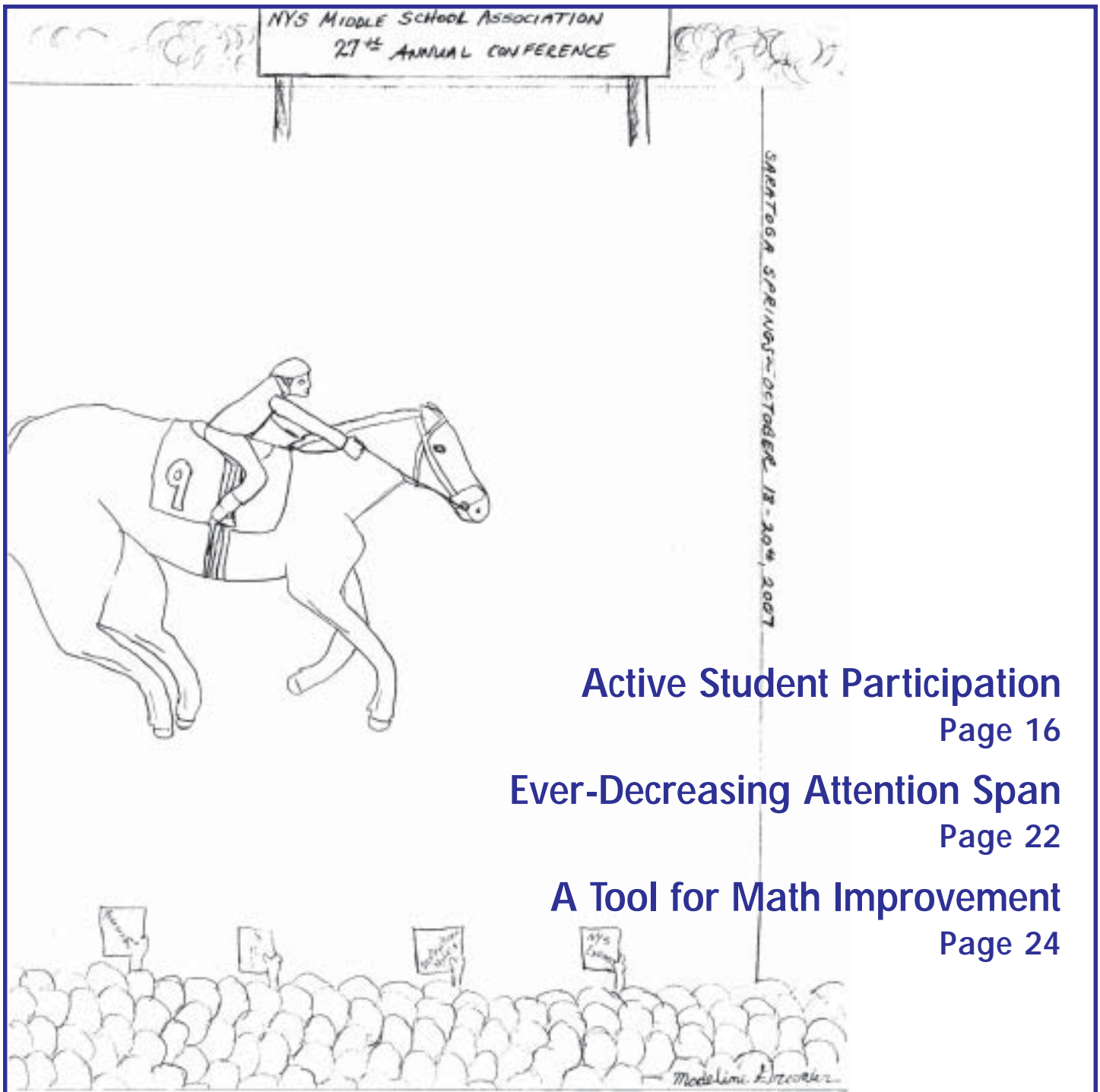


IN Transition

Journal of the New York State Middle School Association



Active Student Participation

Page 16

Ever-Decreasing Attention Span

Page 22

A Tool for Math Improvement

Page 24

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.

Feature Articles

- 13** Poems: A Chronicle of Kids; A Death in 7th Grade
by Ross M. Burkhardt
- 16** Write Your Own Original Dialogues to Increase Active Student Participation
by Rick Heckendorn, Ed. D.
- 22** The Ever-Decreasing Attention Span of the Middle School Student
by Thomas B. Reardon
- 24** Using the Essential Elements as a Tool for Improving Mathematics Results
by Steve Parker Zielinski and Tom Phillips
- 31** The Schools to Watch Site Visit: A Catalyst for Improvement
by Joel H. Weiss
- 33** Our Emerging Middle School
by Theresa Kennedy

In Every Issue

- 2 A few thoughts from the President...
- 4 The Executive Director's Message
- 7 Research at a Glance
- 20 Lea's Lessons
- 38 Submission of Articles

On The Cover

Original artwork by Madeline Greenier, Grade 8, Oliver W. Winch Middle School, South Glens Falls NY.



A few thoughts from the President...

Jeannette Stern, Ed.D.



Jeannette Stern

*Give me six
hours to chop
down a tree
and I will
spend the
first four
sharpening
the axe.*

— Abraham
Lincoln

At first blush, the quotation above might not seem to have any relevance to education. Some might note that it is indeed strange that here is yet another president worrying about cutting down trees (clearly without a study on environmental impact) instead of running the country. But, the more one thinks about the quote, the more one wishes that everyone — from the president and NCLB zealots, to the Board of Regents and the Commissioner, to the local boards of education and superintendents, and even to the teachers, parents and students — would take the time to read and think about the impact of what is being said. How different education might look if everyone did.

The message here is a powerful one. **Any solution (whatever that happens to be) will take less time and energy (and be more successful) if more time is given to the preparations necessary for success.** On a national level, had educators thought of what was needed for students to have “a level playing field” rather than just testing to prove that they did, would the amount of money that

is being spent on testing have been allocated to education? Had someone looked at the inequities in education across the country and advocated for money to be put into teacher education programs, mentoring programs, state aid for programs, facilities, and support, would we now see as many schools on lists for improvements, educators leaving the field, students dropping out, and money being wasted on additional support? On the state level, would the annual fight for state aid take as much time and energy if everyone had a better idea of what needed to be done (based on pre-planning) and each year formed part of a multiple-year master plan? On a more local level, would the educators, parents, and students in the Roosevelt School District now be facing more difficulties than they did before the state walked in had someone thought through what a “take-over” meant before doing it? And in districts around the state, would the publishing of state assessment scores be as critical as progress reports on the status of long-range goals for educating our future citizenry in a democratic society?

Three times a year, NYSMSA publishes this journal to share with you what is working in the field of middle-level education. How do we know? These articles come from you, the practitioners, and more often than not describe the success stories you and your students have experienced. Each and every author details the same pathways: what was the original concern, what was done, what was created, and what is now happening. Most tout their plan as being the foundation of success — sort of like sharpening the axe mentioned above. All share that success does not arrive on a

school's doorstep without work (long, hard and sometimes not-pretty work), dedication (a few at the beginning, with more joining over time), research (knowing what is necessary) and resources (monetary and otherwise).

I am asking for your help, as the strength of any organization rests with the individuals who make it up. The success of middle-level education depends on it. Help others sharpen their axes as you might have done, so the level of success rises. Do more than just read this publication. Contribute to it. There has to be some activity in your classroom of which you are most proud and which results in an "aha!" moment with your students. Share it! Is there a school-wide event that brings the community together to reach a common goal? Send us the details so others can also experience those moments! Is there a staff member,

community member or parent who has made a difference in the education of students in your building? Go to our website — www.nysmsa.org — and nominate him or her for an award (see the left side of the website for hot buttons and forms). Sign up for the CMoG conference and learn from experts (and share with colleagues) in a small intimate setting. Attend our annual conference in Saratoga and experience the combined energy and power that happens when thousands of middle-level educators ponder what can and is happening and plan for the next level.

Sharpen the axe! Learn more! Share more! Be more! And watch what happens in your classroom, in your school, in your district, across the state, and throughout the nation!

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

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

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

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

Go to www.nysmsa.org and click on Awards Nomination on the home page menu for further information and nomination forms.



The Executive Director's Message

Dennis M. Tosetto



Dennis Tosetto

I have spent my entire professional life working at the middle-level. That includes thirty-five years as a teacher, curriculum coordinator, and principal. Since retirement, I have spent an additional five or so years as a volunteer Execu-

tive Director for the New York State Middle School Association (NYSMSA). Prior to my retirement from public education, I had served consecutively for decades as a Regional Director and then President of NYSMSA.

Over that long period of time, it has been my privilege to come to know many of the nationally recognized movers and shakers in our chosen field of education. Over the years, many have become friends. While I would not try to compare my professional accomplishments with those of these folks, there are two things that we all have in common. The most obvious is that we are all a lot older now than when we first began talking together about middle-level. The second is that we are middle-level zealots. We eat and sleep middle-level education and we continue to wait for what is happening in our nation's schools to catch up with the research that tells us what works best for young adolescents.

During the years around 1980, many of us could not help but notice that the typical junior high school program did not complement typical middle-level students; it just wasn't a good fit. We talked; we met; we joined new organizations like NYSMSA. We had a sense of what was needed, but the research just wasn't there to support our beliefs — we had to rely on common sense, sharing our experiences, and experimenting with what worked best.

Many of us from across New York State compiled research from various sources and sought out methods that seemed to work for us. We then worked for two years with the New York State Education Department to develop the *Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and Schools with Middle-Level Grades*. This document was officially issued by the State Education Department in March 1989. For its time, it proved to be a very powerful statement that outlined what should be happening in each of the State's middle-level schools and classrooms. It was truly the most advanced statement of middle-level direction by a state education department in the entire country.

