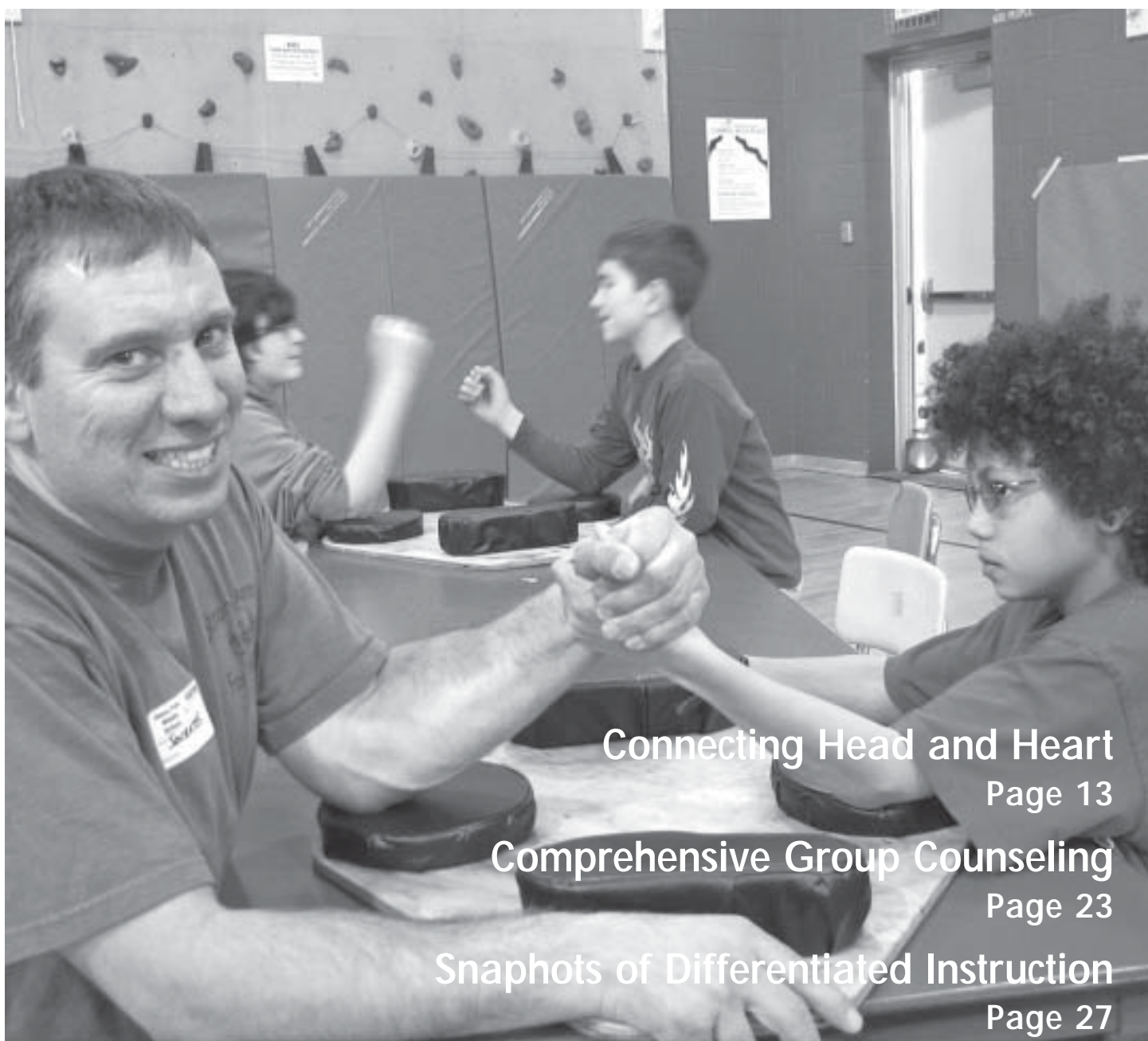


IN Transition

Journal of the New York State Middle School Association



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NYSMSA MISSION STATEMENT AND GOALS

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

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

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

AWARENESS AND RESPONSIVENESS

NYSMSA believes that we must:

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

SUPPORT

NYSMSA believes that we must:

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

CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, & ASSESSMENT

NYSMSA believes that we must:

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

COLLABORATION

NYSMSA believes that we must:

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

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On the Cover

Photo taken by Krystyna Farrell, a sixth grade student at Glens Falls Middle School, Glens Falls NY.



From the Editor's Desk

Chris Reed



Chris Reed

As the newly appointed editor of *In Transition*, the journal of the New York State Middle School Association, I am excited to present you with this issue. You will find numerous excellent articles covering a wide array of topics. We have kept all of the standard columns, which in-

clude: A few thoughts from the President, the Executive Director's Message, Research at a Glance, and Lea's Lessons.

I invite you to consider submitting an article for possible inclusion in a future edition of the journal. You will find the article submission requirements contained on page 36 of this issue and will probably agree that it is a fairly straightforward process. On occasion, we may develop a themed issue on a given topic but, as a rule, we welcome writers to share their thoughts on a middle-level topic of their choice. What program in your school is particularly noteworthy? What best practices could you share with fellow educators around the State? Have you conducted any formal or informal research that you would like to share? Please consider submitting an article to share your experiences.

Finally, don't forget to check out our website at www.nysmsa.org. In addition to a wealth of middle-level information contained therein, you will find information about our Middle-Level Institute, June 30 & July 1 at the Corning Museum of Glass, and our 28th Annual Conference, October 23-25 in Syracuse.

About the Cover

Students at the Glens Falls Middle School enjoyed a brief arm-wrestling unit in their physical education classes in December. Every three years PE teacher Kevin Crossman invites his uncle, Socrates Fronhofer, to conduct an arm-wrestling session with all students in the middle school over the course of a long day. In this way, all middle schoolers get the opportunity to participate sometime during their 6-8 experience.

Socrates has held both national and international titles in the sport and was once ranked second in the world. Much more than just another lifelong activity, Socrates stresses how arm-wrestling has led to many enduring friendships, the ability to travel extensively, and the opportunity to interact with countless different cultures. Socrates was a member of the U.S. contingent that originally taught the sport to the Russians, who now dominate arm-wrestling worldwide.

Arm-wrestling joins snow-shoeing, rock-climbing and table tennis as alternative activities that are taught in the creative physical education curriculum at the Glens Falls Middle School. Schools interested in contacting Socrates for a visit can reach him at Socrates@bdpindustries.com.

NYSMSA 2007-2008 Award Winners

Connie Toepfer Award for Leadership
Carmen Macchia
Principal, Port Chester Middle School



Essential Elements: Schools to Watch Award
North Salem Middle School
Dr. Patricia Cyganovich, Principal



Marybeth Casey, NYSED; Dr. Patricia Cyganovich; Dr. Jeannette Stern, NYSMSA



A few thoughts from the President...

Linda Ruest



Linda Ruest

As the newly elected President of the New York State Middle School Association, I am very pleased to be continuing my service to the middle-level educators and students in New York State in this new capacity. As a former

middle-level teacher, school improvement administrator, and now as a middle-level consultant both in NYS and nationally, I have devoted the past twenty years of my career to advocating for and working toward the implementation of developmentally responsive practices that meet the needs of our middle-level students. I pledge to redouble this advocacy effort over my tenure as NYSMSA President.

When considering topics for my first NYSMSA President's Message, many critical issues came to mind. However, while attending the National Middle School Association Annual Conference in Houston this past November, it became clear to me that for matters of both importance and timing, this message should focus on the current middle-level legislation that is before the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate.

At a leadership meeting of the many middle-level state organizations affiliated with NMSA, we were fortunate to hear from Susan Frost, NMSA's Senior Policy Advisor in DC. She shared with us the quest that she and others at the national level have undertaken in an effort to

ensure that our nation's 15 million middle-level students receive the quality education that they deserve. Her message was inspirational, but, more importantly, she successfully communicated the importance and urgency of our actively joining this quest.

We are now, for the first time in history, poised to make middle-level policy at the national level a reality. Through the dedicated work of the National Middle School Association, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, the Academy for Educational Development, the International Reading Association, the Alliance for Excellent Education, ACT, and the College Board, and with support from state affiliate middle-level organizations including NYSMSA, the case has been made that the middle level, as a separate and distinct entity, is important and that we need a national middle-level policy in place.

As a result, earlier this year, Senators Obama, Reed, and Whitehouse introduced the "Success in the Middle" bill (S. 2227) in the Senate, and Representative Grijalva introduced a companion bill (H\$ 3406) in the House of Representatives. If passed, these bills would encourage and support schools across the nation to improve middle-grades education. They provide federal funding for the middle level, as well as encouragement to implement research-based strategies that specifically help the schools and students who are being left behind. If these legislators, with our support, are successful, then No Child Left Behind would no longer be silent on the issue of middle-level education.

So, here is where we join the quest. Ms Frost's compelling plea to the affiliate leaders was that our Representatives and Senators need to hear from us. They have heard our representative organizations make the case, but they must hear it from us. Middle-level educators – those of us in the trenches – need to let them know what we need and want... what our schools and students need and want. They need to know that we must have a policy to protect and support our middle-level students. As Ms Frost put it, "They are waiting to hear from us."

The nation's high schools have already successfully made their case. And, in making their case, they ensured that their legislators heard from everyone... teachers, administrators, business and industry, civil rights leaders, students, parents, and even Bill Gates. Their legislators heard their message and acted on it. If we are to be successful in passing these two bills, this has to be the model we adopt.

Here in New York State, we are very fortunate to have the force of both middle-level policy and regulation behind us in working toward achieving NYSMSA's mission of "creating, promoting, and supporting effective middle-level programs that are academically rigorous and developmentally appropriate." The *New York State Regents Policy Statement, the Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs*, and the concomitant rubrics and protocols for their implementation all support us in this effort. Additionally, Commissioner's Regulations 100.4.h. requires that "*districts shall ensure that the middle-level program is aligned with the Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and the State Education Department's Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs*" in all three middle-level structural models.

