

# IN Transition

Journal of the New York State Middle School Association



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# NYSMSA MISSION STATEMENT AND GOALS

**MISSION:** The New York State Middle School Association (NYSMSA) represents those who serve the educational needs of all young adolescents in New York State. We are committed to creating, promoting, and supporting effective middle-level programs that are academically rigorous and developmentally appropriate.

**VISION:** NYSMSA acts on our belief that all young adolescents are entitled to academically rich and developmentally appropriate programs. Toward this end, we work collaboratively with the educational community to make high-performing middle-level programs the norm in New York State through full implementation of the Essential Elements and application of cutting-edge research.

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

## **AWARENESS AND RESPONSIVENESS**

NYSMSA believes that we must:

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

## **SUPPORT**

NYSMSA believes that we must:

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

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

NYSMSA believes that we must:

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

## **COLLABORATION**

NYSMSA believes that we must:

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

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"Juggling Middle-Level — Finding a Comfortable Balance" —Photo taken by Brian Sherman, NYSMSA Secretary and Superintendent of the Schoharie Central School District.



## A few thoughts from the President...

Jeannette Stern, Ed.D.



Jeannette Stern

We here at NYSMSA hope that this year brings good things for all of you. Unfortunately, positive press does not look to be in the cards yet again. The *New York Post* has published a series of

articles about middle schools in the Big Apple. On January 2, David Andreatta reported that about 50 schools in the city have reverted to K-8 buildings. Only after you read through somewhat negative comments about life in city middle schools do you find why people seem to be in favor of the K-8 structure. Kathleen Cashin, NYC Region 5 Superintendent, reports that there is a more nurturing environment in the K-8 buildings, leading to less violence, better achievement, and higher attendance.

If one were to look at the *Regents Policy Statement* or *The Essential Elements*, it is clearly stated that successful middle schools are to promote academic excellence as well as positive youth development. Both documents emphasize the need for long-term relationships between adults and students and call for a nurturing environment through advisory programs, counseling, cooperative learning, and other strategies for supporting young adolescents at this time of great change. At first glance, one would think that the philosophy of middle schools is not working. In

reality, if the schools had been true middle schools there in the first place, or only buildings with the title and the grades of students? In a follow-up article on January 4, I had the opportunity to express just that sentiment. When asked by the same reporter what seemed to be the trouble with NYC middle schools, I replied, “What middle schools? New York City never really adopted the middle-school model.” This second article describes some of the practices in successful schools with middle grades, before continuing to report on the rush to convert middle schools to a K-8 structure. Two other articles, appearing on January 16 and 17, lamented the “pattern of neglect” in city middle schools, citing substandard teachers and lack of resources.

In the January 11 edition of the *Washington Post*, reporter Jay Mathews asked for help in finding great middle schools in the D.C. area and its environs to use as the basis of an article. He noted that he has a reputation as a middle school hater, but would like to have information to write more impartially. In an article he wrote in 2005 on how to pick a school for your child, he advised parents of middle-age children: “There are no good middle schools. It is an itchy age, pre-adolescence. You will discover that no one will have many nice things to say about whatever middle school you pick, even the one full of millionaires’ kids. Children of this age are just too difficult to teach.”

So, I sent him a response in which I told him to look at the Schools to Watch program from the National Forum and learn what

makes a middle school a great one. I then suggested that he look at the schools chosen by the local Schools to Watch Committees in the D.C. area, as well as those in Virginia and around the country, so he could see philosophy in practice. Finally, I offered to speak with him to educate him on the “needs of those in the middle.” Others from the National Forum and NMSA have also sent similar replies.

I bring this to your attention because all of us in the field of middle-level education need to take up the gauntlet and answer these articles written by people who see things from what is becoming a very popular point of view. We know that in schools where the Essential Elements are implemented with fidelity, student achievement soars, and students remain successful in their high school years and beyond. It is up to those of us — who thrive in “hormone heaven,” who harness the boundless energy of these pre-adolescents and create learning experiences that other areas can only marvel at, and who understand that teaching middle school is a 24/7 job — to change this tsunami-like wave of negative press. Look at the seven Schools-to-Watch we named last year. Regardless of economic status, each is providing meaningful opportunities for our students here in NYS. Look at other schools — you know the ones — where students are thriving, regardless of what they deal with when they leave their schools.

Join forces to stamp out misinformation on middle level coming from the unknowing! If you see articles in your local papers that bash middle schools, please answer them and send a copy to me via email (stern@nysmsa.org) or snail mail (c/o Wantagh Middle School, 3299 Beltagh Avenue, Wantagh, NY 11793).

## Additional Research

*As a follow-up to my message, I contacted Dan Mac Iver, noted researcher and consultant for middle-grades education. He gave permission for us to share the information below on additional resources showing a lack of significant difference between achievement in middle schools and K-8 schools. We thank Mr. Mac Iver for his permission to share this information with our membership.*

American Journal of Education, 112 (Feb. 2006). The article, “Reexamining Middle School Effects: A Comparison of Middle Grades Students in Middle Schools and K–8 Schools” by Weiss & Kipnes compares K-8 configurations to middle school configurations in Philadelphia. The Research Advisory Board of NMSA invited Weiss to present these results at the NMSA conference in Nashville, TN last fall. It was a very interesting presentation. They didn’t find any data in their research to support the move from middle school configurations to K-8 configurations.

Since 1994, researchers at the Center for the Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University have been studying middle grades educational reforms in Philadelphia. Many of our recent reports have focused on the privatization and K-8 conversion reforms that occurred simultaneously in the district. Our research model has been to follow each cohort of students through the middle grades and to analyze their achievement gains (from spring of 5<sup>th</sup> grade to the spring of 8<sup>th</sup> grade) on Pennsylvania’s high stakes test, the PSSA.

In Philadelphia, as in many other districts, the enthusiasm for K-8 conversion reforms has been driven largely by the finding that students in long-established K-8 schools show greater achievement growth during the middle grades than do students in long-established middle schools. Also attendance during the middle grades tends to be better in long-established K-8 schools. However, these findings are compli-

cated by the fact that the neighborhoods and students in long-established K-8 schools in Philadelphia and many other cities are often more advantaged than the neighborhoods and students served in the existing middle schools. So the real question has been whether a district can get better results during the middle grades in newly-converted K-8 schools than in their remaining middle schools. The bottom line answer from our Philadelphia analyses: Not necessarily.

*Mr. Mac Iver shared several articles and reports that have grown out of the work in Philadelphia:*

1. Mac Iver, M. A. & Mac Iver, D.J. (2006). Which bets paid off? Early findings on the impact of private management and K-8 conversion reforms on the achievement of Philadelphia students. *Review of Policy Research*, 23(5), 1077-1093.

The analyses in this article follow three cohorts of students (fifth graders in 199-00, 2000-2001, and 2001-2002 who reached 8<sup>th</sup> grade in 2002-2003, 2003-2004, and 2004-2005.) We use multi-level change models to analyze the impact on student mathematics achievement. For these three cohorts, students in long-established K-8 schools generally outgained students in middle schools, but the gains were not as large in newly-converted K-8 schools. (Also, the longitudinal mathematics achievement gains were not larger in privately-managed schools than in district-managed schools.) For details, please see the article.

2. Mac Iver, M. A. & Mac Iver, D.J. (2006). Privatizing education in Philadelphia: Are educational management organizations improving student achievement? Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia.

This paper covers the same cohorts of students as “Which Bets Paid Off” but adds analyses of students’ reading achievement gains.

Although, only privatization is mentioned in the title, the analyses also estimate the impact of the K-8 conversion reforms. The most important conclusion in this paper is that broader systemic reforms — such as district-wide increases in the quality and coherence of curriculum and professional development — are bearing fruit. The 2004 and 2005 cohorts of 8<sup>th</sup> graders showed math achievement gains across the middle grades that were much larger than those shown by the 2003 cohort. This finding was broad based, occurring in middle schools and K-8 schools, in privately-managed and district-managed schools.

3. Byrnes, V. & Ruby, A. (in press). Comparing achievement between K-8 & middle schools: A large scale empirical study. To appear in *American Journal of Education*.

This paper is by two of my colleagues. “It compares Middle Schools to established K-8 schools, as well as to newly formed K-8 schools that are part of the district’s K-8 conversion policy, in order to determine if the different school structures have an effect on student academic achievement. The outcome is students’ 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics achievement and our sample includes 40,883 8<sup>th</sup> grade students taken from 95 schools across 5 cohorts from the 1999-2000 to the 2003-04 school years. The analysis uses multi-level modeling to account for differences between student, cohort, and school level variation, and includes a large set of statistical controls that include student demographics, teacher characteristics, school transition, and several cohort and school level factors including average school size.