Ten years later, the New York State Middle School Association published a sixty-page paper, appropriately entitled *Ten Years Later: The State of Middle-Level Education in New York State in a Standards-Based Environment*. This publication brought to light the fact that the Regents Policy Statement had never been reasonably implemented throughout the State's schools. It presented findings and recommendations that were developed by middle-level educators and representatives

from a wide spectrum of organizations, including higher education and corporate America. This was quite an accomplishment for NYSMSA and its member zealots.

In my opinion, *Ten Years Later* proved to be an excellent collaboration that brought together SED Policy, cutting-edge research, and the needs of our nation. Since then, educators and their respective organizations, including NYSUT and SAANYS, actively supported SED's development of a truly comprehensive plan to apply cutting-edge research to middle-level instruction in every school with a grade seven in New York State. Legions of us worked on the revised Regents Middle-Level Policy Statement, the Middle-Level Essential Elements, etc. We showed up at Regents meetings in Albany to lend support to their adoption and we have since collectively offered to help with implementation under the direction of SED.

So, what can YOU do to help move the middle-level agenda forward? Become a member of NYSMSA and ensure that your school maintains a membership, too. (NYSMSA does not profit financially from memberships, as the cost of producing and mailing the journal, other publications, etc. fully offset the money that comes in from our low-cost membership dues.) NYSMSA membership also provides some less obvious benefits to its members. Numbers count when an organization is trying to move forward an agenda that is good for young people. The larger the number of educators NYSMSA is known to represent, the more seriously NYSMSA will be taken as the organization that represents quality middle-level education. All members of our Board of Directors are volunteers who go to work each day in school districts across the State. In other words, we don't just represent you, we *are* you and we need your support.

What we deal with as an Association is not esoteric or ethereal. Some of the topics we

have weighed in on over the past few years include: Should only teachers certified in these specific subject areas teach subjects such as art and music? Should school districts be given waivers that provide dispensation from middle-level regulations? How can the administration of the Intermediate Assessments be improved? What needs to be done to effectively implement the Middle-Level Essential Elements in all schools statewide?

These are just a sample of topics that are currently part of the professional discussion among education-related organizations and SED. Moreover, they are among the topics your Association is monitoring to help ensure that when decisions are made, they are in the best interests of our students and those who teach them.

If you would like to become actively involved in NYSMSA, those of us who are actively engaged can use your help in ways that would fit your interests and availability. All you need do is go online to www.nysmsa.org and, on the left side of the home page, click on "NYSMSA Leadership." Locate the Director for your region and send him/her an email or, if you prefer, just send an email to me at tosetto@nysmsa.org and I'll be happy to discuss with you online or over the telephone how you can best work with others to support your profession at the State level as a middle-level educator.

I have learned that there is a very big difference between reading history and making history (or at least being there when it happens). While working as a middle school principal, I also served as an adjunct professor at a local university. During my final years in that position, students would introduce middle-level topics that they had read about in the professional literature. Sometimes during classroom discussions they would quote some of the legendary folks who helped formulate what middle-level education should be today.

Folks like Conrad Toepfer and John Lounsbury — two men whom I consider to be among the founding fathers of the middle-level movement in the United States. Other names that tend to come up are Nancy Doda, Ross Burkhardt, Chris Stevenson, and a host of others.

Each time these names came up in class, it gave me pause to recall that not only had I read their work, but I had also informally discussed, as a friend, their thoughts and

conclusions. Frequently, this happened as they were tweaking their unique beliefs and preparing them for publication. These were colleagues whom I was comfortable speaking to when I needed some advice. Knowing these movers and shakers didn't make me important; rather it served to make my career more substantial and my point of view richer and more dynamic.

Based on these experiences, I can recommend that all who read this step up to the plate and make their professional lives more

interesting and fulfilled by broadening both their knowledge base and level of accomplishment. In other words, become involved.

Remember that there are those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and then there are those who say, "What happened?" Begin by joining us first at the regional level as an active participant in your Middle School Association. Spread your wings and see what it feels like to

directly impact the profession by helping with a conference, helping us to share the latest information, or networking with colleagues from around the State to help organize a regional dialogue or meeting. What can be accomplished is limited only by our collective imaginations. Trust me, it is much more rewarding to be an active agent of change than it is to be surprised by its impact. Meet the people who make things happen in New York State. Become a part of the collegial conversation and help us to move quality middle-level initiatives forward.

How do you and your colleagues become involved?

Begin by sending an email to:

tosetto@nysmsa.org

and we'll work together to make you an active part of NYSMSA.

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) or phone/fax (914-747-9241).

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

**NYSMSA gives permission to its membership to reprint
any portion of this publication.**

Research at a Glance

Jeff Craig, NYSMSA Director of Research and Technology



Misplaced Criticism

There seems to be a direct correlation between the amount of accountability testing and the negative press paid to middle-level education. Laypeople and politicians are quick to blame middle-level education and declare the middle-level movement a failure. Yet, it is not clear that a comprehensive study of what goes on in middle-level programs has been done. Is it accurate, then, to make the claim that the middle-level reform efforts were wrong? It might be possible that the middle-level reforms that were posited several decades ago have yet to be implemented. There does not seem to be a source of data about middle-level programs that is comprehensive enough to provide an accurate picture of middle-level reform implementation. A similar dearth of information is evident about the relationship between the middle-level reforms and student achievement. That leads to two questions: To what extent have middle-level reforms been implemented in NYS and is there a difference in student achievement in schools where the reforms have been implemented?

No studies seem to measure all of the principles that have been identified to be important according to New York State. There are similarities, but the principles that have been studied do not correspond completely to the *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs* (what NYS tells middle schools they ought to be doing). There has been work done to compare levels of reform with achievement and teaming with achievement, but nothing that comprehensively assesses middle-level programs and compares that with student achievement in middle schools. It might be helpful to list the seven *Essential Elements*:

1. A philosophy and mission that reflect the intellectual and developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents (youth 10-14 years of age).
2. An educational program that is comprehensive, challenging, purposeful, integrated, relevant, and standards-based.
3. An organization and structure that support both academic excellence and personal development.
4. Classroom instruction appropriate to the needs and characteristics of young adolescents provided by skilled and knowledgeable teachers.
5. Strong educational leadership and a building administration that encourage, facilitate, and sustain involvement, participation, and partnerships.
6. A network of academic and personal support available for all students.
7. Professional learning and staff development for all staff that are ongoing, planned, purposeful, and collaboratively developed.

Each of these separate studies seems to suggest that implementation of the concepts within the *Essential Elements* does make a difference. This suggests that the much of the criticism about middle level schools is aimed in the wrong direction. Rather than criticizing middle-level programs for not producing the student achievement that is sought, the criticism should be that implementation of the *Essential Elements* remains incomplete and that's why student achievement is not where it ought to be. Note: Preliminary comparisons between the implementation of the *Essential Elements* and student achievement were conducted showing a

connection between the two – see Craig (2004) below.

What follows is a brief description of some of the research in this area. As you can see when reading the following brief descriptions, no study seems to comprehensively (or individually, for that matter) address all of these *Essential Elements*. Each has some degree of relevance to our work, however, and might be worth further exploration.

Anfara, V. A. Jr. & Lipka, R. P. (2003). Relating the middle school concept to student achievement. *Middle School Journal*, 35(1), 24-32.

The connection between student achievement and the middle-level concept remains elusive because of insufficient and poorly designed studies. Three questions were discussed in this article that elaborate on the inconclusive evidence. Comprehensive implementation of the middle-level construct is supported by research but the evidence focuses on the implementation of individual components of the complete construct and achievement is not conclusive. The individual components that, taken together, comprise the larger construct are considered to be necessary but not sufficient in the absence of systemic implementation of the middle-level construct.

Arhar, J. M. (2003). Perspectives on middle-level student achievement. Rethinking student achievement. *Middle School Journal*, 35(1), 5.

This brief piece is an overview of a themed issue of the *Middle School Journal* that tackles the issue of student achievement at the middle-level. Arhar describes the work of the Research on Student Achievement Subcommittee by the members of the Middle-level Research Organization Network (MLRON). She mentions the debate about the middle school concept and its

impact on student achievement. The debate has several fronts: what is achievement and how has the definition of achievement been constrained within the present context of state assessment, why is there so little research about student achievement at the middle-level, and how compatible is the application of student achievement as an appropriate and authentic assessment of the achievement of early adolescents.

Brown, K. M., Anfara, V. A., Jr. & Roney, K. (2004). Student achievement in high performing, suburban middle schools and low performing, urban middle schools: Plausible explanations for the differences. *Education and Urban Society* 36(4), 428-456.

The authors claim that the differences between high-achieving schools and low-achieving schools can be explained, in part, by the organizational health of the school. Schools that are more “organizationally healthy” outperform other schools that are less “healthy.” Organizational health, as used in this study, refers to the effectiveness and efficiency of structural, managerial, and technical capabilities of the school as an organization. The authors, based on their qualitative, multisite study, conclude that achievement is higher in “healthier” schools. Healthier schools had a greater level of implementation of the middle-level principles.

The authors conceded that SES has a greater influence than Organizational Health and implementation of reforms. The authors maintain, though, that greater implementation of the middle-level construct results in achievement gains.

Note: The authors argue that some studies that showed little difference in implementation of middle-level reform efforts were wrong and that great disparities do exist between the different schools. Significant differences in climate, expectations, curriculum, teacher efficacy, teacher satisfaction, leadership, shared decision

making, resources, parental involvement, and community involvement were documented. The authors conclude that the only way to address student achievement in middle-level schools is through comprehensive and systemic implementation of middle-level fundamentals.

Craig, J. S. (2004). The essential elements: What does the research say? *In Transition*, XXII (1), 9-11.

The Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Level Programs and Schools were developed as a coherent set of guidelines for middle schools. The Essential Elements are more than guidelines, however. They are research-based recommendations that result in increased student achievement. Two research studies have been conducted that demonstrate increased student achievement with greater Essential Elements implementation. In both of these studies the increased student achievement was measured on New York State Intermediate Level Assessments, which makes for a strong argument for implementation of the Essential Elements in all middle-level programs in the state. The data also contradicts the belief held by some educators that the middle-level education approach fails to educate students to high levels. Instead, the research clearly suggests that most middle-level schools have not yet implemented the effective middle-level practices to any great degree and that those that have can demonstrate better student achievement than those that have not. It is logical to conclude that the achievement gap at the middle-level is due to a less than complete implementation of best practices in middle-level education rather than a failure of middle schools themselves.

