Inviting Parent & Community Involvement
Meeting NCLB Requirements
Making Curriculum Connections
Overcoming Cultural Barriers

Plus...
New Role of School Counselors
Differentiated Grading
Spotlight on Middle School Sports
Editor’s Note

Welcome to the 2004-2005 school year. I hope you returned refreshed, rejuvenated, and ready to share your passion for knowledge with your students.

Many of us—educators, parents, and students alike—have mixed feelings at the beginning of a new school year. While we are sorry to see the “lazy, hazy” days of summer end, we are excited about the opportunities that these first few months bring. As NMSA Executive Director Sue Swaim shares in her Perspectives column—premiering in this issue of *Middle Ground*—a new year brings expectations and goals that inspire us to make it even more productive than the last.

But many educators soon become discouraged by the seemingly unrelenting demands on their time and attention. Every year sees more challenges in the form of increased federal and state accountability mandates, more students with special needs, and myriad demands from the community. While these are issues that educators must address, you must not lose sight of your own personal and professional needs in the process.

Spend time with your colleagues—sharing ideas, sharing problems and solutions, and being each other’s cheerleader. The teacher down the hall, the administrator in the front office, the hostess in the cafeteria—all can provide support, inspiration, and insight to keep you on track and motivated.

And don’t overlook the important roles parents can play—not only in the success of your students, but also in your own success. Parents of middle school students are not always sure where they “fit” at school. In fact, many of us have been told in no uncertain terms by our children that if we ever entertained the idea of visiting their classrooms, accompanying them on a field trip, or joining them for lunch, they would never speak to us again. (When I offered to bring in pizza for lunch on my sixth grader’s birthday, he assured me that “Domino’s delivers.”)

That means it’s up to you to invite parents and community members to be involved in your school. Take time to peruse the pages of this month’s *Middle Ground*. You’ll find, we hope, helpful information and guidance about effective ways to involve parents in what’s happening in and around your classrooms. From meeting NCLB requirements, to making curriculum connections between home and school, to establishing a Web site, to overcoming economic and language barriers, the articles provide keys to establishing a solid school–family–community connection that can help you start the year right. We are also excited to include with this issue, a copy of NMSA’s Statement of Beliefs. Refer to it often and share it with your colleagues, for it’s what binds us. *Classroom Connections* will return in October.
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On the Cover
Parents play a vital role in student success.
Photo by Betsy English, priceless designs.
It's been 11 years since I stood at the school house door welcoming students and faculty back for another year of learning together. Yet every August I still think about the hustle and bustle of teachers readying classrooms and completing lesson plans. I'm reminded of how each of us arrived with new expectations and new goals, eager to make this year even more productive than the last. I also remember that by late September, I felt as if I couldn't squeeze one more meeting or one more school event into my calendar… and I worried that my good intentions regarding my own growth as a middle level educator were quickly being pushed to the back burner by all the “have-to-do” demands on my time.

**Bucking the Status Quo**

Neglecting our own professional development is an easy and frustrating pattern to fall into. But we can no longer allow the “status quo” of that pattern to continue. An instructor’s impact on student achievement is so profound that children with effective teachers are estimated to learn up to a full grade level more in a single year than those who have weak teachers.

At a time when raising student achievement has become the focus of national, state, and local education policies, we cannot forget the critical importance of professional development for middle level educators. It is no longer something we get around to when we find the time or when it’s scheduled during the school year.

The National Staff Development Council says the best way to increase the effectiveness of middle grades teachers is through targeted, ongoing, job-embedded professional development. They recommend that schools dedicate a minimum of 10 percent of their discretionary budgets to professional development and devote at least 25 percent of a teacher’s work time to learning and collaborating with colleagues.

National Middle School Association (NMSA) concurs with these recommendations. Furthermore, NMSA believes that professional development for middle grades teachers should focus on the uniqueness of young adolescent students and encompass both content knowledge and instructional strategies.

**Making the Time**

So where does one person begin to change professional development practices or find 25 percent of her work time to learn and collaborate with colleagues? Time and money are limited resources and there’s often a sense that decisions about professional development rest in someone else’s hands. Accepting those restrictions, I believe, gives in to the “status quo” pattern of outdated and ineffective professional development. The commitment to change, albeit a step-at-a-time, rests individually with each of us.

For starters, consider trying some of the following as first steps to implementing professional development that can truly make a difference to your commitment to excellence.

- Commit to reading professional books and articles focused on middle level education. Join your students during sustained silent reading time or read for 15 minutes at the beginning of each day. Start a professional book club with some of your colleagues or join an online reading group.

- Work with your teaching team to utilize your common planning time to the fullest. Designate the focus of each meeting, minimizing the management topics in order to spend quality time on teaching and learning. Consider studying student work to determine whether your planned lessons are helping all students achieve at higher levels. Share your lesson plans with one another with the goal of increasing your differentiated instruction decisions.

- Find a teaching buddy and spend time talking about ways to improve your instruction. Observe each other teach and then take time to critique what happened. Or, videotape several of your lessons and critique yourself. One of your students could help run the camera. Is your content being presented in a challenging, clear, and compelling way that engages every learner?

Yes, these suggestions are merely stepping stones to fully implementing quality professional development within a school, but they are examples of ways to keep your own growth on the front burner for this year. They can help you become that lifelong learner we all aspire to be. Most importantly, they have the potential to help you help your students become the best they can be. After all, isn’t that what middle level education is all about?

Sue Swaim is executive director of National Middle School Association.
news to use

Visit the Library

September is Library Card Sign-up Month, a time when the American Library Association (ALA) and libraries across the country remind parents and students that a library card is an important school supply.

Studies show that children who use the library perform better in school and are more likely to continue to use the library as a source of lifetime learning, according to the ALA. Public library visits have more than doubled in the past decade to nearly 1.2 billion annually. Visit www.ala.org for resources and information about ALA’s latest campaign: “The smartest card is @ your library. Get it. Use it. Now!”

Young Inventors Give a Glimpse of the Future

Want to know what today’s students think about the future? The Toshiba/National Science Teachers Association ExploraVision Awards Program recently announced the names of its eight national award-winning teams for 2004, honoring the students for combining creativity with science to envision future technologies.

 Included among this year’s winners was an eighth grade team from John Burroughs School in St. Louis, Missouri, whose members developed a solution for the growing problem of food contamination. Their E.colacator Gloves alert meat handlers by changing color when they detect harmful bacteria in the meat.

 Other inventions included a robotic device that cleans up pet waste and converts it to energy; a submersible robotic craft that scours waterways for non-native polluting plant species, and innovative new treatments for paralysis, blood clots, and more.

 The ExploraVision program is sponsored by Toshiba Corporation, the Toshiba America Group Companies, and the Toshiba America Foundation, and is administered by the National Science Teachers Association.

 Students on the four first-place teams each received a $10,000 U.S. Savings Bond; students on second-place teams received a $5,000 U.S. Savings Bond. The eight national winning teams received an all-expenses-paid trip with their families, mentor, and coach to Washington, D.C.

 Deadline to submit entries for the 2005 ExploraVision competition is February 2005. For more information or an application, call 800-EXPLOR-9 or visit www.exploravision.org.

Safe Internet Resources

An extensive database of age-appropriate Internet resources, eThemes is organized around more than 750 specific themes ranging from Africa to Yellowstone Park. Each resource is checked out by graduate students who are trained in navigating the Internet and locating child-safe sites. These students review the site and write a description of the kinds of information available. Visit www.emints.org/ethemes/index.shtml.

License Plate Spotting

Many students probably spent part of their summer vacation looking for unusual license plates. Add a twist and get them thinking about the world outside their community—or even their country—by visiting License Plates of the World at www.worldlicenseplates.com.
Middle Level Students Exhibit Selflessness

Five middle level students were recognized for their selflessness and volunteerism in May as recipients of The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards. The students are:

Amanda Crowe, 13, of Upton, Massachusetts, an eighth grader at Montrose School in Natick, who has conducted semiannual book-collection drives for six years to supply reading materials to hospital waiting rooms, shelters, and literacy programs.

Alexandra Holderman, 10, of Mishawaka, Indiana, a fifth grader at LaSalle Elementary School, who has collected and delivered more than 1,200 bundles of baby clothing, blankets, diapers, and other supplies over the past five years for infants born to single and teen-aged mothers.

Jenessa Largent, 12, of White Bear Lake, Minnesota, a seventh grader at Central Middle School, who has made more than 80,000 “freedom bracelets” over the past year to honor and support U.S. soldiers serving overseas and their families.

Warner Phipps, 15, of Kearney, Nebraska, an eighth grader at Sonrise Christian Academy, who designed and taught grain bin safety workshops at camps, school assemblies, farm shows, and other community events across Nebraska.

Anna Rose, 13, of Elizabeth, Colorado, a seventh grader at Elizabeth Middle School, who created a nonprofit organization that has provided more than 5,000 pairs of eyeglasses—plus cases, repair kits, and lens cleaning supplies—to homeless shelters, clinics, and other needy individuals.

These five students, along with five high school students, were honored in a ceremony held at the International Trade Center in Washington, D.C., last May for their outstanding acts of community service. National honorees each received $5,000, an engraved gold medallion and a crystal trophy. In addition, they will have a total of $250,000 in toys, clothing and other products donated in their names to needy children in their areas.

More information about The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards and this year’s honorees can be found at www.prudential.com/spirit.

Understanding Global Connections

Global Connections is a PBS/WGBH-based Web site that helps teachers, students, and the public learn more about events around the world through readings, lesson plans, links, timelines, and maps.

Of particular relevance today is Global Connections: The Middle East, which presents the history of the region since 1900; relevant political, scientific, economic, and social issues of the region; and cross-curricular questions that explore some of the big-picture issues that affect the Middle East. Visit www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/index.html.

Creating Partnerships, Bridging Worlds

To help counter the drop off of parent involvement in the middle grades, The National Turning Points Network has released Creating Partnerships, Bridging Worlds: Family and Community Engagement. The guide features practical research-based strategies and best practices to help middle level educators, parents, and community members bring together all these powerful stakeholders in the lives of adolescents.

An excerpt of the guide and more information about the publication are available at www.turningpoints.org.

Getting Students to Think

Build students’ analytical thinking and critical analysis skills by engaging them in the world around them. NewsHour Extra is an Internet resource that provides a short lesson plan that includes initiating questions, a reading comprehension printout, and extension activities that focus on what’s going on in the world today. Examples include the juvenile death penalty, treatment of prisoners of war, Mars explorations, and presidential debates. Visit www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/index.html.
M
y team teacher and I, along with 30
students and six parents, were on
our way to our end-of-the-year field
trip in Quebec. It was the culmina-
tion of the 2002–2003 school year,
which had been full of fundraising and planning. To
say that we looked bedraggled and worn would be
kind. Although Jennifer, two-and-a-half decades my
junior, looked better than I, she didn't have the 25
years of experience I had under my belt, and I suspect
she was frazzled inside.

Jennifer's only year of teaching experience had
been at a Georgia high school, and she had asked
several times during our year together, “Why are mid-
dle school kids harder to teach?” I assured her that life
in the middle school had its downs, but its ups as well.

