

A Small Miracle in the Early Years: The Lincoln Middle School Story

Transforming Ourselves, Transforming Schools: Middle School Change



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In 1974 the doors of Lincoln Middle School opened. It was a special place in time, for it was to become an extraordinary school; one that changed many lives, mine among them. As a recent college graduate in secondary education and English, I moved to Gainesville, Florida, in search of a high school English position. I had every intention of teaching 9-12 graders and had no knowledge of young adolescents or of the middle school concept. My search somehow led me to John Spindler, the impassioned principal who was charged with designing the program for Lincoln Middle School.

John had decided to step outside the box in fashioning this new program when given the opportunity to leave an elementary school principal placement and take on the challenge of this new middle school program. He had completed his graduate work in middle school education under the famed William Alexander and Paul George team at the University of Florida and had become committed to the middle school concept.

The building had housed many programs before this landmark transformation. Built in the 1950s, its history had been varied and complex. It had struggled as a Vocational Technical School, but before that it was a celebrated neighborhood high school. Neighbors remembered that at one time it was a source of pride for the local community, but with desegregation, it had been closed since it served an exclusively African American student population. In the early '70s, the local school district was experiencing overcrowding in the elementary schools and needed this building space for students in grades six through eight. Thus, the new middle school was born, and a fascinating story was begun.

The Lincoln Middle School story still needs to be told. One might argue that it is set in the too distant past to be relevant for today's middle school reform efforts. I would argue otherwise. This story needs to be told today more than ever before. Stories that reveal only the structural changes involved in becoming a middle school echo hollow. Many are junior high schools under the guise of middle school labels and features. Today's middle school educators are searching for promising models that characterize more than the laundry list of middle school innovations. The search centers, as it should, on the principles and ideologies of middle school, on the demands of reculturing a school that involve substantive change in the core beliefs held about young adolescents, teaching, and learning. Lincoln Middle School was such a middle school community, loaded with abundant wisdom about what it takes to be more than a junior high school disguised as a middle school.

Probably not every faculty member who worked at Lincoln Middle School will share my generous post-assessment of the school. I do know however, my sentiments were more the norm than the exception. After 21 years, one of my former colleagues and still a local resident in Gainesville, organized a reunion of the original Lincoln Middle School faculty. Eighty percent of the faculty attended, and those that could not, sent letters of testimony to be read aloud during the reunion. The original principal, John Spindler, returned and was celebrated. Though I was not able to be there, I understand it was a magical time. That so many of the core faculty were willing to travel



from across the United States to attend this event is testimony that Lincoln had earned a remarkable place in the hearts of many who lived through her seminal years. Why? What was it about this otherwise rather unextraordinary school that made it so extraordinary?

LET'S GO BACK: WHAT HAPPENED IN THIS SCHOOL?

Humble beginnings

Stories can be deeply personal and as such, deeply profound. In the human experience, our search for truth and wisdom often nudges us toward stories (Bateson, 1990). As I tell this story, I must also tell you that this is the story I often turn to for answers to nagging questions about middle school realities. I have looked back at my days at Lincoln in order to advise others. I learned from our collective success there about how middle school can work. I will always return to this story, and I hope you will find in it some truth and wisdom to guide you as well.

I have an advantage in telling this story that must be known up front. While most of what I will share here emerges from my teaching years and my complete immersion in the life of the school, my later years at Lincoln afforded me a sabbatical during which I completed an ethnographic study of two middle schools, one of the school sites was Lincoln Middle School. Alas, I have some sense beyond myself that Lincoln's magic was not only seen through my eyes (Doda, 1984).

John Spindler was a "principal with principle" (Lipsitz, 1984) who came to the task with a crystal clear vision of the middle school of his dreams. He knew that Lincoln was to house about 900 plus sixth through eighth graders from very diverse families. The largest percentage of students would be from low-income families. A smaller but rather demanding group of families from the local university community also enrolled their children in Lincoln. The population would be approximately 55% Caucasian and 45% African American. We also served a number of migrant farmer/rural families whose children traveled quite a distance to attend our school. John knew the needs of our students would be challenging and complex. His vision was intentionally responsive and all-inclusive.

