Balanced Classroom Assessment

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Let’s Go Learn
“Put your books away, take out your Number 2 pencils, please, and stop talking.”

Does that sentence conjure up a certain feeling—like dread? When I was a student, it signaled that point in time—usually at the end of a unit of study or the end of a school year—when I would have to show, by putting pencil to paper, that I learned what I was supposed to have learned during the past several weeks. In the end, we all knew how many answers we got right (that’s all we cared about) and we moved on.

Increasingly, that scenario is the exception rather than the rule. Educators recognize the importance of assessing students more often and in more varied ways, of gathering and examining a continuous flow of information about student achievement so teachers can adjust their instruction as often as necessary to ensure students are learning.

As Stephen Chappuis and Rick Stiggins of Educational Testing Service explain, to be effective, classroom assessments must be assessments of learning and for learning. They should measure not only what students know, but also help students better understand how they can increase their learning. In other words, teachers should combine formative assessment and summative assessment to create a system of balanced assessment.

Formative assessments include questioning, discussions, hands-on activities, feedback loops, and student reflection. The feedback is descriptive in nature, so students know what they need to do to improve learning. Summative assessments include the “traditional” multiple choice, short answer, essay assessments that help provide evidence of student competence and program effectiveness.

This month, we look at different forms of assessment, beginning with an overview of balanced assessment by Stephen Chappuis and Rick Stiggins. Our authors then describe such strategies as peer team assessment, assessment that combines tradition and the new technology, and an approach that focuses on students getting the work done right. Don’t miss Anthony Jackson and Judith Conk’s article on preparing young adolescents for a global world. It’s a preview of a session Tony will present at the NMSA Annual Conference in Denver this November.
Features

Finding Balance: Assessment in the Middle School Classroom 12
By Stephen Chappuis and Rick Stiggins

Conversation Piece: Varying Assessment with Team Testing 16
By B. Lee Hurren and Matt Rutledge

Trying Out a Different Idea: The ABI Grading System 19
By Eileen Dame

The Many Ways of Knowing and Showing 24
By Mary Beth Murgatroyd

Leading for Inclusion: Overcoming the Obstacles 25
By Jason S. Warren

Preparing Young Adolescents for an Interconnected World
Going Global One Day at a Time: 26
By Anthony Jackson and Judith Conk

Youth to Youth: Little Club, Big Impact 28
By Suzanne Whitehead

Don’t Smile Until After Christmas? 30
By Paul Barnwell

Battling Obesity: A Community Affair 34
By Mimi Lynch

ON THE COVER

Connecting Science to the Real World
By Tam O’Shaughnessy

Beyond Bacteria: Science and the Art of Food Safety
By Jennifer Richards

In every issue

2 Editor’s Note
By Patricia George

5 Executive Director’s Note
By Betty Edwards

6 News to Use

8 NMSA in Action

37 Teams in Action
By Meghan McNeely

39 Click Here
By Brenda Dyck

41 Teaching in the Middle
By Rick Wormeli

43 The Mark of Leadership
By Tom Burton

46 Reviews and Resources

48 Megaphone
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21st Century Classroom Exhibit
Keynote address by Alan November, Jim Collins (author of Good to Great), and Marlee Matlin

National Middle School Association’s
35th Annual Conference & Exhibit
October 30–November 1, 2008  www.nmsa.org/annual or 800-528-NMSA
Each time I write one of these columns, I look to the articles for inspiration. And as I read the article by Anthony Jackson and Judith Conk in this issue, I realized that the first paragraph confirmed my thinking about what I needed to say.

“In this election year, we can only hope that the pivotal middle level link in K–12 education receives the focus it deserves. And that focus must extend further than it has in the past, because the world is changing.”

For the past two years, NMSA has spent considerable time and effort communicating with others on the needed educational policy at the local, state, and federal levels. We have joined other associations in supporting the proposed Success in the Middle legislation, and we have worked with others on the state and national levels to identify the importance of middle level education in student success and to highlight the importance of reducing the dropout rates in the United States.

Quite honestly, I find the approaching U.S. presidential election invading my thinking lately because these are critical times for education, and it is essential that each one of us enters that voting booth clear of thought and with a defined decision on November 4. So, I beg the understanding of our international members and affiliates as I spend a few words addressing the educational platforms of the two major candidates for the office of President of the United States.

This is not intended to advance one line of thinking over the other, but rather to provide an overview of positions. The following points come from each candidate’s educational platform.

**Barack Obama**
- Reform NCLB by adequately funding the law; improve assessments; revise the accountability system to support schools needing improvement rather than punishing them
- Make math and science national priorities
- Address the dropout crisis by passing legislation to fund school districts to invest in intervention strategies in middle school
- Expand high-quality afterschool (21st Century Learning Centers) and summer learning opportunities (STEP UP)
- Support college outreach programs like GEAR UP, TRIO, and Upward Bound
- Support English Language Learners
- Create new Teacher Service Scholarships to cover four years of undergraduate or two years of graduate teacher education
- Require all schools of education to be accredited; create Teacher Residency Programs to supply well-prepared recruits to high-need schools
- Expand mentoring programs for teachers; provide incentives to give teachers paid common planning time
- Design innovative ways to increase teacher pay; reward teachers who serve as mentors, work in underserved places, or those who consistently excel.

**John McCain**
- Build on lessons from NCLB with emphasis on standards and accountability; focus on inspiring each child
- Provide effective education leadership by investing in people and rewarding achievement
- Encourage alternative certification methods; devote 5% of Title II funding to states that recruit graduates from the top 25% or participate in alternative certification programs
- Provide bonuses for teachers who locate in underperforming schools and demonstrate strong leadership as measured by student achievement
- Provide funding for teacher professional development
- Provide school principals with greater control over spending
- Give parents school choice and more control over the money with public funding following the child
- Expand the DC Opportunity Scholarship program providing more families with school choice and control of money
- Provide students with access to high-quality tutoring programs that are certified by the district or receive direct federal funding
- Reform the Enhancing Education Through Technology program to build virtual schools; allocate funds to expand online education and pay for student participation costs.

Because space does not allow including the entire transcripts here, I encourage you to go to the candidates’ Web sites (www.barackobama.com, www.johnmccain.com) for the more detailed positions. The more information we have, the more informed our decisions.
Promote Content Literacy
Looking for instructional strategies to promote literacy skills across the curriculum? The Council of Chief State School Officers offers an Adolescent Literacy Toolkit chock full of learning activities, rubrics, lesson plans, narratives, and a professional development module.
Check out the toolkit at www.ccsso.org/projects/secondary_school_redesign/Adolescent_Literacy_Toolkit

Evaluating Online Learning Programs
Increasingly, school districts have been turning to online courses to fill a range of instructional and support needs. But how do you know what programs are effective?
The U.S. Department of Education has released its first guide to evaluating K–12 online learning programs. The 68-page guide, Evaluating Online Learning: Challenges and Strategies for Success, draws lessons from seven recent evaluations of online programs and instructional resources. It was prepared by WestEd, Inc., based in San Francisco.
See the report at www.ed.gov/admins/lead/academic/evalonline/evalonline.pdf

Is Yours a School of Character?
The National Schools of Character Awards program, sponsored by the Character Education Partnership, identifies exemplary schools and districts to serve as models for others and helps other schools and districts improve their efforts in effective character education.
To be eligible for the 2009 awards, a school must have been engaged in character education for a minimum of three full years, starting no later than December 2006. Districts need to have been engaged in character education for a minimum of four full years, starting no later than December 2005.
National Schools of Character winners receive national recognition and a financial grant as high as $10,000. The amount of each grant is based on the size of the school or district, the extensiveness of the winner’s outreach plans, and available resources. Half of each grant is used to enhance the winner’s program and send a team to present at the Character Education Partnership Forum; the other half is used for outreach to other educators. Outreach efforts include providing staff development and mentoring to other schools or districts.
The deadline for applications is December 8, 2008. For more information, visit www.character.org/site/c.kUKTOEJJsG/b.3937991

Helping Students with Diabetes
About 150,000 young people under age 20 in the United States have diabetes, and as obesity rates in children continue to soar, type 2 diabetes, a disease that used to be seen primarily in adults, is becoming more common.
The National Diabetes Education Program has developed Helping the Student with Diabetes Succeed: A Guide for School Personnel to help educators meet the needs of students with diabetes. The guide
• Provides school personnel, parents, and students with a framework for managing diabetes effectively in the school setting.
• Helps to ensure that students with diabetes are medically safe and have access to all educational opportunities and activities.
• Includes user-friendly tools, copier-ready action plans, a diabetes primer, and a review of school responsibilities under federal laws.
This free resource can be ordered or downloaded by visiting www.YourDiabetesInfo.org
Help for Parents

The U.S. Department of Education has developed Empowering Parents School Box: A Tool to Equip Parents for the School Year, a publication that provides parents with tips for helping their children succeed.

The school box includes three booklets: What Parents Need to Know, Taking a Closer Look, and Learning Checklists. A brochure that provides examples of resources and a poster, Empowered Parents Stay Involved with School, are also included.

The school box provides tips on working with children from birth to high school; guidelines for taking advantage of free tutoring opportunities; steps for selecting a high-quality school; ways to get involved in children’s schools; information about financial aid and scholarships; and resources for improving learning. It also includes success stories of schools where parent involvement made a difference.

Get your copy at www.ed.gov/parents/academic/involve/schoolbox/index.html

MiddleWeb Resources for New Teachers

MiddleWeb continues to add new resources to their special page for teachers who are just beginning their classroom careers. Recent additions include a link to Teacher Magazine’s Teaching Secrets and Ask the Mentor pages. You’ll also find classroom management tips, Harry Wong’s tips for success, and the U.S. Department of Education’s helpful guide, What to Expect Your First Year of Teaching.

Check back often: www.middleweb.com/mw/PartInt/PartIntNewTchr.html

Taking a Stand

The Day of National Concern about Young People and Gun Violence is October 22. The day is the culmination of this year’s national Student Pledge Against Gun Violence campaign.

The national campaign provides a means for beginning the conversation with young people about gun violence and refers teachers, counselors, and community leaders to valuable resources. The campaign also includes curriculum suggestions that can be integrated with existing academic programs.

For more information, visit www.pledge.org

Think About It

Questions for Schools is a new Web site that promotes the thoughtful critique of educational status-quo’s with the belief that challenging conventional wisdom, as it relates to classroom structure, philosophy, homework, curriculum, and discourse, will result in positive changes in our public school classrooms.

The Web site was launched by Kentucky middle school teacher Paul Barnwell. Check it out at www.questionsforschools.org

What’s Working in Public Schools

Share your thoughts about American public education. Public School Insights is a Web site hosted by the Learning First Alliance that allows educators, parents, and policymakers to share what’s already working in public schools and start discussions about how those strategies can work for students in every school.

The Learning First Alliance is a permanent partnership of 18 leading education associations, including National Middle School Association, dedicated to improving student learning in America’s public schools.

Visit www.publicschoolinsights.org to get into the conversation.

Disabled Student Leaders Network

The National Youth Leadership Network is a nonprofit organization run independently by young leaders with disabilities from across the United States and its territories. These students promote leadership development, education, and advocacy for all youth with disabilities to help them reach their maximum potential.

Learn more at www.nyln.org
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• 350 education exhibitors
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Middle Level Essentials Conference
April 23–24, 2009 — Red Rock Resort, Las Vegas, NV
Topics include:
• Differentiated Instruction to Meet the Needs of Every Student
• The Differentiated Math Classroom
• Literacy Across the Content Areas
• Ninth Grade Academies (a conference within a conference)

Symposium on Teacher Preparation
April 24–25, 2009 — Red Rock Resort, Las Vegas, NV
Excellence in Teaching, Service, and Scholarship

Student Success Institute
May 29–30, 2009
Calgary, Alberta, Canada
Topics include:
• Student Motivation
• Formative Assessment
• Advisory
• Literacy

Institute for Middle Level Leadership
July 12–15, 2009 — Hyatt Regency Tamaya, Santa Ana Pueblo, NM
July 19–22, 2009 — St. Regis Hotel and Resort, Ft. Lauderdale, FL
July 26–29, 2009 — Hilton Whistler Resort, Whistler, British Columbia, Canada

Try the Newest Technology
For all middle level educators attending NMSA’s 35th Annual Conference and Exhibit in Denver, Colorado, there will be opportunities to see the latest technologies in action and get your hands on them! Tech “sandboxes” will be located in the public areas of the Colorado Convention Center. A map of the sandboxes will be included in the conference program book.

Currently, tech sandboxes will host the following technologies:
• Videoconferencing and virtual field trips and curricula from Tandberg
• Whiteboards, slates, and student feedback devices from Promethean
• International gateway and tools for middle level educators from ePals
• Teachers online from PBS Teachers
• A video production studio from SchoolTube
• Various technologies from Web 2.0 for professional development

The 21st Century Classroom being designed by Bennett, Wagner, and Grody Architects and built in the exhibit hall by Adolfson and Peterson Construction has grown by leaps and bounds and has taken on a new twist. During exhibit hall hours on Thursday, teachers and students from Aurora Public Schools will be actively teaching and learning in the 21st Century Classroom. On Friday, the classroom will feature students and teachers from Douglas County Public Schools.

On Saturday during the exhibit hall hours, the classroom will be open for interested attendees! You will have the opportunity to go inside the classroom and get your hands on all the technologies that you’ve seen during the previous two days. Schedules for the action in the classroom will be handed out at registration.