 Arrested Development
Situated in a rural coastal town in Maine, our K–8
school had both strengths and weaknesses. Our
population has a diverse cultural background and an
equally diverse socioeconomic background. In years
past, our school had been “cutting edge” in terms of
holistic teaching and writing and reading instruction.
With the implementation of the Maine Learning
Results, we had jumped eagerly on board with
assessment.

 The middle level teachers (grades 5–8) had
embraced middle school philosophy and taken advan-
tage of several summer institutes at the University of
Maine, working as a team to implement the elements
of This We Believe and Turning Points: Preparing
America’s Youth for the 21st Century. For the most
part, we sold the concept to the town.

 But were we fully implemented as a middle
school? I think not. We fell under the category of
“arrested development” as educator Tom Dickinson
describes it. Many of the structures were there, but there
was still a lack of “adequate teacher education, principal
preparation, and attention to curriculum and instruction”
(especially since NCLB, which frightened us into a
narrowed focus on testing instead of on learning). In
the seventh and eighth grades, we were still department-
ized, and we were struggling with a K–8 schedule that
fragmented the day into 40-minute periods.

 Jennifer and I were optimistic about change
throughout the year. We had begun to identify some of
the Achilles’ heels of our program. Although time,
scheduling, and instruction were somewhat part of the
problem, relationships were a huge part. Why were
children not responding to the school’s discipline poli-
cies? Why was there an underlying current of mistrust
and disrespect? The school climate was not healthy.

 A couple of unfortunate incidents the previous year
had resulted in a zero tolerance policy that outlined the
behaviors that would result in immediate suspension.
Name calling, harassment, and infringement of civil
rights had always been referenced in the school’s
policy manual, but a new tone among the staff and the
emphasis on zero tolerance seemed to intimidate many
of the students.

 For these reasons, the 2002–2003 school year began
with a strict and stern school climate. As the 5–8 team
leader I had persuaded my colleagues that the following
changes should be made: scheduling changes that
made block scheduling possible and resulted in fewer
students in the cafeteria at one time for lunch; de-
departmentalizing the seventh and eighth grades; and
integrating subjects. However, Jennifer and I knew more
had to change.

 Our goal was to help develop students’ intrinsic
motivation, engagement, and self-discipline, and make
school a sacred place, safe for everyone to learn and grow. We knew the solution was somewhere in the term “voice and choice,” which Lynn Bonsey, Maine’s Middle Level Teacher of the Year Award recipient, introduced us to in a forum. We also knew it was somewhere in the “relationship” realm.

Positive school climate could create attitudes that would make teaching and learning easier. That led us to the idea for establishing a democratic classroom and frontloading relationships for the year to create a new school atmosphere.

**8th Grade Constitution**

_We_, the people of the 8th Grade of Blue Hill Consolidated School have written this constitution with the purpose being to keep us safe, under control, learning to be better citizens, and to grant the rights to be whatever we want to be so that we may grow to be successful citizens.

Generally, we expect all students and teachers to follow appropriate rules. If not followed, the severity of the consequence should fit the behavior. There should be some type of conference that happens to prevent the behavior from occurring again.

Student responsibilities are many, and include the responsibility to learn, the responsibility to behave, the responsibility to be nice, the responsibility to be polite, the responsibility to listen up, the responsibility to follow directions, the responsibility to do their best to stay healthy, which includes not smoking.

Teacher responsibilities are to teach, to protect students emotionally and physically, to keep good order, assign appropriate consequences, and to be good role models.

Students have the right to learn, the right to voice their opinion, the right to dress in their own style but still within school dress code, the right to respect others, the right to feel safe, the right to choose their own friends, the right to be what they want to be without force, the right not to be judged, the right to have fun, and the right to make friends.

Teachers have the right to ask students to leave if they are in the way of teaching, the right to teach without being interrupted, the right to learn and improve professionally, the right to have the materials they need for teaching, and the right to be good role models. They do not have the right to teach their religion or political beliefs, have improper relations with any students, or do anything that makes them NOT a good role model.

_We_, the undersigned, endorse and believe in this constitution, and will follow it to the best of our ability.

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**Day One: Team Building**

We let students catch up with each other after the summer and work again on being a community. We suggested that the eighth graders make the decision about where to place new picnic tables and benches on the playground. Besides being an opportunity to show that we valued them and trusted them, it could be a way to prevent vandalism, as they felt ownership for the tables and benches.

Eighth grade teams weighed the options and physically moved the pieces. They created guidelines for the use of the benches and tables and visited the classrooms of the younger students to share the guidelines with them. To date, there have been no issues with the tables and benches.

This activity was followed by other team-building activities. For example, we examined our school’s philosophy statement and the student handbook. The students worked in teams to put these policies into their own words.
“Students do not always know what a healthy climate is.”

**Day Two: Society**
We chose *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding to teach a lesson about society and the influences of good and evil in all of us. We asked: What does it take to make societies work?

After viewing the black and white 1960s version of the film—the 1990s remake was a bit too gory and had more profanity—students were asked to identify characteristics that make a good leader and a good friend and the symbolism that represented leadership and respect.

The follow up was to identify our own philosophies and write our own classroom constitution. Based on the school’s mission statement, eighth graders created and published a constitution for the year.

**Day Three: Process**
Seeking ways to put our new definitions and feelings about our school and our classroom to work, we began by asking, “what can we do to run a democratic classroom?” Students organized the following committees:
- Peer Relations (conflict managers create a rubric for class rules and consequences)
- Public Relations (students create connections with the larger communities of town and school)
- Tech Team (students help teachers and students manage technology)
- Room and Playground Committee (students are watchdogs for a safe and healthy school)
- Service Committee (students do volunteer work)
- Class Officers (grade level officers, student council, Civil Rights Team perform specific duties).

These three days culminated with two more activities. First, with quill pen and lots of ceremony, we performed “The Signing of the Eighth Grade Constitution.” Then we all headed to my pool for a final warm-weather fling as a team who had worked hard to understand the many relationships among themselves and with the school. We were looking forward to a year that would gel because of understanding and trust. We had all learned together.

**A True Community**
The efforts are still paying off. This is not to say that there are not some tense moments when things whir with details and hectic schedules because of big events like our Haunted Dinner Theater, our World Religions presentations to the entire school, and a whole day simulation of a Japanese school on Japan Day. But the glorious part is that we can bring the kids back by revisiting the Constitution and our goals for the year because we have a strong relationship with them.

The student committees accomplished many things. They developed a behavior rubric, a Big Buddies mentoring program with the younger grades, a yearbook, recommendations to the principal for a new water cooler, a huge chessboard painted on the playground, and much more.

The committees prepared a status report for the end of the trimester to share with parents at student-led conferences. The conferences themselves were richly rewarding, and over and over again parents shared that their children were happy with school and experiencing less stress than in previous years. The principal reported a dramatic decline in discipline report forms for this class compared to their seventh grade year, and also compared to the previous eighth grade. And just as important, Jennifer and I are truly enjoying the students and look forward to our days together with them.

**Della L. Martin** teaches eighth grade at Blue Hill Consolidated School in Blue Hill, Maine.
Hot Links

By Brenda A. Dyck

Home, School, and Community Partnerships: A Power Unleashed
The schools I attended in the 1960s and early 1960s were essentially parent-free zones. My parents made a yearly visit on meet the teacher night, attended parent-teacher interviews, and turned up at the annual Christmas concert. Other than that they left the business of running the school to the experts.

By the time I began my career as a teacher in 1974, the school was full of parents doing all sorts of odd jobs that the teachers didn’t have time for: laminating, photocopying, staffing sports days, and putting up and taking down bulletin boards. The school was now a hub of coming and going as teachers began to recognize the important role parents had in keeping the learning train rolling.

Today we’ve moved beyond parental busywork. As Susan L. Recchia, assistant professor at Columbia University’s Teacher College so aptly puts it, “Our thinking about the role of the family has moved from seeing parents as the source of the problem to seeing parents as the primary solution to the problem.”

Schools are looking beyond their walls to community partnerships that will enrich the learning process. The following links will connect you to Web sites that show what happens when we link quality education with high-quality relationships between the home and the school and community.

>>National Coalition for Parental Involvement in Education
This Web site provides a variety of resources that promote the involvement of parents and families in their children’s education.
www.ncpie.org

>>Supporting Ways Parents and Families Can Become Involved in Schools
The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory links educators to the why and how of involving parents in their children’s education.
www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/100.htm

>>National Network of Partnership Schools
Learn how school, family, and community partnerships are essential in middle level education. www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/Middle_and_High/middle_and_high_schools.htm

>>Parents As Learning Partners
This project, funded by the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project, is designed to help parents understand their role as advocates for their children. Read about schools that are assisting parents in becoming active participants in their child’s education by giving them the skills and knowledge needed to become advocates.
www.laamp.org/parent/plp.html

>>Harvard Family Research Project
This Web portal will connect you with resources, research, and information to foster educational success and the well-being of children, families, and their communities.
www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/announcements/04feb.html

>>Turning Points: Creating Partnerships, Bridging Worlds, Family and Community Engagement
This meaty document expands our view of what family engagement looks like and introduces schools that are taking their parent/school partnerships “beyond the bake sale.”
www.turningpts.org/pdf/Family.pdf

>>Center For Parent Leadership
These two sites will direct you to information drawing on the research about the impact of parent involvement on student achievement.
www.centerforparentleadership.org
www.fcps.net/fcs/default.asp?prcItem=153

>>Promising Partnership Practices 2003
This site from the National Network of Partnership Schools offers more than 70 ideas for increasing parental participation.
www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/ppp.htm#ppp

>>4SiteLearning
Peruse the many professional development opportunities available from Steve Constantino, author of Engaging All Families and 1997 recipient of the Virginia State Principal of the Year award.
www.familyfriendlyschools.org

>>Pulling in the Parents
Read about principal Steve Constantino’s Parent Link program and other initiatives that led to his school being chosen as one of Time Magazine’s School of the Year.
http://tinyurl.com/32t7c

>>Community Partnerships at a Glance
The George Lucas Educational Foundation shows how home, school, and community partnerships are being used to create powerful learning communities.
www.glef.org/php/keyword.php?id=189

>>Virginia Beach Public Schools
Take a look at Virginia Beach City Public Schools, one of the winners of the 2004 National Civic Star Award, an award given to schools providing leadership in promoting academic achievement through school and community partnerships.
www.vbschools.com/involvement.html

>>Guidelines for Family-Friendly Schools
Does your school qualify as a family-friendly school? Take this survey and find out. www.responsiveeducation.org/pdf/guidelinesFamily.pdf

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THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT (NCLB), with its sweeping requirements for annual state achievement tests in reading and math for students in grades 3–8, also requires serious attention to parental involvement. All schools that receive Title I funds must develop policies on partnerships and conduct programs that involve parents in ways that support student success in school.

In addition, all schools must

- Provide professional development to educators to organize effective partnership programs
- Help parents understand state standards and assessments
- Provide materials to help parents assist their children’s achievement at home
- Communicate using formats and languages that parents will understand.