One by one, John gathered a faculty, both veteran and new teachers, who were each interviewed with specific qualities in mind. Foremost, he was in search of teachers who were capable of empathy. He had a small sign marked "empathy" on his desk, which he pointed out during my interview. This focused quest led him to hire a diverse faculty who unknowingly were already connected by a shared teaching philosophy. We were a community of professionals who were devoted to young people and to a belief in the power of education to unleash possibilities. Moreover, we were to discover that we also shared a faith in teaching as a tool for justice and equity - for righting the wrongs that lead children astray. As one interviewed Lincoln teacher explained: "I think teaching is an inspired profession.... a gift and a unique opportunity to help others" (Ashton & Webb, 1986, p. 105).

This common core of beliefs helped us navigate through those turbulent first months with the harsh realities of opening a new, unconventional school in an non-airconditioned building in central Florida, with the sneer of a suspicious community. Upper middle class families did not relish the fact that Lincoln was located adjacent to a housing project. The African American families feared that



their neighborhood school would never again reappear. Many doubted that such an eclectic school community could ever achieve peace.

When I was interviewed and hired in the late summer, John suggested that we tour the building, and as we walked through halls littered with refurbishing debris, he described the beauty that at that time only he could see. Beyond the ill-furnished classrooms and aging space he saw the school of his dreams.

John spoke of the new, flexible furniture he had ordered and its capacity to support the energy of young adolescents and appropriate pedagogy. Confining chairs and rigid single-seat desks would be replaced with multi-sized tables and colorful chairs conducive to small group work and flexible student arrangements. Teacher desks were available, but he hoped they would disappear into the team planning areas, believing that the faculty would rarely use them while actively teaching.

The old high school lockers that crowded the hallways were to be removed, making space for the bouncing bodies of 900 plus middle school students. Colorful, portable lockers, which would be housed in each advisor's classroom area, would be the more developmentally appropriate substitution. Two student advisees would share a locker promoting student cooperation from the start.

I recognized immediately that John had student development at the center of every thought and every detail of his school plan. The physical facility modifications he had envisioned and arranged were just part of the philosophical blueprint for the school. His notion of Lincoln's promise was a synergistic one. Every detail mattered, and all school features were interdependently conceived.

The middle school program

The program features as well as the facility plans were always described in terms of their capacity to impact student growth and development. Each had a rich rationale that always returned to the needs of kids:

- Every student and teacher would be part of a small, stable, caring learning community or team. Students would remain on the team for three consecutive years. That meant that every class would be comprised of a multiage, mixed grouping of students from all three grades. This was John's chosen plan for student grouping designed to facilitate long-term relationships needed to shore up fragile student-teacher relationships, enhance peer relations, dismantle potential racism, discard grade level as an appropriate label for learners, and alter the way less successful students would be perceived and treated.
- Every team would have an appointed team leader to facilitate teaming, to decentralize school leadership, and to serve as a liaison with administration and other faculty and team leaders. Communication and empowerment were fundamentals built into the very organization and structure of school life.
- Every student would be placed on a heterogeneous team and in a heterogeneous advisory group on that team. Student populations, by team, were balanced by race, socioeconomic status, sex, grade levels, special education students, and special programs. No team had a disproportionate number of students from any category.

A Small Miracle in the Early Years *(continued)*



- Ability grouping by skill level was limited to one subject, either Language Arts or Mathematics, per team. Most teams opted for full heterogeneous grouping across all subjects.
- Teams would have two 90-minute blocks for teaching the four basic subjects. This time could be used flexibly as the team decided.
- Every student would have one 90-minute block for exploration (or two 42-minute classes) every other day, backed up to 90 minutes of physical education. Exploratory included the fine and practical arts plus a team-supplied set of mini-courses from which to choose. These mini-courses were open to all students who would choose from a list of about 12 six-week classes each semester. Prerequisites were limited to very few classes making the choices uniquely extensive. Advisors worked to help students balance their choices meeting the basic requirements before graduation in the eighth grade.
- Every teacher would serve as an advisor to a multiage population of about 18-22 students in grades six through eight. Exploratory staff members were included in this capacity.
- With the multiage grouping providing a wide range of learning levels and needs, a mathematics program was adopted that would accommodate multiple learning levels in one classroom. This program had modules for continuous progress math skill development with skills and concepts arranged in units, from basic to advanced. Team teachers teaching mathematics were able to group and regroup for skill work and support, leaning on the cooperation of the team. This allowed them to ensure that students were able to experience small group work with others tackling the same level of math. As students completed and mastered unit components, they could accelerate to the next level regardless of grade level.
- For physical education, students were divided up into A and B day groups. With a multiage population, this division was based on physical size and developmental age, splitting the seventh grade population to either the younger or older side of the fence. This was an asset as the P.E. teachers were able to teach with developmentally geared learning stations and use this time to orchestrate an extraordinary intramural program. While half the team's students went to a 90-minute P.E. block, the other half went to their assigned exploratory class or classes.
- The team leaders met as a steering committee with the administration team and faculty representatives from Exploratory, Media, Special Education, and Guidance. Called the Program Improvement Council, or P.I.C., this model ensured that all faculty would be involved in decision making.
- There would be few bells. Each day would open and close with a bell signal, but class changing was conducted by teachers who synchronized their watches each and every morning.
- Daily recess would be included as a part of the lunch block, along with some additional time in advisory groups. Performing band and chorus students would be free to use this additional lunchtime for rehearsals.
- Each morning would begin with advisory time that started with rituals: brief announcements of "Bulldog Bites" for student contributions, and the time by the office clock. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, everyone then participated in Sustained Silent Reading, which was also announced. ("Today is SSR day. Enjoy the reading material of your choice." These words were so consistently repeated that the actual phrases are engraved in my memory.)



