



A MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION MONTHLY UPDATE

A MICHIGAN MIDDLE START PARTNER ORGANIZATION

DECEMBER 2004 * VOLUME 7 * NUMBER 5

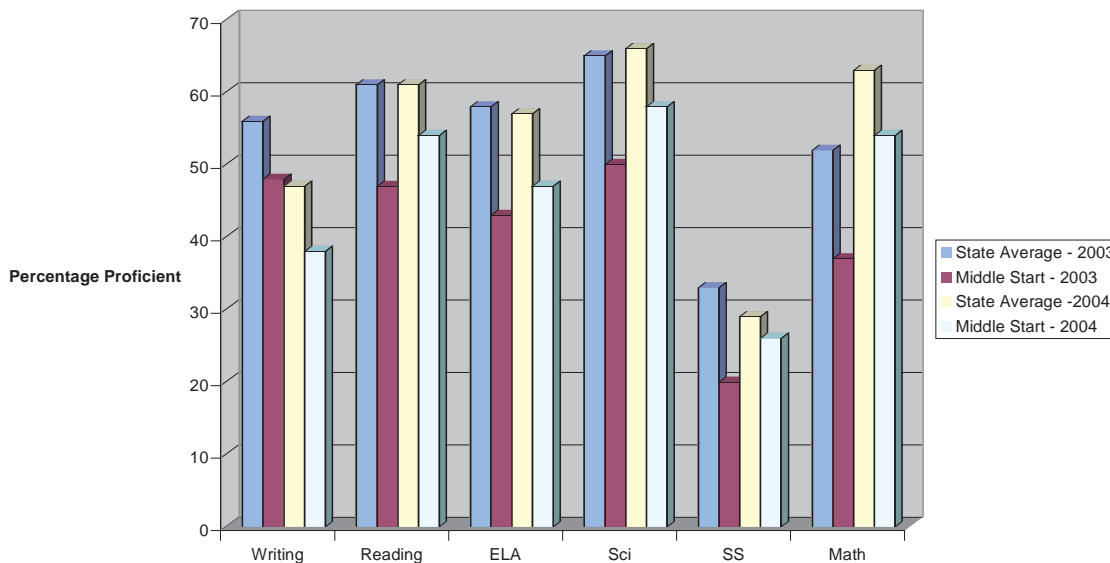
Middle Start schools: Closing the achievement gap

The results are in and the news is great!!! Michigan's Middle Start schools engaged in Comprehensive School Reform are closing the achievement gap when compared to other seventh and eighth grade students in the state. In a standards-based environment with all the mandates from No Child Left Behind, it is, indeed, encouraging to know that reform efforts are paying off for students.

In order to measure progress, we have compared the average state MEAP scores for all tested subjects in 7th and 8th

grades for 2003 and 2004 to the scores of students in Middle Start high-needs schools (25 schools). The chart below summarizes the data which indicates, for example, that the average score for 8th grade science students in Michigan decreased by one percentage point between 2003 and 2004; however, in Middle Start schools, 8th grade science MEAP scores increased by 4 percentage points. Similar gains were made in Social Studies and English/Language Arts.

Middle Start CSR Schools & State Average MEAP Data



So what are these urban and rural Middle Start schools doing to achieve such great student outcomes? These schools are focusing on total school reform. They are intentionally building leadership capacity, with the help of Leadership Coaches who are in buildings several days a month. Middle Start schools are also focusing on literacy and are participating in ongoing professional development to embed reading and writing in all their classrooms. And Middle

Start schools are learning from each other---they come together monthly to engage in seminars and build a professional learning community. These schools haven't taken their eyes off the prize---the students --and MSIM commends them for their efforts. To learn more about these schools and Middle Start, visit our website at www.schoolsinthemiddle.cmich.edu.



Leadership Lifeline

Change Begins with the Leader

What principals think, say, and do profoundly affects the quality of teaching and learning in their schools, the satisfaction they and the teachers with whom they interact derive from their work, and their ability to remain deeply engaged over many years in the demanding tasks of continuous improvement. Therefore, principals who desire significant changes in teaching, learning, and relationships within their schools begin by making significant changes in what they think, say, and do.

"We must become the change we seek in the world."
Gandhi

Principals have the capacity to make a tremendous difference in their organizations through the values they embody, the beliefs they hold, the intentions they express, the depth of their understanding of critical issues, the clarity of their thought and speech, and the ways in which they interact with others. Such attributes can have a substantial effect - for good or for ill - on the moods and performance of countless individuals within the school community.