More than 200 middle level schools across the country have begun to address these NCLB requirements as members of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University. The partnership helps members understand and implement a comprehensive model of school, family, and community partnerships.

Schools in NNPS begin with an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP), a committee of the school improvement team. The ATP uses six types of involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community—to ensure that parents have many different ways to become involved at home, at school, and in the community (see page 16).

The ATP writes an annual One-Year Action Plan for partnerships linked to specific school improvement goals. For example, if a school is working to improve students’ reading and writing test scores, some activities in its One-Year Action Plan will involve families and the community with students on literacy skills and attitudes. If a school is working to increase math skills, the plan will include some family and community involvement activities about math.

All schools in NNPS create a welcoming school environment—a partnership place—where students, families, and educators understand and respect each other as partners for student success. The ATP coordinates and integrates the school’s family and community involvement practices, evaluates progress, and guides the school and its partners to improve outreach to all families and the quality of partnership practices over time.

Understanding the School–Parent Compact

One confusing aspect of NCLB’s requirement for a comprehensive partnership program rests in the term school–parent compact. Some schools interpret the school–parent compact as a pledge for parents to promise to be good partners in their children’s education. But a pledge is not a compact. A pledge—which should be signed by teachers, parents, and students—is a symbolic communication that calls attention to the importance of partnerships. It may be included as one activity in a compact, but is not the compact itself.

NCLB is very clear that a school–parent compact is a detailed plan that outlines how educators and parents will work together to support student achievement and “the means by which the school and parents will build and develop a partnership to help children achieve the state’s high standards.” NCLB also gives examples of activities for the six types of involvement to illustrate the content of a well-planned comprehensive program.
Following are a few examples of how middle schools in NNPS are beginning to address NCLB requirements for a comprehensive program of family involvement linked to school goals for student achievement and success.

**Harborside Middle School** in Milford, Connecticut, designed and implemented strategies to get information from workshops on state standards, school tests and assessments, and school programs to parents who could not attend.

The school produced videotapes and audiotapes of workshops, created a Web site, printed summaries and reading lists for parents, and organized opportunities for parents to ask questions and discuss workshop topics with school staff in face to face meetings, by phone, or via e-mail.

**Collinwood Computech Middle/High School** in Cleveland, Ohio, is working to raise students’ test scores. The school’s Action Team for Partnerships, with support from business partners, hosted a breakfast for parents, students, teachers, and community members about state tests and student work. The morning included proficiency games and information about practice tests and the services and assistance available to help students improve their skills.

The school reported that more students reached proficiency levels after the activity than in the prior year. The Proficiency Breakfast also raised parents’ awareness of the state tests and how to help at home by supporting students’ schoolwork and homework.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt Middle School** in Cleveland, Ohio, conducted a Spring Family Affair with workshops on family literacy, student goal setting, student and family health, and summer learning opportunities for students.

**Thurmont Middle School** in Thurmont, Maryland, conducted math workshops for sixth grade students and parents to help students prepare for Maryland’s Functional Math Test. At monthly meetings, parents and students worked with teachers in
A Research-Based Framework of Six Types of Involvement

All schools can use the research-generated framework of six types of involvement to develop a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships.

Type 1—Parenting: Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.

Type 2—Communicating: Communicate with families about school programs and student progress in varied, clear, and productive ways. Create two-way communication channels from school to home and from home to school so that families can easily communicate with teachers, administrators, counselors, and other families.

Type 3—Volunteering: Improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable educators to work with regular and occasional volunteers who assist and support students and the school.

Type 4—Learning at Home: Involve families with their children in academic learning activities at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities and decisions. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting work and ideas with family members.

Type 5—Decision Making: Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, PTA/PTO, and other parent organizations. Assist family and teacher representatives to obtain information from and give information to those they represent.

Type 6—Collaborating with Community: Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, colleges or universities, and other community groups. Enable students, staff, and families to contribute their service to the community.

Schools may choose from hundreds of practices to represent the six types of involvement. Each type of involvement has explicit challenges that must be met to turn an ordinary program into an excellent one. Family and community activities can be designed and implemented for each type of involvement to help students reach specific goals.


practice sessions, with extra help given to students as needed. More than 80 percent of the sixth graders passed the required math test, exceeding the school's expectations. By involving parents and students, teachers brought the importance of math to everyone's attention.

**Madison Junior High**, in Naperville, Illinois, fosters a welcoming environment for all families by implementing activities for all six types of involvement in the NNPS framework. This strategy includes evening discussions to help parents share effective parenting strategies; a Thursday Things newsletter to send information home once a week; a database of volunteers; honor roll breakfasts; family literacy nights; connections with business partners; Dad's Day; and more. All activities are linked to goals for students in the school improvement plan.

**Byrd Middle School** in Sun Valley, California, found that students' math scores were not improving as fast as reading scores. The school conducted math sessions for parents that focused on the math skills taught at each grade level, teachers’ approach to new concepts and skills in algebra and problem solving, parents’ questions about math, and samples of children's math skills and problems. The sessions helped many parents understand the demands that are made on students in math and how they can support students' math work at home.

**Lowndes Middle School** in Valdosta, Georgia, conducted a Fitness Fair with students and families to link good health and fitness (aerobics, salsa dancing, tennis, football, jump rope, climbing wall) with good work in school. The ATP believes that students’ health and self-esteem influence achievement. Moreover, family involvement in such activities helped create a sense of community at the school.

**De Anza Junior High** in Calexico, California, serves a high percentage of migrant families and English language learners who want their children to succeed in school. If parents of sixth
graders attended information sessions on such topics as student development, drug abuse prevention, gang affiliation, and preparation for middle school, their students could participate in a field trip at the end of the year.

Although parents at first objected to attending the workshops, they agreed that the meetings helped them help their children make a more successful transition to middle school. The school reported higher test scores and academic success, and less crime, violence, and graffiti.

Many more examples of middle school activities that contribute to comprehensive partnership programs can be found in the collections of Promising Partnership Practices on the NNPS Web site, www.partnershipschools.org in the section “In the Spotlight.”

Increasing Communications with Parents
NCLB also requires schools to communicate with parents about their child’s achievement test scores, the school’s status in making Adequate Yearly Progress, disaggregated scores for major groups of students in the school, teachers’ professional qualifications, options for parents to change schools and to select supplementary education services for eligible students, and other information about education programs.

Schools that are developing comprehensive partnership programs are working to ensure that all communications with families are clear, timely, accessible, and in languages that families can understand in print, on the Internet, in e-mail, and in other formats.

Reaching Goals for Involvement
Some have criticized NCLB for seemingly unreasonable demands for high achievement for all students. That challenge must be met, however, to close achievement gaps that have prevented many students from reaching their full potential.

It is encouraging to note that NCLB’s requirements for family involvement are attainable by every middle school. Not only is help available to guide the development of comprehensive partnership programs, but there is a growing network of middle schools in diverse communities ready to share ideas and solutions to challenges to reach all families.

Indeed, NCLB reinforces what middle school educators have noted in Turning Points 2000 and in This We Believe: family and community involvement must be one component of a successful school for successful students.

Joyce L. Epstein is director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools, and a principal research scientist at Johns Hopkins University. Visit www.partnershipschool.org for information about NNPS and its resources.
Family Contact
Connecting Kids and Kin Through the Curriculum
By Ross M. Burkhardt

“Successful schools for young adolescents are characterized by… school-initiated family and community partnerships.” So said National Middle School Association last year when it released the third edition of its fundamental position paper, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents.*

Although in the past NMSA has always advocated “family and community partnerships,” the addition of one hyphenated word—“school-initiated”—emphasizes the importance of middle level educators instituting and developing programs that foster positive connections between students and their families.

*This We Believe* asserts that “families should spend time engaged in their children’s learning, thus demonstrating belief in the importance of school success” (p. 19). And while it is clear that the family plays a crucial role in nurturing success for its youngsters, the school, too, must offer curricular connections so that families can support and engage with their children.

**Initiating Connections**
Many schools have structures designed to enhance school-family interactions. Advisory
programs offer numerous opportunities for schools to connect with family members. Plays, concerts, and sporting events provide parents with regular occasions to see their children engaged in appropriate and worthwhile activities.

But aside from infrequent parent conferences at report card time, how often do middle schools engage parents in the actual learning process? How can middle level teachers create curriculum connections so that families can become more engaged in their children's learning?

Below are four examples of school-initiated partnerships, each of which connects students with their families.

**The Relative Letter**
Ask your students to identify three family members with whom they have a positive relationship and then write one or two sentences that describe the relationship. The sentences might answer the question, “Why is this family member important to me?”

The next day, read to your students a letter that you wrote to a member of your family expressing your regard for that relative. As students watch, place the letter inside a stamped, addressed envelope and ask a student to take it to the office mailbox.

Then, invite your students to write a Relative Letter to an important member of their family. I told my students:

*The Relative Letter should make it clear to the recipient why you are acknowledging him or her. Since there are undoubtedly several reasons why you appreciate this important individual in your life, your letter will contain several paragraphs.*

In most cases, the pre-writing exercise (describing three important family relationships) will provide a basis for beginning the letter. Inform students that they will receive an A on this assignment for completing it, that you will not read it, and that they will send the letter. These qualifiers should encourage students to say what they want to or need to say. Provide envelopes and stamps.

With this assignment, you enable students to engage in real writing, connect with kin, and strengthen the bonds of family. A note of caution, however: Not all of our students have access to both parents. Expand the boundaries of this assignment to include other significant adults in a student’s “extended” family, as appropriate.

**Oral History Interviews**
Everyone is an eyewitness to history, and older family members are a treasure trove of first-person accounts. Ask your students to conduct oral history interviews with older relatives about specific historical events and then create transcripts of their interviews for publication in a class anthology.

Select a unit of study from your curriculum that lends itself to investigating the past. For example, America's history in the 20th century might yield the following interview topics:

- 1950s—Sen. Joseph McCarthy, Sputnik, Elvis Presley
- 1960s—Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, the Beatles
- 1970s—Kent State, Watergate, the Bicentennial
- 1980s—Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Challenger explosion, personal computers

I gave my students the following instructions regarding Oral History Interviews:

*For our study of the time period from ____ to ____ , select an older member of your family who has knowledge of that era and interview him or her about a significant person or event from back then. Prepare at least 10 questions to ask, and tape record your interview. Transcribe and edit it, adding introductory and explanatory material as appropriate. Photographs, newspaper headlines, and other memorabilia from the event will enhance the value of your oral history report.*

Once students have typed their interviews, ask each student to select a short passage from his or her interview and share it with the class. Students should also explain who they interviewed and why, and relate the most significant thing they learned while conducting the interview.

Ask students to reflect on the Oral History Interview project in a journal entry, responding to the following questions:

- What did you learn from this experience? How did it differ from reading the textbook?
- How could you have prepared yourself better for your Oral History Interview?
- How could the teacher improve this activity for next year?
- What else do you have to say about the Oral History Interview project?

Finally, have students prepare their interviews for publication in a class anthology that they then share with their families.

