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AMLE Magazine · OCTOBER 2013
Who’s in Your Class?

Alex struggles with the basics. Mary probably could be doing college work. Kyle falls asleep in class. Anna spends class time filing her nails. John defies you at every turn. Selena barely speaks English and rarely looks at you.

Chances are you’ve got at least two or three of these students in your classroom. You are charged with ensuring each of them learns.


Given the broad range of abilities and attitudes, you know you face a challenge. This challenge is best met by differentiating instruction according to their needs. You take advantage of professional development opportunities. You read. You meet with your team members to talk about your students’ needs. You do everything you can to put best practices into practice.

You can have 20, 30, or 40 years of experience in the classroom, but all that learning and experience take a backseat to really knowing your students beyond the academics—who they are, where they come from, what they dream about, what they are afraid of. Who’s The Rebel? Who’s The Victim? Who’s Invisible? And why?

How do you get to know each student’s backstory when you see 180 in the course of a day?

Sitting down with every student, face to face, and getting them to open up to you, to tell you everything that’s going on in their lives, would be ideal…but improbable. What you can do, however, is keep your ears and eyes open. Learn about your students by simply watching them. Listen to their conversations in the classroom and in the hall. Reach out to their parents and stress the importance of working together. Show them your “human” side. Convey your interest in them as people. Incorporate “getting to know you” activities into your lesson plans.

As you read through this month’s issue of *AMLE Magazine*, take note of the ways you can better meet the learning needs of your students just by getting to know them.

Patricia George, Editor
This Year’s Challenge: A Message to the U.S. Congress

What’s the most important issue the U.S. Congress should consider in 2014?

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Grades: 6–12
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Middle school can be a difficult time for parents who are not sure how or where they fit into their child’s education. From your perspective, what’s the most valuable thing parents can do to help their young adolescent succeed in school?

**Being There**
Parents need to realize that middle school is a time of transition for all students. Some embrace the change while others tend to be a little more introverted, really take the changes to heart, and require a little more time adjusting. Parents can comfort their children and reassure them that they will face this time together.

The best advice I can give to parents is simple: Stay involved! I think other teachers would agree with me when I say that the most successful students in the classroom are the ones whose parents are involved in their education.

We are always told that there are no silly or bad questions, so here are a few questions for parents to ask themselves:

*Do I have the lines of communication open?* Not just with the teachers, but with your child. Being able to communicate with your child can give you an insight into more than just the academics. Ask questions and listen to what your child has to say.

**The Balancing Game**
Knowing just the right level of involvement in a child’s education is a delicate balance. Parents will find it’s not an easy task and very few will strike the right balance the first time. Having said that, I believe they can do several things to help their child transition successfully into and through middle school.

Parents shouldn’t completely “cut the cord,” nor should they hoover over their child in the hallways. Some parents believe they should back off when their child enters middle school. Yes, they should allow their child some degree of freedom and autonomy, but not to the extent that the parents solely rely on their child to update them about their academic, social, and behavioral progress, especially in the sixth grade.

Many parents think their child is succeeding academically because their child said he didn’t have homework or that she did her homework at school and there aren’t any tests coming up. The truth is revealed later.

**Plain and Simple**
What can parents do? They can be realistic.

*Be realistic.* Many parents hope—and some believe—their child is the next prodigy. They can nurture their promise without forcing the child to realize the parent’s unfulfilled dreams. Helicopter parenting is healthy as long as parents are flying in a sightseeing capacity and not in an Apache AH-64 attack chopper.

*Recognize that the middle school years are formative.* Instill a set of core values that should include compassion, honesty, respect, integrity, and fairness. Model these values rather than forcing compliance and be understanding when the child makes a mistake. Healthy habits are key to a strong foundation for life.

*Be consistent.* Promote a regimen that includes a healthy diet, plenty of sleep, and exercise. A reasonable bedtime that is consistently enforced will provide sleep patterns that help a child be more alert and active both in and out of the classroom.
about her day, her friends, and the small things going on at school. You may find out more about your child than you ever imagined.

Do I really know what is required of my student in class? At the start of the school year, most teachers give the students a policy and procedures handout that informs the students—and parents—what the class expectations are. Did you see it, sign it, and never look at it again? Teachers do not mind receiving an e-mail asking about a child’s progress in class. Remember, as a parent you may only have one or two students in school whom you are responsible for; an average teacher in my school is accountable for 130 to 160 students daily.

How can I stay in the loop? Most schools have a website or portal that is easy to access. The information is kept up-to-date and some schools give parents their own password to access a real-time look at their student’s grades and assignments. This is one of the fastest and easiest ways to retrieve the information needed to open the lines of communication with your child and the teachers.

Most important, remember, this is not only a milestone in your child’s life, but also in yours. Facing it together will make it much easier!

Every parent should find out if there is an online grade book that allows parents to view grades at any time. Some schools give parents their parental login and password to their child’s online grade book during open house. They should also communicate periodically with their child’s teacher.

Parents need to keep open the lines of communication, especially if the child struggles with learning. On the flip side, parents should not constantly hover over their child’s school life. Some parents stymie their child’s self-image, life lessons, and the meaningful failures that teach resolve and perseverance—that prepare young adults for life’s challenges.

I also encourage parents to try to get their child involved in organized activities inside or outside school. Encouraging a student to take on a sport or to join a club teaches about teamwork, rules, hard work, and competition at a young age.

Limit screen time. Our “Brave New World” includes a great deal of time spent in front of a screen. It is not uncommon to see “digital natives” sitting next to each other texting or sharing other information. Computers and smart phones have not been around long enough for us to measure long-range effects of their constant use. However, we are now seeing PSAs that ask us to “disconnect to connect” to help us redirect our interests away from the digital flash flood.

Open their child’s eyes and their own. Take their children to museums, libraries, national parks, monuments, and other places of interest. Enjoy all kinds of music together. Go to a rock concert together. Go to a play—local theater is often amazing.

The most valuable thing parents can do to help their young adolescent succeed in school is to be parents. Oscar Wilde’s statement, “I’m not young enough to know everything” playfully relates to the important questions: Who is in charge and how do parents fit into a world with changes that are not measured in years but in minutes and seconds?

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Getting ConnectED

BY BOB WISE

There was a time when the nation thought two-lane roads would meet all of its transportation needs, but when demand exceeded capacity, the federal government acted to expand to interstate highways and ease congestion. Similar action is needed today for the nation’s schools and libraries, where far too many teachers, librarians, and students are facing congestion of a different kind: Internet connections that are slow or nonexistent. That’s something you probably have experienced firsthand.

Thankfully, change is underway. As I mentioned in last month’s column, President Obama announced ConnectED, a plan to provide 99% of the nation’s students with next-generation broadband and high-speed wireless in schools and libraries within five years.

Shortly thereafter, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced that it is accepting public comments on a proposal to expand and modernize the E-rate program, the federal government’s program for connecting the nation’s schools and libraries to the Internet. When the public comment period closes in mid-October, the FCC could take major action that does not depend on congressional action. This is the first real opportunity in years to achieve genuine improvements in access to modern education for all students.

Since its creation in 1996, the E-rate program expanded access to the Internet from 14% of classrooms to 94% by 2005. Ten years ago, access to the Internet was enough; web pages were largely text-based with a few images; YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter had not even been created; and in schools, a single dial-up connection met the needs of schools that were lucky enough to have a computer lab.

Today, teachers and students use laptops, tablets, and smartphones to connect with much more interactive content on the Internet. The combination of richer content with more devices vying for access slows Internet connections to the point they aren’t useful. According to a recent survey from Project Tomorrow, only 15% of schools say they have the bandwidth needed for instructional purposes. That means the nation’s teachers and students are stuck on the old two-lane model.

Broadband connectivity in schools and libraries is critical to achieving the higher college- and career-ready goals that have been set for students across the United States. Technology exists to make this implementation possible and lead a significant transformation of the nation’s education system, but much more must be done to increase the infrastructure to ensure a smooth transition.

Whether located in an urban or rural setting, all students should be afforded access to robust digital learning through streamed video, online courseware, virtual field trips, and safe and reliable connections to appropriate Internet research. Teachers and librarians need high-speed connections to personalize content, video chat with mentors, and interact with online professional development communities.

To meet these exploding education and technology goals, the Alliance for Excellent Education has launched a “99 in 5” campaign urging the FCC to upgrade the E-rate program to provide 99% of the nation’s students with next-generation broadband and high-speed Internet connections in schools and libraries within five years. You can add your name to the effort and share your experiences—both rewarding and frustrating—with the Internet connection in your school at www.99in5.org.

By expanding high-speed Internet in the nation’s schools and libraries, the federal government can ensure that teachers and students have access to tools that help personalize learning and make it possible for all students to reach their learning destinations.

BOB WISE is president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, Washington, D.C.

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Teaching High Achievers

Differentiation for high-achieving students should focus on quality, not quantity.

BY KRISTINA J. DOUBET

When students finish their work early or claim that they already grasp the material assigned, teachers’ most frequent and natural response is to give those students more work: more problems, more pages, more sentences.

The adage that “practice makes perfect” rings in our ears. And besides, we have so many students who don’t get it, that it’s difficult to devote extra time and energy to those who do.

But if we truly believe that every student deserves the chance to grow—that all students should receive appropriate support and challenge to facilitate their learning—then we can’t be satisfied with simply assigning more work. Rather, we should strive to assign work that is more appropriate.

In her 2011 Edutopia blog, “A Neurologist Makes the Case for the Video Game Model as a Learning Tool,” Judy Willis asserts that appropriately challenging tasks are necessary for cognitive growth; if a task is too easy, “...the brain is not alert for feedback and there is no activation of the dopamine reward response system.” Consequently, without a proper intellectual fit, students may spin their cognitive wheels, but they will not move forward in their learning.

Principles in Action

Teachers can effectively address the unique needs of advanced learners in the regular classroom by assigning more appropriate work; however, that possibility rests on adherence to a few key principles for the entire class:

1. Authentic, engaging curriculum as a foundation
2. Formative assessment as a guide
3. Student access to like-able peers as facilitators
4. Flexible grouping as a binding agent
5. Anchor activities as appropriate next steps.

Mr. Carter’s eighth grade U.S. History class can serve as a starting point to examine these principles in action. Before Mr. Carter’s students began studying World War II, he explained the goals, including those listed in Figure 1.

Prior to today’s class, students had engaged in interactive lectures, Socratic discussions, a structured academic controversy (see D. W. Johnson and R. T. Johnson’s article, “Creative and Critical Thinking Through Academic Controversy” in the September-October 1993 issue of American Behavioral Scientist), and a political and economic simulation revolving around the United States’ entrance into WWII. Mr. Carter ended the day’s lesson with an exit card asking all students to answer two questions:
1. Other than Pearl Harbor, what other factors may have drawn the United States into WWII? List what you believe to be the two most important potential factors.

2. Now explain whether you believe these factors would have been significant enough to draw the United States into the war. Defend your answer with evidence from class discussions and resources.

