



A MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION MONTHLY UPDATE

A Michigan Middle Start Partner Organization

*National Award Winning Professional Development*

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# ***Small Learning Communities***

*Teaming is an integral component of the middle school concept and is advocated by the National Middle School Association, Middle Start, and the National Forum, as well as MSIM. But what are the benefits of small learning communities? What does research tell us? The following is an excerpt from a draft of the policy statement being developed by the National Forum.*

“Nowhere are small learning communities more important than at the middle level, when many students first leave their relatively small neighborhood schools for large middle-grades schools that typically draw from many feeder schools. Too often, large middle schools result in impersonalized learning cultures in which substantial numbers of students are not purposefully engaged in learning, do not have meaningful relationships with adults in the school, and are increasingly alienated from school.

## **Benefits of Small Learning Communities**

Research suggests that small learning communities have a number of positive benefits, especially for those students who are most at risk of educational failure. Below is a

summary of the major research findings (see also Galletti, 1998).

**Increased Student Achievement.** Specifically in middle grades with interdisciplinary teams, students within this type of small learning community outperform similar students in schools without such organizational arrangements (Mertens and Flowers, 2003; Mertens and Flowers, 2001; George and Lounsbury 2000; Lee and Smith, 2000; Felner et al., 1997; Lee and Smith, 1993).

**Safer Schools.** Schools-within-schools create communities in which teachers and students know and value each other as individuals. ASCE (2000) refers to this phenomenon as “human-scale” schooling, which increases school safety by reducing anonymity and isolation while increasing students’ sense of belonging.

**Less Truancy, Lower Mobility Rates, and Fewer Dropouts.**

Small learning communities tend to have greater “holding power” than do large schools. As a result, students in small schools have higher attendance rates, are less likely to transfer to other schools and are more likely to

graduate (Cotton, 2001; Gladden, 1998).

**More Personalized Learning Environment.** Schools-within-schools create more intimate learning environments than large schools. When teachers know their students well, they can more easily identify individual talents and unique needs and offer a more tailored learning experience. Being known well and acknowledged is essential to students' psychological well being and learning, especially for those who are typically overlooked in large and impersonal settings.

**Active Learning and Equitable Instruction.** Students in interdisciplinary teams are usually grouped more in heterogeneous and flexible grouping arrangements, with all students receiving the same challenging core academic curriculum (Cotton 20001; Wasley et al. 2000).

**Professional Learning Community.** Schools-within-

schools provide the structural conditions that support a learning community – physical proximity, a sense of intimacy, and increased opportunities for communication. Schools that are learning communities provide regular opportunities for teachers to engage in conversations about students, teaching and learning, and related issues. Through collaborative inquiry and reflection, teachers representing various subject matters and grade levels can decide on what is really important for students to learn, determine whether students are indeed learning, and apply new ideas and information to better meet the needs of all their students. Numerous studies have found that professional learning communities are a major factor in promoting student achievement, especially in schools with large numbers of low-income and low-achieving students (Louis and Kruse, 1995; Hord, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1992; Felner et al, 1997; Mertens and Flowers, 2003).”





# ***Leadership Lifeline***

## *The Changed Role of the Principal*

In the new role, the principal recognizes that no one person in the building is the most knowledgeable or experienced practitioner. Rather, the principal is aware of the strengths of the staff and taps into each member's expertise to improve teaching and learning in the school. The principal works with the staff to develop a strong professional culture in which teachers continuously collaborate.

The principal's new role focuses on five interconnected areas:

- *Sharing real decision-making power with the staff and faculty.* The principal shares authority by providing meaningful opportunities for teachers to participate in significant decision making. He or she works with the faculty to establish academic teams, discipline-based teams, study groups, and the leadership team. The principal communicates that every team's success is of paramount importance and that he or she will support them.
- *Providing support for effective functioning of teams.* The principal ensures that teachers have the skills and understanding to participate effectively in teams. These skills include defining a purpose, setting measurable goals, creating norms for operating, setting agendas, and assigning tasks. The principal also gives ongoing feedback to teams, supporting and encouraging their work.
- *Being an instructional leader who prompts others to continuously learn and improve their practice.* As the instructional leader, the principal often

visits classrooms to work with teachers and students or attends academic team meetings to assist the development of effective teaching and learning strategies. In this role, the principal also obtains instructional resources and professional development opportunities that improve learning, teaching, and assessment practices.