By conducting the interviews, students learn about the past, honor older relatives as important sources of information, and develop skills in interviewing, transcribing, editing, and publishing. And they connect with kin!
Family Traditions
Each student writes a personal essay about a favorite family tradition, memory, or event. Then, students share their family traditions with one another at a class gathering. The writings are published in a class anthology, which each student's family receives.

First, I composed a personal essay describing one of my family's favorite traditions. I included specific details, described several family members, and cited dates and places. I also saved all drafts to show students my writing process at a later date.

In class, I told students that I was going to read a piece of writing and would have some questions for them when I was finished. After reading my personal essay, I asked students what they understood and what details they recalled. Then I issued the following instructions:

- Make sure your students have had several prior opportunities to share their writing aloud with classmates; this should not be their first such experience. After each reading, have the class acknowledge the student reader with polite applause. Depending on the number of students in your class, this activity may take more than one period to complete.
- After all students have read their essays aloud, ask them to reflect on the assignment by responding to the following questions:
  - What did you learn by writing about your family tradition?
  - What did you learn by listening to classmates share their traditions?
  - What else do you have to say about this assignment?
- Finally, ask each student to prepare his or her family tradition writing for publication in a class anthology. When you distribute the anthologies, instruct students to share them with their families, and then have a class discussion about the reactions of relatives.

One aspect of this assignment that pleased me year after year was the positive effect it had on students. They became more tolerant of one another and felt closer to each other when they learned that they all valued similar family moments.

Parent Writing Conference
Each student conducts a writing conference at home with a parent. No teacher is present. The student:
- Selects several representative pieces of his or her own writing
- Places these compositions in a writing folder
- Prepares a set of questions, observations, and insights about them
- Meets with a parent to share the evolution of the writing
- Reflects on the parent writing conference in a journal entry.

The Parent Writing Conference (PWC) is predicated on two factors: that students write regularly in a variety of modes and that students have saved all drafts as well as all polished pieces. The purpose of the PWC is for the student to appear as an accomplished learner in the eyes of his or her family and, consequently, to strengthen the school-home connection.

I began by having students review their writing folders in mid-March and select seven representative pieces of writing. For each piece selected, students wrote two or three sentences explaining why they wanted to use it as part of their PWC.

Simultaneously, I sent a letter to parents explaining the PWC activity and its objectives: to increase parent-child communication regarding learning and to promote a better understanding of the task of writing. “My intention,” I wrote, “is that you will learn more about your child by looking at some of the writing she or he has produced so far this year. Thank you, and enjoy this learning experience with your child.”

The instruction sheets on how to conduct a parent writing conference offered students advice such as:
- Find an appropriate time to first mention the Parent Writing Conference—for example, just before, during, or after dinner, or at a time when your parents can read my letter to them explaining the assignment.
- Give your writing folder to your parent so he or she can read your writing in advance of the conference. Also, review your writing and prepare some questions and comments to share at the conference.
- Make sure your parent understands the request: having a conference with you to discuss your writing and your follow-up journal assignment. You will need from 30 to 60 minutes uninterrupted by any other concerns or other family members to conduct the writing conference properly.
- As you conduct the Parent Writing Conference, share your thoughts about writing with your parent. What have you learned about writing so far this year? What was the most difficult piece for you to compose? Why? Which piece was...
easiest? Why? Respond to your parent’s questions about your writing.

After students completed the PWC, they responded to the following questions in a reflective journal assignment:

- What did you learn by discussing your writing with one of your parents?
- What questions did your parent have about your writing?
- How has your writing improved since the beginning of this school year?
- What are your current writing strengths?
- What areas of your writing need improvement?
- What else do you have to say about your writing during this school year?

As I read through the journal entries, I learned what happened at the PWC, how students saw themselves as writers, and ways that I could do a better job of teaching writing. Kristen wrote, “I think by doing the conference I learned that I really did improve my writing since the beginning of the year. I also learned that my parents appreciate my writing much more than I thought, and it pays to show your writing to your parents [as] they are really good critics.”

I also invited parents to provide feedback by responding to three questions:

- What did you learn about your child’s writing through the Parent Writing Conference?
- What suggestions do you have regarding your child’s writing?
- What comments do you have about the Parent Writing Conference?

With a bit of tinkering, the Parent Writing Conference could easily become a math conference, or a science conference, or a more general parent academic conference. The basic idea is for students to present themselves as accomplished learners to adult family members.

Concluding Thoughts

Every middle school educator should ask the question, “What activities can I do with my students to promote positive family contacts?” You can come up with your own strategies to engage students and families in meaningful ways that reveal academic accomplishment.

You are the educational leader in your classroom—why not create a plan so that every month of the school year, your students engage in at least one activity designed to enhance and develop their academic skills while simultaneously strengthening their family ties.

Ross M. Burkhardt, a past president of NMSA and a 1998 National Teachers Hall of Fame inductee, is currently working on a book about how to teach poetry in middle school.
Differentiated Grading

Treating Students Fairly

Differentiating instruction means doing what’s fair for students. It’s a collection of best practices used to maximize students’ learning at every turn—including giving them the tools to handle anything that is undifferentiated.

In short, it’s highly effective teaching.

Most of us try to live up to the promise of differentiated instruction, but when it comes to grading and report cards, our resolve weakens. We question the legitimacy of giving equally weighted grades to students who demonstrate mastery in alternative formats or through alternative means: Was it fair that one student did an essay while another did artwork? Are both assessments challenging? Was it fair for some students to receive additional support (scaffolding) to accomplish the task while others did not? What about re-dos? Do all students get full credit if they re-do assessments?

Why Give Grades?

For many teachers, a grade represents a valid and undiluted indicator of mastery—what a student knows and is able to do. Anything that dilutes that grade—penalizing students’ multiple attempts at mastery, incorporating non-academic factors (behavior, attendance, and effort), and assessing students in ways that do not accurately indicate students’ mastery, for example—is suspect.

To dilute a final grade because of such factors demonstrates a teacher’s interest in holding students accountable, not teaching. It promotes a “learn-or-we-will-hurt-you” mentality, a red flag, as pointed out by middle level educator Nancy Doda.

Class after class, week after week, grading period after grading period, year after year, we scramble to boil a student’s learning journey down to a single symbol in a tiny box on a thin piece of paper that may or may not make it out from the crumpled darkness of a book bag.

That one little mark has the power to transform not just that evening, but a whole month and beyond into a morass of angst, guilt, self-doubt, dysfunction, and fear in both students and their parents.

We tell students that grades let them know how they’re doing. But we know it’s not possible for one symbol to provide clear feedback of all the information and skills assessed for a grading period.

Given this perspective and the need to be fair with students, maybe we can make the best of such inaccurate yet popular conventions and focus on the instructional uses of grades.

Grades and Instruction

When we grade students, we must make a decision: Do we grade them against the standards, against their own progress, or both? Most of us opt for using the standards, but there are times when this isn’t appropriate, such as when the student is new to the country and doesn’t speak our language or the student is working with an advanced curriculum. With these students, conventional grading doesn’t work.

Rather than perpetuating an uncomfortable contrivance like equal grading for all, we can alter the report card format to promote a more accurate reflection of a student’s achievement. For example:

- Grading the student against his own progress, but indicating that the grade reflects an adjusted curriculum. An asterisk is placed next to the grade or a box is checked on the report card indicating such, and a narrative comment is included in the cumulative folder to explain the adjustments.
- Giving the student two grades: one indicating her
The Subjectivity of Grades

Grades are subjective. As Marzano points out, pure mathematical averages of grades for a grading period are inaccurate indicators of students’ true mastery. He contends that a teacher’s professional judgment via clear descriptors on a rubric actually increases the accuracy of students’ final grades as an indicator of what they learned.

Marzano also presents research demonstrating how a teacher’s judgment via rubrics has a stronger correlation with performance on standardized tests than do point or average calculations. Whoops. We think that using points and averaging mitigates our subjective opinion of students’ achievement and are supposedly unbiased, when really, the reverse is true. Use of pure mathematical averages of grades often exacerbates grade distortions that stem from a teacher’s frame of mind while grading, but use of rubrics with standards is better suited for evening out such distortions over time.

This subjectivity and students’ varied states of readiness and learning styles make strict adherence to equal grading for all disquieting. Regardless of how “teacher-proof” a curriculum becomes, we all emphasize some aspects over others. The curriculum is too huge for student mastery, so we’re always deciding what to prune and what to keep and when to push for mastery—and what constitutes mastery varies from teacher to teacher, no matter how scripted the lessons.

The only ethical thing to do, then, is to abandon one-size-fits-all grading practices in favor of grading students in whatever manner will maximize their learning at every turn.

Such a policy may be uncomfortable at first. For example, this means we allow assignments and tests to be re-done for full credit, as long as students are truly trying to learn and it’s within
reason. We require students to submit a plan of study that will enable them to improve their performance the second time around. We identify a deadline by which this will be accomplished or the grade is permanent. Then we help students create a calendar of completion that will help them succeed.

If we want grades to inform and help students achieve, they must come regularly. Successful differentiated grading emphasizes formative assessment over summative. This means we shorten assignments (example: change multi-page writings to a series of one-page writings), find ways to provide feedback other than from the teacher, and make sure students get feedback within three days of submitting assignments, if possible.

Students will hear and use a continuous cycle of quick feedback in smaller doses. It’s more powerful than extended feedback weeks after the assignment’s due. We must also plan how students will receive timely feedback on every assignment.

**Differentiating Assessments**

When we differentiate teaching strategies, we sometimes have to differentiate the assessment. This may require “tiering” our tests: providing a level 1 and a level 2 test. The level 1 test assesses three of five standards, while level 2 assesses all five standards. Most of the students are assigned to one or the other—it’s non-negotiable unless a student really wants to try the more-encompassing test to see what it’s like.

We keep track of which objectives/standards have been mastered and work with students in tiered lessons on the objectives they have not yet mastered.

What happens if a student gets a high grade on a lower tiered test? What grade does he get on the report card? Remember, it doesn’t matter where in the grading period a student demonstrates mastery. To require all students to demonstrate mastery on Tuesday of this particular week at 10:00 a.m. in this particular format is absurd.

Within reason, give students the whole grading period to receive what you have to offer. If you need to limit the window of opportunity to learn and demonstrate mastery to protect your sanity, that’s fine, but don’t hold everyone to demonstrating mastery with no chance to improve. If students are working diligently, yet demonstrate mastery of all objectives three weeks after everyone else, they get the same high grade as their classmates.

If they don’t yet demonstrate full mastery by the end of the grading period, we’re back to the central question: Do we grade students against their own progression, against standards, or both? It does students no service to record a D on the report card when they have grown tremendously throughout the quarter. I’d rather give them the B or A and indicate somewhere on the card that it was with an adjusted curriculum.

The issue is not, “How do I equitably assign grades?” Instead, it’s, “What is fair for each child?” and “What report card feedback best represents what a child truly learns and promotes the most learning?” If living up to the promise of differentiated practice means redesigning report cards and grade books, let’s do it. Let’s be consistent in our pedagogy: Differentiated instruction means we differentiate grading from time to time, and this does not mean we are weakening our curriculum or lessons. On the contrary, it’s making learning more demanding. Students have little opportunity to escape the challenges; accountability and feedback are specific, vigorous, and frequent. It’s what’s fair.