Some values, beliefs, intentions, understandings, and actions establish trust and respect, focus and energize staff members, tap and develop talents, and stimulate creativity. Others can have the opposite effect. "Every one of our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors has an energy consequence, for better or for worse," Carolyn McKanders reminds us, "Both things and energy matter." Jane Dutton adds another dimension in *Energize Your Workplace* (Jossey-Bass, 2003). "Leaders can make a profound difference in activating and renewing energy by building and sustaining high-quality connections..." she writes. "High-quality connections contribute substantially to individuals' well-being and work performance.

They also contribute significantly to an organization's capacity for collaboration, coordination, learning, and adaptation, as well as its ability to keep people committed and loyal."

Energy is created and performance improved when principals think, speak, and act in ways that connect the school community to larger, compelling purposes and strengthen relationships among teachers and between teachers and students and the families of those students. Energy is dissipated when principals and teacher-leaders hold beliefs and act in ways that express resignation ("there's nothing we can do" or "they won't let us") and dependency ("tell us what to do"). Resignation and dependency undermine genuine collaboration, professional learning, and a school's ability to find innovative solutions to pressing problems.

It is recommended that principals and teachers develop a detailed vision of the school which they wish to create that is consistent with their values and then adopt beliefs, intentions, understandings, speech forms, and behaviors that are consistent with that result. In that way, the creation of schools with higher levels of purpose, energy, and performance begins with principals first changing themselves.

By beginning with the end in mind and first changing themselves, principals are far less likely to be interested in blaming or "fixing" others. Because they have experienced profound change themselves, they are far more likely to see possibility and opportunity in situations in which others may only see limitations. As they empower themselves, they empower everyone with whom they interact.

Adapted from Results (NSDC), October 2004 by Dennis Sparks.



Teacher Topics

Learning is Enhanced in Rich Environments

In this era of standards-based education, high-stakes testing, and teacher accountability, many teachers feel they don't have time to waste on "touchy-feely-foo-foo" activities. In the current educational environment, there is a tendency to speed through a long list of benchmarks and content in order to "cover" material. The agenda often results in lectures, note-taking, textbooks, worksheets and tests. Brain researchers, however, have demonstrated that mixer, get-acquainted, and other non-traditional activities are critical to learning, especially for 10- to 14-year-olds.

Since the early 1980's, research by cognitive psychologists, educators and neuroscientists has discovered that much learning occurs during social interaction (Leinhardt, 1992; Brandt, 1990) and that connections are made and learning occurs when an individual is engaged in the process (Linton, 1997).

The concept of a "rich learning environment" is, in part, based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, which states that unless one's most basic needs for food, shelter and safety are met, it is not possible to effectively address higher-level needs such as self-actualization. Glasser (1990) also subscribes to the belief that students need love, power, fun and respect in order to function maximally.

Recent research on the importance of endorphins to one's mental state is also related to rich learning environments. Sylwester (1995) reports that endorphins are released when a person receives overt signs of support, affection or positive regard. This is crucial in classrooms, because experiences which encourage a relaxed, cooperative and enthusiastic approach to learning are generally perceived as enjoyable, thus stimulating the release of these endorphins. Others remind us that learning is enhanced in supportive, affirming environments in which there is frequent laughter (Linton, 1997).

So, what do rich learning environments for young adolescents look, feel and sound like? A foundation must be laid for care and cooperation. Teachers must commit classroom time to helping students get to know one another and make connections with each other. To create a truly rich learning environment, teachers must create a culture of caring and sharing. Spencer Kagan (1992) has identified dozens of "class-

builder" and "teambuilder" activities which help students make these positive connections with classmates.

The "Mix-Freeze-Group" scenario is one such activity. Creating "mindmaps" of other students is another classbuilder. In this activity, often used early in the school year, students work in pairs, interviewing each other about their likes and dislikes, families, favorite activities, or other pertinent information. On a sheet of butcher paper or newsprint, each student creates a colorful mindmap, using words, graphics and symbols representative of his/her partner. Students then introduce their partners to the class, using their mindmaps as visual aids. Such activities may or may not be tied to the specific subject matter content. For example, students might interview each other regarding their knowledge of the scientific method and create mindmaps of their partners' applications of the scientific method.

