



A MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION MONTHLY UPDATE

A MICHIGAN MIDDLE START PARTNER ORGANIZATION

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A School to Watch?

It was a bone-chilling four degrees above zero in Michigan when I boarded a flight to Charlotte, North Carolina to participate in a site review of Mint Hill Middle School, which had recently applied for Schools-to-Watch status. I joined the site review team, led by John Harrison, early Monday morning, and immediately felt welcomed by this team of middle-school junkies!

Each of us on the review team had read Mint Hill's Schools-to-Watch (STW) application, so we knew that Mint Hill is a newly-formed middle school, in a newly-built facility; that it serves approximately 1200 students in grades 6-8, of whom 31% are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; and that its student population is ethnically diverse (60% Caucasian, 25% African-American, 10% Hispanic, and 5% Asian-American). We also knew that more than 90% of Mint Hill's students are achieving at or above grade-level expectations on North Carolina's state assessments.

Upon our arrival at the school, the review team was greeted at the front doors by Mint Hill's band, playing Christmas carols to welcome us

to their school. The main entry corridor of the three-year-old building was spacious enough to easily accommodate this talented group of young musicians.

From the entry, we proceeded to the school's media center, where we were greeted by teachers, administrators, support staff, and central office personnel. Due to the sizes of both Mint Hill and the Charlotte Public School district, which serves 120,000 students, it was an impressively large number of school personnel who awaited us in the media center. Each member of the review team was given a journal and a backpack full of "goodies" to take with us on our journey through the school.

A Schools-to-Watch review is a highly structured process, but the activities of the first hour and a half are left up to the discretion of the applicant school, giving the school the opportunity to "wow" reviewers in its own unique way. The staff and students at Mint Hill Middle School took full advantage of the "wow" factor! Over breakfast, the review team had the opportunity to hear from each Mint Hill staff member about the accomplishments of the school and its students. We

were also treated to a musical review of Mint Hill's history, featuring lyrics written by students, put to a familiar tune, and performed by Mint Hill's vocal music students; and to a skit about the school, written and performed by the drama class. These students were fantastic, fun, proud of their school, and eager to impress the review team!

Trained skeptics that we are, we left these presentations impressed, but determined to dig beneath the surface and see the "real stuff" of the school. It would have been easy to focus on the excellent design of the building -- a "Main Street" central corridor, and a wing for each grade level, with the offices of each grade's counselor and assistant principal located in the relevant wing -- or to be charmed by the spacious, bright, and comfortable atmosphere, with a multitude of bulletin boards cheerfully displaying student birthdays, value trees, and student work. The review team, however, was intent on looking beyond all that to see whether this was a good place for all kids to learn at high levels, in a caring environment.

We visited classrooms and witnessed students engaged in a wide variety of learning activities: analyzing a political cartoon from World War II, discussing its symbolism in the context of 1940's Germany; traveling from station to station in a language arts classroom, completing a variety of projects centered on the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, which they had just finished reading; using balloons in an experiment measuring lung capacity; and standing on their chairs as they sang along with a CD in a math class. In every classroom, the review team noted lesson objectives posted on the board and student work displayed on the walls.

The team also talked with students -- in fact, we sought out those whom we thought likely to feel unhappy or isolated. Again and again, they told us that Mint Hill was a great school, that their teachers had high standards and expectations for them, and that they felt included, cared for, and proud of their school. The review team was given free access to the

entire building -- no person or place was off limits, and we sensed no efforts to steer us in any particular direction.

Over lunch, the review team had the opportunity to talk one-on-one with parents of Mint Hill students. We learned that Mint Hill has a waiting list of more than three hundred children; and parents were, without exception, delighted that their kids were students at Mint Hill. One mother described her happiness with the individualized attention given to one daughter who has ADHD, and with the school's success in providing her younger (and extremely bright) daughter with the academic challenges she needs.