Rick Wormeli is on sabbatical from his teaching position at Rachel Carson Middle School in Herndon, Virginia. He is an author and frequent speaker at middle level conferences and workshops.
Michael Fletcher was always a straight-A student. But at his junior high school in West Orange, New Jersey, the “cool kids” teased him for being a “mama’s boy.” He did his homework. He stayed out of trouble. Despite his exemplary grades, he wasn't sure he would be able to attend college—his family couldn't afford it.

Because they live in and attend schools in low-income neighborhoods, many students like Michael feel bored and unchallenged by their classes, misunderstood by their peers and teachers, and feel like their school life and their home life are worlds apart.

In New Jersey, bright elementary and middle school students whose parents are financially limited have an opportunity to participate in a program called New Jersey SEEDS (Scholars, Educators, Excellence, Dedication, Success). SEEDS provides intellectually challenging academic enrichment classes on Saturdays and during the summer so that students may be able to continue their education in competitive college preparatory schools.

Involving Parents
Parental involvement is essential for these students’ long-term success; when parents feel detached from the academic lives of their children, their children suffer at school. Parent participation in low-income schools is traditionally low—and that’s certainly the case in low-income middle schools. These parents may feel intimidated by the curriculum, unable to help their children with homework. They sometimes do not have the opportunity to take off work to participate in school activities. As a result, they do not play a part in developing and molding the programs to fit students’ academic and personal needs.

Recognizing the importance of parent participation, SEEDS recently launched a concerted effort to include parents in the education process.
Typically, the parents of high-achieving students are more involved in—and aware of—their students’ educational lives than the parents of other children. So, at SEEDS, we are fortunate to work primarily with parents who are committed to the success of their students. Still, we have faced numerous challenges over the years.

One of the greatest challenges we have faced in working with parents is the language barrier. For many of our parents, English is a foreign language, making it hard for them to understand the mission and requirements of the SEEDS program. It can present a problem every time we need to obtain a signed consent form, pass along a message, or request parental involvement in a project.

To reduce the problems posed by the language barrier, SEEDS hires staff members who are fluent in languages besides English. Two staff members are native Spanish speakers; several have some Spanish proficiency. One staff member is fluent in Arabic, and several can communicate in French. When necessary, we rely on the students themselves to translate materials for their parents.

Another challenge with all parents is communicating during the work day. Parents often are not able to make calls during the work day—especially parents who have jobs in the service sector. We provide our home numbers and cell phone numbers so these parents can call us after hours if necessary.

**Bringing Parents to School**

Two other successful strategies for getting parents involved are Family Nights and Parents Days.

**Family Nights.** For our youngest students and their parents, monthly Family Nights are mandatory events. At least

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**Planning a Parent Event**

Tips for involving parents in the school…

- **Schedule events with working parents in mind.** Once upon a time, schools could schedule events in the middle of the workday and expect a reasonable number of stay-at-home moms to attend. But now, mid-day events are simply impossible for most parents. The best time for a parent event is in the evening or on a Saturday morning. If possible, provide activities for students and their younger siblings, as not all families can afford babysitters or have reliable child-care assistance.

- **Give parents plenty of advance notice.** It’s unreasonable to expect parents to attend last-minute events. To ensure a good turn out, give parents at least six weeks’ notice of an event. If possible, provide parents with a calendar of all events for the year on the first day of school.

- **Be persistent.** Don’t expect parents to remember the time, date, and location of an event. And don’t expect them to treat an event as a high priority if you don’t. Be persistent. Send out letters, “save-the-date” cards, and reminder notices. Call parents during evening hours. E-mail them if possible.

  Be sure to keep track of confirmations and find out why parents cannot attend. If it’s a scheduling conflict, you can use that information the next time you schedule an event.

- **Provide refreshments.** Good food creates a warm, welcoming environment. You don’t have to serve a banquet, but don’t skimp on the snacks either. The money you spend on food will be repaid handsomely in terms of parent involvement in the future.

- **Connect parents.** Parents want to be able to connect with each other through phone, mail, and e-mail. Make sure parents receive contact information for other parents. The better parents know one another, the more likely they are to feel comfortable being involved.

- **Celebrate the parents!** Don’t treat parents like they are a drain on your resources. They are your resources! Don’t expect them to be enthusiastic about a school if the school isn’t enthusiastic about them. Take every opportunity to welcome, thank, and acknowledge them.
one parent, grandparent, or guardian is expected to attend all nine Family Nights held on Thursdays from 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. during the school year.

Each Family Night has its own theme. Past themes have included arts and crafts, African history, and community service. Some Family Nights center on activities parents and students can do together. Others are dedicated to providing an opportunity for teachers to meet one-on-one with the parents. Dinner is always provided. Sometimes it's pizza, other times it's sandwiches and chips. The overall goal is to include parents in the educational process.

Parents Day. Parents Day allows parents an opportunity to learn about the current projects underway at SEEDS and provides them with an opportunity to give feedback about what they think does and doesn't work about the program.

Ninety parents attended the last Parents Day, which was held on a Saturday from 11:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Students were not invited. Lunch was provided.

We began the morning with an icebreaker activity to get people talking. Then, each of the SEEDS staff members provided a few brief remarks about his or her duties at SEEDS and any news that would interest parents.

Parents at each table were then asked to discuss their opinions about SEEDS. What had we done that was successful? What would they like to see us do in the future?

A staff member at each table served as a facilitator. After 20 minutes of discussion, a representative from each table shared a summary of that table's observations with the whole room. Suggestions ranged from, “SEEDS should provide more college guidance” to “SEEDS should help parents coordinate carpool visits to high school campuses.” After the event, a summary report was sent to all SEEDS parents. As one parent said, “It was a very helpful event. It was great to know SEEDS cares what we, as parents, think.”

“One of the greatest challenges we have faced in working with financially limited parents is the language barrier.”

Since many parents expressed a desire for an ongoing forum to voice suggestions, comments, and concerns, SEEDS is exploring a Parents Volunteer Committee. The committee would ensure that parents are recognized as key stakeholders in the future of SEEDS and that parents themselves view SEEDS as an organization committed to growing, listening, and learning.

David Allyn is senior communications officer for New Jersey SEEDS, Newark, NJ.

About SEEDS
New Jersey SEEDS helps prepare motivated, academically qualified, economically disadvantaged seventh graders for entrance into competitive secondary schools.

The CORE Program, an intensive, challenging, 14-month academic program, is designed to prepare students for success in secondary school, college, and beyond. The CORE curriculum combines rigorous academic work, cultural enrichment, social skills building, and leadership training during the summer and on Saturdays. For more information, visit www.njseeds.org.
People, much like our pets, enjoy being rewarded for positive behavior. A pat on the back, a firm handshake, lunch on the boss, or words of encouragement are all gestures that, if sincere, go a long way toward enriching the school climate.

We reward kids from the moment they enter school systems. In elementary schools, candy and trinkets abound. Students are rewarded for washing their hands, taking a nap, identifying words in a sentence, completing math problems correctly, and being good classroom citizens. Cake and ice cream are the mainstays of classroom parties where positive events and accomplishments are celebrated.

At the middle level, rewards and celebrations continue at the team, department, and school levels. They may include recognition of students who have perfect attendance; who have volunteered their time in the community; and who have participated in musical, athletic, or academic competitions.

These kinds of recognition are a fundamental part of high school as well, with great emphasis on recognition for scholarship and athletics.

If we recognize students for their achievement, shouldn’t we acknowledge the accomplishments of each other as well?

As Teachers
Do we celebrate the hard work of our colleagues? Do we shake their hands or pat their backs when their students produce outstanding projects, write award-winning essays, capture first place in the science fair? Do we drop them a note congratulating them if their students capture first place in a statewide mathematics competition?

As Administrators
Do we take the time from our hectic days to jot a congratulatory note to a teacher who presented a terrific lesson or organized the spelling bee? Do we say thank you to staff members who participated in the Multiple Sclerosis Walk with a student whose parent has the disease, or to a teacher who coordinated a community service project to help the needy?

As District Supervisors
Do we recognize building-level administrators for doing what they do, even though it is “part of their job description”? Do we extend a pat on the back or write a sincere note of appreciation in recognition of a principal’s strengths or accomplishments?

Untangling the Wires
Why does the train of rewards and compliments jump the tracks at the junction where students and teachers meet or where administrators and their supervisors meet?

The answers lie within a twisted bundle of wires in the circuitry of education organizations. Rather than color-coded, these wires may be coded by philosophies or theories. As we begin to untangle the wires and study the theories or philosophies they represent, we need to visit, perhaps briefly, the organizational scholars best known to leaders in the education world.

What might sociologist Max Weber say about recognizing the members of an organization for their achievements? Would the recognition of the accomplishments of the stakeholders compromise his study of authority structures and the differences between power and authority? Would the realization of goals...
and subsequent rewards for attaining the goals run counter to Weber’s thoughts related to the efficiency of a bureaucratic organization?

Would corporate leadership expert Chester I. Barnard look at rewarding students, teachers, and administrators as part of the social and personal interactions that organizations require to be successful? Management guru Henry Mintzberg might say that managers are puppets. Are teachers and students and principals puppets as well? Should puppets be rewarded for moving their arms or legs when their strings are pulled?

The Common Sense Model

Philosophically or theoretically grounding the tangled wires may not be the answer to the dilemma of whom to recognize and for what. The solution may lie in the ever-present but not always explored theory of common sense—a blend of philosophical or theoretical thoughts driven by the culture of the organization and climate of the community. The school district’s strategic plan, the building’s site-based plan, and the community’s expectations are all factored into this common sense model of recognition.

Using common sense as a basis for a model that recognizes the accomplishments of others doesn’t require a comprehensive understanding of organizational theorists, nor does it require the technical skills of an electronics technician to solve the complexity of a circuit board gone haywire.

The common sense model requires people of goodwill to acknowledge the work and accomplishments of others. It means acknowledging the academic and social growth of students, the expertise of teachers, and the positive leadership styles of administrators. It means a handshake, a pat on the back, a personal note, a phone call to a parent, a candy bar in a mailbox, or a fruit basket for the staff.

Simply, the common sense model means doing the right thing every day. By modeling this theory, our students, staff, and parents will all enjoy the benefits of a kinder, friendlier, more productive learning and working environment.

Robert Ruder recently retired from the principalship in Manheim Township, Pennsylvania.
Web Sites

Invitation to Participation

By Stacy Schaefer

It’s eight o’clock and the open house is finally over. I take my legal pad with 10 parents’ signatures and shove it into my bag to take home with over 100 papers to grade.

Those 10 parents are not the ones I really needed to see tonight, although I should be happy that any parents showed up. Where are all the parents who so eagerly attended their children’s elementary school open houses? I could still use their support—and so could their kids. It is time to go in search of a connection.

A New Way of Communicating

Over the years I have tried several methods to recapture the parent involvement necessary to help my students succeed. But parent meetings, newsletters home, and phone calls “just because” only frustrated me as I saw little or no results in terms of increased involvement.