These NYS middle-level policies and regulations support us, challenge us, and guide us. It is time that we have a national policy in place that will offer additional support, challenge, and

guidance to middle-level educators across the country, including the financial support that the bills would provide.

The NYMSA Board of Directors is asking that, for the sake of the 15 million middle-level students in the United States, you join this quest. As middle-level educators, here are specific steps you can take to support these efforts:

- Go to NYSMSA.org and click on the NMSA link. Read all the information available regarding the Success in the Middle legislation;
- Email your federal legislators, asking them to support and co-sponsor the bill in his/her house; the information is on the NMSA website (Don't use "snail mail" – letters could take 4 weeks to receive as they are so carefully screened for toxins);
- Call your NYS Senator and make the case (<http://www.senate.gov/>). Ask Senators Clinton and Schumer to co-sponsor the bill in the Senate. (Call the Capitol switchboard; ask for your Senator's office; ask for the name of the person on the Senator's staff who is handling education; when you get that person's voice mail, ask for support for these bills and explain why.)
- Invite your legislators to your school; show them your classes, your students, and your teams that shine. And help them to realize that we need legislation to ensure that all students have appropriate middle-level experiences.
- Check for updates and continue to follow the progress on this important matter. Repeat the above steps and get your friends and colleagues to do so until we are successful.

We need the Success in the Middle bills to be accepted in both the House and the Senate. At this point, the House bill appears to have enough support to pass. However, we haven't made the case in the Senate and, until we do, we have no guarantee. Your action could be the one that tips the scale. Your call or e-mail could make the difference. As Ms Frost so astutely stated, **"Advocate! If we don't, then who will?"**



The Executive Director's Message

Dennis M. Tosetto



Dennis Tosetto

The New Year is upon us and that always brings us to a point of reflection on the past as well as a need to update our plans for the future. Over the past few decades, the middle-level movement has had its ups and downs, but progress has been ongoing. As

a result, NYSMSA has had a bit of a roller coaster ride as the key organization representing the middle grades in New York State and we, too, have made much progress over the years. Initially, some of our friends and colleagues such as Dr. Conrad (Connie) F. Toepfer and Dr. John H Lounsbury gave fire to a national movement that was based upon considerable professional logic (but very little research) regarding what was good for young adolescents. The concept of being child-centered was something that was missing in dominating Junior High School programs across the nation. Folks like Toepfer and Lounsbury were among the first to recognize that to be effective, we had to teach children and not just facts.

I was fortunate to be along for the ride as the research caught up to and began to lead the middle-level movement both in New York State and nationally. Today, we not only know what are good middle-level educational practices, but we can also prove that they are best practices. We now face our most difficult challenge —

jumping from the abstract into the concrete. We know how middle-level schools, including classroom instruction, must change in order to incorporate research-based best practices into our instructional programs on a daily basis. However, we also know how hard it is for many of our colleagues to give up old, comfortable habits and methods for something new and, in many cases, very different. We must also not forget that to make such changes carries with it an admission that perhaps what we had been doing for many years as professionals in a particular school was not a best practice. These are tough, emotion-laden issues to overcome or even talk about during a faculty meeting.

That being said, over the past couple of decades we have met with many successes as middle-level educators. At the national level the National Middle School Association has generated a host of publications that chronicle the progress of the middle-level movement including the publication **This We Believe** that connects the past with the future. At the state level, our Board of Regents issued perhaps the first policy statement on middle-level education to be published by a state or national governmental body anywhere in the world. NYSMSA was proud to be a part of the development of that excellent document and of the middle-level related components that then flowed from SED to school districts across the state.

A little over a decade later after the adoption of the *Regents Policy Statement on Middle Level Education*, the New York State Education Department issued *The Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs*, which put into regulation exactly

how middle-level instructional programs are to be implemented in our schools and classrooms. The New York State Essential Elements are also research based and are now required to be implemented in all middle-grades instructional programs regardless of the school's configuration. In other words, a school can be K-12, 8-12, 6-8, or include any other series of grades. It makes no difference because, according to the regulations of the Commissioner of Education, the New York State Essential Elements must be implemented with fidelity in all middle grades across the state.

Over the past year or so, some of us worked together nationally under the leadership of the National Middle School Association to develop a program or process to move support for a research-based middle-level educational philosophy and methods within the federal government. The result was an NMSA publication entitled *Success in the Middle: A Policymaker's Guide to Achieving Quality Middle Level Education* (<http://www.nmsa.org/Advocacy/PolicyGuide/tabid/784/Default.aspx>).

On October 24, 2007, Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) was joined by Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) and Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) in introducing the Senate version of *Success in the Middle* — S. 2227, a bill that would authorize grants to states and school districts to help improve middle grades education and turn-around low-performing middle schools. Senator Obama is urging other Senators to join him in co-sponsoring the legislation. A companion bill, HR 3406, was introduced in the House by Representative Grijalva (D-AZ) and currently has 15 co-sponsors. Representative Grijalva will offer *Success in the Middle* as an amendment when NCLB is marked up by the House Education and Workforce Committee. Senator Obama will work to get the bill included in the Senate HELP Committee's NCLB proposal.

Middle-level educators who were determined to support the middle-level movement

nationally have begun a School to Watch recognition program under an organization called The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. In New York State, this middle-level recognition program is called the Essential Elements: Schools to Watch Recognition Program. There are several components to this program and it begins with a self-evaluation by school personnel to determine how well the school's middle grades meet the New York State Essential Elements and if the school's assessment results demonstrate a high level of success. Over the past few years several schools have formally gained this mantle of excellence.

Gaining statewide recognition for excellence is not competitive under the Essential Elements: Schools to Watch Recognition Program. The middle-level grades in a school must simply present strong evidence of the quality of its program first by completing and submitting an EE:STW application and then having a review team spend a day in the school visiting classes and speaking with students, teachers and other school district leaders. A good way to begin the process is to download pertinent materials from the NYSMSA website at: www.nysmsa.org.

Once you have the materials, discuss the need to have a staff-based evaluation of the schools current program as it relates to the New York State Essential Elements, then arrange for a representative committee to organize a plan to guide the school along a path that will lead to full implementation and excellence. However, please understand that completing the school improvement process could take one or more years to complete depending on what is currently in place and effectively implemented. If you need assistance or support, please keep in mind that NYSMSA is always available to serve you. We are not just an organization; rather, we are a professional organization made up of expert educators who have volunteered to promote best practices and to lend a hand to their colleagues when needed.

As you can see, the face and direction of NYSMSA is changing as we move our efforts from defining quality middle-level education to collaborating to ensure the implementation of a quality research-based program in every school with middle grades in our state. To this end, we are redoubling our efforts to support you and your colleagues across the state. NYSMSA has led the way for middle-level educators and children over past decades and we are now poised to ensure the full implementation of the New York State Essential Elements.

Our NYSMSA Board has the experience, skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to get the job done. Under the leadership of our new President, Linda Ruest, we are exploring and developing new ways to assist our members and their schools to commit to and fully implement the Essential Elements. We will be asking for your continued support as we move forward in these exciting middle-level times.

And don't forget about our Middle-Level Institute on June 30-July 1, 2008, at the Corning Museum of Glass. Specific information regarding the CMoG Institute will be posted on our website by February 1, 2008. The Institute offers small-group sessions involving ten hours of hands-on instruction over two days in a topic area of your choice. Workshop topics typically range from instructional methodologies to assessment techniques to middle-level leadership. Please put these dates in your calendar and plan to attend. The comments from Institute participants are always filled with high praise and we work hard to make learning and collaborating with colleagues a very positive, rewarding, and fun-filled experience.

We wish you much success in the New Year and we hope that you will continue to be a supportive member of Team 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



A Call to Action

The *Research at a Glance* article in the Spring 2007 edition of *In Transition* presented a collection of research summaries about student achievement and middle schools and middle-level programs (Craig, 2007). The article pointed out that there weren't any large-scale studies that measured many of the principles that have been identified to be important according to the New York State Education Department in the *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs* (Craig). In fact, very few large-scale studies have been done at all (Mertens, 2006), anywhere in the country. As attention on middle-level achievement remains keen in New York State, and as some districts are questioning grade configuration, it is more important than ever that research be conducted in New York.

Another time, it was reported in *Research at a Glance* that two states have undertaken large-scale research projects (Craig, 2007a). The large-scale studies conducted by Arkansas and Missouri are examples of the kind of research that is lacking in New York State. These studies, and other survey-based research studies, prove that such efforts are both feasible and productive.

Currently, there are no major middle-level research projects that are underway in New York State. A review of the literature about student achievement, the *Essential Elements*, and the middle level turned up no published evidence of this kind of research being conducted at any university, college, or center of learning in the state. Nor are there any indications that the State

Education Department is undertaking a middle-level research initiative. As any middle-level educator knows, however, such research is sorely lacking and clearly needed. This situation parallels the state of middle-level research nationally. Indeed, the Middle Level Education Research special interest group of AERA (American Educational Research Association) issued a "white paper" titled "A Proposal for Establishing a National Middle Level Research Project" that articulates the need a concerted research effort (Mertens, 2006a). In this paper, Mertens calls for a national research project that has gone unfunded so far. Because of the lack of funding, the special interest group is undertaking a much more modest study of common team planning time.

It is time, then, that middle-level educators, researchers, and leaders in New York State get organized in order to plan and implement a research agenda. Currently, a statewide assessment of the *Essential Elements* is in its pilot stage. While this study will provide concrete data about the *Essential Elements* and their implementation, it alone cannot represent the sum total of research about the middle-level in our state. Here are some ideas that might help to revitalize research about the middle-level in New York State:

1. Form an informal group of middle-level educators who share a common interest in research. Under the umbrella of the New York State Middle School Association, such a group can become connected.
2. Establish a listserv among interested middle-level educators centered around research and related best practices.