Erb, T. O. (2000). Do middle school reforms really make a difference? *Clearing House*, 73(4), 194-200.

Erb elaborates on the “black box” that some researchers use in their research; what goes on in the “black box” between implementation of

the middle-level construct and student achievement. He describes a research model of middle-level reform that includes five components that are based on *Turning Points*: structural features, normative/attitudinal features, skill and professional preparation features, climate and interactive processes, and instructional/practice features. Among these, Erb points to a few elements he considers non-negotiable. Common planning time is a must and the common planning time must be effectively used. From effective common planning time comes higher teacher satisfaction and a better climate. These are the things that Erb believes lay within the black box that result in higher student achievement.

Felner, R. et al. (1997). The impact of school reform for the middle grades: A longitudinal study of a network engaged in Turning Points-based comprehensive school transformation. In Takanishi, R. & Hamburg, D. A. (Eds.), *Preparing adolescents for the twenty-first century: Challenges facing Europe and the United States*. (pp. 38-60). New York: Cambridge University Press.

This slightly dated chapter describes a large-scale study of more than 60 middle schools in Illinois. Although it is now almost ten years old, it makes some observations that still seem to be relevant. When this study was initiated, there was little to suggest how the degree of implementation of the middle-level concept impacts school improvement (including student achievement). The lack of empirical studies that was noted in this article rings true today; there is still a lack of empirical evidence. Felner, et al, note that at the time of this study there was no evidence that suggested there was enough change in middle schools to make such a study worthwhile; significant reform had not been accomplished and there really wasn't any change to try to assess. The study showed that the first year of implementation of a reform results in a chaotic state for the institution that is trying to reform.

As time went by, schools were grouped based on the degree of implementation. Their data, they conclude, shows that highly-implemented schools had higher achievement than those schools with lesser implementation or without implementation. Discipline data also improved in highly-implemented schools, as did self-esteem. The most significant conclusion that the authors suggest can be learned is that implementation of the reform must be comprehensive if the promised achievement gains are to be realized.

Schools that were participating in this longitudinal project were observed and identified to be at different levels of implementation of middle level principles. The degree of implementations was based on the *Turning Points* criteria. Their data indicate that reform causes a significant amount of disruption in its first year or two. They compared the level of implementation to student achievement among the fully-implemented, partially-implemented, and not-implemented groups and found the average student achievement to be higher in fully implemented schools.

Mertens, S. B., & Anfara, V. A., Jr. (2006). *Research summary: Student achievement and the middle school concept.* Retrieved October 8, 2006 from <http://www.nmsa.org/ResearchSummaries/StudentAchievement/tabid/276/Default.aspx>

This research summary describes four studies and briefly mentions a handful of other studies. One study (Lee and Smith, 1993) found a positive association between implementation of middle-level restructuring and student achievement, student engagement, and equity. Felner's 1997 study found that students in schools with greater implementation of the middle-level concept out-achieved students in lower implementation schools. A third study (Chicago Consortium, 1999) found connections between social support and academic press (high

expectations for academic achievement combined with rigorous work) with student achievement. A relationship between teams with common planning time, best practices implementation, and length of learning was documented.

Mertens, S. B. & Flowers, N. (2003). *Middle school practices improve student achievement in high poverty schools.* *Middle School Journal*, 35(2), 33-43.

This study set out to determine whether effective interdisciplinary team practices had an impact on student achievement in high poverty middle-level schools. The authors concluded that there is a positive relationship. Their conclusion was qualified somewhat, though.

High poverty middle schools in the south were found to have greater implementation of instructional and organizational practices that reflect good practice. Interestingly, this study found that there was a greater implementation of effective teaming practices in schools with a higher level of poverty than in schools with less poverty.

Teachers, administrators, students, and parents were surveyed with an instrument from the Center for Prevention Research and Development called the School Improvement Self-Study. The self-study information (reported on a Likert Scale) in two areas was compared: interdisciplinary team practices and classroom practice. Measures in these two areas were correlated. This was, in turn, compared to both income level of families and to student achievement. Income level, mentioned above, trumped all other factors. They did show some moderate influence of teaming practices on achievement. This study seemed to try to do too much at once, or at least this article tried to describe several studies that were done with the same data. It would have been more beneficial to the reader if it was broken down into separate articles that described separate parts of the study. Because so many parts of a large study are included, the

discussion of methodology seems to brief to be able to ensure its integrity to the reader.

Mertens, S. B., Flowers, N & Mulhall, P. F. (1998). *The Middle Start Initiative, phase I: A longitudinal analysis of Michigan middle-level schools.* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, Center for Prevention Research and Development.

Based on research conducted during the 1990's, this report summarizes the results of a longitudinal study of 224 schools with a seventh grade in Michigan. There was a variety schools in several different needs/resource categories. Some schools received grants to aid their reform efforts; others did not. A variety of grade configurations were noted as well. The study found that the implementation of common planning time and incorporation of advisories varies greatly. Self-study data from the middle schools was compared and indicated that self-reported student adjustment was greater in the reform school than in those schools not implementing a middle-level reform package. Reform school improved in the area of discipline. Substance abuse decreased in reform schools, too. Finally, with regard to student achievement, the schools participating in the grant-funded reform showed achievement gains in both reading and math. The achievement data held true, however, only in those reforming schools that were also implementing teaming. The authors suggest that this makes a powerful case for teams in middle-level programs. In their conclusion, the authors point out that social inequities remained after reform implementation.

Roney, K., Brown, K. M. & Anfara, V. A. (2004). *Middle-level reform in high- and low-performing middle schools: A question of implementation?* *Clearing House*, 77(4), 153-159.

This qualitative study investigated the difference between high-performing and low-performing middle schools. Schools (six of

each) were investigated with regard to implementation of the middle-level construct. The researchers reported that there a relatively even level of implementation among the schools, including between high-performing and low-performing schools. A total of 48 teachers were interviewed (24 each) based on a questionnaire that stemmed from NMSA's *This We Believe* document. They reported that both sets of schools had a 73 percent implementation of middle-level elements. While low-performers had a slightly greater implementation of curriculum and pedagogy, there was a greater level of community and family participation in the high-performers. These investigators challenge the notion that greater implementation results in higher achievement.

The conclusion of this article, that there is little difference in degree of implementation of middle-level principles from school to school, is refuted by the very same team of authors in "Student Achievement in High Performing, Suburban Middle Schools and Low Performing, Urban Middle Schools: Plausible Explanations for the Differences" that was summarized earlier in this bibliography. This incongruity indicates that the level of implementation is subjective and that it can vary from study to study, even within work of the same authors. The authors agree and suggest that there is a need for further investigation.

Russel, J. F. (1997). *Relationships between the implementation of middle-level program concepts and student achievement.* *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 12(2), 169-185.

The relationship between student achievement and the implementation of the middle-level concept in ten middle-level schools was examined. First, the middle-level concept was described. Schools were surveyed in order to determine the level of implementation and this was compared to the student achievement in those schools. Regression analysis was used to

develop a predictive equation that took into account the implementation of different aspects of the middle-level concept. Correlation coefficients were calculated between variables. Some small correlations were noted (some positive, some negative) and the author concluded that there is a limited impact on student achievement. Mathematics achievement was shown to be impacted but this was not true for ELA; no impact on ELA achievement was seen.

Trimble, S. (2002). Common elements of high performing, high poverty middle schools. *Middle School Journal*, 33(4), 7-16.

Operating from a position that effective middle schools outperform less effective middle schools, Trimble sets out to explain this. The same studies mentioned in other articles are again referred to, but Trimble also goes on to say that most schools are not implementing the middle-level concept. This would explain lags in achievement of middle schools as a whole. High-performing poor schools that are effective were found to use resources well, have high-performing teacher teams, and use goals effectively.

Nominations for Fall 2007 Election

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

- **President**
- **Vice President**
- **Director of Region I**
- **Director of Region III**
- **Co-Directors of Region VII**
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Officers serve for a period of two (2) years. Candidates for President and Vice President must have served on the Board of Directors for a minimum of two (2) years immediately prior to running for those offices. Regional Directors serve for a period of three (3) years and must work in the regions they represent.

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

You may nominate an individual or self-nominate for any of the open positions. All

candidates for office must be members of NYSMSA.

Please provide the following information about the nominee:

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

In addition, please include a photograph and a paragraph discussing your reasons for seeking this position. All nominations must be postmarked no later than **July 27, 2007**.

Mail to: NYSMSA
P.O. Box 53
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Ballots will be mailed to the membership in late August. Election results will be announced at the October 2007 conference.

A Chronicle of Kids

Ross M. Burkhardt

When I think of kids,
I remember Joanne
who drifted through school
in search of a plan.
Or Charlie, who seemed
so together, so strong,
but who, later on,
avoided the throng.

I remember sweet Julie
and flaming red hair,
so sure of herself,
no worry, no care.
And then there was Michael,
a cypher, a ghost:
look at him now —
he's made it, almost.

Jennifer wanted
a white picket fence;
she's working at Wal-Mart
for dollars and cents.
John was an athlete,
the star of the team.
He died in Iraq,
defending a dream.

Alicia just e-mailed
to tell me the news;
she's having a baby —
what name should she choose?
Bobby's a doctor.
Kate teaches school.
Brad is in prison —
he's no longer cool.

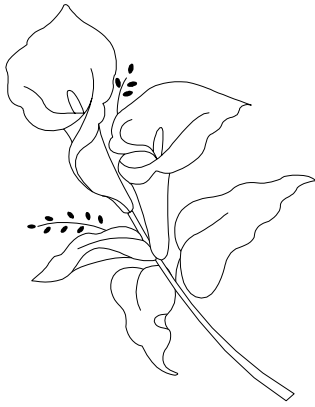
Kids enter our lives
and the classes we teach.
Some listen well;
some we can't reach.
They stay for a while,
then move on in life,
leaving vague memories
of strength, or of strife.