As Mr. Carter examined exit card results, he found three patterns emerging. Several students thoroughly and persuasively defended their answers on the second exit card question, using reasoning and citing historical evidence to support cause-and-effect relationships. In contrast, the majority of the class provided their opinions but had trouble defending them. Five students were unable to cite legitimate factors in response to the first question, and their attempts to answer the second question—if they attempted—lacked a reasoned response.

Realizing that “one-sized” instruction for the class would be ineffective, Mr. Carter chose to differentiate among the three emerging patterns.

**The High Achievers**

Because structured academic controversy was a strategy with which his students were already familiar, he asked the six students with advanced answers to participate in this multifaceted, formalized debate.

He put students with like answers into two trios and pitted them against one another to argue for their stance, then to “switch sides” and argue just as vehemently for their opponent’s stance. Finally, the students had to reach consensus and present the best points from both arguments as a joint position statement.

Students received written instructions for this task and were referred to materials they already had that explained the steps of structured academic controversy ([http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21731](http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21731)). Mr. Carter periodically answered questions, calmed over-exuberant discussants, and made certain student thinking was progressing.

**The Majority**

The remainder of the class needed support in adding fuel to the fire of their arguments. Mr. Carter

---

**Figure 1. Goals in Mr. Carter’s Class**

**Students will understand that...**

- The United States operates both independently and as part of an interdependent world system.
- All actions have reactions/consequences.

**Students will know...**

- Key people (e.g., FDR, Stalin, Hitler), places (e.g., European Theatre, American home front), events (e.g., Pearl Harbor, Bretton Woods Conference), and ideas (e.g., appeasement, Isolationism, Fascism, Nazism).
- Key factors (military, political, economic, and ideological) behind the argument for US involvement.

**Students will be able to...**

- Evaluate international and domestic factors affecting the United States during WWII.
- Analyze the effects of world events on U.S. domestic and foreign policy.
- Make predictions based on historical evidence and patterns.
- Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources (CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RH.6-8.1).
conducted a quick mini-lesson wherein he reviewed the principles of effective argument and the historical resources students could access to support their claims.

Then, he paired those who needed to strengthen their arguments (the majority of the class) with peers with like answers on question #2 of the exit card. Those pairs added support to their assertions, then compared their answers with another pair who held a similar view. Finally, these quads fused their evidence into well-defended joint position statements, hashing out their differences in the process. Mr. Carter periodically monitored their progress.

Those Who Struggled
After the mini-lesson, Mr. Carter selected the five students who had struggled significantly with both exit card answers and divided them into one pair and one trio. His purpose was to engage these students in analytical work as opposed to just looking up facts. He gave each group a set of “cause cards”; each cause card had a factor on the front and evidence/details about that factor on the back. Groups discussed and ranked their cause cards, learning the content as they “crunched” on it through discussion.

Mr. Carter got them started but let them work independently until they finished their rankings. He checked back in and listened as each group defended its conclusion to the other. He then asked them to write their own joint position statement, meshing the best reasoning from each side into one assertion.

At the end of the class, each small group presented its joint position statement, and Mr. Carter returned students’ exit cards, asking them to explain on the back how their thinking had been challenged or extended during class that day.

Mr. Carter also provided students with a list of historical figures and events they would be studying and asked them to choose the two in which they were most interested; he would use their results to form interest groups for an investigative jigsaw the following week.

The Principles Explained
Mr. Carter’s U.S. History class illustrates the five key principles undergirding the success of meeting advanced-learner needs in the regular classroom.

1. Authentic, Engaging Curriculum as a Foundation
   All students in this eighth grade U.S. History class were asked to behave as thinking, meaning-making disciplinarians rather than as memorization machines. Rather than teaching facts like a grocery list, Mr. Carter presented historical content as “ingredients for dinner,” not “dinner itself,” as Carol Ann Tomlinson describes it. He mixed the facts with historical principles and critical thinking skills into a meal all students found appetizing. After students willingly came to the table, Mr. Carter could find ways to support or extend their learning process.

   In each of the three tasks assigned that day, students were asked to use evidence and reasoning to formulate and defend a position. Students in the advanced group had their thinking pushed by increasing the complexity of their reasoning and use of evidence. Students in the other two groups still reasoned and argued, but did so with the support they needed, as evidenced by their exit cards.

2. Formative Assessment as a Guide
   By gathering information about student learning through meaty, thought-revealing assessment questions, Mr. Carter could make instructional adjustments based on data rather than on supposition. He recognized that sometimes students labeled as “advanced” struggle with certain topics or skills, while other students excel in unexpected areas.

   His quick assessment identified students who needed to be challenged—not just those with labels. It also revealed which students needed additional support, again, regardless of label.

3. Student Access to Like-Able Peers as Facilitators
   Students’ answers also revealed exactly what each needed to move forward in the learning process; different students needed different things. Too often, our first inclination is to respond to such differences by having advanced students teach those who struggle. This contradicts Vygotsky’s notion of the Zone of Proximal Development; in order to grow, students must wrestle with material that’s a little too difficult for them and must do so with others who can push their thinking.

   If Mr. Carter’s “advanced down the road” students had simply tutored those who struggled, they would not have engaged with peers who were capable of challenging them intellectually on a task that emphasized critical thinking rather than repeating content they had already mastered. Likewise, had the students who struggled been reduced to “tutorees,” they would have missed the opportunity to work with an expert (the teacher) who could provide appropriate, targeted feedback to help them take the proper intellectual next steps in their learning.

   Different students were “ready” for different work; therefore, Mr. Carter assigned appropriately tiered tasks.
4. Flexible Grouping as a Binding Agent

In this example, grouping by readiness was the defensible response; however, Mr. Carter recognized that using readiness as the sole means of grouping may unintentionally draw too much attention to student differences. Therefore, he planned to focus on student similarities through interest-based tasks the following week.

At the end of his lesson, Mr. Carter collected topic preferences with the goal of forming like-interest groups. Based on the fact that students are more motivated and unified when they pursue areas of preference, Mr. Carter strengthened classroom community and progressed toward his own goal of shifting groups frequently enough that students always wondered with whom they would work next.

5. Anchor Activities as Appropriate Next Steps

Mr. Carter recognized that his diverse group of students would often finish at different times, no matter what kind of task they were completing—group or independent, readiness or interest, etc. However, he subscribed to Carol Ann Tomlinson’s belief that “learning is a process that never ends.” Accordingly, he devised a system that students automatically moved to if they finished an assignment early.

Rather than assign “busy work,” he created an investigative tool students could use to tunnel more deeply into the time period they were studying in class (Figure 2). The tool allowed him to steer students toward columns that were an appropriate fit for their readiness levels, as the columns increased in complexity.

Mr. Carter found that such anchor activities helped students make connections and find historical patterns; in addition, they increased time spent on assigned tasks because free time was no longer an incentive to rush through work in order to finish early.

Final Thoughts

Educators can meet the needs of advanced students in the context of the regular classroom provided they have established the proper foundation. With these five principles in place, students who need additional challenge can be identified and served.

Granted, the use of regular pre-assessment may uncover situations in which a student is so advanced she requires a drastically different course of study; however, following the logic that a “rising tide lifts all boats,” raising the quality of curriculum and instruction for all students results in our being well poised to meet the needs of highly able students. It sets us up to craft tasks that are “more appropriate” rather than simply “more.”

KRISTINA J. DOUBET is an associate professor of education at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She also is a staff developer in differentiation, UBD, assessment, and the Common Core State Standards.

doubetkj@jmu.edu

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Figure 2. Anchor Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complete Column 1 and research your choice of additional column(s)</th>
<th>Column 1</th>
<th>Column 2</th>
<th>Column 3</th>
<th>Column 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Era Currently Being Studied</td>
<td>Compared to Previous Era (discuss connections)</td>
<td>Compared to Present Day (hypothesize reasons for similarities/differences)</td>
<td>Predictions - Future Trends (cite historical patterns to defend predictions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Federal Government’s Major Policies</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Economic Health (description, causes, and effects)</td>
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<td>Foreign Policy/ Alliances/ Strained Relationships</td>
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<td>U.S. Domestic Culture-Shaping Events or Movements</td>
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Working with Under-Resourced Gifted Students

High-achieving students from poverty may present unique challenges.

BY RUBY K. PAYNE

I have no idea what to do with him! Right now, he’s failing, but I know he can do the work. He questions me at every turn. He won’t accept anything without proof! He won’t work if he doesn’t like the project. Some days he’s like a dog with a bone. He won’t let go of a topic!

I finally told him yesterday that a certain conversation was over. So he laid his head down on his desk. I asked him a question, and he raised his head, answered it, and went back to laying his head down. Then I told him I was going to call his mother. He said, “When you find her, I’d like to talk to her too. I haven’t heard from her since she left last month.”

Educators often base interventions on an assumed set of external resources that the student may or may not have. For example, giftedness is a set of capabilities and behaviors associated with high intelligence. The range of intelligence is usually identified by IQ (intelligence quotient) and is based on the concept of a bell-shaped curve.

The top of the chart is 100, although IQ scores can go as high as 200. Ninety-five percent of the population fall between 70 and 130; 2.5% fall below 70; 2.5% are above 130. There is a wider range of ability in the top 2.5% than there is in the “normal range” (and in the bottom 2.5%, for that matter).

The extensiveness of the upper range makes identifying and quantifying intelligence difficult. Furthermore, a person’s environment can determine much of what one knows; IQ mostly measures acquired intelligence. To complicate things even more, the concept of “speed”—i.e., how fast one learns and processes—is part of the giftedness picture.

Many studies on giftedness identify intelligence by using a set of behaviors. However, these behaviors show up in the negative and in the positive. And many gifted students who are under-resourced—
students from poverty—actually are seen as discipline problems because of the many negative behaviors often associated with giftedness.

**What does it mean to be gifted as an adolescent?**

Being gifted can be very uncomfortable for some adolescents—especially those who are under-resourced. The research indicates that many gifted students deliberately fail tests or fail to do homework so that they don’t appear to be too smart. There’s an axis of relationships/acceptance and achievement. At the middle level (and sometimes into high school as well), relationships and acceptance tend to trump achievement. Many of these students choose having friends over excelling academically.

Adolescents who are gifted can be unusually argumentative with adults, shoot holes in every argument, try extreme behaviors (see how many hours or days they can go without sleep, see how many friends they can get on Facebook), make unusual friends (“I just wanted to know what they were like”), quickly see through superficial or hypocritical adults, and engage in deviant social behaviors. Because they can process information so fast, they become bored easily and often think it’s the teacher’s duty to keep them engaged.

In school, we often give these students more work rather than meaningful work. We also think that gifted adolescents should always have perfect scores. Typically that isn’t the case for the truly gifted student. High-achieving perfectionism is something an overachiever will tend to manifest rather than a gifted student. Often overachievers or teacher pleasers are misidentified as gifted students. Truly gifted students frequently don’t care about pleasing the teacher—that is, unless there’s a strong relationship of mutual respect.

**How can we support these students?**

1. **Provide alternative assignments for the handful of students who clearly need a different and creative challenge.** For example, rather than answering the questions at the end of the chapter, ask the gifted students to write their own questions and see if they can “stump” their classmates. Instead of doing the math problems, the gifted students can write problems and questions that expand on the lesson. (You might use some of these on tests because they often are good questions.)