3. Meet as a group at the annual statewide middle school conference in October 2008 in Syracuse.
4. Identify an agenda and action plan.

If you are interested in exploring such a group, please contact me, Jeff Craig, at craig@nysmsa.org. I will take care of the first three steps outlined above. At a gathering in Syracuse in October, middle-level educators and academicians interested in research can start on item number four of those listed above.

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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.

Lea's Lessons

Lea Macdonald



Meeting the Needs of All Learners through Formative Assessment

From judging performance to guiding students to shaping instruction to informing learning, coming to grips with formative assessment is one insightful journey.

—Carol Ann Tomlinson

Differentiating instruction is a philosophy of teaching. It is a complex set of beliefs and practices that take respectable, humane, flexible principles of learning into account. Differentiated instruction enriches the learning of all students by engaging multiple intelligences, the arts, emotions, and interdisciplinary connections and by building a community of learners in the classroom. Another important principle evident in a classroom that addresses the different learning styles and readiness levels of students is formative assessment.

Formative assessment is an ongoing process that evokes evidence about student learning, provides feedback about learning to teachers and to students. Formative assessment involves far more than testing. It delivers information during the instructional process before the final, summative assessment. When teachers assess student learning for formative purposes, there is no grade on the paper. Rather, it serves as an indicator of where the student is on the continuum of novice to expert in their comprehension of the concepts they have learned in class.

Formative assessment is one of the most important aspects of a differentiated classroom. I believe that my students perform better on end of the unit tests because I am checking their progress on an ongoing basis during each unit.

Assessments that come at the end of a unit are less useful to a teacher than assessments that occur during a unit of study. When teachers study student work during the course of a unit of study, they have the opportunity to do many things to support or enrich student learning. One of the most important aspects of formative assessment is feedback. Teachers need to give clear, descriptive, criterion-based feedback to students that indicates to them:

- Where they are in the learning process
- How their response differed from that reflected in the desired learning goal
- How they can move forward

Students are partners in formative assessment and learning. Effective descriptive feedback identifies strengths, suggests areas for improvement and a route a student can take to close the learning gap between where they are now and where they need to be.

There are many other strategies in addition to feedback that teachers can use with their students. First, pre-assessment is used to assess where a student is in relation to a concept, content or skill before a unit of study begins. Many teachers use the KWL chart or pre-tests. One of my favorite strategies to use as a pre-assessment tool is Circle of Knowledge (see shaded box on the next page for directions). It can also be used at the end of a unit for an informal post assessment before the unit test.

Formative assessment is used throughout the unit to diagnose a student's understandings of key concepts, content and skills during the unit of study. This allows a teacher to know where students are before they get to an end of the unit

test, and provides ongoing support. One of my most successful process assessment strategies is exit slips. During the unit I need to assess how the students are faring so far in mastering the key concepts and skills necessary for understanding. For example, I will have the students participate in a 3-2-1-activity midway through the unit on the Clash of Cultures. They need to write down 3 new ideas on concepts that they have learned, 2 questions they have about this knowledge, and 1 new vocabulary term with the definition and use it in a sentence. This exit slip from class is dropped in the box at the door and I can read through them later to get a sense of where students are at this time. Do I need to form readiness groups based on their understandings? Do I need to re-teach? Do I need to provide guided practice? Do I need to offer enrichment tasks to some while I work on basic understandings with others? Exit slips have helped me to prepare students for success on the unit tests as well as helping me to better understand the needs of each learner. Another tactic I use in my 7th grade class is what I call, "clipboard cruising". I carry a clipboard around the class jotting down notes on student progress, participation, and understanding as I facilitate the class work. I use post-its or a class list to make comments about students.

Formative assessment is a worthwhile aspect of the differentiated classroom. It yields valuable information about students' learning. It's a shift from assessment as evaluating students and more to guiding students. Formative assessment is a means to continually gather evidence about learning so that actions can be adapted to meet learning needs, and so that students can be active participants with their teachers in understanding how their learning is progressing and how improvements can be made.

Circle of Knowledge

1. Form teams of 4-5 students per team.
2. Each team has one sheet of chart paper and each student has a different color marker.
3. Each student writes his/her name on the back of the paper with his/her colored marker.
4. The teacher poses a brainstorming question to the class. (Example: What do you already know about the American Revolution?)
5. Students rotate around the circle writing down an idea in response to the question.
6. At any time a student may pass and choose not to respond.
7. No one may speak out of turn.
8. There is a set time limit depending on the complexity of the question.
9. The teacher will act as the moderator of the whole class discussion as rotating teams offer their answers. The teacher will record the teams' responses on a large sheet of chart paper.
10. The team with the most unique answers is the winner of today's Circle of Knowledge.
11. The class poster will be displayed during the unit and students may add new ideas about the topic at any time.
12. The teacher can check each student's individual knowledge by comparing the name on the back of the sheet with the color of the marker.

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

Connecting Head and Heart: Social-Emotional Learning in a Data Driven World

Rebecca Chowske



Today was a fairly typical day: I used data to map curriculum, spoke with three nervous 6th grade parents, and rented a Pitchburst to douse our middle school principal with water during our ELA Spirit Assembly. I love my job.

School Context

Wantagh is located on the south shore of Long Island at the gateway to Jones Beach. As of the year 2000 census, Wantagh's population was 18,971; 94% White, 3.3% Latino, and 1.9% Asian. We are considered a high property tax district; primarily residential, we have a small commercial tax base. The average household income is \$100,480. This is significantly higher than the average Nassau County household income of \$85,248, and the average U.S. household income of \$49,325. Wantagh is not, however, a pretentious town. While the district has some wealthy parents, most are solidly middle or upper-middle class. Staunchly family oriented, the district boasts an extensive and active extra-curricular and activity menu—something for everyone's taste ranging from football to the theatre arts. Wantagh schools have the reputation for excellent Special Education programs, so while we do not have significant cohorts in the areas of ELL or Free Lunch, we are high in the Special Education cohort. We are also, like most schools in the area, bursting at the seams. We are now at capacity with a population of 3000 in grades 6-12 alone. Still, although we are hard pressed to find more instructional space (Note: a bond has passed and we are promised more secondary classrooms within the next 1-3 years) the district's graduation rate is consistently at or above 96% and an average of 86%+ of the student body continues on to a four year

college. What Wantagh is most known for, however, is our focus on social-emotional learning and community service. Our superintendent, Dr. Carl Bonuso, models these virtues from the top; he is an active member of Habitat for Humanity.

The Adventure Begins

I applied for the position of English 7-12 Supervisor in the spring of 2006 at the prompting of my mentor. I was happily employed at my prior district; however the opportunity to work in a district that not only mirrored my teaching philosophy but was filled with people I knew to be humane and professional made me jump at the chance. I was hired in July and, as such, was left with my retiree-predecessor's excellent notes, but only central administration and the middle school's building administrators as transitional support. The Middle School principal, Dr. Jeannette Stern, made it clear that she believed the Middle School ELA department had not received the attention it deserved from the previous supervisor and that there was significant updating and overhauling of curricula to be done. I learned I was also responsible for the 6th grade state assessments and that there was a communication gap between the 6th grade teachers and the 7th and 8th grade teachers. At the time I believed my first job would be teambuilding; the reality was otherwise.

Eek! The 2006 ELA Results

I often mentally begin my discussion of the Middle School's ELA initiative with the statement, "Thank goodness this happened in 2006 and not in 2007." In past years, Wantagh typi-

cally has 73% pass the 8th grade ELA exam. There is certainly room for improvement, but these results set us firmly in the middle of the county “pack.” In 2006 we had a 60% passing rate. The 4th grade ELA and 11th grade Regents both boast passing rates in the high 90s (Last year the high school had a 99% passing rate—including the high Special Education passing rate. No pressure for me there!) To make matters worse, NYSED released the 2006 percentage results *in October* to the media approximately two weeks after districts received their overview reports, but no individual scores or data breakdowns were given. Essentially, school districts with disappointing results, like Wantagh, were left to explain why these scores happened without any information. As a new person, I did not receive any of the initial phone calls, but our Assistant Superintendent and Middle School Principal received many. Even I, who was not as plugged into the community as I am now, heard the “Buzz at the Bus Stops” that wondered why the district was floating a \$16.5 million bond proposal to repair and upgrade our (crumbling and overcrowded) schools when the children were “not being educated properly.” I learned that the public can focus very quickly on the ancillary improvements like the football field and track—legitimate needs—and perceive these needs as frivolous in the face of these scores.

I was told that I had nothing to do with the bond issue and that none of this situation was of my making, and truly I wasn’t held responsible by any group within or outside of the school. I knew, however, that my reaction and response would determine my future leadership and the morale of my department. The confidence of my young Middle School ELA staff was shaken; clearly intervention was needed.

We Just Need a Good Plan

Over one long weekend, I wrote an ELA action plan. Dr. Stern, Randee Zimmerman, the Supportive Reading Supervisor, and I e-mailed

back and forth all weekend, bashing out a logical and workable plan for addressing this situation. Our approach was simple: we can’t change the past, finger pointing is counterproductive, and January is coming rapidly. What is the next right step? Four drafts later, the plan was ready for our meeting with the Assistant Superintendent, Dr. Begley, that Monday morning. The universe had cooperated; I was given a flyer for a Parallel Assessment Writing Workshop the week before. Thus, I was able to present Dr. Begley with an opportunity for meaningful staff development. This meeting also taught me the first level of budgetary negotiation: be sure always know what an initiative will need and cost. I knew that a short term improvement, important to regain the public’s trust and the staff’s confidence, would require test preparation workbooks. Nothing organizes teacher instruction and sends a clearer message to parents than the physical proof that we are addressing the problem. I also knew that this would be expensive, so when Dr. Begley asked how much money this would cost I had the estimates in hand. NCLB has its own budget line in Wantagh, so I was able to get the money immediately. This preparation and some negotiation with the publisher to give us free shipping (saving the district over \$800) is one of my personal victories. I learned to anticipate questions asked....