The conference is also providing, for the first time, a technology strand. The rooms for these sessions will be equipped with the technology needed to make them truly come alive. There are a number of sessions in this strand, along with featured sessions by Montgomery County (MD) Schools, Douglas County (CO) Schools, Will Richardson, Karen Cator, Kate Clark, Tim DiScipio, Sonny Magana, Jan Zanetis, and many others.
Calling all middle school math and science teachers! Join a virtual professional learning community of middle level math and science educators at http://msteacher.org

- Develop increased content knowledge in science, mathematics, technology, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy
- Participate in individual and collaborative professional development
- Easily locate and identify exemplary, standards-based resources
- Increase your understanding of Web 2.0 tools
- More effectively integrate technology into your existing teaching practice
- Explore math and science standards-based topics in depth
- Connect to “just-in-time” teaching ideas

More about MSP2

The Ohio State University College of Education, National Middle School Association, and Education Development Center are expanding the NSDL Middle School Portal to support middle school educators and youth by creating the Middle School Portal Pathways (MSP2). MSP2 capitalizes on Web 2.0 tools to promote interactivity, collaboration, and knowledge sharing among its users. The MSP2 is one of the National Science Digital Libraries funded by the National Science Foundation.

Look for details as MSP2 adds features for middle school aged youth and adolescent health and safety education.

October is Month of the Young Adolescent...

...an international celebration initiated by National Middle School Association (NMSA) that focuses on advocating for 10- to 15-year-olds. Key messages for organizations, states, schools, and communities include

- It is critical to student success that parents, family members, or caregivers of young adolescents are knowledgeable about this age group and engaged in their children’s lives.
- Healthy bodies plus healthy minds equal healthy young adolescents.
- The education young adolescents experience during this formative period of life will, in large measure, determine the future for all citizens.
- Every young adolescent should have the opportunity to pursue his or her dreams and aspirations, and post-secondary education should be a possibility for all.

Month of the Young Adolescent gives everyone the opportunity to showcase the great achievements of middle grades students. Here are ways the month is celebrated:

- States proclaim the month of October, Month of the Young Adolescent.
- Schools host weekly activities for parents and students, including carnival nights, open house, a math game night, a read aloud night or a crafts night.
- Schools host informational nights for community members, business leaders, and opinion leaders highlighting the diverse needs of young adolescents.
- Local community leaders are invited to shadow a student, teacher, or principal for a day.
- Community organizations offer open recreation times.
- Mentor programs are planned for young adolescents in their community
- Parents and community members are invited to visit, tutor, or volunteer at their local schools.

Visit www.nmsa.org/moya to enjoy featured student artwork and podcasts, to get ideas for your celebration, and to take advantage of customizable publicity resources.

Free Resource for Families

Your NMSA membership gives you free access to a quarterly resource for use with families. The Family Connection, edited by Judith Baenen, is a double-sided newsletter that’s easy to read and a great informational resource for parents. Find it online at www.nmsa.org as a pdf that can be printed and distributed exactly as-is or you can cut and paste articles for use in your school newsletter. The fall issue is now available and features articles on students’ sleep habits, text messaging, parents as volunteers, and more.

Welcome!

We are pleased to welcome two interns to our conferences and events team. Cara Pizzuro is a graduate of John Carroll University with a degree in communications. Abby Johnson is a graduate of Wittenberg University with a degree in business.
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Most teachers routinely develop and communicate to students and parents the various plans and policies that govern the middle school classroom. Usually, this includes a classroom management plan, a grading policy, an instructional plan linked to state and district curriculum standards, a homework policy, and perhaps an intervention plan detailing what will happen for students if they fall behind.

Rarely do teachers include a classroom assessment plan. Most teachers typically don’t develop this plan because it has been our history to see assessment as a series of isolated testing events: tests given at the end of an instructional unit or time period, like the end of a semester.

However, as it turns out, students achieve at higher levels when teachers think more deeply about how their classroom assessments fit into their larger instructional environment.

A Classroom Assessment System

Today, more teachers are thinking about assessment in their classrooms as a balanced system of components. One component, summative assessment, fulfills the traditional role of measuring student progress. Results from tests feed into an evaluation, like a mark in a grade book or a report card grade. Also known as assessments of learning, they reflect the level of student learning at a particular point in time.

Another component, formative assessment, is an ongoing process used to inform instructional decisions made by the teacher and student. This process can be extended to encourage and promote further learning. Formative assessments, linked to the targets of daily instruction, provide continuous information—what Margaret Heritage, assistant director for professional development at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) at UCLA, calls a “video stream”—as opposed to a summative snapshot.

Formative assessment happens while teaching is still underway, helping shape decisions about what needs to happen next to better prepare students for the summative assessment.

In a balanced classroom assessment system, neither of these two components is over- or under-used; they work together to generate the combined effects that are greater than the sum of the individual parts. When summative and formative classroom assessments are high quality and purposefully planned, they are synergistic parts of the same system and can help form a more complete and accurate picture of student learning.

We should point out that it isn’t really the assessment itself that’s formative or summative. We see plenty of products in the K–12 market advertised as “formative assessments,” giving the false sense that what is formative is the instrument itself. It’s really how the results of any assessment are used that determines the label to apply.

The purpose of the assessment may be to give students ungraded practice, help them see where they might improve, or inform teachers how they might adapt instruction to help get students to the target. Those are all formative purposes. If the purpose is summative, with an accountability end in mind, the results are used differently, perhaps to assign a grade, as an indicator of student proficiency, or to inform a decision about student placement.

Why Balanced Assessment?

Beyond the commonsense appeal of balance, we advocate both balance and thoughtful attention to formative applications of classroom assessment because clear evidence describes the positive impact formative assessment practices can have on student engagement and learning.

A growing body of research shows that formative assessment does improve learning when students understand the intended learning and the assessment criteria, when feedback to students is
accurate and descriptive, and, most importantly, when students are actively involved with their own assessment.

An extension of formative assessment, beyond providing the teacher with useful information, brings the student into the equation as an important user of assessment results. This is assessment for learning, in which students are intentionally involved in the entire assessment process.

Middle level education has long championed putting the student at the center of learning and engaging learners in ways that allow them to assume responsibility for their own success. Because assessment for learning does exactly that, it is not a far distance for middle level educators to travel. And it is well worth the trip; studies show that all students benefit, especially low achievers. Students can be involved in their own assessment by doing the following:

• Identifying the attributes of a good performance by using a rubric to analyze strong and weak anonymous work samples
• Learning and using strategies to self-assess
• Partnering with their teachers to set goals on what comes next in their learning based on current results
• Generating their own practice tests or test items using their understanding of the learning targets and working with each other to prepare and deepen their understanding
• Working with clearly communicated learning goals to keep track of their success and communicating that success to others, as in student-led conferences.

We want to make learning targets clear to students, give them feedback throughout their learning to help improve their performance, teach them how to generate their own feedback through self-assessment, and show them how to use the feedback and the evidence of their own progress to manage and adjust their own learning.

Part of the good news from this ongoing process is that they, not next year’s students, reap the immediate benefits from the instructional improvements their teachers make in response to the “video stream” of evidence.

What Does It Look Like?

First, an effective classroom assessment system needs to rely on assessments that meet standards of quality in order to work well. That means that teachers need the skill and knowledge to collect accurate evidence of student learning and to effectively use the process and the results to promote further learning. To do that, it is important for teachers to know how to

• Establish the purpose of each assessment and communicate how the results will be used and by whom.
• Be clear with students about what learning targets they are responsible for learning.
• Use an appropriate assessment method (selected response, essay, performance assessment, or personal communication) with procedures that ensure the accuracy of results.
• Effectively communicate the results to maximize further learning.
• Involve students where appropriate in the assessment process.

In Table 1 we describe these five indicators of classroom assessment competence for teachers in more detail. Most teachers have not yet had the opportunity to learn and apply these principles, and so it is likely that some professional development training is necessary so teachers can learn to incorporate them into their own classroom assessment practice.

Once teachers use sound assessment practices, the best way to ensure balance is to have a plan—one focused on the learning to be achieved, not just the grades to be earned. As previously mentioned, it makes sense to create this as an extension of the instructional plan so that it springs up directly from the learning targets to be taught and assessed, truly making instruction and assessment a looping continuum.

Or, it might be a separate plan, still linked to the targets
of instruction, based on a simple analogy: there are practice days and there are game days. The scheduled practice events, communicated to students in advance, are formative assessments: they could be homework, practice tests, first and second drafts, or personal communication strategies used by the teacher to collect information about student progress.

By intentionally planning for more practice, we de-emphasize the competitive nature of school and give students a chance to grow with feedback, risk free.

Then, at some point, it is game day, when the teacher must make a judgment about the learning that has taken place. Leading up to that, teachers can review their assessment plan and ask:

- Have all students been given sufficient practice with the right content at the right level of difficulty? Are they ready to succeed on the summative assessment?
- Have I kept track of student progress by individual learning targets to know that they are ready?
- Have the observations and results from practice been reviewed and fed back into the teaching and learning process?
- Is there existing evidence of how well students have mastered the content that should “count”? Should any formative results contribute to the final grade?

Some teachers may need to adopt record-keeping practices different from their traditional system. That is, it may take a bit of getting used to when thinking about keeping track of formative results and holding them separate from summative marks. Some teachers use two grade books or use different sections in the same one. Others color code the two types of results, while others use a computer program for the summative results and a portfolio-type approach for the formative results, which students can also help manage and maintain.

Teachers can also self-monitor their assessment balance by keeping a simple log of the assessments of and for learning (see Table 2). Teachers also can use the log to audit a previous unit of instruction for which the assessments were already administered to check for balance.

### Table 1: Indicators of Sound Classroom Assessment Practice

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Why Assess? Assessment Processes and Results Serve Clear and Appropriate Purposes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers understand who the users and what the uses of classroom assessment information are and know their information needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers understand the relationship between assessment and student motivation and craft assessment experiences to maximize motivation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers use classroom assessment processes and results formatively (assessment for learning).</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers use classroom assessment results summatively (assessment of learning) to inform someone beyond the classroom about students’ achievement as of a particular point in time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers have a comprehensive plan over time for integrating assessment for and of learning in the classroom.</td>
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<td>• Teachers have clear learning targets for students; they know how to turn broad statements of content standards into classroom-level targets.</td>
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<td>• Teachers understand the various types of learning targets they hold for students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers select learning targets focused on the most important things students need to know and be able to do.</td>
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<td>• Teachers have a comprehensive plan over time for assessing learning targets.</td>
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<tr>
<th>3. Assess How? Learning Targets Are Translated into Assessments That Yield Accurate Results</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers understand what the various assessment methods are.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers choose assessment methods that match intended learning targets.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers design assessments that serve intended purposes.</td>
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<td>• Teachers sample learning appropriately in their assessments.</td>
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<td>• Teachers write assessment questions of all types well.</td>
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<td>• Teachers avoid sources of bias that distort results.</td>
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<th>4. Communicate How? Assessment Results Are Managed Well and Communicated Effectively</th>
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<td>• Teachers record assessment information accurately, keep it confidential, and appropriately combine and summarize it for reporting (including grades). Such a summary accurately reflects the current level of student learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers select the best reporting option (grades, narratives, portfolios, conferences) for each context (learning targets and users).</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers interpret and use standardized test results correctly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teachers effectively communicate assessment results to students.</td>
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<td>• Teachers effectively communicate assessment results to a variety of audiences outside the classroom, including parents, colleagues, and other stakeholders.</td>
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<th>5. Involve Students How? Students Are Involved in Their Own Assessment</th>
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<td>• Teachers make learning targets clear to students.</td>
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<td>• Teachers involve students in assessing, tracking, and setting goals for their own learning.</td>
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<td>• Teachers involve students in communicating about their own learning.</td>
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In Closing

Teachers who attend to both the summative and formative components of a balanced classroom assessment plan know that other components integrate to form the larger instructional system: curriculum maps, differentiated instruction, standards-based grading practices, homework policies, and communication of student progress, to name a few.

Although perhaps not always seamless, and certainly not always easy, this systemic approach can benefit teachers and students because it is set up for rapid response on the part of both.

The high-stakes, large-scale accountability tests that continue to drive school improvement are but a small fraction of the assessments students experience throughout school. The vast majority of a student’s assessment life is spent with teacher-developed classroom assessments, geared to what’s happening in the classroom right now.

Once teachers know how to do it right (assess accurately) and use it well (to both promote and verify learning), they can use the entire assessment process as a fulcrum to help students learn how to self-manage their own learning. And for students in the middle, that contribution to their success can truly be life-long.

Stephen Chappuis (SChappuis@ETS.org) and Rick Stiggins (RStiggins@ETS.org) work at the ETS Assessment Training Institute in Portland, Oregon.

Table 2: Auditing for Balance

List on this form the assessments you give during a unit. When you have finished teaching the unit, check for balance between assessments for and of learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Title</th>
<th>Date Given</th>
<th>For</th>
<th>Of</th>
<th>Learning Target(s) Assessed</th>
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Resources


Testing is a powerful and pervasive tool in today’s school systems. We evaluate students for learning, advancement, graduation, college entrance, and exit. We also evaluate them so we can compare students, institutions, and regions.

Along with this high-stakes testing comes test anxiety, which is one of the most common variables associated with underachievement at all academic levels.

Education can and should be enjoyable, exploratory, meaningful, long lasting, and full of discovery. The same is true of testing.