2. **Have them make a list of 10 things they would like to be, do, learn, have in their lifetime.** Encourage them to do research on their list. Gifted individuals often delve intensively into something, then when they’ve exhausted it to their satisfaction, they drop it and go on to something else.

3. **Be honest.** Tell them when you don’t know something. If they ask a question you cannot answer, say, “I think that’s a great thing for you to research; let me know what you find out.” If they tell you they’re bored, ask, “What particular thing about this topic would interest you?” If they don’t know, tell them they’ll need to do the current assignment until they have an idea of their own.

4. **Help them make friends.** When my son was in fifth grade, he came home from school and said, “Mom, I don’t have friends. I would like to have friends. Do you think it would be better to talk about Eastern or Western philosophy first?” I told him that probably neither of those would be a good idea. If he wanted friends, he needed to talk about what they were interested in. So we made a list of things he could learn more about so he could develop friendships. One thing that helped him tremendously was role-playing video games because they require players to develop their own characters and stories.

5. **Last but not least, when gifted adolescents want to argue with you, teach them the rules of fair discourse and debate.** Encourage them to stay with the ideas and argument without name calling or getting personal with criticism. Also urge them to focus on specifics, to ask good questions, and to find ways to buttress the validity of their argument.

**Giving Gifts**

If we can infuse gifted adolescents with a passion for and interest in particular ideas or subjects, they likely will carry that passion for learning with them the rest of their lives. This truly is a gift—indeed, a gift for the gifted.

RUBY K. PAYNE is an educator, author, and founder of aha! Process, Inc. (www.ahaprocess.com). She is a featured presenter at the AMLE2013. Her newest book, Under-Resourced Adolescents, published by AMLE will be available this November.

rpayne@ahaprocess.com
www.ahaprocess.com

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rpayne@ahaprocess.com
www.ahaprocess.com
Students with special needs are learning alongside their regular education peers in classrooms across the country. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Education, of the approximately 6.5 million special education students enrolled in our nation’s public schools, the vast majority receive all or part of their education in the regular classroom.

As a result of the academic, behavioral, and social needs of these students, regular education teachers are becoming more skilled at modifying curriculum. However, although middle level teachers know they are required to make these accommodations, many teachers, trained exclusively in a regular education curriculum, may not understand the overall system of special education.

Because legal mandates are associated with these special education students, it is critical that all middle level teachers have a working knowledge of the rights afforded these students.

1. Students with special needs are protected by federal law.

The vast majority of special needs students receive their services under a special education law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA); other students may get their services under a specific section of a civil rights law, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, Section 504. Although both laws provide accommodations to children in school, the requirements for qualifying under each law vary.

IDEA requires the student to qualify under a specific handicapping condition from a list developed by the federal government. These conditions include specific learning disabled, emotional disturbance, intellectually impaired, communication disordered, and others. Students are assessed for a particular disability and information is gathered to help determine the student’s eligibility for services.

Section 504 is designed differently, with no identified handicapping conditions. Instead, qualifying for services requires documentation to prove the student has “a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits a major life function.”

2. Students with special needs have legal paperwork.

If a student qualifies for special education services under IDEA, the student will receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). If the student receives services under Section 504, the student receives a 504 Plan,
Although some states may refer to it by another name. Although both IEP and 504 Plans are legal documents that protect the rights of disabled students, the rules governing each set of paperwork differ.

Federal law requires an IEP to be developed on behalf of the student by members of a multidisciplinary team that includes a special educator, a regular educator, an administrator, and the student’s parent or guardian. Frequently, other professionals will participate on the team as well. This team meets to revise the student’s IEP as often as needed to address issues that arise with the student’s progress. The law related to 504 Plans is not as specific, resulting in a general requirement that 504 Plans be updated only periodically. Although a 504 Plan is developed by people knowledgeable about the student, parents are not required to participate in the development; still, it is best practice to welcome their input.

Both Individualized Education Plans and 504 Plans are considered confidential and are not stored with the student’s other educational records. Although only specific individuals are authorized to view confidential records, regular educators have the right to access them if they carry any responsibility for the education of a student with special needs in the general classroom.

A 504 Plan is generally brief and focuses on the accommodations provided to the student. The Individualized Education Plan is a detailed, extensive document that provides a great deal of information about the special needs student, including

- Category of disability.
- Present levels of performance, including how the disability affects the student’s involvement in the regular education curriculum.
- Measurable annual goals and how progress will be measured and communicated to parents or guardians.
- Specially designed instruction and accommodations that are required for assignments and assessments.

3. Students with special needs are entitled to a free and appropriate public education.

This provision under IDEA is referred to as FAPE, and it has two parts: the parent or guardian cannot be charged for the education of the child and the education the child receives must be best suited for his or her individual needs.

What constitutes an appropriate education is a decision the multidisciplinary team must make as it develops the student’s IEP. Although FAPE is not a provision specifically identified with Section 504, many school systems apply the same basic concept to students who have 504 Plans, focusing on the accommodations that must be made to afford the student an education that addresses his or her individual needs.

4. Students with special needs are entitled to a variety of accommodations and services.

Both the IEP and 504 Plan outline the modifications that have been determined to be necessary for the special needs student. The majority of students with a 504 Plan will receive these accommodations in the

+ EXTRA!
Read more information about this article online at www.amle.org/magazine.
5. Students with special needs must be educated in the least restrictive environment.

Under federal law, students who qualify under IDEA must be educated in their least restrictive environment (LRE), or as much as possible with their nondisabled peers. This expands the range of possible educational settings to include the regular education classroom.

Unlike the special education of years past, few students are now educated exclusively in a separate environment such as a special school or special classroom. The multidisciplinary team must determine the student’s LRE and address it within the Individualized Education Plan. Least Restrictive Environment is not a provision of Section 504, and as a result, the majority of students who have a 504 Plan are educated in the regular classroom.

With an increasing number of special needs students being educated in the regular classroom, it is critical that middle level teachers understand the key concepts that guide special education programming and decision making. These important ideas serve as the basis for the student’s legal right to an appropriate and individualized education as outlined in federal law.

KIMBERLY KODE is assistant professor of education at York College in Pennsylvania.

ksutton1@ycp.edu
Social Revolution Through Sports

Sports can be a powerful catalyst for breaking down barriers.

BY BRIAN QUINN & BETTY EDWARDS

In eighth grade, co-author Brian Quinn played on one of his district’s ice hockey teams, which included students from different social circles. He was not in one of the “popular” groups at his school, but being a member of the sports team and interacting with his teammates made him feel better about himself. When people wear the same jersey, practice together, compete and travel together, they develop a unique bond that is difficult to duplicate with other programs.

Brian wasn’t significantly different from his school mates—he just wasn’t one of the popular kids. Imagine what it is like for students who are viewed as different because of a disability. According to a national study on the attitudes of middle school students toward peers with intellectual disabilities, (*Exceptional Children*, Summer 2007), students said that in school, they had little contact with students with intellectual disabilities and did not want to interact socially with them.

How, then, can students with intellectual disabilities become part of the social fabric of the school?

One answer is Special Olympics Unified Sports®, which brings together athletes with and without intellectual disabilities to train and...
compete on the same team. In middle level schools, this form of inclusive sports can be implemented as a physical education class, part of an intramural program, or as an interscholastic team that brings together Unified Sports teams within a local region.

Students who participate in Unified Sports
• Learn new sports and skills.
• Experience meaningful inclusion as they play valued roles on a team.
• Socialize with peers to form friendships.
• Demonstrate their abilities to their schools, families, and communities.

Janet Cuppage, a physical education teacher at Highland Junior High School in Gilbert, Arizona, shares the impact that her Unified Sports PE class has on her students: “Students look forward to my class more than any other. They feel like they are needed and important in my class….They feel responsible to someone else besides themselves. Someone else is counting on them, and they want to rise up.”

Cuppage’s feelings about her students are reinforced by research about young adolescents. The students are generally idealistic, want to make contributions to issues larger than themselves, and show compassion for others. Across the country, schools are using this inclusion model to create a social revolution for all students.

Better Understanding
When students are consistently working together, they develop a better understanding of one another. With this understanding come true friendships and respect. We see this translated beyond the playing field and into the hallways. Students become the strongest advocates for each other and help reduce bullying at the source.

Kelly, a student at Haddam-Killingworth Middle School in Killingworth, Connecticut, expressed her thoughts in an essay:
One girl with autism was part of a video about “derogatory words” last year, and I was in awe of her standing up for our friend who has Down Syndrome…. Most of the time it hurts me when I see that [students with intellectual disabilities] know that people may call them mean names or make fun of them…. Whenever someone uses the derogatory and hurtful word “retarded,” I immediately reprimand them…. The Unified Sports class has reminded me that all men are created equal, and I am relieved that this saying finally has total and complete meaning.

Educators generally want to include students with disabilities in sports and other programs; however, they often are unsure how to create these inclusive opportunities. Sometimes educators give these students a role as team manager or give them the opportunity to play at the end of a blow-out game. While the intentions are good, the school staff must provide all students with a true sports experience where everyone can achieve meaningful success.

Equal Opportunities
Special Olympics Unified Sports is an established model that has been working in schools for more than 20 years. Internationally recognized rules and models help structure teams and guide competitions. All students have the opportunity to be meaningfully involved on a team, to contribute their own unique strengths and talents, and to be recognized by others for special skills and attributes. All students—those with and without intellectual disabilities—are
expected to follow the same rules and are held accountable for their actions.

Providing each student with the opportunity to be actively engaged in school athletics is not just the hope of a few. Several months ago, the U. S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights released a letter clarifying each school’s responsibility to ensure that students with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in extracurricular sports.

This is not a new law, but it clarifies Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973: “When the interests and abilities of some students with disabilities cannot be as fully and effectively met by the school district’s existing extracurricular athletic program, the school district should create additional opportunities for those students with disabilities.” Unified Sports helps education leaders address this guidance so that all students are engaged meaningfully in athletics.

We are delighted that these civil rights are receiving attention, but we want schools to join the movement toward inclusion because it is good for all students and good for the culture of the school. We have seen repeatedly that Unified Sports creates a comfortable and inviting environment for all students, encouraging those who may not have typically engaged in sports to become active.

For example, Jane, a student in Ms. Cuppage’s class, did not have an intellectual disability but did have a heart condition, which often made her feel like an outsider in her PE classes. Jane transferred to one of the Unified Sports sections and was able to help another student do her best without being judged by what she, herself, couldn’t do. Being valued for what she could do was motivational for Jane and for the intellectually disabled student with whom she was working.

Conversely, Unified Sports can give elite athletes a new perspective on competition and sportsmanship. The book Perfect Game, by Washington Post sports columnist and acclaimed youth author Fred Bowen, follows Isaac, a short-tempered 13-year-old who is trying to make a junior league all-star team. Along his journey, he accidentally discovers Unified Sports where he meets a new set of athletes who show him a different way to think about being “perfect.”

**Chances for All**

Much like Brian’s middle school hockey experience, the ongoing interaction that takes place in Special Olympics Unified Sports helps break down barriers and erase pre-conceived differences among students. It helps to shatter stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities in a fun and inclusive environment. Everyone deserves the chance to have friends and experience the “thrill of the game.”