First Steps to Recovery

Our first step toward recovery was to benchmark the entire middle school population. A logistically challenging task, Dr. Stern, the Assistant Principal, Randee Zimmerman and I put together a plan that would give an abbreviated ELA assessment to the entire school. Stopping instruction entirely to provide the benchmark (the previous January’s released ELA) would establish our serious intent—to students, faculty, and parents. Ultimately, we decided to give only the reading multiple-choice section from the corresponding grade level’s test; our writing analysis would take place in

individual classrooms. Our rationale was this: by focusing on the multiple-choice was hoped to easily and efficiently improve scores. The next step was to analyze the data, a challenging task because we did not, at that time, belong to the BOCES Data Warehouse.

After analyzing the January 2006 ELA data, we found that almost 20% of the 7th and 8th grade students had missed the level three cut by 1 or 2 questions! Tracking these students showed another twist: many of the students who scored a 2 were doing well or exceptionally well in classes. The hidden blessing was that this combination of data, while exhausting to collect by hand, was allowing us to view each student as an individual learner. The challenge was to find the disconnect between test performance and actual student literacy.

The benchmark provided a swift response to parent questions and concerns; communication of our process was key. A letter to parents was sent home prior to benchmarking explaining the purpose and process. After the benchmark was corrected we invited students who performed poorly for additional ELA review sessions after school three days each week. In both cases, the effort to communicate with parents was fruitful. Parents, when they called, asked how they could support their children's efforts. In class, teachers utilized parallel assessments to support their current curriculum while introducing students to the form and vocabulary of the state assessment. Courage and confidence grew with the direction and support of central and building administration. Improvement, it seemed, was within reach.

The Results

When the dust settled, the 8th grade scores had improved by 18.3%, the 7th grade by 4.1% and the 6th grade by 6.6%. Respectable gains, but we knew that this response was merely an academic Band-Aid; we needed to establish a protocol for data collection and analysis, provide staff development and support, and write curriculum that responded to—but *did not teach to*

the state assessments. Ideally the NYS core curriculum, we agreed, should be the minimum standard for student achievement.

Remembering Who We Really Are

After the ELA we stopped and assessed what we had done during the last few months. Were we truly responding to what we felt was important, the individual student? Not always—the Test had dominated. How could we respond to the requirements of the staggering NYS core curriculum and assessments and still stay firmly rooted in the social-emotional education to which we ascribe? We put on our thinking caps and got moving.

Later that Year

By providing materials, staff development, time, and emotional support we have begun to create something fine and strong joining both “head and heart.” We began on a fundamental level, re-examining our curriculum. This has been an ongoing process: at press, we are in the midst of rewriting and retooling “what we love best” to support “what we need to do.” “What we love best” is our celebration of character development and education. In the spring of 2006 our 7th grade students participated in Scholastic's “Classrooms Care” (For each 100 books students read, Scholastic donated 100 books to students in need.) Our 8th graders, in conjunction with a unit on *The Diary of Anne Frank*, hosted Mrs. Etunia Katz, a Holocaust survivor and author. In a grade level assembly, Mrs. Katz held our 8th graders rapt as she recounted her incredibly survival story. After the assembly, students wrote journal responses to her speech and thank you letters to Mrs. Katz. Yet this was not enough for the students. Still later, in response to Mrs. Katz's message of hope and tolerance, the 8th graders created their own celebration: “Character T-shirt Day.” On a cold day in March the 8th graders wore their character tees. Each 8th grader decorated his or her own shirts with a special quote or quotes

reflecting a positive world vision. That day the halls were literally filled with positive messages. In both the 7th and 8th grade, students were now combining the ELA requirements with authentic and meaningful social-emotional and literacy experiences. We had begun to meld what we love with what we need to do.

How Are We Doing?

Deep into the next ELA preparation cycle, we are currently continuing with our curriculum overhaul. Teachers wrote new curriculum over the summer for a 6th grade supportive skills program; 7th grade teachers created a lunchtime Team Lab that offers targeted skills for the 7th grade curriculum, and the 8th grade AIS has blossomed. Within classes you'll see many more parallel assessments, but they are grounded in authentic and meaningful literary experiences.

How meaningful? This fall, in our continued effort to create a vibrant community of readers, writers, and thinkers, we announced our first annual reading competition. This year our middle school community will read to “Dunk Dr. Stern.” Our principal and resident good sport, Dr. Stern has agreed to allow the top readers from grades 6-8 to attempt to “dunk” her in a Pitchburst, a device that drops a balloon filled with liquid onto the “dunkee” when a target is hit. During a middle school assembly top readers will be honored, Dr. Stern will be dunked, and—as an added treat, we will have members of the Islanders hockey organization come to speak on teamwork. The middle school band will play, our cheerleaders will be present and we will celebrate our reading community—on January 11, the last Friday before the ELA.

Clearly the reading contest is not a new idea, but yet again our approach reflects what we love—our kids. Students record the number of minutes read, not the number of books; the result is that we have everyone, from the self-contained Life Skills class (their parents are reading to them) to our gifted program and staff

competing. Everyone is welcome; you must only read.

Three months into the program we have found that many students who are reluctant readers are reading far beyond their norm. As a result we will be presenting over 250 students an “Above and Beyond” award celebrating their progress. Two of the special recipients will be from Katie Lux’s Life Skills class. One, his mother told me, asks each night that she read his Dr. Seuss books to him because, “I’d really like to dunk Dr. Stern.”

And We Continue...

The curriculum review and revision will continue; our goal is to create an organic cycle of “Review, Revise, and Respond.” Embedding this cycle into our level meetings and staff development will allow us to head off foreseeable problems and to respond to individual student needs. However, this is an uncomfortable change for some teachers. One of the ELA teachers stated last week, “I think that the assessments have taken all the fun out of school.” I respectfully disagree. The assessments challenge us to examine our performance trends, respond to individual students, and reassess what learning we think is happening in our classrooms and correlate these beliefs with what learning is *actually* happening. Can they become the focus of our existence? Absolutely. But with care, planning, and creativity we can join the academic and the social-emotional to teach students—“head and heart.”

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Act Your Age: Using Performance in the Middle-Level Classroom

Amber Rain Chandler



“Nice threads! Gimme some skin. Let’s go downtown to get us some new kicks,” John says as he struts in front of the classroom.

“Backatcha brother. Let’s keep on truckin’ down to the mall. I hear there are some primo ladies there. We’ll get your new kicks, too, so don’t have a cow. Hey, Mrs. Chandler just gave me the hairy eyeball. Let’s blow this taco stand,” Kevin replies as the duo exits the room.

No, the above scene isn’t out of a bad movie from the Seventies, but rather one of many pre-reading skits my students performed for their peers before we began reading *The Pigman*. Initially, I was nervous about teaching a novel with such thick slang — some of which I had to research myself. However, I decided I’d try a different approach.

Before I even distributed the novel, I gave groups of four students a list of about fifty slang words from the Seventies. Next they drew tasks from a hat and were given twenty minutes to prepare. We then spent the next twenty minutes watching very brief, but very informative skits demonstrating both the meaning of the words and the inherent goofiness of 13-year-olds. I only wish I had costumes! What was most interesting about this particular performance-based activity is that I had only prepared a class set of the Seventies slang, yet by the end of the day I had at least twenty requests for a copy of

the handout. Never in my teaching career have I had so many students clamoring for a handout; it was a nice contrast to the number of times I have picked handouts off the floor.



In order to generate the Seventies slang list, I did some Internet research, looking for age appropriate words. Next, I gave each one a kid-friendly definition, as well as a practical instance of the word. For example, “What it is” is a greeting, usually meaning, “Hey, what’s up?” It was fun to hear them in the hallways over the next few weeks saying “Catch you on the flip side.” Be prepared though, I had to bring in a vinyl record for them to understand what was

meant by a “flip side.”

Next, I looked at the list I had generated. I wanted them to be able to use as many of the slang words in a skit as possible, so I created skit tasks that were very general. The table shows the tasks that my students picked from a hat.

Slang of the Seventies Skit Tasks

- You are saying goodbye to your friends.
- You are trying to borrow money.
- You like someone’s outfit.
- You are saying hello to people as you walk down the hall.
- You want to go shopping for new clothes.
- You are inviting someone to a party.

- You are describing the weather.
- You got pulled over for speeding.
- Someone is not sharing.
- You are depressed about something.

Another example of a performance-based activity is the commercials my students create for *Tuck Everlasting*. As a concluding activity, I ask my students to create either a commercial persuading their peers to drink the water for eternal youth, or a public service announcement persuading their peers to avoid the water at all cost. We discuss advertising techniques, and spend a day analyzing old Super Bowl commercials. They are, despite what some may believe, quite astute consumers.

The resulting commercials are hilarious; I frequently think I have future advertising executives in my midst. One of my favorites from last year was a spoof of the *Napoleon Dynamite* characters. I encourage them to use props, bring in costumes, and videotape the commercials. One of their favorite end-of-the-year activities is to go back and watch these videos. Students, when given the opportunity, prove to me that they understand the elements of persuasion, advertising techniques, and awareness of audience.

Clearly these are not everyday activities; however, there are several ways that performance can be “worked in” to daily lessons. For example, as a warm-up, when teaching vivid verbs, I ask for five volunteers. I pull them into the hall, telling them to act out ways of walking into the room. Students have to guess which vivid verb the student is using instead of the boring “walk.” The volunteers slide, skip, strut, and tip-toe in. The audience enjoys seeing their classmates act silly, while the volunteers are creating a visual picture for them. Again, for once, my students are begging to practice vivid verbs instead of tuning out during a grammar lesson.