- Advisors would mentor their advisees, maintain home school connections, schedule conferences, inform other teachers about the special needs of their advisees, and provide ongoing support over the students' three years at Lincoln.
- Seasonal intramurals would replace interscholastic sports, and all students would play a part. Since this was the athletic program, the focus was on playing, learning, and growing; and school-wide events often featured playoffs. Faculty always participated by playing students in a game for every seasonal sport.
- The Media Center was conceived as a center for learning, and as such it became one. It was not a quiet library in the traditional sense. There were quiet areas, but it was, for the most part, another although larger classroom. This was enormously important since so many of our students began their careers at Lincoln as struggling or reluctant readers. In our first three years, the book circulation rate tripled. This was no small feat and certainly impacted our reading achievement.
- Two guidance counselors served the entire school, focusing their energies on working with teams and advisors who had front-line contact with students. This allowed them to know more students, be accessible and visible to more students, and support the faculty's efforts to build community. They were able to address the personal development needs of students and identify target areas that needed additional attention. Since advisors arranged for nearly all parent conferences, counselors were called upon as needed to meet with teams and/or students and their families.

While this list of program features does not cover every detail, it is clear that the design was destiny for Lincoln. With beliefs behind these organizational components and attributes, Lincoln's faculty and students created and experienced a school that yielded a powerfully positive place in time.

Persistent themes

Several themes emerge that characterize Lincoln's story more fully and serve to frame its most useful wisdom.

Beliefs and moral commitments. The organizational features of Lincoln Middle School were important not only because they reflected what was even then thought to be best middle school practices, and is today confirmed so by research (Felner, et al., 1997; Jackson & Davis, 2000), but because these structures made possible the enactment of certain beliefs about teaching and learning. The story of Lincoln would not be complete without the organizational features, yet there is much more to the story of why Lincoln was an exceptional, model middle school.

The structures at Lincoln wielded power because the administrative team and the majority of faculty owned the underlying beliefs behind those structures. Moreover, they were implemented with fidelity, simultaneously, and in an integral way. Pedagogical wishes were matched by accommodations in programs, practices, and supportive features. In other words, first order changes were actually preceded by some degree of second order change (Oakes, Quartz, Gong, Guiton, & Lipton, 1993). Beliefs came first; structures second, or all at once.



The learning communities, advisory program, and multiage grouping, for example, were fundamentally about altering the nature and quality of relationships in school. While not enough middle schools embrace this connection, teachers at Lincoln were passionate about shifting from typically impersonal, academically driven, and random relationships to relationships that were sustained, intimate, and linked to school and life. These structures supported our driving desire for altered relationships and allowed us to witness evidence that our beliefs about relationships as being critical to the successful academic and intellectual development of our students were indeed accurate. We believed it to be true; and it happened, so we believed it. This cycle explains much of our story.

Change theories present conflicting notions about how and why change in beliefs occurs. (Senge, 1990). Did the teachers at Lincoln all enter the school with a belief in the transformative nature of positive relationships? Or did being a teacher in that school, organized around a belief in relationships, yield a dynamic culture that cultivated that belief? Perhaps it is both. Nonetheless, it is clear that structures advocated in middle school theory may lead schools to only surface changes, merely giving new guise to old practices. At Lincoln, we lived through change that penetrated the surface of structure, exacting an impact on the quality of school life that students experienced.