The results find that older K-8 schools do perform significantly better than Middle Schools, and that this advantage is adequately explained by the two school type’s differing student and teacher populations, differences in average grade size, and the extra school transition that Middle School students must make from elementary to the middle grades. Newer K-8 schools created as part of the district’s reform

efforts outperformed Middle Schools but not by as much or as significantly as did older K-8 schools, despite having smaller grade sizes and lower rates of school transition. We found that this was likely due to their student populations, which like those of Middle Schools, consisted primarily of minority students from high-poverty backgrounds. We conclude that while K-8 schools do perform better in terms of student achievement, the advantage exists for several reasons and may not be easily replicated or represent a solution to the problem of low achieving schools and students in large urban public school districts that serve high-minority and low-poverty student populations.”

**In addition to these 3 papers, let me add one final note:** In the latest cohort of students (8<sup>th</sup>-graders in 2006), comparisons of achievement growth (between spring of 5<sup>th</sup> grade and spring of 8<sup>th</sup> grade) in district-managed schools replicate the finding of no significant differences in achievement growth between the students in the 7 remaining district-managed middle schools and the 23 district-managed converted K-8 schools. The converted K-8s get marginally better gains in reading but not in math. The largest gains continue to be found in long-

established K-8 schools that existed before the K-8 conversion reform initiative began in Philly. A full paper which includes the results of this cohort is under preparation.

One caveat: These reports focus on achievement growth. Obviously, there are other important outcomes that these reports do not address.

Final comment: There are wonderful middle grades schools of all grade spans, mediocre middle grades schools of all grade spans, and dismal middle grades schools of all grade spans. Each type of grade configuration has strengths and weaknesses. A reform initiative that focuses on grade configuration conversion reforms without simultaneously instituting reforms in the curriculum, professional development, and support provided to teachers and administrators in the middle grades is, in my opinion, doomed to yield disappointing results. The quality and coherence of the instructional and emotional interactions that occur in every middle grades classroom every day have profound impacts on students’ learning and other outcomes. The grade configuration of a school may have little direct impact on these interactions.

## Membership and Publication Information

*In Transition* is a benefit of both individual and building membership in the New York State Middle School Association. Annual membership dues are \$50 for individual membership and \$150 for building membership. Memberships are on an “anniversary date” basis; renewal invoices are mailed approximately one month prior to end of membership.

For any changes in membership information, please contact Julie Schwartz at the NYSMSA office by e-mail ([schwartz@nysmsa.org](mailto:schwartz@nysmsa.org)) or phone/fax (914-747-9241).

Individual and Building Membership applications can be downloaded from our Web site: [www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org). Additionally, new membership applications paid via credit card can be completed online.

**NYSMSA gives permission to its membership to reprint  
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# The Executive Director's Message

## Dennis M. Tosetto



Dennis Tosetto

The New York State Middle School Association and the New York State Education Department recently completed celebrations for seven middle-level schools. Each school community had formally completed a process

that demonstrated that its school met the rigorous criteria needed to be designated an **Essential Elements: School to Watch (EE:STW)**. Nationally, 87 schools have earned the Schools to Watch designation over the past four years. The Schools to Watch program began this past year in New York State and our results were exceptional.

To become a New York State School to Watch, your school community must meet the criteria that can be found on our website ([www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org)). The criteria include being able to demonstrate that the New York State Education Department's *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs (Revised 2003)* are fully met and that assessment results evidence that the program is successful.

The New York State Middle School Association and SED recognize the following seven EE:STW schools as being demonstrably among the very best in the United States:

- Barker Road Middle School, Pittsford, NY; Michael Pero, Principal
- Calkins Road Middle School, Pittsford, NY; Scott Reinhart, Principal
- Moravia Middle School, Moravia, NY; Bruce MacBain, Principal
- Sayville Middle School, Sayville, NY; Dr. Walter Schartner, Principal
- Twelve Corners Middle School, Brighton, NY; Terence M. Quinn, Principal
- Victor Junior High School, Victor, NY; Carl Christensen, Principal
- Oliver W. Winch Middle School, South Glens Falls, NY; Mark Fish, Principal

Marybeth Casey, SED's Middle-Level Associate, and I were fortunate to be included in the celebrations that were held at four of the designated schools. In each case, there was a sincere feeling of accomplishment and mutual support that encompassed not just the school's staff and students, but also included staff members from other schools in the district, each superintendent, and members of the board of education. Everyone appeared to feel that they were part of this significant achievement and the auditoriums were filled with a sense of pride and accomplishment from staff and members of the community alike.

I strongly encourage you to introduce this rewarding program to your colleagues in your school district and to encourage their participation. I can think of no better way to gain the cooperation and support needed to first determine the dynamic dissidence between where your school's program is and where you

collectively want it to be. NYSMSA stands ready to assist you through the process. For more information on EE:STW, please contact Dr. David Payton at [payton@nysmsa.org](mailto:payton@nysmsa.org). (Yes, following his retirement from SED, David has joined NYSMSA as the Director of the New York State EE:STW program. Does it get any better than that?)

### **NYSMSA/CMoG Middle-Level Institute, June 25-26, 2007**

Speaking of school improvement opportunities, the brochure for the fifth annual NYSMSA/Corning Museum of Glass Middle-Level Institute is now available at [www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org). Every year, participants give our Middle-Level Institute superior evaluations for quality and content and this year should be one of our best Institutes ever.

The Institute provides ten hours of hands-on instruction in one of six available workshops that take place over two days. We built in numerous opportunities to socialize and network with everyone in attendance, including the presenters. Our goal is to ensure that participants return home with a suitcase full of new skills, methods, and ideas, as well as with the names of many new friends and colleagues from around the state with whom they can collaborate during the year and on into the future.

Details of the Institute's program, including a brief bio for each presenter, are available on the NYSMSA website. However, here is a thumbnail sketch of what you can expect:

Session A: *The Teacher as Writer: Creating Models, Engaging Students, Producing Results* (Ross Burkhardt)

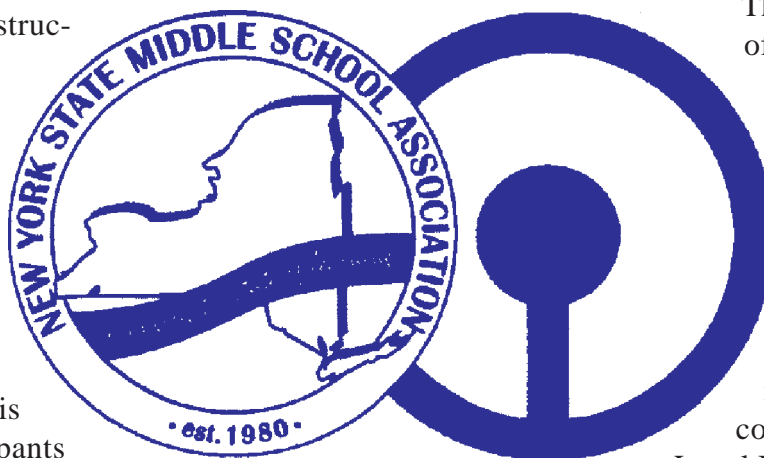
Session B: *NYS Assessment Data: Using Data to Inform Middle-Level STUDENTS about Their Academic Progress!* (Denise Anthony)

Session C: *Building ENGAGING Communities: Developing Social-Emotional Abilities AND Increasing Achievement in the Middle* (Dr. Paul Vermette and Cindy Kline)

Session D: *Exploring the Possibilities: Creative Solutions to Middle School Challenges* (Martha Evans)

Session E: *Making Writing Manageable for Middle-Level Students: 6 Traits of Writing* (Karen Adams)

Session F: *Middle-Level Leadership That Works* (Jeff Craig)



The Corning Museum of Glass provides an ultra-modern facility for our hands-on workshops as well as opportunities to participate in exciting special creative activities that include working with both hot and cold glass. Our Middle-Level Institute truly provides for some very unique learning experiences; experiences we guarantee that you will thoroughly enjoy and never forget!



