



A MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION MONTHLY UPDATE

A MICHIGAN MIDDLE START PARTNER ORGANIZATION

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Grade Configuration: It is NOT the Question

No doubt many of you have read the August 1 TIME magazine article, "Is Middle School Bad for Kids?" In the article Claudia Wallis compares a K-8 school to a 6-8 school in Milwaukee and discusses how well each serves young adolescents. The problem is that grade configuration is not the question--it really never has been the question. The question is, how do schools and educators best meet the needs of young adolescents?

Wallis acknowledges the debate as she summarizes the article, stating, "But educators on both sides of the debate tend to agree that how the grades are packaged ultimately matters less than what's happening inside the school." Anthony Jackson (Turning Points 2000 author) believes that the exact configuration is a distraction. Jackson reminds us that "What counts, is good instruction and caring relationships."

Members of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform have responded to the TIME article with the following letter:

Dear Editor:

Simply converting middle schools to kindergarten-through-eighth grade schools (Wallis, TIME, Aug 1) will not necessarily lead to improvements in student learning and healthy development. We need to emphasize -- insist upon -- and implement promising and best practices which support academic excellence and positive affective development rather than divert the

focus to grade configuration changes. The final comments at the end of the article say it all. We've fought the grade configuration battles in this country's history, to no avail. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform believes that K-8 is not a "magical" solution in itself. We need to devote resources to support good education regardless of where middle-grades students are housed.

Improving middle-grades education requires focusing on what happens inside the classroom and the various supports, in school and district administration, policy, higher education, and leadership development that contribute to improving classroom practice and student performance. After years of research and first-hand experience, we know what works. The best middle-grades schools, regardless of grade configuration, offer rigorous courses that challenge students to use their minds well. They provide a personalized, caring learning environment, and they make sure that all students have access to high-quality classes and the support they need to succeed. Each year, the National Forum's "Schools to Watch Program" identifies high-performing middle-grades schools in which all students learn and achieve at high levels. We can point to excellent schools in K-8, 5-8, 6-8 and 7-8 buildings across the country. Reshuffling students

is not a panacea. Let's start providing good instruction and personalized support for all students wherever they are, rather than dismantling schools in another attempt to find a "silver bullet."

And so, we are again reminded of the need to "keep our eye on the ball" ---in this case it is the kids. In the midst of all the grade configuration talks, MSIM urges you to bring the conversation back where it belongs.....doing what's best for kids.

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Leadership Lifeline

The Middle School Principal

There is at least one thing that all schools have in common. The principal is central to shaping the direction and climate of the school.

Who is the principal? “The principal may not even be called the “principal.” He or she may be called the “building coordinator,” “the school team leader,” “the co-principal,” or some other name that communicates that the person does not exercise control through hierarchical authority but by forging consensus and mobilizing talents to enhance student performance.

According to education researcher Ulrich Reitzug, the principal should be “asking questions and suggesting a variety of alternatives that expand conceptions of how organizational tasks might be accomplished, rather than telling organizational members how these tasks must be accomplished. ...The principal’s role shifts from prescribing substance to facilitating processes in which substance can be discovered.”

- *For the principal, high performance always comes first.*

The principal organizes and leads the middle school so all young people are able to perform at the highest levels possible. For principals, this is the greatest commandment. The administrative and operational dimensions of the principalship are very important, but they are secondary to the task of creating a school in which the emphasis is on academic performance. The principal does not apologize for this priority and does not merely rely on words or admonitions to focus faculty, students, and parents on increasing student achievement as the primary mission of the school. Action is the key.

The principal knows that how the

school looks and “feels” communicates a great deal about its mission. Everything about the school should direct students toward high levels of performance and achievement beyond high school.

The walls of the school should be covered with students’ themes, science and history projects, and math homework. Just by walking down the halls, students should know that the school is serious about achievement, and that their work really counts.

- *The principal constantly interacts with the school.*

The principal is not hiding in the office nor merely “visible” in classrooms and hallways, but is constantly interacting with adults and students around issues of performance. Students know that every day the principal will randomly stop at least one student entering school, ask to look over the student’s homework, and give feedback and a few words of encouragement. Students also know that at the end of every day, the principal will randomly invite one or more students to sit down for a few minutes and discuss the classes where they are doing their best work, those where they are performing least well, and why.