In addition to our belief in intimacy in school relations, we also believed in heterogeneous classrooms. In most middle schools, tracking and/or ability grouping at some level is still the norm, but we nearly superseded that common practice. How?

The moral commitment of the faculty that could be captured in interviews and conversations (Doda, 1984), centered on a core belief in the worth of every child—that young adolescents should not be judged prematurely, nor should schools celebrate one kind of learner over another. Thus, we believed that each and every student had equal capacity for growth. By acting on this belief, we created a culture in which competition was downplayed and collaboration encouraged. In turn, students were more likely to collaborate across traditional boundaries of grade level, sex, race, and social economic class (Damico, Bell-Nathaniel, & Green, 1981). Watching these beliefs yield positive results encouraged us to sustain them. We were fed by our own success.

The structures and programs at Lincoln immersed us in the life and workings of the whole child. Each of us participated in the team teaching of common students. Team conversations revealed diverse images of students across disciplines, situations, and learning settings. As individual teachers, we could not hide behind our narrow notions of any single child or groups of children. These notions were constantly challenged by others who taught the same students but somehow saw them differently.

Likewise, multiage grouping demanded that we view both our students and ourselves in a new way. Serving the same students for three consecutive years, we were unable to dismiss difficult students after one year's challenge. Their imminent return called on us to fashion a long-term view of growth and progress and of our role as agents of social and moral development. Moreover, we could no longer accurately define students by grade level expectations. Learning was a longitudinal enterprise with far greater complexity.



This of course was also true for students. They too observed that in a multiage context, when learning alongside students from other grade levels and age groups, being different is the norm. They did not expect to see all of the classmates always doing the same tasks in the same ways. At the same time, they were invited to learn together and from each other over time. Eighth graders did not snub sixth graders, and on a daily basis few of us even knew who was in which grade. This was liberating in building trust and community as well as in inviting instructional methods that invariably moved us away from teacher whole class drill and skill lessons, or single text teaching.

While it is probably not necessary to unravel each belief and practice, I hope it is clear that at the core of our success were our common beliefs and moral commitments. Far too many middle schools never get to the more penetrating spiritual changes. Our story implies that without that shift, authentic school reform is impossible or severely compromised.

Democracy at work. Team organization is fundamentally a decentralized and democratic school design (Erb and Doda, 1989), and yet more often than not, its democratic capacity is rarely realized. Many teaching teams report feeling scrutinized, highly supervised, and micromanaged. They hardly feel empowered. Imagine trying to be a middle school committed to student voice when teacher voice is not appreciated or heard? In looking back, the one reason why so many of the original Lincoln faculty were so content despite the dramatic drawbacks of our scenario - no planning time during the day, no air-conditioning in a Florida school building, large classes of 28-32, and large numbers of special needs learners - was because we had power. The power to change the school was shared. We were central to that equation.

Before our doors were even opened for the first days of Lincoln's operation, the faculty was invited to join a new kind of professional community. For most of us, the professional respect and advocacy we received from our principals were unprecedented in our careers. Some took this for granted, but most of us were keenly aware that we had something precious and rare. The details are illuminating.

John Spindler organized a decentralized decision-making model that revealed he was dead serious about being democratic. He appointed willing team leaders who would serve as facilitators of team business, liaisons with all other faculty and administration, and spirited champions of our new venture. Before school had even begun that first year, John took these new teacher leaders to lunch, anointing them as co-leaders for the year. Most confessed to knowing little about the role of team leader (i.e.; there was no official job description nor financial compensation) but delighted in the role they could play in the democratic governance structure planned.

Meeting twice monthly, team leaders and representatives from administration, guidance, physical education, media, and special education gathered to hash out decisions about how Lincoln should be run. These meetings were often lengthy and philosophical. All faculty were invited to "fishbowl." Team leaders were regularly asked to poll their colleagues on decisions and issues and to bring back a vote on issues ranging from hallway traffic, intramurals, report card distribution, retention, advisory problems, and so on.



We learned that democracy is difficult and demanding. From the very start we were thrown into vital decision-making situations often deferred to administration. Team leaders and teams were given three days to prepare for our first grand opening. With a list of each team's students and a master block schedule, we were to schedule our own students into our classes and prepare for the opening days of the year. I recall one team leader who entered our team planning area in tears saying, "I don't know anything about scheduling. Why am I doing this?"

