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**Michigan Schools in the Middle**  
A Middle Start Partner Organization  
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**Middle Grades Voices Needed**

How will high school reform impact your middle school?

I have been asked to give the opening address at the **Middle School Summit** hosted by the **Michigan Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development** on **February 6, 2007** in Macomb County. The question that I, as well as other panelists, have been asked is “What impact is high school reform (new high school graduation requirements) having on middle schools, or what impact should this reform have on middle schools?” Believing that the best sources of information are those directly working in middle schools every day as principals, teachers, counselors, and staff, I am requesting your help.

Would you be willing to weigh in on this issue? It would be a tremendous piece of research for all of us as we begin to feel the impact of high school reform on middle grades practices and cur-

riculum. I will share a summary of responses to this question in the next issue of the FYI. If you are one of the first 50 people to respond to the following questions, **Michigan Schools in the Middle** will send you a free middle-grades book!

Please take five minutes right now and complete the survey at the end of the newsletter. You may use the form or just send us typed answers. Thanks so much for your continued contributions to middle-grades education!

Please either email your responses to [duval1p@cmich.edu](mailto:duval1p@cmich.edu) or fax them to 989-774-7684.

Thank you again for your help.

Pat Benson,  
MSIM Director

See Middle School Summit information on page 9

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## Leadership Lifeline...School Culture Begins with the Leader

Cultural change, although challenging and time-consuming, is not only possible but necessary—especially in organizations in which stakeholders use the word “culture” as a rhetorical talisman to block leadership initiatives, stifle innovation, and maintain the status quo. In the last decade, the education standards movement has taught us that policy change without cultural change is an exercise in futility and frustration.

How do you change the culture of schools? When it comes to lasting cultural change, four essentials are consistent across many leadership contexts.

First, *define what you will not change*. Identify specific values, traditions, and relationships that you will preserve. Rather than make every change a battle that exhausts political capital and diminishes trust, effective leaders place change in the context of stability. They take care not to convey the message, “Everything you have been doing in the past was ineffective, and your experience and professional judgment are irrelevant.” A more thoughtful message is, “I am only going to ask you to engage in changes that will have meaning and value for you and every stakeholder we serve.” For example, many schools have cherished traditions of excellence in athletics, music, or art—traditions that can be threatened when the leader says that academic achievement must be the top priority. Effective change leaders identify and build on traditions rather than compete with them. The trophy case bursting with evidence of athletic championships can share space with exceptional student artwork, outstanding science projects, and superb essays.

Second, *recognize the importance of action*. Speeches and announcements are not enough. To lead challenging reform efforts, you must be willing to make personal changes in decision-making policies (Who has the authority to decide what?); personal time allocation (Which meeting invitations do you accept and which do you decline?); and collegial relationships (Do you make time to listen to the personal stories of your colleagues?).

The greatest impediment to meaningful cultural change is the gap between what leaders say they value and what they actually do. Staff members are not seduced by a leader’s claim of “collaborative culture” when every meeting is a series of lectures, announcements, and warning. Claims about a “culture of high expectations” are undermined when school policies encourage good grades for poor student work. The “culture of respect” is undermined by every imperious, demanding, or angry e-mail and voice mail coming from the principal. Leaders speak most clearly with their actions. When staff members hear the call for transformation from a leader whose personal ac-

tions remain unchanged, their hope turns to cynicism.

Third, *use the right change tools for your school or district*. Christensen, Marx, and Stevenson (2006) differentiate *culture tools*, such as rituals and traditions; *power tools*, such as threats and coercion; *management tools*, such as training, procedures, and measurement systems; and *leadership tools*, such as role modeling and vision. Leaders must choose the appropriate change tools on the basis of a combination of factors, including the extent to which staff members agree on what they want and how to get there. Leaders who approach reform determined to apply a particular change method are making the mistake of the person holding a hammer who therefore sees only nails.

Fourth, *be willing to do the “scut work.”* Scut work is the willingness to do “unglamorous work.”

Although education leaders must make speeches and attend board meetings, leaders aspiring to change school culture will take the risk, as Superintendent Stan Scheer of Murrietta Valley Unified School in California has done, of taking a turn as a substitute teacher or spending time with bus drivers at 5:00 on a frosty morning. When the school leader puts down the briefcase and picks up a stack of trays in the cafeteria or a pile of writing portfolios for personal review, then everyone knows that the leader takes every job in the school seriously. If you believe that every job has value and there is no such thing as unimportant work in schools, then demonstrate that belief through your actions.

Taken from *Educational Leadership*/December 2006/January 2007, Douglas Reeves

For a copy of the complete article and other books and articles by Douglas Reeves, call the Center at 989-774-7678.