**BRIAN QUINN** is the manager of Youth Education & Unified Sports® for Special Olympics North America Project UNIFY.

✉️ [bquinn@specialolympics.org](mailto:bquinn@specialolympics.org)

**BETTY EDWARDS,** the former executive director of the Association for Middle Level Education, is chair of the Special Olympics Project UNIFY National Education Leaders Network.

✉️ [bedwardsk@aol.com](mailto:bedwardsk@aol.com)

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**Bring Unified Sports to Your School!**

If you are interested in starting a Unified Sports program at your school, there are many avenues available. Each state and the District of Columbia has a Special Olympics Program with a support staff in place to help you.

Additional information about Unified Sports and free resources can be found at [www.specialolympics.org/unified_sports.aspx](http://www.specialolympics.org/unified_sports.aspx) and [www.specialolympics.org/Sections/What_We_Do/Project_Unify/Project_Unify.aspx](http://www.specialolympics.org/Sections/What_We_Do/Project_Unify/Project_Unify.aspx).
Reconciling Common Core State Standards

The balanced literacy model helps all students achieve in the face of the Common Core demands.

BY DARLENE SCHOENLY

Common Core State Standards advocates contend that the standards provide consistent, clear targets of what students should learn. The standards, they say, are robust and relevant to the real world, with the ultimate assurance that graduates will be college and career ready. Embedded in the content of the standards is the expectation that all learners will interact with complex texts. Adversaries, however, object to the requirement that learners engage with materials that are so demanding and rigorous that success is impossible for a major segment of the student population. As Richard Allington and Peter Johnston state in their book *Reading to Learn: Lessons from*
Exemplary Fourth-Grade, the best way to become a better reader is to practice the reading process intensely, with self-selected materials that can be read independently.

Educators can honor best practices while adhering to the rigor of the standards.

Further, those who oppose the Common Core movement express concern that too much instructional time is devoted to preparing learners for high-stakes exams and to conforming to discrete learning expectations. The resulting conformity supplants opportunities to be creative, innovative, and imaginative. Each of those learner qualities is essential to competing in a global economy that values creators and designers of new knowledge, risk-taking systems, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Common Ground on Common Core

Educators can honor best practices while adhering to the rigor of the standards. Both camps have elements of merit and value.

First, the Common Core State Standards incorporate an element of rigor and challenge that is essential to long-term learning. As Margaret Gredler states in her 2012 Educational Psychology Review article “Understanding Vygotsky for the Classroom,” a level of tension or disequilibrium must exist to ensure growth in learning.

However, in the context of a challenging curriculum, a high level of teacher support or scaffolding is vital. Also, in the same context of rigorous learning, we must not ignore the role of motivation. In motivation theory, the experience of success is essential to extended and sustained learning, according to Gredler. This begs the need to provide instructional interventions and learning materials that are at a level that ensures learner commitment and endurance.

To reconcile these opposing views, we need a model for responding to the expectations while adhering to the research and best practices in teaching and learning. The balanced literacy model for promoting reading and writing competence in learners from preschool to high school does just that.

The balanced literacy model offers gradual release of teacher responsibility. As such, it supports all learners, even those who have trouble engaging with demanding and sophisticated texts. In its design, teachers can use the rigorous and demanding texts endorsed in the CCSS while using best practices of education. These instructional elements create scaffolds that allow the teacher to move from large group to small group to individual readers.

Here is a brief description of the elements of the balanced literacy framework for reading:

Read Alouds and Think Alouds—In a large-group setting, teachers model the thinking and reading expectations for all learners. Carol Ann Tomlinson and Cindy Strickland suggest in their book, Differentiation in Practice: A Resource Guide for Differentiating Curriculum, Grades 9–12, that as the teacher reveals the process, the learners hear what a skilled reader does to make sense of a text. The use of grade-level or more rigorous text is appropriate because the teacher models how an accomplished reader navigates the challenging text.

Shared Reading—Also in a large-group setting, the teacher directs the readers to turn and talk to a partner about their understanding and thinking. Again, a grade-level or more rigorous text is effective because the teacher is there to provide ample support.

Guided Reading—This strategy takes place in a small-group setting where the learners apply the pre-taught reading-thinking processes. Here, the readers have increased responsibility; the text selection is more appropriately matched to the reading competence of the readers; and the teacher’s role moves from model to monitor.

The teacher documents the readers’ thinking and reading behaviors to determine what thinking and reading strategies to model in future Read Alouds and Shared Readings. The teacher differentiates by matching the readers to texts that are on the readers’ instructional level, not necessarily their grade level.

Independent Reading—This critical element of the framework gives readers the opportunity to apply the comprehension strategies modeled in Think Alouds and Shared Reading. The opportunity for students to self-select texts is critical; they should select appropriate texts that are at their independent level and are interesting to them. Increased reading stamina is one of the goals of independent reading time.
As in the case of the reading segment of the balanced literacy framework, the writing components offer the same opportunities to reconcile the CCSS demands for increased writing volume, focus on argumentation rather than persuasion in writing, and increased attention to nonfiction writing. Once again, the writing components of the balanced literacy framework provide a manageable structure.

Here is a brief description of the writing elements:

**Modeled Writing**—This is the “I Do” element. Learners watch the teacher construct text and use thinking/problem-solving strategies to draft a piece of writing. Included in the teacher modeling process are the various genres included in the CCSS, including argumentation, research, and informative texts.

**Shared Writing**—This is the “We Do” element. The teacher uses authentic and real-life texts as models for the students to replicate. The teacher directs the students to study the content and the writer’s technique. Jeff Anderson, in his book *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer’s Workshop*, calls this approach an “invitation to notice.” After the learners identify the author’s strategies, the students are challenged to apply the strategies to their own drafts.

**Guided Writing**—This is the “You Do” element. The teacher brings together the student writers who demonstrated particular strengths or needs in the Shared Writing activity. The teacher differentiates instruction and increases instructional contact time with the writers as necessary.

**Independent Writing**—Quality independent writing is the ultimate goal of the balanced literacy framework and the Common Core State Standards. The addition of teacher/learner writing conferences increases the volume of writing and enhances its quality. As the young writers apply the strategies and techniques they’ve learned, their chance of successful independent writing increases.

**We Can Do This**

As the full implementation of the Common Core State Standards looms ominously, and with the realization that there is no turning back, we must move from conceptual understanding to effective implementation. By implementing the components of the reading and writing domains of the balanced literacy framework, classroom teachers can honor the research and best practices of literacy teaching and attend to the demands of the Common Core State Standards.

By implementing the CCSS and the steps of a balanced literacy framework, we can supplant the exasperation of “Here we go again” with the notion that “We can do this.” The Balanced Literacy Framework offers the structure; the teachers provide the expertise and attitude.

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**DARLENE SCHOENLY** is an assistant professor in the College of Education at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania.  
<schoenly@kutztown.edu>
That’s How We Roll: Integrating the Curriculum

A slightly different look at interdisciplinary curriculum keeps everyone on the same page.

**BY LAUREN POROSOFF**

The benefits of an integrated interdisciplinary curriculum are pretty well settled, but let’s review.

Interdisciplinary learning gives students more opportunities to process information so they can remember and use it, according to the brain research Robin Fogarty cites in *How to Integrate Curricula*.

When we prioritize cross-disciplinary ideas over discipline-based facts, we teach our students to construct their own knowledge instead of reducing them to being memorizers and mimics. In *Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction*, H. Lynn Erickson explains how in interdisciplinary curricula, “The focus for teaching and learning becomes the ideas that can be taken forward and applied in new but related contexts.”

In *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink points out that “seeing the big picture, crossing boundaries, and being able to combine disparate pieces into an arresting new whole,” an ability he calls “symphony,” is a key skill in the 21st century where that information is so easy to access.

But how can our students see the big picture when we’re creating so many little ones? How can we expect students to make connections when we build Berlin Walls between subjects?

**Enter Integrated Curricula**

In some schools that integrate the curriculum, students study a concept simultaneously in different classes for a designated amount of time. For example, for two weeks in October, they learn about immigration in history class while reading *The Arrival* in English. Or the school suspends the regular class schedule during a two-week interdisciplinary project on immigration. Although coordinating across classes might seem more manageable when given a limited time period, some teachers might see the unit as a detour from the “real” curriculum.

Keith Barton and Lynne Smith describe in their September 2000 *The Reading Teacher* article, “Themes or Motifs? Aiming for Coherence through Interdisciplinary Outlines,” that interdisciplinary units often “organize content and activities together simply because they contain or mention a similar subject,” such as a unit on apples where students cut apples into fractional parts, look at pictures of apple trees, read about Johnny Appleseed, and write about some aspect of apples.
Even if some students enjoy these activities, this unit lacks the purpose and authenticity necessary to engender deeper understandings. Jere Brophy and Janet Allerman point out in "A Caveat: Curriculum Integration Isn’t Always a Good Idea" (Educational Leadership, October 1991) that in integrated units, “suggested activities sometimes call for students to do things they are not prepared to do, either because the task is ambiguous . . . or because it requires them to use knowledge that has not been taught in the curriculum and is not likely to have been acquired elsewhere.”

Instead of students studying a concept simultaneously in all their classes, they study it one class at a time.

Learning ancient Egyptian history doesn’t help students make scale models of pyramids in math. Meanwhile, pyramid-making week is time spent not learning new math skills or doing a more meaningful project. And students who enjoy learning different things in different classes—or who don’t happen to be jazzed about ancient Egypt—are just waiting for the week to end.

The Rolling Unit

Presenting an alternative to the concurrent interdisciplinary study: what I call a “rolling” unit. Instead of students studying a concept simultaneously in all their classes, they study it one class at a time throughout the year, incorporating knowledge and skills they’ve learned in the past to help them move forward—much as a snowball rolling down a hill gathers in size and momentum.

At Fieldston Middle School, our seventh graders take life science, history (focusing on ancient civilizations), English, and pre-algebra. For world languages, music, and PE, our seventh graders choose their courses; arts and ethics courses rotate on a quarterly schedule. These disciplines could hook into the interdisciplinary theme, but since the rolling unit depends on a month’s study in one class feeding into next month’s study in another class, the rolling unit only includes subjects in which everyone takes the same course at the same time.

Setting and Success

For example, the Setting and Success rolling unit begins with an interdisciplinary essential question designed to stimulate thinking and cut across subjects: How much does our setting affect our success, and what can we do to become more successful within our setting?

Science–Evolution. In February, students begin examining this question in science, during a February unit on evolution. The unit doesn’t look interdisciplinary—yet.

Essential Question: How does evolution happen by natural selection?

Assessment: Make a cartoon showing how a species adapts to environmental pressures. Include examples of trait variation, competition for scarce resources, environmental change to which some individuals are genetically better adapted, and selection for favorable traits.

History–Mesopotamia. In March, in history, the seventh graders start studying how food surpluses in agricultural societies like Mesopotamia allowed for a sedentary lifestyle, economic specialization, and social stratification. The students use concepts they learned in science class the month before—variation, competition, environmental change—to help them think about how Mesopotamian social and economic structures developed.

