large numbers of people who are academically superior, creative, and innovative. They require workers who are skilled at working as part of a cooperative team. In order for our students to become excellent in these areas, we must develop a strong focus on these skill areas through an ongoing cooperative effort that involves both parents and educators.

We need to remain at the forefront of global innovation in order to maintain our economic standards. However, with 1.3 billion people, China can successfully compete intellectually with a much smaller percentage of its population having achieved academic excellence than would be required of the United States. Consequently, we must use every means available to ensure that every young person across our state and our nation meets high academic standards so that a very high percentage can excel globally with advanced academic degrees.

It is my opinion that in order to meet these high standards we must first inculcate in our nation's youth a real need and hunger to do so. In developing countries, the dynamic dissidence between and among what was in the recent past, current life style, and tomorrow's opportunities are stark reality. The

contrasts are great, the choices clear, and the personal consequences obvious.

The Chinese people seem to truly love Americans. Time and time again, individuals from various walks of life would, without prompting, acknowledge the United State's achievements, including our living standards and values. They frequently speak to how we are the model and standard upon which their long-term goal as a nation is formulated. Educated Chinese people seem to see what is happening between our countries as friendly competition among allies. I would have no way of knowing the true perspective of the Chinese government, but I can tell you that throughout China it is very common for Chinese mothers to ask Americans whom they have never met before to be in photographs with their families. Evidently, having a picture of their children with an American confers a level of cultural status.

In China, all government signs are written in both Mandarin and English. This includes street signs, building signs, directions, etc. English as a subject is mandatory through the eighth grade and it is likely that workers won't be hired into better job positions if they cannot speak, read, and write English. Young people regularly approach Americans on the street or in other public places just to practice conversational English. They understand that this is good for their country and they take pride in their skill.

I went to China believing that the average Chinese citizen must be unhappy and living in fear of what I considered to be a totalitarian government. This is not the case. To understand perceptions in China today, one must understand the past. Comparatively, for many Chinese people, things are now good to great. For example, living through the Cultural Revolution, food shortages, and a lack of electricity and running water provides a very different starting point when considering current circumstances. I needed to be re-

minded that, as with hot and cold water, most values are comparative.

Initially, it seemed to me that China was progressing rapidly, but that the average person had a hard life that didn't hold out much hope for improvement. It was immediately apparent that, unlike residents of the United States, Chinese citizens do not publicly criticize the government or the leadership in China. CNN is available on television, but the picture and sound are lost every time a position or news story is presented that is contrary or negative to the Chinese government's position or direction. The same policy in the United States would likely come close to eliminating public broadcasting as we know it.

Chinese workers work cheap by our standards. You can hire a security guard for about \$50 a month and \$10,000 a year would be an exceptional income for the average Chinese worker. OSHA inspectors would have nervous breakdowns observing working conditions and public health care, and disability safety nets are minimal. However, while

we may see the above facts as negative, from my discussions with scores of Chinese people from all walks of life, their lives have greatly improved over the past twenty years and they have a strong belief in an even better future.

From the beginning, each American generation has improved both educationally and economically over the generation of its parents. Will this continue to be the case for our children and our grandchildren? For middle-level educators the answer lies not in the stars, but in us. In fact, for middle-level educators in New York State, the task has been made easier through the adoption of the triad of SED middle-level documents – the *Regents Policy Statement*, the *Essential Elements*, and the *New York State Intermediate Learning Standards*. We know what must be accomplished and we know how to begin to make it so. The question that remains for us as middle-level educators is: Do we have the will to lead and the determination to succeed in this global competition? The answer, of course, is that we must succeed because there is no reasonable alternative.



**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**

Research at a Glance

Jeff Craig, NYSMSA Director of Research and Technology



In the Fall 2005 In Transition, this column described the research about retention. This edition's column explores some of the reasons behind the research-practice gap and then argues that the retention versus social promotion argument is a false dichotomy and that an alternative is necessary.

The Research-Practice Gap

The research about retention is clear: it doesn't work and there is considerable evidence that suggests the process does harm to children who are retained. Few things in education are as clear as this, but millions of students are retained each year in spite of the research.

Why does retention remain such a widespread practice? An examination of the literature suggests that there is no single reason for the disconnect between research and practice. On the one hand, it is suggested that the decision to retain a child is made in ignorance of the research. On the other hand, it appears that the decision to retain is sometimes made with a conscious disregard of the research. What follows is a description of the various reasons offered to explain why retention remains such a prevalent practice.

Public ignorance of the research. Public understanding of retention and its implications is shallow. Educational research is typically inaccessible to the general public and is rarely referenced in the mass-market media outlets such as television or newspapers. Yet it takes a close examination of the research to conclude that retention is ill-advised. Unfamiliarity with the research can explain why some people continue to support the practice of retention. Retention has been going on for more than one

hundred years, so retention is a common aspect of the educational experiences of many people. In our own educational experiences, we can recall students being retained. Without considering the research on retention, there would be little reason to suspect the practice does harm or damage.

Social promotion seems wrong. In general, the political policy makers and the general public are uncomfortable with the notion of social promotion. If social promotion is unacceptable, then, by extension, the opposite (retention) must be the better alternative. Because social promotion runs counter to cultural mores of earned advancement, the alternative of retention is advanced and applied all across the country. It seems to violate the "Puritan work ethic" if someone gets something (social promotion) for nothing (Parker, 2001). Social promotion itself isn't a good idea. It's just that retention, as an alternative to social promotion, is worse. Until one learns that retention doesn't work and that it causes harm to many children there is no reason to argue against it.

Unprepared workforce. Employers and the public are demanding that students demonstrate mastery of basic skills. Employers are also reporting that their workers don't have basic skills and that they must spend a great deal of money retraining their workers (Sharing Success, 2004). There are mounting concerns about the inability of the workforce in the United States to be ready for global competition. Similarly, claims of students who are ill-prepared for college permeate the media (Sharing Success). It just seems counterintuitive to pass on students who have not mastered the learning; common sense would seem to suggest that additional

time, in the form of another year, would help (Wheelock, 2000).

Political pressures. The political cries against social promotion are loud and persistent, and several U.S. Presidents and many governors are quite publicly indicting the practice (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). Governors are pledging to eliminate social promotion (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). In an increasing number of political races, social promotion is used as a political issue (Holmes & Saturday). In the politically charged environment of California, the legislature has passed laws about social promotion (Jimerson & Kaufman). At least ten more states have adopted policies against social promotion (Jimerson & Kaufman). As long as policy-makers make their decisions without regard to the research, retention will continue.

Teacher and administrator ignorance of the research. Teachers and administrators are often unfamiliar with the research and so they make retention recommendations in ignorance of the potential harm that can befall the retained student. In a survey of teachers from ten different schools, almost none of the teachers could name a single harmful effect of retention (Shepard & Smith, 1989). In that study, the same teachers who could not describe any harm that retention might cause reported that they would prefer to err on the side of retention rather than err on the side of social promotion (Shepard & Smith). This is evidence of a considerable disconnect between what the research says and what practitioners believe.

“Unscientific” research. The lack of double-blind or randomly assigned experiments might be a reason why the question continues to be raised. At least this might be true if one conceded that the strictly experimental form of research (as required in NCLB) was the only worthy form of research. But doing such research is unethical (Thompson & Kolb, 1999). Students cannot be randomly retained or promoted and then studied to see whether the

retention worked. Instead, researchers use other methods to inform their conclusions: correlational studies, matched pairs, and meta-analyses. While these research methodologies are generally accepted and produced conclusions with excellent confidence intervals, double-blind and random assignment studies are impossible to conduct. Strict application of Positivist principles, as included in NCLB, imply that methods other than double-blind, random assignment are not rigorous enough to be used for decision making.

Lack of social promotion research. No statistics are kept that document the number of students who are socially promoted (Thompson & Kolb, 1999). Without these numbers, it is difficult to accurately describe the extent of social promotion. In one case, eighty-five school districts were surveyed and it was found that none of these districts had a written policy of social promotion; yet, social promotion was applied frequently (Thompson & Kolb). Studies that attempt to measure the success or failure of social promotion are difficult to find; instead, the conclusions about social promotion are extrapolated from studies that indicate the harmful effects of retention.

Abuse of the research. There are people who identify themselves as educators who promote retention as a fair, necessary practice. In one case, a former classroom teacher who now travels the country as a self-proclaimed retention “expert” encourages “additional learning time” for students who have not demonstrated mastery of content (Grant, 1997). Grant contends that retention is correction for educational misplacement.

The swinging pendulum. Some educators argue that the answers to many educational policy questions change from time to time, like the swinging of a pendulum. It is possible that the backlash against social promotion is just a swing in a particular direction of the pendulum (Parker, 2001). Blaming a metaphorical pendulum for shifts in policy is a trick that allows

people to avoid a close, perhaps difficult, confrontation with the research on retention.

The path of least resistance. To some, retention seems like an easy answer to the complex problem of raising achievement for students of all situations (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004). Simply retaining a student does not require any new programs, new training, or new services. Students who repeat the same grade have another opportunity to learn the material. If the second time through the curriculum is the same as the first time, some policymakers maintain that students are more likely to succeed given the familiarity of the curriculum (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development). Retention itself is not a stand-alone program since retained students are blended in with other students. Therefore, retention is not really scrutinized as a separate program and is not really considered by policy-making groups and Boards of Education (Natriello, 1998).