# Research at a Glance

Jeff Craig, NYSMSA Director of Research and Technology

## A Review of Educational Taxonomies (part I)

The *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs* (commonly called the *Essential Elements*) provide advice to middle-level practitioners. Research has proved that greater implementation of the *Essential Elements* translates into higher student achievement (Craig, 2004). The *Essential Elements* themselves, though, are not detailed enough to inform every decision; the seven *Essential Elements* are the scaffold around which a middle-level program is built. Therefore, middle level educators must turn to a variety of sources for information about best practices and current best thinking to construct and maintain a program built on the *Essential Elements* scaffold. Some best practices have been around for decades; other practices are more recent in their genesis. This column will describe a few tools that have been in place for decades, educational taxonomies, which can help middle-level educators fill in the details that are supported by the *Essential Elements* scaffold. The portions of the *Essential Elements* scaffold that are most supported by these taxonomies are listed on page 9.

The taxonomies of educational objectives are tools that middle-level educators learned about as undergraduates and graduate students. The taxonomies, and the domains they encompass, provide detailed guidance to middle-level programs. This

edition of “Research at a Glance” will briefly review some of the educational taxonomies that have been in use in effective middle schools for some time. In the next issue of *In Transition*, some “newer” taxonomies will be reviewed – powerful tools for a standards-based middle level classroom.

There are a variety of taxonomies, each covering a part of the larger puzzle of learning. No single taxonomy is sufficient. Bloom’s Taxonomy for the Cognitive Domain is arguably the most frequently used taxonomy. Over-reliance on that single taxonomy ignores much of what is important for schools and classrooms to focus on for the comprehensive well-being of early adolescents. That is why this article will briefly visit Bloom’s and some of the other less common taxonomies. The other taxonomies, in conjunction with the cognitive taxonomy, can inform a comprehensive approach to the setting of objectives in our middle level programs. The reason that these taxonomies are useful is because their deliberate and overt application to a middle-level program and curriculum can result in an array of learning opportunities that meet all of the needs of early adolescents: the intellectual *and* developmental needs. A good middle level program should attend to all of the domains outlined included in these taxonomies. If any of these domains are absent from your program, then perhaps something is missing for your students.

## Essential Element 1: Philosophy and Mission

A philosophy and mission that reflect the intellectual and developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents (youth 10-14 years of age).

*Every young adolescent deserves a school that values academic achievement and personal development and provides a supportive environment...*

The middle-level educational program has a purpose beyond linking the elementary grades and the high school. Its basic aims are to educate and nurture. It has a culture of collective and shared responsibility. To be successful, it must attend to both the intellectual development and the personal needs of young adolescents. The philosophy and mission of a standards-focused middle-level school or program must reflect a set of shared beliefs.

The school and staff within the school must commit to:

- 1.1** Developing the whole child, intellectually and academically, personally and socially, physically, emotionally, and ethically.
- 1.3** Accepting — individually and collectively — responsibility for the educational and personal development of each and every student.
- 1.4** Ensuring for each student a safe, inviting, trusting, and mutually-respectful learning environment that offers both physical and psychological safety.

## Essential Element 2: Educational Program

An educational program that is comprehensive, challenging, purposeful, integrated, relevant, and standards-based.

*Every young adolescent needs a challenging, standards-based course of study that is comprehensive, integrated, and relevant.*

A standards-focused middle-level educational program:

- 2.1** Emphasizes not only intellectual

development but also personal, social, physical, and ethical development.

## Essential Element 4: Classroom Instruction

Classroom instruction appropriate to the needs and characteristics of young adolescents provided by skilled and knowledgeable teachers.

*Every young adolescent requires skilled and caring teachers who have a thorough understanding of their subject(s) and of the students they teach.*

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

Successful middle-level teachers in a standards-focused school:

- 4.2** Provide instruction that is standards-based, challenging, rigorous, and purposeful.
- 4.4** Have a deep understanding of their subject matter, of different approaches to student learning, and of diverse teaching techniques.
- 4.6** Use a range of successful, research-based teaching strategies that are developmentally and cognitively appropriate, matching instruction to the students' varied learning styles and different intelligences.
- 4.7** Involve students in their learning, encouraging them to contribute to their learning experiences, to make choices, to explore, to question, to experience, to learn, to grow, to develop social, interpersonal and leadership skills in addition to academic proficiency.
- 1.6** Providing each student with a variety of learning experiences that are academically challenging, developmentally appropriate, and personally relevant in order for each of them to make informed educational and personal decisions.

### Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Cognitive Domain

Benjamin Bloom (1956) led the development of a taxonomy that was designed to guide educational objectives for lessons. The taxonomy for the cognitive domain is widely used in education, particularly the first steps in the taxonomy. The general goal is to try and move students to work at the “higher” levels within the taxonomy. Using particular verbs, questions and prompts can be formulated to ensure that students are working at the desired level within the taxonomy.

### Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Affective Domain

Middle-level programs that have embraced the Essential Elements and best practices recognize that students succeed only when we help them academically and personally. This scheme, the Affective Domain, can guide the effort of middle-level educators to assist students emotionally and socially. The taxonomy is hierarchical and cumulative. Middle-level programs should include deliberate programmatic goals for these domains and should be working to help students progress in their thinking through the levels. Many middle-level advocates would argue that the impacts of objectives in this taxonomy are most

Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Cognitive Domain	
Domain	Description
Knowledge	Recall or recognition of basic facts or information
Comprehension	Understanding enough to organize or arrange information
Application	Applying previously learned concepts to a new situation
Analysis	Thinking critically and deep; making and supporting inferences and conclusions
Synthesis	Using concepts and understandings to create a new or alternative solution
Evaluation	Making and defending judgments according to established or new criteria

Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Affective Domain	
Domain	Description
Receiving	Passively paying attention and being aware
Responding	Actively participating or responding in some way to a stimulus
Valuing	Attaching some value or worth to something.
Organizing	Taking different ideas and values and reorganizing them in a way that is meaningful to the individual
Characterizing	Values or beliefs that have become a part of the individual, evident through behavior

Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Psychomotor Domain	
Domain	Description
Perception	Ability to use the senses to guide physical activity
Set	Being ready to act or respond
Guided Response	Attempting or imitating an action
Mechanism	Habitual action with some skill
Complex Overt	Performing action to a skilled degree
Response	with confidence and automaticity
Adaptation	Effectively applying skills to different circumstances
Origination	Replacing the learned skill or action with an original one

important and reflect our very natures. Note: while the Cognitive Domain is often referred to as Blooms' Taxonomy, this scheme is sometimes referred to as Krathwohl's Taxonomy (1973). This label is dated since Krathwohl recently led a team that has reformulated the older taxonomies into a newer scheme, which will be described in the next edition of *In Transition*.

### Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Psychomotor Domain

The focus of this taxonomy is on the development of motor skills. Simpson (1972) led the efforts to articulate this taxonomy. Actually, there are a number of psychomotor taxonomies that have been developed; the scheme presented here is Simpson's.

Williams' Taxonomy of Divergent Thinking & Feeling	
Domain	Description
Fluency	The ability to generate different ideas or solutions
Flexibility	Taking ideas and changing or adapting them for different solutions
Originality	Generating new ideas that depart from traditional solutions
Elaboration	Building on previously identified possibilities
Risk Taking	Experimenting with new challenges or ideas
Complexity	Multi-tasking or dealing with competing priorities; finding order in chaos
Curiosity	Hypothesizing or following a hunch
Imagination	Going beyond the known; visualizing possibilities

### Williams' Taxonomy of Divergent Thinking & Feeling

This is another cognitive-oriented taxonomy that is geared more to creativity than the traditional cognitive taxonomy (Rutherford, 2002). It also has some affective elements included in it. Like the other taxonomies, it is hierarchical.

Does your middle-level school or program deliberately include objectives aimed at these domains? It should. It is important to examine (or reexamine) these taxonomies in that they can

serve as a good check of your school's/team's/classroom's practices. A good middle level program will attend to all of the domains outlined in these taxonomies. If any of these domains are absent from your program than something is missing for your students.

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## Share YOUR Best Practices.



NYSMSA is interested in collecting examples of Best Practices from middle-level teachers. These will be distributed in paper publications and posted on NYSMSA's website.

SHARE the wealth!

Submit your experiences to [editor@nysmsa.org](mailto:editor@nysmsa.org).