Essential Question: How does environment affect social and economic structures?

Assessment: Create a brochure about Mesopotamian society that shows how its social stratification and economic specialization evolved.

English–Success on Mango Street. In April, in English, the kids read The House on Mango Street, a book of vignettes about a girl, Esperanza, who dreams of leaving her oppressive neighborhood. The students bring the concept of social stratification from history into their analysis of how Esperanza’s access to success relates to her race, class, and gender.

Essential Question: How does our setting affect the ways we can be successful? How can I be successful in my setting?

Assessment: Using The House on Mango Street as a model, write a series of vignettes showing ways you’re succeeding within your setting and ways your setting limits your ability to succeed.

Math–Functions and Graphing.

The following month, in math, the students transition from a unit on ratios, proportions, and percents, into the year’s last unit: functions and graphing. They learn to identify variables, such
as how much time they spend practicing guitar or how often they help a friend, and relate those variables to quantifiable measures of success. Their final project requires them to set up and solve equations—using skills they’ve developed all year—and also bring in ideas about setting and success. How can I use algebra to show how my success is related to my environment?

**Assessment:** Write, graph, and explain a series of equations that show 1) how successful you are in different areas in your life that matter to you (e.g., social, academic, athletic, artistic, civic) and 2) what factors these successes depend on. Describe how you might change your behaviors and/or environment to ensure greater success rates.

**Advisory.** In June, the rising eighth graders are ready to synthesize their understandings of how setting relates to success and establish concrete, personally meaningful goals for future successes.

**Essential Question:** How much does our setting affect our success, and what can we do to become more successful within our setting?

**Assessment:** Write an essay explaining how your science cartoon, history brochure, English vignette collection, and math report show that setting affects success. Then, present a series of goals—to be accomplished by the end of summer, the first month of eighth grade, the end of eighth grade, and by high school graduation—for how you might change your behaviors and environment to ensure greater successes in your future.

**Connecting for Understanding**

While logistics might be simpler if all classes studied the same concept at the same time, the “rolling” approach seems more likely to meet Brophy and Allerman’s two criteria for an effective integrated unit: activities should be “educationally significant, ones desirable even if they did not include the integration feature” and “foster, rather than disrupt or nullify, accomplishment of major goals in each subject area.”

In Setting and Success, the content and assessments are already important in each course and need only minor adjustments to fit the integrated theme.

Connecting these units builds greater understanding without sacrificing time or rigor in the core classes, and the students are more likely to understand how success relates to setting if they can develop that understanding over time. They’re also less likely to get bored if they’re not bombarded with the topic in every class at once.

The rolling approach takes work. Teachers need time to discuss their curricula, develop a shared vision for the unit, and gain at least as much familiarity with each other’s content as their students will have. The teachers also have to be open to playing with their other units’ timing so the rolling unit hits each class in a sequence that makes sense. I hope that given the potential for such “symphonic” understanding, teachers will be willing—and excited—to do that work.

Lauren Porosoff teaches English at Ethical Culture Fieldston Middle School in Bronx, New York. She has served as a team leader, diversity coordinator, and project leader for curriculum mapping. lporosoff@ecfs.org

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**Figure 1. The Rolling Unit**

- **Month 1**: Students begin to study a concept in a single class, as it relates to that discipline.
- **Month 2**: Students study the same concept in a different class, as it relates to that course’s content. They begin to develop a broader understanding of the concept.
- **Month 3**: Students study the concept, now in a third class. The students’ understandings become more complicated, and they need support in understanding connections and distinctions.
- **Month 4**: Students study the concept in a fourth class. The students’ understandings are becoming more textured, though they still need support in understanding connections and distinctions.

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**EXTRA!**

Read more information about this article online at www.amle.org/magazine.
Is it time for a face lift? No, not you. You look fine. We’re talking about your classroom.

Take a look around. Are those textbooks from the 1980s and 1990s? And your bulletin boards! Power Rangers? (You know, “Math Is Power!”)

Do former students come to visit and remark that “this room hasn’t changed a bit since I was here five years ago?” That’s not really a good thing.

Look inside your file cabinet. Have your tests been photocopied so many times that the font appears to have grown its own 5 o’clock shadow?

Surely you are not lecturing in front of an overhead projector with
that bottle of water and a handy towel!

If you diagnose your classroom as needing a face lift, how about trying some of these ideas? Reinventing your classroom might even reinvent your teaching.

**Outer Beauty**

Some teachers live to create exciting bulletin boards. They change them on a monthly basis. They are colorful. They sport cute slogans. They are certainly eye-catching. But do they elevate the level of instruction within their classrooms?

Not only should bulletin boards be fresh, they should complement the current lesson’s goals and objectives. A poster of Peyton Manning in quarterback stance under the slogan, “Score on the ACT!” is motivational, but is it instructional? Give this bulletin board a face lift by providing statistics about Manning’s passing ratings, touchdown completions, and interceptions, along with line charts, pie charts, and box-and-whisper plots.

**Inner Beauty**

How are things looking inside your classroom—from an instruction point of view? Is your lesson plan a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching? We know all students don’t learn the same way. Visit your lesson plans and ensure they have what John Parks LeTellier describes as the VAK factors—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements—to engage the learners and program their brains for long-term information storage.

Engage your students to discover their interests, then bait the hook to suit the fish, so to speak. Use examples they can relate to. Use terms that catch their interest. Change a word problem from “Janet sent 30 invitations to her party and received 23 RSVPs....” to “Brad spends 10 more hours playing Xbox than Sam....” This small change gives vitality to an otherwise outdated word problem.

What about your assessments? As teachers, we often teach and test the way we were taught and tested. But today’s students are different. Inundated with high tech digital sounds and images, their brains process information differently. What’s more, the demands of the workplace require more.

Assess more than students’ ability to crunch numbers or regurgitate facts. Assess students’ ability to create, evaluate, analyze, apply, understand, and remember content.

What’s the point of your homework assignments? Entire books have been written about how much to assign, whether to assign, whether to grade it, how to grade it, etc. It all boils down to, “What is the goal of the homework?”

Do you assign it because of tradition? Do you assign it to keep students busy for the rest of the period, knowing they probably won’t complete the assignment anyway? Reflect on the purpose of the assignment. Does a student really need to find the perimeter of 50 rectangles to get the point? Probably not.

Consider assigning 10–15 mandatory problems, but offer a bonus to those who go above and beyond. You may need to differentiate your instruction by assigning struggling students more practice. Allow those who have mastered the objective to mentor their struggling peers.

**Going Up!**

The keys to giving your classroom environment and teaching methods a face lift are reflection and action. Reflect on what you are doing and lift it to a higher level. The improvement doesn’t have to be one substantial leap, but a series of incremental steps toward a classroom that is student-centered and content-focused, where instruction is engaging and assessment is meaningful.

**JOEL E. ROWLETT** is an assistant principal at Rock Springs Middle School in Smyrna, Tennessee. rowlettj@rcs.k12.tn.us

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Scholastic.com/teacherstore
An Experiment in Flipping

Lack of time for hands-on learning prompted a classroom flip.

BY POOJA PATEL

Class time was just too limited. Research suggests that teachers should systematically and explicitly teach students to craft essays, yet I struggled with finding the time to do it all: teach my students the skills necessary to write the essay, provide proper written models of the various elements, support them in fully digesting and using the writing process, and provide them opportunities to ask questions.

Delivering the essential instruction on how students should link ideas, craft body paragraphs, and write clear thesis statements took up a significant chunk of my 75-minute periods, leaving students with little class time to actually engage in the essay-writing process.

I needed to change my instructional process so students could learn the elements of the essay and have time to work on the process of writing and thinking about the essay with me. Flipping my classroom was the answer.

In a flipped classroom, students are asked to listen to and learn the content, concepts, or skills of a lesson for homework, then apply the new information to their work in class. The teacher has an opportunity to interact with the students as they are applying the skills and concepts to their work—answering questions, stretching their thinking, helping clarify misunderstandings, and encouraging them as they work.

My Flipped Classroom

When my colleagues and I decided to flip our classrooms, we identified the criteria we would use to evaluate our students and crafted the final assignment the students would complete.

In my seventh grade English class, I decided to flip all the instructional lessons associated with writing essays. Students were to come up with a question linked to a theme from the novel Ask Me No Questions by Marina Budhos. Some acceptable questions were “How does the theme of secrecy affect characters’ actions?” or “How do relationships between peers, adults, and siblings change in the novel?”

I created a 5–10 minute podcast for each essential element of the essay and posted them online (www.mspatel.podomatic.com). I used PowerPoint and Prezi (www.prezi.com) to create the visual...
portions of the podcast and added an audio component with QuickTime I (www.quicktime.com). Each podcast centered on a question that the students could answer after they had viewed the video, such as “What is a thesis statement?” and “Where is the thesis statement in an essay?”

In a flipped classroom, students are asked to listen to and learn the content as homework.

Many of the podcasts required students to bring a completed activity to class and discuss it. For example, when students were learning how to connect body paragraphs so the essay would be perceived as one piece of writing rather than separate paragraphs, I asked them to write a conclusion sentence or sentences for each paragraph that connected to the next body paragraph by using the information from the model on the podcast. Their conclusion sentences needed to include two elements: 1) a wrap-up of the main ideas of the paragraph and 2) a brief introduction of the topic to be discussed in the following paragraph. The next day, we reviewed their efforts and made sure the assignment was done correctly based on the concepts students learned in the podcast.

We spent the first 10–15 minutes of each class discussing the key points from the podcasts, linking the information to the students’ particular assignment, reviewing the homework from the podcasts (if assigned), and answering questions.

Students also completed short mini-activities from an activity packet that linked to the topic of the podcast. For example, when students were crafting thesis statements, one activity from the packet asked them to evaluate different thesis statements. The statements that were strong included all the necessary elements; students needed to revise the weak statements.

When I reviewed the students mini-activities from the packet, I got a sense of who might struggle during the application portion of the class. This prompted me to keep a closer eye on those students when they worked independently in class.

Students are able to access the podcasts at any time to refresh their learning—even when the unit is finished.

Student Response

I debriefed students about the change in the classroom model before I flipped the lessons. I went over the guidelines for watching the videos and shared the new procedures in class. They knew they were required to watch the podcast before coming to school; take notes on information they heard; watch the podcast more than once if necessary; complete the homework; consult the podcast if more questions about that topic arose; and notify me immediately if they could not access the podcast or complete the homework.

After the students completed the mini-lesson in class, they worked independently to complete the aspect of the essay under discussion, consulting me if necessary. I encouraged the students to ask questions, review portions of the podcast, ask me to review aspects of their written work, revise elements of their essay, and continue to engage in the writing process.

I gave the students opportunities to evaluate the podcasts’ effectiveness in improving the students’ ability to write an essay. Overall, a majority of the students viewed the podcasts favorably. Although they said the videos themselves could have been more “exciting,”
they believed that the videos and the flipped classroom model were helpful:

- **The podcasts are effective.** The information is presented simply and straightforwardly, making it easy to understand. Also, all the key pieces of information the students needed to complete their essays are discussed.