Internal political pressures. Another reason that retention continues as a practice in schools has to do with the pressures exerted on principals and decision makers within schools. Schools are political places, and administrators must take into account the attitudes and perceptions of community members and the teachers in their schools. Administrators hear the public reactions to reports that graduates are ill-prepared and lacking basic skills (Natriello, 1998). Administrators also hear from teachers in their buildings who are frustrated over students who are not motivated or prepared (Natriello). Having students in classes who have been socially promoted can mean that a class might contain a wider range of experiences and abilities, which presses the need for differentiation of instruction. Administrators report that they have to balance the abilities of their teachers to differentiate and respond to the varied needs of students with the research about retention, and that they frequently decide to retain students as a result (Natriello).

The Missing Profession

There are many reasons why the practice of retention continues despite the overwhelming arguments against it. Many of those reasons have been described in the previous paragraphs. Some of the reasons have a greater impact; others might have a lesser impact. Yet, taken as a group, the totality of those reasons is substantial and seemingly strong enough to counter the weight of the research. In the absence of a concerted, large-scale public education campaign (unlikely to occur given the present political leadership) the disparity between research and practice is likely to persist.

The situation exists, in part, as a result of the professional vacuum in education. If education was more like medicine, there would be a greater emphasis on research and a greater expectation that research and best practice be applied in schools. Because this “guild power” is lacking in education, there is no valued or sacred science to teaching and education. Without such science, the public can disregard the research about retention and simply dismiss it. Not only can the public disregard the research because there is no perceived science in education, practitioners within the field of education can choose to disregard the research. This explains why so many teachers seek to retain students despite the overwhelming research to the contrary. If teachers don’t value the research or act as if there is any science to education, there is no reason for the public to do so.

Education is not a profession and does not have the sacred research orientation that professionalization brings. Nor is it likely to have a “science of education” any time soon, despite what the Holmes Group predicted (Johnson, 1987). Research in the field of education certainly does exist, but a faithful application of research in education is lacking (Johnson). This suggests the solution to the retention versus social promotion debate does not, in fact, lie with the research. The research against retention exists; the public and practitio-

ners alike continue to ignore the research to a great extent. No, the solution lies in an emphasis on alternatives to both retention and social promotion.

A False Dichotomy

Frequently, retention is used in schools as the alternative to social promotion. As described previously, the argument is made that a student should not be promoted if she/he hasn't demonstrated mastery of required standards or if she/he has failed to do the work. It is an oversimplification, though, to say that it is an either/or situation.

This series (see the last edition of *In Transition*) began with a summarization of the research on retention: retention does not work and can cause harm to those who are retained. This article did not argue that social promotion is an effective strategy for increasing achievement. Indeed, no proponent of social promotion in and of itself could be found. If the choice is social promotion or retention, then social promotion must be the choice because it has not been shown to do the harm that retention often causes. The societal pressures against social promotion seem to be the reason that retention is so frequently applied. Until those societal pressures are significantly reduced, the widespread practice of retention is likely to continue. It is likely to continue, however, in the absence of alternatives. Those alternatives do exist and have been successfully employed as a third option. The decision doesn't have to be retention or social promotion: many alternatives exist that have proved effective. Some of those alternatives will be discussed here.

Training for teachers. Studies have shown that the quality of the teacher is the most important influence on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Better teaching, argues Darling-Hammond, will enable students who have previously been unsuccessful to be successful: "Teaching that is developmentally, cognitively, and culturally responsive enables a

greater range of students to succeed." If teachers were better prepared to work with students of differing abilities and achievement, retention would not be necessary. With better prepared teachers, students would meet with success in subsequent years.

Packing in additional instruction. Students who are struggling in a particular area can receive additional instruction in that area. Some schools are providing twice the amount of mathematics or language arts work to struggling students, a practice that has been shown to be effective (Woelfel, 2003). Packing a schedule with extra, targeted instruction allows students to proceed socially with their peers while attending to deficits. The downside to the additional instruction is that students might have to give up an elective to provide time in the schedule for the additional instruction. Some urban areas have telescoped two years of studies into three years to allow for additional instruction and still leave room for electives and studies in areas of interest (Woelfel).

Wrap around additional instruction. Another way to provide additional instruction is by using the time before and after school. In some schools, students arrive early to get a start on their day and receive additional instruction. In other schools, this takes place after school. Instruction can be focused on academic areas or readiness for instruction can be enhanced through study skills, mentor, or attendance supports.

Focus on the essential. If the focus of instruction can be narrowed for unsuccessful students, it is more likely that students can meet a lesser number of objectives (Parker, 2001). This does not mean that students don't meet the state-identified standards. It means that students focus more narrowly on the state standards (must know) and ignore the important to know and nice to know items in the curricula.

Learner-centered environments. Historically, schools have been oriented around teaching

rather than learning. If school environments were significantly altered to be more learner-centered, previously failing students can be successful (Thomas, 2000). Thomas describes a learner-centered environment as one in which high expectations for all students of all races and genders are juxtaposed with efforts to ensure that all students belong and are valued (2000).

Better assessment. Frequently, the lack of effective feedback is cited as a contributing factor to the lack of student success. Assessment that is better aligned to instructional objectives and assessment that is more formative than summative can help previously unsuccessful students become successful (Parker, 2001) (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Better assessment practices will result in more succinct feedback for students; students will therefore have a better sense of progress and how close they are to meeting the target (Parker). In addition to a greater application of formative assessments, assessments that are more performance-oriented can have a positive impact on student achievement (Darling-Hammond).

Relationships and belonging. It has been shown that students are more successful in schools that are designed to be smaller and more personal (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Students are more likely to feel like they belong if the school they attend is smaller. Large schools can approximate smaller size via team, house, and academy subdivisions. In addition to creating smaller school settings, schools can create structures that promote long-term relationships between students and staff; relationships have been shown to have a positive impact on student achievement (Darling-Hammond).

Conclusion

The resolution of the retention – social promotion debate lies with an emphasis on alternatives to both. Retention is ineffective and potentially harmful. Social promotion doesn't impact student achievement and is presently

socially and politically unpopular. Therefore, there must be another option. There are, in fact, many alternatives and approaches that have been shown to help students who have been unsuccessful to meet with future success. Rather than emphasizing the debate between retention and social promotion, resources should be directed toward the deliberate and systematic implementation of the alternatives.

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A Different Perspective on Retention

Russell B. Moore, Ph.D.



I read with interest “Research at a Glance, Retention and Social Promotion...” by Jeff Craig in the Fall 2005 edition of *In Transition*. While Mr. Craig reinforces several points that have been stated and restated for years regarding retention and social promotion, like most writers who have written on this subject he omits a relevant facet of this topic. Mr. Craig writes (p.7), “It seems paradoxical that the practice of retention should remain so widespread in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.” Yet he doesn’t attempt to address this seeming paradox, just like most researchers who write about retention. Surely the reasons educators would state to support retention, when all “evidence” indicates that retention does not work, merit serious consideration in any discussion of this practice. For consideration I submit the following, an updated version of an article I wrote that was published in the February 14, 1999 issue of the *Albany Times Union*.

Quality research has focused solely on the associated negative effects that retention visits on the students being retained, such as lack of academic gains once held back, separation of students from their same-age peer group and a greatly increased chance that the retained students will eventually drop out of school. While these and other negative outcomes are highlighted by these studies, it is also true that academic failure, which most often leads to the subsequent retention, is usually just one of the characteristics of students considered at risk of retention. Other symptoms include poor attendance, disaffection with school, lack of education in the home and thus a disrespect of the need for schooling, lack of parental interest and involvement in school and in the child, lack of

supervision and many others of significant scope.

Indeed, anyone would be hard pressed to assert that retention in grade alone is the cause of the aforementioned problems evidenced in later years, as cited in the studies. Mr. Craig as well does not assert such a notion. Even considering these mitigating factors regarding the perceived evils of retention, I, along with numerous other educators, maintain that there is another facet of retention that merits noting, an effect of retaining students that is beneficial, if not to those retained students then at least to those students who move on, and which supports one of the basic tenets of education.

For some background, I am in my 30th year as an educator; my first ten years were spent as a junior/senior high school math teacher and I am currently in my 20th year as an administrator, the last 18 as a junior high school principal. I often have to make decisions about promoting or retaining students, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of both options as presented by teachers, counselors, fellow administrators and parents. I am well-informed of the research regarding retention, as a significant portion of my doctoral dissertation was a review of the previously mentioned studies. In my writing, I, like most researchers, reiterated the negative aspects of retention, but I did not assert that retention should not be employed.

As a practicing teacher and administrator, I have seen firsthand, and have become a supporter of, the selective retention of students. There are few, if any, academic gains evidenced by retained students that lead to my support. Indeed, my experiences serve to reinforce most

results stated by the numerous studies. I support selective retention because of the educational principle it supports and because of the message it sends to the retained and, almost more importantly, to all of the other students.