Kagan (1990) recommends that teachers engage students in at least one classbuilder per week so that students get to interact with and know each other. These classbuilders function in very much the same way that icebreakers might at a conference or social function, and they help to create an environment which is supportive, affirming and full of fun.

These rich learning environments, while important to learners at all levels, are particularly critical for young adolescents, who are especially sensitive to the need to "fit in" and be accepted and affirmed. The National Middle School Association (1995) believes that it is not enough that our middle schools are physically safe: they must be psychologically safe as well. Pat Wolfe (Linton, 1997) reminds us that learning shuts down when we feel intimidated. So, for teachers who think they can't afford the time for "touchy-feely" games and activities: think again! Brain researchers indicate that teachers can't afford not to take the time required to create rich classroom environments.

Taken from **Brainy Ideas: Brain-Based Instructional Strategies**, by Patricia Benson



Student Station

Building Community

If you're like most people, you have a small circle of friends with whom you spend most of your time. And, if you're like most people, this circle of friends is made up of others who are a lot like you. This only makes sense; after all, you are likely to choose friends who are about your own age, who have the same interests and values you have, and who live close enough that you can spend a lot of time together.

Do you ever reach out beyond your circle of friends? For example, do you talk with kids older than you, or participate in activities with them? Do you mentor younger children? Do you spend time getting to know the elders in your community, or the person who cuts your hair, or your bus driver? What about people whose skin color is different from yours, or those who follow different religious beliefs?

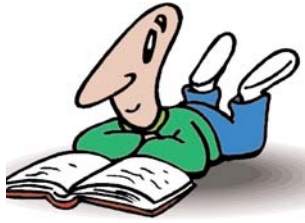
Often, differences in age, culture, or social status keep us separated from other people. We may think, "Oh, what could I possibly have in common with that person?" Or, we may be afraid that we will say or do something that offends a person who seems different from us. In extreme cases, we may even grow to hate or fear groups of people who are "differ-

ent." We often find it much more comfortable to stick with people we know.

But, if you surround yourself only with people who are like you, what do you miss out on? What kind of wisdom might an older person have that she could pass on to you? What interests or hobbies might you share with someone whose skin happens to be a different color from yours? What hopes and dreams do you have in common with people whom you normally wouldn't notice? If you look beneath the surface, you will find that most people share some interest, goal, dream, or experience with you.

Does this mean that you should turn your back on your friends and start hanging out only with people who are different from you? Not at all! Your circle of friends can be as big as you want it to be -- you can keep the friends you already have, and add to your circle. After all, no one can have too many friends!

So, try it! Talk with your bus driver, your barber, your grandparents, or the kid from the "other side of the tracks" who sits next to you in class. Find out what you have in common. You may be planting the seeds that will bloom into friendship.



Student Book Review

Cat Running

Author: Zilpha Keatley Snyder

Cat Kinsey is the fastest runner in Brownwood School. She's hoping to win the sixth grade girls' race and the Winners' Grand Finale, too, as she did last year. But her old-fashioned father won't let her wear slacks like the other girls. Cat is so mad that she decides not to run at all. Still, it's hard to ignore the excitement about the races. Some kids say she's afraid to race the new boy, Zane Perkins, a barefoot Okie who says he can beat her. Cat has been told to stay away from people like Zane and his family, but she finds that she can't ignore them. As she gets to know the Perkins family, she is drawn into their lives, and she begins to see them as more than just the poverty-stricken outsiders whom her people scorn. And, one fateful evening, she meets Zane in a race that could mean life or death!

Cat Running is one of many excellent novels by Zilpha Keatley Snyder. If you enjoy this book, you might also want to read *The Egypt Game*, about a group of children who use their imagination to re-create the land of Ancient Egypt in their backyard, and end up solving a mystery at the same time. Or you may enjoy reading *The Changeling*, in which a middle-school girl befriends a strange classmate who opens her eyes to new ways of looking at the world.

The main characters in Snyder's books are often young people who become friends with kids who are different from them in some fundamental way. The friendship always changes the lives of both characters. *Libby on Wednesday* is a great example of this theme: it features four students whose talent for creative writing is about the only thing they have in common. They gradually discover that their shared interest in writing is enough to help them overlook their differences and connect with each other. And that is what Zilpha Keatley Snyder's books are really all about -- connecting with other people, and finding out that we have a lot in common with each other, in spite of the differences we see on the surface.

Pick up *Cat Running* or another great book by Zilpha Keatley Snyder, and you're guaranteed an exciting read!