- *Developing collaborative accountability.* The principal works with the leadership team to hold individuals and teams accountable for reaching their goals. By asking teacher teams to document their progress, the principal and leadership team make it clear that every team's results matter, and that when a team reaches its goals, the whole school moves forward.
- *Managing and monitoring the change process to make sure it is always moving forward.* The principal and the leadership team ensure that all members of the school community clearly understand all parts of the change process and are committed to the vision. This includes using the Turning Points benchmarks to communicate the standards by which the school's progress will be measured.

Source: *Guide to Collaborative Culture and Shared Leadership*, Center for Collaborative Education, 200



# Coaches Corner



*Each month we will be featuring one of our Comprehensive School Reform/MSIM Coaches. We are very proud of our coaching staff and would like to share some information about each one with you over the next few months.*

Toby Kahn-Loftus is our featured coach for this month. Toby wears many hats, but her passion is in the area of Literacy training for middle school teachers, students and parents.

Toby has served as a Middle Start Coach for the past four years and has worked in that capacity with the following middle schools: Brethren, Grayling, Hesperia and Grand Rapids Westwood. At the present time, she is the Leadership Coach at Ewart and Mancelona Middle Schools.

Toby has been a middle school teacher and administrator, with much of her experience in the Detroit area. Prior to her present position, she was Assistant Principal for the Dewey Center for Urban Education. She has a Bachelor's degree in Literature and a Master's degree in Educational Administration and Leadership from Wayne State University and has been admitted to a Doctoral program at Michigan State University.

She has worked with many schools on reading and writing strategies through a professional development series she has developed for teachers across the curriculum. In addition, Toby has served in faculty positions at Central Michigan University, Ferris State University, Walden University and Wayne State University.

Toby has been a mentor for many young educators and recently coached a team of Language Arts teachers from Brethren Middle School to make a presentation at a national meeting in Atlanta, GA. She is a fine example of professionalism and is a member of several state and national educational organizations. One of her favorites is as a contributing member of the Red Cedar Writing Project.

One of Toby's favorite quotes: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy." John Dewey, 1902

Thanks, Toby, for your fine work!



# *Student Station*

## **Like a Tree in a Windstorm**

Have you ever watched a large tree bend and sway in high winds? The branches, and even the trunk, may bend, but when the wind dies down, the tree stands tall again. This ability to bend, but not break, under pressure is called **resilience** (pronounced “ree ZILL yenss”). Now, imagine what would happen to a tree that could not bend -- under pressure from heavy winds, it would snap apart and collapse.

Trees have resilience; and, in a different way, people have it, too! Do you know anyone who has gone through many hard times but still keeps pushing on? “Bouncing back” from misfortune is a kind of resilience; so is learning from one’s mistakes. For example, if you earn a bad grade on a test, you could say, “Oh, well, I can’t learn that stuff, anyway,” or you could resolve to study harder before the next test. Which is the more resilient way to respond?

In the book *Child of the Owl*, by Laurence Yep, twelve-year-old Casey thinks that old Mr. Jeh looks like a tree as he practices Tai Chi in the park. His gnarled trunk and limbs bend as he does the flowing Tai Chi forms, but he seems to be rooted strongly to the earth, as well. Casey later learns that Mr. Jeh has lived through many hardships, including losing his fortune and his family in China’s Communist Revolution. Although he has lived a hard and lonely life for many years, Mr. Jeh has not allowed his bad luck to change him. He is still honest, loyal, courageous, and compassionate. Mr. Jeh is resilient.

Would you like to read more books about people whose resilience has helped them to get through hard times? Try *The Miracle Worker*, by William Gibson, the true story of a girl named Helen Keller who was left blind, deaf, and mute by a childhood illness; or pick up *The Barn*, by Avi; or read Cynthia Voigt’s book *Homecoming*, in which four children who have been abandoned by their parents struggle to make their way home. All of these are books about people who have made it through hard times by hanging on to the values that are important to them. As you read, think about your own life. What tough things have you gone through? How did you respond to them? Did you let them defeat you, or did you use them as opportunities to learn and grow? Most likely, as you think back, you will realize that, like a mighty oak tree, *you* have a great deal of resilience, too!

***Be sure to pick up  
a good book today!***



# ***Student Book Review***

## **Child of the Owl**

by Laurence Yep

Twelve-year-old Casey and her father, Barney, have never stayed in one place long enough to put down roots. Barney keeps them moving from town to town, all over northern California, working at low-paying jobs for a while and then moving on. Casey is happy with this lifestyle; but when Barney ends up in the hospital, she must go to live with her grandmother in a tiny one-room apartment in San Francisco's Chinatown.