### January Freebie

The first two people to contact us will receive *Teaching Reading in Social Studies, Science and Math*, by Laura Robb.

Contact: [duvallp@cmich.edu](mailto:duvallp@cmich.edu) or  
989-774-1198

## Teacher Topics...Teaching Beyond the Book

In classrooms that are invariably overpopulated—and in which standards dictate that every student must develop along a predetermined timeline of learning goals and testing dates—it can feel reassuring to clutch the teaching guide and forge ahead. Teaching is exhausting, and it's easy to forget to ask ourselves whether we are teaching sparrows, ospreys, ducks, or flamingos. Likely we're teaching all of them.

One of the great joys of teaching is that we can learn as much from our students as they can learn from us. When we lift our eyes from the pacing guide long enough to observe the individuals in our classroom, they will often teach us exactly what nourishment they need to thrive. It's not a matter of *either* teaching the curriculum *or* teaching students. Good teaching is inevitably the fine art of connecting content and kids—of doing what it takes to adapt *how* we teach so that *what* we teach takes hold in the lives and minds of students. We know from both classroom experience and scholarly research that the same formula won't work for every student. By definition, *typical* is not a synonym for *all*.

The principles that follow reflect the power of teaching to student strengths—of tapping into students' areas of greatest comfort, confidence, and passion when we find that teaching to the “typical” student doesn't work. The principles are illustrated by stories of teachers who learn to watch for and teach to their students' strengths, and they are illuminated by the work of researchers and expert practitioners.

### Principle 1:

Teachers who see the strengths in students teach positively.

Before we can nourish student strengths, we must learn to recognize them. For example, a student who built unusually complex structures with blocks and other building materials found writing difficult. Teachers were able to encourage him to write by having him talk and write about his hand-built structures and their uses.

### Principle 2:

Teaching to students' strengths helps students see themselves positively.

Ellie was a natural leader who entertained her classmates with tales about her eccentric family and their frequent trips to Puerto Rico. When Ellie struggled with geometry, her teacher put Ellie in a group of successful students to solve a set of applied problems and

assigned her the job of talking through the steps that group members used as they worked toward solutions. She was to report on the procedures that led to success.

### Principle 3:

Teaching to students' strengths helps students see strengths in one another.

Henry was a 7th grader wrapped in a veil of hopelessness. One day when the other students were reading novels of their choice, Henry pulled a loop of string from his pocket and absently began making complex finger weaving—a Jacob's Ladder contraption with dozens of steps and permutations. Later, Henry demonstrated his string art as classmates attempted to write directions for his procedures. He wrote directions of his own, worked with the teacher to edit them, and gave them to his classmates so they could work with their loops of string at home.

### Principle 4:

Teaching to students' strengths helps students see learning positively.

“I love learning about the Civil War,” Mrs. Lupold shared with her students, “because it speaks to something inside me. Your job is to learn about something that speaks to you, too.” She had the students each select a topic from their class list. “The only thing I ask,” she added, “is that you study your chosen topic as it relates to the Civil War period.”

### Principle 5:

Teaching to students' strengths helps students overcome weakness.

Howard Gardner (1991) talks about employing a specific strength to support an area of weakness. Work in service of something we love often doesn't feel like work. Teaching to students' strengths does not mean ignoring weaknesses. It simply means teaching in a way that takes advantage of student power to energize learning.

Taken from *Educational Leadership*/September 2006, Carol Ann Tomlinson & Jane Jarvis

For a copy of the complete article and other books and articles by Carol Tomlinson, call the

## Student Station....Utopia or Dystopia?

Have you ever heard the word “utopia” (pronounced “you-TOE-pee-uh”)? What about “dystopia” (“diss-TOE-pee-uh”)? If someone asked you to define those words, could you?

A utopia is a perfect society – the kind of world that everyone dreams of living in. A dystopia, on the other hand, is the exact opposite – a society in which things are very, very wrong. Throughout history, many people have tried to build utopian societies; and some of the best literature written over the past two hundred years has been set in utopias or dystopias.

At first glance, the world of Lois Lowry’s book *The Giver* seems like a utopia. There is no pain, no war, no fear. Everyone has a job; everyone has a family; no one is left without home or food or clothing. But, as we dig deeper into the book we see that things are not as wonderful as they seem to be. True, people experience none of the suffering that is a normal part of life; but they also experience none of the joy. Their lives are dull and colorless, empty of meaning. The more we learn about it, the more the society in *The Giver* seems like a dystopia.

In your opinion, what does it take to

make a utopia? If you could build a perfect society, what would it look like? What would people’s day-to-day lives be like? How would they treat each other? Where would they live, and what would they own? What would their thoughts, feelings, hopes, and dreams be like? Who would make the rules, and how would the society be governed?