Finally, a couple of years ago, a teammate suggested creating a Web site as a way to keep students informed about what was going on with regard to homework and special events. I enthusiastically jumped on board, not realizing what an impact a Web site would have on parent involvement.

My classroom Web site (www.schaeferscience8.homestead.com/Main.html) includes the following elements:

- Special Events and Announcements: A scrolling list of test dates, field trips, sports schedules, special events, and volunteer opportunities for parents
- General Assignments: Proper headings for papers, quizzes, late assignment policy, make up work
- Weekly Assignments: Assignments for each day of that week
- Classroom Procedures: Behavior expectations
- Grading Scale: Grading scale and overview of how final grades are determined
- Extra Credit: Guidelines
- Supply List: So students are prepared to learn
- About Ms. Schaefer: So students and parents can know about me on a personal level
- E-mail link to me.

After the Web site had been operational for several months, I realized that it opened the door to increased parent involvement.

First, it established a line of communication between the parents and me. Parents could e-mail me at the touch of a button—and they could do so at their own convenience.

Working parents could now contact me from work or even late at night. Parents could request information on student progress at any time and I kept a running record of when this information was sent.

The Web site also provided a unique support system in that parents could keep up with weekly assignments, know what was happening in class, and know what needed to be completed at home. Again, parents no longer had to rely on students to convey the correct information. Links provided tutorials for students and parents alike.

The Web site also enabled parents and teachers to shift the responsibility of keeping track of assignments back to students. Students could check on assignments from home and were less likely to conveniently “forget” what the assignment was if they knew that their parents could simply check the Web site. Parents also appreciated the ability to keep up with assignments when students were absent from school.

The most effective components of the Web site are those that keep parents informed about the daily activities of their children.

For example, I conducted a survey that showed that the sports and field trip schedules on our team Web site and the classroom assignments page on the classroom Web site were more positively received than even the parents’ ability to contact a teacher via the Internet.

The simple act of getting the information “out there” for parents without having to rely on the students taking a piece of paper home was wonderful.

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Creating Your Own Web Site

Creating a Web site that is an effective communication tool between the teacher and parents requires total commitment. Before you go about creating a Web site, ask yourself if you are committed to keeping it up to date. If you are not willing to make sure the information is always current and informative, don’t read further. If you are willing to make that commitment, then let’s go!

First, determine your purpose. Why do you want a Web site? What are your goals? What information do you want to share? How elaborate do you want the Web site to be? Do you want lots of graphics? Audio? Streaming video? Links to other sites?

I used a story-board approach to plan my Web site to make sure that all of the pages were linked and to ensure a balanced use of graphics and animations. Planning allows you to make sure that the site is user-friendly before you put a lot of time into building the site itself.

When planning your Web site, keep in mind that the goal is communication. Include such amenities as links to your e-mail, links to tutorial sites, lists of classroom activities, and weekly assignments. Keep links and buttons in the same location on every page. Parents are more likely to use all of the pages of your Web site if they do not have to search for the information or the links.

Now it’s time to choose a Web hosting company. Web hosting companies vary in price and options, so it is wise to shop around. Several companies provide free services for educators, but you may be restricted in the amount of information you can post on the site.

Most Web hosting companies offer tutorials on how to create the pages, which is similar in many cases to using presentation software such as PowerPoint or Hyperstudio. Other page creation options include FrontPage, Adobe Page Mill, Dreamweaver, and Netscape Composer.

It is easy to get over-enthusiastic about putting together your first page. I recommend keeping the graphics and animations simple because it reduces the wait time for people to load the Web site. Too much animation could be the reason a parent cannot load the site, and that could be the difference between their using the site or abandoning the task all together.

You can find great clipart to download—free in many cases—from such sites as school.discovery.com/clipart and www.freeschoolclipart.com. More sophisticated Web graphics can be created with software such as PaintShop Pro, Photoshop, and Illustrator.

Update your Web site regularly. Check for broken links, delete old information, and add the new. Parents won’t bother to visit your site if you don’t offer them the information they need. An out-of-date Web site signals a disinterest in maintaining parent-teacher communication.

Beyond the Newsletter

The information age has brought valuable resources to our fingertips, and we are wise to make use of the technology in our efforts to increase parent involvement in schools. Team and classroom Web sites are just one way to incorporate the many aspects of parent involvement, from constant accessibility to their child’s classroom activities to inviting parents to participate in school functions.

My experience with a classroom Web site has been very reassuring. As a busy mom, I can appreciate the ability to communicate with my child’s teachers at my convenience. As a teacher, I love the ability to spend 30 minutes updating my Web site and know that it has relayed the information to all of my students and parents. The Web site goes beyond the typical newsletter home and it has opened my classroom to the entire education community.

Stacy Schaefer is a science teacher at Archdale-Trinity Middle School in Randolph County, North Carolina.

Research on Parent Involvement

The middle school environment is a microcosm like no other. While we acknowledge all the emotional, physical, and academic changes taking place in middle school students, we sometimes fail to acknowledge the changes taking place in parents as well.

Writing in Transforming Middle Level Education (Allyn and Bacon, 1992), Auburn University professor Frances Kochan suggests that parents often mistakenly decrease their involvement in middle schools for several reasons:

• Students, naturally progressing toward becoming independent learners, do not want their parents involved at middle school.
• Middle schools do not know how to welcome parents effectively.
• Because more parents work more hours as their children get older, they are often not able to attend during the day. Another reason parents may shy away from involvement is that they do not feel prepared to help their children with increasingly complex curriculum.

But effective parent involvement is more than just assisting with homework; it means a true collaboration between educators and parents. Educators should be seeking parent involvement, not reacting to it.
With the starting increase in obesity among adolescents, ensuring middle school students have opportunities to participate in activities that get them up and moving is more important than ever. While all schools have some kind of physical education program as part of the regular curriculum, not all have an interscholastic or intramural sports program.

The reasons vary. Some schools do not have the financial or personnel resources to offer athletic programs. Some do not want to promote the sense of competition or exclusion that these programs often elicit. Others don't want to risk the kinds of injuries associated with adolescent participation in sports such as football and basketball.

Done “right,” structured athletic programs are one means of keeping students active while, at the same time, teaching them the valuable skills and characteristics of leadership, teamwork, cooperation, and sportsmanship. The key, as Don Davidson points out in his article, is to ensure that the program is developmentally appropriate, open to all students, and safe. Davidson describes the successful sports program at Eagleview Middle School in Colorado that gives all students the opportunity to explore their talents in a non-competitive atmosphere.

Is the Eagleview program typical of middle level sports programs? It seems not. Take a look at what John Swaim and Ken McEwin have learned from a national survey of middle level sports programs and what they recommend to make middle level sports more focused on making education and the welfare of young adolescents a top priority.
sports program created to cultivate the exploratory nature of
the true middle school and its students.

What is success? If you acknowledge that middle school
is the place where kids experience the thrill of playing full
contact football without worrying about athletic scholarships,
playing basketball without being destined to play for the
WNBA, or learning to “bump” a volleyball without aiming to
play for the United States Olympic team, then you have dis-
covered the level of success at Eagleview.

At Eagleview, 90 percent of the student body partici-
pates in intramural or inter-
scholastic sports programs,
including football, basketball,
cross country, tennis,
wrestling, and softball.
“Intramural” means that stu-
dents, regardless of size, skill, or potential, can compete in
“clusters” against peers of similar abilities. From these clus-
ters, coaches choose participants who may want to compete
against other schools in our interscholastic program. There is
one catch: to play interscholastically, one must also participate
in intramurals.

We have eight full-contact intramural football teams
playing a six-game schedule and an interscholastic team
playing a four-game interscholastic schedule and a six-game
intramural schedule. And we do all of this in four weeks!

How did this come about and what makes it successful? First, educators recognized that placing young adoles-
cents in competitive sports programs increases the propen-
sity for problems. As Kenneth McEwin reported in
Interscholastic Sports: Battle Not
Fought, participation in a traditional
junior high sports program may
involve high injury rates, abandon-
ment of sports by kids who feel they
aren’t good enough to play on the
“A” team, and burnout when fun is
replaced by pressure to perform like
a professional player. In the tradi-
tional approach to athletics, 10 per-
cent of the participants are playing
while 90 percent are in the stands
watching their friends compete.

At Eagleview, the sports program
grew out of the ideas cultivated by
Peter Cicatelli, an educator who had
specific thoughts about how adoles-
cents might have fun, learn skills,
and gain a lifelong appreciation for
fitness: Create healthy competition,
teach sportsmanship, and have fun.
He developed the “scramble” and
“cluster” coaching concepts that Eagleview has adopted.

“In cluster coaching, staff members who choose to
participate in this middle level experience divide players
into clusters that are then subdivided into several skill-bal-
anced teams. The cluster coaches direct different teams
each day. This strategy is based on the work of D. D.
Christensen, who found that students often abandon mid-
dle level sports if they perceive that they are on a losing
team and that their team will continue to lose because of an
inexperienced coach.

“At Eagleview, parental support comes from families happy to see
their children enjoy success in athletics while being protected by
team selection based on weight and ability level.”
In cluster coaching, the teams may have a different coach each day, thereby giving kids unique perspectives and allowing “rookie” coaches the opportunity to learn from their veteran colleagues.

With scramble coaching, one coach acts as the skills trainer, demonstrating specific skills. After a skills demonstration, each coach scrambles to a station to help students reinforce skills. Then, games are played based on students’ talent levels.

In both approaches, skills development and sportsmanship are of paramount importance and are emphasized by coaches who serve as adult mentors.

Let the Games Begin
The Eaglevie sports program continues to grow based on past wisdom and best practices. Scheduling is done a year ahead of time in an association meeting; the athletics secretary coordinates with the other schools to confirm schedules.

We continue to refine and improve the process. In football, for example, we fulfill our responsibility to balance ability by holding a “draft” to pick players.

All players practice the first few days with each coach teaching fundamentals, evaluating skills, judging weights of players, and screening for readiness to play a contact sport. At the end of this period, the coaches put the players’ names into a “pool” from which they “draft” players based on skill level, weight, and developmental readiness. The draft order is never revealed; rosters for the intramural teams are designated Gold, Blue, Orange, etc. Let the games begin!

At Eaglevie, parental support comes from families happy to see their children enjoy success in athletics while being protected by team selection based on weight and ability level. The athletics program emphasizes skills, sportsmanship, and teamwork supervised by coaches who are committed to these principles.

Is this program the best we can offer our kids? Look at your own children and ask: “Am I glad they played hard or would I rather they had sat in the stands as spectators?” I think your answer is probably self-evident.

Don Davidson, former assistant principal and athletic director at Eagleview Middle School in Colorado Springs, is now principal at Craig Intermediate School, Craig, Colorado.

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What’s Happening in Middle School Sports?

By John H. Swaim and C. Kenneth McEwin

Although American education has been making progress in efforts to establish and maintain successful middle schools for young adolescents for more than four decades, sports programs have changed little at most middle schools.