Some middle school students simply are not good at taking traditional tests. Some feel more comfortable expressing information through discussion, presentation, demonstration, and other creative venues. Incorporating these elements into classroom assessment could reduce test anxiety greatly. While we do not advocate removing traditional testing methods, we do favor the use of additional evaluation methods that closely mirror student learning and instructional strategies.

Introducing Team Testing

For Matt, the concept of team testing came about in 2003, when he was teaching middle school English. He noticed that his students could knowledgeably discuss any given grammatical/mechanical idea as long as they were allowed to “talk about” a topic.

For example, when students were asked to identify
the characteristics that distinguish a concrete noun from an abstract noun, the majority could do so. However, as soon as written tests were distributed, students' knowledge seemed to vanish. This discrepancy perplexed Matt. He frequently addressed test anxiety, lack of study time, study skills, and the importance of effort in achieving grades. Still, the discrepancy persisted.

Finally, while preparing to administer a test on sentence fragments, it dawned on him: conversation was missing. During instructional times, he allowed students to talk; however, during tests, he took away this aspect. Realizing that this element proved vital to students' acquisition of knowledge, Matt devised a plan whereby students could make orderly, authentic use of conversation as part of assessment.

Matt decided to allow his students to take team tests. He outlined a detailed process, considering two key components as he divided the class into groups of three or four: achievement level and “friend factor.” He matched students who performed at higher levels with students who tended to perform at lower levels, hoping that the underachievers could model the higher-achievers' problem-solving processes.

Concerning the “friend factor,” he separated students who appeared to share close relationships so that the friendships would not interfere with the procedure.

He gave all students individual copies of the sentence fragments test, assigning one student to be a reader and the rest to be judges. The reader read each test item aloud to his or her group and then posed the following question to each member: “Do you think that this item is a fragment or a complete sentence? Why?”

In turn, the judges each shared their thoughts. After soliciting responses, the reader presented his or her ideas. If all of the members agreed, they would mark the item at hand and move to the next item. If the group members did not agree, the process repeated itself, allowing each member to restate his or her stance. After recycling the process, the students had two options: If they now agreed, they would mark an appropriate response and move to the next item; if they still disagreed, each member marked what he or she believed was the appropriate response.

To clarify the procedure, Matt selected one group to model the process. Scheduling a practice day prior to the actual assessment also could be a good idea.

While students work together in groups, the teacher must patrol the room to verify that all students are actively involved.

What transpired stunned Matt: Not only did the students adhere to the process, they also seemed to enjoy it. Students who normally were frustrated and discouraged by tests were seriously engaged. They listened, talked, debated, and deciphered. Even an oft-frustrated dyslexic student had hope in his eyes. Moreover, all students passed with atypically high scores.

Answering the Questions

This assessment method could be a source of great support to middle school students of all abilities; however, it could also create some controversy. Therefore, we have compiled the following list of justifications for the use of the team test. The team test
1. Enables students to use all facets of language.
2. Obligates students to use problem-solving skills and to learn from other students' skills.
3. Fosters a sense of cooperation and community.
4. Obligates each student to fulfill his or her role and assume more responsibility.
5. Combats stigmas, such as test anxiety, about traditional testing.
6. Is democratic.
7. Generates motivation and excitement.
8. Creates a student-centered classroom.
9. Validates the curriculum: Because students are actively engaged, they view the curriculum as being meaningful.
10. Develops critical thinking skills among students.
12. Requires students to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject matter.

However, we do not presuppose that this method generates no cause for concern; therefore, we have added a list of our reservations.

1. Students could manipulate the team test by foregoing proper procedures.
2. The team test might breed dependence.
3. Teachers might over-use the team test, instead of using the approach to diversify testing.
4. School administration, fellow teachers, students' parents/guardians, and students themselves might challenge the team test.

Teachers who use this assessment strategy may choose their methods and measures for evaluating students' tests. However, we offer the following suggestions for areas of appraisal: appropriate discussions of topics, appropriate answers for questions, effective cooperation within groups, and sufficient discussion time.

When Lee taught high school and middle school Spanish classes, he often used group testing activities one day and then a more traditional testing method the next day, combining the scores for one total grade. The discussion and review of materials the first day also relieves some stress for the following day. Students are better prepared for the individual testing because of discussion and review in a serious testing format and because they are able to identify areas in which they need more work.

Some students may be uncomfortable working in groups, especially in a testing situation. However, in our experience, a student’s grade was never jeopardized because of team testing. The students with higher grades tend to have a positive influence on others and many have found great satisfaction in helping others understand what comes more easily to them.
Teachers should expect some early disappointments when they first introduce this innovative assessment. It may take 15–20 minutes, or even a few trials, before students feel comfortable and ideas begin to flow. When we both introduced this strategy in our classrooms, we actually had to encourage students to openly discuss their answers. They were afraid they were being set up, that suddenly the teacher would shout, “Hey, this is a test! No talking!”

**Now and Forever**

To be successful now and in the job market, our middle school students need to develop skills in creativity, flexibility, and group processing. Team testing puts students in situations closely related to real-life activities in which they must work in groups.

This type of testing affords more students the opportunity to share positive evaluation experiences. It is not meant to be the assessment method for every unit of every class; however, it offers another tool whereby teachers assess students’ progress in a more equitable and balanced way.

---

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**Matt Rutledge** has taught middle school English for 8 years and is currently teaching English and math at Hubbertville School in Fayette, Alabama. E-mail matthew_e_rutledge@yahoo.com
Sally plays school very well. She keeps pretty notes in a well-organized binder. She makes an effort on every homework assignment. She passes in every extra credit report. Sally earned a B in my class.

Yet Sally has no comprehension of the material.

Sam refuses to play school at all. He brings no materials, does little classwork and no homework. According to my grading policy, Sam should flunk spectacularly.

Yet tests demonstrate that Sam has mastered the material.

These two extremes highlight the effort versus knowledge dichotomy with which I have always struggled when it comes to establishing a grading plan. How do I resolve this? Just what are grades supposed to measure anyway? What is fair; what is useful?

Last summer, I stumbled upon the ABI grading system. In their book, Effort and Excellence in Urban Classrooms: Expecting—and Getting—Success with All Students, authors H. Dickson Corbett, Bruce Wilson, and Belinda Williams describe how the system is used at a junior high school. I fell in love.

One year later, I can honestly say adopting ABI grading was the single best teaching decision I, as a reading teacher, have made.

**Every Assignment Done Well**

ABI grading is simple.

- $A = 90+$ = Above and beyond. Every assignment done well plus A-credit projects done well.
- $B = 85$ = The basics. Every assignment done well.
- $I =$ Incomplete = One or more assignments are missing or not yet done well.

Only students who are on top of their work are eligible to submit A-credit projects. Extra credit projects cannot be substituted for regular assignments.

Students who earn an Incomplete continue to work on assignments after a marking period ends. When all assignments are done, and done well, the Incomplete is changed to an 85.

Failure is not an option. The message behind ABI grading is that every student will succeed. Some may learn quickly, others will take longer, but every student will succeed.

This had always been my thinking, but I could never make it a reality. I said zeroes were not permitted, but never had the wherewithal to enforce it. I permitted—I encouraged—students with poor marks to retake their tests. No one took me up on the offer.

With ABI, I require that students complete and submit every assignment, no matter how late. With ABI, I mandate the retakes. With ABI, I do not allow failure; in fact, I do not allow Cs or Ds. Each student must master each assignment. Isn’t that the point?

I have to believe that every assignment is work worth doing, worth tracking, worth chasing. This has made me a better teacher. I have traded quantity for quality, demanding fewer, more meaningful assignments.

I mark papers one of three ways. Perfect papers get a sticker. A check mark means there were minor mistakes, but that the work
was acceptable. Anything less gets an R, meaning re-work, revise, and return it to me. At first, students are beside themselves. "But, Miss, I did this already!" "Nah, no way, I am not doing this again!" "But, Miss, this is good enough!"

My response: "Pretend I asked you to solve 2+2 and you wrote 5. Would you expect me to give you a star and move on? Of course not! It's the same here. My work—your work here—is important. You can do it. I will help. I will not let you give up. I will not let you fail."

Parents love the policy. I had only one somewhat disgruntled parent, surprised when her bright son did not receive an A. I showed her my ABI flyer, the letter I sent home for parent signature (hers was not on file), the A-credit project binder, and the reminder posted on my board. She was won over and became a strong supporter.

**Content Before Responsibility**

One of the loudest arguments against any policy that permits—even demands—accepting late work is the "teaching responsibility" sermon. Yes, I want to help my students become organized and responsible. However, I will not penalize them for continued struggles in these areas.

My job is to improve reading skills. Therefore, I grade my students on reading skills. I believe I am on solid footing.

There is nothing about timeliness of submitted assignments, one-try-only testing, or orderliness of binders in my state frameworks. Further, I contend that ABI grading conveys more meaningful messages regarding responsibility than do failing grades:

- A student's responsibility is to do assigned work.
- Ignored work does not disappear.
- A job done poorly must be done again.

A bad idea? Well, no, not a bad idea. However, I will concede that ABI has a couple of drawbacks.

**A student in need.** I had one student clearly in need of special education services. We requested an evaluation, but these things take time. Meanwhile, after multiple efforts and much one-on-one hand-holding on each assignment, I would grant her credit. Thus, she received a B. A lie. Anyone looking at that grade would believe she had learned the material, when, in fact, she had not.

**Last on the list.** One unintended message of my policy is: any assignment, any old time. Even the more responsible students would not lose sleep over handing me late work. Putting work for other teachers ahead of my work reflects solid decision making on the part of my students, who face more severe consequences for late and missing work elsewhere. Still, I tire of being last!

**A Bonus Item ... Or Three**

- **Grading is a breeze!**
  I do not worry about point values; I do not quibble over whether Sally earned an 87 or a 91. I need only determine whether the work must be done again.

- **Entering grades is a breeze!**
  My academic grades are almost all 85s. Students who submit A-credit project work earn 90 or 95. There are a few Incompletes. Done.

- **Students take pride in their work.**
  An unexpected phenomenon is that students do not turn in papers until they are satisfied with the quality. Naturally, I prefer everything passed in on time! Still, I love that students tend not to submit inferior work, done hastily to meet a deadline.

**A Blasted Idea**

I confess that I harbor a grudge against those students who are perpetually behind. Yes, I still enter 85 in the gradebook. Yet, I do exact some small reprisal. I use my district's Effort grade to reflect how often I have to chase a student. Thus, students earning 85s might somewhat incongruously show Ds in Effort. Do they care? Doubtful.

I also must confess the truth about "every assignment." Well, ... no, not every assignment. Every test, homework paper, significant classwork paper—yes, these must be done. However, there are low-stakes classwork activities that, if not done well, simply detract from the Effort grade.

**Records, Re-dos, and Detention**

No way around it—this policy demands both a lot of record keeping and a lot of time evaluating resubmitted work. I tell myself this is a fair trade-off for the time I save calculating percentages.

Scrambling to wrap up 10 weeks’ worth of work just before a marking period ends serves no one. Therefore, I do assign detentions when students fall behind.

Now, earning a detention simply for not doing work was novel at my school. Historically, detentions have only been meted out for behavior issues. The students were incredulous. They were outraged. "But, Miss! You can't do that! It's only homework! I didn't do nothing!"

"Ah, but you should have done something: your work. Sitting still and looking attentive is not enough. You must actually do the work."

**A-Credit Confessions**


I did not establish grading rubrics. Mistake.

Book reports began rolling in and, well, a lot were ... awful. I gave full credit anyway. The next summer I put those rubrics together, and I will add only two or three points—not five—for each shabby report.

**Finally Failing**

I could not chase students beyond the last day of school, so any outstanding Incomplete marks needed to be changed to a failing grade, cold numbers at the year's end.

Only Tom was in danger of failing last year. He had earned only one 85. When I arbitrarily changed his three Incompletes to 60s (65 is passing) to see what the result would be, I saw that he would still pass for the year with a 66.25. Whoops! I need to reassess my grading strategy and use the harsher 55 for failing. This year, three Incomplete quarters equals a failing 62.5.

Happily, Tom worked long and hard with me and, in the end, passed for the year.

**A Bright Idea**

With ABI, I am finally satisfied with the grades I post. More importantly, I am confident that my students learned far more than in prior years.

*Every assignment, done well. What's not to love?*

---

Eileen Dame is a reading teacher at Worcester East Middle School in Worcester, Massachusetts. E-mail adame@charter.net
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After completing a graduate course in technology integration, I figured it was time to cross the time and space continuum that often separates those of us who have been in education for a while from all that is new and innovative in our profession.

It was definitely time to get on board and apply my newfound knowledge in my English/Language Arts classes. This involved a bit of dry-mouthed panic at the thought of leaving my comfort zone to masquerade as an aficionado in the world of blogs, wikis, and podcasts.

The good news, however, was that my middle school students were curious, trusting, and daring enough to blindly tackle a large project with me. Fortunately, their intuition and interest when it comes to matters technical meant that we started from a very positive perspective.

The goal of the project I decided to try was to help students problem solve in a realistic way. It became clear from the outset that this project would only work using a “backwards design” model. After I determined that overall outcome, I decided what assessments I would use (rubrics) and what activities would best lead students toward the goal of the assignment. I presented the assessment rubrics at the onset of the project so students clearly understood the expectations.

The activities I chose integrated the technology I was just coming to understand, and included reading a book, blogging daily, creating a wiki, and recording a podcast.

First a Book and a Blog
We began by reading the novel The Twenty-One Balloons by William Pene DuBois. This is a personal favorite of mine, full of rich imagery, adventure, and quirkiness. DuBois wrote this brilliant story in 1947—a fact that instantly turned my students off before they got past the copyright page. After all, how can a book that is older than their grandma (ponder that for a minute) possibly be good?

