



A MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION MONTHLY UPDATE

A MICHIGAN MIDDLE START PARTNER ORGANIZATION

SEPTEMBER, 2006 * VOLUME 9 * NUMBER 2

Standards of Excellence in the Middle Grades

Ever find yourself in need of a good example of excellence? As teachers we are often reminded that young adolescents need exemplars of quality work along with scoring guides or rubrics to help them perform at high levels. All of us need models to help us in our work. Models of excellence help us clarify our vision of quality, and in Michigan we are fortunate to have examples of excellence in middle-grades education....they are called Schools to Watch.

The Schools to Watch (STW) program, initiated by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, identifies schools that serve as examples of excellence in four areas: Strong Academics, Respect for Students' Needs and Interests, Equal Access to a High-Quality Education, and Support for School Improvement. Each of these four

areas is subdivided into 8-11 specific criteria, with indicators to help educators reflect on their work and progress toward excellence.

So what do STW designated schools "look like"? Imagine, if you will, conducting your own walk-through in a STW. Here are some of things you would probably observe: standards, benchmarks, and/or GLCE's would be posted, and students would know what standards were being addressed in the day's lesson. The day's outcomes or goals would also be communicated to students. Students would have opportunities to revise their work and to connect their learning to real-life situations. During your walk-through you would notice a lot of student work displayed in the classrooms, and students would be engaged in numerous projects and small-group

learning activities. Students struggling with the work would have multiple opportunities for extra support for their learning and it would be apparent that the teachers judged their teaching by the quality of their students' work.

As you continued your visit of the school, you would, perhaps, have a chance to visit a team meeting and observe teachers examining student work or engaged in deep conversations around curriculum, instruction, and assessment. And you would hear teachers collaborating to help needy students and their families. You would, no doubt, sense an atmosphere of caring and respect permeating the building. Students in this building would have voice and choice....they would help design learning, clubs, and school activities. Every student you talked to would have at least one adult to

whom they could turn for support....someone who knew them well and cared about them. As a visitor you might also notice many parents involved in the school and a sense of pride in the school.

If you are naturally suspicious, as some of us are, you might start wondering about those kids who are often left out or isolated in the school. You would notice that all classes are open to all students and that everyone appears to "fly first-class" in this school. Class schedules would be flexible to allow more time for learning as needed. Your walk-through would also highlight the use of data and the emphasis on closing achievement gaps in the building. But, mostly, you would notice that respect for all was clearly evident throughout the entire building: from the bus driver, to the lunch room, to the principal's office, "what's best for kids" is the mantra. Everyone just seems to love being a part of this STW.

If your time permitted, you would also note that several support structures were in place to help this school achieve excellence. A quick review of

meetings would indicate that norms and agendas guide every meeting, and the school's vision is a living document that directs the daily work of the staff. Administrators would be involved in all aspects of the school. The principal would take opportunities to get to know every student and to support teaching and learning in meaningful ways. You would also notice that there is shared leadership in the school.....teachers are also leaders.

Ah, yes, models of excellence. We all need them....they are real, they are not perfect; they are schools that are on a journey, and they are helping young adolescents to travel the path toward excellence. Want to visit such a school in Michigan? The following schools have been identified as Schools to Watch:

White Pine Middle School

Bonnie Eaves, Principal
505 N Center
Saginaw, MI 48603
989-797-1814
bjaves@stcs.org

Saline Middle School
Nic Cooper, Principal
7265 Saline Ann Arbor Rd
Saline, MI 48176
734-429-8070
coopern@saline.k12.mi.us

Oakview Middle School
Alice Seppanen, Principal
917 Lake George Rd.
Oakland Twp, MI 48363
248-693-0321
aseppanen@lakeorion.k12.mi.us

Want to engage in a reflective process to see if you are a STW? Visit Michigan Schools in the Middle website:

schoolsinthemiddle.cmich.edu and go to Schools to Watch to download a copy of this year's application and the standards and indicators in each of the four categories.

Free for MEMBERS ONLY

Would you like Pat Benson or another MSIM staff member to facilitate a whole staff reflection on the STW standards & criteria? This works well for a staff meeting, late start or half-day PD.

This service is free to Michigan Schools in the Middle 2006-2007 member schools.

If you are interested, call Pattie at 989-774-1198 to arrange a visit.

If you have not yet renewed your membership, now is the time to send in the registration form and check.