The current move to raise standards and hold schools accountable for student achievement is a positive one. Every educator must embrace this initiative and work to provide the support each student needs to succeed. Only after we, the professionals, have done all that we can should retention be considered. It is our responsibility to put each child in a position to succeed, and I've yet to see a hardworking, dedicated student fall short. Unfortunately, sometimes, despite our best efforts, a student chooses to fail, and therein lies my and other educators' concern.

How can we in good conscience send a child on to the next grade level when he or she has not worked to acquire the skills necessary to be successful at the current grade level?

One of the lessons that is crucial to the maturation and development of every child is that there are consequences for one's actions. Students are perceptive; they sometimes hear what adults say, but they always see what adults do. Students are also frankly honest when asked to self-evaluate. Any teacher who has had students evaluate their own performance will affirm that they are more critical of themselves than are the teachers.

Thus, what message do we send to those students we promote who have not earned it? What message do we send all students when we promote a student who has not earned that promotion? Similarly, what are we saying to teachers, parents, ourselves?

In particular, what have we said to students who work hard and just scrape by, or those students who are inclined to work as little as possible, if at all? What are we saying about the necessity of having standards if we're not going to hold ourselves and others to them? What

lessons are we teaching in this most teachable of moments?

Some will react to my statements with accusations of using retention to punish students. In response, I say that students need to demonstrate specific behaviors and/or life skills needed for the next grade level before they are promoted to it. Retention is not a punishment; it is a logical consequence of not doing what is necessary to earn promotion. In a profession, if a person fails to demonstrate those identified competencies required to earn a promotion, is that person being punished by not being promoted? I think not.

Similarly, there must be a consequence for students who put themselves in this position, with consequences ranging from attendance at a summer school program to repeating only certain courses, to being retained, to other viable alternatives. Regardless, this life lesson is learned by, and reinforced for, all students, not just the students who face retention.

End social promotion? For many educators blanket social promotion ended a long time ago and is no longer an effective educational practice. No student deserves to move on to the next grade level merely because he or she has "put in the time." Promotion should occur for one, and only one, reason: it was earned.

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Lea's Lessons

Lea Macdonald



Reading Across the Curriculum: Middle-Level Educators' # 1 Challenge

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early years is needed (International Reading Association, 1999).

We see it all the time at the middle level: students who read pretty well in Language Arts demonstrate more problems when reading in other subject areas. What begins as a relatively small problem in elementary school looms larger and larger as children move on to middle school. The difficulty of the text increases, as does the volume. The tasks we ask our students to perform based on the text also become more difficult. Curriculum standards and high stakes testing have focused our attention on this matter: more students need proficiency in more subjects and reading plays a part in every one.

The testing mandates are impacting teachers of content area subjects, especially in middle schools. Beginning with the 2005-2006 school year, every student in grades 3-8 will be tested annually in math and reading.

Science will be added to the testing cycle during the 2007-2008 school year. In New York State, students in grades 4 and 8 are tested in social studies. So why should middle-level content area teachers be so concerned? Whether one teaches middle school science or social studies, those subject areas are dominated by reading. After several years of analyzing test scores, it has become clear that what our students don't get about a particular subject often has to do with not understanding what they've read about the topic. Young adolescents have always struggled to read for understanding in the content areas; now that this issue is being acknowledged publicly across the state and country, many of us are focusing our energies to address it.

In this installment of Lea's Lessons, I would like to discuss ways to help students become strategic readers. Strategic readers actively construct meaning as they read, interacting with the text. Strategic readers set purposes for reading, select methods for accomplishing these purposes, monitor and repair their own comprehension as they read, and evaluate the completed task. A strategic reader constructs, examines, and extends meaning before, during and after reading for a variety of texts. The teacher of strategic reading continually introduces, models, explains, reinforces, helps students apply, and evaluates reading strategies as students read various texts for diverse purposes. Thus, the teacher of strategic reading develops and follows an organized plan in promoting student growth in the use of before reading, during reading and after reading strategies.

The Reading Process

The reading process involves three phases: Before Reading, During Reading and After Reading. This basic model can be used whether students are reading expository or narrative text.

Before Reading

- Set purposes for reading.
- Write specific questions which you would like answered.
- Make specific predictions about what you think you will learn.
- Preview the selection with attention to bold print, captions, and graphics.
- Activate background knowledge through self-questioning, brainstorming .

During Reading

- Generate mental pictures about what you are reading.
- Summarize what you have just read and try to answer the questions you asked in the Before Reading phase.
- React to unclear passages, confusing terms and concepts.
- Synthesize information by thinking out loud and questioning.
- Monitor their reading comprehension and do it so often that it becomes automatic.

After Reading

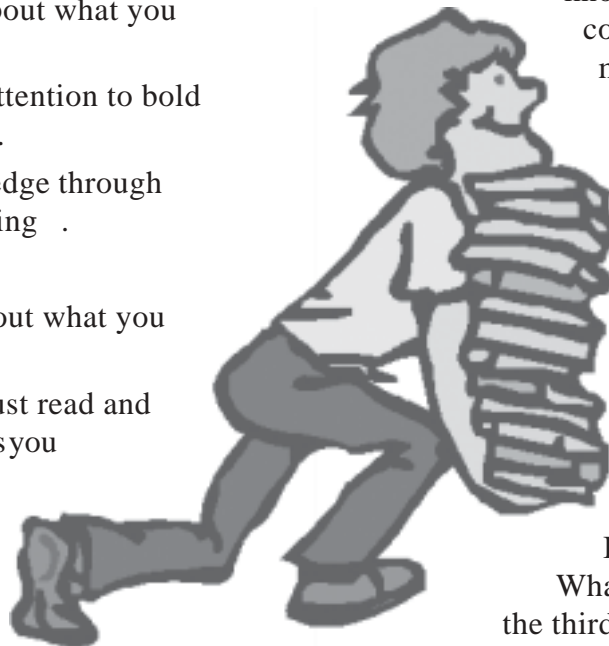
- Create a final summary of what you have learned.
- State how you can use the information you have learned.
- Distinguish between relevant and irrelevant ideas.
- Reflect on and personalize the text.
- Integrate new understandings and prior knowledge.

Useful Strategies for the Reading Process

How can secondary content area teachers successfully apply reading comprehension skills to their core material? Strategies go far beyond rudimentary vocabulary definitions and review questions. I would like to focus on a range of strategies that teachers might use before, during, and after reading.

Before Reading Strategies

Vocabulary introduction, prediction, knowledge inventory, and content prompts are major components of laying a foundation for building reading comprehension through pre-reading activities.



KWL Charts: A KWL chart is a vertical diagram in which students make three columns. The first is labeled, What

I Know, the second, What I Want to Know, and the third, What I Learned. The first two columns are utilized during the pre-reading stage.

Visual predictions: Using slides, transparency images taken from the Internet or other illustrations that pertain to the forthcoming unit, have students work individually or in groups to predict or interpret the setting and plot within the picture.

Vocabulary introduction: Given a list of the relevant vocabulary for the chapter, have students categorize the words into subgroups-people, places, events, problems, solutions or descriptive words.

Visual vocabulary introduction: Have students define words. Then ask them to create pictures in which they draw a scene

or symbol that represents the word. The only writing allowed is the term itself.

Anticipatory guide: Give students a list of true/false statements pertaining to the reading assignment. Have them make their best guess whether the statements are true or false *before* they begin to read. As they read or after the reading has been discussed, they can go back and make corrections.

During Reading Strategies

Organization of content, summarization, rereading and supporting prior predictions are important for comprehension of content material. Following are some ideas for helping students make sense of their reading during the reading phase.

Graphic organizers: These visual versions of traditional outlines come in various forms and make excellent tools for enhancing comprehension as students read. They also provide exceptional methods for students to monitor their learning.

Reading road maps: These teacher-made note-taking guides help students to guide their reading.

Sketch-to Sketch: Students might draw a sketch depicting the main idea of a specific paragraph, or they may create a storyboard of events in sequential order.

Sticky notes: Students use post-its to jot down questions, facts, and ideas while reading.

After Reading Strategies

Skills often used to review reading include validating/refuting predictions, reflecting, comparing/contrasting, inferring, and summarizing. The following activities help students reflect on their reading.

Compare and contrast: Venn diagrams are interlocking circles designed to assist in comparing and contrasting two or more topics within a segment of a text.

Cause and effect: Chains of events (flow charts) and fishbone maps are visual aides that plot the natural progression of cause and effect within a major topic.

KWL: Complete the “Learned column” of the chart created during the Before Reading phase.

Anticipation guide: Correct your mistakes.

Exit slip: Students complete a 3-2-1 ticket out the door. Three things I’ve learned about the topic; two questions I still have about the topic; and use one new vocabulary word in a sentence.

Many of these strategies are not new; however, in targeting improved reading comprehension for all students, an increase in the number of tools content area teachers have in their repertoires increases the likelihood of success.

Most importantly, we must remember that reading is thinking. Good readers interact with text and use personal and background knowledge to make predictions and connections, revise them as they read, learn to infer, ask questions and summarize text and synthesize information. This is a challenging task for middle-level teachers and students; however, it is a goal we can achieve by collaborating and sharing ideas to foster literacy in the middle.