# NYSMSA's 2006-2007 Award Winners

For exemplary contributions in support of middle-level education

## Connie Toepfer Award for Leadership

David Payton ①

NYSED Supervisor of Middle-Level Education, retired

## Ross M. Burkhardt Educator Award

Bruce MacBain, Principal ②

Moravia Middle School • Moravia NY

•

Miryam Matulic-Keller, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction  
East Irondequoit Central School District • Rochester NY

## President's Award

Robert Bennett, Chancellor  
New York State Board of Regents

•

John Nori, Director of Instructional Leadership Resources  
National Association of Secondary School Principals



*Miryam Matulic-Keller with  
NYSMSA President Jeannette Stern*

## Schools to Watch Award

Barker Road Middle School • Michael Pero, Principal ③

Calkins Road Middle School • Scott Reinhart, Principal ④

Moravia Middle School • Bruce MacBain, Principal ②

Oliver W. Winch Middle School • Mark Fish, Principal ⑤

Sayville Middle School • Walter Schartner, Principal ⑥

Twelve Corners Middle School • Terry Quinn, Principal ⑦

Victor Junior High School • Carl Christensen, Principal ⑧





## Do We Really Need Another Wake-Up Call?

J. Thomas Kane

September 29, 2006: a 15-year-old student shot and killed the Weston School principal in Cazenovia, Wisconsin.

A 15-year-old boy who prosecutors said was the mastermind of a failed plot to go on a shooting spree at Township High School in Camden County, New Jersey, was sentenced to six years in state prison (Asbury Park Press, October 8, 2006).

Nearly all students returned to classes October 10, 2006 at a middle school in Joplin, Missouri, where a 13-year-old boy had fired a shot from an assault rifle into the ceiling the day before, then left without injuring anyone after his gun jammed (Education Week, October 18, 2006).

Schools in Virginia, Nebraska, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon and Wisconsin were closed or locked down the week of October 2, 2006 because of threats of violence or guns on campus (Asbury Park Press, October 8, 2006).

Since the 1992-1993 school year, shootings that occurred at or near schools number 323 (Education Week, October 11, 2006).

In an earlier study of school shootings, this author noted that the teen shooters were either in middle school or just out of middle school. This gives us professional middle-level educators pause to reflect. If we have incorporated **all** the tenets of middle-level education as poignantly indicated in the work of Robert Felner and associates (1997), then we have two built-in safety nets to “capture” early adolescents and have no young teen fall between the cracks: a well-functioning team

of teachers and a vibrant advisory program. The teen shooters slipped by parents, teachers, guidance counselors and school administrators without anyone noticing their desperate needs.

*Turning Points 2000* minces no words when it calls for “hiring middle-school teachers who are EXPERT at teaching early adolescents.” Middle-school teachers need to have a refined understanding of the dynamics of early adolescence. Such knowledge is the foundation on which teaching strategies, classroom management and interdisciplinary experiences are based.

Middle-level education is getting hammered for a lack of academic achievement and for curriculum that is not rigorous, challenging and integrative. No Child Left Behind and its focus on test scores fires yet another shot at middle schools’ lack of academic success. But as NMSA’s *Success in the Middle* states: “The national movement to ‘leave no child behind’ has largely bypassed students in the middle.”

In the frenzy to address NCLB mandates, we are liable to create lopsided middle schools. Some ill-informed folks have pontificated that we middle-school folks have over-emphasized the affective needs of early adolescents and have not sufficiently addressed their cognitive needs; hence the mad rush to the cognitive, lessening the addressing of affective needs. The key word is BALANCE. We must regularly reflect on the **balance** of the cognitive and affective needs of our students. Is there a pervasive balance in our school, in our classroom, in our team efforts?

Put aside addressing the affective needs, put aside refining team functioning, put aside revitalizing an advisory program and for sure early adolescents will fall between the cracks. Lose them between 10 and 15 years of age and we won't get them back and sadly we can prepare ourselves to read about more teen school shooters.

**J. Thomas Kane** (tifkane@aol.com) is a Past-President of NYSMSA and currently serves as New Jersey Middle School Association's Director of Professional Development.

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## NYSMSA's 27<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE

OCTOBER 18-20, 2007  
Saratoga Springs, New York

# Betting on the Middle

## Featuring:

### Thursday, October 18

School Visitations  
Full-Day Pre-Conference Workshops  
Banquet with Keynote Speaker

### Friday, October 19

General Session with Keynote Speaker  
Practitioner Workshops  
Feature Presentations  
Trade Exhibit

### Saturday, October 20

Breakfast with Champions  
with Linda Tilton\*

Individual and group registration materials will be available online by May 1, 2007.

Visit [www.NYSMSA.org](http://www.NYSMSA.org) for additional details.

\* Linda Tilton is the author of *The Teacher's Toolbox for Differentiating Instruction — 700 Strategies, Tips, Tools and Techniques and Inclusion, A Fresh Look: Practical Strategies to Help All Students Succeed*. She is known for her practical and realistic strategies to help every learner succeed.



# Lea's Lessons

Lea Macdonald

## Middle School: The 8<sup>th</sup> Natural Wonder

*Last October, at the New York State Middle School Associations' annual conference in Niagara Falls, New York, I was honored to give the keynote at the Thursday night banquet. The theme of the conference, for those who weren't there, was the belief that the middle school philosophy and best practice at the middle level have made a positive impact in the lives of our young adolescents. I would like to share with you some of the thoughts I shared that night with middle-level educators about the kids we teach, the strides we have made to make a difference, and the future of the middle school.*

I am honored to be here tonight talking about one of my favorite topics, middle school and the 8<sup>th</sup> natural wonder, the kids we teach. I feel privileged to be in the company of so many middle-level educators, many teachers who for some unknown reason find themselves teaching in middle school yet another year, and a sampling of first-year middle school teachers who are excited to be attending this conference, but aren't quite sure about teaching and surviving in the halls of "hormone heaven." I'm so glad that you decided to join me tonight and I hope my words will energize and inspire you to maintain a clear vision of where we're going, a passion for the children we teach, and the willingness to take action to keep the fires burning at the middle level. In this age of high stakes testing ("No Child Left Untested") and accountability ("No Teacher Left Unexamined"), it's difficult to remember what really matters. Middle schools have always been about possibility; the promise of what could be, the possibility that

junior high schools with 10-14 year olds could be different, better, and more responsive places for young teens. From the late 60's when there were few schools that called themselves middle schools in New York State, to literally thousands today, the middle school has a name and life of its own. Though there are still folks who have yet to embrace the ideology of middle school, these past forty years have been productive in middle-level reform and growth.

This evening I want to speak to you as a 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and as a fellow colleague working in New York State. I want to focus on the following aspects of teaching in the middle. First, who are these kids we teach? We need to stop and remember why we work with young adolescents; the laughter, the vulnerability, the promise of the future. The recognition, understanding and celebration of young adolescence have long been a hallmark of the middle-school movement. Middle schools have pushed to keep kids at the front and center of all we do. We have to push more! Second, relationships at the middle school level are important. One certain truth we have always known is one we must embrace again with more passion. Relationships matter. The more intimate the school, the more successful in getting students engaged and learning. We need to build communities of learners at each and every middle school in New York. According to *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*: "Raising student achievement requires more than choosing the right instructional strategies and classroom curriculum to meet student needs. If schools are centers of learning, they must be relationship-based, student-focused places." Third, meaningful engaged learning is the critical piece for student success. When students understand the relevance of what they are

studying, they are more motivated to learn. Relevance is rigor and our students must see meaning to invest in the process.

Lastly, middle schools are the gateway to the future. It is our responsibility to ensure that each child has a place at the table. Teaching today means facing a world of children different from the ones we faced decades ago. We need to differentiate curriculum to meet the needs of the diverse learners in our classrooms. All students deserve a first class seat.

Here is the wonderfully complex young adolescent. Fiercely independent, yet yearning for meaningful relationships; revealing emotional vulnerability, yet deeply self-protective; capable of complex analytical thinking, yet disorganized to the point of chronic forgetfulness; compassionate and altruistic in the desire to make the world a better place, yet capable of striking out cruelly at fellow classmates; able to respect the needs of others, yet displaying a self-centeredness that is a far cry from the 9 year old we knew a few years ago. These young adolescents worry us and astonish us at the same time. As the people responsible for teaching middle-level students, we know that these contradictions are developmentally necessary and that some struggle is normal. Still we wonder how to balance academic support and social support to encourage and guide children during these years. The emotional, social and cognitive complexity of the students with whom we work coupled with the external pressure to meet standardized testing benchmarks is a daunting challenge.