- **The podcasts are a powerful resource.** Students can refer to the videos when needed—not only for this assignment, but also for any writing assignment in other classes for this year and in the future.

- **There’s time for processing.** Watching the videos provides students with time to process the information. By the time they come to class, they can identify the areas of confusion and clearly articulate the questions they may have.

- **There’s more time to write.** Students have more class time to work on planning and writing their essays, using me as a guide. Prior to the flipped classroom, if students did not have time to ask their questions in class, they had to see me during their breaks. In this model, students have ample time to ask questions in class and show me versions of their drafts.

- **Alternatives are available.** If students have problems accessing the videos because of Internet issues, I give them a copy of the videos to download onto their computers.

**Suggestions and Conclusions**

During this three-week flipped unit, I worked more effectively with my students. I was able to consult with them more often and provide them with more specific individualized feedback throughout the essay-writing process. As a result, their confidence during the writing process steadily improved, their level of engagement during independent work time increased, and they diligently spent their time crafting their essays and consulting with me for advice.

Students asked far fewer basic questions and, when they did have questions, were better able to articulate them. They also were willing to start writing before consulting with me. Most important, the students were writing for the majority of the class time.

If you are considering flipping your classroom here are some suggestions:

- **Don’t reinvent the wheel.** There is much information on the Internet to help guide you.

- **Keep podcasts short and simple.** Simplicity helped students focus on the key pieces of information.

- **Link videos to classroom instruction.** Be sure podcasts have a clear purpose linked to the activity that will be completed the next day.

- **Hold students accountable to actively watch the podcasts.** Embed a short activity into each podcast so students must be engaged while watching. Ask students to bring the activity to the next class.

POOJA PATEL is a learning specialist and middle school English and humanities teacher at the United Nations International School in New York City. She is also an adjunct instructor at Teachers College, Columbia University.

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Mentoring Students at Risk

Bringing college students into the classroom as mentors can promote student achievement.

BY LEAH WASBURN-MOSES & JENNIFER C. ELLERBE

Mentoring can benefit middle grades students at risk who need support, guidance, and assistance as they navigate early adolescence. Yet, lack of time and personnel often prohibit schools from establishing mentoring programs.

One school-based youth mentoring program that shows consistently positive outcomes, according to the What Works Clearinghouse, is Check & Connect (www.checkandconnect.org), which monitors and assesses student engagement in school and provides individualized intervention and support.

The intervention described here is an adaptation of Check & Connect and uses local college students as mentors. Implemented in an alternative school program for students at risk in grades 6–12 in a rural Ohio school district, the program involves weekly meetings between the volunteer mentors and students at risk.

Mentoring Step by Step

The weekly meetings typically last 45–60 minutes and focus on weekly goals the students and mentors develop to help guide the student toward success.

Step 1. Teachers provide volunteers with a list of their student’s academic needs, such as the need to complete missed assignments or the need to improve attendance; icebreaker activities (see Step 2); and a generic menu of potential interventions (see Step 5) aligned with risk factors and associated with available resources.

Step 2. Mentors choose a short icebreaker activity to build a relationship with the student.
For example they may play UNO or checkers or take a brief walk around the school.

**Step 3.** The mentor and student complete a Data Monitoring Sheet together. This sheet includes boxes to check indicating tardies, absences, behavior referrals, and suspension/detentions for the week, as well as the number of classes in which the student has a grade of D or F. The sheets also include a space for mentors to record notes and indicate the interventions being used.

**Step 4.** Based on the data, the mentor and student identify risk areas (see Table 1 on page 36).

**Step 5.** Using this information, the pair discuss the success of the previous week’s goal and set a goal for the coming week. The mentors select interventions to address identified risk factors. For example, if the student’s data sheet shows a pattern of skipping classes, the mentor and student discuss the importance of attending school and determine what incentive might ensure the student attends class each day the following week—a small reward, for example.

**Step 6.** Together, the student and mentor complete a Goal Sheet that identifies the weekly goal and outlines strategies for obtaining that goal.

**Step 7.** If the student’s goal was not met from the previous week, they complete a Goal Strategizing Chart to determine alternate strategies to meet the goal. This chart asks them to answer three questions: Why didn’t you meet your goal? What could you have done differently? What additional strategies could help you meet your goal?

**Step 8.** The Goal Sheet and Goal Strategizing Chart (if needed) are placed on or near each student’s desk as a daily reminder of what needs to be accomplished that week.

**Positive Outcomes**

The teachers report that most of the pairs set specific academic goals and developed reward systems based on those goals. Consequently, the teachers noted increased time on task and an increase in the overall amount of work completed by the students at risk. The mentors often discovered alternative ways to teach difficult academic concepts to their students. Additionally, the students had a more positive attitude when they anticipated their mentor’s visit.

The mentors benefited as well. When asked what they found to be most satisfying about the program, the college students responded that getting to know their students and building a relationship with them was the most satisfying.

The students liked their mentors. One student shared that the mentors “were kind,” and another wrote, “they were there to help and guide us in the right direction.”

When asked to list what they learned from their mentor, some students responded, “to try harder,” “solving two-step equations,” “things about girls,” and “to look something up if I don’t know or ask for help.”

Eleven of the 13 students said they felt comfortable talking to their mentors about anything, good or bad.

**Future Directions**

The teacher who implemented this pilot program said, “These particular students tend to be the most difficult, challenging, and at-risk students that attend (our district). They tend to be cautious about meeting new people and letting others help them.” However, she said, gradually, the pairs were able to connect. “The mentors were all caring and compassionate and I think that persistence really spoke to my students.”

One important issue the teacher said should be addressed is training: “I don’t think [the mentors] felt prepared to deal with the attitude the students displayed or the problems they were going to be willing to tell them. A few of the mentors expressed surprise at what extreme poverty some of their mentees lived in, what kind of homes they came from, and the number of times some of their mentees had been arrested and/or incarcerated.”

She recommends a training session with a teacher or school counselor dealing with how to interact, support, and motivate their mentees before the program begins.

**Multiple Supports**

Teachers often find themselves spread thin, particularly when they are working with several students who have complex needs. This mentoring intervention...
represents one time-efficient and resource-efficient way to use classroom volunteers effectively. The program could be implemented in different settings (e.g., self-contained classrooms, alternative schools, pull-out intervention courses), with different types of volunteers (e.g., college students, parents, community organizations) and with different student populations and grade levels. It works well as one of multiple supports provided to students with complex needs.

LEAH WASBURN-MOSES is associate professor of educational psychology at Miami University. She is also director of Campus Mentors, alternative schools located on college campuses.

wasburnh@miamioh.edu


ellerbej@talawanda.org

Table 1. Indicators of High Risk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator of Risk</th>
<th>High Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tardiness</td>
<td>Five or more incidents per month or incidents on more than 15% of the days in the month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipping</td>
<td>Three or more incidents per month or incidents on more than 15% of the days in the month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
<td>Three or more incidents per month or incidents on more than 15% of the days in the month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Referrals</td>
<td>Three or more referrals per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detention</td>
<td>Four or more incidents per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-School Suspension</td>
<td>Two or more incidents per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-School Suspension</td>
<td>Two or more days suspended per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failing Classes</td>
<td>Two or more Ds per grading period and/or one or more Fs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind in Credits</td>
<td>Earning less than 80% of the possible credits per grading period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsatisfactory Academic Performance</td>
<td>Two or more Unsatisfactory grades per grading period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Meeting Standards in Reading and/or Math</td>
<td>Standardized test score not meeting or partially meeting standards; teacher reporting of students in bottom quartile; below class average in reading or math; or not proficient in reading by third grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Recommended Resources

- Check & Connect: www.checkandconnect.org
- MENTOR National Mentoring Partnership: www.mentor.org
- U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center: www.edmentoring.org
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The Top 3 Reasons Top 5 Lists May Be Harmful

Is distilling education strategies into lists doing more harm than good?

BY DRU TOMLIN

Middle level educators in the field often are prisoners of an odious and seemingly innocuous warden: the clock. Time hovers over us, pressing us to do more and learn more so we can “teach” more.

We also feel the pressure of efficiency and measurable progress, so we reach for more: more helpful hints, more practical tips, more logistically responsive solutions, more value-adding answers.

As a result, many of us scamper around the physical and virtual landscapes looking for shrink-wrapped “edu-snacks” that we can quickly read, digest, and then immediately apply to our classrooms and schools. In fact, many of us write and craft these edu-snacks, pressing together years of practice and thought into bulleted lists like safe, sanitary meals of convenient contemplation.

Has the vast expanse of educational thinking been reduced—in the name of “efficiency” and “progress”—to fit into a culture of convenience? How do we rise up and include a slower, more reflective voice? Let’s start with a Top 3 list of questions.

1. Do lists about education limit our scope and passion about education as they attempt to provide quick practical help?

I know I am painting with a broad stroke, but one of the main reasons most of us became educators was because our passion drove us to explore. With books in our hands and pedagogical fire in our hearts, we crossed the thresholds of our first classrooms with glimmering visions of inspired learning:

The Top 3 Reasons
Top 5 Lists May Be Harmful
smiling students with sparked curiosities and eager minds. How does a list about educational “to do’s” fit into that original, incendiary mindset—or does a list simply snuff it out? Although a list may be a fast way to answer a question about teaching and learning, it can also narrow our vision and box in our imaginations about the possibilities.

**Healthy Habit Hint:** A fast snack must fit into our overall health mission. Therefore, before we approach any list about education, we must develop our own vision for teaching and learning and then plant it firmly in our hearts and minds. We must listen to our own wide-reaching pedagogical philosophy so a list can’t place blinders on our work. We must see the students we teach and think about how they would be affected by the quick solutions—and then come up with our own.

2. **Do lists about education push order onto a field that should be appreciated for inquiry and for its lack of orderliness?**

Education and learning are messy endeavors. From a constructivist perspective, knowledge is infinite and constantly co-created as we interact and ask powerful questions along the way.

Thankfully, like a glorious rose bush, learning grows beyond any curricular fence lines we attempt to erect in the name of order and efficiency. The students (and parents, administrators, and fellow faculty members) we work with every day make that growth happen—and thank goodness they do.

Because our students bring their complex lives, changing interests, and rich questions into the schoolhouse, no linear list can capture and contain their learning. Therefore, we shouldn’t kowtow to a list that attempts to do so. Moreover, if we want students to be bold and to ask questions, why do we as educators, often settle and reach for easily accessible answers?

**Healthy Habit Hint:** A fast snack that is prescribed for every health mission disregards personal tastes and goals. Therefore, every teacher, staff member, and administrator should first take a moment or two to remember what he or she was like as a learner—and then embrace that kid for his or her social peculiarities, strange humor, low self-esteem, physical awkwardness, academic struggles, and more!

Remember what questions you had that went unanswered. Remember what burning interests you had that were extinguished. Remember what bright ideas you had that dimmed over time.

The students you serve have those same questions, interests, and ideas! But how will your classroom or school respond to them? A list won’t.