Knowing how large and colorful this story is, I must admit I delighted in their initial reactions. I looked into their glazed eyes and promised them that this would undoubtedly end up as one of their all-time favorite novels.

Happily, this is usually the case. In the end, my students marveled at how far ahead of his time DuBois was in his technical and inventive thinking. They were quick to compare him to the genius of Walt Disney.

Each evening, students were expected to go online and contribute to a blog set up on www.blogger.com. I contributed prompts and open-ended questions to give them starting points for their discussions about the book. As time went on, I needed to give them less and less guidance for their responses. They had so much to say on their own and they fed off of each other’s ideas and thoughts.

We initiated one major rule from the beginning: we would always remain respectful of other people’s opinions and thoughts, whether we agreed with them or not. This became the basis of many fruitful discussions as students learned some diplomacy skills while formulating responses to their peers’ writings. They came to understand that it was acceptable to hold opinions different from their friends’ without diminishing anyone else’s ideas in the process.

Had I asked students to do the traditional read and write activities, the results would have looked very different. I would have had reluctant writers who undoubtedly would have completed minimal work. They might have dreaded reading the book because it would only mean more seat work.

By using a blog, I was amazed at the depth and quality of their responses. They put a lot more effort into their work without having to be reminded, nagged, or coaxed into doing so. In fact, they often left class saying, “Don’t forget to put up today’s blog, Mrs. M!” They enjoyed reading each other’s responses and creating their own points for discussion, which frequently carried over into class the next day.

And Then a Wiki
After we finished the novel, we began work on a wiki designed on Wikispaces. I organized my students into groups of four to complete the wiki and podcast parts of the project. I purposely grouped students who would not normally choose to work with each other. This forced them to interact with people they did not know well and many new friendships grew as a result. Also, on-task behavior was greater than it would have been if they had been allowed to work with their best friends.

Each group was assigned its own page to create and edit. Students had to establish their own rules for collaboration to guarantee quality of work, fair and equitable contribution, time management, problem-solving strategies, and attitude for working successfully as a group.

Students were given a multi-layered problem-solving task that loosely but creatively related to the book. The task was realistic so they instantly became engaged; it became meaningful and relevant to them. They seemed to enjoy the challenge of finding real solutions that were viable in today’s world.

Students used their technical know-how to scan, upload files and images, research online, write, revise, and edit their work. Their collective efforts produced some excellent results. The artwork they generated digitally was fascinating.

On to the Podcast
Once the wiki was completed, we began the third and final part of our project. Students created a podcast using the program
Garageband. They took the final outcomes of their problem-solving task from the wiki and turned them into podcasts using a newscast format.

Students had to write the newscast, practice their news anchor voices, create thought-provoking questions for interviews, and make decisions about sound effects and music that would lend authenticity to the podcast.

We spent the first day investigating sound effects, learning how to record voices, layer sounds, and edit all the various elements. This experimentation provided much of the basis of their final projects. It took several days of practice to complete the podcast. Students learned how to convert their podcasts into mp3 files stored on iTunes. Once again, students acquired a variety of technical skills.

Students were eager to share their projects with classmates so we spent two days presenting the wikis and podcasts. We were all impressed with the quality of work, innovation, and creativity that each group displayed. I was astonished at their depth of knowledge, use of artistic abilities, and heightened levels of composition.

**Universal Learning**

As far as group dynamics and classroom management went, I dealt with far fewer issues on a daily basis than I normally would have with common seatwork. Overall, students worked well together and accomplished more than I thought possible. I think they surprised themselves, too. They completed peer reviews that seemed objective and fair when compared with my own daily observations.

Overall, the entire experience was a positive one. There were frustrations along the way, but I received enthusiastic support from various IT teachers every day. They were only too pleased and eager to share their passion with a newbie like me. I had no idea that this level of support was available until I took the initiative to find it. I learned as much as my students or more throughout the entire process.

I will fine-tune certain elements and worry less about time constraints next time I undertake a similar project. I am no longer afraid of technology and am excited to learn how to do even more.

My students worked enthusiastically, their parents were impressed with the project and learned a lot by conversing about “what they did in school today”, and I feel like I am finally actively engaging in the wide world of technology. **MG**

---

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Since the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, there is more pressure than ever on public schools to provide the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. Schools use a wide variety of models to provide this environment and the inclusion model is becoming more popular than ever, but there are scheduling issues, staffing issues, and teachers who just plain “don’t want to fool with it.”

Three years ago a group of teachers and I committed to making inclusion work, and while it has not always been easy, we have seen the benefits. Our school met the Adequate Yearly Progress performance objective for the disabled subgroup in math and English/Language Arts for the first time last year after only two years of focusing on the inclusion model.

For us, success involves three ingredients.

**Scheduling.** Ensure that the inclusion students are on the same team. Also take the time to ensure that other students with IEPs or 504s are not on the same team as the inclusion students. Teachers can quickly become frustrated when trying to provide 12 students in the same class with “preferential seating.”

**Assessing.** We didn’t want to have too many inclusion students in class, so we carefully reviewed every student who was recommended for inclusion to see who really needed this service. We discovered after review and data analysis that some of the students were recommended for inclusion “just in case” they needed the help.

Just because you offer inclusion does not mean you can’t offer other models as well. It is worth doing the research and requesting additional staff when you are planning to implement the inclusion model or any other models.

**Leading.** The final ingredient necessary for successful inclusion is leadership. The administrator who is supervising the program must be committed and must repeatedly communicate to all the staff the vision of what the inclusion classes should look like. The administrator should monitor the model to ensure effectiveness and not let it become the scapegoat for other issues that may arise during the year.

Teaching an inclusion class is difficult. Leaders should support teachers as they strive to ensure the environment is conducive to learning.

Remember, the goal is to help the students, not the teachers. If it’s good for students, it’s good. **MG**

---

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*A version of this article appeared in the spring issue of Palmetto Administrator magazine.*
In this election year, we can only hope that the pivotal middle level link in K–12 education receives the focus it deserves. And that focus must extend further than it has in the past, because the world is changing.

In addition to educating all young adolescents to high standards, middle level schools also must help prepare students for work and civic roles in a globalized environment, where success increasingly requires the ability to compete, connect, and collaborate on an international scale.

From science and culture to sports and politics, ideas and advancements are crossing borders and spanning the world. Globalization of business, breakthroughs in technology, and the increased rate of immigration require the citizens of the world to work on a global scale.

Schools with a Global Perspective

Because of this new connectivity, all of our students need a new skill set that includes deep knowledge about other cultures; sophisticated communication skills, including the ability to speak at least one language in addition to English; expert thinking skills; and the disposition to interact positively with individuals from varied backgrounds.

These are the foundations of work and citizenship in the 21st Century and are at the heart of the Asia Society's International Studies Schools Network (ISSN), a national network of design-driven schools with the core mission of developing college-ready and globally competent high school graduates. The network currently includes 13 public schools in urban and rural communities across the United States. ISSN schools serve students in grades 6–12 or 9–12, the vast majority of whom are from low-income and minority families.

The ISSN school design strives to help teachers systematically integrate within the curriculum, knowledge about the world and skills to understand how it works. The goal is to build teachers’ capacity for thoughtfully infusing international content and perspectives within rigorous, engaging coursework.

To meet these goals, the ISSN school design puts into practice a set of common principles:

- An intellectual mission focused on international studies that targets educational excellence for every student
- A curriculum that meets state standards and integrates international content throughout all subject areas
- Engaging, inquiry-based instruction and multiple forms of assessment that promote learning with understanding
- The opportunity for students to study one or more world languages, including an Asian language
- Innovative uses of technology that support instruction and links to schools around the world

A school culture that promotes a sense of belonging for every student and supports students' personal growth

Opportunities for student and teacher international travel and exchange

Internationally focused internships and community service opportunities

Engagement of faculty in continuous high-quality professional development.

Anyone familiar with Turning Points 2000 and This We Believe will quickly recognize that these principles do, indeed, represent the essence of these works adapted for the requirements of a global era. It is helpful to list them, but even more valuable to understand how they come alive in the experience of a young adolescent.

In what follows, we have tried to capture that sense by positing a day in the life of Eduardo, a middle level student attending City International Studies School. Eduardo is fictitious, but much of his experience is drawn from 6–12 ISSN schools—a composite of what success looks like in middle level schools that “go global.”

Day in the Life

Eduardo arrives early at City International Studies School because he and another student in his eighth grade Algebra I class are this week’s “techno tutors.” Working with their math teacher and a member of the school’s technology team (a twelfth grader), the students design and produce a short tutorial on a specific algebra topic that is recorded and then placed in the school’s podcast archives. Other students who, like Eduardo, can at times find algebra daunting, can download the tutorial in school or at home, whenever and wherever they need help.
School usually begins with a 15-minute community meeting, but the faculty chose to modify the schedule today for a brief question and answer session with an official from the Palestinian Information Office. The official has been invited as part of a series of dialogues that will later involve spokespersons from the Israeli Consulate and from other interest groups with offices in the city. The topic is the origins of unrest and options for peace in the Middle East. These kinds of "conversations for understanding" on world issues are a regular part of the school culture at City International.

Today, since it is an "A" day in the school's block schedule, Eduardo's first class is English/World Literature, where he continues work on an essay and multimedia project jointly assigned by his English and social studies teachers.

Among a series of project options, Eduardo's group chose to do an analysis that compares U.S. and Japanese perspectives on the causes of World War II, and to use their findings to discuss the issue of when a country should go to war.

Much of today's work will involve providing and receiving suggestions for improving the written portions of their presentation using one of the "critical friends" feedback protocols that they've been taught to use.

After the morning break comes one of the best parts of Eduardo's day: Advisory. He enjoys it, in part, because his small advisory group meets in the student lounge of the school library, a hodgepodge of donated, gently used furniture that contributes to a décor affectionately described in the school paper as "shabby chic."

Students participate in the council process during which their advisor asks them to express their thoughts and feelings about what she calls "micro-aggressions" against people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds—unintended put downs by people that may mean well but don't realize what they say reflects bias. What are examples we see in the media or in everyday life in our community? Is it best to say something or just take it in stride?

For the remainder of Advisory, Eduardo meets with his advisor individually to go over his Passages Portfolio, a collection of student work that demonstrates his development during the middle grades, which he will present to the school community at the end of eighth grade.

Up next: Integrated Physical Science (IPS), where Eduardo soon finds himself in an animated discussion with his work group about the best strategies for "solving for substance X."

Throughout the year, the IPS teacher has designed opportunities for students to learn the methods of science and to frame questions and pursue solutions just as scientists do. Now class members must apply their knowledge to first figure out what a mysterious substance is, then research where in the world the substance is most prevalent, then describe "what difference it makes" to the people in the region where it is found. For the latter part of the project, Eduardo's project group must cite at least one source outside the United States.

At lunch, Eduardo chats with the school principal about the trip to the Concordia Language Village in Minnesota that he will be making in the summer to further develop his Chinese language skills. Like most students at City International, he plans to travel abroad during his high school years, perhaps to China, or to a Spanish-speaking country to further hone the language skills first provided to him by his parents.

Eduardo's next class, Chinese, is staffed by a credentialed Chinese language teacher and supported by a Chinese visiting teacher from Shanghai. In addition to the normal curriculum, the class is preparing for a Friday field trip to a nearby nursing home for primarily elderly Chinese immigrants where they will practice conversational skills with residents.

These visits happen once a month but Eduardo spends additional afternoons here as part of a service-learning project that involves working with a Chinese-American youth group to develop oral histories of the residents' experience before and after immigrating to the United States.

The school day ends with physical education, where the current block is yoga. Eduardo enjoys the graceful movements of this ancient Indian physical art form but is also looking forward to the next week when his class will participate in something a bit more active: lacrosse!

Eduardo's hypothetical experience, grounded in the real world of ISSN schools, represents what bringing the world into world-class education means for middle level schools. In an increasingly "flat" world, our work must be to make such schools a reality for all young adolescents.

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Even with the dismissal bell and announcements in the background, you can hear their animated chatter as it filters down the hall. Their energetic banter gets louder and more pronounced with each step. “Oh, it’s going to be a crazy meeting today!” I think, smiling broadly. Their enthusiastic discussion gets interrupted with bursts of laughter, and I can begin to make out the distinct voices of “my kids.” There is a final clamber to open the door. As it swings wide, I hear the words in unison: “We’re here! We’re here for the meeting! Can my friend join?!” Too late; they are already in the door. (As if I have ever said no!)

Middle school students are energetic anyway, especially about life itself. But to be excited about attending an after-school club where the main focus is staying off drugs and decreasing violence in our school and community, every single Tuesday, for 90 minutes, without fail? At first glance, maybe not. Unless, of course, the club is Youth to Youth.

Youth to Youth (Y2Y) is an international substance abuse and violence prevention program that started as a grassroots venture in Columbus, Ohio, in 1982. Twenty-six years later, it has spread its upbeat, positive message all across the United States and into 26 foreign countries.

I was fortunate to have stumbled across Youth to Youth in 1987 while I was working as the program director in a substance abuse treatment clinic in upstate New York. I was looking for a better way to reach out to young people, something that really made a positive difference, when a friend told me to visit a Y2Y conference being held nearby.

I decided to check it out, and by the end of the day, was convinced that Youth to Youth has something that no other program I had ever been involved with had. It truly meant something to these kids, who kept returning to meeting after meeting and conference after conference.