Another reviewer and I interviewed the principal, an energetic woman with great passion for her school. She had served as an assistant principal during Mint Hill's first two years of existence before being named principal for the 2005-06 school year. Her understanding of best practices in curriculum, instruc-

tion, and assessment was truly impressive, and she had managed to escape some central office mandates (strict adherence to pacing guides, e.g.) by providing administrators with positive student performance data. She had a strong vision for her school and supported the good work of her teachers.

The review team focused on the crucial Schools-to-Watch question: "Is Mint Hill academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable?" The answer was best summed up by John Harrison, the review team's leader: "These teachers are delivering high school level content to middle school kids, with an elementary school heart."

I left North Carolina, believing that every young adolescent in America deserves a Mint Hill education. I hope to return in the spring to help Mint Hill Middle School celebrate a well-deserved selection as a School to Watch! Pat



January's "Freebie"

This month we have video tapes to give away. They are from the *Managing Your Classroom* series. The first 4 to contact us at 989-774-1198 or email at duval1p@cmich.edu will receive a tape from the series.

Last month Jay Bartlett, Tami Morel and Tracy Martin, all from StandishSterling, recieved MSIM bags.



Leadership Lifeline

The five principles of successful meetings.

by Robert Garmston

Successful meetings have always existed, yet the pervasive memories of poor ones dominate the memory's palette, leading us, like Pavlov's dogs, to groan at the mere use of the word "meeting". Yet, meetings can be events in which educational communities learn, dialogue, plan, problem solve, monitor, and make decisions.

Effective meetings require more than skilled facilitators. Facilitation is important, as are sound agendas and functional physical surroundings. More important are skilled group members and the application of certain principles. Meeting success is influenced more by the collaborative norms of the group than by the knowledge and skills of a meeting facilitator (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

The principles of a successful meeting are embodied in five standards.

1. Discuss only one topic at a time;
2. Use only one process at a time;
3. Achieve interactive and balanced participation;
4. Respect cognitive conflict by eliciting disagreements

and respecting other viewpoints; and

5. Have all understand and agree to meeting roles and responsibilities.

ONE TOPIC AT A TIME

One of the brightest groups of which I have been a member had a habit of putting kernels of ideas and topics in the air as if we were living in a popcorn machine. Meetings were exciting, but not productive. Finally, in frustration, we realized we were violating this very basic principle of effective group work and decided one of us would serve as facilitator in each meeting. Having adopted this standard, both the facilitator and group members can help the group stay on track. Either can offer a relevancy challenge: "Help us understand how your comment connects to this topic." The typical response is either that it doesn't fit and the speaker will save it for later, or an explanation of how it does connect. Listing the off-topic ideas on a wall chart respectfully holds the ideas in group memory so they are not lost.

ONE PROCESS AT A TIME

Like the first standard, this one is easily forgotten when group discussions become intense. In any meeting, multiple thinking styles are at work, and it is natural for members to examine topics with different approaches. When my wife and I have fiscal discussions, we have learned to name the process we will use, agree to it, and live by it until that phase of the conversation is done. Because we approach tasks differently, this is essential to effective technical conversations together and saves us from "process arguments" during our work.

In the same way, for a group to brainstorm effectively, all members need to be on the same page. During brainstorming, all ideas are accepted without comment, question, or challenge. To ensure this, the facilitator uses a strategy called PAG/PAU. In the first phase, Process As Given, she carefully describes the process, then states what to do and what not to do. "If you have a question or criticism during the brain-

storming, hold on to it. We will hear it later.” Then the facilitator checks group members’ understanding. During this Process As Understood phase, she queries the group. “So, what are your ground rules? How much time will this take? What will you do if you have a question or criticism?” With PAG/PAU, the facilitator has psychological permission from the group to intervene should any process agreements be forgotten.

INTERACTIVE MEETINGS

The most heroic of group members will begin to lose information in short-term memory without interaction with ideas. The most effective groups use processes learned in classrooms to keep members engaged and thoughtfully productive. Any meeting that runs beyond 20 to 30 minutes without members being directed to turn to a neighbor and talk is probably burning out brain cells.