In similar ways, the principal daily interacts with teachers to provide support and gain insights into classroom and instructional issues that affect student performance. The principal either teaches one class a day or substitutes for at least 25 class periods a year. On any given day, the principal may volunteer to be a teacher’s aide for a full class period, invite a teacher for lunch and informal discussion in the principal’s office, or help a teacher grade papers after school.

- *The Principal makes the school safe for learning.*

It is also the principal's job to reduce the risk environment in which students learn and faculty teach. The term "reduce the risk environment" means assuring not only freedom from physical harm, but also safety in a broader context--teachers feeling safe to express their opinions, safe to take initiative in solving problems, and safe to try, and try again, more effective ways to enhance student performance. It means students feeling safe to question, safe to explore, and safe to achieve.

The principal establishes a reduced risk environment by developing a collaborative relationship with teachers that fosters trust and enables the principal and teachers to identify school-based barriers to learning and to honestly address them.

Learning is at risk when some teachers are moving in one direction while others are moving in another, when parents are uninformed about what their children should be learning, or when students are able to keep teachers and parents isolated from one another. The school is not safe for learning if teachers, students, and parents do not understand or agree on what students should know and be able to do.

- *The principal keeps the focus on standards.*

The principal believes that standards are important benchmarks that can help students advance along a continuum of learning. Standards can focus the teaching and learning process so the force that drives the school is not the state test but clearly defined statements of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their education. Students need to understand what the school expects them to learn and how the school will assess whether they can apply what they have learned. Parents need to understand the results they can expect to see from their children's education.

- *The principal takes control of the school's "assessment destiny."*

The principal accepts the legitimacy and value of the state test but believes the school must seize the initiative to creatively use assessment in ways that promote learning. The principal shares this view with teachers and engages them in considering questions related to school-based assessment. What could the school do to enable teachers, students, and parents to better understand what students know and can do? What steps could the school take to systematically determine not only whether students meet academic standards, but also their growth in performance?

This is what it means to become a "principal." The call is demanding, and the challenges are great. It is understandable that not all principals want to make the effort, and the fact that so few do so is reflected in the performance of many children in our nation's schools.

Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up." The harvest is students who can perform at the levels of which they are capable, who seek and obtain as much education as they can, and who, in a new and different age, can earn enough to keep themselves and their families out of poverty. Principals will reap this harvest if they do not grow weary, if they do not give up.

Taken from Hayes Mizell in a speech given to Middle School Principals in Louisville, Kentucky

If you would like a copy of the entire article, contact MSIM at 989-774-7678.



Teacher Topics

Connecting With Parents: Do Your Own PR

Middle school is a really interesting place. Most middle schoolers think so, too, but you'd never know that from what they say at home.

The fact is, our students are not our best public relations representatives! A teacher's job would be easier if there were at least some spillover at home of all the excitement we see at school. I believe that teachers should take charge of their own public relations, and this is not a hard thing to do.

Of course, your first big PR opportunity is the day you meet the parents. Your main job is to win over the students, of course, but if you also win over the parents, a true partnership can begin.

Parents are looking for a teacher who is professional (Watch how you dress!), competent (Watch the slang!), and warm (A little humor is good). If you act flustered or disorganized (Where did I put my notes?), the first time their child comes home and says you lost something, the parents will believe it. If you act rigid and can't laugh at yourself, a parent can more easily believe that you are picking on their child. Naturally, the complete and parent-friendly curriculum schedule that you hand out is another big PR opportunity.

Your next chance for great PR is the student's assignment book. Make sure students write their homework assignments and include which book they are to bring home. Even if there is no homework, have the students write one sentence about what the class focused on that day.

If the student actually takes the assignment book home, looking it over is an opportu-

nity for parents to talk about what happened at school and assist the child in getting organized for homework. You might even encourage parents to write comments in the book for you or their child. Don't forget about the "Hooray" postcards and "Just to say" phone calls. Make a couple of sets of labels for your classes at the beginning of the year and make sure every label is used at least two times during the year for a postcard with good news. Make a third set of labels for phone calls. Once you've completed a call tear off the label to know you've contacted that family just to say hello or offer a good comment about the student. It's exceptional PR for about \$40 in postage.

Teach parents how to ask better questions about school. "How was school?" is a PR blocker if ever there was one. Early in the school year, give parents a list of questions that might elicit better responses, like:

- "Did anything funny happen at school today?"
- "Did you get called on in any classes today?"
- "Did you get to do anything today that made you feel great?"
- "Did you have a chance to tell the teacher about what you read last night that tied in with what you're studying?"