Family Focus

Communicating with Your Young Adolescent

Young adolescents are often not great at communicating, especially with their parents. As they begin to want to establish independence, they often become less talkative and less willing to share their private thoughts with you. But, as most parents know, staying aware of what your children are doing and who they are spending time with can reduce the likelihood that they will get lured into destructive behaviors like smoking, sex, drugs, delinquency, and violence. So, how can you, as a parent, keep the lines of communication open with your young adolescents, without unduly prying into their lives? Of course, if you've already established good habits of open and deep communication with your kids by the time they reach early adolescence, it will be a relatively easy thing to continue in the same pattern. But it's never too late to start. Here are a few simple tips:

- Create opportunities to talk. Make yourself available -- in the car, at the supper table, at bedtime, during shared activities. Young adolescents tend to resist "scheduled" talks, but if you make yourself available to them when they want to talk, you may be surprised at how receptive they'll be. It helps if you can arrange to have more time together without the distraction of television, video games, or radio.

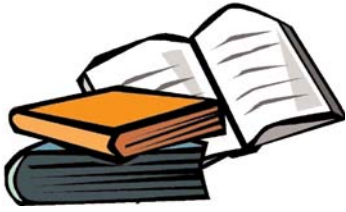
- Listen. As parents, we often want to give advice, or tell our kids the "right" way to do something. Our intentions are good -- we want to spare them the pain of making the mistakes that we made. But what young adolescents really want is for someone to listen to them -- to pay attention, without interrupting, and to offer encouragement and support. You

may find that, the less you offer advice, the more your young adolescent will ask for (and accept) your advice.

- Talk over differences. Like any two people, you and your young adolescent will have differences of opinion. Having clear expectations and consequences in place can help to limit these differences; and the setting of these expectations and consequences can provide an important opportunity for negotiating and re-thinking limits. You can work with your young adolescent to establish boundaries that are acceptable to both of you.

- Avoid over-reacting. Responding too strongly to something your young adolescent does or says can shut down communication. The more you can keep anxiety and emotion out of the conversation, the more likely you are to keep the lines of communication open. If you can discuss your own feelings and thoughts calmly, and encourage your child to do the same, often the two of you can reach agreement.

- Communicate with kindness and respect. Both your tone of voice and the words you say speak volumes to your child. People in general respond in kind to others who treat them with kindness and respect; your young adolescent is no exception to this rule. Treat him or her the way you would like to be treated; you will be setting an example for your child to emulate.



Resource Review

You Gotta BE the Book

Author: Jeffrey D. Wilhelm

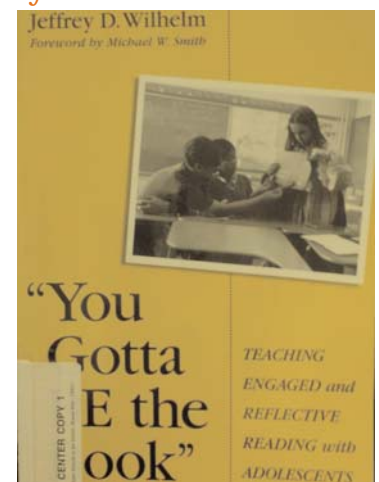
In this ground-breaking book, Jeffrey Wilhelm draws on nearly two decades of experience teaching reading and language arts at the middle school and high school levels to create a portrait of a literacy program which engages young adolescents in active and reflective reading. Wilhelm combines his own experience and observations as a classroom teacher with a review of research and scholarship in the fields of reading and literacy to develop a convincing argument for the efficacy of his program.

The seeds of change germinated in Wilhelm's mind during his early years as a reading teacher, as he watched many of his students struggle with traditional methods of reading instruction. He began to watch -- really watch -- his students as they read, and he noticed that those who were most engaged in the process approached reading differently from the way less-engaged students did. Highly engaged readers thought of reading as "a relay race" or as "a safari, in which the author was the guide" or as similar to "reading a map" which the author had created. These readers viewed themselves as taking such an active role in the reading experience that they became, really, a part of the experience. Less-engaged students, Wilhelm observed, were often astonished to hear their peers talk about the extent to which they visualized settings and scenes, identified with characters, and placed them-

selves within the fictional worlds about which they were reading.

Wilhelm hypothesized that helping less-engaged readers to immerse themselves in the experience of reading would pique their interest and engagement. Based on his classroom observations, in-depth interviews with highly engaged readers, and a thorough review of research on engagement of readers, he began to introduce dramatization, visualization, and artistic expression into students' reading experiences. As less-engaged readers became more facile with active-reading strategies -- visualization, connection, identification, extrapolation -- their interest in, and engagement with, reading blossomed.