3. **Do lists—in their attempt to offer definitive answers—disregard other ideas that have validity?**

The field of education has no end and needs very little mowing. It has a past, present, and future that are limitless and the field bears long blades of grass, deep forests, and indescribable flora that spread far and wide. On the other hand, a list that ends at #3 suggests that there is an end point—a finality, a ledge, an authoritarian conclusion.

If we accept a list in its entirety, aren’t we also accepting its brevity? If we accept some lists and authors, aren’t we in danger of excluding others? Other ideas are out there for us to explore, to invent, to theorize, to posit, to tweet, to debate, to marinate, and to reflect upon.

The answers we reach should be as malleable and unique as the students we serve—and the good ones typically take a long time to develop.

**Healthy Habit Hint:** A fast snack does not equal the final meal for a healthy mission. It is part of a larger vision that is growing and being shaped every day. Therefore, lists about teaching and learning should be approached as smaller, optional parts of a more expansive pedagogical menu that we are creating with our students, teachers, staff members, and stakeholders.

When we grab for quick lists and convenient edu-snacks—no matter how many we throw into our pedagogical lunch sacks—we can starve ourselves and our schools. We need to collaborate with those around us, discuss how everything fits into a larger plan for our students and teachers, and acknowledge throughout the process that we are always learning.

**DRU TOMLIN** is the director of middle level services at AMLE. He was a middle school teacher and administrator.

dtomlin@amle.org  
@drutomlin_AMLE  
www.amle.org
When report cards come out, I brace myself for the angry phone calls and e-mails from parents who say they had no idea their child wasn’t doing well or a parent whose child has never gotten below an A, so I must be doing something wrong. Dealing with upset parents can be overwhelming. How do I keep my cool?

Every day, teachers must make phone calls and have conferences with difficult parents, yet few of us have had training to help us improve our skills in this area. Through my experience as a proud middle school teacher of 20+ years, I have found the following ideas helpful when working with challenging parents:

1. Take time to pull your thoughts and emotions together before you make the call. If you need to vent or process information to keep your emotions in check, then by all means find your BFF and get those emotions out prior to calling the parent. With that said, make your call within 48 hours of the initial contact. If you wait longer, you may be battling a secondary issue of not being prompt in responding to a troubled parent’s request.

2. Review your documentation and make sure it’s in order. If there’s a grading issue, make sure you can explain and defend the grade. If there’s a behavior issue, make a list of the behaviors you have experienced with the student and all the interventions you have tried in the attempt to help the student succeed.

3. Listen. I use the following: “I really hear you. I know you are frustrated. How can we work together to solve this issue?” Often, disgruntled parents just need to vent and you may be their sounding board. However, if the attack is on you as a teacher or a person, calmly state that you do not think this conversation is being productive and you would like to reschedule it for a later time.

4. Notify your principal about the situation. It’s likely the principal will be hearing about it anyway, and it will be advantageous for you to reach him or her first. Explain how you plan to proceed and what your hopes are for the end result. Don’t be afraid to ask your principal to help you walk through a mock phone call or send you to a veteran teacher for advice.

5. Be open to asking advice from the parents as to how to best meet the needs of their child. For example, “What works at home when Janey shuts down?” Be willing to try their advice. By accommodating their suggestions, you demonstrate that you respect and value their input.

6. Admit that we all make mistakes when working with our students. Accept and admit a mistake. Don’t compound your mistake by trying to explain or deny it. Apologize, admit you were wrong, and move on.

7. Notice that I have used the word “call” when working with challenging parents. E-mail allows for interpretation in a way that a phone call does not. By calling I can connect with a parent on a personal level, and build relationships that I can tap into later.

8. After a few days, follow up with the parent. Be honest about what is working and what is not. The follow-up can be an e-mail, but if you sense from your student that some frustration or anger is resurfacing, you know what to do: pick up the phone and call again.

Working with challenging parents is never easy, nor is it ever going to go away. So take a deep breath, get your ducks in a row, and make the call your student needs you to make.

KIM CAMPBELL is a teacher in the Hopkins School District in Minnetonka, Minnesota, an AMLE consultant, and SOAR coordinator. She is a featured presenter at the AMLE Conference.

kim.mtm@gmail.com

Bring Kim Campbell to your school. Contact AMLE Director of Middle Level Services Dru Tomlin at dtomlin@amle.org for more information.
The afternoon is a rush of activity. Your mind is on hyper switch-tasking mode, denying the growing reality that you’ll never get it all done.

On the way to the school office to pick up your mail, grab your lunch bag from the lounge, and requisition the heat probes you need for next month’s lab activity, you are stopped by your student, Tony. He asks if you heard about what happened at last night’s talent show.

Yes, you already have heard this story three times today. As Tony starts relating what seems to be a long, complicated story, you know you would rather be getting to the other matters on your to-do list.

In this moment, do you think about your own state of affairs and rush Tony along, providing a truncated description of last night’s event yourself so you can end the interaction and move on?

Or do you realize that this student chose you to be the person with whom to share the story? This moment is about Tony summoning the poise to talk to an adult, share a funny moment in life, and make a connection with you.

Wisely, you slow your heart rate and give every body language indicator that you are committed to Tony and his story and that what he has to share is worth hearing.

Meaning and productivity, especially in teaching, come down to mindsets, and mindsets are forged by the operating tenets with which we perceive the world and conduct our actions. Effective teachers regularly assess these principles to see if they still work. Even more powerfully, they strive to make their actions reflect their principles.

**Teaching/Learning Tenets**

Let’s explore this decisions-based-on-principles approach with a variety of teaching tenets. For each sample teaching/learning tenet listed, I suggest several policy and behavior implications. Notice that some suggestions require unconventional responses. Principled teaching can push us in less popular but highly effective directions.

**Principle/Tenet:** Students learn at different rates of speed.

- I will recognize that some students will need more or less support to meet learning deadlines.
- I will encourage re-dos and re-takes for full credit.
- I will incorporate formative assessment in my classroom to make sure teaching matches learning needs.

**Principle/Tenet:** Teachers should teach in the ways students best learn.

- I will constantly update myself in terms of new methods and tools for teaching.
- Sometimes, I will provide learning experiences for students that are outside my comfort zone.
- I will ask students how they best learn and use that information in my lesson planning.

**Principle/Tenet:** Teachers should teach for mastery.

- Basic recall, matching, and memorized responses will not suffice for mastery on my tests.
- I will teach students models, but also how to flex and break them as necessary.
- I will require students to incorporate their own unique voices in projects.
- I will break the rules once in a while to increase learning and creativity.
- I will provide students with multiple examples of individuals who parted from normal procedures and improved the human condition as a result.
**Principle/Tenet:** We can’t get creative students from non-creative classrooms.
- I will cultivate my own creativity as a teacher and thinker and model it for students.
- I will teach students specific techniques to boost their own creativity.
- I will invite students to incorporate creative thinking in most assignments and assessments.
- I will provide frequent descriptive feedback on students’ creative endeavors.

**Principle/Tenet:** Fair isn’t always equal.
- I will use different teaching techniques with different students as needed for them to achieve competencies.
- I will not use a one-size-fits-all theme in my lessons.
- Grades will be a report of only what students know and can do after learning’s cycle, not the routes we used to get there.

**Principle/Tenet:** Memorization is still important in a “you can always look it up” world.
- I will teach students at least two dozen memorization techniques.
- I will ask students to memorize tools, formulas, facts, definitions, sections of text, and other curriculum elements in order to boost their capacity to make connections when encountering new material.
- I will provide multiple examples and experiences in which content memorized resulted in positive results and feelings.

**Principle/Tenet:** Teachers are no longer the only oracle or final arbiter of knowledge.
- My lectures will not be something to store in the brain and retrieve for a test. They will be launching pads for students’ personal investigations.
- I will invite students to analyze multiple online presentations on our class topics and compare them with our own.
- In each lecture/presentation, I will provide a “so, what does all this mean?” portion in which we explore the larger perspective and the next steps in our learning.

**Principle/Tenet:** My testimony as a teacher is what students carry forward at the end of my lessons, not what I presented to them during those lessons.
- At the end of lessons, I will re-visit/summarize major elements, even if we don’t get to their final portions during those class periods.
- I will teach for long-term memory retention, not settle for short-term.
- I will put previous curriculum on all subsequent assessments, even months later, and those later grades will count heavily on the final grades for those standards.

**Principle/Tenet:** Whoever does the editing does the learning.
- I will stop editing students so often. Instead, I will put a dot at the end of the line or in the general area of the issue in a math problem or lab write-up and ask students to identify and fix the mistakes. If necessary, I will provide a one-word clue as to the nature of the error.
- I will include students’ critique and editing of others’ work as a portion of the evidence of their own mastery in that content area.
- I will increase students’ practice with editing/critiquing the work of others.
- I will do more self-talks and think-alouds of successful editing of content and skills, and I will ask students to demonstrate the same in front of their classmates.

**Principle/Tenet:** Carrots and sticks systems don’t work for cognitive learning and growth.
- I will not use rewards and punishments to motivate students to engage in curriculum. Instead, I will provide descriptive feedback and strive to make the work meaningful.
- I will not rely on grades and grading policies for my classroom management tool.
- I will study motivation of young adolescents.
- I will help students build grit, perseverance, and independence in their learning.

**Principle/Tenet:** When instructing and grading, teachers should be criterion-referenced, not norm-referenced.
- I will compare students’ performance on assessments to the standards, not to the performance of their classmates.
- I will identify evidence of learning in each standard with my like-subject colleagues, and I will exchange assessments with them to make sure our assessments assess what we think they assess.
- All grades will report on what is listed in the standards set for my course. Anything not listed in the course description will not be included in the grade, though it may be given a column or category of its own.

**Principle/Tenet:** Recovering in full from a failure teaches more than being labeled for failure.
- I will not let a student’s immaturity dictate his learning and thereby his destiny.
• I shall not abdicate my adult responsibilities and simply wag my finger in admonishment when a child makes a bad decision, assuming that the wagging finger builds moral fiber and self-discipline.
• I will help my students build plans of action to recover from their failures, and I will give them full credit when they do so.

**Principle/Tenet:** Personal processing—meaning-making after initial learning—has more impact than presentation of material.

• I will emphasize the back side (personal processing after practicing) of my lessons just as much as the front side.
• I will learn and incorporate methods of personal processing, i.e. meaning-making, not just sense-making.
• I will stop thinking that just because I said something to students means that it was learned by those students. The real learning comes in what they do with the content.

**Principle/Tenet:** Homework is for practicing what has already been learned, not for learning content for the first time.

• I will not assign homework to students who do not understand the content.
• I will give some students homework and others different or no homework, depending on their proficiency in the content.
• I will do more exit slips and formative assessment during class so I can determine proper after-school practice for each student.
• I will not give homework because parents and administrators expect me to do so, or because it’s a particular day of the week.
• I will only give students homework if it furthers their proficiency in the field we’re studying.

Taking a step back and looking at the larger picture of what we do results in clearer, more effective decisions. Gathering a bunch of recipes in the form of techniques, quick tips, and “Give me something I can use the next day” ideas from conferences in order to build our teaching cookbooks isn’t enough. We must be strategic, not simply throw techniques at a problem and blame the technique when it doesn’t work.