In our work with Adaptive Schools, Bruce Wellman and I have described fifty meeting strategies that accomplish this and other meeting purposes (Garmston & Wellman, 1999). In one strategy, members turn to one another and summarize the most important point of the preceding

discussion. In another strategy, pairs identify concerns about a topic before general discussion begins. In yet another, subgroups read and discuss a policy statement to identify topics for full group discussion.

PRODUCTIVE COGNITIVE CONFLICT

Groups that discuss substantive differences of opinion produce better decisions, increased commitment, cohesiveness, and follow-through than groups who lack this “cognitive conflict” (Amason, et al., 1995). Bruce Wellman and I have found that even groups with histories of directing anger at individuals rather than ideas can learn to set aside this “affective conflict” and develop ways of talking respectfully to individuals while disagreeing vigorously with their ideas.

The importance of cognitive conflict cannot be overstressed. Good groups disagree gracefully about ideas. They have norms and tools that allow full expression of differences, examinations of assumptions and mental models underlying different points of view, and resolution techniques that provide for “best possible” resolutions to arise. They produce better results. Ineffective groups either

avoid conflict and live with poor decisions made by the leader or the most vocal member of the group, or personalize conflict and create a host of negative factors like apathy, balkanization, decreased commitment to the group’s purposes, and, always, poor decisions.

UNDERSTAND AND AGREE ON ROLES

The most influential role in any group is the group member. Skilled members who know meeting standards and group processes are able to work in harmony across differences to get the greatest value from meeting time. Most groups engage in decision making, planning, or problem solving need a facilitator and someone doing public recording. Most often, one group member is a decision maker--that is, a person of role authority like a principal, or of knowledge authority like a specialist in whatever topic is being discussed. The least effective use of these people’s time is in the facilitator’s role. This robs the group of valuable knowledge they have to contribute to topics.

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Teacher Topics

Student Stations for Literacy

Looking for ways to engage your middle schoolers in deeper thinking around a book or story which they have read? Want to include multiple means of assessment? appeal to a variety of learning styles and intelligences? Want students to use higher level thinking skills? Hope they will work cooperatively? Here is an idea which I brought back from North Carolina --- like any good educator, I steal good ideas whenever and wherever I can!

Students in a language arts class had just completed reading the book, "Tuesdays with Morrie." This is a great book with a high level of analysis and application required to appreciate its message. In order to engage students in dialogue and deepen their understanding of the book, this teacher had created student stations with the following projects required:

Station 1:

Create a six page children's book based on the text. You are the protagonist, instead of Mitch. You are to create six fictional Tuesday meetings with Morrie, and visually show them in your children's book. Each page must have a colored illustration and a three sentence (minimum) caption.

Station 3:

Create six Cause and Effect chains based on Morrie's perceptions on life. Each cause and effect chain must contain a colored illustration and line or quote from the text.

Station 5:

Compose a five stanza poem that encompasses a major theme for Tuesdays with Morrie. Each stanza must contain at least five lines. The poem can rhyme or be free verse. The poem is to be handwritten initially, and then typed for homework.

Station 7:

Conduct and script an interview with Morrie as if he were still alive. Compose six specific questions to Morrie, and generate Morrie's responses to your questions.

Station 2:

Create two billboard graphic organizers for this station. One billboard will represent society through Mitch's eyes (2004). The other will represent how society should be according to Morrie. Each billboard will contain seven exact lines or quotes from the book, followed by seven colored illustrations.

Station 4:

Create a Road Map graphic organizer that demonstrates Mitch's life, before and after meeting with Morrie. Each "stop" on the road which is Mitch's life must include a picture and an exact line or quote from the text. For the last three stops, you must make an inference about Mitch's future after Morrie's death. *12 stop minimum*

Station 6:

Create a fishbone graphic organizer that depicts Mitch's learning experience. You must produce ten concepts Mitch specifically learned from Morrie. Each concept is a "bone" on the fish. Next to the bone, you must include a colored picture and exact quote from the text.