Somehow we found our way together. Refusing to ability group, teams decided to randomly and heterogeneously schedule their students into specific core classes and then use the first week of school to watch and see. On our teams, if we discovered dramatic peer conflicts or imbalance in our placement of special needs students, we would adjust by the end of the first week. In addition, we fashioned that first week to collect data on our students using our own learning style, reading, and math pre-assessments. Above all, we felt elated by our own competence and success.

The empowerment piece is enormously important and continued to appear in multiple aspects of school life. Scheduling was everyone's job not only for the team core classes, but at the school level as well. Each term, using our advisory groups as a unit, we scheduled our students into new exploratory classes. Provided with a list of the new offerings, students would choose their top three, and then using varied but fair methods, teachers would create new rosters for the next term's exploratory classes. In addition to the typical fine and practical arts choices, every faculty member created two mini-courses that would expand choices to a rich array for students. While this was additional preparation for each of us, the joy of designing something unique that might also meet unaddressed student needs and interests was phenomenally empowering and professionally rewarding.

Even the master schedule was in our hands. John recruited help from teachers, and on most occasions our adjusted schedule proposals came from faculty to faculty. After our first year, we decided that advisory at lunch hour was not working well. It was changed for the next year because we were instrumental in its assessment.

Faculty performance reviews were also indicative of how faculty was perceived. Individual conferences with the administration were largely driven by our questions, which prompted self-reflection and self-evaluation. We were not told how we were performing - we were asked. Each of us was charged to plan and monitor our own professional improvement plan. I felt respected, honored, and heard. I also felt a sense of moral obligation to live up to the vision John held for every teacher. His respect inspired me to work harder in every aspect of school life.

Empowerment was evident in more subtle ways. Administrators rarely attended team meetings. Teams were not expected to report every team decision nor each activity to the administration. While all teams kept records for their own planning purposes, these were not to be delivered to the administration. The Program Improvement Council (PIC) needed to be kept informed, especially when activities were out of the ordinary or impacted public perception. These were given careful review to ensure equity across teams.



Phone lines were installed in every team planning area. These areas also were equipped with one set of team-assigned media basics, consumable supplies, and storage areas. Since teams had an annual budget to self-manage, these planning areas were more than symbolic of shared power.

While democracy in schools can go much further than what I have reported here, I have come to believe that it must be reflected in school governance before it can reach the deeper levels of reform in planning and teaching. It was true that at Lincoln, we were given marked freedom in determining how we managed the core curriculum standards. At that time in the history of education, standards were neither easily accessible nor well defined. This was both a burden and a blessing. Topics of study emerged from our understanding of our students' needs, questions, concerns, and interests. Skills were woven into larger units driven by big ideas, themes, or questions. We were deeply committed to developing literacy skills, since large numbers of our students were struggling readers, and yet somehow we were determined to teach these skills in meaningful contexts. Between the years 1974-1979, literacy scores leaped, presenting what was to be our continuing achievement trajectory. We knew that many of our students had been deeply disappointed by their public school histories. We wanted to correct that.

Students were not exempt from the demands of democracy. Advisory groups made decisions regarding school governance that were transported to the administration and faculty via student representatives. Rather than traditional student council elections that are often popularity contests, each advisory group voted on a student to represent the group at the school level. With about 36 advisory groups, this truly expanded the number of students who were active in school governance. Such small acts added up to create a culture that emphasized involvement and empowerment.

What matters here in looking back is that the school became our school, sometimes at a cost. Some faculty often complained that we had too many decisions to make. Most of us recognized, however, that Lincoln was an exceptional place for students because it was an exceptional place for faculty and staff. Our voice was critical as was the voice of our students. We all mattered. Such power is needed fuel for the most dramatic reform imaginable.

Aggressive and pervasive caring. The notion that good schools are caring places is rarely debated, and this has indeed been the longstanding message of middle school reform conversations. Some interpretations of caring, however, have led middle schools to ignore the ultimate connection with meaningful learning, erring on the side of emotion or affect alone suggesting that caring is antithetical to intellect. The familiar pendulum sweep from hard to soft has frequently wreaked havoc with helpful notions of caring in many middle level schools.

At Lincoln caring was a way of life. Beginning with the faculty, and flowing to our students, we invested heavily in building relationships and creating a sense of community. Each August, John hosted a family faculty picnic at his home where he welcomed all with talk of vision and community. This yearly ritual set the groundwork for a community that valued "community."