At first, Casey finds Chinatown strange and frightening, and she feels that she doesn't fit in. The other students at her new school tease her because she knows so little about her Chinese-American heritage, and shopkeepers are rude to her because she speaks only English. But Paw-Paw, her grandmother, teaches Casey about her culture and about life in China before her ancestors moved to the United States. She also tells stories about Casey's mother, Jeanie, who died when Casey was a baby. Gradually, Casey begins to feel more at home in Chinatown. She befriends Booger, one of the girls who used to pick on her, and she meets the mysterious Mr. Jeh, an ancient man of great wisdom and inner strength.



One day Paw-Paw shows Casey a strange amulet which she wears on a chain around her neck. She says that it was given to her family many generations ago by the Owl Spirit. Then she tells the story of the Owl Spirit, a tale of love and longing and loneliness that stirs Casey's soul. Paw-Paw tells her that every woman in their family, going back many generations, has been a Child of the Owl -- has suffered the kind of deep loneliness that Casey feels due to her separation from Barney.

When the amulet is stolen from Paw-Paw's dresser, Casey suspects Mr. Jeh's nephew, Gilbert, a flashy-dressing young man who seems to care for nothing but money. Casey, Mr. Jeh, and Booger set out to find and recover the amulet. Their search takes them to some of the shadiest corners of Chinatown, and what they discover will change Casey's life forever. Read *Child of the Owl*, and find out what Casey and her friends learn in their search for the stolen owl amulet.



# ***Resource Review***

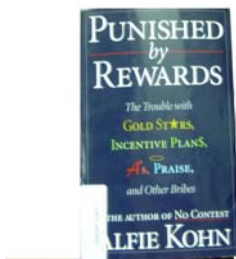
## **Punished by Rewards**

**Author: Alfie Kohn**

In this provocative and controversial book, psychologist Alfie Kohn challenges our widespread reliance on systems of rewards and punishments at home, at school, and at work. He traces these systems back to their roots in the psychology of behaviorism, which posits in part that organisms (including humans) can be conditioned to repeat certain behaviors if they are consistently rewarded for engaging in those behaviors. Kohn argues that the resulting “Do this and you’ll get that” strategy for controlling human behavior has become so pervasive that it seems only natural to us to “dangle goodies (from candy bars to sales commissions) in front of people in the same way that we train the family pet.”

Kohn cites dozens of studies which demonstrate that the reward-and-punishment system works to modify human behavior in the short term but, in the long run, fails and even does lasting harm. Offering such incentives as pay-for-performance in the workplace, candy for good behavior in the home, and even “A” grades for academic performance ultimately shifts the focus of the worker, the child, or the student away from the task itself and onto the expected reward. In this way, we gradually begin to lose intrinsic motivation to do a good job, to

behave well, or to learn, as our intrinsic motivation is replaced by extrinsic motivation (desire to earn the “goody”). This mindset is regularly demonstrated in classrooms by students who ask, “Are we going to have to know this for the test?” or who follow a rubric to the letter and, in the process, wring all individuality and spirit out of their work.



But, what is the alternative to this carrot-and-stick psychology? With the system of rewards and punishments so deeply rooted in our schools, our homes, and our workplaces, it can be difficult to imagine any other system that might work. In the final chapters of the book, Kohn offers a set of practical strategies for teachers, parents, and managers which move beyond the reward-and-punishment system of controlling people. Whether you agree or disagree -- whether you love Alfie Kohn or hate him -- *Punished by Rewards* is an iconoclastic manifesto well worth reading.



# ***Teacher Topics***

## **Student Choice in Independent Reading**

In his provocative book *Punished by Rewards*, scholar Alfie Kohn asserts, “Every teacher who is told what material to cover, when to cover it, and how to evaluate children’s performance is a teacher who knows that enthusiasm for one’s work quickly evaporates in the face of control. Not every teacher, however, realizes that exactly the same is true of students: deprive children of self-determination and you deprive them of motivation.”

Janet Allen, in *Yellow Brick Roads*, echoes Kohn’s position in her discussion of independent reading. In Chapter 8, “Organizing for Choice,” Allen describes her first attempt to allow her students to choose their own literacy projects. She announced to her students that they would have a time each week for Independent Literacy Exploration, during which each student would be free to choose his/her own literacy-related project. Allen reports, “Students slept, talked, asked to go to the bathroom and their lockers and even other classes. No amount of cajoling could get them moving toward any literacy behaviors.” The students were simply not prepared for a transition from a totally-teacher-directed curriculum to one in which students made their own choices; they needed more guidance.