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Welcome to Our Table: An Interdisciplinary Unit That Brings the Community Together

Robin Brand

The dinner party unit takes place in the Home and Careers class, but students will use skills and resources from English language arts, social studies, math, science, art, music, foreign languages, and technology. The culture of the school is greatly enriched by the dinner parties. The agenda is simple: to celebrate the students' accomplishments. The atmosphere is relaxed and filled with hospitality and friendship. Students and their families feel welcome, as they are joined by administrators, teachers, secretaries, janitors, and other community members to share a meal and pleasant conversation. Students are encouraged to share their traditions and cultures as well. Special education students participate with great satisfaction and pride. It is a level playing field, where all students can contribute, succeed, and flourish.

In New York State middle schools, whenever there is much discussion about how to raise standardized test scores, there is also much discussion about replacing or eliminating the exploratory courses. This trend stems from attempting to find more time for the basic core courses in hopes of raising the scores and increasing the ability levels in these key areas. Conversely, today more than ever, the value of exploratory classes at the middle school level is undeniable. These classes provide the arena for students to apply what they have learned in the core areas. It is here they learn the valuable basic skills that they will use in their everyday lives, both now and into adulthood. A dinner party unit that was developed at Indian River Middle School in Philadelphia, New York, illustrates the

value of Home and Career Skills in middle-level education.

This was perhaps the perfect place for the dinner party unit to evolve. The school is adjacent to Fort Drum, the proud home of the U. S. Army's 10th Mountain Division since 1985. The schools of Indian River became a connection for the rural communities to successfully blend with the new families who were relocated there from other parts of the country and the world. The children of these families are of varying abilities, races, religions, and languages. Many are a long way from their extended families and birthplaces.

Although Indian River is a large school district, the dinner party has also been adapted to very small, rural schools, again with great success. The objectives of this unit are to teach students the importance of being invitational, to help them develop needed lifelong skills, to use the skills of all other disciplines, and to have fun while accomplishing it all. Adolescents are naturally social. They enjoy both having parties and being invited to them. However, since most students have never been involved in the actual preparations necessary to host a dinner party, this is a wonderful place to start.

In seventh and eighth grade, students have learned about manners, decision-making, basic kitchen skills, career exploration, nutrition, and foods preparation, which are all used in preparation for this unit. Starting with the same staple components of the unit, each class is then given the opportunity to choose and customize its own dinner party.

The first time the unit was introduced to the eighth grade classes, students were skeptical. What was the catch? Were they really going to be allowed to have a party, right here at school? They went along, but were cautious about getting their hopes up. When they were told they could invite their own guests from



Setting out the food and beverages

home, a new dilemma was created. Many did not want to appear “uncool” by inviting their parents, and thought that eighth graders are too old to invite mom and dad to school. As a result, only a few parents attended. Teachers were also invited to the dinner party, but many did not attend because the party was during their planning period and they were quite busy. So only a few teachers attended the dinner parties the first semester.

It did not take long for the dinner party unit to gain a reputation in the school and in the community. The next semester students couldn’t wait for their opportunity to plan a dinner party. Many departments in the school offered their assistance. Students wanted to invite moms and dads, and grandmas, grandpas, aunts, uncles, pastors, and neighbors. The teachers wanted to attend all of the five classes’ dinner parties. The word was out.

Basic Steps of the Dinner Party Unit

- Brainstorming sessions begin as students are asked to choose a theme for their dinner

party, which will include decorations, food, clothing, and music or entertainment ideas. After many different ideas are presented and listed on the board, students are given some campaigning time, usually 10-15 minutes, to sell their favorite ideas to their classmates. Following the campaign, students vote for their favorite idea. The theme receiving the most votes is adopted and from that point, all students collaborate to make their party its best. The following day, with their theme in mind, the class uses the same process to choose their menu.

- Students work in smaller groups or committees, responsible for the different areas of preparation. This arrangement encompasses the different learning styles and allows students to showcase their talents.



Serving guests at a luau-themed dinner party

One committee may use technology to produce a quality invitation, while other committees work on designing and creating room decorations, centerpieces, party favors, planning the music or entertainment, napkin folding, grocery lists, room layout, collecting RSVP’s or arranging seating charts. The entire class helps to prepare the food for the party, and students

continually sign up for new committees to “greet and seat” guests, create and deliver the welcoming speech, and serve food and beverages.

- The day of the dinner party is a busy one. Students stay after school the previous



Students and guests enjoy the luau

afternoon to prepare the room with decorations and set the tables. Anticipation builds as students come to school dressed in appropriate attire, which might range from a toga to a tropical shirt and sunglasses, dressy clothes, or bib overalls and kerchief. The event is held in the Home and Careers classroom during the assigned class period of 35 minutes, so things have to progress smoothly. The room is totally converted into a dining room with the décor matching the theme of the party. Students prepare the food throughout the day and place decorative directional signs from the main office to allow their guests to easily find their classroom. Students are asked to arrive to class a few minutes early to assist with final preparations. Guests are greeted by students and seated according to the seating charts. After the welcoming speech or skit is performed, students introduce their guests and engage in conversations about the preparation of the dinner party.

- Students from another class capture the party on video and with digital cameras. At

the end of the meal, guests are asked to complete a comments and evaluation sheet to provide the students with feedback about the various components of the dinner party. These comments, videos, and pictures are shared with the class on the following day.

- All students assist with the clean up.

The planning, instruction, and preparation time takes 17-18 days. Authentic assessment is used for the dinner party unit. Students use peer and self-evaluation rubrics during their various tasks and in the end create a genuine product they can assess. They seem to thrive on the feedback of their peers and are always anxious to hear the comments from guests. The self-evaluation process after the dinner party is also very satisfying. Students are often quite critical of their efforts and struggle to do their best.

The Possibilities Are Endless

Over the years, students have chosen many exciting themes. Shortly after 9/11, a Fourth of July barbeque with a patriotic flavor was planned. Classes have chosen a country style barbeque, a Christmas party, a Mardi Gras celebration, an Easter party, and in June, an eighth grade graduation party. One class chose a New Year's Eve party for the new millennium and others have chosen to celebrate with a Superbowl party. Living in the cold climate of upstate New York, tropical parties were very popular with the students. Classes have also chosen ethnic dinner parties including a Mexican fiesta, fine Italian dining, an African American dinner party, a Chinese dinner party, and one of the most memorable, a Roman toga party.

Students are encouraged to focus and capitalize on three areas:

- Using skills from all other disciplines
- Finding and using the many resources available to them

- Using their collaborative imaginations and problem-solving skills

Student work begins with research to enhance the themes of the dinner parties. For example, in preparation for the Roman toga party, students researched the dining habits of Romans and learned that only the working class sat to eat their meals, while the upper class preferred to recline for dinner. From there, students found out more about this practice and designed and built their own “reclinatorium,” and decided to place it in the center of the room for any guests to use if they so desired. Each class uses technology skills to create its own specialized party invitation. Welcoming speeches and skits are written, edited, and performed by students. Math skills are applied to increase the yield for chosen recipes and to determine amounts of ingredients for the grocery list.

Students quickly seek out available resources to bring their ideas to life. For instance, students contacted a high school Latin teacher, who provided a video about the history and relevance of different types of togas in Roman times. She also made available a list of common Roman table manners and customs, based mostly on superstitions of the time. The entertainment at the toga party was a violin duet performed by seventh grade students from the orchestra, and parents assisted by helping students make their own togas. For a Chinese dinner party, our class invited a mother who had owned a Chinese restaurant to help the class prepare egg rolls and won ton soup from scratch. She also shared her family recipe for traditional almond cookies, and provided decorations and artifacts to help the class learn about Chinese culture. Even the local grocery store was thrilled to be included in the preparations.

Students love to be creative. One student’s idea is quickly built upon by another student, and plans and concepts evolve. For the Chi-

nese dinner party the idea came up to build a giant dragon’s head to encompass a doorway for the guests to walk through. Upon first consideration, it seemed like an insurmountable task. Students drafted sketches and art teachers were asked for materials. After their diligent collaboration, the guests did indeed walk through a giant dragon’s head.

The dinner party unit appeals to educators because it adheres to the New York State standards and involves interdisciplinary learning, cooperative learning, multicultural components, and authentic assessment. The unit also encourages students to incorporate technology to enhance their learning, and builds stronger school and community relationships. The students enjoy the dinner party unit because it features hands-on learning, allows them to learn about a topic of their own interest, and connects academic skills to real life experiences. The skills acquired in this unit will serve these students for years to come. This approach fulfills each student’s need for fun in learning and gives each student an opportunity to shine. Admittedly, the dinner party unit involves intensive planning and preparation, but the benefits far outweigh the efforts. The smiles speak for themselves.

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A Teacher's Attitude Always Matters!

Rick Heckendorn, Ed.D.



A teacher's attitude has a powerful influence over what transpires in the classroom. It is not the only influence, certainly, but the teacher can be the model who motivates students to be more positive. There is ample literature that supports the idea that teacher attitudes affect lesson success. There is evidence that the teacher's enthusiasm correlates with students' intrinsic motivation (Patrick, Hisley & Kempler, 2000.) Their study found that the teacher's enthusiastic attitude led to students in college having greater interest in the class and increased excitement about the subject matter.