When teaching the types of conflict, I divide students into groups, asking them to create a physical representation for each type. They then lead the rest of the class in acting it out. Last year, students decided that shaking their fists in the air was a good physical symbol to relay man vs. man. Another group pulled their hair to indicate man vs. self. After the class has learned all of the physical symbols, we stand up and everyone acts out the symbols as I yell them out. I say “yell them out” quite purposely. Performance-based activities tend to be noisy, some students always get a little out of control, and your colleagues may think you’ve lost it if they just stroll by.

With those precautions in mind though, try out a performance-based activity. At the end of the two-year loop I have with my students, I always ask them to identify their favorite lesson. Without fail, the answers are always the times that I let them “be the show”: the public speaking unit, the commercial, the skits, the human video. In other words, when I let them act their age.

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Roles of Effective Family Involvement Principals

Kathy B. Grant, Ed.D.

How can a principal at the middle school level function effectively as the school's family involvement leader? What innate personal characteristics, flexible attitudes, and administrative dispositions held by a school leader tend to nurture authentic family involvement beyond the traditional activities of parent conferences and open houses? For example, is there an administrative willingness or reluctance to support the recruitment of parents and community representatives as members of school advisory councils with a decision-making voice in curriculum and school policies? Is the principal a strong proponent of "culturally responsive" family engagement and does he or she demonstrate knowledge of the special challenges middle school parents might be experiencing as their children progress in school?

Research substantiates the powerful impact a committed "family involvement" middle school principal can have on school partnership programs in varying ways (VanVoorhis and Sheldon, 2005; Davies, 2002; Sanders and Harvey, 2002). Moreover, without an effective administrator spearheading organized efforts in family involvement, teachers who are enthusiastic about including parents in all aspects of school planning and engagement often get discouraged when that support is lacking. As one study found:

Principals have the power to motivate and mobilize school personnel for specific purposes and hold the purse strings for specific initiatives. Principals hold the key to initiating programs and processes. They can enlist school community support, earmark funds for specific priorities, and pro-

vide time for teams of teachers, parents, and community members to meet, plan, and evaluate their family involvement actions. When principals fail to support partnership efforts, teachers may abandon their focus on partnerships and shift their energies elsewhere (Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2005, n.p.).

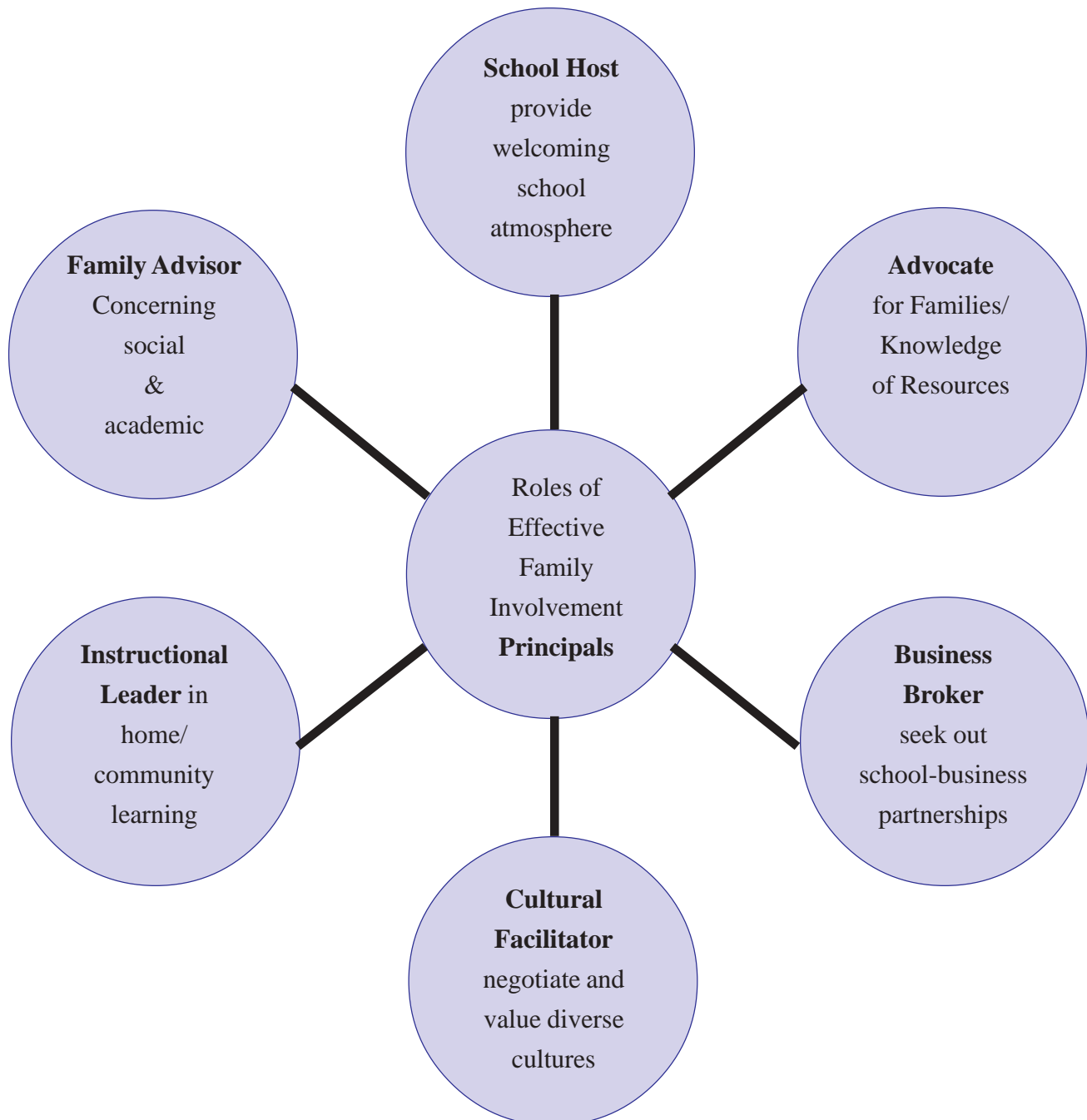
What sort of personal characteristics, attitudes, and dispositions held by school leaders tend to promote a school climate of family collaboration? The author, in her role as a Parent Involvement Coordinator, noted the most successful middle level principals were indeed flexible problem-solvers who remained open to seek "expert" advice on families. The very best administrators also had counseling expertise and could genuinely empathize with families having gone down life's "bumpy" roads themselves. Administratively, they were consistently creative in reaching out to parents reluctant to enter schools by conducting home visits, dining with them in a restaurant, or even visiting their workplaces.

What roles might a successful middle school principal assume? As the "host" of a school, the principal must make sure parents entering the school experience a welcoming and positive atmosphere; from the friendliness of the school secretary, to helpful signs in multiple languages, to a principal's "vision" or "motto" for family engagement in school. As a family advisor, the ability to effectively communicate through different modes with families is crucial. As an instructional leader, a savvy administrator should encourage teachers to connect their teaching with learn-

ing at home and to work with families on issues including family literacy, home extension activities, and learning challenges of middle level students.

Moreover, a principal should be adept at functioning as an advocate for families establishing an informational base of state, district, and community resources available to support families. In addition, the administrator must maintain a deep understanding of cultural

considerations of the community and where to turn for resource personnel for translations, as well as cultural guides to the community. Finally, as the school's business broker, the principal is instrumental (in collaboration with a school team) in seeking school-business partnerships, especially those tied to community needs. The figure below presents a model of the roles for effective family involvement administrators.



Unfortunately, middle school teachers may feel powerless to influence their current administrator's beliefs and practices concerning family involvement. However, when faced with a "reluctant" principal, teachers can join together to model the power of strong family involvement impacting student learning, especially in the area of study skills, test preparation, and homework practices. At some time in their career, teachers may serve on a hiring committee for the school's new principal. Consider these questions:

1. How would the administrator describe his/her prior experiences in collaborating with families specifically at the middle school level?
2. Can he/she discuss "culturally responsive" family involvement experiences and the resulting connections with middle grades families?
3. What facilitative communicative skills has he/she used to create family friendly dialogue? What forms of parental contact have proven successful?
4. What personnel and fiscal resources would he/she be willing to allocate for starting up a comprehensive family involvement program?

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Comprehensive Group Counseling in the Middle School Setting

Linda M. Fortin, Maureen Finnigan Rundle, and Karen Mackie



"It's not the I, it's not the you, it is the we that gets us through."

At Merton Williams Middle School in Hilton, New York, we have developed a comprehensive school counseling program designed to meet the needs of early adolescents. This program includes classroom outreach, individual counseling, classroom lessons, and an extensive group counseling program. We strongly believe that providing school counseling groups increases the students' abilities to achieve in school. Schools are about academics, yet students who are stressed, have poor social skills, or are coping with family issues have a decreased ability to focus on academics. Later in this commentary, we will present our data showing a strong link between comprehensive school counseling and academic achievement.

As our title suggests, young adolescents also need a sense of belonging, opportunities for positive social interactions that build personal competence, and a community space in which to explore and develop self definition. Our group counseling initiative also meets these psychosocial needs.

School counselors need to be proactive in their approach to students in this age group since not all students will seek out the help that they need in negotiating this crucial stage of life. Prevention, however, is key. We know that poor social skills combined with a need to fit in and belong socially can lead young people to make decisions that can affect their sense of identity for years to come. Conducting a needs assessment for all students, and then implementing an extensive group coun-

seling program, can be crucial to providing the prevention, intervention, and social learning that is critical in these growing up years.