You Gotta BE the Book offers teachers a perfect blend of theory, practical observation, and specific strategies for increasing readers' engagement. Check out this excellent resource today! Call the Center at (989) 774-7678 and ask for resource # CALA-49.





CELEBRATING OUR CSR SCHOOLS



Hamady Middle School, Westwood Heights Schools Flint, Michigan

Principal: George Gray
Coach: Mary Alice Krajenta

Grade Configuration: 7-8
Students: 221

Hamady Middle School has been involved in two professional development programs led by Carolyn McKanders. The first was a presentation on Professional Learning Communities, which focused on staff collaboration. The second presentation was "Voices for Student Success," that raised staff awareness on student achievement and emphasized moving forward as a united group. All staff members and the superintendent were invited to participate in this meeting.

The Leadership Team is involved in Studying Student Work by using the "Slice" Protocol for an all-school activity. Grade-level teams are analyzing MEAP results in an effort to increase student achievement. Mary Alice Krajenta is the new CSR Coach, and she is doing walk-throughs to become acquainted with the school.



Hesperia Middle School Hesperia, Michigan

Principal: Dave Bukala
Coach: Tracy Nofs

Grade Configuration: 5-8
Students: 380

Hesperia has implemented a Shared Reading program during its Advisory Period. Each grade-level team has selected four novels to read with its Advisory classes during the school year. The teams made diverse, yet excellent selections for their classes. Some titles being enjoyed by HMS students include, *Freedom Crossing* (5th grade), *Pictures of Hollis Woods* (6th grade), *No More Dead Dogs* (7th grade) and *Devil's Arithmetic* (8th grade). A "Celebration" is held at the end of each novel, and teams often do skits and/or "Battle of the Books" competitions between advisories.

Hesperia staff are continuing to work with the RTC program. They are also in the process of looking at student work to identify evidence of analysis. In addition, teachers are working collaboratively to collect and use student data to identify strategies to help every student be successful. Teams each have a notebook with common assessments for their students.



CONGRATULATIONS AuGres-Sims!!

AuGres-Sims Middle school was chosen to participate in an ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) video on professional development. Heather Ballien, principal at AuGres-Sims, gave us the following highlights from the ASCD visit.

- * ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) approached us and asked if they could include our school and the things we offer kids in their latest professional development video series production.
- * The PD Series is (tentatively) titled "Resiliency and Student Achievement." They focused on what we offered our kids and our staff that helped them achieve despite the odds. In other words, what was it that we are doing that helps kids and adults be resilient.
- * Four students, two teachers, the principal, & the superintendent were interviewed in addition to several class tapings and observations.
- * A Parent Advisory Committee meeting was captured on video to gain perspective into what the parents and community contribute.
- * My middle/high school staff PD session (late-start Professional Learning Community or PLC day) on Monday morning (10/25) was videotaped.
- * ASCD's production crew (producer, video tech, sound tech, set/light tech, and grip (general all around gopher and taker carer of)-- were on site during the week of October 25, 2004 filming and observing.
- * The production team will be working in a North Carolina school next as they continue production.
- * The final product is due out summer 2005 (and we can't wait!).

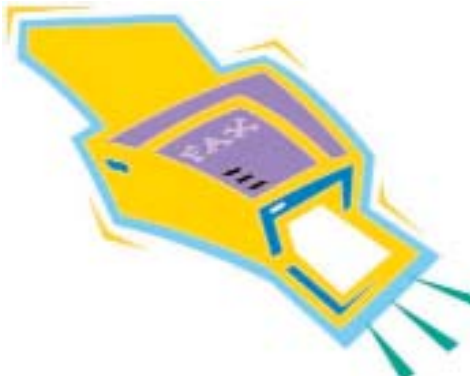
If you would like more information about the visit, contact Heather Ballien at AuGres-Sims Middle School, 140 S. Court, AuGres, MI 48703. The phone number is 989-876-7157.

Powerful Quote

“Everything depends on what people are capable of wanting.”

Enrico Maltesta

Contact us:



989-774-7684



www.schoolsinthemiddle.cmich.edu



989-774-7684



CMU - 678 Ronan
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859



From our MISM family to you --

Have A **S**afe

&

Happy **H**oliday