Educators have discussed the need for passionate teachers who are lifelong learners for some time (Sizer, 1992.) The passion for teaching reveals itself in a teacher's words and actions, where the teacher is committed and excited about learning and helping others learn. The reflective practitioner embodies these strivings to learn and achieve and share in the class s/he creates (Barth, 2001.) The caring about one's students is a crucial part of one's attitude (Noddings, 1984.) The passionate teacher does not give up on the students' ability to learn and improve (Wisehart, 2004.) By using probing questions with minimally successful students, this teacher was able to raise their achievement levels significantly.

I have felt this enthusiasm for teaching for my entire career. Still, I am about to share the most unbelievable experience of my teaching career, one that further shows the power of the enthusiastic teacher, the committed educator who cares about his students' learning, the passionate one who is dedicated to carry on with a lesson despite many obstacles that might thwart others. My story unfolds.

I had the pleasure of having two topics accepted by NYSMSA at its conference in October in Rochester. My topic for the first session was "Individualize and Create a Classroom Community." As a college professor who feels comfortable talking with teachers and prospective teachers, I was looking forward to presenting my ideas on how to actively involve students in one's classes. As you will see I experienced several mountains and valleys on the route to this first session in Rochester. It ended with a Hollywood ending worthy of *Mr. Holland's Opus!* Kindly follow me on this journey. I am going to suggest that subsets of enthusiasm and passion for teaching might be the importance of flexibility, the value of maintaining a positive attitude in the face of adversity, the promoting of one's talent to motivate one's students, and the need for demonstrating an inclusive approach to others.

I was pleased at being accepted as a speaker at the conference; however, less than two weeks before the conference I suddenly developed a detached retina in one eye that required four laser treatments in the surgeon's office. The doctor forbade me to fly or to drive. I cancelled my plane reservation, but the doctor allowed me to take the train from New York City. When I went to Penn Station to pick up my ticket the day before departing, they would not permit any item on the train that was wider than 28 inches, which included my electric piano. Although music was an integral part of the motivation for my demonstration lesson, I was prepared to sing a cappella if necessary. I departed on the eight-hour trip and arrived in time for the evening dinner and opening ceremonies. Wanting to check out my workshop room, I reconnoitered

the area. I was excited beyond belief to find a baby grand piano outside my presentation room. This would enable me to use my original tune to motivate my audience.

The next morning, after hearing an excellent opening speaker, I walked to the workshop room to prepare. I heard wonderful music coming from a 40-piece middle school jazz band. I was excited to hear them until I suddenly realized that they were using that baby grand piano! It would not matter since I was prepared to sing a cappella. As I started my workshop the music suddenly stopped. Two teachers mentioned that the students only played between workshop sessions. How convenient for me. The piano was available.

During my workshop I asked the assembled 12 educators to become my middle-school class as we learned about the Preamble to the Constitution. They would experience the mini-lesson before they would debrief what had occurred wearing their educators' hats. Fifteen minutes into the presentation, I asked the educators to join me outside to sing the melody I had written for the Preamble. As we walked towards the piano a few teachers remarked that the noise would make our singing impossible. Although the 40-piece jazz band musicians had finished playing, they were packing up, hanging out, and talking loudly, as middle school youngsters normally do. I asked the educators not to be concerned. First I would sing the melody and then they would hopefully join in with me the second time. We would not disturb the students, and they would not disturb us. We would be only a few minutes.

Now to relate the part of the story that still gives me chills. I played the introduction softly and suddenly there was a hush in the room. Everyone listened as I sang the melody alone the first time. When I asked the educators to join me the second time around, they did! They sang out loudly, clearly, and well! At the conclusion the middle-school students applauded enthusiastically and asked if they could sing along!

I thought quickly. I had about 20 extra copies of the words with me to distribute to the eager students. I played the introduction and we all sang it together: educators, students and I. It was a thrill beyond belief! I had always sensed the importance of maintaining one's enthusiasm as a teacher to encourage our students. Here I learned specifically the importance of flexibility, the value of maintaining a positive attitude in the face of adversity, the possibilities of using one's talent as a role model to motivate, and the power inherent in including others. Permit me to give examples of each.

Flexibility. I was determined to sing the melody despite the lack of musical accompaniment. When students asked to sing, I enthusiastically agreed.

Positive attitude. Despite my eye problems, my missing electric piano, the students' loud talking, and the educators' doubts about singing with the noise, I felt this activity was worth trying and kept moving forward enthusiastically.

Promoting one's talent. The educators and the middle school students sang with me. I started with my piano introduction and sang the melody first. I put myself out there and they sang along. Nobody was forced. All were invited. The allure of music can be a magnificent motivator. It worked! Teachers have their own interests, hobbies, and abilities that should be utilized in the classroom to connect with and motivate the students.

Inclusive approach. I invited the educators to sing after I had sung. They realized that I had planned an authentic, expressive activity to help them learn and were willing to join. Why did the students listen and sing? I suspect that these young musicians respected our efforts that sounded decent to their ears. Still they could have been alienated had I asked them to be quiet, had I been rude to them, had I pretended to possess a superior right to take over. I did not. In an effort not to disturb them I played softly, but they heard it. When they asked to be in-

cluded I welcomed them wholeheartedly. Including the students was based on mutual respect.

Unfortunately this thrilling Hollywood event was neither taped, nor photographed, nor filmed. Therefore I share this event to illustrate the potential power of a teacher's enthusiasm. This marvelous event enabled me to analyze enthusiasm in a teaching situation and present what I perceived to be its four component parts: the importance of flexibility, maintaining a positive attitude in the face of adversity, using one's talent as a motivator, and the value of including others. There was electricity in the air as the students, educators, and I collaborated to make beautiful music on that Friday morning in Rochester. Every teacher can make this happen, by utilizing his or her special, secret talents. As teachers continue diligently planning their lessons, they might consider reflecting on the importance of flexibility, a positive attitude, and being inclusive. The students may surprise you, as they did me. A little Hollywood is just around the corner! It could be *Mr. Holland's Opus* time. Thank you NYSMSA for making this possible!

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A Student Speaks...

Teacher Advisory Programs in Middle School

Heather Meyer

One of the goals of every educator is to help others become educators. Beginning in this issue, we are taking this notion one step further by printing exceptional papers from undergraduate and graduate students who are taking courses geared to teaching “in the middle.” For those of you who are teaching at the university level, if you have articles you feel are worthy of sharing, please e-mail them to us at editor@nysmsa.org and be sure to include written permission from the author.

—Jeannette Stern

Middle school is a time of great change and development for students; a time when adolescents are trying to find their place within their group of friends, the school, and the community. With so many changes and developments in their lives, the middle-level grades can often be difficult and overwhelming for many students. They face countless challenges on a daily basis, and struggle to find and define their own identity amidst a wide range of influences, such as family, friends, the media, and the larger community. This is a time when students need to feel safe, secure, and nurtured, and able to develop a belief system of their own. It is vitally important that our middle-level students have a place in the school where they can go to find shelter from their changing world, and know that they always have an adult who cares for and supports them. Advisory programs provide students with these opportunities, and are essential in the development of young adolescents.

The National Middle School Association defines an advisory program as “an arrange-

ment whereby one adult and a small group of students have an opportunity to interact on a scheduled basis in order to provide a caring environment for academic guidance and support, everyday administrative details, recognition, and activities to promote citizenship” (1996, p.1). Another way to view an advisory program is “an organized group of one adult and a dozen or so kids that serves as the students’ first line of affiliation in their school” (Hopkins, 2004, p.1-2). Furthermore, teacher advisory programs are “part of the foundation of the middle school movement, and one of the features that distinguishes middle schools from high schools or elementary schools” and also “reflect middle school initiatives in student-centered, affective education” (Gallassi & Gullede, 1997, p.55). According to Trudy Knowles and Dave Brown, in an advisory program, “an advisor (usually a teacher) meets with a small group of students on a regular basis for the primary purpose of helping students develop trusting relationships with an adult and close social bonds with a small group of classmates” (2000, p.152). Middle school can be a challenging time for adolescents, and these close relationships are developed in advisory to help middle-level students handle many of the difficulties they face during this transition in their lives.

Young adolescents face a variety of challenges and changes on a daily basis, and navigating the middle school world can be a difficult task for many students. In middle school, adolescents are “busy searching for identity, building relationships, and aligning with various groups including peer groups”

(Whitney & Hoffman, 1998, p.233). Furthermore, adolescents are “becoming more self-determined, making decisions that affect their day-to-day relationships as well as their future lives, and experienc[ing] new heights in thinking, building capacity for decision making and other types of critical thinking” (p.233). Adolescents are “eager to learn academics, as well as information about their evolving physical and social characteristics” (p.233). These challenges are not the only ones students face on a daily basis. In addition, Knowles and Brown (2000, p.151) state that “it is amazing that anyone gets through middle school without incurring some type of permanent emotional distress.” They cite that on a daily basis adolescents face: “dealing with physical changes, making new friends, being a member of the ‘right’ peer group, developing independence from parents, avoiding peer pressure, going steady with boy-friends/girlfriends then breaking up, finding a sexual, cultural, or ethnic identity, being harassed by other students, and handling the pressure of academic demands.” As a result of all these changes occurring during middle-level years, it has become apparent that advisory programs are imperative to help our students overcome the challenges they face on a daily basis. In order to handle these changes and challenges, adolescents need and deserve to have an adult they can come to for support, knowing that the adult encourages and defends him or her. As teachers, it is imperative that we nurture and instruct not only the academics of middle school, but also the emotional and social aspects as well. This time can be emotionally and socially strenuous for middle-level students, and “educators have an obligation to foster the development of students as well-rounded, integrated members of a society that honors our commonality and our diversity” (Whitney & Hoffman, 1998, p.236). Advisory programs have been developed in response to the many needs,

challenges, and changes of the adolescent in middle school.