Each month, John held an informal gathering of faculty after school on a Friday. Called POETS (Phooey on Everything Tomorrow's Saturday), this gathering was vital to our morale during the challenging, beginning years. While it did not maintain the same zeal and attendance consistently, it was symbolic of our need to care for one another and to maintain community. For those who did not attend, there were other avenues. Faculty hospitality was fueled by many gregarious and talented faculty members who organized a fund, arranged for team-sponsored monthly breakfasts, additional holiday parties, and celebrations. These events were part of Lincoln's pulse and life. They kept us connected and nurtured trust.

In addition to these rather playful acts, early professional development work focused almost exclusively on becoming a community. Every faculty member completed the Meyers-Briggs Personality Inventory and attended a follow-up workshop. We learned of our personality type, and how we were alike and different. Bearing little signs with our personality label, faculty dialogue was rich with humor and understanding. This was a foundation piece for tolerance and acceptance and one of many examples of our effort to grow a collaborative culture.

Perhaps the most notable evidence of how this core value extended to students was the faculty's commitment to postpone our official academic schedule of classes until the third day of school. Our sense was that we had to win students over, create community, and establish ties that would sustain us throughout the year. We needed two full days to begin that process. While we reduced this to a single day in the following years, we never entered a school year without this investment in working on relationships and on helping ensure success for all students. We scaffolded students long before they needed it, and as such, were constantly acting proactively to prevent students from falling through the cracks.

There was a kind of genius in this opening schedule. Each team designed a plan for the first one or two full days. All students would remain self-contained in advisory groups and the team's learning community context until day three. Students spent the first two days learning about the middle school concept: the meaning of teaming, advisory, exploratory, and multiage grouping. We wanted them to own the school as much as we did. We introduced them to the block schedule, each other, the teachers, the staff, the daily procedures, the handbook, lockers, supplies, the no bell way of schooling, the media center, and so on. At one point during the first day, each team hosted a team meeting and invited all staff not affiliated with a team to meet and greet the team. No program was left out. By day two, students were saturated with the way we hoped to do things at Lincoln Middle School. When we were ready to begin the academic schedule, students had mastered the physical plant, lockers, and new faces and procedures. Anxiety was low and affect positive. The culture was unfolding before them and within them.

They were invited to join in with their vision of a great school and to help establish our teams' constitution and identity. The first two days we demonstrated to our students that we were here to help them make it through with success. In every act of preparation for the year, we made the entry into the school as trouble free and inviting as we could. Advisory doors were all decorated with catchy logos and the names of each advisory member. Teams posted signs to mark the areas and welcome students to the team and the school.



As students arrived by foot or bus on the first day of school, student helpers with large colorful signs were ready at the front of the school to help students locate their team and advisory assignment and then would escort them to their advisory classroom space. No one was lost, left out, or alone. Every act of assistance was an act of love. Kids felt it. We all felt it. No one ever spoke of love; we just did it.

Student discipline was testimony to our collective caring capacity. Caring for us was far more than affection. Many of us believed that teaching was caring enough for students to help them become better learners. In a descriptive study conducted by George (1987), teachers reported, "...being much more willing to attempt behavior management alternatives when conventional or accustomed techniques failed..." (p. 10). Another teacher, who participated in a microethnography that I completed of the school, shared her perception of her job.

Our job is to educate kids, and we care about subject matter very much, but the most important thing is that we're teaching kids.... I think before you can teach kids anything, you must teach them how to live.

We didn't just express such views; we acted on them. It was anything but common to see a student sitting outside a classroom as a form of punishment. It was, however, common to see a teacher and student outside a classroom engaged in an on-the-spot counseling session designed to spur a plan for improved behavior. Referrals to the office were rare. It was always a last resort to remove a student from the learning environment. For us, it was nearly always viewed as a defeat.

The early days revealed the kind of pervasive caring often associated with exemplary schools (George & Lounsbury, 2000). We held on to a core value at the school because we saw the results. This continued to be the norm at Lincoln. Each morning, John and several students would make announcements that always included "bull dog bites" acknowledging positive contributions made to the school. Effort was celebrated as ebulliently as achievement. Teams found creative ways to acknowledge all kinds of contributions, ranging from scholarship to citizenship, and everything in between.