Station 8:

Write a two page letter to Morrie Schwartz. In your letter, you must include three specific concepts you learned or changed in your life. Each concept must be supported by an exact quote from the book.



Student Station

Setting Goals

In last month's Student Station, we discussed the importance of discovering your purpose -- whatever it is that gives meaning and direction to your life.

You've had some time, now, to think about what really motivates you, and to imagine what you'd like your life to be like in a year, in five years, in ten years, in twenty years, and maybe even beyond.

So you have some pretty solid ideas about how you'd like your future to look -- great! Your next big question is, "How do I GET there? How do I make my dreams come true?"

One of the most important tools available to help you achieve your purpose is your ability to set goals. Goal-setting is a skill which you can learn and which you will be able to use throughout your life, in a variety of situations. All you need to get started is a pen, a notebook, and some quiet time to think and plan. (If you have written down any notes or thoughts about your purpose, it would be great to have those with you, too!)

Once you're comfortably settled in a quiet place, with your pen and paper in hand, write down your long-term goals -- all of the things that you'd like to accomplish over the next ten or twenty years. You will probably have a wide

variety of items on this list, and that's fine! Next, pick out your top ten goals; and then prioritize your top three.

Most likely, at least one of the items on your "Top Three" list will be closely related to your purpose. For example, perhaps in thinking about your life's purpose, you have realized that you are fascinated by studying the planets in our solar system, and you believe that your purpose is to learn all you can about the planets and share your knowledge with other people. So, at least one of your goals will probably read something like, "Make new discoveries about the planets," "Write books about astronomy," or "Attend a university which has a great Planetary Science degree program."

Now that you've identified your major goals, it's time to set some medium-range goals -- things that you need to accomplish in the next three to five years in order to move you along the road toward achieving your long-term goals. Say, for example, that your top long-term goals are to get a doctorate in Planetary Science and to make new discoveries about the planets. Some medium-range goals that will help you move toward your long-term goals

might be: "Find out which universities have the best Planetary Science programs," "Read as much as I can about astronomy and the planets," and "Volunteer at the local observatory."

Once you've developed a list of medium-range goals, prioritize them according to how well they will help you move toward accomplishing your long-term goals.

Next, keeping in mind your medium-range goals, your long-term goals, and your purpose, set some specific short-term goals that you'd like to accomplish within the next year or two. In our example, these might include goals such as "Search on the Internet for information about universities with good Planetary Science programs," "Ask my school's guidance counselor to describe to me what kinds of grades I'll need to earn in high school in order to be accepted into a good university," or "Go to the school library and check out a book that relates to astronomy or planetary science." These short-term goals are things that you can get started on right away... maybe even today! Remember, you can make all the goals you want, but it's only when you take action that you begin to achieve them.

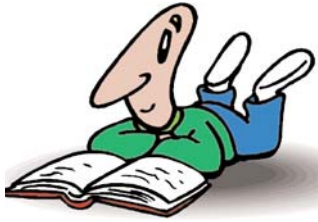
A couple of additional words on purpose, goals, and goal-setting: remember that your purpose and your goals do not have to be career-related. For many people, goals and paid work go hand-in-hand, but not for everyone. Your purpose may be to be an outstanding homemaker, managing your family's day-to-day activities and providing a comfortable and healthy

place for your spouse and children to live. Perhaps you want to learn how to build straw bale houses and pass this knowledge on to other people, free of charge. Maybe your "purpose" is to be the most honest, ethical person that you can be, or to strive to always treat others with fairness and compassion. Any of these, and a million more, are legitimate purposes! And, in order to achieve them, you will likely need to set goals and then to take action.

Last, but not least, keep in mind that everything you do affects the world and the people around you. If your purpose is to make lots and lots of money, and you decide that a good long-term goal would be to have a million dollars, it's still probably not a good idea to set a short-term goal of robbing a bank! While you might get a bit closer to your million dollars, you'd be doing a lot of harm in the process, and you might even get yourself tossed in jail! Make sure you always keep the "big picture" in mind when you're setting goals and working toward them.