Now, think about what a dystopia might look like. In your opinion, what would be the worst possible kind of society to live in?

In reality, no human society is a perfect utopia or an absolute dystopia. All cultures have a mix of good and bad features. Still, that doesn’t mean that people can’t continually strive to make their societies better. Think about our own culture, for example: what are some aspects of U.S. society that you think are really fantastic? What are some things about our culture that aren’t so great? If you ruled the world, what kinds of changes would you make? What things would you leave the same? How would you go about turning our world into a utopia?

## Student Book Review....*The Giver*, Author: Lois Lowry

Imagine a world in which there is no war, no pain, and no fear; a world in which people don't have to face difficult choices and everyone has a place and a purpose. This is the world in which Jonas, the hero of *The Giver*, lives. But when Jonas reaches his twelfth birthday, he is chosen to receive special training from The Giver. The Giver alone holds the people's memories of the true pains and pleasures of life, and Jonas is being groomed to take over as Giver when the current memory-holder dies.

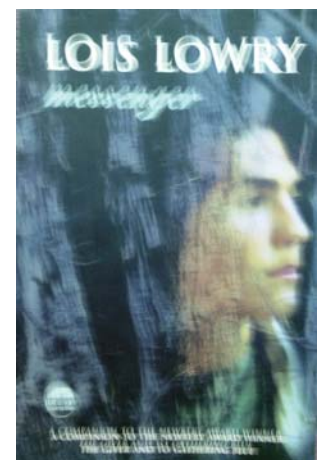
As Jonas experiences emotions for the first time, he begins to understand the shallowness and blandness of the life he has led so far – the life his parents and everyone else in his community still live. And he must decide whether to allow his community to continue as it has been, or break the mold and expose his people to the joys and sufferings that are a part of living.

If you've already read *The Giver*, you may want to pick up its sequels, *Gathering Blue* and *Messenger*. *Gathering Blue* tells the story of Kira, an orphan girl with a twisted leg, who lives in a world where the weak are cast aside. Kira, a gifted weaver, fears for her future until she is spared by the all-powerful Council of Guardians, who want her to use her skills to complete an important weaving project which no one else can do. Although her talent keeps her alive and brings certain privileges, Kira soon

realizes that she is surrounded by mysteries and secrets. She must not let anyone else know of her blossoming plans to uncover the truth about her world – and to find out what exists beyond it.

*Messenger* features Matty, a boy who has lived in a small village under the care of Seer, a blind man known for his special sight. Once, Village was a place that welcomed newcomers and offered hope and homes to people fleeing poverty and cruelty. But something sinister has seeped into Village, and the people have voted to close it to outsiders. All along, Matty has been invaluable as a messenger between Village and other communities. Now he must make one last journey through the increasingly treacherous forest to spread the message of Village's closing and convince Kira (remember her from *Gathering Blue*?) to return with him.

These exciting books will challenge the way you view your own world. Grab one today and start reading!



## Family Focus...Boundaries and Expectations

In earlier Family Focus articles, we have discussed the importance of supporting and empowering young adolescents at home and in the community. Early adolescence is also a time when children begin the trek toward adulthood, stretching their own abilities and testing boundaries. During these years, it is crucial for parents to provide firm and realistic boundaries and hold high expectations for their kids' behavior.

What, precisely, do we mean by "boundaries"? Boundaries are the rules, standards, and norms set by adults for young people's behavior. As children mature, it is important to establish new rules and standards which protect them while still encouraging them to take on additional responsibilities and explore new freedoms. For example, many middle-schoolers are ready to begin spending time with peers in lightly supervised activities such as school dances and sporting events; initially, parents should closely monitor these activities by setting and enforcing curfews and by ensuring that they always know where their kids are, with whom, and what they plan to do. As middle-schoolers mature into high-schoolers (and as they establish a track record of responsibility), parents can begin to ease their monitoring. Parents may also monitor their children's homework on a daily basis, helping their kids to adjust to the responsibility of keeping track of multiple classes and heavier workloads; as kids demonstrate the self-discipline and responsibility to keep up with homework, parents often decrease this monitoring appropriately.

In order for boundaries to be effective, they must be connected with clearly defined consequences for overstepping them, and these consequences must be enforced consistently. Research has shown that "authoritative" parents

(those who strike a balance between protecting their kids and allowing them to explore new things) generally do the best job in setting boundaries and enforcing consequences. Often, authoritative parents negotiate boundaries and consequences with their young adolescents; kids are more likely to adhere to rules which they have helped to establish.