What are the words,
the advice we can give
to guide them along
and help them live?
What would I say to them
now that they're grown?
"I hope you are thriving
out there on your own."

Back then I served
as advisor and teacher;
relating to kids
was a regular feature.
How much did I help?
How well did I do?
Did I make a difference
when things went askew?

It never is easy;
it's never the same.
Some know what to do;
some think it's a game.
Our job as they grow
is support and respect,
being a model
of how to connect.

Ross M. Burkhardt (rossnewm@aol.com), a past president of both NYSMSA and NMSA, is a middle-level consultant and author of *Using Poetry in the Classroom: Engaging Students in Learning* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) and *Writing for Real: Strategies for Engaging Adolescent Writers* (Stenhouse, 2003).



A Death in 7th Grade

Ross M. Burkhardt

Can you recall the day your father died?
The sudden loss...the grief...and how you cried?
I was fifty-nine when Dad passed on.
I'd long imagined life when he'd be gone.

Doug's father died in March; Doug was twelve.
This young boy abruptly had to shelve
His youthful ways and grow up all at once.
Our relationship, then, measured months.

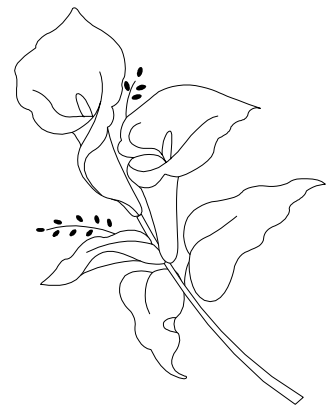
He was in my advisory that year.
I sensed the man-to-be when he was near.
Doug exuded strength and confidence,
But now he coped with that which made no sense.

I sat beside Doug at the funeral home.
The minister read verses, and a poem.
Lilies withered in a wicker basket.
We walked together to the open casket.

Doug bent and kissed his father one last time,
As in a novel, but the paradigm
Of youth unfurling, carefree, all ahead,
Had ever shifted, now his dad was dead.

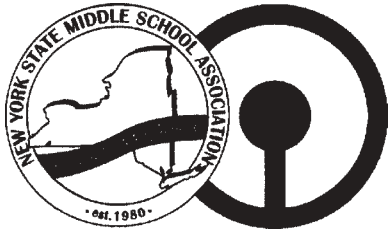
The teacher became the father in Doug's life.
I comforted the son, the grieving wife.
Doug and I grew closer, having shared
A day for which we both were unprepared.

Sleep knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care.
Today Doug is a father, and aware;
And he and I, still linked in life's parade
That started with a death in 7th grade.



Ross M. Burkhardt (rossnewm@aol.com), a past president of both NYSMSA and NMSA, is a middle-level consultant and author of *Using Poetry in the Classroom: Engaging Students in Learning* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) and *Writing for Real: Strategies for Engaging Adolescent Writers* (Stenhouse, 2003).

Fifth Annual



Middle-Level Institute at The Corning Museum of Glass

Middle-Level Educators...

- Are you the best educator you can be?
- Do you have a collegial network that extends beyond your school building?
- Do you regularly have opportunities to discuss the latest educational research, best practices, and how to create effective learning opportunities?

Monday, June 25 & Tuesday, June 26, 2007 (www.nysmsa.org)

For most educators the answer to each of the above questions is probably “No” and that is why the NYSMSA/CMoG Middle-Level Institute was developed. After all, we all have room to grow as professionals. All you need do is choose a topic from six available offerings and then spend two days with a small group of educators interacting with recognized experts. Institute instruction is hands-on with continuous opportunities to discuss best strategies and methods with colleagues from around the state.

The NYSMSA/CMoG Middle-Level Institute is kept to six different workshops with overall Institute attendance maintained at about 100 participants or less. Institute registrants choose to participate in one of the six two-day workshops where they learn about current research as it applies to best practices. Each participant then works with his/her class to develop plans and materials for immediate use back at school. Individual workshop sessions tend to include between ten and twenty participants who receive a total of about ten hours of focused instruction over the two days of the Institute.

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

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

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

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

Middle-Level Leadership That Works (Jeff Craig)

Please go to www.nysmsa.org for detailed information about the highly rated NYSMSA/CMoG Middle-Level Summer Institute, including its workshops and instructors. Also available to be downloaded is the Institute brochure including registration materials. We look forward to seeing you at the Institute!



Write Your Own Original Dialogues to Increase Active Student Participation

Rick Heckendorn, Ed. D.

Original Dialogues

Every reflective teacher realizes it is hard to plan what main ideas, concepts, skills, and facts that should be emphasized in any given lesson. In teaching social studies I have found that the several hours I devote to writing an original dialogue are worth the time because it helps students get involved and understand the content. It also helps me to clarify for myself what ideas are most important to stress. This strategy helps students to focus on problems, situations, and interactions that are real. It helps students ask questions because the content becomes more accessible. Why? The ideas, concepts, skills, and facts emerge as the characters discuss their lives, the challenges, opportunities, and obstacles that they confront just as people do today. Including an emotional component along with the intellectual content enables students to get involved in the time period, with the characters in the dialogue who like real people dealt with their own problems or issues.

New York State Middle School Association Conference

Since the last NYSMSA conference in October, 2006 my experience with using my original dialogues has expanded. Originally I had used dialogues on two levels: with my middle-school students as their social-studies teacher and with my college students who want to become teachers of middle-school students. At the conference, I had the new opportunity to utilize one of my original dialogues with teachers who had no prior interactions with me. The workshop was

instructive and rewarding for them and for me.

Six Factors in Teaching

I have discovered that writing original dialogues in social studies (and why not also in English, math, science, and foreign language) enables the teacher to satisfy each of the six factors that I hold to be crucial in teaching a lesson: planning, content, strategies, caring, flexibility, and formative assessment. There is considerable literature to back up the importance of each of these six factors: write down your plans (Thornton, 2005), know the content (Adler, 1982), vary your teaching strategies (Dewey, 1938; NMSA, 2003), show the students that you care about them as individuals (Noddings, 1984), demonstrate flexibility within your lesson (DuFour, R. Eaker, R. & DuFour, R., 2005), and engage in formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998) to check whether the students understand the material that you are teaching.

The NYSMSA Session Dialogue

During my workshop session at the last Niagara Falls conference, we used a dialogue to explain the contrast between Ancient Egypt and the Greek city-states. Thales, the founder of Greek science, spoke with an Egyptian and a few other Greeks. I asked for volunteers to read the dialogue aloud. Immediately several teachers volunteered and read with feeling to breath life into the conversation. These readers made the material exciting and interesting for everyone listening! One person had had theatrical training and experience with live

theater. Invariably, there are those individuals who thrive on the opportunity to show the expressive side of themselves in a classroom that we will want to utilize (Zemmelman, 1997). This had also occurred during the reading of dialogues with middle school or college students.

We teachers need to be risk takers, especially when we write something down for others to read, like this short description. We hope that others see its usefulness, but we do take a risk by revealing our creativity (or lack thereof) as we attempt to engage others actively in the material that we obviously feel is important enough to teach.

The other teachers in the audience were visibly impressed with their performances. Everyone applauded their efforts! (Not a bad thing for anyone's self-esteem, especially middle-school students!) I had prepared a series of high and low-level questions to involve everyone in discussing the ideas that the characters in the dialogue discussed. (Kellough & Kellough, 2007.) Low-level questions allow the slowest students to participate. High-level questions stimulated the thinking of all, especially the brightest students. My prepared questions were hardly necessary at the workshop since a discussion about the historical events and comparisons immediately occurred. One should always over plan. We reviewed some of the vocabulary that I used, since this whole language strategy can enrich students' vocabulary.

Planning and Content

An integral part of a teacher's planning is to know what one wants to emphasize in the curriculum. Writing a dialogue requires a deeper knowledge of the content and the willingness to write and rewrite it until it is sufficiently good to present to the class. Teachers emphasize most important ideas by including them in the dialogue. Although it is time consuming creating one's own dialogue,

it is a productive use of time for two reasons: it is likely to stimulate student interest and thereby reduce classroom disruptions, and, once written the dialogue remains available to use (with modifications of course) forever! Writing lesson plans and knowing the content are two key preparations every teacher should make. Dialogues can serve as a link between them.

Strategies

Reading dialogues in class offer at least three optional teaching strategies: reading aloud as I chose to do, reading silently, and reading separately in small groups. If a teacher were to use many dialogues as I had done with my middle school students you would want to vary the strategies to maintain high student interest and involvement. As with any teaching strategy there are advantages and pitfalls for each. When the entire class works together progress remains more coordinated to allow everyone to learn from the mistakes of others and to help them. However, it also may hold back some who could move more quickly, or it might lose those who are intimidated to ask questions in the large class setting. Small groups encourage more participation since there are more readers, but the teacher would have to rotate quickly among the groups to correct mistakes and keep everyone on task. This opportunity for effective collaborative learning allows a bright student to lead each small group. Silent reading removes the social enjoyment factor but it can help students to focus on their individual understanding of the text if challenging and interesting questions guide their reading and the teacher can monitor them effectively. Although I have used all three I prefer reading aloud to assist our efforts to build a supportive and caring classroom community (Christensen, 1994.)

Caring

I have found that writing dialogues allowed a teacher to show caring for students on several levels. First, students realized that a teacher was working diligently to write this original material for them. Students knew more than most adults realized about what teachers were doing as I discovered at a panel of students speaking openly and honestly before a Kappa Delta Pi panel discussion. Second, it took the subject matter and made the students deal with it directly as they presented the information they acted out. Third, it allows certain students to shine as they acted out their parts expressively. This was a marvelous way to boost students' self-esteem. Fourth, it showed the students that the teacher had a mastery of the subject matter. Finally, it allowed for individual differences as some students would understand the finer nuances that others may miss. Still all could learn from the characters' interactions that were fun to observe.