Leadership Lifeline

Creating a Teaching Organization

"Winning organizations are teaching organizations. Everybody teaches. Everybody learns," Noel Tichy writes in *The Cycle of Leadership: How Great Leaders Teach Their Companies to Win*. In such organizations, "everyone in the organization is expected to be constantly in a teaching and learning mode...(T)rue learning takes place only when the leader/teacher invests the time and emotional energy to engage those around him or her in a dialogue that produces mutual understanding."

Tichy's view contrasts sharply with leadership as it is practiced in many schools and school systems--directives issued, compliance monitored, and rewards and sanctions applied as appropriate. In these organizations, communication flows from the top down and fear is a primary motivator. "Command-and-control hierarchies, with their cram-down, one-way communication, create vicious cycles in which information is hidden, gamesmanship is raised to a high art, and trust is destroyed," Tichy argues. Such leadership practice "...is the mark of a weak leader who doesn't have the self-confidence to face criticism or grow, and it doesn't generate the excitement or energy needed to win," he writes.

On the other hand, a "Teaching Organization" is one in which "everyone is a teacher, everyone is a learner, and reciprocal teaching and learning are built into the fabric of everyday activities. A key ingredient in a Teaching Organization is a leader who teaches by "...drawing on and learning from the knowledge and experience of the students."

Cycles of teaching and learning in Teaching Organizations become part of the organization's culture, occurring in many formal and informal settings rather than being relegated to particular times or circumstances such as "inservice days" or ceremonial functions.

Because Teaching Organizations expect everyone to be a teacher and a learner in a continuous cycle, and because it is essential that system leaders be engaged in this process, leaders must value interacting with others in a teaching/learning mode and set aside regular time for reflection on their vision, values, and ideas. "Building a Teaching Organization starts with a mind-set that teaching is a valuable core activity...(T)rue learning takes place only when the leader/teacher invests the time and emotional energy to engage those around him or her in a dialogue that produces mutual understanding." Taken from *The Learning System, Cycle of Leadership*, September 2005

Want to gain skills in creating a culture of learning?

Treat yourself and your staff to a world-class opportunity

Improving Instruction Through Collegial Dialogue with Carolyn McKanders

The 5- day workshop is being held in Flint

September 27 & 28, 2006

October 24, 2006

November 16, 2006

December 13, 2006

Registration deadline is September 15.

**Go to our website for a registration form
www.schoolsinthemiddle.cmich.edu**



Teacher Topics

Classbuilders

Starting the Year off Right

Looking for ways to build community and create a respectful learning environment in your classroom? Excellent middle-grades teachers know that time spent building relationships during the first weeks of school is time well spent! Sometimes in the rush to review for the MEAP, we deprive our students and ourselves of opportunities to get to know each other so that everyone supports the learning of others.

Spencer and Laurie Kagan remind us that the use of Classbuilders is essential to develop a spirit of cooperation in middle-grades classrooms. So, what are Classbuilders? The Kagans define them as activities that have all students standing, usually moving around, and interacting with one another. Hmm, movement, a chance to talk....sounds like a match for the characteristics and needs of young adolescents!

Listed below are a few of the Classbuilders that you might want to use in your classroom. They only take a few minutes, require little or no preparation, and can set the stage for a great year.

- **Mix-Freeze-Group:** Music is played and students are asked to move or "dance" around the room greeting one another until the music stops. Students then form pairs, trios, etc. as called for by the teacher. The groups then discuss a question posed by the teacher. Good beginning of year questions include: What is your favorite TV show; why? What is your favorite food? What is your best subject in school? What is your favorite after-school activity? Essentially any question that allows the students to share briefly with one another is fine. The music starts again, it stops, students freeze, find a new partner or partners, and share another question.

- **Inside-Outside Circle:** Teacher divides the class into two equal groups. One group forms an "inside circle" and turns to face outward. The second group forms another circle surrounding the first group. This group faces inward so that they are facing a

classmate in the inner circle. The students in one circle are directed to move 2 or 3 persons to the left or right to create new pairs. The pairs are then asked to share some information, such as: "If you were a book, what kind of book would you be?" Or, "What is one goal you hope to achieve this year?" One circle is then directed to move, new partners are formed, and another question is posed.

- **Corners:** The teacher posts sheets of paper around the room---maybe 4-6 places around the room. Each posted sheet has the name of something on it; for example, names of pets (dog, cat, horse, etc.) Students are asked to think about which pet is their favorite and why (give them think time) and then they go and stand under this "Pet Sign" and share with others in their group about why this is their favorite pet. The categories can range from States, to food, to sports, to books...anything that appeals to kids.