With our racially diverse population, several University of Florida faculty had wondered just what tension might exist among students of differing races. In fact, they eventually conducted a study of cross-race friendships in various schools and found that cross-race relations at Lincoln were not only largely positive, but that more students actually chose to engage in friendships with peers of a different race than in other similar middle school populations (Damico, Bell-Nathaniel, & Green, 1981). While conclusions pointed to the multiage grouping (e.g., 6-7-8 graders working side by side) as one source of leverage on improved peer relations, I am certain it was the effect of multiple conditions including the team community, advisory time devoted to peer relations, multiage grouping, the absence of ability grouping, and the faculty's caring culture. As one student wrote to me in his eighth grade graduation note, "Mrs. Doda, this team is the best. Not only do you guys care about us, you care about each other."



One of the most telling testimonies available regarding the impact of our caring efforts, was our final day of school. When we ended any given year, the last day was in no way ordinary. Large numbers of students lingered long after dismissal. Hugs, tears, and gifts were common. Very few students left without exchanges, and thanks. The last day of school was like a good book; and all of us, even the most exhausted of teachers, were sorry to see it end. In my research, as an unobtrusive observer, I was able to capture through observations two middle school (i.e., Lincoln's and another school's) closing days. The contrast was stunning. In the traditional junior high, the students fled the building, leaving teachers who commenced to celebrate the end together without them (Doda, 1984).

Play. The notion of play in the workplace is not new. In fact, Stephen Covey (1994) and others have long advocated for such a quality to enhance productivity in the corporate world. At Lincoln, play was an ongoing, deliberately cultivated aspect of school life. As a faculty, we worked hard and we played hard. We invited students to do the same. We did not believe that school needed to inflict pain and create strain to be effective.

Each year, teams engaged students in an outdoor event to kick off the year. While the focus was also on community building, students were literally engaged in games that nurtured relations and fostered a sense of play. Halloween was celebrated with costumes, contests, food, and games. Afternoons were designated as time to celebrate this event. It is hard to imagine that we actually took class time for such gatherings. Advisory groups occasionally cooked breakfast together, or made special plans to get together for a fun event outside of school. In the spring, all teams competed in a field day. Intramural playoffs were also a big school-wide event that rallied spirit.

Play was central to curriculum and instruction. Our exploratory classes featured classes such as sailing, amphibians and reptiles, gardening or "Grow your own thing," outer space, chess, dance, and a host of other high interest studies. Classroom learning activities often used drama, music, games, and art. This exploratory program was a dramatic departure from the traditional electives program where students had fixed offerings. Teams surveyed student interests and then built a series of six-week mini-courses around those interests. Compiling the team's list with the regular courses offered by the fine and practical arts teachers created an incredible list of semester choices. Students were free to choose two classes each 12-week term. Students in Beginning or Advanced Band had only one class slot free as they were committed to band for one exploratory period each term. Since the exploratory classes were multi-graded and there were few if any restrictions for participation, students were able to meet the state requirements over three years' time. Students were advised to take one class per area over three years but could actually focus on a favorite area if they chose. This was possible because the fine and practical arts curricula were converted from 18-week courses into several more focused and shorter sub-courses. Art, for example, was divided into Ceramics, Drawing I and II, and Painting.

This was no small feat. After all, the faculty from these areas were then required to adjust to shorter courses and to a reorganization of content and skills. Moreover, the conception of exploratory was further away from the specialization still customary in many middle schools. Only Band and Chorus students (these were mutually exclusive) had a single exploratory class all year. If a student chose either of these two year-long classes, it was imperative that the other exploratory slot remained open for true exploration. This was part of the mission of the program.



In addition, we were one of the few middle schools that had a daily recess during lunchtime. It was our belief that having fun was conducive to learning, and it worked. Students who had records of early school defeat returned to learning at Lincoln.

Play is no doubt a tricky concept for today's middle schools. Today more than ever, it must be carefully conceived and executed. Far too many middle schools have misconstrued play and lost ground instead. At Lincoln, our play was integrated into our philosophy that helped us achieve balance. We believed that good learning involves play and play involves good learning. We needed to constantly ask ourselves whether or not an intended play practice would involve learning. Nonetheless, in trying to capture the magic at Lincoln, our sense of play was part of it all.

Culture of self-reflection, growth, and respect. When fear of administrative retribution and faculty competition disappear, real growth and reflection are invited to occur. This is a critical piece of wisdom for middle schools attempting to cultivate accountability through overt and often threatening means. At Lincoln we learned that true accountability lies within, and its truest form cannot be bought or coerced. We had that driving desire to be good, not because we would be reprimanded or rewarded. We wanted to be good because doing good felt right; rewarding, satisfying, and uplifting. We felt safe to look objectively at our work and ourselves since we felt the results.