There are many purposes and benefits to having an advisory program in middle school, and according to Susan Black, they include; “to make sure every student is known well at school by at least one adult, to make sure every student belongs to a peer group, to help students find ways of being successful within the academic and social options school provides, and to promote communication and coordination between home and school” (2002, p. 1). Advisory programs have been developed to help students maneuver through the difficult problems they face on a daily basis. Through advisory programs, students have the opportunity for contact with a small group of peers and an advisor on a regular basis to help them deal with problems and concerns, and to help their development through changes, all in a safe, caring, supportive environment.

Advisory sessions should be designed with the middle-level student in mind. According to Knowles and Brown, advisory sessions should promote student-to-student, or teacher-to-student conversations on personal topics that are not possible to have in a larger class of students (2000, p.152). “The sessions are nonacademic, ungraded, and planned with young adolescents’ social and emotional interests and needs in mind” (2000, p.152). Claire Cole states that middle level students are more comfortable when they are with their peers, and advisory programs make it possible for students to belong to a group of their classmates, feel cared for by a teacher, and discuss items of importance in an environment with a higher level of trust and concern (1992, p.6-7). Topics that can be discussed in an advisory session include issues such as “drug, alcohol, and tobacco use; sex and dating; friends and relationships; conflict resolution; study skills; community service; current events; values and ethical issues;

decision making; school spirit; and problems students have at school or at home” (Gallassi & Gullede, 1997, p.56). However, advisory programs should not substitute for guidance services, but should in fact supplement them. Teachers should not act as guidance counselors in an advisory session, and are not expected to know how to solve all of the problems of their students. Teachers need to be able to refer students with issues or problems beyond the scope of an advisory session to those professionals, such as guidance counselors or specialists, who can provide the student with the necessary services and support (Cole, 1992, p.20). Overall, advisory sessions permit students to handle topics not generally discussed in depth during the school day in an environment where they feel comfortable and safe.

There are many different structures an advisory program can take in a middle school to meet the scheduling needs of the school. The ideal advisory session is usually twenty minutes in length or longer, because shorter time periods do not usually generate as effective and in-depth discussion as a longer session does (Knowles & Brown, 2000; Hopkins, 2004). Furthermore, many schools hold advisory sessions at the beginning of the day because, according to Knowles and Brown, advisory sessions held at the end of the day might be perceived as of little importance. Claire Cole (1992, p.10) states that in a typical advisory session that meets every day, the format might be as follows: Monday is for a relationship-building activity; Tuesday the students participate in intramurals; Wednesday is devoted to silent-reading; Thursday is another relationship-building activity; on Friday, the students participate in a tutorial or independent study. However, she also states that this is not necessarily what every school must adopt to have a successful advisory program. Schools need to find and develop a program that

works for their schedule, needs, and most importantly, students. She continues by saying that whatever type of program a school designs, the teacher advisory program should be scheduled, planned, appropriate, and feasible within the context of the school, and supported by the administration and the faculty (1992, p.11). It is imperative that all of these components work together to create a well-balanced and structured advisory program.

Another issue to consider in the development and implementation of an advisory program is who will become an advisor. Typically, teachers are the primary advisors in a school. However, to reduce the number of students assigned to each teacher, often counselors, administrators, librarians, district specialists, and other professionals in the building are assigned an advisory group as well (Knowles & Brown, 2000, p.153). Cole (1992, p. 14) states that administrators should select advisors based upon their personality, willingness to become an advisor, and availability during the week to meet regular advisory sessions (1992, p.14). Becoming an advisor requires training and knowledge of how to deliver this type of program effectively to students (Knowles & Brown, 2000, p.153). Furthermore, an effective teacher advisory program requires cooperation among all levels of school personnel. The administration is ultimately responsible for the decisions made regarding teacher advisory programs, however, advisors and school counselors also have vital roles in the development and implementation of this program (Cole, 1992, p.12). Members of the community can also support advisory programs through teaching mini-courses, providing information on careers, and helping with community service projects. Students also play a key role in the success of teacher advisory programs as advisees; they can participate in community service projects, be organizers of activities, and be peer men-

tors within their individual groups (1992, p.13). Often teacher advisory sessions are coordinated with help and input from everyone involved, including administrators, counselors, advisors, community members, and students (1992, p.13). Including each representative group in the planning of advisory sessions leads to a school committed to the success of its program.

There are many components to an effective and successful teacher advisory program. Some look at the work involved and believe it is too extensive. However, when one considers the benefits of teacher advisory programs, it is hard to imagine how any school could refuse the opportunity to implement one in their school. Advisory programs are based upon the idea of creating caring relationships between adults and students, between students, and among parents, teachers, and students, that in turn create safety, support, and encouragement among all involved (Gallassi & Gullledge, 1997, p. 57). Knowles and Brown (2000, pp. 154-155) state that through an advisory program “both advisors and advisees belong to a ‘family’”, a place that is their “base” and “home away from home.” Furthermore, through advisory programs, schools can “nurture psychological and physical health; academic, social, and emotional development; and positive attitudes and values which will favorably influence all other initiatives of the school” (Gallassi & Gullledge, 2000, p.57). Through the activities of teacher advisory programs, all other aspects of the school will benefit. For example, Dr. Nancy Doda (2003, p. 23) states, “Feeling safe in school is a prerequisite for learning and achievement.” This means that in order for students to achieve at their highest level, it is imperative that they feel secure in their school environment, something a teacher advisory program provides on a daily basis. Doda also states (2003, p. 24) that “[a]dvisory is academic” because it “keep[s] our young

people solidly invested in themselves, each other, their learning, and their school experience.” Advisory programs create kind, caring, and respectful adolescents; this benefits their relationships with friends, parents, and adults, but also benefits their academic work and their role as responsible citizens in the community as well.

Teacher advisory programs in middle schools are vital for the development of successful middle schools and successful middle-level students. The middle school years are a time of great transition for adolescents, as they face many challenges and changes on a daily basis. From dealing with peer pressure, to family issues and academics, and trying to find their place within a group of friends, middle school can be a very difficult time for students. It is through advisory programs that adolescents can find a secure environment where they always feel safe and welcome. Advisory programs provide students with the opportunity to form a close relationship with a group of peers and an adult in the building, creating a feeling of belonging, acceptance, and comfort for the student. Here, students can discuss issues not normally covered in academic classes where there are typically a larger number of students. Teacher advisory programs can take many different forms, but it is essential that a school find an advisory program that meets the needs of its particular students. It is also essential that everyone in the building works toward the success of the program, because the benefits of a teacher advisory program far outweigh the work necessary to achieve this goal.

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Have Students Plug into Connection Reading Frameworks When They Are All Reading Different Books

Ed Daniels, NBCT



You want your students to read independently. You want your students to self select the books they're going to read. You want to know if your students are actually reading and understanding the books they've chosen. And you want your students to interact with each other to discuss their reading.

Making sure all these things happen is no mean task, especially when students are reading different books. How can teachers assess for understanding if their students aren't all reading the same book? Even harder, how can teachers assess for understanding if they haven't read what the students are reading themselves?

One way teachers might help themselves when students are reading different books is by using a teaching strategy called **Connection Reading Frameworks**. With Connection Reading Frameworks, teachers ask students to "plug into" a common framework of questions or stimulus material to make connections between their reading and that framework. The connections students make will reveal both their knowledge and comprehension of what they have read and provide the teacher the means to make a holistic assessment of their understanding.

Connection Reading Frameworks are not so different from what teachers normally use to assess their students understanding of a book they're reading. However, there is one significant difference. Instead of students all having the same book in common, they now have a common Connection Reading Framework they

can respond to, regardless of what they're reading. The framework becomes the commonality among students, not the book that's being read. As such, it becomes the focal point of student activities and assessment.

Connection Reading Frameworks can be almost anything. The only requirement is that the framework components can be addressed by all of your students, regardless of the book. For example, at a very basic level, a teacher might ask students a series of questions about the characters, or the setting, or the plot of their books. Or the teacher might ask about the action in the story, or the problem that has to be solved, or the attempts to solve the problem. Students will, of course, have different answers depending upon the book being read. However, the fluency and richness of the answers given will reveal volumes about their levels of understanding.