You're ready to go! Dream on, plan away, act on your plans, and watch your dreams come true!





Student Book Review

Chasing Redbird Author: Sharon Creech

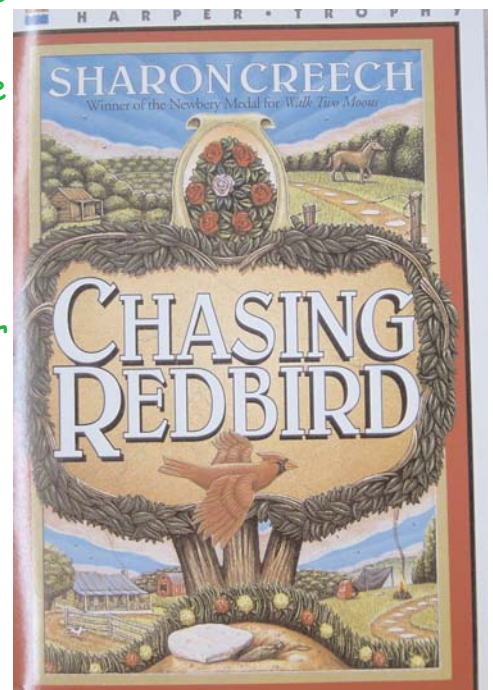
It started out as an ordinary summer. But the minute thirteen-year-old Zinny discovered the old, overgrown trail that ran through the woods behind her family's house, she realized that things were about to change.

Right from the start, Zinny knew that uncovering the trail would be more than just a summer project. It was her chance to finally make people notice her, and to have a place she could call her very own. But more than that, Zinny knew that the trail somehow held the key to all kinds of questions. . . and that the only way to understand her eccentric family, to come to grips with the death of her Aunt Jessie, and to find herself, was to find out where the trail went.

Even if you're not a big reader, you won't want to put this book down! Zinny's personality and her wry sense of humor will keep you engaged, and the suspense will build as Zinny uncovers more and more of the trail, and learns more about the meaning of what she finds.

Sharon Creech, the author, has written several other books that you may find interesting if you enjoy *Chasing Redbird: Walk Two Moons*, in which 13-year-old Salamanca and her grandparents drive across the country searching for Salamanca's mother, who has disappeared; *Bloomability*, whose smart and insightful protagonist, Dinnie, and her gang of misfit friends struggle together to find their places in the world; and *Absolutely Normal Chaos*, in which the act of keeping a journal leads a girl to new insights about herself and the people around her.

Head over to your school's library and pick up one of these great books today!





Family Focus

Reading Aloud

In last month's Family Focus, we began looking at the Parent Institute's list of "Twenty-Five Ways Parents Can Read with Children." We discussed the importance of making reading a part of the family's routine -- reading at least 30 minutes per day, visiting the library regularly, and keeping books in easy-to-reach places around your house or apartment.

This month, we're going to focus on the Parent Institute's fourth suggestion: Read aloud to your child. Research shows that reading aloud to kids on a regular basis, beginning from the time they are infants, is one of the most important factors influencing their future success as readers.

If you've been reading to your child all along, great! Keep it up! If you haven't, don't worry -- it's never too late to start. Even if you spend just ten minutes a day reading aloud to your child, it will help her to develop listening skills, concentration, and the enjoyment of reading.

Pick a variety of reading material -- short stories, picture books, newspaper articles, poems, plays, magazines -- and try to vary the length and subject matter of what you read aloud. Make sure that you pick reading that you enjoy,

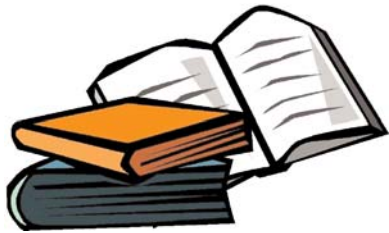
too! If it's clear to your child that you're interested in what you are reading to him, it will help him to be interested, too.