Too often, educators consider the desires and interests of adults—family members, coaches, fans, the press—rather than what is best for young adolescents when they make decisions about the nature of middle school sports programs.

Many stakeholders view senior high school varsity sports as the real game and middle school sports as a farm club where the very best athletes can practice so they can perform better if they make senior high school varsity teams. This view is shortsighted and robs hundreds of thousands of young adolescents of the benefits of participating in developmentally responsive sports programs.

Problems in Youth Sports

One needs only to read stories in popular news magazines or books such as Sports in Schools by John Gerdy or Why Johnny Hates Sports by Fred Engh to understand the problems in youth sports in this nation. These problems include inappropriate coach behavior, inappropriate parent behavior, low participation rates, high burnout rates, unrealistic expectations of student athletes, and high injury rates.

One of the most often noted problems with competitive sports is that adults have taken the fun out of participating by emphasizing winning at all costs.

Young people are expressing their discontent with sports by not participating in sports programs. Although the number of youth ages 6–17 has risen, the most popular team sports have lost significant numbers of players.

A National Study of Middle School Sports

To find out more about the state of middle school sports, we mailed a survey to a national random sample of middle schools. Selected results from an analysis of data from the 365 responding public middle schools are presented here in the form of brief questions and answers. More detailed results will be reported in a future National Middle School Association publication.

Do most middle schools have interschool and intramural sports programs? Without doubt, interschool competitive sports are a component of almost all middle schools in the nation. However, only 42 percent of middle schools reported having intramural sports programs. Basketball, volleyball, and soccer were the most frequently offered intramural sports.

What are the most frequently offered interschool sports for boys and girls? Basketball and track are the most frequently offered interschool sports for both boys and girls. As Figures 1 and 2 illustrate, other frequently offered sports are different for boys and girls. As would be expected because of tradition, football is the third most frequently offered interschool sport for boys with volleyball as the third most popular for girls.

Do most middle schools have “no cut” policies in selected sports? Fifty-six percent of middle schools reported having a no-cut policy in selected sports. The most common no-cut sports were track, football, and cross country. Thirty-four percent of middle schools with no-cut policies maintained the policy for all sports offered at their school.

These results make it abundantly clear that in most middle schools the major emphasis is on competitive interschool sports for elite players rather than on opportunities for wide participation. This, in combination with not offering comprehensive intramural sports programs, means that large numbers of young adolescents who love sports are denied opportunities to participate.

Which grade levels are allowed to participate in competitive interschool sports? Data regarding which interschool sports were provided at each grade level were not collected in this survey; however, results of a previous national study of middle schools by McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins (NMSA, 2003) indicate that middle schools typically offer competitive interschool sports primarily at the seventh and eighth grade levels. When interschool sports are offered for sixth graders, the sports included are usually basketball or track.
Implications of the Study

As previously noted, the information presented in this article represents only a fraction of the data collected by this national study of middle school sports programs and practices. When all information collected in the study is considered, there are some encouraging findings.

Some middle schools have established effective intramural programs and taken steps to make interschool sports programs safer and more inclusive. Other middle school sports programs have moved away from being only practice and preparation for future high school athletes to at least junior varsity status. In these cases, many schools have good intentions of making their sports program fit the middle school philosophy by serving larger numbers of young adolescents in sports programs that recognize their unique needs and interests.

Unlike other components of the middle school concept, however, the majority of middle school sports programs continue to mimic senior high school and college sports models. It seems that many stakeholders still perceive middle school sports programs as practice fields for preparing a few elite players for senior high school competition. In some cases, the middle school sports teams are even forced to use the same football plays as those used in senior high school to help players prepare for future competition.

Recommendations for Middle School Sports

The full report will provide recommendations for improving middle school sports programs. A few of these recommendations are provided below:

• Middle school sports programs should have clearly stated philosophies and guidelines that provide direction for the programs. These philosophy statements and guidelines should be widely distributed, understood, and accepted by everyone involved in middle school sports programs.

• Coaches should be carefully selected based on their knowledge of young adolescent development, knowledge of the sports being coached, and their dispositions toward the purposes of middle school sports. All coaches, especially those who are not licensed teachers at the middle school where they coach, should be closely supervised and their performance evaluated regularly.

• All young adolescents should have the opportunity to participate in at least one sport that is available at their grade level. To help accomplish this goal, some middle schools have established multiple interschool competition teams in basketball and other sports.

• Precautions should be taken to reduce the number of injuries in all sports, since young adolescents are highly susceptible to injury because of their stage of development. Precautions include physical examinations, safe and well-fitting equipment, safe and well-maintained playing...
fields, knowledgeable coaches, access to quality medical care when injured. Contact sports with high injury rates should be minimized (football, wrestling), especially for the youngest middle school students.

• Emphasis should be placed on enhancing self-esteem and developing social skills as well as physical ability—not on winning at all cost. Sports participation should be fun and rewarding.

• There should be a willingness to modify rules in some sports to make them safer for the age group (e.g., shorter tracks, shorter game lengths, everyone must play rules, smaller playing fields, limit on number of innings pitched in baseball, coaches allowed at edge of mat in wrestling).

• Parents should be schooled in how to support their children’s participation in interschool sports in positive ways (e.g., parent education programs, pre-participation contracts, sharing of philosophy and guidelines).

The goal should be a balanced approach to physical education, intramural sports, and interschool sports. Interschool sports should not be the tail that wags the dog.

Focusing on the Students

Is it possible for middle school sports programs to be redesigned in ways that allow them to place the education and welfare of young adolescents as the top priority?

Some educators are willing to take on the challenge of carving out a new identity for middle school sports that are developmentally responsive. However, it will require concerted efforts on the part of all those responsible for the education and welfare of young adolescents if developmentally responsive interschool sports programs are to become the norm rather than the exception.

Reference


John H. Swaim is a professor of education at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio. C. Kenneth McEwin is a professor of curriculum and instruction and coordinator of middle grades teacher education at Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

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Throughout history, jobs have changed to meet society’s demands—from the dentist who must master a new high tech wand to the car mechanic who works on an engine by “tuning” a computer.

The job of school counselors is no exception. The contents of counselors’ schedule books are very different from 10 years ago in both the type and the amount of responsibility.

What’s behind the change? Political shifts, budgetary crunches, a society in flux, demographics—even technology plays a role. Already-undersized counseling staffs are being stretched and pulled, leaving some counselors with feelings of inadequacy.

“For many years it was our role to offer responsive service, but now we are being asked to do so many other things as well,” says Linda Eby, who has been a counselor for 21 years at Gordon Russell Middle School in Gresham, Oregon.

Eby says today’s counselors must split their time carefully between the students’ academic, career, and education planning, and their personal and social needs.

“If we are going to do it all, we have to ask ourselves what our program is and what we have to let go, no matter how important it is,” Eby explains. “We have to plan well and choose priorities carefully.”

Patti Kinney, principal of Talent Middle School in Talent, Oregon, says two “dean counselors” and one part-time counselor now handle discipline, which in the past was not a counselor’s responsibility. Already-undersized counseling staffs are being stretched and pulled, leaving some counselors with feelings of inadequacy.

“We have to do more with less and this is one of the ways we are doing it,” she says, noting that her school district trimmed 10 school days off the calendar this year to avoid losing 40 teachers.

New Challenges

Kinney says this demand to do more with less comes at a time when more families are struggling, the immigrant population is growing, and societal shifts are handing middle school children new, complex problems.

Many more children have disabilities, she says, or are on medication. Students are having sex at a younger age, are experimenting with drugs at a younger age, and more are dealing with the breakup of the family unit.

“Good school counselors try to connect these kids with services in the community to get them help, but there is less and less out there, too,” Kinney says.

As in middle schools around the United States, the population of students from other countries has soared at Rocky Hill Middle School in Clarksburg, Maryland—a suburb of Washington, D.C. This has created yet another responsibility.

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“We really are responsible for helping students and parents navigate the school system, and there are so many nuances to this,” says counselor Larry Austin, noting that the D.C. area’s growing population of Eastern Europeans has a much different approach to education than the sizable Hispanic community. People new to this country require more time from the counselor and each culture has different needs.

Austin says that the impact of the high number of single-parent households also has had a dramatic effect on students in ways that are not always evident until they show up in the counseling office.

“The parents are often simply overworked and just don’t have the energy or time. They have good intentions, but they are exhausted,” he says.

That means it is more difficult to get parents to come to the school when they are needed, and it means that students don’t get parental guidance or attention.

“I often am checking in with some kids two or three times a week because they just don’t have much other support,” Austin reports.

Austin also says that sex is a bigger issue in middle school than many people suppose, claiming that the sexual revolution that began with college age students has now
Paul Meck has been an educator for 33 years in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, across the Susquehanna River from the state capital of Harrisburg. For the last 23 he has been a school counselor, and he’s seen many changes in that position.

He is particularly interested in the changes that have been brought on by technology, which often creates new issues or takes old ones and quickens their pace or amplifies their impact.

“They are the same issues, but they come at you in different ways,” he says.

For instance, Meck says he speaks with a growing number of students whose social problems have evolved online, with e-mail, chat rooms, and instant messaging, where rumors can grow more quickly and with more anonymity.

“[Rumors are] so volatile and can be about anything you can imagine. When [students] are the victims, they don’t know what to do.”

He says online conversations can also connect young middle school children with undesirable people. “They really have no idea what is out there.”

He says technology also consumes the unsupervised student’s time. Counselors report that students aren’t doing homework, are exhausted in school, or are skipping school because they are spending so much time playing video or online games or communicating with friends.

“They just may not find school as engaging, and when a child is coming to the end of a marking period with failing grades we often find it is not their ability [that’s the problem] but that these things are consuming hours of their time.”

Meck says that although the technology of e-mail is positive in that it increases the amount of contact parents make with the counselor, he estimates that he spends an hour every day responding to e-mail and voice mail messages.

And he notes that parents and other educators often expect a quick response because they are conditioned by the online pace.

trickled down to middle school.

“They have attitudes about sex that we had in college in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s,” he says.

Politics and Paperwork

Deedy Smith, a counselor for 14 years at Sullivan Middle School in Rock Hill, South Carolina, says that in this education environment, ruled by No Child Left Behind, counselors must pay greater attention to students’ academic achievement, while also paying attention to their social and emotional needs.

Taking students out of class for a group counseling session or finding classroom time to make a presentation is more difficult because teachers are pressured with an academic-related agenda.

At her school, the counseling staff is heavily involved in the standardized testing process, which consumes much of their time for about three weeks.

At testing time, “course selection for the following year must happen, summer school lists are gathered, letters sent home, end-of-year student academic plans have to be developed and entered into the computer, IEP meetings must be attended, and honors programs planned,” she says.

Smith says counselors also have become case managers for special education and are responsible for the student assistance programs and all referrals to in-school or outside services.

“The biggest difference for me in the last 10 years is the amount of paperwork and administrative tasks that now fall to the counselors,” she says, noting that No Child Left Behind legislation has greatly increased the need for documentation.

Collecting documentation for services provided may help counselors plan and assess their efforts, counselors say, but it requires time in a day already jammed.