Want more ideas? Call MSIM at 989-774-7678 and ask to check out the book on Classbuilders.



**September
"Freebie"**

The first 5 people to
contact us at 989-774-1198 or
duval1p@cmich.edu
will receive a Kagan Classbuilding
Smart Card



Student Station

Leaving It All Behind

Have you ever wished that you could have a second chance at life - that you could leave behind everything you know, and start over? A chance to change your life, to begin again with a clean slate, to unmake the mistakes you've made... sounds great, doesn't it? At one time or another, we've all dreamed of doing something so radical.

Think for a minute about some parts of your life that you might be better off without. Some of you may wish you could re-invent yourselves as someone cooler or more popular; others might want to get a fresh start in your classes; perhaps some of you even dream of trading in a sister, a brother, or a parent!

Now imagine for a moment that you've entered the Witness Protection Program, as Toswiah Green did in the book *Hush*. In the middle of the night, you have been hustled from your home with nothing but the clothes on your back. You can't take along your favorite clothes, your CDs, your photos, your computer, your pets, your mementos and keepsakes... nothing.

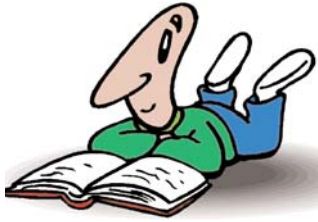
You are taken to a location that's secret even to you, and forced to memorize a false personal history set in a city where you've never lived. Your friends and relatives will not know where you are; you will have to get a new e-mail address and cell phone number, and you will never be allowed to contact anyone from your former life. You'll be moved to a place far from your former home - perhaps a place very different from where you

lived before. You may have to get used to a different climate, unfamiliar local customs, or a reduced level of living.

Perhaps leaving it all behind isn't sounding so great to you, after all! But, once you've settled into your new life a bit, you'll make the same discovery that Toswiah did - you'll realize that, no matter where you go, you take yourself with you. In spite of all the changes in the people, places, and things around you, you will still be the same person inside.

And that is, actually, a great thing! It means that, whatever may change in the world around you, you still have a solid core identity to hang on to. It also means that, if there's something you want to change about yourself, you can do it without leaving your whole life behind you. You can keep all those things in your life that are good for you, and just change the things you want to change.

Perhaps you can't get rid of that big brother who bothers you so much, but you can change the way you react when he picks on you. Maybe you can't become a straight-A student overnight, but you can make a good start by doing your homework every day. You can't control how other people treat you, but you can alter the way you treat others. These small things can add up to big change - give yourself a chance, and build the life you've been dreaming of!



Student Book Review

Hush

Author: Jacqueline Woodson

Toswiah Green had a perfect life - a happy family, a nice house in a Denver suburb, a neighborhood full of good people, and a very special best friend. It didn't matter that her father, a policeman, was the only African-American in his precinct; or that Toswiah and her sister Cameron went to school in an almost all-white suburb. Toswiah knew that she was where she belonged, and she and her family were comfortable and happy in their community.

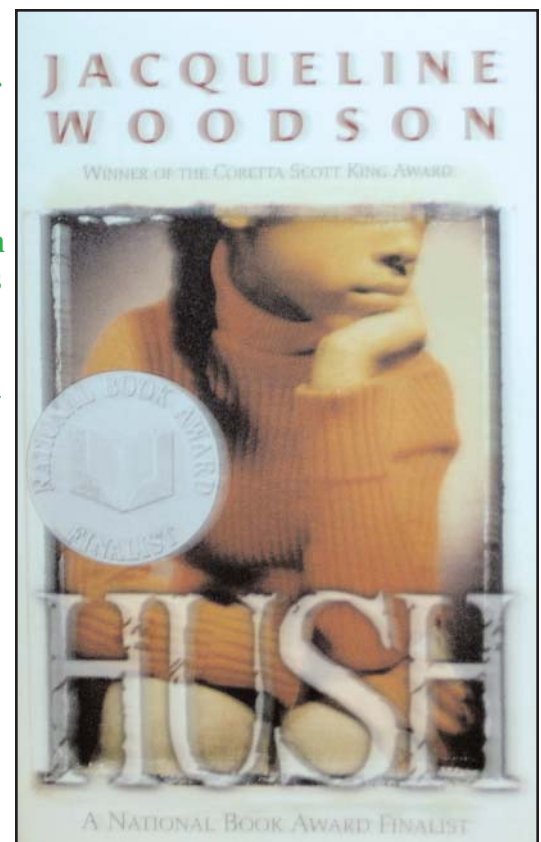
That all changed one night, when Toswiah's father witnessed two white policemen shooting an unarmed African-American boy, who turned out to be a brilliant honor student with no history of trouble with the law. Suddenly, her father was faced with a big dilemma - should he break the "blue wall of silence" and testify against his fellow police officers, or should he remain silent about what he had seen?

