



A MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION MONTHLY UPDATE

A MICHIGAN MIDDLE START PARTNER ORGANIZATION

JANUARY 2005 * VOLUME 7 * NUMBER 6

Middle School Concept Leads to Increased Learning

When it was announced this year that over 75 percent of our eighth-grade students were proficient in both reading and math, it was time for a celebration at William Thomas Middle School (WTMS). That was quite an accomplishment, considering that when this same group of students entered the school as fifth-graders, only about 30 percent were proficient. Currently, almost 70 percent of the students at our school are economically disadvantaged and over 30 percent are English language learners.

One of the greatest influences on student performance at WTMS has been a commitment to our middle school philosophy; that is, everything must be based on the developmental readiness, needs and interests of young adolescents. Current research shows that when this concept is effectively implemented, higher levels of achievement result. My experience as principal at WTMS bears this out.

To focus on the growth of our young people, we have eliminated a tracking system that left students stuck in the rut of seemingly inescapable poor performance. We also made a shift from being a school that focused on school discipline and the negative behaviors of students to one that looks at the positive strengths of each student and builds on those strengths.

In addition, we have implemented teacher teaming, a teacher advisory program, a flexible block schedule and a parent advisory committee. Our teacher advisory program has changed over the last 15 years, but the primary focus of having an adult advocate for every student has remained a constant. Each advisor teacher has a "watch list" that is made

up of four or five non-proficient students. They make sure that each of their students receives all the help possible to improve his or her learning.

Teams of teachers work together to integrate and coordinate instructional efforts. Science and technology teachers know they play a key role in students learning and applying math skills. All content-area teachers know that they play a key role in teaching reading and writing.

This past year we made literacy a school-wide effort. With the help of a grant, we added a literacy coach to our team and provided ongoing, extensive training to every staff member. This training was done once a week during team collaboration time. In addition, we developed school-wide goals with team and individual action plans. As a result, we saw a 27 percent increase in reading proficiency rates.

All parents are invited to attend parent advisory committee meetings. Twice a year, over 90 percent of our parents attend student-led parent-teacher conferences. Parents frequently look to the school for help, and we must be there to support them. At this critical time in a child's life, we need to educate parents on issues pertaining to adolescence and encourage them to stay involved with the school and maintain a healthy, communicative relationship with their child.

As a principal, I work hard to know and have a personal relationship with every student in my school. Each

week I interview four students and take them out for a pizza lunch. At some point during their tenure, nearly every student goes with me to Pizza Hut. I have gained 30 pounds, but those 540 lunches have been the best hour I've spent each week.

Also, every day during advisory period, I meet with students from different grade levels in what I call Principal Town Meetings. This time allows me to meet with every student in my school once a week to share important information on the operations of the school. If there is a problem at the school, I can address it with every student. If students need an inspirational speech on putting forth their best efforts, I can give it.

Developing the whole child is also a top priority at our school. Young adolescents need to explore different activities, develop their skills in the fine arts, and be introduced to the variety of careers from which they can choose.

Working with young adolescents is one of the most demanding and complex jobs in education. Because this is such a tumultuous time in their lives, those of us who know and love them must be their greatest advocates.

Randy Jensen has been the principal of William Thomas Middle School in American Falls, Idaho, for the past 15 years. Jensen is the recipient of the 2005 Middle Level Principal of the Year award from the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Taken from *The Achiever*, www.ed.gov
December 1, 2004 Vol. 3, No. 18

One of the greatest influences on student performance has been a commitment to our middle school philosophy.



Leadership Lifeline

Fire Fighting: Why Am I Standing on the Hose?

Every year, I think, “This is the year! This is the year I get into classrooms to see more learning and teaching, provide feedback to teachers, and become a true instructional leader.” And each June, I reflect back on the school year and compare what I wanted to do with what I actually did, and I am appalled. I know that spending my time talking with teachers about student learning is the most important thing I can do. So, why don’t I spend more time doing what I know affects student learning the most?

Could it be because I have become a fire fighter? For all the talk that the principal is in charge, is it possible that the school leader has become a fire fighter moving from one fire to the next? I think this is probably true. The principal is constantly faced with competing commitments that promote being reactive rather than proactive.

What, if anything, can turn around this cycle of frustration and disappointment? What can turn the fire fighting into an exciting future where one sets high goals for the school and closes the achievement gap? Enter a leadership coach - someone who can assist others to be as effective in their leadership as possible. A coach helps others to move from feeling overwhelmed, overworked, and under supported to feeling capable, energized, and focused about achieving what they want. One high school principal describes the experience of working with a coach this way, “Coaching shows me the direction to take, rekindles my passion about children’s success, and gives me hope that I will make a difference for all children.”

