

IN Transition

Journal of the New York State Middle School Association



Engaging Critical Thinking
Page 15

Quality Mathematics Instruction
Page 19

Team Spirit
Page 22

NYSMSA MISSION STATEMENT AND GOALS

MISSION: The New York State Middle School Association (NYSMSA) represents those who serve the educational needs of all young adolescents in New York State. We are committed to creating, promoting, and supporting effective middle-level programs that are academically rigorous and developmentally appropriate.

VISION: NYSMSA acts on our belief that all young adolescents are entitled to academically rich and developmentally appropriate programs. Toward this end, we work collaboratively with the educational community to make high-performing middle-level programs the norm in New York State through full implementation of the Essential Elements and application of cutting-edge research.

NYSMSA's goals are listed below. Taking into consideration current research and available resources, these goals will assist the Association in fostering the creation of new curricula in support of the NYS learning standards and, in general, supporting the improvement of instruction for middle-level students in New York State.

AWARENESS AND RESPONSIVENESS

NYSMSA believes that we must:

- Promote a climate of acceptance and understanding of young adolescents;
- Stimulate and promote the development of the middle level as a distinct educational structure for young adolescents;
- Promote middle-level education and be a significant advocate for the appropriate education of young adolescents;
- Offer a variety of professional development activities that positively impact the attitudes, performances, and practices of middle-level educators.
- Compile, maintain, and respond to current research and development initiatives.

SUPPORT

NYSMSA believes that we must:

- Be a significant source of information and resources on young adolescents and their schooling;
- Offer consultant support to schools and districts in refining and strengthening their middle-level programs;
- Provide a variety of resources (video, publication, teleconferences, position papers, etc.) in support of appropriate programs for young adolescents;
- Seek, secure, and provide grants and other financial resources to support planing and implementation of effective middle-level practices;
- Provide, throughout the year, member services to public and non-public urban, suburban, and rural schools;
- Engage regional directors who provide, assist, and support regional and state activities;
- Support the ongoing importance of communication and interaction between State Education Department personnel and members of the Association.

CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, & ASSESSMENT

NYSMSA believes that we must:

- Influence the quality and content of pre-service and in-service education for prospective and practicing middle-level educators;
- Support teachers, schools, and districts in refining and strengthening their middle-level programs;
- Work with constituent groups to identify effective models for curricular, instructional, and assessment issues;
- Disseminate position papers that provide guidance on appropriate curricula, instruction, and assessment issues;
- Monitor the implementation of the NYS learning standards at the intermediate level, promoting programs with strong academic rigor within the framework of good middle-level practice;
- Monitor the intermediate assessment results, seeking to ensure the results measure good middle-level practice and are developmentally appropriate in scope, content, and administration.

COLLABORATION

NYSMSA believes that we must:

- Work with other associations in sponsoring professional development activities;
- Implement a collaborative relationship with universities, departments of higher education, SED, NMSA, parent-teacher organizations, and other groups that impact on the lives of young adolescents;
- Develop and expand cooperative ventures and relationships with corporations and businesses;
- Create networks of educators, parents, and others involved in the lives of young adolescents;
- Serve on the boards of supportive organizations;
- Engage in continuous planning through participation and shared decision-making;
- Provide for internal assessment of all major Association functions with provisions for external audit where appropriate.

Feature Articles

- 14** Character Counts
J. Thomas Kane
- 15** Notice, Think, and Wonder: New Pathways to Engage
Critical Thinking
by Michael Fisher and Nancy Cook
- 19** An Application of "The Quality Secondary Math
Classroom" to Middle School Mathematics Instruction
by Jennifer L. Jones, Karrie A. Jones, and Dr. Paul J. Vermette
- 22** Team Spirit Helps Ensure Success in the Middle
by Nancy Morris
- 25** An Efficient Approach to Cooperative Learning
by Thomas B. Reardon
- 27** Student Perceptions of a Middle School Video Advisory
Program: A Critical Analysis
by John Christie and Timothy P. Martin, Ed.D.