And just as important, we need to sit together and discuss whether our decisions and actions reflect our principles. If not, do we have to the courage to change our practices to align with our beliefs? It’s a scary proposition, but effective schools have that alignment, despite the economy or politics of the time.

**RICK WORMELI** is a teacher, consultant, and writer living in Herndon, Virginia. His newly released book, The Collected Writings (So Far) of Rick Wormeli: Crazy Good Stuff I Learned about Teaching is available from AMLE at www.amle.org. He is also a featured speaker at AMLE2013.

**rwormeli@cox.net**  
**@rickwormeli**

*Bring Rick Wormeli to your school. Contact AMLE Director of Middle Level Services Dru Tomlin at dtomlin@amle.org for more information.*
OMG, Common Core!
There were times last school year when Susanne closed her eyes and imagined clicking her ruby slippers, hoping she would return to the time before Common Core—the place of familiarity, of the curriculum she knew, the home of certainty.

However, in all honesty, Common Core State Standards have stretched us and brought out the best in many of us. To meet the “fewer, clearer, and higher standards” of Common Core, all of us must continue to implement strategies that enhance teaching and learning. The primary focus for all educators, then, must be expanding the quality of ways in which we expose our students to context and content.

What better way to ease the transition to the Common Core than through technology tools? Digital strategies are essential to helping us translate the standards into meaningful 21st Century skills. So what tech tools do we use and how do we go about ensuring seamless integration?

Tech and the Common Core
Jing (www.techsmith.com/jing.html) is a simple free tool that can help you and your students capture images or short videos from your computer screen. What a great way to “remember, list, describe, or retrieve” basic facts, concepts, or formulas for today’s students. Users can share items through an upload feature, thereby connecting concepts with an entire audience.

A great deal of research supports the flipped classroom. Using technology to create and record instruction leverages learning, maximizes instructional time, provides on-demand learning, and allows for reteaching at a student’s discretion. Check out these great free apps to begin to integrate flipped instruction:

- Khan Academy (www.khanacademy.org)
- ShowMe Interactive Whiteboard (www.showme.com)
- ScreenChomp (www.techsmith.com/screenchomp.html)
- Knowmia Teach (www.knowmia.com/teachers)
- Ask3 (www.techsmith.com/ask3.html)

To learn more about flipped instruction, Google Jonathan Bergmann. Students must be able to know and do—which brings us to project-based learning (PBL). Its essence revolves around students’ learning elements of Common Core State Standards and applying what they know to solve authentic problems. Isn’t that a much-needed skill as we help students make the connection between Common Core and the ever-changing global economy?

Our school district recently challenged students to use PBL to focus on the central theme of kindness. Students in K–12 displayed projects that embodied creativity, empathy, and a passion to impact our community and communities on the other side of the hemisphere. That is when Common Core becomes anything but common.

What about analysis skills? Mindmeister (www.mindmeister.com) and Mindomo (www.mindomo.com) are online mapping tools like graphic organizers on energy drinks. Most are free or have free versions with solid capabilities to organize, collaborate, and share, and can be accessed via an app. They make prewriting and project planning easy and visually clean.

One of the most visually stunning websites for evaluating data is Gapminder (www.gapminder.org). This site allows users to view data sets from around the world and make comparisons on up to five different variables. The results are eye-opening and completely interactive.
Also be sure to check out quick ways for students to respond online using Wiffiti (http://wiffiti.locamoda.com), Poll Everywhere (www.poll everywhere.com). With the increase in Bring Your Own Technology, it makes sense to use these sites for a quick formative assessment check.

Collaboration is vital in our global world. With a limit of 140 characters, Twitter (www.twitter.com) really does encapsulate Common Core’s thread of fewer and clearer ways to reach students. Don’t think of Twitter in one form; it can be enhanced with new tools including Tweetchat, Twitterfall, and Twubs. Tweetchat (www.tweetchat.com) is a prearranged chat option based on predefined hashtags. Twitterfall (www.twitterfall.com) alerts the reader to upcoming trends and patterns. And Twubs (www.twubs.com) provides awesome moderation tools.

Edmodo (www.edmodo.com) provides secure social networking for students and teachers. Using Edmodo, you can post assignments, polls, video clips, quizzes, and a calendar of events for students, all through a secure environment. Teachers can create groups to facilitate discussions among sub-sets of students.

The power of Edmodo comes through the potential for online collaboration, as this piece allows critiquing and feedback. Parents can create a parent account to keep up with their child’s assignments as well. It is student-friendly right down to the emoticons.

If you are looking for a free online tool to create and manage learning groups or sign-ups in your class or club, check out SignupGenius (www.signupgenius.com). This quick easy tool can make your next group learning activity a breeze to kick off.

Some great websites/apps to keep up with current tech trends include

• Learnist (www.learnist.com), the educational equivalent to Pinterest.
• TEDed (ed.ted.com), featuring original K-12 videos with accompanying lessons and quizzes.
• The Digital Sandbox (www.dsbox.com), a site filled with Common Core research, activities, and ways to integrate technology.

To promote effective grade level or content-driven Professional Learning Communities, try using Weebly (www.weebly.com), a free website builder. You and your colleagues can post videos and Common Core resources. LiveBinders (www.livebinders.com) is another tool to upload, edit, and share documents. It’s a great way to reduce paper use and post resources in an electronic fashion.

Digital Richness
For today’s students, there isn’t any separation between technology and life. Digital tools help expand the scope of assignments. It’s a digitally rich environment out there, and it’s our job to help students move forward. There is so much more for them to see, experience, learn, and conclude. So OMG, Common Core, we are glad you’re here!

SUSANNE LONG is a principal for Onslow County Schools, Jacksonville, North Carolina.
susanne.long@onslow.k12.nc.us

BRENT ANDERSON is director of secondary services for Onslow County Schools, Jacksonville, North Carolina.
brent.anderson@onslow.k12.nc.us

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MAKING THE TEAM

Communication & Commitment

BY CHRISTINE BOETTCHER & KELLEY MCCANN

We began our teaming relationship more than a decade ago. At first, aside from the occasional Friday afternoon kickball games, we rarely planned lessons that supported or even complemented each other. We were a team on paper only.

As our school began to move toward a fully inclusive environment, we knew our teaching would change, but we couldn’t have fathomed how much. We learned a lot about working with others, about ourselves as teachers, and most important, about ourselves as team members. From this journey we have identified some essential components of effective teaming.

Key Component: Communication

Teams cannot be successful unless the members can communicate effectively. They must be able to voice their honest opinions—even if their opinions are not popular—when those opinions have the best interests of students at heart.

It is almost impossible not to develop a personal connection with your colleagues, especially when you are on the same team. Although making that connection is important, it can make professional disagreements especially difficult. That’s when communication is important and when it’s essential to remember that sometimes it has to be about “business.”

One of the conversations that may be difficult is the one about team expectations—and to be effective, teams must have that conversation early on. If they are going to work effectively with and for their shared students, all team members must be honest about their “non-negotiables.” For example, what student behaviors will not be tolerated in any classroom? What will the homework policy be? What about late work and tardies? Teams must develop a common classroom management plan that all team members can support, implement, and maintain with validity.

Another conversation must focus on protocols for meetings and planning time. Educators never seem to have enough time, and protocols help make meetings and planning time more efficient. Effective teams make time in their day to sit together as a team to discuss, plan, and collaborate. This means not just talking to each other about the daily updates, but communicating honestly and openly about specific topics.

Having a clear goal for each meeting is critical. Protocols that spell out what decisions need to be made and who will follow up and when are essential. For example, team protocols may dictate that student needs are not addressed in the same meeting that curriculum connections are discussed. Protocols also set reasonable meeting times so meetings don’t become overwhelming.

Student academic and behavioral needs often influence each other. To keep discussions focused, they should be data-based. That means teachers should gather and be prepared to present data at the meeting. Together, team members can look for trends in the data and plan accordingly.

For example, if one student continually acts out during tests, then arranging for a small group-testing environment may become part of general curriculum planning for all classes. If students need to know how to convert liters to milliliters for the next science lab and some or all students do not have this skill, the team members can talk about how they can work together to ensure the students meet that learning goal. Having this pointed and open dialogue allows team members to identify shared standards that support each other’s curriculum. Student needs dictate when and how curriculum needs to be covered, so identifying these needs in an efficient and grounded way will move the team more quickly toward sound curriculum decisions.

When planning together, our team has approached curriculum in a few different ways. For example, sometimes we planned interdisciplinary units where a theme was carried throughout all the core subjects. The teachers taught in their own disciplines, and the only connection students saw between the subjects was the theme.
Other times, we taught curriculum as an integrated unit. In this case, meaningful planning was essential as we collaborated on the integration. The core subject lines were blurred and the students really didn’t know if they were in science, math, social studies, or literacy. The protocols were essential to this planning: who was going to do what, when, why, and how.

To make this integration successful, we needed to blend roles. There are many types or styles of role blending: lead and support, co-teaching, parallel teaching, and station teaching. We established these roles during the planning process and followed through during the lesson. Sometimes students were not able to differentiate between the “cross categorical” teacher and the “general education” teacher. Every teacher was responsible for the modifications and/or differentiations for all students. This all happened through purposeful communication and collaboration when planning as a team.

**Key Component: Commitment**

Successful teams must have commitment from their team members and from their administrator. They need to know their administrator will hire staff members who share a similar philosophy of putting students first and doing what is best for students, not what is easiest for staff.

Commitment may not look the same for all team members or even happen at the same time. If a science teacher needs a teammate to come in to help ensure students are using the Bunsen burners safely, the math teacher who is available shouldn’t think twice about helping out—making copies and grading last night’s homework can wait.

Members must be committed to helping strengthen each other’s weaknesses. A teammate who notices a colleague struggling with a lesson and sees an opening to help should be able to offer assistance without worrying about who’s in charge. A committed teammate on the receiving end of the help will not take it personally and will welcome the assistance.

Communication and commitment are two essential components to effective teaming. They are just as important to successful teaming as honesty, professionalism, responsibility, trust, and reliability.

**CHRISTINE BOETTCHER** is a computer technology teacher at Sherman Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin.

**KELLEY MCCANN** is a member of a three-person sixth/seventh grade looping team at Sherman Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin.

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__Student Voice__

**Capturing the World**

Give a young adolescent a camera and see what happens!

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“Schooling in this country has for a long time been built around the idiosyncratic practices of lone practitioners. This means, as any parent knows, that when kids get great teachers they tend to do well; when they don’t, they enter a year of danger.”


“Real teachers know that real teaching is not based on the Common Core, or blended learning, or the newest notebook of rules and regulations handed out at the Tuesday staff meeting.”

— Rafe Esquith, fifth grade teacher at Hobart Boulevard Elementary School in Los Angeles, in his book, Real Talk for Real Teachers.

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“My challenge this year is not to only build a classroom based on academic inquiry, but to also build one in which I inquire more about [students]...as people in progress.”


“Are we really expected to believe that it’s just a coincidence that the public education and poverty crises are happening at the same time? Put another way: Are we really expected to believe that everything other than poverty is what’s causing problems in failing public schools?”

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