As he wrestled with his decision, the friendly fabric of the Greens' community started to unravel. Toswiah and Cameron were deserted by many of their friends; a mysterious caller began phoning with ominous threats; and one evening someone fired three shots from a rifle through the window of the Greens' house. Mr. Green, pushed past his breaking point by the threats, decided to testify against his former friends, and as a result, things got so bad that Toswiah and her family were forced to go into the Witness Protection Program.

The government moved the Greens to a mid-western city, where they knew no one. They left behind all their possessions and chose new names. Toswiah, who was now known as Evie

Thomas, had to pretend that she was from San Francisco, a place where she had never even been. One wrong word, one slip of the tongue, could have life-threatening consequences for her family. Under the pressure of their new life in hiding, her family began to fall apart - her father sat and stared out the window all day, her mother joined a new religion and became almost fanatical about it, and her sister began making secret plans to leave.

Toswiah felt abandoned and forgotten in this alien place. She needed to find something of her own, something to help her fit into her new world and start afresh, something that would still allow her to hold deep in her heart a bit of the girl she used to be. And, in the process of finding her own new identity, she needed to help her family find the togetherness and solidarity they had lost.





Family Focus

The Developmental Assets: An Overview

In last month's Family Focus, we mentioned an important book, entitled *Developmental Assets*. The authors, Dr. Peter Scales and Dr. Nancy Leffert, reviewed more than 800 articles and research reports dealing with the growth and development of young adolescents. They found that there are certain factors in the lives of young people which help them to grow into healthy, well-adjusted young adults.

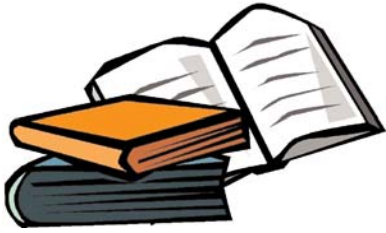
The authors call these factors "developmental assets," and based on their research, they have grouped them into eight broad categories:

- **Support Assets** include love, affirmation, and acceptance from parents, other relatives, caregivers, teachers, neighbors, community members, and other adults with whom kids come in contact on a regular basis.
- **Empowerment Assets** focus on the way in which the community views its youth, the opportunities young people have to contribute to the greater good, and the extent to which youth feel safe, valued, and important in their communities.
- **Boundaries and Expectations Assets** provide a set of consistent messages about appropriate ways to behave in various socializing situations. Ideally, these assets will be experienced in the family, at school, in after-school programs, and in the neighborhood.
- **Constructive Use of Time Assets** focus on providing kids with a wide array of structured, adult-supervised activities during non-school hours. Healthy communities offer a rich smorgasbord of activities through schools, community organizations, congregations, youth organizations, and for-profit centers.

- **Commitment to Learning Assets** reflect how connected young people are to their schools, how motivated they are to achieve, and whether they express their curiosity and work ethic in homework and reading for fun.
- **Positive Values Assets** are important "internal compasses" that guide young people's priorities and choices. Scales and Leffert focus on several values that are widely shared among different communities and subgroups.
- **Social Competencies Assets** are important personal and interpersonal skills youth need to negotiate the maze of choices, options, and relationships they face; these skills also lay the foundation for independence and competence as adults.
- **Positive Identity Assets** focus on young people's views of themselves - their own sense of agency, purpose, worth, and promise.

Of course, no young person enjoys all of these assets all of the time. But the body of research studied by Scales and Leffert shows that the more of these assets a child has in his or her life, the more likely he or she is to grow up emotionally and socially healthy and strong. Over the next nine issues of FYI, we will be examining each of the categories of assets in detail and providing advice for building these assets in the lives of your own and others' children.

Next month, we'll begin by looking at the most important factor in kids' success--the support they receive from their immediate family.