Flexibility

Flexibility is built into this teaching approach since some students reacted to different parts of the conversation. This was exciting because similar to reading poetry, novels, or plays different people saw different things as they make sense of the text. The increased student interest and involvement should result in a greater opportunity for students' voices to be heard (Miller, 1990.)

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment meant that we should check for students' understanding continually, in every class. We should not wait for the test to find out who understood and who did not understand the information. When students mispronounced a word or a term it was a good indication that their understanding of that term was lacking. When students read something interesting, they were

more likely to participate. As they talked more and the teacher listened more, the teacher learned about the students' understanding of the material. The students' reading provided a check on their understanding as they acted out the material. The teacher's questions focused the students' attention on major points included in the conversation.

Many More Dialogues

A few of my former students have used their own original dialogues in their classes as teachers or as student teachers. The reactions have been positive. Students paid more attention. Students appreciated the performances of their peers. Students were more interested in the material than when they read from the textbook. Many students continued to volunteer to read aloud. The teachers' questions got students involved in crucial issues raised in the dialogues.

My current undergraduate social studies methods class met every other time in a middle school as we collaborated with one 6th grade social studies teacher. My students taught 20 minute mini-lessons in this class. They had the option to write a dialogue as their lesson for this class. Two students took this choice, and the results were fantastic. One dialogue explored the history of the Byzantine Empire. The other dialogue looked at the development of illuminated manuscripts by European medieval monks. Each time the 6th grade students were very excited to read a part aloud. Each time everyone in the class listened attentively. Each time the students were able to answer the accompanying questions based on the dialogue. My college students had to research the content and write creatively to finalize these dialogues that demonstrated their understanding of the content and their ability to plan lessons that actively engaged the students.

Two Future Suggestions

Consider writing your own dialogue. If you e-mail me at Manhattanville College I would be happy to e-mail you the example I used in the NYSMSA conference at Niagara Falls. I could also offer advice how to get started. What a wonderful surprise this could be for your new students in September. Once you see their excited reaction I predict you will want to write more of them.

Second, if I am accepted on the program of the state conference for this fall, you will be able to act out or witness one of my dialogues in one of our sessions. I believe we can help each other reach into our individual creativity and interests with dialogues to make interesting and challenging lessons for our students. They will benefit enormously.

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Lea's Lessons

Lea Macdonald

Teacher Leaders: The Heart and Soul of the Professional Learning Community

“As an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff-development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement.”

—Shirley Hord

As another school year comes to an end, and this year's final issue of *In Transition* arrives at your school, I thought I would digress from my usual instructional strategies focus and talk about building a true “professional learning community” in our schools. The most promising and challenging strategy for school improvement is the formation of a professional learning community; a group of administrators and teachers who are united in their commitment to student learning. They share a common vision, work in collaborative teams, see themselves as life-long learners, and participate in school-wide decision making. Teacher leaders are the driving force behind this type of learning organization.

Today, leadership roles are undergoing a metamorphosis; teachers are offered real opportunities to impact educational reform without leaving their classrooms. Teachers are now serving as mentors, lead teachers, team leaders, and curriculum directors in many middle schools. Teacher leaders believe in the idea of the learning organization as a community of learners working together to maximize student learning. Student learning is the centerpiece of a shared vision. Teacher leaders

provide opportunities for collaborative action, focus on building relationships, and lead the way in developing the fundamental beliefs for the organization.

In today's society, school leaders must build bridges between the administrators and teachers for change to take place. The collaboration of administrators and teachers is critical for the success of the professional learning community. Teacher leaders are the bridge between the administration and the teachers. Supportive and shared leadership develops as the administration accepts a collegial relationship with teachers, shares decision-making, and promotes leadership development among the staff. Leadership is a collaborative effort, a joining together with other teachers to promote professional development and the improvement of educational services.

Classroom Visits

One way to foster a community of professionals in a learning community is the practice of having teachers visit each other's classrooms to learn from each other. This open and trusting practice provides feedback to teachers and contributes to best practices in the school.

Interdisciplinary Teams

Secondly, most middle schools embrace the middle-school philosophy of creating developmentally responsive schools based on the needs of young adolescents. These middle schools have formed interdisciplinary teams that share students and common planning time. At our school, teams meet on a regular basis to discuss students, plan curriculum and

instruction, and meet with parents and the guidance counselor. These grade-level team meetings ensure open communication about student progress and concerns.

School-wide Learning Teams

In addition to small teams across grade levels, however, schools need to create ongoing school-wide learning teams where all teachers share their concerns, ideas and successes throughout the school year. These team meetings would be based on democratic participation and teacher choice and voice. The lines of communication would be established by setting up voluntary meetings where staff could come together to share concerns in an open forum. This could be an initial step in the development of a more formal decision-making structure for all staff members. These teams or small learning communities could meet on a regular basis for joint lesson planning, formulating common assessments, problem solving or other issues facing the school. Because teacher leaders work in the trenches, their leadership relationships can be the most influential forces in the school.

A Shared Vision

One of the challenges of creating a professional learning community is communicating ideas clearly while accepting the views of others, so that we can move toward realizing a shared vision. The vision statement forms the basis for school improvement. It is important that teacher leadership roles be part of the school's vision and set of values that allows teachers to participate in leadership responsibilities. A school's vision should evolve from the beliefs of the staff, the norms that the staff supports, and focus on personal mastery in developing this shared vision.

As teacher leaders we need to encourage our staff to answer these questions: What do we believe in? What does a good middle school look like? What is my role in an exem-

plary middle school? Are we living the vision? Good schools begin and end with good teachers who live the vision and bring inspiration and direction with them.

Highly skilled teachers working in a supportive environment are a critical factor in creating a professional learning community. Administrators need to support teachers while maintaining high expectations for student achievement as well as professional growth. In order for a professional learning organization to survive, administrators and teachers need to grasp the idea that teachers are equal partners in leadership and, if given the encouragement and support, can become successful leaders.

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The Ever-Decreasing Attention Span of the Middle School Student

Thomas B. Reardon

Keeping the Middle School Student Engaged Isn't as Hard as One Thinks

As a relatively new teacher (going on six years), the ideas imparted to me in my Instructional Methods classes are not distant memories, and I find myself referencing the texts quite often in the development of lesson plans for my eighth-grade English classes. While writing lesson plans on a Sunday afternoon, cup of coffee in one hand and the glowing screen of a laptop on the coffee table, I've always felt that this was the perfect example of the unfortunate disconnect that can occur between *theory* and actual *practice*. Let me give you an example.

When beginning to teach a Holocaust unit, using *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a literature staple, I wanted to give my students as many opportunities to understand the pain and anguish of this time period. Again, referencing back to my Instructional Methods days, my head was immediately swarming with the various ways one could incorporate the idea of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, literature circles, think-pair-share activities, and other innovative instructional techniques so that I could rest assured that all of my students, regardless of learning style, were engaged in the lesson. I would begin with a free write, asking students what the Holocaust meant to them, followed by a brief discussion of their answers. Putting some pictures the digital screen (I am privileged enough to have access to amazing technological resources), I provided students with a virtual tour of a concentration camp, along with various sound clips of Adolf Hitler's rallies. I would then have students stand up, and, using some masking tape, simulate for the students the unique, cramped conditions of the attic where

the Frank and Van Daan families hid for three years when avoiding Nazi capture. Following this simulation, students would begin reading the dramatic version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Truly, a lesson plan that (on paper) is fit for the English Language Arts textbook. Once again, it is important that at this point, the lesson plan has not left the computer screen of the Sunday afternoon weekly lesson plan session.

With Monday approaching, I have all of my materials in place, and am ready to execute this lesson. As the students come in, my mind is racing with various facts and figures I want to include in my activities. With everything in place, I began my class. The timing couldn't have been more perfect, which each activity lasting exactly the amount of time as planned. My teaching schedule is quite packed, teaching four of my five classes in a row. With very little time to reflect, I kept moving forward with my lesson, completing all of the activities listed in on my original Sunday plan. At the end of my four class stretch, I felt quite proud of all that I had accomplished within each class.

With a considerable stretch of free time before my final afternoon class, I stood in the hallway during the class passing time, and took a minute to obtain the ultimate feedback for a teacher: the students. Catching a few students whom I trust to be brutally honest to me, I informally asked them what they thought of today's lesson. Taken aback, they initially answered with very anemic comments, mostly in favor of the lesson (then again, when a student is on their way to lunch, they'll say almost anything as to avoid being late). Two female students, however, without missing a beat, gave me a piece of criticism that completely changed my

pedagogical view. Gina stated that she felt the lesson was informative, but that it “moved too fast.” It was Caroline’s comment that truly captured the essence of my instructional mistake. She said, “it seemed like you were rushing to pack in as much as you could. It’s like you were running out of time.”

As I sat eating my sandwich, I had a lot to think about. As a fifth-year teacher, I had designed and executed a lesson that represented the archetypal instructionally sound lesson. Though not a formal “rule,” was also taught in my Methods classes that one should abide by the *Age + Five Rule* when determining how long to spend on a particular activity. The figure loosely represented the number of minutes a human being can spend on one activity before they begin to lose interest (obviously reinforcing the idea that middle and elementary school students need constant stimulation). The comments from these two reliable students completely negated what I had indoctrinated as truth.

As teachers, we are fighting a losing battle against attention span. Regardless of the numerous students diagnosed (formally or informally) with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), the exponential rise in video game playing and television viewing has built quite a mountain for educators to climb. How can a teacher maintain the focus of a student, when put up against the graphic sensory stimulation of the media? We have assumed that the key is to “match” the pleasure a student derives from these sources by keeping our classes fast-paced, unpredictable, while appealing to as many of the learning styles as possible. Quite a daunting task to endure on a daily basis.

As a result, I began to ask myself: Are we doing our students a disservice by attempting to compete with the stimulation of the outside world? Are we not teaching our students the innate fun of learning and thinking for its own sake, but instead prostituting education to be “no different than a video game?”