Now, after 21 years of volunteering with the program and starting six chapters of my own, I can tell you this: it works because it is genuine, you build relationships, and the kids know you care. It isn’t a magic formula, but it makes all the difference.

As Lindsay Warf, a founding member of Y2Y at my school tells me, “Y2Y makes a difference in middle school because it teaches teens while they’re young about the dangers of alcohol and drugs, and it gives them a safe environment to learn about them.”

**Four Cornerstones**

Youth to Youth incorporates four dictums: drug education and information, personal growth and decision making, environmental change, and drug-free fun. It emphasizes enhancing developmental assets of students and is a true adult–student partnership.

The foundation of Youth to Youth is to train students in leadership and communication skills. The trained youth help facilitate the programs in the club, and in turn reach out to help other youth in need. Amy Rose, a two-year veteran adds, “I learn the best ways to make a difference!”

The premise is simple; the effects are powerful. The students keep coming because they know they will be accepted for who and what they are, and the judgments stop at the door. Students need no special talent to join and no one is asked to leave for lack of attendance. Students of all backgrounds, races, creeds, disabilities, educational abilities, and economic status come to the meetings.

Every student is welcome, and they know it. The students know they can talk about the tough issues of adolescence and, as Aaron Burton, a quiet young man, now turned one of our star performers put it, “My friend told me to come, and I loved being there.”

We have more than 45 members in our after-school club; we have had more than
120 members at one time. In one room, after school, with all that energy? Yes, and we all work toward one mission: to help make our school a safer place for all.

As eighth grader Catie Groner told me: “I’m in Youth to Youth because I want to stay off the streets and learn how to be drug free.” Catie’s good friend, Melanie Montas, adds, “I know for sure that when I get older I’ll have to go through being offered drugs. By meeting with Y2Y and all the things we do, I get to know the right way to handle those situations.”

Becky Johnson, president of the club at Grafton Middle School, says, “Y2Y is a bunch of fun-loving middle school students who want to learn more about drugs and what they do to us so that we can make a positive difference.” Shelby Pellerito echoes, “I am in Y2Y because I like to help people and get involved in stuff!”

Students in Action

So what do we do in Youth to Youth? I meet with the four club officers several times per year and we plan the meetings. We present ideas and discuss how we think they will work with the group. In addition, we often conduct brainstorming sessions with the club members and then vote on what the majority would like to work on. Some meetings we concentrate on leadership activities. Another time we might do a trust-building exercise, such as conducting trust walks throughout the building. For other meetings, we just have fun and enjoy silly games, such as trying to make someone else smile while you act as silly and goofy as you possibly can (you have three tries while the member has to keep a straight face). Other times we conduct awareness activities, such as setting up an obstacle course and having each member navigate through it while wearing “beer goggles” (simulating what it’s like to be drunk).

There is a very serious side of Youth to Youth as well. We conduct all the drug awareness activities at our school, such as National Red Ribbon Week (celebrated in most schools the last week of October). In the past, we have conducted clothing theme days for the student body to raise awareness and also had group members portray “drugs.” They collected (pre-selected) “victims” from classrooms every two minutes to demonstrate the number of daily deaths due to drug abuse. The “victims” (including administrators and faculty) received an armband, a note explaining their “fate,” and a candle, and returned to class with instructions not to talk for the rest of the day. At the end of the day, the silence is palpable.

Demetrius Williams, a two-year member, summed up his sentiments: “Youth to Youth is important because even in middle school, drugs are everywhere, and students need to be ready and have knowledge of the effects of drugs.”

Students also write and present their own skits. The students find a popular song with a good message and write incredibly moving skits. We have conducted skits about school violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, and drunk driving. In the skits, the students pretend to overdose, to get drunk, and even die in car accidents on stage. Yes, they are middle school students and the skits are always conducted tastefully. But they are also very hard-hitting. The ideas come from the students themselves, and many describe what they have seen and live with every single day.

We perform at schools, businesses, and for state conventions, and the students have won numerous recognitions over the years. Students have contacted me 2, 3, 10, and 20 years later telling me what a lasting, positive difference Youth to Youth has made in their lives. Their legacy continues to profoundly affect mine.  

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Don’t smile until after Christmas.

I’ve always been puzzled, even slightly annoyed, by this informal policy for dealing with students. Some teachers believe they must convey a position of unyielding authority throughout the first several months of the school year in order to set a “who’s the boss” tone.

Even more troubling are those educators who continue to hold back overt happiness or joy, who refuse to display humanity in the classroom—in the form of spontaneous laughter, gentle joking with students, or abounding smiles. It is sad and even detrimental for students to be stuck in these environments.

Brain research suggests that influential, long-term knowledge retention is linked to positive emotions. Good teaching and learning engage feelings, according to Eric Jensen, author of Teaching with the Brain in Mind. Jensen cites dozens of studies that establish the importance of emotion in relation to learning, capturing student attention, and memory.

The way students feel at school is critical to the effectiveness of teaching and learning—a counterpoint to traditionalists who criticize progressive educators and their penchant for being too touchy-feely. Laughter, smiles, and other positive emotions are wonderful elements of our humanity. When teachers model these qualities, this excitement is apt to rub off on students.

It Takes a Person

In what type of classroom are student emotions more likely to be tapped, triggered, or engaged, thus likely to result in more effective teaching and learning? Is it in a classroom with straight rows of desks, much lecturing, low levels of banter, and little interaction between students and teacher? Or is it in a classroom full of spontaneity, laughter, and a sparkle in the instructor’s eye?

I remember milling about in Mr. Larry Wolfe’s classroom, lucky to be a member of the Wolfepack Village. Mr. Wolfe devised a way for eight- and nine-year-olds to claim ownership in this “mini-town,” acting as tax collectors, mayors, wood workers, and bankers. I remember Mr. Wolfe helping us with challenging tasks like balancing our checkbooks, leading sing-a-longs while strumming his acoustic guitar, and being brought to tears as he read us Where the Red Fern Grows. Palpable excitement surged through the room most days as we bustled about, unaware that we were learning so much in the way of academic and social skills.

In eighth grade, Mrs. Lewis brought in candles (probably outlawed these days) and spooky music for our ghost story readings. We loved it. In tenth grade biology, Mr. Browne always had a glint in his eye when introducing a new topic, such as behaviorism. We ended up training rats during class for several weeks. We got into that, too.

Joyful Engagement

As a teacher, I strive to recreate for my own students the feelings like the ones I experienced in these classrooms, knowing that perhaps, they’ll be as turned on to language arts and learning as I was. If laughter and spontaneity explode in my classroom because my students are joyfully engaged with the subject, I am ecstatic.

I’m not proposing a learning environment in which a teacher shouldn’t be stern or serious. Just the other day, a student blurted out an insensitive remark and others laughed. I frowned, pausing in the lesson to explain that these types of comments will not be tolerated, asking the students to think about being in somebody else’s shoes. Of course we can’t exude happiness and passion every day. But if we are able to display humanity and enthusiasm, students are likely to learn more effectively.

According to Parker Palmer, author of The Courage to Teach, great, inspirational teachers may differ in their instructional methods—some may rely on lecture, cooperative learning, or creative chaos, among other techniques—but they do not differ much in their enthusiasm for subject and willingness to expose their humanity, thus likely to trigger positive emotions in students.

Enthusiasm for subject matter won’t necessarily translate to poignant learning experiences for students. The passion, coupled with an openness to explore the tricky job of triggering student attention and emotion, can transform learning experiences for teachers and students.

We must get to the point where laughter and excitement in the classroom shouldn’t be contained in elementary school settings, but celebrated and practiced through middle and high school as well.

Paul Barnwell teaches eight grade language arts at Shelby County East Middle School in Kentucky. E-mail psbarnwell@gmail.com
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Connecting Science to the Real World

By Tam O’Shaughnessy

Despite the fact that science is ubiquitous in everyday life, many students do not know what scientists do, how scientists work, or what makes a “good” scientist. If you ask students to draw a picture of a scientist, most will draw a man who looks like Albert Einstein, wearing a white lab coat and working alone in a lab.

Early adolescence is a critical period for shaping attitudes and outlooks. So in elementary and middle school, we have a tremendous opportunity to dispel such stereotypes and fuel student interest in science.

Here are six practical ways to spark young adolescents’ interest in science and open their eyes to possibilities they may never have imagined.

1. Introduce Diverse Role Models

The perception that all scientists are Caucasian males or nerdy intellectuals has been created and reinforced for many years by movies, television, magazines, newspapers, textbooks, and even parents and teachers.

Introducing diverse, real-life role models is an effective way to interest students in science and inspire them to think about their futures. When we show students real scientists—who look like them—doing real things, they begin to see the range of possibilities. There is no shortage of fascinating women and men making important contributions.

• Rita Colwell, a marine molecular biologist, discovered that filtering water with sari cloth cut cholera by 50% in rural Bangladesh.
• Forest ecologist Rodolfo Dirzo helped uncover the way plants and animals in tropical rainforests adapt to each other.
• Physicist Shirley Ann Jackson ran the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission and is president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Jackson was the second African-American woman to earn a doctorate in physics.
• Building physicist Mahadev Roman designed some of the first environmentally friendly buildings.
• Atmospheric chemist Susan Solomon helped determine that the hole in the ozone over Antarctica was caused by human-made pollution.

Such examples not only dispel stereotypes, but help students imagine themselves as scientists and encourage them to pursue their interests.

2. Connect Science to the Real World

By incorporating the stories of real scientists (their paths to science, their hobbies, and their work) into instruction, teachers can easily connect science to the real world and demonstrate the array of exciting science careers.
Indeed, research has shown that connecting science to the real world is an effective strategy for engaging students in science and math. Showing the relevance of science through case studies of research on environmental or medical topics, for example, can stoke students’ curiosity and sustain their interest—a critical challenge schools face today.

On the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) science test, only 29% of the nation’s fourth and eighth graders, and 18% of twelfth graders scored at or above the Proficient achievement level. Thus, the challenge is not just getting children interested in science, but keeping them interested, particularly at the middle school level.

How can we improve science education and encourage both girls and boys to explore the vast opportunities in science? From astrobiology to zoology, there are infinite ways to show students how science is a part of their world. Invite scientists to the classroom or host a science career day at school. Invite a
- Microbiologist to show students how to extract DNA from a strawberry.
- Astrobiologist to discuss how to look for life on other planets.
- Engineer to show how to build a bungee cord for an egg.
- Physicist to discuss and demonstrate the physics of dance or sports.
- Science writer or environmental reporter to talk about local environmental issues.

Showing students examples of diverse science careers brings science to life and illustrates how science is closely connected to other areas of the curriculum—English, math, history, social studies, art, physical education, and more—to deepen learning.

If practicing scientists are not readily available, there are other resources to supplement science instruction in this area. For example, Sally Ride Science (www.sallyridescience.com) includes information about science careers. Resources such as these show students there are many paths to successful careers in science. Some scientists, for example, switched majors in college several times. Some did not enjoy school or like math. Some had no clue what they wanted to do with their lives when they were young, while others had a clear goal and achieved it.

3. Map Students’ Interests and Goals

Encourage students to think about their futures and help students get to know themselves better. Ask students to evaluate their strengths, values, and interests. It is never too soon for students to start planning their futures. Many scientists found their careers by doing what they love and following their interests.

Here are some questions to get students started:
- What subjects fascinate you?
- What is your dream career? (Name two or three.)
- What do you naturally do well?
- What local, national, or world issues interest you?
- What is the most satisfying thing you’ve ever done?
- If you knew you couldn’t fail, what would you most like to do?

Then, ask students to map their short- and long-term goals, from classes and student activities like music and sports, to college majors and careers.

4. Include Hands-on Activities

To help students stay engaged, integrate hands-on activities and long-term projects into existing science lesson plans. Ask students to work in teams. Collaboration is a key part of science and an important skill in most areas of life.

Create after-school clubs for science, engineering, math, or technology. Digging into science in an informal social setting makes it fun and creates a looser environment to think, wonder, and explore. Studies show informal science helps keep students—especially girls—engaged in science.

5. Create a Gender-Equitable Classroom

While no teacher wants to discourage students’ interests, some unconsciously do so through their own ideas about science and gender roles. Fortunately, there is a lot teachers can do to demonstrate to all students they can excel in science.
To help students develop a positive attitude about science:
- Assume both girls and boys are interested in and capable of excelling in science. Encourage students to get excited about science.
- Examine your own views about science, math, and gender. Have you ever unintentionally conveyed messages that may reinforce gender stereotypes?
- Cultivate a sense of belonging in science. Are textbooks, posters, and other materials gender balanced? Do they present female and male role models?
- Create a risk-friendly classroom to encourage all students to get involved. Arrange desks in a U-shape or pods.
- Foster participation. Wait three to five seconds before calling on someone to answer a question. Keep track to ensure all students participate. Or, write each student’s name on a Popsicle stick and randomly pull them from a jar until all students have participated.

6. Connect with Parents
Parents play a vital role in developing and supporting their children’s academic achievement and career aspirations. Yet, many parents do not know there are many levels of education for scientists or about the vast opportunities.

To encourage parent involvement and promote a positive image of science at home, assign science homework that requires parent participation. Provide resources for parents—such as Web sites, books, or community science centers—to help them take a more active role in their children’s schoolwork.

Tying It All Together
Whether or not students decide to explore a science career, science skills are an essential part of everyday life. Science is a way of understanding our world. It is about asking questions and searching for answers.

