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On the Cover

The middle level...a time reflective of personal, social and physical growth; a time when getting to know the person in the mirror can be a monumental challenge that is simultaneously embraced and shunned.

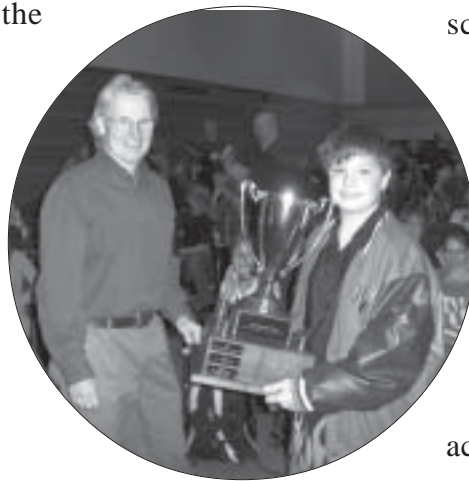
Photo taken by art teacher Joy Muller-McCoola, Glens Falls Middle School, at the end of class one day when "we were *walking on the ceiling* (you hold the mirror up to your chin and walk out into the hallway). This mirror-play activity is something the class may engage in if they've worked hard and completed their objectives for the day."

Using the Essential Elements to Raise Scores

Jeff Green & Bruce MacBain



Our middle school was recognized as an Essential Elements School-to-Watch in 2006. Since earning the distinction, several schools have come to Moravia to observe our program and converse with us. Everyone that visits invariably ends up asking the same question: "Why do you think your program has been successful?" The answer to the question is obviously complex, but each time we are asked we give a similar synopsis: We adhere to the philosophy that we can reach all of our students, and each aspect of our program is designed to meet not only our students' unique academic needs, but their social and emotional issues as well. The following article is a more detailed explanation of our program's key components.



A house leader receives the House Cup with one of his students in Forum.

Teaming

Many middle schools throughout the state now utilize some form of the team approach to education. We feel it is the most essential aspect of our program. Grade level teams meet daily for one period during the school day. During the meetings we plan interdisciplinary units, analyze data, discuss student concerns, meet with students and parents, plan extra curricular trips, discuss opportunities for student recognition, and work on a host of other tasks that benefit our students both academically and socially. The meetings ensure that we are not teaching on an island. The daily communication provides us with support and ensures that we maintain a shared

vision. Daily discussion among colleagues promotes creative thinking and planning that would not happen otherwise.

Forum

We begin our day at Moravia Middle School with Forum. All of our middle school students meet in the auditorium before their first period classes. Teachers use the time to make important announcements and recognize students in a large group setting for their recent successes. The students are also encouraged to make announcements about recent sporting events and other activities.

This may sound very simplistic, but it is an important component of our program. When teachers and students recognize accomplishments, everyone enthusiastically cheers for one another. Forum creates a sense of community and establishes a positive tone for the school day.

One of our goals is to make sure each student has at least one positive interaction with an adult every day. Forum is a great place to start.

The House System

At Moravia we employ a house system, which is loosely based on the *Harry Potter* novels. All of the students are assigned to one teacher's class at the end of the day and they

report to the same teacher for the entire year. Efforts are made by the teachers to establish camaraderie within the groups so the students have support socially and academically.

At the beginning of the year, all of the houses take a trip to a ropes course to work on team building activities. The groups also compete against each other in a house competition throughout the year. The teams accumulate points for positive behaviors and successes, and at the end of the year one team wins the house

cup. The program provides each student with a place to go at the end of the day where they feel comfortable getting help on homework. Students work with their peers on the day's assignments and the teacher assists the students when they encounter problems. House leaders are advocates for their students in team and are the first contact for parents.

Because of the positive rapport established among the students and the teacher, students often feel comfortable enough to discuss social problems with the teacher. If a student reveals a problem the teacher does not feel comfortable dealing with, then the teacher will notify the guidance counselor, psychologist, or resource officer immediately.

Interdisciplinary Activities

Students at Moravia encounter many interdisciplinary activities.

We use books to establish themes across the grade level. For example, the students in seventh grade read the novel *My Brother Sam is Dead*. While reading the novel in English,

the students are learning about the Revolutionary War in social studies.

This is a common teaching strategy, but we take it a step further by incorporating other disciplines into the overall theme. Each teacher develops a content specific topic for a "mini-class" and the students choose the class in which they are

most interested. The home and careers teacher, for instance, instructs the students on the preparation and preservation of food from the time period. The science teacher leads a mini-class on sound waves, linking that instruction to Ben Franklin's invention of the armonica. With several choices to choose from, students study in depth a specific part of the interdisciplinary unit's theme. At the conclusion of the classes, the groups present to their peers to provide the students with a

diverse understanding of the American Revolution. Students make connections from the different disciplines and presentations.