Teachers looking for more divergent thinking might show a brief video clip, or a piece of art, or play a song and ask students how what they've read might somehow connect to what you've asked them to watch or listen to. This may seem a little dangerous; after all, there's no telling what might be said. But with a little practice, both teachers and students seem to enjoy using these types of frameworks. I've used this method many times over and have found it extremely helpful and quite interesting in terms of what students say. The connections they make are often surprising, usually quite interesting, and always illuminating in terms of their understanding.



Using Connection Reading Frameworks in your classroom isn't hard. Simply follow these basic steps.

Step 1. Determine the Connection Reading Framework you want your students to plug into. Remember, the key is to create a common framework that students can connect to their reading. The framework might be one or more questions, a graphic organizer designed to collect information, or some other connector material that allows students to demonstrate their understanding of their reading.

Step 2. Explain the Connection Reading Framework to your students. By explaining the nature of the *Connection Reading Framework*, teachers give purpose to their students' reading. Students can zero in on framework specifics as they read, creating a focus of attention in their reading they might not normally have.

Step 3. Ask your students to silently read a portion of the books they've selected. How you determine the portion read is up to you. Some teachers set a specific number of pages to be read while others announce a set amount of time for reading. In a classroom setting, allowing a set reading time is probably the better choice because it allows everyone to be done at the same time, even though students are reading at varying rates.

Step 4. Have students work by themselves to make connections between their reading and the Connection Reading Framework while you informally assess their work. Walk around the class and note student work. Look at the quality and depth of their connections. Tell them not to worry if the connections don't come right away. Students should record their connections in their notebooks or on graphic organizers, whichever is more appropriate.

Step 5a. Have students meet with a partner and share connections as you monitor and assess students' actions. Partners may be randomly chosen or purposely chosen by you. I would not suggest letting the students select

their own partners, although, as always, this is the teacher's prerogative. Each partner should have an opportunity to share what s/he's read with the other and explain the connections s/he was able to make. Partners should be encouraged to suggest additional connections based upon the other's account of his/her reading. Teachers should walk around and listen carefully to what is being said and feel free to take notes if a more formal assessment is desired.

Step 5b (Optional). Ask partners to do something more with the connections they've shared. Teachers can have partners compare and contrast, or analyze, apply, or synthesize the connections they made. For example, teachers wishing partners to compare and contrast might ask them to complete a Venn diagram using the connections each partner has made.

Step 6. Conduct a whole class discussion. Teachers should ask individual students to share their connections with the whole class. If possible, commonalities or emerging patterns from the connections offered should be discussed and built upon. As always, teachers should ask students to consider what they have learned based upon their connections.

Connection Reading Frameworks can be valuable to a teacher and fun for students. They provide the missing link between the student's reading and the teacher's attempts to assess all his/her students as they read different books. And Connection Reading Frameworks are good for students, too. Good Connection Reading Frameworks let students plug into a series of meaningful exercises that permit them to go beyond the mere recognition and recall of the "facts" of their story as they make connections at the higher cognitive levels.

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Journey to Oz: Reinventing Public Education Practices at the Middle Level in Response to SINI Identification

Laura Carbone

Just as Dorothy's family and friends gathered around her, willing her to consciousness after the tornado in Kansas, a similar situation occurred in our district office at Indian River Central Schools. A collective group of administrators and teachers viewed the notice of School in Need of Improvement (SINI) identification and decidedly willed our district to rise to the challenge of meeting annual yearly progress and awaken successfully, as Dorothy did, with adequate yearly progress in New York State tests for eighth grade middle school students in English Language Arts. Now flash back to our own tornado, known as SINI, and the whirlwind journey it created for this district.

We're Off to See the "State Education Wizard"

Our odyssey began with the announcement from the State Education Department that two of our grade levels, fourth and eighth, had failed to meet accountability status in the area of English Language Arts. Therefore they were being identified as SINI 1-School in Need of Improvement Year 1. As a result we were summoned to Chancellor's Hall in Albany to join the multitude of other schools identified along the SINI continuum. Members of the State Education Department reviewed the criteria for identification, which primarily focused upon a district's failure to meet AYP in one or more cohorts. The session concluded with a review of the Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP) that every district in SINI status must complete. It included a creation of a school leadership team, the vision and mission statement of the district

and specific building, a detailed narrative of the district demographics, identification procedures and range of services, a needs assessment, and an action plan in which goals and objectives for raising student achievement were to be spelled out in specific details. The catch was that our identification was approximately two months behind schedule, so all plans were to be submitted and up and running within a month. The up side was that SINI districts with approved CEP plans received \$65,000 (later increased to \$75,000) of funding to bring about positive school change. Wow! We felt as if Dorothy's house had landed upon us instead of the Wicked Witch of the East.

We're Not in Kansas Anymore: Data Analysis & the Need for Change

Upon returning from Albany, a collective group of administrators and instructional technologists met to more deeply analyze the accountability reports and determine the immediate course of action. There was an impending sense of urgency as we were at the beginning of October 2004 and the NYS English Language Arts test for Grade 8 was fast approaching in January 2005!

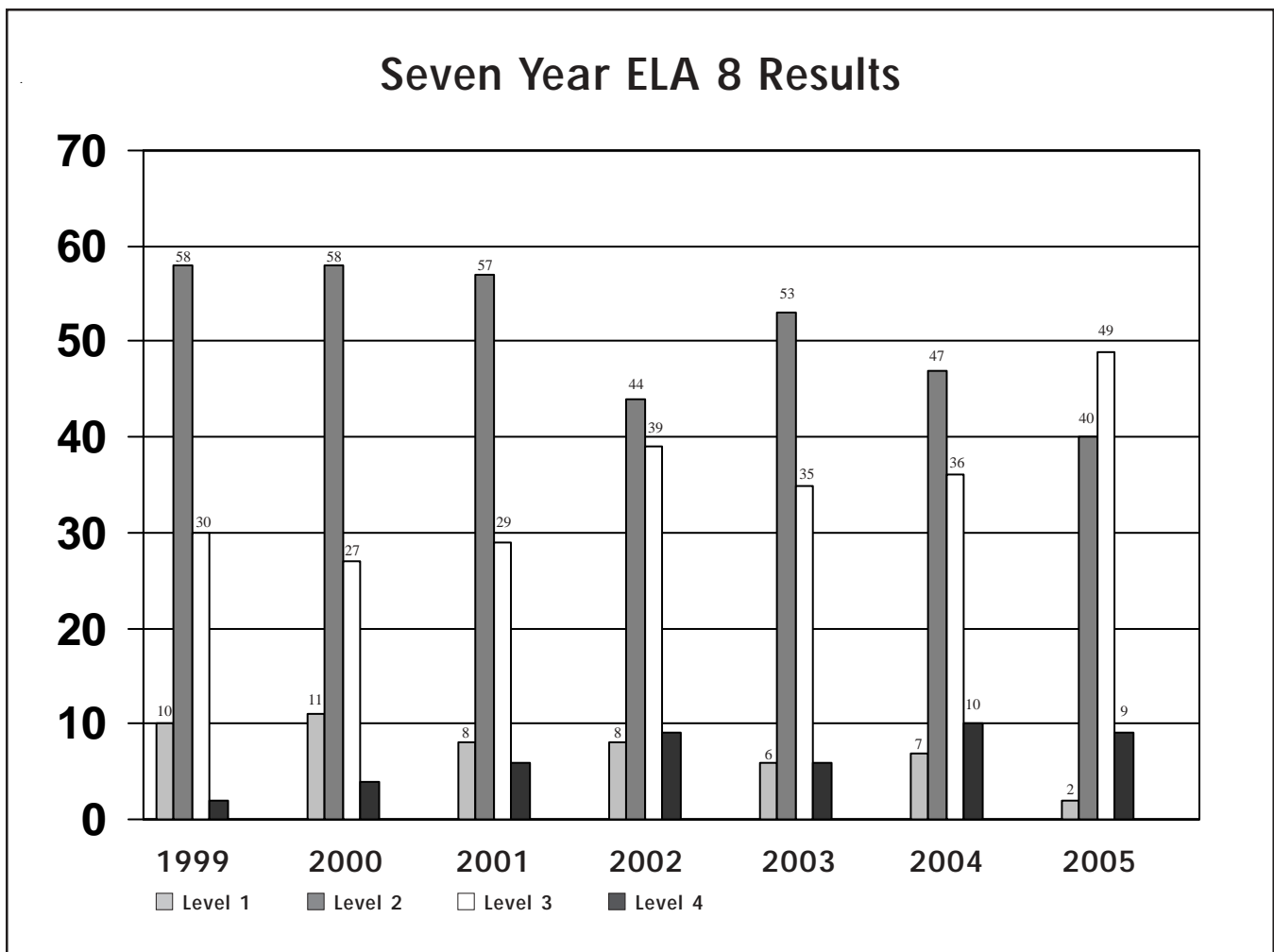
The data revealed several key results. The first was that our district's AYP progress was beginning to plateau across the majority of cohorts in the general education areas. A cohort is one of nine groups containing 30 or more students. Therefore districts would need to have fairly large populations before they could amass enough students for a cohort. The demographics of our district fit these criteria as we have approximately 3,500 students due

in large part to the enrollment from 10th Mountain Division families in neighboring Fort Drum. The second finding was that our Students with Disabilities cohort was the one group which failed to meet AYP. The majority of SINI 1 schools had fallen into identification based upon similar performance scores.