Why were we drawn to the middle school in the first place? For some of us, it was probably the only job left. Seriously, some of us gravitated to the middle to heal a wounded adolescence. Seventh grade for me was a time of vulnerability, full of insecurity and tears. I always knew that someday I would teach seventh grade and make my classroom a safe haven for all. Adolescence is also one of the most fascinating and complex transitions in the life span: a time of accelerated growth and change

second only to infancy; a time of expanding horizons, self-discovery, and emerging independence; a time of metamorphosis from childhood to adulthood. The events of this crucially formative phase can shape an individual's entire life course and thus the future of our society. Many of the problems of adolescence begin to surface in the turning point years of 10 through 14. It is the phase when young people often take the wrong path and make decisions that can have lifelong consequences. Teaching young adolescents offers a unique window of opportunity to guide children on the right path. In the words of David Hamburg, former president of the Carnegie Corporation: "The problems of adolescence deal with deep and moving experiences. They center on a fateful time in the life course when poorly informed decisions can have lifelong consequences. The tortuous passage from childhood to adulthood requires our highest attention, our understanding, and a new level of thoughtful commitment." Adolescence, in fact, is the last phase of life in which society has reasonably ready access to virtually the entire population, so the potential for constructive influence is great.

In this era of testing and accountability, test scores are all that matter. Or are they? Could our preoccupation with test scores be producing classroom conditions that actually undermine student learning? When tests become high-stakes, teachers naturally focus their attention on the skills the tests measure, leaving less time to engage students in collaborative learning with teachers and their peers. Learning requires effort and one of the best predictors of students' effort and engagement in school is the relationship they have with their teachers.

John Dewey said in 1920, "Educators must first be human and only after that professional." Teachers can enhance student's motivation to learn by first fulfilling fundamental emotional needs. Relationships in the classroom have an impact on achievement. According to brain research, the brain does not naturally separate emotions from cognition. When we develop

one-on-one relationships we enter the realm of learning as well. If learning in schools meets students' emotional needs, they will more likely engage in the learning process. School becomes a motivating place to be. John Dewey also said, "Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Founding father John Lounsbury says "there is more to teaching than organized instruction." Our tweeners embrace us with a fervor that escapes the older high school student we may have once aspired to teach. In their search for acceptance and affirmation, they appreciate with keen emotion our warmth, compassion, and empathy. For some kids we are the only stable adult in their lives and we can make a difference.

Finally, I believe that everyone has a basic need for love and belonging. In a world of broken commitments, a strong supportive relationship is important to students. While we cannot control the students' environments outside of the classroom, we can control their environment for 8 hours a day. It might be our best chance to make the world a better place; in a caring classroom, relationships based on shared respect, trust, and high expectations are nurtured among every person in the classroom. Never forget how you treat them and what takes place in your class.

In the last decade the middle school movement has come under a magnifying glass. Although the middle school concept is now effectively embedded in thousands of schools in America, Canada, Europe, Asia and Australia, the middle school concept is continuously under siege. As teachers, we must be willing to join in the race to keep the middle school a dominant feature of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The heart of the middle school reform movement is to build developmentally responsive learning communities in which professionals acknowledge the important link between curriculum and instruction and provide a caring, safe environment that matches the ways in which young adolescents learn best.

We live in a time in which a revolution in education is occurring. Through brain research and technology we have unlocked many of the reasons why some children experience so much difficulty in learning. Dr. Mel Levine says all brains are wired differently. We know more about effective teaching practices than at any other time in history. Through technological advances we have the whole world as our resource base. Additionally teachers are finally being empowered to make the choices that affect their classrooms. Although we live in an age in which vast amounts of information must be assimilated, synthesized and communicated, many classrooms in the United States still rely on rote memorization of dates, places, and facts. We focus on activities best left to computers. It is no wonder that we are losing our students and that they enter a world ill-prepared for the information explosion ahead. Imagine a classroom that prepares our students for the next century. Students are being taught in an environment conducive to maximum equitable learning. They are being taught relevant, meaningful information that has a connection both to the world in which they live currently and to the world in which they will live as adults. Students are taking an active role in their learning because life is not a spectator sport. Specifically let's look at 5 challenges we face as educators as we prepare our young adolescents for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

1. High level of support for achievement: Teachers and students must strive for quality work. Students know what they must do in order to be successful and they are given the tools to help make success possible. Higher order thinking skills are developed when students are given meaningful, challenging work. Time on task is only important if the task is meaningful. All students deserve to be pushed to their limits to make sense of their world and maximize their capacity as learners.

2. Depth of learning is emphasized: *Breaking Ranks* states "They barely get wet as they swim

hurriedly through an ocean of material.” We need to uncover, not cover, the curriculum

3. Connections are made to the real world and between the disciplines: William Glasser says “most students can be taught anything as long as it is relevant to their world.” Excessive specialization is the enemy of growth, vitality, insight, health, strength or flexibility.

4. De-tracking: Tracks in middle schools prevent equitable learning opportunities for many students. When *Turning Points* published its recommendations in 1989, the Council stated that “tracking was one of the most destructive of current practices.” Educators need to build foundations for more complex learning for all students. If we build more inequitable opportunities, the urgent warning of *Turning Points* might become a reality. As the youth population left behind grows, and opportunities in the economy for poorly educated workers diminish, we face the specter of a divided society; one affluent and well-educated, the other poorer and ill-educated. We face an America at odds with itself.

5. Celebrate strengths: If we want to prepare kids for adulthood, one of the most important things we can do is to celebrate their strengths, those assets with which they are going to find meaning in life and be able to make contributions. For the most part, adults who are leading worthy lives are doing so by mobilizing their strengths and affinities. What we should strive for is a consonance between a student’s education and his future career.

6. Collaborative environment: To be successful in the job market, students must be able to articulate what they know and listen to the ideas and opinions of others. Sizer says, “The real world demands collaboration, the collective solving of problems...learning to get along to function effectively in a group is essential.

Above all else, we as teachers need to be dedicated to our profession. We need to take pride in being a teacher. We need to continue to

wave the flag and push harder to preserve the middle school philosophy. We must remain committed to creating a program that has high expectations within the context of curriculum and instruction that meets the needs of young adolescents. As middle-level educators we can all make a difference by remembering that we’re all about kids. We need to remind people that we are all about helping kids deal with self-identity, helping them explore ideas and possible careers, challenging them to become life long learners, helping them conquer their fears and overcome their anxieties, and nurturing them towards becoming autonomous individuals. Although our purpose is not to raise test scores but to uncover the curriculum, good middle-level practices will accomplish both tasks as they meet state and national standards. Although we did not join this movement to prepare middle-level students for the high school, an exemplary middle school that incorporates developmentally responsive practices will also accomplish that goal. Thornton Wilder once wrote that “every good and excellent thing stands moment by moment on the razor’s edge of danger and must be fought for.” We can’t give up the race. The middle school is not finished; it’s a work in progress. The school in the middle will always face important challenges. Above all we need to remember that our children, with their boundless energy, imbue our daily lives with excitement, surprise, and an almost eccentric quality of diversity. So while we wonder at times how we will survive the complex demands of middle-level teaching, those moments are balanced by times of exhilaration and elation, with small miracles indicating our success.

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**Lea Macdonald** (leamiddle@att.net) is a social studies teacher and curriculum coordinator at Pleasantville Middle School; 40 Romer Avenue, Pleasantville NY 10570. She served as NYSMSA Region VI Director from 1996-2003.



## The Role of Good Evidence in the Essential Elements: Schools to Watch Process

Mark Fish

The Essential Elements: Schools to Watch (EE: STW) application process requires that schools develop and provide evidence that they are academically excellent, responsive, socially equitable, and organized to ensure continuous improvement. The process requires the collection and reporting of supportive data that is both clear and understandable. In other words, exemplary schools considering the application process must understand what they are doing to integrate the Essential Elements into their middle-level program, collect proof that connects what is happening in the building to the Essential Elements, and then communicate their findings in writing. Additionally, if your school is selected for a visitation, a team of middle-level experts will follow the documentation provided in the application to substantiate objectively that what you say is happening is actually occurring throughout your school.