Philosophy

Each year at Merton Williams Middle School the school counseling department members, including three school counselors, school social worker, interns and an outreach counselor, team up to co-lead 15-18 groups each week with approximately 8 student members in each group. Co-facilitators monitor the process and content in each group. Two leaders insure that equal attention is given to both group process and content. It is difficult for one leader to listen to the content of the group while also attending to process.

Our groups are limited to one class period (42 minutes) per week, and we meet for 15 weeks. Groups are centered on several different topics, based on the students' needs each year. We run groups dealing with Family Issues, Stress and Anxiety, Peer Relationships, Growth and Awareness, and Grief Processing. Students self select for participation in the groups program.

Our group counseling program is based on the therapeutic factors contained in *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* by Irvin D. Yalom. Yalom's book is designed for therapists who are working with groups. Our program incorporates his key concept of therapeutic factors in our support groups. The therapeutic factors include: instillation of hope, universality, imparting information, altruism, imitative behavior, catharsis, and development of socializing techniques. These support groups are not therapy groups, as the

“Here and Now” focus and the group stage of “storming” are often not appropriate in the school setting. We do, however, encourage the therapeutic factors in every group session.

We begin with instillation of hope early in the process as we explain to the students how being in a support group will help them to gain the skills they need to cope with academic, family, and peer issues. Students are placed in specific group with the concept of universality in mind. Students who have similar issues and needs are placed in groups together. This tends to help students feel like the other members understand them and their situations right from the beginning. During group sessions, imparting information is a critical piece of our work. We will teach stages of grief, anxiety reducing techniques, and the coping skills needed for living with someone who has an addiction. We will teach whatever information is necessary to increase students’ knowledge, thereby giving them additional coping skills. We often teach basic social skills, such as listening, not interrupting others, personal space, and empathic response.

Altruism is another key curative factor that we encourage in groups. We praise students for helping each other and for giving each other needed support and ideas for coping. Altruism meets the developmental need of being a helpful member of society and helps to increase self esteem of the group member. As group leaders we strive to model effective communication skills, and we are diligent in keeping the members to the rules we have identified during the groups’ first meetings.

It is interesting how, over time, the students will begin to behave as group leaders reminding each other of the rules, praising each other, and correcting one another if proper social behavior is not being followed. This therapeutic factor is called imitative behavior, and is critical to learning social skills in a group setting. The development of

socializing techniques, another therapeutic factor, happens both directly and indirectly in group. We may direct students through role play or through teaching of social skills. Indirectly, we reinforce positive socializing techniques and discourage negative ones either by ignoring or direct intervention.

The opportunity to express inner thoughts and feelings in a safe environment can be healing. This is the therapeutic factor known as catharsis. It is our hope that each group participant may reach a level of catharsis that is beneficial to him or herself. Again, group co-facilitators monitor the process and content of what is happening in group in order to keep the safety factor intact.

Our group counseling program has been developed through a process of trial and error, and refined over the years. Running effective support groups for young student-clients is not an easy task. The forming and norming of each counseling group is critical to its success. Every student who shows an interest in a support group is screened individually by a counselor and placed in an appropriate group. Students need the safety and structure of group rules and expectations, and leaders must be consistent and diligent in providing this structure and safety. Any deviations from the group rules must be dealt with immediately and firmly. Once the rules are in place and the group is safe, the real work can begin.

Logistics

The support of building administrators and teaching staff is vital to the success of group work in the middle school setting. Students miss one class period per week on a rotating schedule, for approximately 16 weeks in order to fully participate in groups. In order to gain support and enhance understanding of the groups program, we offer an informational meeting to new staff on an as needed basis. We also share evaluations and end of year data

with the teaching staff through team meeting discussions and school-wide faculty meetings.

Before the end of September each year, counselors speak in classes to every seventh and eighth grade student about the counseling program and how to access services. Every student is asked to complete a needs assessment survey during this class time. Any student who checks that he or she may be interested in individual or group counseling, or that they are unsure about counseling, will be screened individually by a counselor for possible placement. Each year, over 200 students indicate some interest in counseling at our school.

Screening meetings take place through mid-November. At that point, all students who are interested and appropriate for groups will be hand placed in a group to meet their individual needs. Students must understand and agree to confidentiality, as well as their own responsibility for making up class work that will be missed for group counseling.

Fortunately, we have a new conference room that provides ample physical space and natural lighting for our groups. Comfortable chairs are placed in a circle with no table or physical barrier in the middle. Co-facilitators seat themselves across from each other in the circle. Group participants place all of their belongings behind their chairs so as not to put any obstacles between themselves and other group members.

Groups meet weekly from mid-November through the beginning of April. Each group will meet on the same day of the week, but will rotate through the periods of the school day. Students report to their classrooms first to get their group passes, turn in any homework, and find out what they will miss that day. They are responsible to make up missed class work. Counselors and teachers freely consult as needed to be sure students are meeting their expectations for school work.

Evaluation and Data

Evaluation and data collection are becoming more and more important in the work of school counselors. District administrators demand evidence of effectiveness of our work, as well as numbers of students and different student population served. Over the past four years, we have developed and refined tools for evaluation and data collection for our group counseling program.

Each student participant in a group completes an evaluation form in April. Students rate specific statements on a continuum ranging from “not helpful” to “very helpful”, as well as answer open-ended questions about their group counseling experiences. For the 2005-2006 school year, 90% of group participants reported that groups were helpful or very helpful in increasing overall school performance. Ninety percent of the students reported that group was helpful or very helpful in improving overall attitude toward school. In addition, students who were in groups reported that group counseling helped them gain confidence, solve problems, release anger, express themselves, and help others as evidenced by specific written comments such as: “I don’t flip out and punch walls anymore;” “Group helped me not to stereotype;” “I’m not alone in my problems;” “Group helped me deal with bullies;” “Group raised my self esteem;” and “I got ideas for dealing with problems”.

When comparing improvement in academic achievement of students who received counseling services with students not in counseling, a higher percentage of students receiving counseling improved their grade point averages (GPA) throughout the school year. Specifically, 73% of group participants improved their GPAs from second to third quarter during the 2005-2006 school year, as compared to 59% of students not receiving counseling services. 77% of students who

received both individual and group counseling improved their GPAs during this time period.

When asked for any suggestions to improve group, the majority of students inevitably respond “make the group longer” or “have group all school year long”. Many times the students ask to extend the group meetings until June, which is not possible because of other other time commitments.

The data we have collected for the previous three school years shows consistent results. A higher percentage of students who participate in counseling improve their GPAs over the course of the school year. We plan to expand our data collection and analysis to include possible links between counseling and improved attendance and fewer behavioral referrals.

Conclusion

Our comprehensive group counseling program at Merton Williams Middle School is designed to be available to all students. The number and types of groups we offer vary

from year to year based on students’ needs and issues. Group counseling not only helps students grow socially and emotionally, as evidenced by self-report and observation, but also positively influences academic growth for many group participants.

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Snapshots of Differentiated Instruction K-12

Matthew Conrick, Tina Hayes, Kathleen Skellie and Olivia Sutton



Two years ago our school district came to us with an invitation to attend a three-day workshop on differentiated instruction (DI) with Gayle Gregory. The idea was to cultivate a district-wide teacher training team on DI with the hopes of starting a grassroots instructional movement. The South Glens Falls Differentiated Instruction team consists of teachers with various backgrounds: Kathleen Skellie, a high school English teacher; Tina Hayes, a former special education teacher now currently teaching at the elementary level; and two middle school teachers, Matthew Conrick, also a former special education teacher and current English teacher, and Olivia Sutton, an eighth grade English teacher with a reading degree.

The Gayle Gregory workshop laid the foundation for success. Building on a model where there was district-wide support, the first day of the three-day workshop focused on the core ideas of differentiation and was attended by the team as well as building and district level administrators. Throughout the three-day training, we began to approach DI first as classroom teachers by constructing examples of differentiated instruction for our own lessons, bouncing ideas off of one another and sharing ideas. On the third day we began to conceptualize how DI could be shared with the entire district teaching staff. The workshop concluded with our district level administrators returning for a planning session for successful district implementation. Our initial energy and excitement gained momentum upon returning to the classroom; we were able to immediately implement the DI strategies Gayle Gregory showed us and

with great success! Students were actively engaged in learning - learning material that we had always taught, but now in a new and innovative way.

The next few months led us in the direction of constructing a team presentation that would lay the framework for creating a common understanding of DI and what it looks like in the classroom. Over the past two years we have conducted a variety of district level trainings ranging from a DI 101 for a wide audience to a focused Math DI training for the Middle School mathematics educators. The following “snapshots” are examples of instructional strategies we have used in the classroom at an elementary, middle, and high school level. Many of these activities were incorporated into our workshop at NYSMSA’s Annual Conference this year in Saratoga Springs.

Elementary Snapshot

Gone are the days when you taught in your classroom all by yourself all day long. Consultant services, services being provided directly in the classroom by specialists, and co-teaching models have opened the classroom doors. The elementary teacher embraces the multi-tasking and differentiating that is needed to teach the varied content of the classroom teacher. Reaching out to same-grade colleagues and across grade level boundaries to collaborate and coordinate has become a common and refreshing practice.

Children at the elementary level need to be actively engaged in learning. Many highly effective DI strategies have been practiced at

the elementary level for several years including *Cooperative Learning* and *Center Based Learning*. With additional staff development in differentiated learning, our district has been able to increase and enhance the differentiated possibilities at this level.

Three highly effective DI practices that have been practiced at the elementary level for several years include:

- *Enhanced Center Based Learning*: Children are grouped with mixed or same level learners depending on the tasks. Pre-, during-, and post-assessments tools during this type of learning have increased.
- *Multiple Intelligence Surveys*: With more surveys available for young learners (even non-readers), the teacher and parents have more opportunities to discuss and support the child and his or her strengths and weaknesses.
- *“Tic Tac Toe” Homework Free Choice Grids*: Using information from learning styles and multiple intelligence surveys allows children to have a choice in homework. All levels of learners are allowed to try something outside their strength by completing three tasks/projects in a row on a grid. The grid choices are open ended and allow for creativity and for differentiation.