Resource Review

Creating Literacy-Rich Schools for Adolescents

Authors: *Gay Ivey and Douglas Fisher*

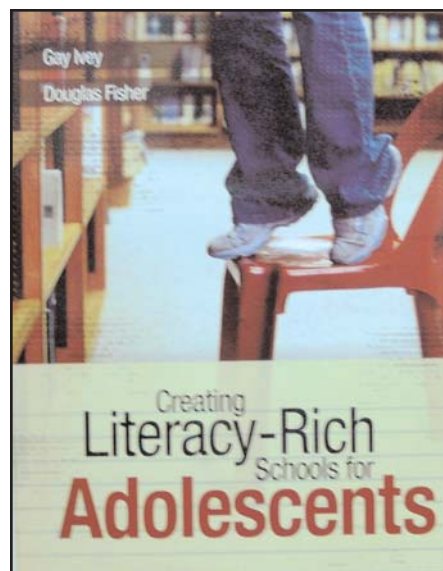
We know that literacy is the key to learning in school, yet millions of middle and high school students lack the literacy skills they need to succeed. Ivey and Fisher define "literacy" as reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing, and they make a compelling case that teachers across all content areas have a role to play in students' development of skills in these areas. Rather than focusing solely on reading instruction, the authors urge teachers to incorporate rich literacy-based learning experiences into their classrooms, with the goal of helping students to learn and think across the curriculum.

Offering research-based findings, engaging examples, and extensive lists of resources, the authors encourage readers to:

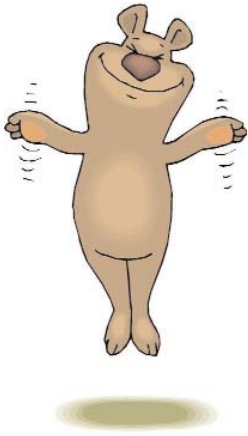
- Reexamine the materials, experiences, and expectations of the ELA classroom;
- Use strategies to improve literacy in all the content areas and implement alternatives to the traditional textbook;
- Make independent reading an important part of students' ongoing literacy development;
- Design and use interventions that really work for struggling students; and

- Consider schoolwide elements - professional development, peer coaching, leadership, and assessment - that should be in place to support teachers and students.

Essential questions provide the focus for each chapter, and the Quality Indicators for Secondary Literacy rubric helps readers gauge where they are on the continuum of providing a meaningful literacy experience for students. Rather than being overwhelmed by the challenge of improving literacy at the secondary level, readers will be inspired to move ahead with confidence that the task is essential, worthwhile, and achievable.



To borrow this book from MSIM, call us at (989) 774-7678 and ask to check out resource number CAL-41.



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. Five 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 teachers of what traits and characteristics young adolescents admire in their teachers.

The Writing Prompt:

Describe the best teacher you have ever had in school.

Thought-starters:

Why was this teacher your favorite teacher? What was special about this teacher? What do you most remember about your best teacher?

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:

- Essays must be word-processed in Microsoft Word and sent as e-mail "Attachments."
- **Each entry must include the writer's name, school, teacher's name and grade level (entrants must be in Grade 5, 6, 7, or 8).**
- Maximum length for essays is 250 words.
- Deadline for submitting entries is Monday, October 2.
- Entries may be e-mailed to Michigan Schools in the Middle at duval1p@cmich.edu

Questions: Call 989-774-1198

This could be your last FYI.

The FYI is a benefit for Michigan Schools in the Middle members only. After this issue, the list serv will be edited to remove non-members.

**Don't miss the great information available;
renew your membership now.**

**Go to www.schoolsinthemiddle.cmich.edu
to download a membership form or call us at
989-774-7678 to have a form faxed or mailed to you.**



Month of the Young Adolescent



**OCTOBER
2006**

What are you doing for MOYA?

For ideas, go to the the National Middle School Association website
www.nmsa.org.

More information and ideas will be coming in the October FYI and from the
Central Michigan University Middle Level student organization.

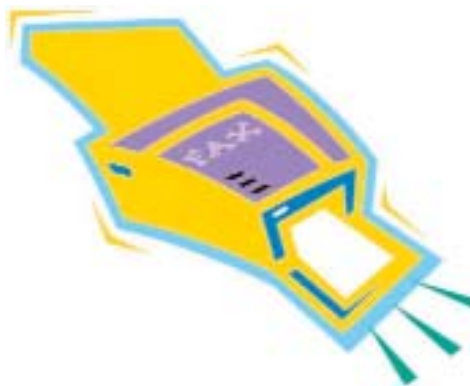
“CELEBRATE YOUR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS!”

Powerful Quote

"Learning will occasionally happen in workshops but most of it will occur as teachers plan lessons together, examine their students' work to find ways to improve it, observe one another teach, and plan improvement."

--Dennis Sparks, NSDC Executive Director

Contact us:



989-774-7684



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