Many skills students use every day are the skills of a scientist—observing; asking questions; gathering, interpreting, and sharing information; and coming up with new questions. These are important skills, no matter what career a student pursues.

Battling Obesity: A Community Affair
By Mimi Lynch

After reading Nora Howley’s article, “Make the Investment in School Wellness Initiatives” (Middle Ground, April 2008), I was compelled to share what the team of seventh grade teachers at the Jordan Road School in Somers Point, New Jersey, has undertaken to address the rising rate of childhood obesity.

Last year, the teachers chose nutrition and fitness as one of their annual cross-curricular projects. As a kick-off to the unit, the students watched Super Size Me, the admittedly extreme but convincing film that documents the connection between diet and chronic disease. Each teacher then planned activities that promoted wellness through diet and fitness. For example,
- The social studies classes conducted mock trials arguing corporate vs. personal responsibility for obesity.
- The writing class wrote and performed nutrition “raps” and Letterman’s Top Ten nutrition picks.
- The industrial arts students developed healthy menus for space explorers while the science students conducted food science experiments.
- In math class, the students calculated and graphed the percentage of the recommended dietary allowance they were actually consuming.
- Family and consumer science students used their skills in reading nutrition facts labels to modify a recipe and create a “healthier” trail mix bar.
- The health students researched the benefits of exercise and the physical education students produced a fitness DVD.
- The unit culminated with a Community Health Fair showcasing the students’ work. The fair, open to the entire community, also featured local health and wellness professionals such as fitness trainers, yoga and massage experts, a dental hygienist, a chiropractor, and an anti-smoking group. One local hospital conducted screenings and the other provided community outreach services in the areas of women’s health and child health and wellness.
- The evening was all about food and fitness. The seventh grade students prepared and served healthy snacks as well as the trail mix bars. A guest chef demonstrated an alternative to fast food and the teachers prepared and served Make Ahead Meals. A smoothie station kept the guests refreshed.
- The fitness DVD played on a giant screen TV and copies were distributed to attendees. The rock climbing wall and student-developed fitness games entertained the young participants.
- The evening was a huge success, with more than 95% of our students and their parents participating. The second annual health fair was even larger with the addition of student cooking demonstrations, and a hands-on cooking class for “little chefs.”

Getting kids to adopt a healthier lifestyle is an endless struggle, but there are endless possibilities for addressing this critical need. I am fortunate to work with a creative, energetic group of professionals who are up to the challenge and a supportive administration that appreciates the efforts of the seventh grade team.

Mimi Lynch is a family and consumer science teacher at Jordan Road School in Somers Point, New Jersey. E-mail mimilynch6@yahoo.com

Tam O’Shaughnessy is chief operating officer and executive vice president for Sally Ride Science (www.sallyridescience.com).
Bacteria growing in the human body, projectile vomiting, and diarrhea—all engaging topics for young adolescents, and all part of a food safety unit that teaches students about microbiology, proper hygiene, exponential growth, basic statistics, and socio-economic geography. Oh, and it also hones their nonfiction reading comprehension skills.

Why teach an interdisciplinary unit on food safety in middle school? The American Dietetics Association asserts that today’s youth are more at risk of contracting a foodborne illness than previous generations. Therefore, the more they know about the proper way to handle food, the less likely they—and the people around them—will get sick.

*Food Safety in the Classroom* is an interdisciplinary unit that wraps food safety concepts around state standards for science, math, social studies, and language arts. This curriculum, funded by the USDA’s National Integrated Food Safety Initiative and administered by the University of Tennessee’s Food Science and Technology Department, was designed to improve food safety education among middle school students and offers middle school teachers the opportunity to couple standards-based science activities with interdisciplinary instruction.

In addition, the program directly addresses three *This We Believe* characteristics:

1. Relevant, challenging, integrative, exploratory curriculum
2. Active learning
3. Health, wellness, and safety.

Pilot tests of the curriculum indicate that the lessons and activities raise student content knowledge and significantly improve food handling. In addition, teachers who have used the curriculum describe their students as very engaged in the topic. One teacher shared that she sees “changes in student behavior as a result of this program. They share *E. coli* breakouts in the news and discuss these among themselves as well, so students are listening to the news and discussing more.”

The interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum also is appealing as a means of providing students the opportunity to connect concepts across disciplines. One teacher explains that “the interrelation of material allows students to deal with all subject matter and make connections. It gives kids a chance to see how it all fits together so they see the forest and the trees.”

**Anatomy of the Unit**

The food safety science lessons and activities are organized based on the inquiry approach of engage, explore, explain, elaborate, and evaluate.

First, students rate how clean they believe their hands are on a scale of 1 to 10 and then list the last 10 things they touched since washing their hands. Student responses are varied and often surprising: hair, other people, locker, shoes, guinea pigs, bathroom pass, trash can. Many students admit that they haven’t washed their hands at all that day.

Through discussion, students begin to understand that they are exposed to hundreds of contaminated surfaces in the course of a normal day. Now they are ready to draw connections between the bacteria on these surfaces and the transfer from their hands to their food.

To explore the importance of hand washing, students conduct a lab experiment in which they test the effects...
of various hand-washing techniques. Students establish a control plate by imprinting their unwashed hands onto the surface of the Petri plate. They imprint their other hand on a treatment plate after having performed one of three hand-washing treatments: 1) cold water with no soap for 5 seconds, 2) warm water with soap for 20 seconds, and 3) hand sanitizer only.

Throughout the lab, students practice the scientific method by creating hypotheses, observing their plates, and collecting data for two days. Students also adhere to standard laboratory protocols, including using gloves, sanitizing all work areas, and washing hands thoroughly.

Once the data collection is complete (after plates have incubated at room temperature for 48 hours), the data is aggregated to reflect class totals. From these aggregated totals, students discuss discrepancies in the data, make suggestions to improve the procedures to ensure greater reliability in future experiments, draw conclusions, and make recommendations on the most effective means of hand washing.

Making Connections

Now it’s time to discuss the connection to food safety and improved health. To activate prior knowledge and provide a scaffold upon which to build future learning, the teacher acts as a facilitator to help students create a concept map of their existing knowledge of bacteria. Common responses include: you need a microscope to see them, they can make you sick, they grow everywhere, and they are used to make medicines.

The teacher then leads students through an interactive PowerPoint presentation that introduces students to basic concepts about bacteria, such as how bacteria look like, how they reproduce, how they eat, what are helpful bacteria, what a pathogen is, how they can avoid a pathogen.

To apply and synthesize their new knowledge, students work in small groups to consider the results of their hand-washing experiment and create a list of things about which they would like to learn more. From this list, students choose the one topic that intrigues them the most and rephrase that topic into a researchable question. They then brainstorm research procedures that would allow them to answer their researchable question and design a simple experiment.

Finally, students write an appropriate hypothesis for their experiment. Many students have used these experiment designs for local science fair projects. While not as objectively scored as a traditional pen and paper test, this assessment more accurately evaluates students’ abilities to think critically and synthesize acquired knowledge about bacteria.

Assessing Knowledge

Students work in small groups to consider the results of their hand-washing experiment and create a list of things about which they would like to learn more. From this list, students choose the one topic that intrigues them the most and rephrase that topic into a researchable question. They then brainstorm research procedures that would allow them to answer their researchable question and design a simple experiment.

Finally, students write an appropriate hypothesis for their experiment. Many students have used these experiment designs for local science fair projects. While not as objectively scored as a traditional pen and paper test, this assessment more accurately evaluates students’ abilities to think critically and synthesize acquired knowledge about bacteria.

Across the Curriculum

Using inquiry learning as an organizational method, the science activities in the Food Safety in the Classroom curriculum allow students to assume the role of scientists as they experiment, learn more about bacteria, and generate new avenues for learning. These activities are part of a larger interdisciplinary unit on food safety. Supplemental and complementary activities were also designed for math, language arts, and social studies.

In math, students use modeling clay to demonstrate bacterial growth as a model of exponential growth, apply knowledge of exponential growth to solve real-world food safety scenarios, explore concepts of scale through the creation of scale models that correspond to the magnifications commonly found on school microscopes (4x, 10x, and 40x), and apply basic statistics to analyze bacterial growth on Petri plates from their science experiment.

The language arts component includes a jigsaw cooperative learning activity to teach students the four core concepts of food safety (cook, chill, separate, and clean) and then asks students to apply that knowledge by evaluating scenarios to find food-handling mistakes. In addition, students research nonfiction reading materials to gather information about foodborne illness that they then use to write a press release educating their community about the risks and ways to prevent outbreaks of foodborne illnesses.

Finally, social studies activities focus on informational research by investigating recent outbreaks of foodborne illness around the world. Students identify significant outbreaks and gather standard of living information for each country affected. They then draw connections between outbreaks of foodborne illnesses and countries’ standards of living to determine what, if any, patterns exist. As a concluding activity, students bring these outbreaks into a geo-spatial context by creating outbreak maps.

Complete lesson plans and activities from Food Safety in the Classroom are available at www.foodsafetyintheclassroom.org
Teams in Action

Collaborating Across the Miles

Meghan McNeeley

Even after eight years of teaching middle school, I still think teacher collaboration can be elusive. I am not obsessively secretive about my classroom teaching practices or particular lessons, but time to truly collaborate, plan, and strategize with my co-teachers is easier said than done.

With that in mind, nearly two years ago I participated in a program in which I was required to collaborate extensively with two other teachers. The three of us created what is now one of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Belfer Exemplary Lessons, proving that teacher collaboration is priceless, necessary, and possible, no matter what the circumstances.

In 2006, I became a Museum Teacher Fellow with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Fellows in previous years were required to create a Holocaust-based outreach project for their community, but we, the 2006-2007 fellows, were required to do something entirely different. We were grouped with other teacher fellows who lived in our region and instructed to create one lesson that could be taught in any middle school or high school English or history class in a 45-minute period. Of course, we also were required to satisfy national standards and standards in our particular states.

We were grouped with other teacher fellows who lived in our region and instructed to create one lesson that could be taught in any middle school or high school English or history class in a 45-minute period. Of course, we also were required to satisfy national standards and standards in our particular states.

We were to create the lesson collaboratively, teach the lesson, critique the lesson, and improve the lesson. So it began…

Thrown Together

Three teachers from Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina embarked on a voyage with seemingly no end in sight. We’d never worked together—we’d met in Washington, D.C., four days before being grouped together. We all had very different styles of teaching. We taught in very different environments with very different students. We taught different levels (high school and middle school) and different subjects (history and English).

These were not ideal situations for collaboration, but we had no choice. We knew that whenever teachers collaborate, they face obstacles. For this process—indeed any collaborative process—to be truly effective, the group must be willing to keep the focus on the lesson and the students, which is exactly what the process of Lesson Study intends.

We left Washington, D.C., for our respective classrooms with deadlines established and a scheduled time to meet in Georgia. From August to October we intended to inundate one another with e-mails, phone calls, and postings on BASE CAMP, an online database created for the Museum Fellows to communicate ideas, documents, messages, and even “chat.” In reality, the communiqués between us were few and far between.

Our saving grace was the Georgia work weekend. The communiqués that had previously ebbed now flowed as our time together neared. We shared information gathered, as well as ideas for strategy and coordination.

In the day and a half that we worked side by side, the concrete lesson began to take shape and we realized that the key for us to work together was to be together. True, other Museum Teacher Fellowship regional groups never saw each other throughout the months leading up to the actual teaching of the lesson, and their lessons are still brilliant. But being together worked best for us and so we planned for another work weekend.
For the next work weekend, the Georgia and South Carolina Fellows again met in Georgia; Mississippi joined via telephone. After four months of planning and plotting, researching and reading, we changed everything.

But teachers have to be prepared for that. We all know how quickly plans can change in the classroom, how rapidly (instantly, even) we must alter a lesson to meet the needs of the students at hand. The same holds true in Lesson Study. Maintaining focus on the lesson and what works best for students means being prepared to start over again, if necessary.

Getting It Right

We genuinely wanted a lesson that was flexible enough for any teacher and could be taught within the parameter laid out for us by the Museum: in any middle school or high school language arts or history classroom.

Our original lesson was not satisfying those needs. In our desperate attempt to preserve this lesson for grades 6-12, English and history, we had to question everything. The result was a revamped lesson that addresses the question: Why didn’t anyone do anything to stop the Nazis? It examines the role of bystanders in the Holocaust, but it also establishes a chronology of events leading to what students know of the Holocaust—Auschwitz and the atrocities of the concentration camps—and it stops there.

Following the change in the lesson topic we continued to work to perfect it. We e-mailed, called, and posted vigorously. We adapted, changed, rewrote, altered, and edited our lesson and its activities many times. The fact that we were separated by hundreds of miles meant nothing. The most important aspect of Lesson Study was looming just ahead of us—the teaching of the lesson—and we were determined to be ready.

The key to this kind of collaboration is not merely to write the lesson together, but to improve it together. To do that, we had to observe students as the lesson was being taught and question everything again. In February 2007, all converged on Georgia’s middle school English classroom for the first “run-through” of the lesson. It was taught as written and the observers—the Mississippi and South Carolina teachers, and the two directors from the Museum in Washington—noted the students’ reactions and results.

We then debriefed the lesson, looking at what was working and what wasn’t, what needed to change or be improved, what could stay the same, what was confusing, and what we needed to do next.

By always keeping our focus on our students and on the lesson, criticism in the debriefing was not difficult to hear. Understandably, teachers often take censure personally because we are the ones in front presenting the material, but the process of Lesson Study removes that affect. The spotlight is trained on the lesson itself. The students, their reactions to the material, and their performance with regard to the lesson are key, not the presenter.