The administrators made clear that they were always open to learning and were willing to look for better ways. That message was the prevailing reason why teachers at Lincoln were likely to ask "why not?" in response to innovation or change. Moreover, data were constantly being collected regarding how students, parents, and faculty felt about implemented programs or practices. We did careful study before making changes but always came back to both the data and our beliefs. There were few administrative fiats, and even those were given faculty consideration.

Our school culture managed against many odds in large part because we also embraced mutual respect. John led the way as he demonstrated repeatedly that he was no more important than any of us. His acts were often great equalizers. During each lunch block where we managed to feed about 950 students from six learning communities in one hour, he was there not only to supervise the lunchroom and playground, but to regularly carry a big sponge, wiping off tables that were also co-cleaned by other teachers and kids. No job was too mundane for John. His willingness to share the dirty work was an act of humility that evoked great respect. What greater statement of respect than to willingly do what he asked all of us to do. This had a tremendous impact on faculty, staff, and students.

The acts of such demonstrated respect are many. John never violated teacher or student dignity. He was never harsh or unkind. He often said, "Modeling is the best way to teach." He walked his talk. Rarely in his office, he was visible nearly every hour of every day in halls, classrooms, team areas, media center, and playground. As such he had a sense of the school - it's feel, its climate, its needs. As a faculty member, I never felt that there was division between administration and staff. This made it possible to take risks that led to new discoveries and improvements.



Classroom time was sacred, as was team planning time. Announcements did not interrupt class time, and teams were able to use their team planning time to plan for the needs of students, curriculum, and instruction. Team leaders often came in to John's office to simply check in, sharing the team's needs and the status of team life. Students were asked to join John for lunch to chat about life at school. This vigilante effort to stay close to the daily life at school was the ultimate act of respect for faculty, staff, and students.

In reading this, you might think I am wrongly overemphasizing the role of the principal. Beginning with the leadership here is intentional, as I have watched how critical leadership style can be to the development of a successful middle school. As one principal told me when he was struggling to implement a Program Improvement Council like the one we had had at Lincoln, "My key chain says 'the boss,' but I can't be that kind of principal anymore. I am, however, not sure of what kind I can be." Sadly, principals do not generally get the help they need to make this kind of transition in philosophy and style. In Lincoln's history of success, the principal was a primary change agent to jump-start the program. Once up and running, Lincoln's empowered faculty carried the torch.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There are no formulas to follow in becoming a great middle school, but there are beliefs, practices, and principles that, when applied, yield results. I have listed some key points worth noting.

1. Growth cannot be pushed, forced, or mandated. It must be invited, coached, and supported.
2. The kids must come first.
3. The most powerful resource we have in school change is the people in our schools. If they cannot change, schools cannot change. We must invest in people.
4. Systemic structures influence behavior over time. Patterns become a way of life, which makes us feel compelled to act in certain ways. Learning is the only way to change our patterns.
5. "Truth telling" is absolutely vital to school success. Talk is never cheap. It matters what we say and how we say it.
6. We must agree to disagree and use dialogue to explore the distance between us.
7. We must integrate our intuition and reason - our heads and hearts.
8. We must share power to become a community.
9. Admitting mistakes, remaking, and redoing are all critical to success.
10. Great middle schools are fed by deep purpose and bold ideals.

Lincoln Middle School was by no means perfect. Not every teacher in the first eight years who reads this would echo *yes* enthusiastically to all the statements to which I have attributed "we." At times, Lincoln felt chaotic and dangerously exhausting. There was such an incredible intensity in our mission and in the complexity of the arrangements we used to accomplish that mission, it should not be surprising that it was just too much for some. Many of us in those early years recognized that those who were the youngest had an asset much needed for this school's vision and plan. The days were long, hot, and heavily laden with needy students and families. Ambitions were high, and we expected a great deal of our students and ourselves. Resources were limited and tentative.



But for approximately 15 years, Lincoln remained an exemplary middle school and for many a transformative one. Not surprisingly, like many other contemporary middle schools, Lincoln's historic middle school identity has been significantly altered by changes in the mental models held by the current leadership, faculty, community, school board, and central office. I know today it is not the school I have described here, and while I cannot tell you its current story with sufficient credibility, I have recently learned that it is no longer a school committed to young adolescents and to equity, as it sorts children according to narrow measures of capacity and ability. That doesn't mean it cannot change again. That after all is my hope and the hope of every educator - that schools will be forever growing, improving and changing.

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