Tuesday’s lesson plan (on paper) was just as packed as Monday’s, with a variety of short activities each attempting to expose students to the atrocities of the Holocaust. With nothing to lose, I put those activities on hold, and, using my projector once again, placed a picture of concentration camp prisoners waiting on line to receive their daily food rations. I asked students to take few moments to “free write” on this picture, and then opened the remainder of class up for discussion, knowing that I had an arsenal of other activities I could begin should this prove to be a disaster.

I cannot thoroughly describe the depth of our conversation only that it took many turns, and in the end, taught me more about human compassion and empathy than I had ever known. The students (almost shocked that the class was not changing gears every ten minutes), was able to relax, and truly think about the class topic, rather than race through a series of experiences.

I am not saying that the use of various instructional techniques does not have its place in the classroom, but I do think we must remember not to shortchange our students on the power of simple conversation and thinking. Many times, we assume such a lesson plan will be perceived as “boring” or “typical.” While advancements in technology and pedagogical techniques have certainly improved the state of American Education, it is important to remember that some of the greatest teachers (Confucius, Plato, and Socrates) had nothing more than passion and a voice. Let’s keep our students entertained, but never forget the power and effects of the basics. They worked then, and certainly have their place in contemporary American education.

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Using the Essential Elements as a Tool for Improving Mathematics Results

Steve Parker Zielinski and Tom Phillips

Background: *In the spring of 2003, the South Seneca Central School District in Ovid, New York began a focused transition from a grades 7-8 Middle School to a 6-8 Middle School. The purpose of this transition was to more closely align practices with the Essential Elements in an effort to increase student achievement. The mathematics department took the opportunity of the realignment to revise the math curriculum in an effort to design an integrated three-grade level program. As a result of their efforts, the students' achievement scores on the grade 8 math assessment increased from a low of 41% of the students achieving at levels 3 and 4 in 2001 to a high of over 70% of the students achieving levels 3 and 4 in 2006. The following is a short description of their process.*

When our math teachers decided to rewrite our middle-school curriculum in anticipation of our school moving from two grade levels (7-8) to three (6-8), we knew we wanted to treat the experience, from a student's viewpoint, like a three-year course. We clearly wanted to be using common vocabulary, parallel tasks that not only mimicked the state assessment, but also had the same "look" from one grade level to the next, and a methodology for us to track progress throughout the three years. Using state-assessment labels, we challenged ourselves to move 1s to 2s by the middle of the seventh-grade year, and 2s to 3s by the time they sat for the 8th grade test. If we failed in that mission for any individual student, we wanted to be sure we could list the interventions we tried along the way.

But, most of all, we knew we wanted to communicate clear academic objectives to our students, in a language they could understand and embrace. In the years before the 2005 process and content strands, our first impulse was to share directly with students the state's core curriculum. It didn't take us long to realize, though, that the language of the standards was not language middle-school students could confidently incorporate into their day-to-day approach to learning. We had to rewrite the standards in a way our students could take on as a challenge.

As the project evolved, we began to envision a one-page list of objectives, written as questions, which might incorporate all the standards we hoped for students to learn in a given year. Because we hoped students would take responsibility for their own active learning, we named them "challenges" and provided them on the first day of class for a prominent place in their math binders. We boldly predicted that if students could learn to confidently answer these questions during the school year, they would carry with them all the content knowledge they needed to succeed in their math courses. Our students loved the idea that the whole thing was right there, up front on the first day and written on one double-sided piece of paper.

The challenges themselves range from the extremely simple ("What is one-fourth as a decimal and a percent?") to the more complex ("How do you solve an equation?"), but they all have the advantage of pointing a student with extreme clarity at an aspect of fundamental mathematical knowledge or process. We

SOUTH SENECA MATH CHALLENGES GRADES 6-8

CHALLENGE 1

What is ONE-FOURTH as a decimal and a percent?

CHALLENGE 4

What are COMPLEMENTARY angles?

CHALLENGE 7

What are the FACTORS of a number?

CHALLENGE 10

Can you make a LINE GRAPH of data?

CHALLENGE 13

How do EXPONENTS work?

CHALLENGE 16

Can you find measurements using a SCALE DRAWING?

CHALLENGE 19

Can you write a VARIABLE EXPRESSION?

CHALLENGE 22

What are the IDENTITY PROPERTIES?

CHALLENGE 25

Can you substitute a NUMBER FOR A VARIABLE to evaluate an expression?

CHALLENGE 28

Can you calculate the CIRCUMFERENCE of a circle?

CHALLENGE 31

Can you find the ABSOLUTE VALUE of a number?

CHALLENGE 34

Can you MULTIPLY AND DIVIDE FRACTIONS?

CHALLENGE 37

Can you fill in a FUNCTION TABLE?

CHALLENGE 40

What does 200% of a number mean? 100%? 50%?

CHALLENGE 43

Can you do a DILATION of a figure?

CHALLENGE 46

How do you tell if a number is divisible by 2? 3? 4? 5? 6? 9? 10?

CHALLENGE 49

Can you convert from SCIENTIFIC to STANDARD NOTATION?

CHALLENGE 52

What are RATIONAL, IRRATIONAL, and REAL numbers?

CHALLENGE 2

How do you know that a figure is a SQUARE?

CHALLENGE 5

What is the COMMUTATIVE Property?

CHALLENGE 8

How do you solve a PROPORTION?

CHALLENGE 11

Do you know the basic CONVERSION FACTORS?

CHALLENGE 14

Can you calculate a RANGE of data?

CHALLENGE 17

What are INTEGERS? What kinds of integers are there?

CHALLENGE 20

Can you do a TRANSLATION of a figure?

CHALLENGE 23

Can you find the MEAN, MEDIAN, and MODE?

CHALLENGE 26

Do you know the FOUR QUADRANTS on a coordinate plane?

CHALLENGE 29

Can you calculate SIMPLE INTEREST?

CHALLENGE 32

What is ONE-FIFTH as a decimal and a percent?

CHALLENGE 35

What do you know about figures that are CONGRUENT?

CHALLENGE 38

Can you graph an INEQUALITY?

CHALLENGE 41

What is the SQUARE ROOT of a number?

CHALLENGE 44

Can you make a BAR GRAPH of data?

CHALLENGE 47

What are SUPPLEMENTARY angles?

CHALLENGE 50

Can you move numbers and variables around in EQUATIONS?

CHALLENGE 53

What is the DISTRIBUTIVE property?

CHALLENGE 3

What are the order of operations?

CHALLENGE 6

How do you calculate the AREA of a TRIANGLE?

CHALLENGE 9

Can you recognize and extend a PATTERN?

CHALLENGE 12

What is the PERIMETER of a figure?

CHALLENGE 15

Can you change ANY FRACTION to a decimal and a percent?

CHALLENGE 18

Can you calculate the VOLUME of a BOX?

CHALLENGE 21

Do you know the PERFECT SQUARES from 1-100?

CHALLENGE 24

Can you locate a CENTRAL ANGLE on a circle?

CHALLENGE 27

Can you read/make a FREQUENCY TABLE?

CHALLENGE 30

Do you know how to use RATES?

CHALLENGE 33

Can you make and read a HISTOGRAM?

CHALLENGE 36

Can you use a PROTRACTOR to measure an angle?

CHALLENGE 39

Can you find the PRIME FACTORS of a number?

CHALLENGE 42

How do you know a figure is a RHOMBUS?

CHALLENGE 45

Can you calculate ANY FRACTION of a number?

CHALLENGE 48

What is ONE-THIRD as a decimal and a percent?

CHALLENGE 51

Can you calculate the AREA of a PARALLELOGRAM?

CHALLENGE 54

Can you PLOT ANY POINT on a graph?

SOUTH SENECA MATH CHALLENGES GRADES 6-8

CHALLENGE 55

What do you know about figures that are SIMILAR?

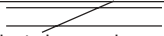
CHALLENGE 58

Can you MULTIPLY and DIVIDE SIGNED NUMBERS?

CHALLENGE 61

Can you calculate ANY PERCENT of a number?

CHALLENGE 64

PARALLEL LINES:  What do you know about the angles here?

CHALLENGE 67

What do ZERO and NEGATIVE EXPONENTS mean?

CHALLENGE 70

How do you know a figure is a RECTANGLE?

CHALLENGE 73

What is TWO-THIRDS as a decimal and a percent?

CHALLENGE 76

What is the SURFACE AREA of a three-dimensional figure?

CHALLENGE 79

What are VERTICAL angles?

CHALLENGE 82

What are "CORRESPONDING" angles and sides?

CHALLENGE 85

How do you know a figure is a PARALLELOGRAM?

CHALLENGE 88

What is the ASSOCIATIVE property?

CHALLENGE 91

Can you add and subtract POLYNOMIALS?

CHALLENGE 94

Can you calculate a PRICE WITH SALES TAX?

CHALLENGE 97

Can you COMBINE LIKE TERMS in algebra?

CHALLENGE 100

Can you list the possible outcomes of a single event?

CHALLENGE 103

What is the sum of the angles in a triangle? A quadrilateral?

CHALLENGE 106

Can you use a table of values to write an equation?

CHALLENGE 56

How do you calculate the AREA of a CIRCLE?

CHALLENGE 59

Can you do a REFLECTION of a figure?

CHALLENGE 62

What are the MULTIPLES of a number?

CHALLENGE 65

Can you make/read a CIRCLE (PIE) graph of data?

CHALLENGE 68

How do you find the DISTANCE between two points on a graph?

CHALLENGE 71

Can you put a list of rational numbers in order?

CHALLENGE 74

Can you ADD and SUBTRACT FRACTIONS?

CHALLENGE 77

You know two sides of a right triangle. Can you find the third?

CHALLENGE 80

Can you do a ROTATION of a figure?

CHALLENGE 83

How do you calculate the AREA of a TRAPEZOID?

CHALLENGE 86

Can you find the PRICE OF AN ITEM after a DISCOUNT?