As the principal of the Oliver W. Winch Middle School in South Glens Falls, New York, I was looking for a way to reflect on our middle-level program after five years as a grade 6, 7, and 8 middle school. At a meeting of the New York State Middle Level Liaisons, I saw a presentation on the EE: STW Program as it was being developed in New York State. I decided to learn more about the New York State initiative and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform. A review of the process made it very apparent to me that one of the first items a school interested in applying must do is to form an EE: STW Team. This application process is not a project that can be adequately done in isolation by the building principal or even a team of administrators. A successful building team brings the passion, dedication, and com-

mitment of the entire school to the process. The building team should be large enough to be representative of the school. The most critical job of the team is to gather supporting evidence. Early on, the team should review the application process, establish a timeline, and divide the responsibilities for evidence collection and reporting. It is a highly collaborative process.

In completing the application process, our EE: STW Building Team divided the responsibilities and worked in groups comprised of two or three teachers to collect and report good evidence. The team met periodically to report on progress and to make sure that assigned tasks were being accomplished with continuity across all groups.

Section A of the application required the collection of basic supporting data on things like school information, demographics, suspensions, New York State Assessment results, master scheduling, and Academic Intervention Services. Along with the basic reporting of this information, we utilized attachments such as our suspension policy data, our pure block flexible schedule document, and a list of courses taught at each grade level as a supplemental opportunity to make our case with good supporting facts.

Section B of the application, The EE: STW Self-Study Rating Scale, is really the backbone of the entire application. This is the reflective tool that had originally attracted my attention as a means of reflecting on our progress as a middle school. In South Glens Falls, we thought it was important to involve everyone in this process. Meetings were established with small groups of grade-level teams and teachers to

explain the scale and to encourage participation. Non-instructional employees had an opportunity to participate as well. The scale was also introduced to parents at a Home-School Association meeting. All stakeholders were asked to log into a district computer, access the rating scale, report on a 1-4 rubric on implementation of the Essential Elements, and, most importantly, to provide supporting evidence as to why they gave an item a 1, 2, 3, or a 4. At the Oliver W. Winch Middle School, we had a very high percentage of participation in this survey that took about an hour for each person to complete. The evidence was collected in both numerical and comment form and was compiled into a spreadsheet and incorporated into the final application.

In Section C of the application, our sub-groups teams reviewed the evidence collected in the Self-Study Rating Scale to develop narratives on academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, organizational structure and process, and future plans. All of this valuable information/feedback had to be presented in ten pages or less in the application. The sub-group teams reviewed the data from the spreadsheet and then went out to their colleagues to gather additional evidence in support of the implementation of the Essential Elements. This evidence was synthesized into a fact-based report communicating what we do and how we do it at the Oliver W. Winch Middle School in South Glens Falls.

Section D is simply the New York State School Report Card information. At this point, the team is ready to put the application together for submission by the deadline.

As a reviewer for the EE: STW Program this year, I had the opportunity to critique a completed application and to look at the evidence provided by another school in support of its implementation of the Essential Elements. The review process provided a different perspective for me on the importance of providing good evidence in the process. In the review, I had to

look at the evidence provided and make note of the positives, negatives, and things that would need to be checked if a visitation was granted. In a summary rating sheet, I was asked to note strengths, concerns, and recommendations on academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, organizational structure and process, and future plans for the school making application. I was also asked to give a recommendation on a visitation for further evaluation of the applying school's middle level program. As a reviewer, I was asked to look at all the evidence and determine what was good evidence, what was missed the mark, and what needed a closer look. On a successful application, "good" evidence is clearly communicated in an organized fashion and easy to find it in the presentation.

During the application review, I was able to see how the whole EE: STW Process works. A school follows the steps and provides specific evidence that they are indeed an exemplary school worthy of the EE: STW designation based on evidence provided in support of the essential elements implementation. A team of trained reviewers looks over the evidence provided in the application and determines if there is enough "good" evidence there for a team of evaluators to be dispatched. During visitations, the team of evaluators' uses the script developed in the application review process to make sure that the applying school is really doing what they say they are doing. Specific evidence is essential in every phase of this process.

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**Mark Fish** (fish@nysmsa.org) is principal of Oliver W. Winch Middle School; 99 Hudson Street, South Glens Falls NY 12803; (518) 792-5891. He also serves as NYSMSA Region V Acting Director.



## Victor Junior High School: A Snapshot of a School to Watch

Pat DiGristina and Regina Muscarella

*To teach*

*To learn*

*To support*

*To improve*

*To achieve*

— The mission of Victor Central Schools; the heart of Victor Junior High School

We have always known that Victor Junior High is a special place, with a caring faculty, an involved administration, engaged students and supportive parents. Working here is a privilege and a joy. But now, our secret is out. Not only are we labeled a Middle-Level Support School and a High Performing/Gap Closing School, we now have another moniker – A School to Watch, and people are watching. What makes us so special?

The Victor Central School District, in Northwestern Ontario County, is home to a myriad of families from different homes, lifestyles and means. But when the bell rings at Victor Junior High, everyone is the same. Our dynamic learning environment celebrates these differences; academic excellence is paramount, diversity encouraged and equity pivotal.

Victor Junior High is a learning community with high expectations for all. Our vision statement, posted in every room, reminds us of what is important, and this philosophy drives our day-to-day activities and lessons. With a student population of six hundred plus and growing, the advantages of teaming become very obvious. The three-team approach at each grade level allows for a more intimate learning environment, and encourages rapport and relationships to flourish. With common team meetings, cross-

curricular units are planned. Common core class periods provide for flexible, creative implementation. Students are able to make connections from one core subject to another, and realize their interdependence.

Academics is central to any school. Here at Victor, we recognize that as times and needs change, our curriculum must change with it. All areas of curriculum are reviewed every five years, and are aligned to the Essential Elements of Middle Level Education and to the New York State Standards. Teaching strategies are refined and redefined to mesh with these revisions. All teachers in the junior high are skilled in differentiation of instruction, and employ a variety of strategies in their classrooms. These strategies recognize multiple intelligences, as well as ability levels. In addition, accelerated courses and co-taught blended classes ensure respectful and challenging learning for all. Working in this environment makes us confident that we are meeting the needs of all our students in an ever-changing world.

Helping our kids be the best they can be is important to us here at Victor. Providing extra support might be just what they need. Reading and Study Skills and Math lab are scheduled in the day to increase performance and confidence for students in need. Our 504 coordinator works one-on-one with her students and their teachers, helping them achieve their goals. In addition, enrichment classes round out the students' schedules by providing opportunities to explore both academic and non-academic interests, while allowing teachers to share hobbies and passions outside of their academic areas. To promote and encourage learning throughout the

year, we offer Summer Academy to bridge the June-September gap by helping kids maintain their skills. In addition, summer enrichment classes bring kids back to the campus for high-interest learning fun. This more relaxed setting helps to forge relationships with students and their teachers, paving the way for lifelong learning.

It is no surprise that junior high kids love involvement, so this is a perfect time for us to foster, nurture and develop involved citizens. At Victor, we strive to be a community, and like all communities, we need to work together. Through activities such as Student Council, Builders' Club, Youth to Youth and Peer Helpers, students learn the importance of working together to make communities better places. This also provides teachers an extra opportunity to see kids, and to be seen, in different roles. Club involvement also acts as a springboard to provide opportunities to work in a larger community — the town, the country and the world. From preparing and delivering food baskets to needy families in the Victor community, to giving financial support to both our sister school

in Pass Christian, Mississippi, and the victims of the tsunami, Victor Junior High students realize that they have an impact far beyond the classroom walls. As teachers, it is gratifying to see our kids realize that they can and do make a difference in all their communities.

Victor Junior High is a special place. We are proud of our school, its programs and its kids. But we realize that all good things need to be tended and nurtured, and while we have positive and influential recognition, we cannot become complacent. We must continue to modify and adjust, tweak and edit, review and assess every aspect of our school and its programs so that Victor Junior High will continue to be a School to Watch.

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**Pat DiGristina** and **Regina Muscarella** are seventh grade English Language Arts teachers at Victor Junior High School; 953 High Street, Victor NY 14564; (585) 924-3252.

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

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## Strengthening Positive School Culture through STW Application and Site Visitation

Terry Quinn

Have you often said to yourself, I think we are a great school and it is a shame that others don't know what we are doing, or, we think we are a really good school but we have a few areas where we still need to improve? I thought this about Twelve Corners Middle School two years ago. There is a way to find out and a way to let everyone in your school and community know as well.

Fill out a Schools to Watch application with the faculty and staff in your building. The application highlights four core areas where middle schools should thrive: Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity and Organization Structure and Processes. The application materials can be found at [www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org).