Middle School Snapshot

Each time when I am asked, “What grade do you teach?” I am met with the similar blank stares or the raised eyebrows that harbor the question, “Why on Earth...?” Teaching at the middle level was something that I used to meet with the same raised eyebrows myself, yet with each passing year at this level I gain more and more insight into the adolescent mind. Using guided instruction, it is evident how students at this level begin to evolve and attain self-awareness as learner. They begin to take responsibility for their own learning. DI

is one way to develop that evolution in the middle-level student.

Differentiated instruction allows students to explore what kind of learners they are. Examples of DI activities for the middle level include:

- *EXIT card*: An effective technique at the end of a lesson where the teacher can see what was learned and what questions still exist for the student.
- *Free Choice Grid Projects (content specific and interdisciplinary)*: A grid with nine different choices of homework assignments; one choice is always a “free” choice that the student can submit to the teacher for possible approval.
- *Agree/Disagree*: A strategy where students are to agree or disagree to a series of questions based on a certain theme or topic; students must be ready to defend their answers to the rest of the class.

High School Snapshot

As you move further away from the concept of “everything I needed to know in life I learned in kindergarten” you will find high school. High school is a wonderful composite of young adolescents focused on social issues (friendships, relationships with the opposite sex, and being invited to parties), academics (how to get three hours of homework done in ten minutes before homeroom), and the “politics” of life (how to defeat the opposing sports teams in an effort to attain glory and a potential opportunity on a college level team). As a high school teacher, the key is finding a balance and allowing students to make connections to their own adolescent lives. Differentiated instruction is the conduit for successful communication between the high school student and the high school teacher resulting in meaningful learning.

Examples of DI activities for the high school level include:

- *Graffiti Walls*: A successful approach to collecting and activating prior knowledge on a topic, concept, or response to an essential question. Students record ideas, thoughts, or questions on a large expanse of paper. A graffiti wall shows the evolution of understanding as more information is added and misinformation is revised.
- *Gallery Walks*: As indicated by the title, a gallery walk is an opportunity to walk, observe, reflect, and respond to individual student work, group projects, or teacher-generated prompts.
- *Give-One Take-One*: This activity is incredibly simplistic. Students use a piece of paper and write down at least three responses to a prompt, question, or topic. They then circulate and share with other classmates until everyone has a substantial list. Within a few moments, this activity builds communication skills, encourages active thinking, and promotes collaboration.

Summary

In summary, the four of us on the DI Team have observed and experienced first-hand the true power that exists when one creates and teaches within a differentiated instructional classroom, no matter what the age group is. It is exciting to see students succeed through the use of creative and engaging differentiated lessons, lessons in which all learners will be able to learn and make progress in their skills and knowledge bases. For districts that are looking for ways to meet the needs of their students more fully, we believe that many of the answers can be found through promoting a purposeful, focused DI approach in every classroom.

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A New Approach to Academic Intervention Services

Cynthia Freed, NBCT

At Queensbury Middle School, located in an upstate New York community, we have taken the attitude that academic intervention must be revamped to meet the individual needs of the student. As presented at the 2007 New York State Middle School Association Conference, the new academic intervention program for the English Language Academic Services course at Queensbury Middle School is truly an innovative approach that not only meets the needs of the individual student, but also lowers disciplinary infractions, promotes individual achievement through skill development, communicates effectively with parents, and creates self-advocacy.

What is this miracle program I speak of? It is one that has been established through a tremendous amount of time, effort, and support. Creating a relevant, standards-based program to address skill development required the patience and full support of my administrators. The ability to take a risk was important when I suggested to Principal Silvernell that I wanted to completely overhaul the existing AIS program that accommodated over 120 students in the middle school. Realizing that the existing program was reaching some students, it was necessary to create a program that would now impact all the students who receive intervention services.

According to *AIS: A Guide to Academic Intervention Services*, a collaborative publication of NYS PTA (New York State Parent-Teacher Association) and NYSUT (New York State United Teachers), I knew that a good intervention program would be: based on a variety of pieces of information that identify

specific needs, know the implication of meeting the state learning standards, group students according to their needs, evaluate students regularly to amend or end the services as needed, include multiple approaches to learning, and use a variety of materials including technology to meet the needs of the students. To achieve all of these goals in a program may seem like a daunting task, but as the fifth year of my service as an academic intervention teacher started, it was actually quite simple. It was through a network of experiences and searches that I found the perfect fit for our needs.

All along I have had a certain philosophy of what intervention should be. I felt that Academic Intervention Services (AIS) should be taught on a variety of levels. The general skills needed to succeed in all classes should be addressed. Basic reading comprehension exercises, critical thinking skills exercises, writing skills exercises, and listening exercises should all be incorporated into the scheme of the program. I also believed in developing organizational skills among the students by maintaining a binder in class. Developing self-confidence would be vital to personal success. Extrinsic rewards are recommended since students who are struggling usually do not receive rewards or have the confidence to believe in the intrinsic role of education at this point. Working at an appropriate reading level is vital to the success of students in order to reinforce skills that have only been partially mastered. Stressing the development and use of technological skills is also very important. Consistency and routine are vital. The students must be given high expectations, but they should also be made aware of what the expectations are and how they can be achieved. AIS, to me,

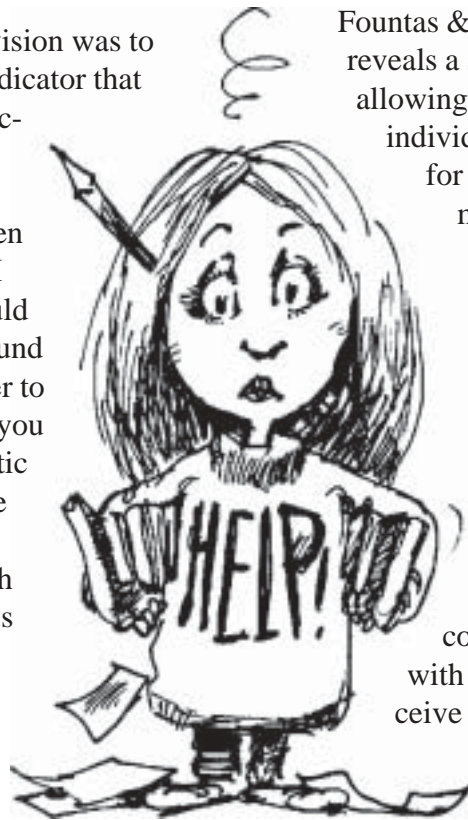
should be a chance for students to use strategies and skills they already know (activating prior knowledge) in order to gain skills and strategies that can help them to succeed in future endeavors. Receiving AIS does not have to be a chore. It should be a fun and rewarding experience that allows each student an equal opportunity to master the skills they are lacking.

The first step is realizing my vision was to address the need for a base-line indicator that would allow me to gauge the effectiveness of the students' efforts in the program. After a long search, and with the parameters I was given from our technology department, I found an assessment tool that would fit our needs perfectly. It might sound strange, but DORA was the answer to my questions. "What is DORA?" you might be asking. DORA, Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment, is the tool that helped to give me direction in formulating a new approach to AIS. DORA is a product of Let's Go Learn, Inc. With the help of Brian Wiffin, Vice President of Sales and Business Development, I found the right program to use as a diagnostic tool; a way to gauge performance not only throughout the school year, but also for the entire educational career of a student. According to Letsgolearn.com, DORA is a comprehensive, valid, and reliable web-based assessment that diagnostically assesses students' reading abilities. Dr. Richard McCallum, from UC Berkeley, is the co-founder of Let's Go Learn. It was through his classroom and teaching experiences that the model of DORA was developed.

Like having a reading specialist in every classroom, DORA adapts to students as they respond to each question in the online program, getting harder or easier as needed to complete the diagnosis. DORA's interactive style makes testing fun, engages students, and allows teach-

ers to test an entire class simultaneously. The program is perfect for grades K-12. The eight sub-skills of reading assessed by DORA are: high-frequency words, word recognition, phonics, phonemic awareness, oral vocabulary, spelling, reading comprehension, and fluency. By examining multiple reading measures together (including DRA, Reading Recovery, Fountas & Pinell, and Lexile), DORA reveals a student's unique reading profile, allowing teachers to tailor instruction to individual student needs. DORA is ideal for automating the diagnostic assessment process, which is often paper-based and labor-intensive. Individual student and classroom reports are instantly available for teachers to download, view, or print. DORA would give us the ability to start the year knowing what grade levels our students were reading on and what level to instruct each student. DORA would also serve as a communication tool each quarter with the parents. Parents would receive a parent report in the mail that would give them insight into their child's reading abilities. It would also offer pages of practical ideas of how they could help their child at home.