Teachers are doing wonderful things in middle schools. You need to make the time to let your parent constituents know about those things. You will find that your parent relationships are better, and that means you can work together more easily toward what's best for the kids.

Taken from Middle E-Connections, NMSA, August 2005

If you would like a copy of the entire article, contact MSIM at 989-774-7678.



Student Station

What Do You Know?

Have you ever wondered how the pyramids of Ancient Egypt were built, or where geese go when they fly south every winter, or why it's impossible to keep your eyes open when you sneeze? Mysteries like these are all around you, just waiting for you to investigate and solve them. Sometimes, you can get an answer to your question by simply asking someone else; often, you can find answers by reading books and doing research; at other times, you may decide that hands-on investigation is the best way to solve a mystery. In *The House of Dies Drear*, the subject of this month's book review, Thomas used all of these methods to learn more about the Underground Railroad and about the house his family had bought.

Curiosity lies at the heart of learning. When you are really interested in finding something out, it can be a lot of fun to play "detective," and to keep following up on bits of information until you have pieced together a complete answer to your question or problem. Maybe you wonder why everyone seems to be so worried about the rising price of gas and oil; perhaps you are interested in learning about the way the Space Shuttle works; or maybe you're curious about how Hurricane Katrina engulfed New Orleans earlier this month. You can learn more about these things by asking your teachers or parents, by reading articles in newspapers and magazines, and by doing some guided research on the Internet.

You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to solve life's everyday mysteries; in fact, many of the things that we take for granted in the 21st century seemed very mysterious to people in earlier times. For example, until approximately one hundred years ago, most people thought that the idea of building machines that could fly through the air was ludicrous. However, for centuries, curious people had been collecting and recording information about how birds fly; and in the early 1900's, several groups of inventors used this information to help them design the earliest airplanes.

Many other aspects of our everyday lives are the result of people solving small mysteries. Thomas Edison wanted to record sounds, and he invented the phonograph. Florence Nightingale wondered how statistics could be used to inform government officials about public health issues, and ended up inventing the pie chart, which you know and love from your study of mathematics!

What is there in your world that arouses your curiosity? What questions stimulate you to seek out answers or explanations? Be a detective: use the resources around you to find answers to your questions, and see what you can do with your new knowledge!



Student Book Review

The House of Dies Drear by Virginia Hamilton

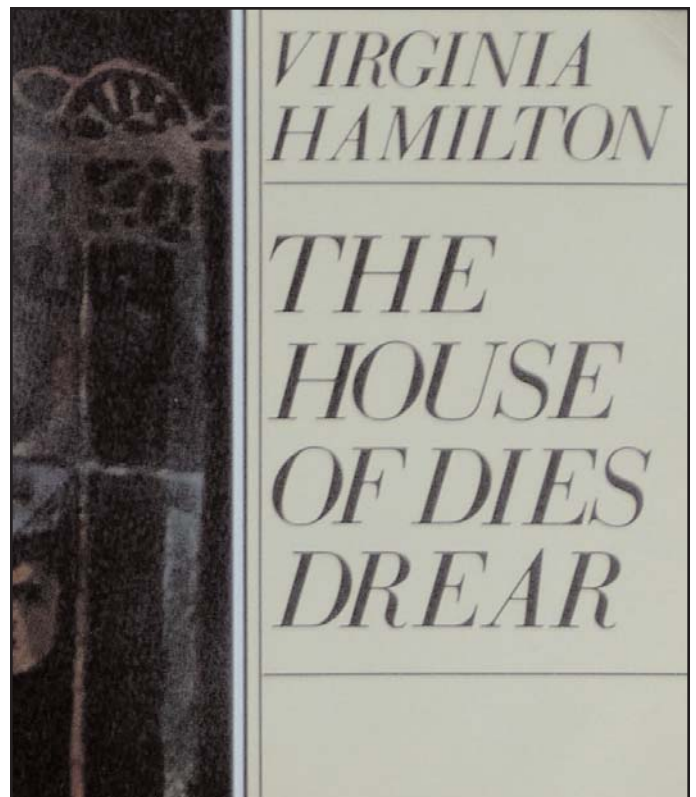
When Thomas Small and his family move from their home in North Carolina to a big, spooky old house in Ohio, Thomas is excited and intrigued. Legend has it that, a hundred years ago, the house was a way station on the Underground Railroad -- a place where escaped slaves from the South could stop and rest as they made their journey north to freedom. It is also believed that Dies Drear, the owner of the house back then, had been murdered there, along with two escaped slaves he was harboring.