We continued to refine the lesson based on the Georgia teaching and debriefing, and then again for Mississippi and South Carolina, each time following the protocol of observing and debriefing the lesson.

Making Connections

The lesson, called The Road to Auschwitz, improved with each teaching, and though we did vary the lesson only slightly to accommodate our own individual styles, the students’ reactions remained similar. We discovered that all students, from average eighth graders to high school AP History students, connected with this lesson in a very personal way.

Achieving this connection has always been a challenge when teaching the Holocaust, but The Road to Auschwitz granted students the freedom to discuss, deliberate, and debate without the possibility of being wrong.

Without the input from one another—our different experiences, our different student populations, our different grade levels and content areas—we might never have created a lesson such as this on our own.

Since May 2007, we have presented our lesson at numerous national and regional workshops and seminars for middle school and high school teachers of the Holocaust. The nine other Museum Teacher Fellows in the three other regions also completed truly amazing and exemplary lessons using the method of Lesson Study. (Their work includes lessons on the other victims of the Holocaust, the question of bombing Auschwitz, and Nazi policies that made Jewish citizens outcasts.)

Lessons in Lesson Study

We have proven that this process works. We overcame every obstacle and every excuse anyone might have for collaboration—other commitments, time, proximity, subject/content area, teaching level, varying standards, time allotted in the classroom—to create a lesson that is being shared with teachers, worldwide.

Collaborative teaching and planning is the foundation of the middle school design, and Lesson Study is an ideal way to maximize that foundation. Try it in your own schools and your own classrooms. Work with those inside or outside your building. Use e-mails. Make phone calls. Plan a working weekend. Observe it. Talk about it. Improve it. Do it again. Share it.

Meghan McNeely, a 2007 Museum Teacher Fellow with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, has been teaching eighth grade English-Language Arts for eight years at Clarke Middle School in Athens, Georgia. E-mail mcnemley@clarke.k12.ga.us.

Meghan and co-Fellows Laura Boughton, a history teacher at South Panola High School in Batesville, Mississippi, and Cynthia Capers, a history teacher at Lexington High School in Lexington, South Carolina (now associate director of education at the Holocaust Museum Houston in Houston, Texas), created the Belfer Exemplary Lesson entitled The Road to Auschwitz. To find out more about the Museum Teacher Fellowship and the Belfer Exemplary Lessons, visit www.ushmm.org.
Nora Ephron’s 2006 book, I Feel Bad about My Neck, not only tickled my funny bone, it gave me an insightful glimpse of myself. Made up of 15 essays that broach familiar topics that plague busy, modern women, the book included one essay that seemed to have my name written on it. “I Hate My Purse” describes my own purse with uncanny accuracy: that “filthy, bulging purse containing numerous things you don’t need—and couldn’t find if you did.”

Ephron suggests that our purses are actually reflections of other areas in our lives. For some of us, our purses reflect that we are hopelessly disorganized and encumbered by our inability to throw anything away.

I’m not sure if there’s any hope for my purse, but thanks to easy-to-use technology tools such as del.icio.us (www.delicious.com), Furl (www.furl.net), Diigo (www.diigo.com), and StumbleUpon (www.stumbleupon.com), I am optimistic about improving the organization of my computer Favorites.

Since last summer, I have been using a free social bookmarking Web application called del.icio.us to save and organize my bookmarks. After registering for a free user account, I downloaded a del.icio.us button to my computer toolbar. Now when I come across a Web site I want to save, I just click the del.icio.us button and it saves the site’s Web address to my online account. It didn’t take me long to realize that this organizational tool had the potential to revolutionize my ability to manage and access my bookmarks by storing them online so I can connect to them from any computer.

**Those Terrific Tags**

By using the tagging feature on del.icio.us, I take a moment to think about the keywords that I want to classify this Web site by so I can find it when I want to access it again. If I decide to make my bookmarks public, these tags become the “breadcrumbs” that will lead me and others back to the resources I’ve saved on my del.icio.us account. And, I can search other resources that have that tag assigned to it.

Tagging information resources introduces us to a new way of looking at information storage and retrieval. For the first time it may become, according to the Educause Learning Initiative, “less important to know and remember where information was found and more important to know how to retrieve it using a framework created by and shared with peers and colleagues.”

**In Plain English**

Get started with a short video introduction to the concept of social bookmarking at www.youtube.com/watch?v=x66jV7GocNU. It’s not only an informative video that gives you the basics, it’s fun to watch.


Add eight more things to know at www.free-press-release.com/blog/133/8-things-you-should-know-about-social-bookmarking

Learn why educator Doug Johnson calls the online bookmarking site del.icio.us a poster child for what is referred to as Web 2.0. Check it out at www.education-world.com/a_tech/columnists/johnson/johnson017.shtml.

Drowning in bookmarks? Consider using Diigo, a social bookmarking tool that some suggest is del.icio.us taken to the nth degree! Learn more about the application and how it can help educators at www.edsupport.cc/mguhin/share/index.php?n=Anthology.


Head over to the YouTube video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlqfJsmjC0s&feature=related to learn even more about social bookmarking and Diigo.

I may be a lost cause in organizing my purse, but you can be sure my Web life is getting organized. Give these social bookmarking sites a try!

Brenda A. Dyck

Brenda A. Dyck is the moderator of NMSA’s Middle Talk listserve and is an instructor on the faculty of education at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. E-mail dyckba@shaw.ca
Helping Kids Build Skills that Make a Difference

New Programs from the American Red Cross

Babysitter's Training Now Available

The American Red Cross Babysitter’s Training course gives 11 to 15 year olds the skills and confidence to be great babysitters. Through hands-on activities, interactive video and lively discussions, the course teaches young people how to:

- Care for children and infants
- Be good leaders and role models
- Make good decisions, solve problems and stay safe
- Handle emergencies such as illnesses, injuries and household accidents
- Write resumes and interview for jobs

Become a Red Cross authorized provider and teach Babysitter’s Training when and where you want. Your staff can be certified as instructors in as little as 4 hours. They can also add on training to teach First Aid/CPR/AED to youth and staff.

To learn more about Babysitter’s Training:

- Contact your local American Red Cross chapter
- View a short online presentation at www.RedCross.org/services/hss/courses/bst.html

COMING SPRING 2009

Newly Revised Swimming and Water Safety Program
I have two fears about formative assessment:

First, unless we're careful, it will become a buzz phrase lost to the cacophony of jargon that surrounds every teacher, thus generating indifference.

Second, many educators, including whole school districts, think they are incorporating formative assessment when they are not. This spreads cynicism regarding what should be a very healthy and non-negotiable tool of learning.

Let's do what we can to make sure these fears don't see the light of day.

True formative assessment is not safe or passive; it provokes. It compels a response in the teacher and student. "You earned a 92%, Joel," says the teacher as she passes back test papers. "Better than most of the class." There's no spark that ignites further contemplation. There's no specific feedback, no invitation to engage with the results or the material any further. The assessment was instructionally inert.

"Let's explore this section here," says the teacher, pointing to the middle of the student's lab write-up. "You claim that you identified all dependent and independent variables, but I couldn't find any mention of the water's salinity. Can you help me find it? If we look at this and find you forgot about salinity, what will you have to adjust in the lab to prove you understand the roles of independent and dependent variables?"

Here, the feedback is contextualized and the student is given the opportunity to revise his thinking and subsequent performance in light of that feedback. There's no comparing students to other students, and there's no giving tests just to have enough grades in the grade book. This assessment is an opportunity for progress, not a declaration of deficiency.

Notice the focus on the standards or learner outcomes in the second example. This is key. Over the years, I noticed that students who repeatedly struggled were the least likely to know where they stood against the lesson's goals. Students who did well were more likely to know the lesson's goals and where they stood against them. Frequent formative assessment provides this awareness. When I give struggling students information about the lesson's goals and their personal progress toward them each week, their learning improves.

Beyond the Format

When colleagues ask me to show them an example of both a formative and a summative assessment so they know how to design each kind, I show them the same assessment task. It's not the format that makes an assessment formative or summative; it's when we give the assessment and how we use the data from it that makes it formative or summative.

Formative assessments happen during the course of learning and summative assessments happen after the learning is done. Teachers could use an official final exam as a formative assessment during the unit of study if they used the scores on the exam to adjust later instruction, and, after taking it, the students could go back, learn from their mistakes, and take a new exam to better demonstrate their updated competencies.

Formative assessments are purposeful and ongoing checks for understanding that cause teachers to revise instruction based on assessment data and cause students to learn more ways to learn. Just as importantly, teachers give students opportunities to pursue those new strategies.

Because of their immediate applications to the current learning sequence, most formative assessments tend to be shorter than summative versions, but not always. They assess focused areas of the curriculum. This way, teachers can consider their results quickly as they make weekly and sometimes daily instructional decisions.

Half- to one-page quick writes, exit cards, oral responses to clarifying questions, thumbs-up/down, buttons pressed on audience response system "clickers," metaphor/analogy generation, completing graphic organizers, observing body...
language and facial expressions, practice problems/sentences, skill demonstrations, and think-alouds are all examples of useful formative assessments.

Summative assessments can use these same tools, of course, but they tend to encompass more curriculum and take longer to consider—but not always.

Summative assessments can be just as cut-to-the-chase short as formative assessments, and formative assessments can require students to weave together complex understanding and applications, just like summative ones. The difference is to what degree the assessment shapes subsequent instruction and student growth.

Formative assessment almost rivals the quality of the teacher when it comes to its positive impact on students’ learning. For many of my own students, it is formative assessment that creates the most transformation, particularly with diverse populations. It’s the in-route assessments that change everything, so much so, that we should be able to see formal formative assessments listed in our daily lesson plans.

If we don’t see them there, the lessons aren’t as powerful as we think they are.

**Transforming Assessment**

Ideas for formative assessments usually come from teachers breaking down the standards or outcomes required in the summative assessments. This means we should design the summative assessments first, basing them on the standards or outcomes. Then, we break off smaller pieces of those summative tasks/prompts to use for our formative assessments during instruction. For example:

**Summative Assessment:** The student will translate a paragraph written in English into Spanish, accounting for correct vocabulary, verb conjugation, sentence structure, and other nuances of the Spanish language.

**Formative Assessment:** The student conjugates regular and irregular verbs, translates single sentences, defines vocabulary terms, identifies errors in others’ translations and corrects them, justifies pronoun/verb/noun/adjective sequences, and receives descriptive feedback about his performance with each element.

Anything can be broken down into focus areas for formative assessments, and by tying them closely to summative assessments, we create a clear picture of students’ readiness and what we need to provide next in their development.

Will students have to think of novel applications of a concept on the final exam? During instruction, we provide frequent formative assessments dealing with “curve balls” in applying the concepts. Will students have to write a compare-and-contrast essay? We give them ample formative assessments on each portion of essay writing: drafting introductions, body paragraphs, conclusions, transitions, revisions, as well as assessing their capacity to identify substantive similarities and differences.

**About the Grades**

Formative assessment isn’t graded. It can be marked, but not with letter grades or percentages. If we have to grade it for some reason, we make sure it isn’t included in the final summative report of students’ performance against standards, i.e., academic achievement grades on report cards.

For formative assessment to be effective, students must feel free to explore content without fear that their first and continued wrestling with new ideas are the final declarations of their proficiencies with those ideas. This not only diminishes learning, it’s unethical because the grade is inaccurate. Letter grades and percentage are associated with final declarations of mastery, not the early and ongoing explorations of students moving toward that mastery.

Some teachers claim that students won’t do assignments if they aren’t graded. My response to this issue is four-fold:

1. We can comment on these assessments, just not letter grade them. We give students very clear feedback that will serve them better than an abstract symbol ever will. We record these comments somewhere for documentation purposes.

2. We can change our assignments. We can make them compelling enough to warrant students’ investment of time and energy.

3. Students want to be productive; they’re wired that way. When they are not productive, there’s something going on we need to investigate and help resolve:

   - Time management issues?
   - Auditory processing issue?
   - Intimidation?
   - Test anxiety?
   - Trouble at home?
   - Students struggle to complete work?

   It’s usually not for unimportant reasons.

4. Grades are poor motivators. It’s a mistake to think that students do tasks simply because of a lure or threat of grades.

   The instructional power of formative assessments is too important to diminish because we felt compelled to put a grade or percentage on a formative experience.

   We should be strong enough to keep formative assessment instructional. An emphasis on formative assessment also translates into a focus on student self-assessment. To provide the timely and helpful feedback associated with formative assessment, the assessment can’t be limited to the teacher’s one perspective. The students will need to do a lot more assessing.

**Making the Right Noise**

Just like most important elements in sound instruction, formative assessment is a mindset. A basic tenet of this mindset is that teaching and learning are interactive, not one-way streets. Students learn how to learn for themselves using teacher and classmate connections, and teachers adjust instruction in light of evidence gathered in assessments.

Now we have to make a decision: Do we do whatever it takes to keep formative assessment on our radar scope this school year, or do we let it slip into the land of wishful thinking, only to be brought to life during teacher evaluation cycles? There’s enough going for it, including its real impact on students’ personal lives, to keep our scope sharply focused on formative assessment.

Let’s do it correctly, and let’s still the education-speak cacophony with formative assessment’s clear high notes—critical elements of successful middle level instruction.

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Mark of Leadership

Creating Magic in the Middle

Tom Burton

Like most people, I love magic. I love watching in awe as a magician disappears, narrowly escapes the “saw of death,” or baffles me with a flying card.