What is Coaching?

Coaching is the process of assisting the school leader to move toward goal clarity, to consider multiple pathways for accomplishing the goal, to select a strategy that holds the greatest potential for impact, and to design a plan of action for goal achievement. It is a model of professional development embedded within the reality of the job so that the work is about the real issues or concerns of the school leader. Some examples might include:

- implementing research-based strategies

in the classroom

- redesigning faculty meetings so that they are instructionally focused
- closing the achievement gap between subgroups of students
- increasing the rigor of instruction

One also begins to understand the coaching relationship by listening to how principals describe their coaches. Coaches are “non-threatening, unbiased, and confidential.” Coaches force principals to focus their energy and challenge them to grow. Principals describe the process as giving them the freedom to propose ideas, create solutions, and share frustrations and personal feelings without the fear of consequences.

How Does Coaching Work for Educators?

Just as a coach encourages a client to consider multiple pathways, there are possible options for how coaching can work. Possibilities may include attending training or a workshop. With this option, people learn about powerful communication and coaching strategies. Then they begin to coach themselves to improve their own personal effectiveness. Another option is coaching without the workshop. With this option, a person commits to talking to a coach in person or by phone two or three times per month to set personal goals and implement plans to take important actions in his personal and professional life. A third option is training with coaching. This is the most powerful option. When training is combined with weekly intensive coaching, principals, superintendents, and educational leaders who desire to meet the complex challenges of their work learn how to produce improved results for their students and staff.

Taken from *MSDC Update*, Fall/Winter 2004

To learn more about MSIM’s Middle Start Coaches, go to our website:
www.schoolsinthemiddle.cmich.edu - click on the “Middle Start/CSR” - click on “Coaches”



Teacher Topics

Time for the "State Finals"

Relax! Take a deep breath! You can do it!

Yup, it's time again for the MEAP.

To help you prepare students for the MEAP, MSIM offers you the following *'tongue in cheek suggestions.'*

1. If you are not teaching 6th grade, apply for a quick transfer.
2. Never ever allow your students to practice the type of thinking required on the MEAP. After all, athletic coaches wouldn't think of having athletes practice the actual game....that would be cheating.
3. Focus all your attention on individual facts and information rather than teaching critical thinking skills.
4. By all means, convey to your students that they can not possibly be successful on this difficult test.
5. Pray for snow days to interrupt the testing cycle and a massive flu out-break to assure lots of make-up testing.
6. Remind students of how stupid this whole assessment system is and why they shouldn't have to take the test.
7. Arrange for the principal to interrupt at regular intervals with P A announcements.
8. Call in sick and leave them with a substitute teacher.
9. Encourage students to hand in tests early and not check their work.
10. By all means, don't review major concepts in your subject area.



Seriously, MSIM wishes you and your students great success on this year's MEAP. We know how hard you and your students work all year to address standards and to help students apply critical thinking skills in their work. MSIM schools have been closing the gap, and we anticipate another outstanding year of achievement!



Student Station

One Hundred Years Ago.....

One hundred years -- it seems like a long, long time, doesn't it? Yet, in the course of human history, one hundred years really isn't that long, at all! Think it over for a minute. In your social studies classes, you have probably looked at ancient human civilizations -- cave dwellers who lived many thousands of years ago; the first farmers; Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome; the Medieval period with its knights and castles and conquests; the Renaissance and Reformation. And all of this took place before the first European settlers arrived in the New World and changed the face of life on the American continent!

When we look at all the changes that humanity has seen over the millenia, one hundred years doesn't seem so far back, after all. Let's take a brief look at what life was like in the United States one hundred years ago.

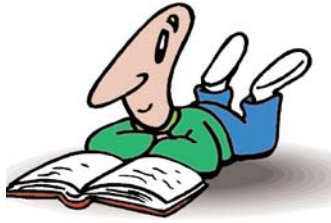
At the beginning of 1905...

- on average, a person could expect to live to be 47 years old
- the three leading causes of death were pneumonia, tuberculosis, and diarrhea
- ninety-five of every hundred babies were born at home
- nine out of ten households did not have a phone
- seven out of eight households did not have running water
- most people washed their hair only once a month
- there were only eight thousand cars in the whole U.S.
- there were only 144 miles of paved road in the U.S.