Soon after the Smalls move in, strange things begin happening. They meet the house's cranky old caretaker, Mr. Pluto, who lives in a small cave on the property, and their nearest neighbors, the Darrows, who seem obsessed with the house and property of Dies Drear. Thomas discovers a secret passage and hears odd noises while he's exploring it; and four mysterious metallic triangles appear in the house and in Mr. Small's office overnight. Mr. Small suspects that Mr. Pluto or the Darrows may be trying to frighten them away... but Thomas is convinced that the house is haunted by the spirits of the murdered people.

Thomas sets out to investigate, and what he finds surprises everyone! When the Smalls learn why Mr. Pluto has been living in the cave for so many years -- and

what he has been hiding there -- the secret of the house is finally revealed.

If you enjoy this exciting and suspenseful book, you will probably also like its sequel, *The Mystery of Drear House*. The author, Virginia Hamilton, has written many excellent books for young adolescents, including *Cousins*; *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*; *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World*; and *Her Stories: African American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales*. Check your school library for these great books!





Family Focus

Keep Your Young Adolescent Active!

Fall in Michigan is a time when many of us are looking forward to football, crisp air, and big piles of fallen leaves! As the days get shorter and chillier, it's still important for young adolescents to get regular exercise and sunshine.

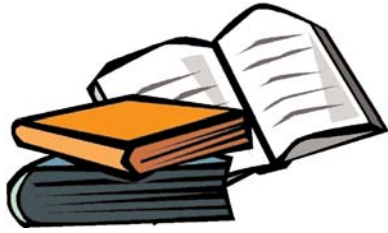
Middle-schoolers need regular physical activity. Have you ever noticed that your young adolescent seems to be full of energy and in constant motion? This is a natural result of the physical growth taking place in your child at this time. For many young adolescents, it is very difficult to sit still for extended periods of time, partly because they are experiencing the physical discomfort of rapid growth, and partly because they need movement and activity to help them get accustomed to the changes taking place in their bodies. So, as fall approaches, encourage your young adolescent to get regular exercise. Exercise does not have to be strenuous. It can take many forms, from practicing tai chi, to walking around the block, to playing a game of pickup basketball.

Getting fresh air and sunshine is also important for middle schoolers. It is important for all of us, actually, since sunshine activates certain hormones that help us to avoid depression, chronic

exhaustion, and a variety of other medical problems. Young adolescents, who are experiencing rapid changes in hormone levels as well as all the anxieties and social pressures of the middle school years, are especially vulnerable to depression and fatigue. Being certain that your child gets at least an hour of fresh air and sunshine on most days can help to keep those hormones in better balance, and can give your child another tool for fending off stress and depression.

Remember, the example you set will influence your child -- so, while you're encouraging your middle schooler to get outside and exercise, it wouldn't hurt for you to set a good example. Why not find some form of outdoor activity that you and your child both enjoy, and spend some quality time together doing it?





Resource Review

Developing Minds

The third edition of *Developing Minds* explores important questions about teaching thinking skills: Why teach thinking skills? What are the best strategies for teaching thinking in the classroom? What roles can technology play in the development of such expertise? And how can we assess a student's mastery of thinking skills?

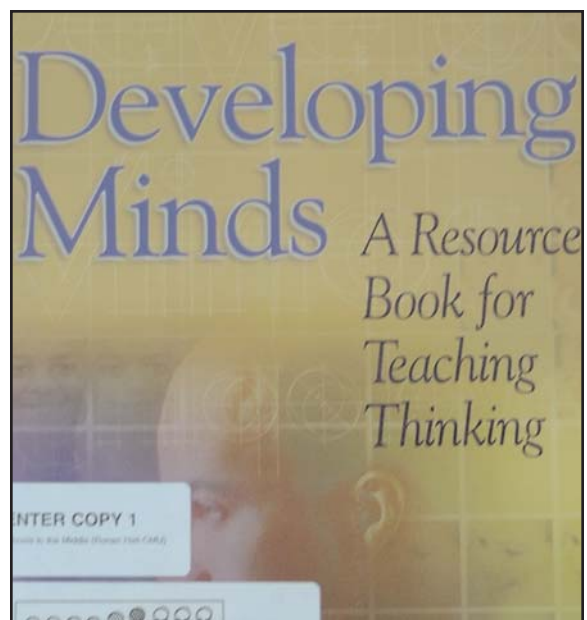
Editor Art Costa has assembled an impressive array of authors and essays addressing these and other issues related to teaching students how to think deeply and effectively. The major goal of *Developing Minds* is "to foster a world filled with classrooms, schools, and communities that are more thoughtful places." To this end, Costa seeks to forge a common vision among the education community of what characterizes effective and creative thinkers and problem solvers. He then draws on the works of Geoffrey and Renata Nummela Caine, David Martin, and others to address the importance of creating environments -- both school and non-school -- in which effective thinking is nurtured.