We filled out a STW self-rating application and found out specifically as a school what great things we were doing and the areas that still needed improvement. The excitement built as the staff looked at the many examples we could provide on the application that showed specific evidence of how we were implementing strategies that address the four core areas. A collaborative decision was made to finish the application and apply to be a School to Watch.

As part of the process we hosted a site visitation. Three principals from middle schools across the State visited our school for two days to verify the evidence provided in the application. The principals met with representatives from our high school, elementary school, board of education members, team leaders, parents, and students and also visited many classrooms. Everyone that was interviewed gave positive feedback to our site visitors. This was all done at very little cost to the district. At the end of the

process, we received feedback about the good things they saw at our school and areas where we could still improve. I had the opportunity to meet with the team during and after their visit. I think everyone came away with a positive view of the process and an in-depth dialogue about good practices in middle-level education.

Since receiving the award last year, a great deal has occurred to transform people's feelings and impressions about our school. We have received recognition from the New York State Middle Schools Association, National Forum on Middle Level Reform and from our local, county and State government officials. It has focused on the positive aspects of our middle school and let the faculty, staff, Board of Education, and community celebrate our success.

Constant improvement is our goal at Twelve Corners Middle School. As we face the challenges of more testing, less instructional time, rigorous standards and a changing population of students, we should be sure not to forget that we also must address the social, emotional and physical needs of our students. Our school is great because we address all areas of development important to children of this age and keep high and appropriate achievement levels for all. I recommend that each middle school in New York State rate itself on how it is meeting the needs of its students by filling out the Essential Elements rating scales provided by NYSMSA or the STW application rating scales. Both can be found at [www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org).

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**Terry Quinn** ([quinn@nysmsa.org](mailto:quinn@nysmsa.org)) is principal of Twelve Corners Middle School; 2643 Elmwood Avenue, Rochester NY 14618; (585) 242-5100. He also serves as NYSMSA Region I Director.

## The Schools to Watch Program: Site Visitors Benefit, Too

Jo Slovak



Many schools drift into some form of isolationism over the years and miss opportunities associated with sharing ideas and best practices. The Schools to Watch program is a two-way street. It not only helps district personnel and stakeholders benefit from a self-evaluation and review by outside professionals, but it also provides the site visitors with opportunities to view and experience best practices not implemented in their own districts. Sharing philosophies, sharing practices, sharing frustrations and successes lead to new ideas and renewed energy. That is how I felt after a Schools to Watch site visit last spring to Sayville Middle School. We had opportunities to share philosophies, practices, frustrations, failures and successes. All parties came away from these conversations with a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, enthusiasm, and renewed energy.

One benefit to being a site visitor is seeing the school through everyone's eyes — teacher, administrator, board member, parent, and student. These discussions helped articulate the image the team had of the district and complete the picture the self-study had given us. The mirror we had held up to teachers reflected the same beliefs and philosophies when held up to the other stakeholders. This is a vital factor because, if a school is to succeed, everyone needs to be on the same page. It reinforced the importance of having a shared vision, not just in the middle school but also in the district. The middle school concept cannot be successfully implemented and maintained if people don't a) believe in what they are doing, and b) understand how vital everyone's support is to the continued

success of the school. While not every teacher had the same degree of commitment, they all believed in what they were doing, and their actions reflected those beliefs. The total support and commitment the superintendent and board members had for their middle school was unmistakable. Those conversations energized me and reinforced just how crucial such support is to the success of an entire school system, not just a middle school.

Another benefit to being a site visitor comes from the relationship one forms as a site team. Again there are multiple opportunities for discussions and sharing with people who share the same beliefs but have different experiences and perspectives. Even though one of us came from a small, rural upstate school, and another came from a large, urban downstate school, and another came from a private city school, we all shared the same belief — middle-level education is a vital component to a successful school district. Hearing how we each have implemented the Essential Elements of an Effective Middle School or how we have handled various problems or concerns proved to be one of the best professional development experiences I have had.

Gathering, digesting, synthesizing, and summarizing our findings into a coherent report was challenging yet gratifying. These activities provided their own benefits. There was an opportunity to examine, evaluate, and explain our findings with one another as we compared our information to the criteria developed by the National Schools to Watch Program (strong academics, respect for stu-

dents' needs and interests, equal access to a high quality education, and support for school improvement). This "mental exercise" took our knowledge of the Essential Elements of an Effective Middle School, the Schools to Watch criteria, and the application of the rubric to a deeper level.

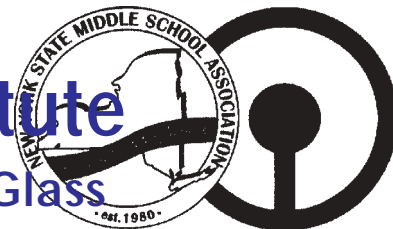
And probably the last benefit to being a site visitor, for me at least, is coming away

from the experience with the hope that I can convince our middle school principal to take that leap of faith and apply to be a School to Watch!

---

**Jo Slovak** is the Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment for the Honeoye Central School District; (585) 229-5171.

## Fifth Annual Middle-Level Institute at The Corning Museum of Glass



You are invited to join your middle-level colleagues from across New York State at the 2007 NYSMSA / CMOG Middle-Level Institute on...

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Session A: *The Teacher as Writer: Creating Models, Engaging Students, Producing Results* (Ross Burkhardt)

Session B: *NYS Assessment Data: Using Data to Inform Middle-Level STUDENTS about Their Academic Progress* (Denise Anthony)

Session C: *Building ENGAGING Communities: Developing Social-Emotional Abilities AND Increasing Achievement in the Middle* (Dr. Paul Vermette and Cindy Kline)

Session D: *Exploring the Possibilities: Creative Solutions to Middle School Challenges* (Martha Evans)

Session E: *Making Writing Manageable for Middle-Level Students: 6 Traits of Writing* (Karen Adams)

Session F: *Middle-Level Leadership That Works* (Jeff Craig)

For complete detailed information, including presenter biographies, go to  
[www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org)

# Have Cooperative Pairs Diagnosis Pre-test Weaknesses and Develop a Prescription for Improvement

Ed Daniels, NBCT



How do doctors help make their patients better? They ask questions or conduct tests to diagnose what's ailing them. Then they prescribe a course of action patients need to follow to get well.

How can your students help make their grades better? They act like doctors, as well, analyzing their "test knowledge" shortcomings in Cooperative Diagnosis Pairs, then devising and following "prescription plans" that address them.

Cooperative Diagnosis Pairs can be used to get ready for any test or assessment but are particularly effective for preparing for tests that require knowledge of terms, names, definitions, or the like. Below, are some suggested steps for using *Cooperative Diagnosis Pairs* to prepare for a spelling and vocabulary test.

**Step 1: Select the spelling and vocabulary words you want your students to know.** These words can be from spelling and vocabulary lists, or words students themselves identify from their assigned readings as alien or unfamiliar.

**Step 2: Give the students some time to study the spelling and vocabulary words you've selected.** Some teachers have students study for homework, others allow students time in class. It's your choice.

**Step 3: Set up your Cooperative Diagnosis Pairs.** Pairs can be set up in a variety of ways using a random pairing method such as count offs or through more teacher structured methods. When possible, weaker and stronger students should be paired together.

**Step 4: Have Cooperative Diagnosis Pairs give each other a practice test on the spelling and vocabulary words.** This is simpler than it sounds. One member says the spelling word while the other writes it and its definition down. Once all the words have been asked, they swap roles and repeat the process.

**Step 5: Tell students to review their answers individually and assess their "degree of certainty" for each spelling word and accompanying definition.** Students should place a "+" next to each word or definition they are absolutely sure of, a "-" next to each word or definition they don't know, and a "?" next to each word or definition they are somewhat, but not definitely, certain of.

**Step 6: Ask partners to switch papers and check each other's spelling and definitions.** Partners should work together here, each taking a turn correctly spelling the words aloud while checking his/her partner's paper for errors.

**Step 7: Partners give each other back their papers and diagnose their own performances.** Students check their mistakes, verifying the accuracy of the degree of certainty ratings. Students should indicate whether words they marked with a "+" were in fact correct and how far off they were on the words and definitions they marked "-" and "?".

**Step 8: Together, partners develop an individual "prescription plan" of study for each.** This is an essential part of the activity.