However, as we all know, the magician doesn’t just disappear and the card can’t possibly fly through the glass window. The illusions are incredible, but that’s all they are: illusions.

I believe that true magic is what happens each and every day in middle schools around the world. Helping students learn new things, challenging students to reach levels previously unknown, lighting a fire within (as William Butler Yeats describes teaching), recognizing the true gifts of colleagues and students alike.

Magic is what we believe to be possible, and I believe that by creating magical moments we leave behind a legacy that will make us proud. I also believe that there are six characteristics of great teachers that help create and sustain magical moments:

1. Start with the end in mind.

   Remember Mr. Holland’s Opus? Mr. Holland didn’t get into education to make a difference in the lives of his students. He was just passing time until he finished his opus.

   Every time I think about the movie, I laugh at the fact that he went into education because of the money. Although he never dreamed of such a long career in education, once he believed in his students, he focused on the end. He dreamed of great performances and worked to make them happen. Along the way, in a storied career, he left an indelible legacy.

   Great teachers start with the end in mind. After all, how do you know how to get there if you don’t know where you are going? From the lessons we design to the games we coach and the activities we advise, we must always start with the end in mind. How do you want to be remembered?

2. Focus on the solutions, not the problem.

   Once we recognize a problem is a problem, we must devote our energy to finding a solution. Far too often, we are paralyzed by our problems. Hunter Campbell “Patch” Adams, M.D., whose story was told in the movie Patch Adams, was able to look past problems and focus on solutions. As a result, he often found solutions to cases that stumped his medical colleagues because he was willing to look at alternatives. Great teachers find ways to help all students succeed.

   Patch Adams knew it; we should, too.

   The day-to-day grind can lead us down the path of negativity, especially if we don’t feel supported or appreciated. However, staying positive and focusing on solutions puts us in a better place mentally, and ultimately will lead us to a solution and perhaps a better workplace environment.

3. Make the most of the time you have each and every day.

   I didn’t need the movie School of Life to remind me that life goes too fast. We lose family members, friends, and colleagues in the blink of an eye. However, the movie...
did drive home the point that we must use every minute of the day to reach students.

Class periods, semesters, and school years go by much too fast. Yes, some years seem to drag on because of "that kid" or "that class," but just imagine the impact you might have had on those students had you been given more time.

As a young teacher I gave students a couple of free minutes at the end of each class because, I said, the class worked hard and it was only a couple of minutes. Yet by the end of the day or week I would yearn for more time, not realizing that I had all the time I needed. I just had to use the time wisely.

We all need to use our time wisely. Plan accordingly and make the best use of the time every day. After all, once the clock stops ticking, we can’t rewind it!

4. Be able to shift and be innovative, yet stay on course.

The Emperor Penguins are a great example!

In the movie March of the Penguins, we watch the incredible yearly journey of the Emperor Penguins as they make their way across the cold tundra of the South Pole. Even though the ice is constantly changing (reminds me of state and federal mandates) beneath the penguins’ feet, they consistently reach their destination, time after time. Regardless of the roadblocks—and there are many—the penguins keep their eyes focused on the goal.

One of my favorite quotes is "the only constant is change." With that in mind, we must always search for the best way to reach our students and be prepared to change quickly if we need to.

5. Advocate for all students.

That means ALL students.

In the movie Radio, an entire community rallied behind an intellectually disabled young man whom many believed didn’t have a future or much of a life. But it took the efforts of an advocate who was willing to fight for what was right to bring the community together.

The advocate was the head coach of a very successful high school football team. He watched his players torment Radio. Feeling guilty for the way his football players treated Radio, the coach invited him to help at practice. He included Radio in activities. Radio eventually was considered a part of the team and was accepted by the players, yet many community members and school employees believed he was a distraction. The coach held his ground, continuing to involve Radio in team activities, and eventually resigning when the community refused to accept Radio. In an emotional good-bye, the coach reminded everyone that “we aren’t the ones who’ve been teaching Radio. Radio was the one teaching us.”

As advocates for all students, we must stand strong and continue to push for what we know is best for our students. Regardless of ability and emotional level, all of our students need advocates. If we don’t advocate for our students, who will?

6. Leave a legacy.

You leave a legacy every day. The way you treat your students, colleagues, and parents will ultimately define your legacy. Your efforts can change the world. The movie Pay It Forward demonstrated how one assignment can, indeed, change the world.

Hardly an Illusion

It is easy to lose focus and forget about the big picture as we face our daily challenges. When we are feeling down and perhaps question whether we are making a difference, we must start anew and be re-energized. We must remember that our students need our help, deserve our very best every day, and will flourish with our nurturing.

Our job, quite frankly, never ends, and that is why it is daunting. However, we are rewarded every day as we see the connections being forged between students, between students and adults, and between students and content.

As we attempt to balance an incredible work load, grading papers at all hours of the night, modifying lessons to reach all students, creating new and engaging lessons, remember that we are paying it forward every day. When students see us helping others, they are more likely to be willing to lend a helping hand.

Let’s continue to create magic in the middle!

———

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Teaching Kids to Change the World: Lessons to Inspire Social Responsibility for Grades 6–12

It is all too easy to be cynical about the state of education in the United States these days, with the emphasis on standardized, lockstep teaching approaches and a focus on mastering “the basics.” Nevertheless, few teachers dedicate themselves to middle level education without believing that their mission is to prepare their students, not just to be successful standardized test-takers, but also to be socially responsible citizens of a democratic society.

National Middle School Association, in This We Believe, calls on middle schools to provide curricula that help early adolescent learners “achieve the attitudes and behaviors needed for a full, productive, and satisfying life.” For many educators, these “attitudes” include an awareness of and empathetic response to social and/or environmental challenges, and the “behaviors” include actively striving to make the world a better place.

That is the position of the authors of Teaching Kids to Change the World. They have identified eight principles of change to share with students, along with more than two dozen lessons, activities, discussion questions, and resources designed to help them move from awareness to responsible activism.

An ideal way to use this book would be within the context of a middle school advisory program. Over time, students would explore what it truly means to be a responsible citizen and how to develop realistic decision-making skills, including weighing the consequences of well-intended but not-well-thought-out actions, learning to build consensus and form alliances, and making the difficult choices involving tradeoffs when trying to solve social or environmental problems.

Clearly, the authors do not want teachers to involve students in a superficial set of discussions or a series of do-good activities such as food drives and stream cleanups. Their goal is to develop in students an understanding of social responsibility that is sustainable, meaningful, and long-lived.

Review by Howard M. Miller, a professor of education at Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, New York.

A Reflective Planning Journal for School Leaders

Effective and efficient planning can be a savior for school leaders as they face the ever-increasing demands of their daily jobs. Jorgenson’s A Reflective Planning Journal for School Leaders is a perfect month-by-month planning guide that can help ease the complexities of the principalship.

Each month offers pertinent themes to guide individual professional development and reflective practice. Award-winning elementary and secondary school principals offer sage advice to help leaders prioritize their schedules.

While such wisdom is most valuable, the book’s best feature is its flexibility. The author provides ample space and opportunities for users to log their own thoughts and concerns relative to the aforementioned insights.

I particularly like the monthly To Do list of widely held principal duties that can be a checklist, a reminder, or a doable goal. The inspirational quotes are just plain fun for personal reflection.

Perhaps the most helpful feature is the weekly reflective journal where school leaders can write their own responses to thought-provoking statements. Then, this journal becomes a personal account that, reviewed yearly, can provide a personal growth plan. I encourage users to note in the margins particular events that happened in their schools. Comparing these notes from year to year can be the beginnings of a frequency scattergram that may forewarn principals of possible future problems.

While the insights and tips from award-winning principals were of some interest, they truly could have been said by many outstanding school leaders. Quality leadership comes from the application of professed personal values consistently adhered to over a period of time. Experience is truly a valued teacher for all successful principals. In using this journal, I encourage principals to add the experiences of their veteran colleagues. A rich compendium of insight, reflection, advice, and wisdom will be the reward.

Review by William J. Grobe, an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina.
Differentiating Reading Instruction: How to Teach Reading to Meet the Needs of Each Student

Bestselling author Laura Robb combines practical and theoretical knowledge from teaching and educational consulting to create an easy-to-use book for educators who are interested in developing effective differentiated reading practices that engage all learners. Perhaps what is most beneficial about Robb’s book is that she begins by addressing the problems associated with reading instruction; provides a sound theoretical framework as well as data that reveals how and why reading needs to be personally differentiated; and, most importantly, shares how teachers can implement useful differentiated reading approaches that motivate students to become authentically engaged in reading.

Noting that teachers feel increasing pressure to ensure that students perform high on standardized tests, Robb acknowledges that the present climate may cause some teachers to shut down and just rely on streamline approaches that provide little beyond the routine. In the meantime, students may become bored and frustrated. She says that teachers can continue to deliver an engaging and differentiated reading curriculum that meets the standards yet still promotes higher order thinking and high engagement for diverse groups of learners.

To increase engagement, units of differentiated reading instruction must be carefully planned. Robb outlines the vital components of reading instruction, such as read-alouds, multiple texts, independent reading time, tiered reading, and ongoing assessments.

Robb provides practical examples, forms, rubrics, and unit plans of study that support the teacher implementation and scaffolding of authentically engaging reading practices to fit the needs of their own classrooms. These detailed “how-tos” make it easy for teachers to apply differentiated reading instruction throughout the year in conjunction with their normally scheduled courses. This book would prove useful for professional development purposes across the curriculum.

The Quality of Public Education

A national poll and “Civic Index for Quality Public Education,” released by Public Education Network (PEN) and funded by MetLife Foundation, offers a look at the public’s views on education and education progress.

The poll reveals that even when other issues, such as rising gas prices and unemployment, are seizing the day, Americans still care about education, ranking it third, after gas prices (22%) and jobs and the economy (19%). They ranked education (12%) above health care (11%), crime and drugs (8%), taxes (8%), the budget deficit (4%), homeland security (4%), the environment (3%), and traffic and roads (3%).

Americans say that schools are getting worse, not better, and that improvement efforts are not working well enough. Four in 10 Americans (40%) said that the quality of the schools nationally has declined; 15% said that schools were getting better. About one-third of all Americans (32%) said that the quality of schools in their local community has declined compared with 26% who believe schools are getting better.

Overall, the public is divided about the effectiveness of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. About 3 in 10 (31%) Americans say the law has helped the performance of local public schools; 31% say it has hurt; and 38% say that it has made no difference or that they don’t know. African-Americans and Latinos are the most positive about the law, indicating by about a 2-1 margin that the law has helped rather than hurt.

The poll, which was conducted by Lake Research Partners, is based on a national phone survey of 1,220 adults nationwide, including oversamples of 100 Latino and 100 African-American adults.

Copies of the report are available on Public Education Network’s Web site, www.publiceducation.org

Review by Lisa Winstead, an assistant professor in elementary and bilingual education at California State University, Fullerton.
“One of the strangest things in this age of young people’s empowerment is how little input our students have into their own education and its future. Kids who out of school control large sums of money and have huge choices on how they spend it have almost no choices at all about how they are educated—they are, for the most part, just herded into classrooms and told what to do and when to do it.”


“Most of my years in teaching have been spent in ‘at-risk’ middle schools—schools that have central office staff visiting nearly every day and morale problems that interfere with instruction. In fact, I once chaired a teacher morale committee at one of these schools. Morale was so bad that the committee members wouldn’t even show up for the meetings.”


“We can’t control that the children don’t have parents that graduated from high school, or that speak another language or that live in poverty or are from broken homes, but the one thing that we have control over that has the biggest impact is that teacher.”


“It is hardly surprising...that parents, teachers, and students often discuss or dispute grades, with the constant threat of panic or conflict if a grade drastically dips. What is shocking is how rare the following question is asked: Does this grade reflect whether or not the student has actually learned anything?”

—Sixth grade teacher Paul Barnwell. Education Week, June 30, 2008.

“Our low-performing students are starting to make respectable gains. By all means, let’s keep that trend going. But if gains by low achievers are our only measure of success, America faces big challenges in the years ahead.”

—Chester Finn and Michael Petrilli, in the Foreword to High Achieving Students in an Era of No Child Left Behind, by Ann Duffett, Steve Farkas, and Tom Loveless. Published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

“…[W]hat the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.”


“People in leadership roles are ubiquitous, but leaders are in short supply. From the classroom to the board room, there has never been a greater need for leaders with the commitment, knowledge, and skills to mobilize, organize, and inspire others to educate all children more effectively.”


“Kids are using sound and images so they have a world of ideas to put together that aren’t necessarily language oriented. Books aren’t out of the picture, but they’re only one way of experiencing information in the world today.”

—Donna E. Alvermann, a professor of language and literacy education at the University of Georgia, suggesting that interpreting videos or pictures may be as important a skill as analyzing a novel or a poem. In “Literacy Debate: Online, R U Really Reading?” The New York Times. July 27, 2008.

“We have this inside joke, that the reasons to teach are June, July, and August. …But really, it is a very, very stressful job. I look forward to the time off [during the summer]….Truly, when you get those light bulb moments, that’s when you know why you’re doing it. It’s worth it for that. …But it is a tough job.”

Elizabeth Wade, an eighth grade science teacher at Silver Spring International Middle School. Maryland Gazette, June 25, 2008.

“Can you imagine a federal law that promoted community schools—schools that serve the neediest children by bringing together under one roof all the services and activities they and their families need? Imagine schools that are open all day and offer after-school and evening recreational activities and homework assistance, and suppose the schools included child care and dental, medical, and counseling clinics.”

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