- the speed limit in most places was ten miles per hour
- the average worker made between \$200 and \$400 per year
- sugar cost four cents a pound; coffee cost 15 cents a pound
- eggs cost 14 cents a dozen
- a three-minute call from Denver to New York City cost eleven dollars
- the population of Las Vegas, Nevada was thirty people
- there were about 230 murders reported in the entire U.S. that year.

How does this compare to life in the United States at the beginning of 2005? How might you find out what our current life expectancy is? Where might you find information about the number of cars, or the number of miles of paved road, in our country today? Pick a couple of the statistics from the list above, and investigate how they have changed over the past hundred years; then share your findings with classmates.

Now, speculate about what life might be like one hundred years from now -- in 2105. Will we be living longer? Will we be healthier, or less healthy? What new conveniences might most of us have, which few or none of us have today? What about cars -- will we still be using them, or will we have found safer or cheaper means of transportation? If the world runs out of oil, as experts think we will, what kinds of changes might we have to make in the way we live? Make a few predictions of your own, and then ask your family and friends to do the same. Who knows -- you might predict a major trend for the future!



Student Book Review

Orphan Train Rider - One Boy's True Story

Author: Andrea Warren

About one hundred years ago, on a farm north of New York City, a woman died after giving birth to her seventh child. Her husband, a poor farmer, tried to raise the children on his own, but the stress of farming, caring for seven kids, and grieving for his lost wife was too much for him. He gave up. He told his three oldest children that they must move out of the house and go to work. He gave the two youngest children to family friends, who raised the boys as their own. And he sent the two middle children to live in an orphanage in nearby Watertown.

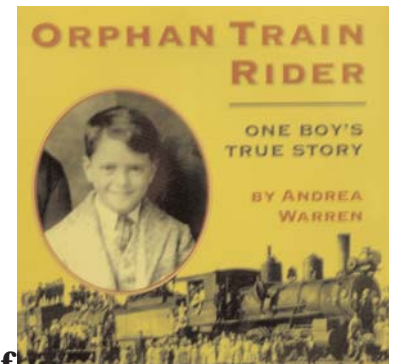
One of those two middle children -- Lee -- was seven years old when his father abandoned him, leaving him and his four-year-old brother alone in the world. For two years, they lived in the orphanage, with many other children whose parents had died, abused them, or abandoned them. Lee and his brother were often hungry and cold at the orphanage. They felt lost, hopeless, and unloved, and they wondered if their lives would ever get better.

One day, they were taken for a ride on a train with ten other children from their orphanage. To their surprise, the train didn't return to Watertown that afternoon; instead, it kept stopping in different towns and picking up more children. Finally, an adult told Lee that he and the other children were being taken "out West" to be adopted. The train they were riding was called an Orphan

Train, and it would stop in towns throughout the Midwest, where potential parents would come and look at the orphans, and perhaps select one to adopt. Lee realized that he and his little brother would probably be separated, and might never see each other again.

So, what happened to Lee? Was he taken in by a good family? by a cruel family? Did he get to stay in contact with his younger brother? What about the rest of his brothers and sisters -- did he ever see them again? Pick up *Orphan Train Rider* and find out!

If you'd like to learn more about what kids' lives were like a hundred years ago, check out *Kids at Work*, by Russell Friedman, which has many pictures and descriptions of kids as young as six or seven doing paid work in factories and on farms. Or try *Kids on Strike*, by Susan Campbell Bartoletti, which shows what happened when these working kids banded together to demand better wages, safer working conditions, and shorter hours. Another interesting view of life in the early 1900's comes from Sarah Louise Delaney and her sister Elizabeth, in their book *Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters' First One Hundred Years*.





Family Focus

It's MEAP Time Again!

January 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... getting ready for the 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.

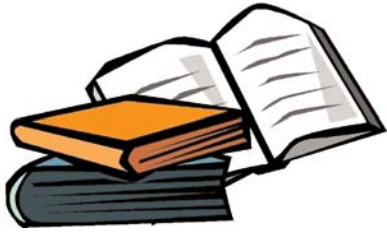
- **Have your child dress in layers.** Worrying about being too hot or too cold makes it hard to concentrate on learning or on testing.

- **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 January or February when your child sits down to take the MEAP!