Partners should discuss their areas of weakness with each other and ask for advice as to how each might study for them. Teachers often will have students complete a written prescription stem like “My spelling and vocabulary condition is \_\_\_\_\_. To make my condition better, I will have to do the following: \_\_\_\_\_. Often, students will specifically list the words and definitions they need to study and the specific errors they made in their diagnostic test.

**Step 9: Partners should sign off on each other’s prescription plan.** Students should be told that Partners’ signatures mean each partner worked on the other’s prescription plan and agrees it is an appropriate plan of study for his/her partner.

**Step 10: Conduct a whole class discussion and have *Cooperative Diagnosis Pairs* explain their prescription plans to the whole class.** Assess how realistic each plan is based upon student explanations. Student plans are often very general the first time around and may need to be made more specific. When necessary, make suggestions to make prescription plans even better.

*Cooperative Diagnosis Pairs* is a stimulating way for students to methodically check pre-test knowledge and take responsibility, with support, for zeroing in on specific areas of needed study. Teachers like to use *Cooperative Diagnosis Pairs* because, like most cooperative techniques, it allows them to see student strengths and weaknesses prior to testing. Students like *Cooperative Diagnosis Pairs* because it allows them to develop an efficient, individualized plan of study by working with classmates. Best of all, using *Cooperative Diagnosis Pairs* can lead to better grades, something both teachers and students enjoy seeing.

---

**Ed Daniels** (edaniels@sjcny.edu) is a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT). A former middle school teacher in the Smithtown Central School District, he currently is an assistant professor in the Child Study Department of St. Joseph’s College, Patchogue NY, and an adjunct lecturer at SUNY Stony Brook.

Have you visited NYSMSA’s website lately?

Go to [www.nysmsa.org](http://www.nysmsa.org) for...

- the latest information on what’s new “in the middle”
- updates on State Education Department discussions
  - articles of particular interest
- Corning Middle-Level Institute and Annual Conference materials
  - ways to contact your local regional director
    - the NYSMSA book store
    - membership renewal and more

# Getting Kids Involved: The Value of Extra-Curricular Activities

Kevin Swartz



As a middle-level social studies teacher for the past 10 years, I have worked both individually and collectively to help students raise their level of achievement in the classroom. Each year, staff members take steps to help students improve their reading, writing, comprehension, and skills across the content areas. School districts around the state are working to ensure that these goals are measured and that improvement with learning is ongoing. Students are often praised for meeting their potential in academic areas and on state assessments. Meanwhile, numerous interventions are occurring for students who struggle to meet standards. While these actions are essential and must continue, I believe there are other ways to raise student achievement. Interestingly, the way students spend their time after school seems to impact the success they find in school. Because I deeply believe this, I feel it is critical to encourage all students to participate in extra-curricular activities.

Most middle-level teachers would agree that young teenagers are often seeking a feeling of belonging, from both peers and school programs. This sense of belonging is often what provides students with the necessary confidence they need to succeed in academics. While most schools offer a vast array of extra-curricular activities, few seem to put the time and effort into actively encouraging students to participate. Often, it is the same sub-group of students who participate in multiple extra-curricular activities. Unfortunately, an entire group, sometimes large in number, exists in middle schools that do not participate at all in after school activities. It is

often these students who struggle with confidence, which can translate to their performance in the classroom. Since schools set clearly identifiable goals for academic achievement, goals should also be set for participation in extra-curricular activities.

So often, schools make commitments to fund and support new clubs and activities, but few steps are taken to ensure that participation levels will remain high. Teachers and administrators must take daily steps to promote and celebrate all of the programs within their buildings. Acknowledgement of these efforts helps make the idea of participation contagious. Sadly, many educators focus only on their task at hand, which is to teach their content, worrying little about what club or sport may help that timid student in their classroom. The answer may not lie in an instructional strategy, but rather an after-school activity where that student can be expressive and feel part of something positive. As adults, we know that being well-rounded is both healthy and rewarding. Middle-level students may sense this too, but they are often hesitant to take risks due to peer pressure or anxiety. This is where we, as educators, must encourage and promote students to take that risk. Certainly, students may well discover that this endeavor just wasn't for them, yet, this is not always negative. That student has learned something about themselves to help them make choices further down the road, possibly in other areas of interest or ability.

There is no room for debate; the positive impacts of after school activities are endless.

As teachers who make the commitment to lead these activities, we must remember to reach out and include those who could best benefit from participation. A few hours spent in an after school activity is certainly better than a few hours spent at home or on the streets. Participation in extra-curricular activities alone is not the only avenue to help

students discover confidence and acceptance, but there is no doubt that doing so will help improve the culture of our schools.

---

**Kevin Swartz** (kevin.swartz@palmaccsd.org) is an eighth grade social studies teacher at Palmyra-Macedon Middle School; 163 Hyde Parkway, Palmyra NY 14522.

## Submission of Articles

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

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

Please note the following format guidelines:

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



# CALL FOR PRESENTERS

## NYS MIDDLE SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

### 27<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE

### SARATOGA SPRINGS, NY

### OCTOBER 18-20, 2007

As part of the **2007 NYSMSA Annual Conference**, one-hour workshops will be scheduled throughout the day on **Friday, October 19, 2007**. Individuals or groups of individuals are invited to submit a Call for Presenters application on any topic related to middle-level education.

**Please note: All workshop presenters MUST be registered for the conference. Registration fees cannot be waived.**

*Please return completed Call for Presenters application forms by June 1, 2007.*

Name of Primary Presenter \_\_\_\_\_

Position \_\_\_\_\_

School/Organization Name \_\_\_\_\_

School/Organization Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Phone (WORK) \_\_\_\_\_

(HOME) \_\_\_\_\_

Fax \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Check here if you or your school has a membership in NYSMSA?

Check here if you are registered as a trade exhibitor at this conference.

**(Please note: Trade exhibitors may not promote their products during workshops; they may only promote developmentally appropriate instructional practices, using their products as models.)**

**Please address all completed applications and questions to:**

Nancy Sampson

Pioneer Middle School

PO Box 619

Yorkshire NY 14173

FAX (716) 492-9417

e-mail: sampson@nysmsa.org

**Title of Proposed Presentation:**

**Abstract:** (For inclusion in program; please limit to fifty words or less.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(over)

**Essential Elements / Schools-to-Watch (circle or highlight all that apply):**

**Academic Excellence**

- Curriculum alignment
- Depth/real world connections
- Challenging/engaging learning activities — variety
- Variety of assessments
- Time/flexible scheduling
- Supports for students/AIS
- Instructional strategies
- Interdisciplinary units

**Organizational Structure and Process**

- Teaming
- Leadership
- Professional Development
- Vision / Mission Development
- EE:STW School process/program/highlights
- Connections to higher education
- Involvement of stakeholders
- Overcoming barriers
- Middle-level philosophy

**Developmental Responsiveness**

- Advisory
- Transition program
- Parent involvement
- Citizenship and service
- Career exploration
- Character Education
- Comprehensive services — guidance, support services
- Co-curricular activities — clubs, sports teams, exploratory and service projects
- School culture

**Social Equity**

- Varied approaches to learning
- Adaptations to meet student needs
- Parent participation
- Student voice/involvement

**Other**

---

**Content Specific (circle or highlight all that apply):**

- ELA
- Math
- Science
- Social Studies
- Technology
- FACS
- Art
- Music
- LOTE
- Health/Physical Education

**Workshop Format (check one):**

- lecture       interactive       discussion       demonstration

**Technology Needed (check one):**  Overhead projector       LCD projector

**Presenters MUST bring their *own* computer, DVD player, and/or any other technology!**

Other presenters in your group (if applicable):

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

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ruest@nysmsa.org

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Jamesville-DeWitt MS  
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(315) 445-8360  
craig@nysmsa.org

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NYSMSA West  
2201 Pine Avenue  
Niagara Falls, NY 14301  
(716) 282-6511  
tosetto@nysmsa.org

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Brian Sherman  
Schoharie CSD  
P.O. Box 430  
136 Academy Drive  
Schoharie, NY 12157  
(518) 295-8132  
sherman@nysmsa.org

### Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch Program

David Payton  
payton@nysmsa.org

### Professional Development

James Tobin  
tobin@nysmsa.org

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Marybeth Casey  
NYSED 319EB  
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casey@nysmsa.org

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macbain@nysmsa.org

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Pioneer MS  
P.O. Box 619  
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(716) 492-9376  
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(315) 628-4432  
abel@nysmsa.org

### Administrative Assistant

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NYSMSA  
P.O. Box 53  
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schwartz@nysmsa.org



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