We also incorporate units in which math, science, and technology are the primary focus. On Metric Day our students take part in the Metric Olympics where they participate in outdoor activities that

encourage real world application of the metric



Students learn to work as a team at the Ropes Course.



Students measure the flow of a stream during an interdisciplinary mini-class.

system. While participating the students estimate and make measurements to use in calculations. The students learn in the context of fun, challenging, and relevant activities.

Our teachers' interdisciplinary units offer opportunities for students to explore their interests and display their strengths. Every year in seventh grade, for example, the students take part in a mock convention designed to eventually elect their class officers. The students develop platforms for their parties, debate and vote on key issues, write news articles, acquire and graph relevant data, develop a newspaper, and give speeches. Because their work during the unit has a practical purpose, the students remain engaged and enthusiastic. We also feel that interdisciplinary units are effective because they require the students to utilize what they have learned in a variety of classes. We don't want our students to view learning as something forced on them to receive a high grade in a class. We help our students understand the value and purpose of what they learn by designing activities that require them to make connections and think critically.

Flexible Scheduling

Teachers in team control the scheduling of 6 periods of each day. There are no other classes taught in those 6 periods other than classes taught by teachers in team. This allows teachers to adjust the schedule daily based on student needs, mini-classes, blocking, content needs, etc.

Students are grouped, regrouped, and regrouped again to put them in positions to receive differentiated instruction and gain perspective.

Unifying Themes

In seventh and eighth grade, the teachers have established unifying themes to which all of the teachers make interdisciplinary connections throughout the year. In eighth grade, for instance, the students start the year by reading a book called *Seedfolks* in English class. The story teaches the lesson that individuals can make a difference in the world, so throughout the year, all of the eighth grade teachers make connections to the theme "The Power of One".

Establishing a unifying theme provides a structure that allows us to incorporate more enrichment activities into the curriculum. This year the math teacher is teaching a unit that gets students to apply their understandings of math concepts to a walk-a-thon. Instead of just discussing the math involved in a walk-a-thon, the students are actually going to participate in a walk-a-thon to help raise money for a student from our school who was recently involved in an accident. This activity not only helps the students develop their math skills, it is also an obvious connection to "The Power of One" theme.



Students pose during construction of the Memory Park.

Culminating Activities

All of the work that we do in connection to our unifying themes leads up to a crescendo in June. Two years ago we made a decision to make June different at Moravia Middle School. Year after year teachers would point out how unfocused our students were just prior to summer vacation. We finally

realized that the students were not going to magically become focused in June, so we made a decision to administer our final exams early and make June different.

What we do in June is a culmination of our focus on the unifying theme for the year. In eighth grade two years ago the students designed and built a memory park in the front of our school. The park is a connection to “The Power of One” because people can purchase engraved bricks to be placed in the park to honor people who have positively impacted the community and the world. The students were involved in every step of the park’s construction. Students from Cornell University came to Moravia and gave a presentation on landscape design ideas, and the students submitted potential plans. Once we decided on a design, the math teacher took her classes out to the construction site to discuss how to create a perfect circle. The technology teacher worked with students to create benches for the park. In various classes, the students would go out and help with the actual physical labor it took to construct the garden. A local landscaper came to give a presentation on different plants that could be placed in the park. All of the activities associated with the construction of the garden involved practical application of the skills and knowledge the students had acquired throughout the year, and because what they were doing was so different than what they had previously experienced in June, they were fully engaged.

When the park was finished, the eighth grade students and teachers organized a ceremony for the last day of school. It was an amazing event. Students, teachers, parents, administrators, and community members were all in attendance. Several people from the local media came to report on the event. The

ceremony not only introduced the park to the community, it also provided an opportunity for community members to speak about the people for whom they had purchased engraved bricks, and a student shared an essay connected to “The Power of One” theme that she had completed in English class. The ceremony is now a yearly tradition.

Now that we have the structure in place, the potential for expansion is limitless. Last year, the eighth grade developed “Moravia Kid Corps.” In June teachers and students organized and participated in

community service projects throughout Moravia. The students did things like yard work for elderly people in the community, painting for the local fire department, and other tasks that helped out people and organizations in the town.

Results

The most important result of implementing the Essential Elements are the well-rounded, thoughtful, intelligent, curious, and passionate leaders of tomorrow we are graduating from the middle school. But for those of you interested in numbers, our scores have skyrocketed. Before we fully implemented the Essential Elements, our Performance Index in math and ELA was in the lower 130s. Our most recent report card shows us to be in the upper 160s, and we know when this year’s report card comes out we will be in the 170s or 180s. We have gone from being at the bottom of the scores in our BOCES to being in the top two. Assessment scores are not our primary concern at Moravia, but it is gratifying to know that educating the whole child raises students’ state scores as well.



The Moravia Kid Corps relaxes after helping at the local Historical Society.