The possibilities now were endless. Now that time would not have to be used to diagnose and assess students through a tedious process, I could focus my attention to the curriculum and the running records. These records would gauge the development of the eight sub-tests covered under DORA, and the New York standards that address other areas such as writing, listening and speaking. In order to develop a list of skills necessary for exiting the program, my colleague, Susan Cunningham and I came up with approximately 400-500 individual skills for middle school students in the areas of English and social studies. The sub-skills included every-



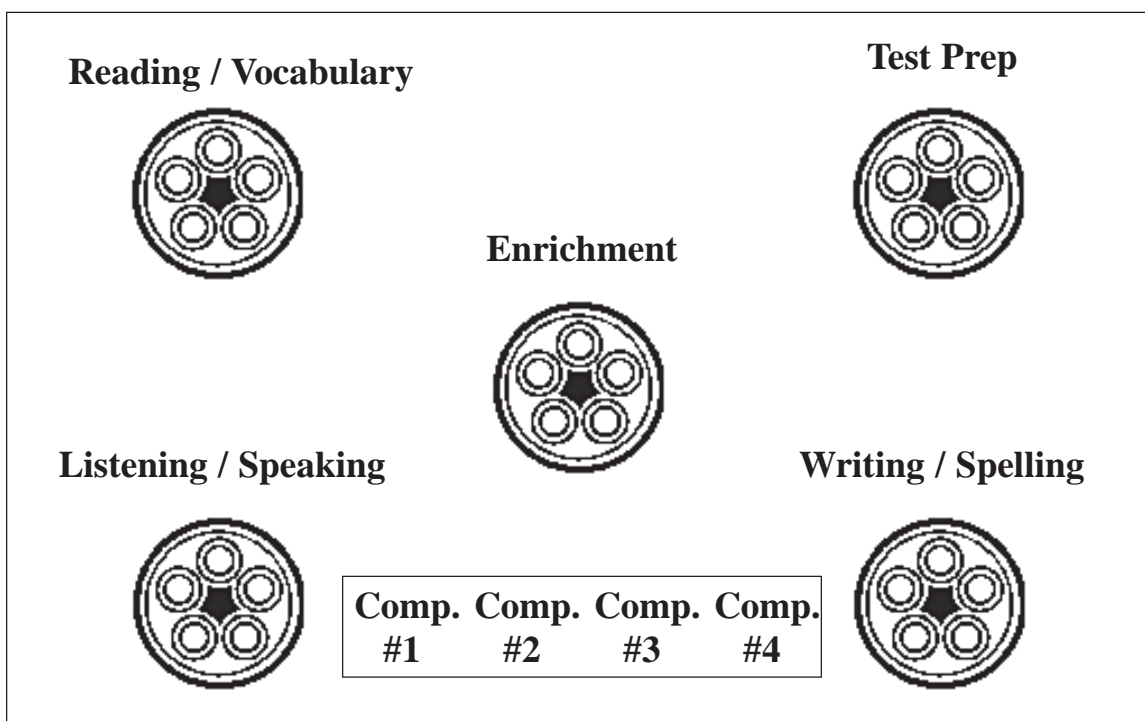
thing from literary elements, learning modalities, story/novel elements, reading strategies, genre studies, vocabulary development, structural features of texts, listening for various elements, speaking effectively, spelling/phonics, the writing process, grammar skills, enrichment activities, test-prep activities, and various listening exercises.

From that list we then developed running records which included all the measures necessary to ensure mastery of each and every skill listed. The steps would include an introduction to the skill, guided practice, individual practice #1, individual practice #2, benchmark #1, individual practice #3, benchmark #2, and finally mastery of the given skill.

The next step was to formulate the curriculum materials. The idea came to me that the curriculum, in order to be individualized for the student, would need to be presented in a stations style approach. Stations have been a mode of instruction used at elementary levels, but could it work at the middle school level? I was sure it could. The individual stations would help to

force myself into the notion that I could only address a maximum of three students at a time; thereby ceasing the whole group instruction setting. I divided the room up into five general station areas. Following the New York standards, I created a grid for my classroom (shown below).

Finding the resources to instruct each skill was a time-consuming task. However, once I started it seemed to flow nicely. As I looked through workbooks, handouts, online sources, and text books, I realized that all the materials I needed were easily at my disposal. All I had to do was break it down into the various skills. I also had to keep in mind that no assignment could be tedious. For instance if I am teaching about nouns, my introduction/guided practice might be a simple sheet that explains the skill while the student practices guided questions on a white board. The independent practice may only consist of ten questions. The second practice would be more independent and may include fifteen questions. The first benchmarking activity would be representative of the indepen-



dent practice exercises; possibly twenty questions. The third independent exercise would be one in which the tactile learner may be addressed by creating a collage from a noun hunt in magazines, or even a trip to the computer to complete an online activity to engage the student. The second benchmarking activity would be more complex with possibly twenty-five questions. Finally, mastery would integrate a bit of all the aforementioned into one activity. All activities and exercises are meant to be easily graded by the teacher in order to give expedient feedback to the student. The immediate teacher responses give the students the positive reinforcement they crave.

I know you are asking “How can I be in five stations at once?” The program is designed so you don’t have to be in all places at once. I am very lucky to have a special education teacher co-teach with me in each class. This teacher, a different one for each period of the day, instructs at one of the various stations. Wherein I might be instructing students at the reading station, she is instructing students at the writing station. The enrichment, test-prep, and listening stations do not require as much one-to-one instruction. These stations are designed with activities that allow students to use critical thinking skills, technology, and their own prior experiences in completing the exercises. The students love the opportunity to do new and exciting activities that will challenge their minds.

Since beginning this program I have noticed many positive results. First, I no longer have disciplinary problems. Students are so engaged in their individual learning plans that there is little time to interact with others. Second, I am pleased at the speed in which the students have learned the new procedures of the class. They enjoy the opportunity to move from station to station, interacting with new types of assignments along the way. Third, I am impressed that the students are mastering skills with confidence. As a student masters a skill it is quite evident that a new found confidence has been

realized. And finally, I am so pleased to see that my administration and colleagues have embraced the concept so wonderfully. In fact, we have now established exit criteria for students based on the mastery of sixty preselected skills and quarterly grades of 80 or above in their ELA and social studies courses. It has opened up discussions of how to monitor students who do exit the program. The monitoring will allow the ELA teachers to recognize that these students have been in the program and that they need to be followed and monitored for continued progress.

To say that I am happy with the outcomes of the program so far would be an understatement. It is what is driving me to continue with my vision of what academic intervention can and should be: a program that engages students and promotes success.

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Using Data to Individualize and Improve the Middle School Experience

Andy Eldridge

This is my second year as principal at Union Springs Middle School and I have started to figure out what it takes to run a successful middle school. My entire first year was spent putting out fires, metaphorically speaking of course, as well as learning the ins and outs of being a principal. Don't get me wrong, our teachers and students achieved good results on their assessments last year. In addition, lots of students participated in our school and community extra-curricular activities. The thing is, we achieved good results but we didn't really understand why or how. This year, we decided to analyze our progress by using academic, social-emotional, and extra-curricular participation data to ultimately improve our middle school program.

The first step in improving a school is to encourage a rigorous and relevant curriculum delivered with top-notch instruction. We are fortunate to have teachers who are experienced professionals that understand the uniqueness of the middle level student. During the course of the last three years, our school district has spent a great deal of time and money toward improving and writing our prioritized curriculum in every subject. Currently we have completed all of our core area curriculum guides and are in the process of finishing other subject areas such as art and physical education. With the core curriculum finished, our assessment scores in grades three through eight have been steadily improving over the course of the last three years, but we want to ensure this continued success, and not allow anything to chance.

The next step in attaining our goals has been to analyze our students in terms of their academic, socio-emotional, and extra-curricular participation at school. Both of the seventh and eighth grade teams of teachers meet twice each week to chart their student's performance and participation across these three areas. Teachers also log their communication contacts with each student's family. Once per month, the entire staff comes together to analyze trends in all areas. Grade level, classroom, and individual interventions are created from the results. Our teams meet on other days of the week to coordinate their curriculum delivery and receive instructional training.

We have only been charting our data since the beginning of this school year, but so far this system is showing enormous results. The teachers are starting to piece together a fuller picture of their students through the data. Also, teachers are starting to better identify students that need to be positively influenced to succeed in challenging subject areas. While a student may excel in social studies and English Language Arts, he or she may not be performing well in math, science, and technology. With this data, the social studies and English teachers are better able to advise their peers on how to motivate these students. In our second year, this spirit of collaboration is beginning to create a different environment in the middle school. It seemed that last year we spent an inordinate amount of our time solving the day-to-day business of the middle school, while not enough time was devoted to creating the positive atmosphere needed for students to effectively learn. We were fixing

problems as they came up with no real system in place to ensure our interventions were working. This year, we are solving problems based on the data that we have in front of us. Through data collection and team communication we can better analyze our students and their middle school experience. There is the feeling that we are all in this together. Students are learning and achieving. Teachers feel supported and empowered to solve the educational problems faced at the middle level.

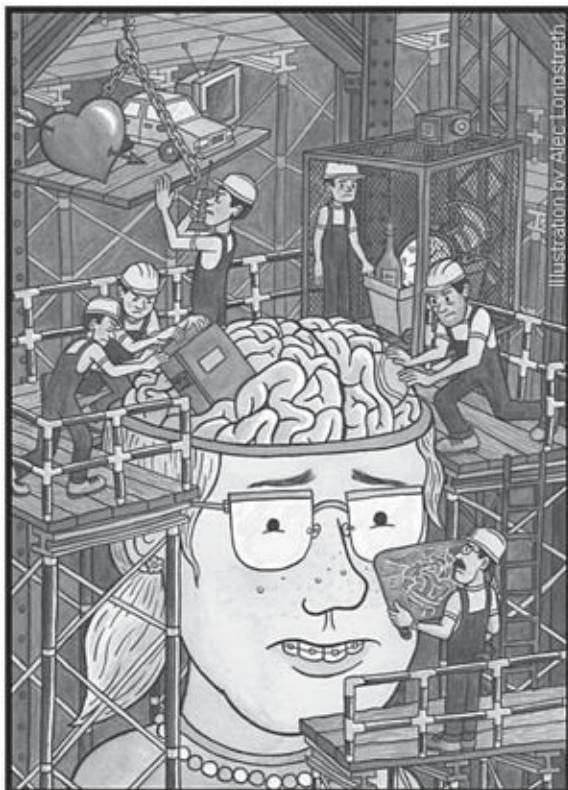
Please stay tuned. Our hope is to turn all of our kids on to the love of learning while they are still in the mutable stage of middle school. We sincerely want our students to lead fulfilling lives as learners, and there is no better time to start than now!

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