Don't be surprised if your child interrupts your reading frequently, with questions or comments about the story. This is great -- it shows that she is listening and engaged in what you're reading! Answer her questions right away, and then go on with the reading. Remember, the number of pages you read is much less important than the satisfaction you and your child get from the reading experience.

It may be that reading isn't easy for you. Don't be afraid to try. Even if you stumble a bit as you read, your child will see that reading is important to you, and he will be more likely to take reading seriously, himself.

Perhaps you can find a family member or a friend who is willing to help you with reading. With a little support, you will likely discover that reading well isn't as far out of your own reach as you had thought!





Resource Review

Promoting Literacy in Grades 4-9: A Handbook for Teachers and Administrators

This book provides a comprehensive look at the promotion of literacy as a driving force in middle-grades schools. Editors Karen D. Wood and Thomas S. Dickinson have organized twenty-nine chapters written by leading literacy experts into three sections which, together, provide a detailed view of literacy in the middle grades.

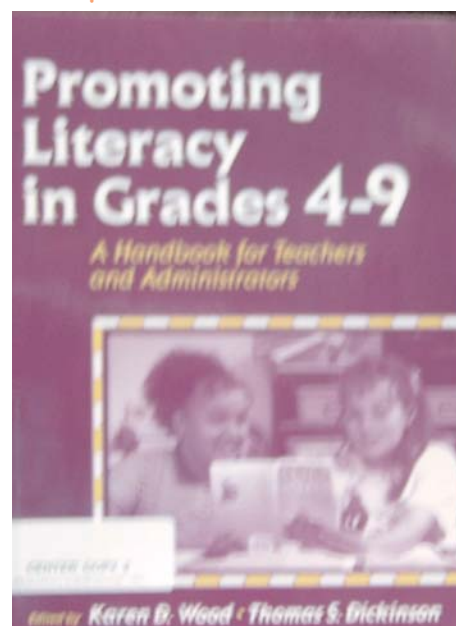
Part One, *The Literacy Program in the Intermediate and Middle Grades*, focuses on the roles of teachers, administrators, parents, schools, and communities in fostering literacy. In addition to detailing the roles of specific groups of stakeholders in students' literacy education, each chapter combines a review of the best research, the most effective practices, and the ideal setting for the successful promotion of literacy.

Part Two, *Literacy and the Intermediate and Middle School Learner*, focuses on the learners themselves, with insightful chapters on the needs and characteristics of young adolescents, on fostering motivation among middle-schoolers, on giving students a voice in their literacy program, and on effective methods for teaching students with learning disabilities, students for whom English is not their

first language, and linguistically gifted students.

Part Three, *Promoting Literacy in the Classroom: Research into Practice*, presents sixteen chapters which combine the research presented in the first two sections into practical programs for embedding literacy into multiple aspects of the school environment. For example, one chapter discusses the promotion of literacy via integrated curriculum; another focuses on helping struggling learners to read and write; spelling, picture books, literature circles, technological literacy, and building critical thinking skills via literacy education are among the rich array of practical applications provided.

To check out a copy of this excellent resource, call MSIM at (989) 774-7678, and ask for resource number CAL-19.

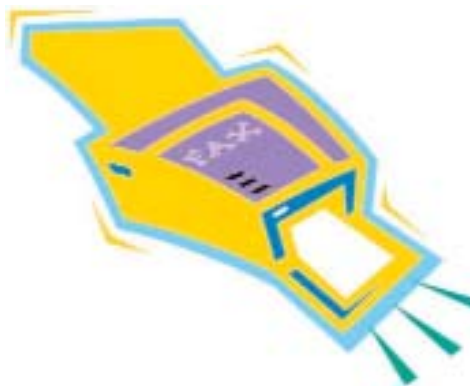


Powerful Quote

If it takes a lot of words to say what you have in mind, give it more thought.

-- Dennis Roth

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