Immediately, two objectives were identified: 1) The short term objective was to lift the scores of those students in the identified cohort who failed to meet AYP specifically due to weaknesses in the area of reading comprehension. 2.) The long term objective was to restructure programming to raise overall AYP for all students, again with a focus upon reading comprehension development, as a definite plateau had been identified which would lead to eventual lapse in AYP for

all students in both general and special education. (See bar graph chart below for ELA performance in grade 8.)

At that point, Patricia Fabrizio, instructional technologist for the district and, I firmly believe, one of the most innovative and enthusiastic educators on the face of the earth placed an offer on the educational table. She proposed to create a group of educators who would work with those students in the identified cohort in an intensive immersion program until the ELA test in January. It would require the collaboration and cooperation of a wealth of people, but its outcome could have unprecedented potential. Furthermore, it would set a framework in place that might also successfully meet the short and long range objectives stated above. As one administrator shared, “It



has to be about doing something differently. Because more of the same programming done harder has not worked.” The green light was given and the adventure really began!

Follow the “Yellow Brick Road” of Scientifically Based Research

Pat selected a diverse group of educators to work on what was to become known as the Learning House Team, or in today’s common jargon, a small learning community. It included a mix of staff members, many with veteran teaching experience. Pat had been an eighth grade English teacher prior to her transition into instructional technology and curriculum development. She was already responsible for blazing a trail throughout the district in the areas of curriculum mapping and ELA instruction. She chose a group of trusted, enthusiastic, and highly open-minded educators from the background certification areas of reading specialist, special education, elementary and middle level, as well as the grade level guidance counselor. I was also selected to provide liaison support in the area of administration, with a focus upon special education and academic intervention. It is important to note that there were reality checks throughout this process. One was the fact that the delayed notice of SINI identification meant we were already five weeks into the school year and staff assignments had been set. The individuals chosen were selected for two reasons: their highly positive and collaborative professionalism and the fact that their schedules were the most malleable. Now that the “who” had been established, the next step was the “what” of programming.

The SINI CEP plan included action planning with specific, measurable goals and objectives. It also stipulated that funding would be provided to programming based upon scientifically based research. Therefore, the task at hand automatically became to create a sound academic support program

based upon best practices in education. Well, the wealth of experience and knowledge amongst the members of the Learning House group was phenomenal. Each strategy and applied research finding contributed by the members of the group were as valuable as the gold bricks that were laid on the yellow brick road. Ironically, one of the key sources - Janet Allen’s *Yellow Brick Roads*, detailing shared and guided reading paths - is what prompted the underlying theme of Oz in this article. Several group members had been schooled in constructivism and applied this methodology to the program creation. The group chose their task, focused upon exploratory learning through scientifically based research strategies, and set about the formulation of rubric-oriented goals for measurement of success. It was a highly effective and efficient means to working through a process in which time was of the essence.

However, there were also an overarching set of research principles that ultimately framed the group’s initial planning. They were Universal Design on Learning (UDL) and Super-Learning. New met old and the two combined to be a formidable framework, as we would later see in post-test results. Both theories are based upon the concept of maximizing learning potential through careful consideration *equally* of academic, physical, and socio-emotional lesson planning for individual student-centered learning. This became the key, we strongly believe, to programming *differently* in contrast to the prior methodology of doing more of the same programming for a greater frequency of time. Our middle school philosophy had always been mindful of the balance between academic and socio-emotional education. However, this was more balanced; it was a conscious balance that became akin to a trinity of educational consideration.

The group also drew upon current district initiatives and effective teaching practices

they had successfully applied in their individual classrooms. The planning seemed to divide itself between the physical environment, which included fostering socio-emotional well-being, and that of the academic delivery of lessons. The sky was the limit for progressive and innovational planning! The group ultimately applied research from all of the following areas: brain based learning, sensory integration, skill streaming, curriculum mapping, metacognition, differentiated instruction, constructivism, and strategies for improving comprehension in reading instruction. Other areas of strategic development included application of wellness & nutrition, mentor & mentee, small & whole group instruction, multiple intelligence instructional delivery, and most importantly the development of positive self-concept. The group was decidedly unanimous in feeling that it was equally important for students to improve in reading comprehension and test taking skills as it was to develop a positive belief system in the students that they could be successful and active contributing participants in this program.

The opening day for the Learning House was as electrifying and invigorating for us as educators as it appeared to be for Dorothy and her friends entering the Emerald City in the movie. And, unbeknownst to me at the time, this would definitely be life imitating art as we strived to help our students succeed in more ways than they could ever have imagined.

The Emerald City, Known to Us as the Learning House

The Learning House opened its doors in late October 2004. The students' schedules had been rearranged to allow for attendance periods one and two in the Learning House. Research shows that middle-level students learn better later in the day; however, this was another reality check for the group. The

maneuvering involved in rearranging student schedules was incredible; therefore the team decided that the next best option was to have students, right off the bus, start their day together in the best emotional standing. The class roster was the list of students in the identified cohort along with the six chosen teachers.

Walking into the physical classroom was like walking into what could only be described as an educational utopia or Oz. The room was actually a double or multipurpose size room. The group had researched color theory and had theatre gel inserts of sky blue over half the lights to create a calm learning atmosphere. Tables were arranged for group work and there were colored bean bags in primary red and yellow to enhance memory and retention skills. Positive self-concept posters were all around with soft lit lamps. Classical music played softly in the background prior to the beginning of the day. The students were given bottles of water for continual hydration, based upon recommendations from brain-based research. Visualization and casual conversation also started each morning prior to the bell ringers. This is where the mentor component began, as each teacher worked daily with a table of five students. Students had every type of sensory aide available, from grips on pens to squish balls for focusing. Nutritious snacks were also provided at the mid-point of the block time to enhance well-being. Rules were established to encourage participation, positiveness, and a safe environment. They were continually revisited and proactively reviewed. The team was emphatic in creating an atmosphere where students felt valued and secure.

Academically a variety of interventions and planning frameworks had been developed for the class. There were several fundamental principles the group utilized to keep activities as concise and efficient as possible due to the test being only three months out. All students

had been benchmarked prior to the beginning of the program to determine individual reading levels. The class would consist of individual reading groups in which the teachers worked with the same students they mentored. Large group instruction would involve integrated learning with social studies curriculum and concepts, as this had been a successful past practice at the middle level. The group chose the *Among the Hidden* series by Margaret Maddox. They also chose to implement the SQ4R reading strategy as the primary test preparation learning strategy. All activities connected to the text were formatted according to the layout of the ELA Grade 8 exam. In essence, then, a layering of assessment strategies were at work on a continual basis. Students also practiced on past ELA exams as another means of preparation, but primary instruction involved embedding the components of the test into daily parallel test tasks. The group utilized the online EBSCO program to develop activities that correlated with each student's reading level. This resource draws from a bank of non-fiction texts; so this was another area of weakness being continually reinforced. No homework was assigned because students were still attending all of their regular classes, including English. The class ran straight through to the test and beyond, to the end of the semester in January. This also provided the teachers the time to have an end of programming celebration and complete a second round of benchmarking. The students returned to regular class programming in January, but a



lot had changed for everyone in three short months.

Return to Kansas: SINI and Beyond

Preliminary benchmarking results were astounding, as were the predicted results of the students' performance on the ELA's. The instructional technologists had estimated the formula of the state exam and cautiously shared what looked to be astounding growth and results. The official results correlated strongly with the preliminary estimates; our students had demonstrated outstanding academic achievement!

Planning has not ceased from the moment of SINI identification. While the eighth grade students were working in the

Learning House, benchmarking had begun with the seventh graders. They began their own version of a learning house in January 2005, to continue into eighth grade for the assessments in January 2006. The fourth grade also began

working in its own literacy framework, the Literacy Gang, in preparation for the 2005 Grade 4 ELA assessments. A Learning through Technology grant was obtained and a majority of the district's third graders have been schooled in many of the strategies of the Learning House. Plans for further creations of learning houses were completed over the summer for the middle level and implemented in September 2005. The district also sent four teams of educators and administrators to the

summer Constructivist Conference, where teams worked on such topics as positive school change, administrative cohesion, pupil personnel support services, and middle-level literacy. Therefore, one small notification - SINI- appears to have brought one large impetus for change in our district.

The Yellow Brick Road of change for us has been both exhausting and exhilarating! The teachers of the Learning House possess the same characteristics that Dorothy did in the Wizard of Oz. They are positive, enthusiastic, and encouraging to all students involved in the program. They even kicked their ruby red slippers together to create a scientifically based Oz of research-based applications and strategies. However, it's the students who are the most symbolic of the Oz characters. They are the ones who began this journey like the Scarecrow, the Lion, and the Tin Man. Many entered the program so beaten down in the misconceptions that they could not learn, were behavior problems, or had extremely low self-worth. Yes, they gained knowledge and understanding through the experience; but most importantly, they displayed the courage to thrive and the radiance of abounding self-worth. These traits far outweigh any AYP measurements; they are lifelong rewards, not merely yearly assessments under NCLB.

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