Allen quickly learned that she needed to support student choice in four important ways. First, she constructed a schedule that built in times for such crucial whole-group literacy strategies as Read-Alouds, Shared Reading, Guided Reading, and writing, while still leaving substantial time for student choice, both in Independent Reading and in Independent Literacy Exploration. Second, she posted an ongoing list of ILE possibilities, which she supplemented each day as the class encountered interesting readings or topics. Students were free to select from these topics or to generate their own and add them to the list. Third, she worked to build a classroom library that included nonfiction, reference books, and vertical files full of articles on topics that interested her students. Finally, Allen became adept at accepting and evaluating a wide range of student products which demonstrated learning, without lowering her learning goals or her standards of excellence for the students.

This teacher-supported form of Independent Literacy Exploration has led Allen’s students into researching topics ranging from teen pregnancy to the existence of unicorns, from religious cults to the Vietnam War. With the guidance of their teacher-mentor, students explore topics of immediate importance to them, and their exploration leads them to read and write with unparalleled zeal.

For more details about organizing for student choice, call the Center and ask to check out *Yellow Brick Roads* (CA-13).



# ***Family Focus***

## **It's MEAP Time Again!**

February in Michigan is a time for enjoying the cold, crisp air, watching icicles form on the eaves, trekking through snow-covered fields, drinking hot chocolate around the fire, and... taking MEAP tests?!? Yes, it's that time of year again; and, as parents, you can help your kids to do their best on the MEAPs. Here are some things you can do:

- **Help your kids to understand why these tests are important.** Tests like the MEAP are designed to help schools see patterns of learning among their students. When your school's administrators can see what kids know and where kids are struggling, they can plan ways to improve instruction to better meet students' needs.
- **Be positive, supportive, and confident.** Tell your child, "This test is important. I know you will try hard and do your best." This is a great way to encourage your child without putting additional pressure on him/her.
- **Have your child dress in layers.** Worrying about being too hot or too cold makes it hard to concentrate on learning or on testing.
- **Be sure your child gets a full night's sleep and a good breakfast.** A well-rested, well-fed child is more alert and can concentrate better. Of course, plenty of sleep and good nutrition are important all year -- not just at MEAP time! If you make sure your child eats and sleeps well before EVERY school day, he/she will go to school ready to learn every day, and this will translate into better grades and higher MEAP scores.
- **Encourage your child to read, read, read!** Again, it's important to do this every day, not just during MEAP time. The more your child reads, the more he/she will learn. One of the best ways to encourage your kids to read is to let them see *you* reading. Kids who grow up seeing reading as an everyday activity in their homes become kids who choose to read on their own.
- **Stay involved in your child's education.** Ask your child questions about school; help him/her with homework, or find someone who can; talk with teachers and with other parents; set aside some time each day to shut off the TV and the radio and spend time talking about what your child is learning in school. Working hard all year long will pay off, not only at report card time, but also in February when your child sits down to take the MEAP!

## Resource Highlights



CCM-10	Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community	Kohn
CCM-16	Creating the Peaceable School	Bodine, Crawford, & Schrumpf
CCM-25	Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers	Johnson & Johnson
CCM-34	When Students Choose Content: A Guide to Increasing Motivation, Autonomy, and Achievement	Passe
CCM-36	How to Achieve Discipline with Dignity in the Classroom	Mendler

Do you need the resources you checked out longer than you anticipated? Just give us a call and, if no one is waiting for them, we will renew them for you. Our phone number is 989-774-7678 - ask for Bryan.



**M** - Movement, nutritious snacks and water can help students perform better

**E** - Educators can communicate the importance of MEAP to parents & students

**A** - Attitudes are contagious - think positively about MEAP, and your students will, too

**P** - Preparation is the key, and your curriculum is aligned with MEAP



## ***Upcoming Events***



### ***Connected Mathematics: Michigan State University***

[www.math.msu.edu/cmp](http://www.math.msu.edu/cmp)

- CMP Users' Conference, February 20 & 21, 2004
- Getting to Know CMP – Weeklong workshop – June 21 – 25, 2004

### **CSR Renewal Schools Grant writing workshop**

- February 17, 2004, Courtyard Marriott, Lansing

### **Best Practices Workshop – Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools**

- March 15 – 16, 2004
- 8:30am to 4:00pm, Marriott Conference Center, Ypsilanti
- \$375 per participant
- for registration information contact Karen Miller, MCES, 517-780-9814, [miller@michigances.org](mailto:miller@michigances.org)



***“Powerful Quote”***

**“Spectacular achievements are always preceded  
by unspectacular preparation.”**

**Roger Staubach**

*Contact us:*

***Michigan Schools in the  
Middle***

***KIDS ARE AT THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING WE DO!***

***678 Ronan Hall  
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859***

***Phone: 989-774-7678***

***Fax: 989-774-7684***

***E-mail:***

***msim678@cmich.edu***

***Web:***

***www.schoolsinthemiddle.org***