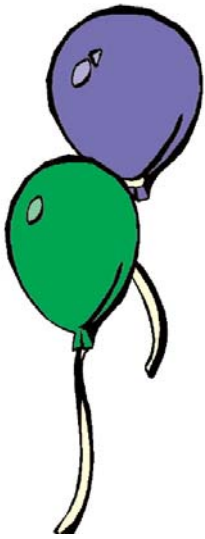
Two critical sections -- one on human perspectives about thinking and one on varying human abilities and styles of thinking -- follow, including essays from Robin Fogarty, Robert Marzano, David Lazear, Ruby Payne, and others. Next, *Developing Minds* focuses on teaching thinking across the curriculum and in individual subject areas, drawing on the works of Barry Beyer,

Bena Kallick, Robert Swartz, and more.

Costa then shines a spotlight on techniques and strategies for teaching thinking in the classroom. He draws largely on his own work in these sections, as well as on the thinking of Marzano, David Hyerle, Jay McTighe, Richard Paul, and Thomas Jackson. The final two sections of the book address, respectively, the role of technology in teaching thinking, and the assessment of growth in thinking abilities. An excellent set of Appendices and Recommended Resources concludes the text.

This valuable resource provides a wealth of information and knowledge for the teacher or administrator who wishes to better guide students down the path toward higher-order thinking. If you'd like to review *Developing Minds*, please call MSIM at (989) 774-7678 and ask to check out Resource Number IS-88.





Hey, Kids!!! Send us your best writing and win some book money!

Young Writers Contest!!

In celebration of the National Middle School Association's Month of the Young Adolescent, Michigan Schools in the Middle is sponsoring a Young Writers Contest for students at middle schools across the state of Michigan. Three essays will be selected for publication in the October "FYI," and each winning essayist will be awarded a \$25.00 gift certificate to Barnes & Noble Booksellers.

Purpose of Contest:

MSIM wants to foster understanding among adults of what it is like to be a young adolescent in the early 21st century.

The Writing Prompt:

What do you think adults should know about what it's like to be a middle-schooler in the year 2005?

Thought-starters:

What are your hopes and fears? How are you changing physically, socially, emotionally, and/or intellectually? What are some of your most important "likes" and "dislikes"? What are your dreams for the future? What are some of the challenges you face in school? What is your home and family life like?

Criteria for Selecting Winning Essays:

Essays will be judged based on the following characteristics:

1. the extent to which they address the writing prompt;
2. their creativity and originality; and
3. the technical quality of their writing.

Rules and Guidelines:

- o Essays must be word-processed in Microsoft Word and sent as e-mail "Attachments."
- o Each entry must include the writer's name, school, and grade level (entrants must be in Grade 5, 6, 7, or 8).
- o Maximum length for essays is 250 words.
- o Deadline for submitting entries is Monday, October 3.
- o Entries may be e-mailed to Michigan Schools in the Middle at pattie.du_vall@cmich.edu