“What I’d like to see is the data that proves that all this data collection pays off.”

Austin says that despite the increased demands, the counselor remains a critical cog in education.

“I love this job. It has changed, but it is still the best job in the school.”

Jim Paterson is a writer based in Olney, Maryland.
Content Area Reading Instruction

Strengthening Skills Across the Curriculum

By Katherine E. Misulis

Few would refute the importance of students’ ability to read well by the time they leave elementary school. In fact, much of students’ early education focuses on developing reading skills. Students receive formal developmental reading instruction in grades K–5 and sometimes through grade 8.

Yet as the focus in middle schools turns more toward content and less on specific reading skills development, many students have trouble making the transition from “learning how to read” to “reading to learn.” Some students may have trouble reading expository writing. They may be intimidated by the large, word-heavy textbooks. Inadequate decoding skills may prohibit them from reading fluently and understanding what they read.

All teachers across the curriculum and across grade levels can provide students with reading skills and strategies to become independent learners through content area reading instruction.

A Comprehensive Perspective

Recognizing the importance of promoting reading skills, some teachers set aside a portion of each class period to address reading/writing strategies. For example, they may devote 40 minutes of a 60-minute block to content instruction and then spend 10 minutes on reading.

However, the goal is to help students learn the subject matter and, at the same time, help them improve communication and reasoning skills necessary to learn the content.

Teaching content area reading skills within content instruction reflects a holistic, integrated instructional model that benefits teachers and students.

Content area reading instruction interweaves vocabulary development, comprehension skills, study skills, and writing proficiency into content instruction.

Vocabulary Development. Vocabulary reinforcement activities such as word puzzles and multiple choice activities can give students a literal level of understanding of vocabulary words.

More advanced activities such as graphic organizers, analogies, categorizing exercises, writing activities, and application within experientially based activities can help students understand the words and concepts at higher levels of thinking.

Comprehension Skills. Study guides can help students develop comprehension and reasoning and problem-solving skills while promoting independent learning. Effective study guides outline learning goals, help students set their own objectives and learning strategy, identify learning resources, and provide opportunities for students to assess their mastery.

Study Skills. Study skills instruction helps students learn, organize, and remember information and ideas. In essence, these skills help students formulate their own systems for learning. Students should learn a variety of study techniques and know how and under what conditions their application can promote effective learning.

Research skills such as using the Internet, dictionary, and library, and organizational skills such as note taking and outlining promote comprehension by helping students find, learn, review, and recall information pertinent to the content area. Specialized techniques such as Robinson’s SQ3R strategy (survey, question, read, recite, review) help students develop purposes for learning, guide the learning experience, and then encourage reflection upon what they have read.

Writing Skills. Activities that incorporate writing reinforce subject-area learning and therefore promote comprehension. These activities may include research projects, notations in logs, journal entries, short-answer essays, or even fictional stories that interweave content knowledge.

Putting It into Practice!

Content area reading instruction is not something “apart from” or “in addition to” the content instruction in the classroom. Rather, content area reading instruction can be integrated into the everyday classroom instruction.

A wealth of instructional strategies and techniques already exists. As lifelong learners, teachers should always be looking for new ways to connect content with reading strategies. Not only will students become better learners and communicators, teachers will become better instructors. Content area reading instruction is truly something for everyone.

Katherine E. Misulis is associate professor and area coordinator for reading in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, School of Education, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

Review by Larry Austin

Don’t be misled by the title of this book; its contents provide both the tools and the underlying principles to build a comprehensive counseling program—one in which the counselor not only survives, but also may, in fact, thrive.

John J. Schmidt, a professor of counselor education at East Carolina University, has put into this book all of the most crucial elements that should be present in an effective school counseling program.

The chapters are keenly focused, supported with rationale as well as numerous checklists, samples, assessments, and specific suggestions that enable the reader to immediately put into practice each aspect of the comprehensive counseling program. For example, one area crucial to student success is the involvement of those other, non-school adults in a student’s life. Even as a veteran counselor, I still seek ways to better communicate with these important people and elicit their support and cooperation.

In the chapter “Involving Significant Others,” Schmidt correctly explains how inadequate and restrictive it would be to limit this chapter to just “parents.” Due to cultural and other societal realities, we must often expand this field to include grandparents, guardians, brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles, as well as unrelated significant others.

As is the format in all of the chapters in this book, once Schmidt thoroughly explains and examines this topic, he provides the necessary resources for implementation: an easily adaptable student survey to help better understand the student’s home situation, a sample memo to parents/guardians, and myriad suggestions for involving critical adults.

This book is an outstanding resource—one I believe any counselor seeking to develop and maintain a truly comprehensive school counseling program would find invaluable.

Larry Austin is a middle school counselor who recently retired after 31 years with the Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland.


Review by Kathleen Canupp

When you read a “how to” book, regardless of the topic, do you often wonder, “How do they know this will work?” Robert Marzano’s Classroom Management That Works is not just another “how to” book for teachers. His text is research-based with each and every suggested management strategy supported by data collected in classrooms.

Marzano reminds us that it takes effective teachers to manage successful classrooms and no single role played by the teacher is sufficient to guarantee student achievement. Effective teachers must be proficient at making wise choices about the most effective instructional strategies to use, designing classroom curriculum to promote student learning, and making effective use of classroom management techniques.

After reading about recent studies done in this area, you will find yourself agreeing with Marzano: classroom management is the foundation of effective education.

Classroom rules and procedures have a lasting effect on student achievement, but only if they are properly explained and involve group input. Students should ultimately be responsible for managing their own behaviors. Rules and procedures should be looked upon as a “contract” between teacher and students. Without them, teachers cannot properly instruct and students cannot productively work.

Through the use of vignettes and “Action Steps,” Marzano’s strategies are brought to life. We “see” teachers using these strategies and learn the most effective way to implement them in our own classrooms. And, we can see from examining the data that consistent use of these strategies will bring positive results.

Subsequent chapters involve using disciplinary interventions, building teacher-student relationships, and getting off to a good start at the beginning of the year.

Marzano’s final chapter is a poignant reminder that manage-
ment does not start or stop at the individual teacher’s doorway.

Kathleen Canupp teaches at Westview Middle School in Longmont, Colorado.


Review by William Grobe

Roland Barth’s latest book, Learning by Heart, is wonderful old wine in a new bottle. I can hear the voices of William Purkey, Carl Rogers, and Terrance Deal in his thesis proclaiming meaningful, lasting school reform will only occur when what we know about learning comes from our hearts—not federal and state mandates.

This easy-reading, somewhat whimsical book is a compilation of Professor Barth’s heartfelt reflections on what he believes to be the cornerstones of effective schools. Simply, it is teachers, principals, and school community leaders establishing what they believe young people need to know and master to live meaningful lives.

I found particularly poignant his contrast of war stories with craft knowledge. War stories, Barth claims, are therapeutic bromides to cleanse experiences of the previous week to begin a restorative weekend. Craft knowledge is much more than the telling of war stories; “It is a description of practice accompanied by an intentional analysis of practice” (p. 57). In short, craft knowledge is the war story with what was learned. Telling war stories is just fine if what was learned is the significant additive.

I recommend Learning by Heart to everyone interested in maintaining the goals and objectives of school reform in a manner based on the principals of a free and open democracy.

William Grobe is associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

Demand for Middle School After-school Programs

America After 3 PM: A Household Survey on Afterschool in America finds that just 6.5 million children are in after-school programs but the parents of another 15.3 million children say their children would participate if an after-school program were available.

Need is especially high for middle school children: just 6 percent of middle school students are in after-school programs; another 34 percent of America’s middle school students are unsupervised in the afternoons.

Commissioned by the Afterschool Alliance with funding from the JCPenney Afterschool Fund, the study also found:

• Twenty-five percent of K–12 youth care for themselves in the afternoons. Older children are more likely to spend time unsupervised. Of the children reported to be in self-care, 11 percent are in grades 1–5, 34 percent are in grades 6–8 and 51 percent are in grades 9–12 (4 percent of children in self care are in unidentified grades).
• African American and Hispanic youth spend more time unsupervised than other children.
• Public schools are the largest provider of after-school programs. YMCAs, religious groups, Boys & Girls Clubs, and private schools round out the top five providers.
• On average, families spend $22 per week for after-school programs.

For more information, visit www.afterschoolalliance.org

Fundraising Provides Basics, Not Frills

Many schools that raise funds are using that money for basics rather than supplemental items, according to a survey of 22,000 parents commissioned by the National PTA and QSP Reader’s Digest.

According to the survey, 50 percent of the parents polled said that their schools are using the proceeds from their fundraising to pay for items previously included in the school budget. Close to 70 percent said at least a portion of the money raised is put toward general needs and school supplies. More than half of the parents said their school holds one to three fundraisers per year.

For a look at the full results, visit www.qsp.com/article.asp.
“Blaming public schools, their principals and teachers for losing the education war feels a lot like blaming the ground troops for losing the Vietnam War. Are we committed to an education war? Do we have the will? I fear that the late Walt Kelly, creator of the comic strip Pogo, had it right: We have met the enemy and he is us.”


“Contrary to conventional wisdom, we found that school budgets may not be the biggest barrier to deploying and utilizing technology effectively in the classroom. Instead, visionary leadership coupled with an aggressive development of community and parental support seem to drive change in the most technology-intensive schools.”


“In my experience over the years of working with hundreds of teachers across the country there are three key things to bringing about a change in teacher attitude and skill level:

1. A supportive administration to value and provide quality professional development in science which is sustained over a long period of time.
2. Materials, textbooks, and other instructional materials which can help facilitate quality science instruction.
3. And time: time for teachers to analyze and reflect on their own practices and time for lesson study conducted with knowledgeable facilitators. This collegial approach provides the depth of understanding necessary to bring about change.

By creating these pathways for teachers we are likely to inspire and see greater student achievement in science.”


“I was just hoping that I got a word I studied.”

—David Tidmarsh, 14, of South Bend, Indiana, who won the National Spelling Bee by correctly spelling “autochthonous.” The Philadelphia Inquirer, June 4, 2004.

“I can’t leave my students. They’ll say, ‘He left because of the money.’ And I don’t want them to think that way. I want them to know that there is at least one black male who is committed to staying.”

—Philadelphia educator Salome Thomas-EL, who declined a chance to transfer from his inner-city middle school to a teaching position at another middle school that would provide better teaching conditions, more money, and more administrative authority. Education Week, April 7, 2004.

“Web surfing or instant messaging is not the same thing as reading a book. Our children need more encouragement to walk, run, and play. Homer Simpson is not a surrogate babysitter. The computer is not an electronic park. Get your kids on their feet!”


“When you’re dyslexic, you’re always being taken out of class and you are never feeling quite as normal as the rest of the kids, but when we went to PE or when we had after-school athletics, you kind of felt more like part of the group. Sports just provided me with a lot of self-esteem and confidence.”


“Who’s going to walk around school eating an apple?”

—Akeem Brown, 14, reacting to the news that Boston schools are considering stocking vending machines with healthful foods rather than foods with little nutritional value. The Boston Globe, May 27, 2004.