Resource Review

Leadership in the Age of Standards and High Stakes

Video Journal of Education

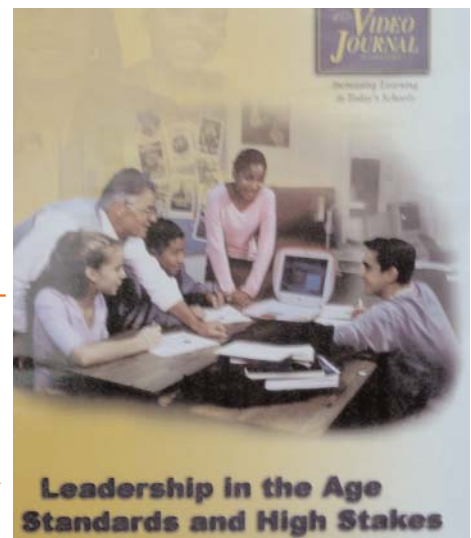
This two-part video features Richard DuFour, noted educational leader and superintendent of the highly successful Adlai E. Stevenson High School District, in Lincolnshire, Illinois. Under Dr. DuFour's leadership, the failure rate in the District has diminished from 22% to just over 1% over the past eighteen years. This video takes a close look at the success of the Stevenson District and at how other struggling schools can achieve similar results.

The first half of the program details the importance of establishing a Professional Learning Community in the school, founded on the Four Pillars of Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals. DuFour describes each of these Pillars in detail, and demonstrates what a Professional Learning Community in action really looks like.

The second major component of the video focuses on the positive impact which successful Professional Learning Communities can make on student learning and achievement. Using examples of impressive results from urban, suburban, and rural schools, at the elementary, middle-grades, and high school levels, DuFour highlights a wide range of dramatic success stories. He also demonstrates how a shared commitment to mission, vision, values, and goals inevitably increases learning.

A close look at the Stevenson District's "Pyramid of Interventions" describes a multi-layered plan for drawing all students into successful learning, and avoiding scenarios in which individual kids get "lost in the shuffle." The video concludes with intensive examinations of total school improvement case studies from Vermont and Connecticut, emphasizing the positive impact which comprehensive improvement makes on student learning.

To check out this valuable resource from MSIM's Resource Library, please call (989) 774-7678, and ask for item # LSDV-1.





CELEBRATING OUR CSR SCHOOLS



Mancelona Middle School
Mancelona, Michigan

Principal: Diana Kelly
Coach: Toby Kahn-Loftus

Grade Configuration: 5-8
Students: 390

Good things are happening at Mancelona Middle School! There are several new staff members this year. Attendance has increased, warranting adding new teachers in sixth and eighth grades. Some of the current projects are as follows:

- Monthly Newsletter
- Six Traits of Writing, with District-wide Professional Development
- Studying Student Work using the Slice protocol
- Student Led Conferences
- Walkthroughs
- Retreat with professional development on Behavior Management, "Making Connections," presented by Carolyn McKanders
- Crisis intervention: CPI training and support staff training
- RTP is going well



Montabella Middle School
Blanchard, Michigan

Principal: Ron Farrell
Coach: Tracy Nofs
Academic Coach: Wendy Somers

Grade Configuration: 6-8
Students: 270

Montabella Middle School is now in the third year of the Comprehensive School Reform Program. Tracy Nofs and Ron Farrell recently gave a CSR presentation to the Montabella School Board describing progress and providing data. Some of the program highlights are as follows:

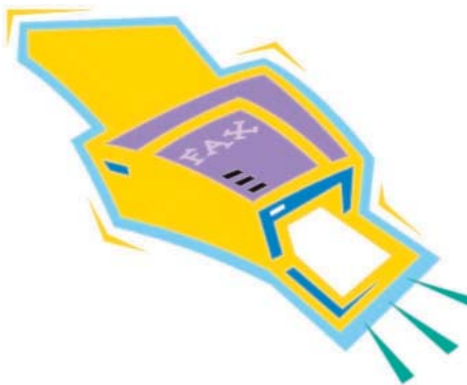
- Creating a culture at school so that reading is now "in"---fantastic!
- Beginning grade report card analysis and looking for ways to support struggling learners.
- Collecting and using student data to direct work toward what is best for students.
- Using advisory time to emphasize reading.
- Completed literacy training-Reading Across the Curriculum.
- Using agendas and norms at leadership team meetings.

Powerful Quote

“ To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong.”

Joseph Clinton Pearce

Contact us:



989-774-7684



www.schoolsinthemiddle.cmich.edu



989-774-7678



CMU - 678 Ronan
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859