Questions: Call 989-774-7678

MICHIGAN SCHOOLS TO WATCH UPDATE

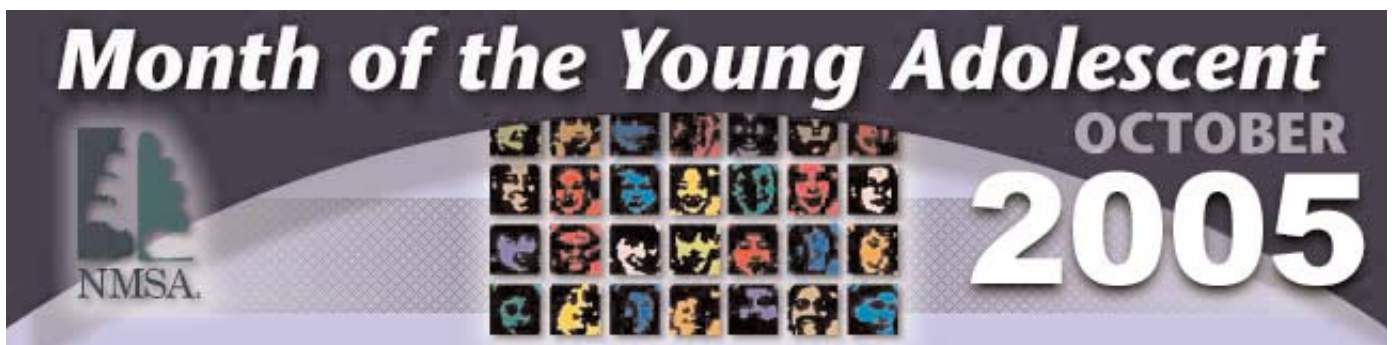
The site reviewers are trained and the Michigan Leadership Team (Steve Hoelscher, Pat Benson, Linda Chase, Nancy Fenton, and Dave Spaulding) are anxiously waiting to receive applications from Michigan middle-grades schools. Applications are due November 1 and can be submitted electronically. Walden University has generously volunteered to develop the Michigan STW website and they tell us that the website should be “live” in the next day or so. At that time you may download a copy of the Michigan Schools To Watch application. Middle grades schools which include seventh grade and one other adjacent grade are eligible to apply for this recognition

STW applications are intended to be a reflective process, and you are urged to collaborate as an entire staff as you pull together the narrative and requested documentation. STW criteria are aligned with the National Forum's vision of Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, and Social Equity. The process also includes Organizational Structures.

Applications will be reviewed in November and December, and site visits will be conducted in early 2006. There is not a set number of schools which will be named STW sites in Michigan. The criteria will be strictly held and schools will be acknowledged in accordance with the national criteria. The Leadership Team hopes to be able to name several STW sites throughout the state.

STW sites selected will have celebrations in the spring. These are huge community events with government, county, and city officials attending, businesses participating, and family and community members joining in the celebration. We also hope that some of our Michigan STW sites will be presenting at the National STW Conference next June 22-24 in Washington, DC.

For more information regarding STW, please feel free to contact MSIM at 989-774-7678 or www.schoolsinthemiddle.cmich.edu



**Go to www.NMSA.org for articles,
resources, and other ideas to help
your community
celebrate its young adolescents.**

Comprehensive School Reform Programs

The Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program is designed to increase student achievement by assisting public schools across the country with implementing comprehensive reforms that are grounded in scientifically based research and effective practices. The CSR program targets high-poverty and low-achieving schools, especially those receiving Title I funds, by helping them to increase the quality and accelerate the pace of their reform efforts. The eleven components of the Comprehensive School Reform Program provide an organizing framework that encourages schools to build upon and leverage state and local school initiatives into a comprehensive plan for school improvement.

Piece-meal approaches to school reform rarely succeed. That's why every CSR model gives attention to curriculum teaching, professional development, evaluation and several other areas that research has shown to have a strong impact on student achievement. CSR aims not only to fix the individual parts of a school but also to fit those parts together, so that they all add up to a coherent whole.

Congratulations to the following schools, which have just been designated as CSR Schools, and have chosen Middle Start as their model provider and are being served by Michigan Schools in the Middle. We will be featuring individual schools in future issues of the Newsletter.

Central Middle School, Saginaw
Hamady Middle School, Flint
Hancock Middle School
Marion Jr/Sr High School
North Middle School, Saginaw
Rose City Middle School
Surline Middle School, West Branch



Powerful Quote

"No other age level is of more importance to the future of individuals, and, literally, to that of society; because these are the years when youngsters crystallize their beliefs about themselves and firm up their values - the things that are the ultimate determinants of their behaviors."

John H Lounsbury



"Freebee"

The first 5 people to contact us will receive a copy of either *Making Change* by Holly Holland or *Understanding by Design* by Wiggins and McTighe. To receive your book, email Pattie at duvallp@cmich.edu with your name and address.

Contact Us:



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