In addition to boundaries and consequences, "expectations" are also important to the development of young adolescents. Middle-schoolers are becoming capable of much more – intellectually, socially, morally, and physically – than they could do as younger children, and it is crucial for the adults in their lives to encourage and expect them to stretch themselves in these areas. For example, parents may expect young adolescents to begin to take a more adult role in family gatherings; or they may increase their expectations in regard to the high quality of their kids' performance on household chores. Academically, it is very important for teachers and parents to expect kids to do the best work of which they are capable, and to encourage them to share those expectations.

Some parents dread setting boundaries and expectations for their young adolescents, because this can be a source of friction and conflict... but research shows that, in the long run, kids whose parents set appropriate boundaries, enforce consequences lovingly and firmly, and hold high expectations grow up to be more successful, emotionally healthier, and more self-directed than their peers who did not experience this parental support.

## Resource Review...Closing the Achievement Gap

This short (15-minute) video is part of ASCD's Books in Action Video Series; it highlights the most important points in the book *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices*.

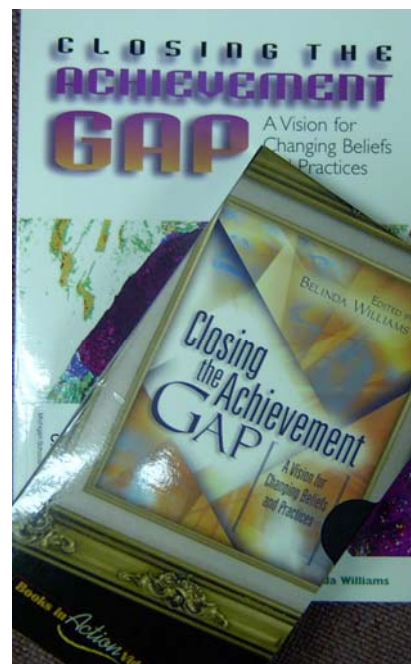
The "one-size-fits-all" strategy governing the current structures of schools ignores the complex dynamics influencing the gaps among groups, argues the book's editor, Belinda Williams. The book presents a full picture of the possibilities for integrating theory, research, and evidence with school reform proposals; the video takes viewers to Toquam School in Stamford, Connecticut, where these principles can be seen in action every day. At Toquam, teachers combine their understanding of human development, neuroscience, cognition, and sociocultural issues to create a vibrant learning community in which all students have the opportunity to learn and thrive.

While the video can certainly be viewed on its own, it is highly recommended that it be viewed as a corollary to the book, as an example of the practical application of the principles outlined in the text.

The book includes chapters on direct vocabulary instruction; opportunity-to-learn assessment strategies; balancing equity and excellence; cultural values in learning and education; pedagogy, knowledge, and teacher preparation; so-called "turnaround" teachers and schools (including Toquam School); and an examination of "schools that work" – a small sample of schools which have successfully

closed the gap and which are providing excellent educations for all of their students. These offerings are framed by two insightful chapters written by Williams: Chapter One, "What Else Do We Need to Know and Do?" introduces the subjects of the subsequent chapters and details their importance in closing the gap; and the book's final chapter, "Reframing the Reform Agenda," looks at ways in which these important issues can become the crux of school reform aimed at closing the traditional achievement gaps between students of differing ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, genders, ability levels, and more.

To borrow these important resources from MSIM, call our office at (989) 774-7678, and ask for resource number LSDV-33 (video) and LSD 70 (book).



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## **Contact us:**

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***Kids are at the center of all we do.***

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## **Powerful Quote**

**“A problem is an opportunity in  
work clothes.”**

**—Henry T. Kaiser, Jr.**

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# See you February 6 at the Middle School Summit

## **Middle School Summit**

*February 6, 2007, Macomb ISD*

## **Middle School Summit**

### **Effective Middle Schools lead to Student Success!**

Keynote Speakers: **Pat Benson**, Director of Michigan Schools in the Middle, Central Michigan University and **Diane McMillan**, Associate Director, MASSP

#### **This workshop will address:**

- The priority steps that middle school faculty and administrators should be taking NOW to ensure student success in both middle school and high school.
- How high school reform has a lot to do with middle schools.
- Proven middle school practices that impact student learning and actions.

#### **The workshop includes:**

- Keynote speakers who will share what works in middle schools for both students and staff.
- A knowledgeable panel of Michigan Educators who will address the challenges in middle school education.
- 16 breakout sessions of PROVEN middle school practices that lead to student and staff success.
- Quality reference resources.

**Bring a team!** This is a unique opportunity to meet with educators who are facing the same challenges as you and seeking answers to those challenges. Superintendents, curriculum directors, principals, teachers, school board members, counselors, and other interested educators are invited.

#### **Hours:**

This workshop will run from 8am until 3:15pm.

**For more information and an application go to**

**<http://michigan.ascd.org/MiddleSchoolSummit06.htm>**