CHALLENGE 89

Can you determine the PROBABILITY of COMPOUND EVENTS?

CHALLENGE 92

Can you add and subtract SIGNED NUMBERS?

CHALLENGE 95

Can you calculate the AREA OF A SECTOR?

CHALLENGE 98

What are the LAWS OF EXPONENTS?

CHALLENGE 101

Can you make and read a VENN DIAGRAM?

CHALLENGE 104

How do you calculate a salesperson's COMMISSION?

CHALLENGE 107

Can you recognize LINEAR and NONLINEAR graphs?

CHALLENGE 57

Can you add, subtract, and multiply MONOMIALS and BINOMIALS?

CHALLENGE 60

How do you SOLVE AN EQUATION?

CHALLENGE 63

What's the INVERSE of a number?

CHALLENGE 66

What's the FACTORIAL of a number?

CHALLENGE 69

What is a CHORD of a circle?

CHALLENGE 72

Can you recognize ACUTE, RIGHT, and OBTUSE angles?

CHALLENGE 75

Can you make a TREE DIAGRAM for probability problems?

CHALLENGE 78

Can you switch from MIXED NUMBERS to IMPROPER FRACTIONS?

CHALLENGE 81

Can you calculate the PERCENT CHANGE from one number to another?

CHALLENGE 84

Can you determine the PROBABILITY of a single event?

CHALLENGE 87

What is an ISOSCELES triangle?

CHALLENGE 90

How do you know if a figure is a TRAPEZOID?

CHALLENGE 93

Can you read and write numbers up to 999 TRILLION?

CHALLENGE 96

Can you make and read a PICTOGRAPH?

CHALLENGE 99

You know the circumference. Can you find the radius and diameter?

CHALLENGE 102

Can you SOLVE AN INEQUALITY?

CHALLENGE 105

Can you divide a polynomial by a monomial?

CHALLENGE 108

Can you GRAPH A LINE using an equation?

strove to boil the standards down to a finite set of tools that students could carry with them into the world and feel mathematically competent.

We also excused ourselves, and this is extremely important, from achieving perfection with the challenges. We accepted that our final documents could be criticized for not incorporating every aspect of every standard in the core curriculum, and that we might reserve the right to revisit them and edit as we gained some experience using them with our students. In fact, that is exactly what we've done over the years, and when the 2005 standards were rolled out, with their accompanying off-year testing and pre-and post-March expectations, we found we only had some minor adjustments to make in our pre-existing documents: take out the trigonometry and box-and-whisker challenges; rearrange the challenges a little by grade level; begin to offer our new challenge sheets after the March test as well as at the beginning of September to more accurately reflect the alignment of state curriculum. While other schools were faced with rewriting entire local curriculum documents and evaluating new textbook series, we found we simply needed to adjust what we were already doing. We made the transition relatively seamlessly.

As listed here for publication, the 108 challenges encompass all three years of study in our middle school. We deliberately arranged them randomly (not according to topic) to allow for use as a study aid as the tests approach. We keep the numbering consistent for all three years, and at each grade level, we present the students with a grade-specific version for their notebooks. The challenges for the current year are presented to students in bold type, and the ones not pertinent for that year are in light gray. They don't disappear, but they are de-emphasized, "tucked away" for use in future applications. To give an idea of a year's worth of challenges, the

108 original are reduced to 49 for the March-to-March year leading to the grade 8 assessment.

At South Seneca Middle School, we have learned to keep an eye on the *Essential Elements* and let them guide everything we do. As we developed the math curriculum in general, and the challenges specifically, we kept our *mission* to serve every individual student in mind; we put together a sound *program* that helped guide our everyday *instruction*; we used the *organization and structure* of our building to our advantage; we received the greatest possible support from the *leaders* in the school; we maintained *support* for every student as they worked to master the challenges; and we concentrated our *professional development* on techniques that would help us achieve our goal of communicating our local curriculum to our diverse learners. None of us feels our recent success has been a coincidence, and we won't feel our work is done until we've succeeded with every student.

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* 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.

New York State's Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch Recognition Program (2007-08) (Third Cohort)

Do you believe your middle-level school is a model for others? If so, please consider completing the application for the third cohort of schools in New York State's Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch recognition program.

New York State is seeking to identify a small number of diverse, high-performing model middle-level schools that will constitute the third cohort of schools selected for inclusion in New York State's Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch Recognition Program. These schools must be academically excellent, developmentally appropriate, socially equitable, and organized to ensure continuous improvement, as they will serve as exemplars for the implementation of the Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and the State Education Department's Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs.

An EE: STW State Leadership Team consisting of representatives from the New York State Education Department, the New York State Middle School Association, New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), the New York State Association of Teacher Educators, the New York Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, the Statewide Network of Middle-Level Education Liaisons and Support Schools, and the New York City Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform is directing this initiative. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform developed the project prototype — the nationally recognized Schools-to-Watch Program — in 1999. New York State's *Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch Program* is a State-level adaptation of the National Forum's model.

In New York State, selection criteria for the Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch recognition program are aligned with the *Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education*, the Education Department's seven *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs*, and the National Forum's four tenets of a model middle-level school: academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures and processes aimed at continuous improvement.

Benefits to participating schools and districts that elect to complete and submit an application include:

- A thorough, research-based, review of the middle-level school and its programs consistent with the Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education, the State Education Department's Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs, and Commissioner's Regulations related to the middle grades.
- Engagement of the educational community in a constructive school improvement activity.
- Identification of school/program strengths as well as areas in need of improvement.
- Development of a research-based continuous improvement plan for the school.
- Collection of research-based, baseline data to substantiate requests to the State Education Department to implement innovative programs and practices (as per Commissioner's Regulations).
- Complimentary registration for a site team at the New York State Middle School Association's Annual Conference.

Additional benefits to those schools and districts ultimately selected to be in New York State's third cohort of Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch schools include:

- National and state recognition for the district, school, and staff.
- Membership in a small, select pantheon of nationally recognized middle-level schools.
- Priority recipients of targeted grants for research and special projects.
- Professional development opportunities and networking through complimentary Institutional Membership to the New York State Middle School Association.
- Coaching towards continued success.

The minimum eligibility criteria are:

- I. Schools making application must have **at least TWO of the following grades**: grade six, grade seven, grade eight and
- II. Schools making application may satisfy the minimum student performance eligibility requirements in one of two ways:
 - Possess a 2006-07 Performance Index of 155 or higher **OR**
 - With a 2006-07 Performance Index of less than 155, have met all Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) growth targets for both the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years.

Eligible schools and districts interested in being considered for the third cohort of New York's Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch recognition program should view and download the application announcement and related information at the New York State Middle School Association's website (www.nysmsa.org), click on "Schools to Watch," and follow the directions to complete the school self-rating and the formal application. Note that completed applications must be postmarked no later than Friday, October 12, 2007.

Questions about New York State's Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch recognition program should be directed to a member of the EE: STW State Leadership Team:

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(212) 636-6436
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OR

Contact the New York State Middle School Association directly at NYSMSA@aol.com

The Schools to Watch Site Visit: A Catalyst for Improvement

Joel H. Weiss



A little more than a year ago I was asked to participate in a three-person site visitation team for the Essential Elements: Schools to Watch Program. The school, Barker Road Middle School in Pittsford, was to be judged specifically on how it met specific criteria in four areas: Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and Organization Structure & Processes.

Brian Sherman and Teal Abel were my teammates for the visitation. Both Brian and Teal were working at Indian River Central School District, while I was principal of Clarence Middle School at the time. I was excited to be part of the process for several reasons:

- I knew that Barker Road Middle School had an excellent reputation and I wanted to see first-hand some of the initiatives that the staff had undertaken.
- I consider a visitation to another middle school to always be one of the best ways to grow professionally. Over the years I've had the opportunity to visit middle schools in several states and abroad. I have always come away from the experience richer and with a sense of excitement.
- Working with Teal and Brian was a delight. Both are bright, insightful administrators with a clear vision of middle level education. Sharing insights and observations with them for two days was very rewarding.
- I welcomed the opportunity to see first-hand how the Schools to Watch Program worked. As principal of one of the higher ranked middle schools in Western New York, I was anxious, as was my superintendent, to “start

to get our feet wet” in the process, with an ultimate goal of an application for our middle school to be considered a “Schools to Watch” school.

The timing for the site visitation couldn't have been better. Clarence Middle School was in the planning stages for a major renovation — adding dozens of classrooms, new offices, and a new auditorium. We had been developing a vision for a new model for the school. I had previously visited four other successful middle schools in New York State in the fall of 2004 to glean information as we made plans for a new model: Bay Trail Middle School (Penfield), Canandaigua Middle School, Bethlehem Central Middle School, and Farnsworth Middle School (Guilderland).

What I hadn't anticipated at Barker Road Middle School was the degree to which the school and the entire community rallied behind the designation process. As my colleagues and I settled into a review mode at the school, we were bombarded with students, faculty and staff, administrators (building and district), parents, school board members, and community members all with a common vision for articulating the success that their school has experienced.

As I reflected on the single-minded and positive response, I began to realize how much work my school needed to do to get to that point. Conversations with my superintendent, Dr. Thomas Coseo, confirmed that we needed to find a way to use the rating criteria that are part of the “Schools to Watch” program as a starting point for improvement.

That is not to say that Clarence Middle School had a flawed vision for success. It has some fabulous teachers, supportive parents, and a great reputation. However, change is needed in order to continue to experience success and to find success at an even higher plateau. As a district, we have decided that we should try our best to address the rating criteria — not necessarily to eventually apply for recognition as a “School to Watch,” but rather because it’s a perfect jumping off point to focus on reform.

To that end, five committees were formed. Each committee consisted of an administrator and four additional faculty members. In February of this year each committee visited a “Schools to Watch” school, or, in one case, a school that was preparing for the site-visitation process. The schools that were visited were: Barker Road Middle School in Pittsford, Victor Junior High School, Twelve Corners Middle School in Brighton, Amherst Middle School (site visitation preparation was ongoing) and Monticello Middle School in University Heights, Ohio.

Every school had something different to offer. The committees came away from the visitation with wonderful stories of hospitality, genuine examples of school improvement, and a slightly clearer vision of what Clarence Middle School needs to do to get to the next level and perhaps down the road apply to become a “Schools to Watch” school.

What an exciting, fantastic opportunity we have! I feel so fortunate to have been a participant on the site visitation team, and to be part of the process of change. The experience has done a great deal for Clarence Middle School as we grow and look to a bright future.

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Our Emerging Middle School

Theresa Kennedy



The Middle School initiative in the Voorheesville School District began in the spring of 2000 when the voters approved a multi-million dollar expansion project. This approval resulted in the creation of a separate middle-school facility and the reorganization of students who had previously been enrolled within the configuration of grades K-6 and 7-12. In addition to the physical facility, the restructuring proposal stated the following:

The Voorheesville Central School District will create a single-building middle school. The charge of the Middle School will be to increase the academic achievement of all students in grades 6 – 8 while also recognizing and addressing their social and emotional needs (Kennedy & Tobler, 2001).

An Action Plan was developed using basic strategic planning that encompassed the seven *Essential Elements*, and each element was applied specifically to those characteristics deemed important in the Voorheesville District. Benchmarks were identified from December 2001 through the summer of 2002. The Plan established goals in preparation for a smooth transition of students and teachers as the construction of the building project moved towards its completion. Potential constraints were also identified and included budgetary concerns, the autonomy of the middle school within the structural environment, and the level of district comprehension of middle-school philosophy and needs. The seven *Essential Elements* were used to focus the blueprint, and a middle-school program was designed that included:

- a mission to develop the whole child through a variety of learning experiences

and partnerships between students, parents, teachers and the community-at-large

- a leadership philosophy that integrated the needs and developmental characteristics of young adolescents with high standards for classroom instruction, the interconnectedness of subject matter and different learning styles of students
- grade-level teams which used both horizontally and vertically-aligned rigorous and purposeful curriculum based on the New York State Standards and guided by an administrator dedicated to middle school
- the opportunity for enrichment/advanced courses as well as an Academic Intervention Service program
- provision for age appropriate clubs and activities
- opportunities for parents and students to explore the changes associated with early adolescence with a network of trained professionals, programs and community resources
- teacher-training programs designed to keep the faculty and staff apprised of changing national/state requirements and new technologies (Kennedy & Tobler, 2001).

Although Voorheesville has achieved many goals in five years, we are currently in a place of reflection and growth. We have discovered that the task of creating a new school entity is not a finite endeavor. It has evolved into an ongoing process, and now five years later we pause to ask, “Where are we

now, and what is our mission as we head into the second half of our first decade?”

As we began this reflective process, we identified two important opportunities for growth. Both are associated with the seven Essential Elements and identified by the New York State Education Department in the article “Difficulties Associated with Realizing Substantive Middle-Level Educational Change in New York State” on which we are now focusing. These two “Defining Issues” relevant to us are:

“Defining Issue One: For many middle-level practitioners, teachers and administrators alike, the purpose of the middle-level school or program – the vision and mission – is not clear, commonly understood, or fully endorsed (Purpose).”

and

“Defining Issue Seven: Middle-level schools and young adolescents lack sufficient support systems – academic and personal – to insure that all students achieve at high levels (Support)” (New York State Education Department, 2001).

With regard to Defining Issue One, SED challenges the schools to decide which middle level model to use to build their “purpose”: (1) focus primarily on academic achievement at the expense of personal development of young adolescents, (2) focus on personal development at the expense of academic achievement, or (3) “attend to both academic growth and personal development in a conscious, balanced, complementary way” (NYSED, 2001). Through meetings with stakeholder focus groups, we have identified the third path as appropriate for our district to follow. We believe that strong personal support will further enhance learning for all students including the academically gifted as well as the struggling student and all those within the middle of this spectrum. To that end, the Middle School administration and

staff collectively developed the following Mission Statement:

DRAFT
Voorheesville Middle School
Mission Statement

The Voorheesville Middle School believes that all middle-school students have a right to a rigorous and relevant academic program provided in an autonomous environment that addresses intellectual and developmental needs of young adolescents. To keep pace with the skills required in the 21st Century, the Voorheesville Middle School will offer students the learning tools that will enable them to work toward becoming compassionate, productive, and successful citizens. Addressing the unique needs of the middle school student requires a passionate commitment to lifelong learning on the part of the entire middle school community with a focus on nurturing and developing the whole child.

This draft is currently being distributed to parents of students currently in grades 3 – 8. The parents were asked to review the statement and provide input to the Middle School Associate Principal. This process has allowed not only current middle-school parents but also parents of future middle-school students to have a voice in the identification of the nature and purpose of the Voorheesville Middle School. We have also initiated a discussion at the Site Based Team meetings as well as the Middle School and High School Student Councils. This process of including all stakeholders has helped to reduce potential obstacles to systemic change and improved academic achievement. With a mission statement created collaboratively, there is strength in working together with common beliefs, goals, and values, all of which drive our actions.

In addition to our focus on the development of a strong mission statement, we also recognize the need for a strong culture that addresses the developmental needs of our students as expressed in Defining Issue Seven.

With the reauthorization of ‘No Child Left Behind’ (NCLB) in 2007 and its accompanying testing requirements, we must be careful that our focus does not become so narrow that it fails to address the developmental needs of the middle-school student. A middle-school program **must** address both academic and developmental needs if the whole child is to be educated. Although there are some academic areas not tested, they “nevertheless have a large effect on student achievement and are a significant piece of what we want our students to know and be able to do well” (Guifoyle, 2006). NCLB requirements for annual testing can provide us with some useful information relevant to instructional strategies; however, this must be only one facet that provides direction for a rigorous and relevant program.

Hawkins and Catelano list three “protective factors” that schools need to “build on ...to encourage positive behavior, social development and *ultimately improved student achievement* [italics added]” (NYSED, 2001). They hold these factors as necessary to provide connectedness for the middle school student and include: adequate opportunities for students to be involved: social, academic or behavioral skills needed for successful involvement; and recognition for students who contribute to the middle school community (NYSED, 2001). Related to the “protective factors” of Hawkins and Catelano are the findings of Klem and Connell who completed a commissioned paper in which longitudinal data was used to show that “the more engaged a student is at school, the better the academic performance and achievement” (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Student engagement can be defined as: “The extent to which students (1) are motivated and committed to learning, (2) have a sense of belonging and accomplishment, and (3) have relationships with adults, peers, and parents who support learning” (International Center for Leadership in Education/Successful Practices Network, 2005). To

both Hawkins/Catelano and Klem/Connell high achievement is the result of a multilayered approach in education. With our focus on student engagement as the necessary foundation for high academic achievement, our concept of an effectively balanced approach to student learning includes supporting the middle-level student on multiple levels and can be best explained by the graphic below:



This illustrates the importance of integrating three strands that must be addressed to best educate the middle-school student: intellectual needs, developmental needs, and a sense of community. An autonomous environment is necessary to provide focus on the specific concerns of the early adolescent as opposed to those of the child at the elementary level or the emerging young adult in the high school. With this model in place, the student is viewed through the scope of human development and their need for connectedness as well as educational practice. In *The Best Schools*, twelve key features for an authentic, developmentally appropriate middle school were identified. These included safe school climate, small learning communities, personal adult relationships, engaged learning, positive role models, metacognitive strategies, expressive arts activities, health and wellness focus, emotionally meaningful curriculum, student roles in decision making, honoring and re-

specting student voices, and facilitating social and emotional growth (Armstrong, 2006). This extensive list illustrates the absolute necessity to address the whole middle school child at every level.

To continue the reflective process at Voorheesville, the entire faculty and staff met in small groups to answer the question “What are the educational goals that you would stand behind for each and every student?” From the answers received, it is apparent that the areas of curriculum, developmental support, and community, as well as an independent environment identified in our model are crucial. This process also provided a multi-grade level approach to the question and maintained a vertical perspective that effectively addresses students before, during, and after the middle-school years.

As a result of this process, we also recognized several strengths already in place. One of these is a strong Character Education program which is crucial to the success of the early adolescent as the student learns to make choices and decisions that are respectful and responsible. Particularly at the middle level, students are taking their initial steps as young adults, and it is our task to help them with a scaffolded approach similar to that applied in their academic areas. Expectations for both behavior and achievement will be kept high with an emphasis on personal best. Another strength involves our willingness and ability to work collaboratively. In light of this, an effective academic tool recently available to us is our current participation in the Successful Practices Network (SPN), an organization supported by the International Center for Leadership in Education. As we address our common goals, we will access support from SPN to challenge the students in the area of real world application as well as depth of knowledge (ICLE/SPN, 2005). We are also in the process of content curriculum mapping across the grade levels to ensure that there are

no gaps or overlaps in the scope and sequence of instruction in the middle school.

What are the implications for Voorheesville Middle School and where do we go now? To determine this we have initiated the development of a new Action Plan using the “Organic Planning Model” (McNamara, 2006). In combination with the traditional linear planning, this model is most appropriate for school as a living organism and allows for the acknowledgement of common values, dialogue and shared reflection. Currently, the process of forming our (Organic) Action Plan is unfolding to reveal several needs. We have asked the question, “What is best for all of our students?” When considering the level of student engagement, our goal is to motivate no less than 100% of the student body, to connect with each student and establish a relationship that is supportive and encourages student growth and academic accomplishment. The basis for our direction is founded in the belief that students need to know that there are adults who care about them as individuals as well as their success in learning. This connectedness will foster engagement and motivation which will in turn engender academic achievement. “Good teachers teach their subject matter well; great teachers engage students in the learning tasks of the moment and instill in them the desire to keep learning long after graduation” (Sadowski, 2006). We look forward to the next five years and will keep our vision centered on nurturing and developing the whole child at the Voorheesville Middle School.

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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.

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:
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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

27TH 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) _____

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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 _____

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