Editorial Reprint

- 4** Middle-level Mastery

In Every Issue

- 2 A few thoughts from the President...
- 5 The Executive Director's Message
- 8 Research at a Glance
- 11 Lea's Lessons
- 32 Submission of Articles

On The Cover

Photo courtesy of the Saratoga Springs Visitors Bureau. Visit www.saratoga.org for more about the area, host to NYSMSA's 27th Annual Conference, October 18-20, 2007.



A few thoughts from the President...

Jeannette Stern, Ed.D.



Jeannette Stern

We have come far...but have more to do.

It is hard for me to believe that six years have passed since I became president of NYSMSA. It was July 2001, which now seems like a

light year ago! September 11th had not happened. Gasoline hit an all-time high of \$1.76 a gallon for regular. Ipods were not the rage they are now. The highest grossing pictures that year were *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Shrek*, and *Monsters, Inc.* The Sopranos and *Sex in the City* were still in their infancy.

Thanks to the hard work of all of you, the past six years have seen some major breakthroughs for middle-level education. The New York State Education Department presented *The Regents Policy Statement*, updating their previous policy of 1989. In 2003, The New York State Education Department's *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs* was developed in collaboration with this association, along with The State-wide Network of Middle-Level Education Liaisons and The New York City Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform. There were no Middle-Level Support Schools and no Essential Elements: Schools to Watch

Program. School websites now are the norm, not the exception, allowing schools to share their "best practices" with others without the need for personal visits. And, there were no annual state assessments with the resulting analyses, where politicians and other non-educators sometimes forget that students are children at one of the most difficult junctures of their lives and not just vehicles for blackening in multiple-choice answer sheets.

A great deal has been accomplished, but there is more to do. While all of the above-referenced documents and programs have been created and publicized, there is no hard data to show how much influence they have had on classroom instruction. New teachers and new administrators are still receiving their credentials from some colleges and universities without having a firm foundation in middle-level education, as opposed to secondary education (a.k.a. high school). Some middle-level schools are still organized like the "junior high schools" of the early 1900s. Not every middle-level building belongs to NYSMSA in order to receive the most up-to-date information on how to achieve the best results at this level.

At the upcoming conference, as I assume the title of "past president," you will have a new set of officers. I want to take this opportunity to thank Susan Allen (vice president), Brian Sherman (secretary), and Jim Tobin (Director of Professional Development) for their years of tireless efforts and support. I also want to thank each of you who are reading this message for,

without you, the membership, no association can survive and be successful.

Please understand that NYSMSA can't continue to move the middle-level agenda without your support. Become familiar with the above-referenced documents and look at your school with the critical lens of an outside evaluator. What can and should be changed? Begin the process slowly...it is

easier than you think. Seek out the help of others. Contact your regional director. Go to our website (www.nysmsa.org) and find all the information you need to share with your site-based team. Together we can continue to make the difference we need to make. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do for those whose hearts are "in the middle."

NYS Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch Program

Congratulates

North Salem Middle School

North Salem, New York

Dr. Patricia Cyganovich, Principal

A 2007 "School to Watch"

The following editorial appeared in *The Journal News* on September 2, 2007, and is reprinted with permission.

Middle-level mastery

North Salem school recognized as leader in educating adolescents

Ever since the state's accountability system for students, teachers and public schools went into effect more than a decade ago, emphasizing transparency in how local schools *really* are doing, there was widespread angst: Did New Yorkers *really* want to know where the weakest links in the system are? Near the top of the list of concerns: middle school, stereotyped for so long as a vast wasteland of hormonally driven turmoil, a holding pen bridging the charm of elementary school and the rigor of high school, a level, frankly, no teachers in their right minds would cheerfully "teach."

Indeed, as initial year-to-year state testing in English Language Arts and mathematics would show, the performance of eighth-graders would consistently fall off from when they had been tested in fourth and fifth grades — dramatically so across the state. As more data were collected, it was confirmed: Something goes "wrong" in middle school. And it isn't just a rite of passage; academic performance and social success there are strong predictors of high school success — and failure.

'Essential elements'

If the "vast wasteland" picture of middle school were ever true, it's not now — or shouldn't be. State education officials, and many local leaders, turned on the light and turned up the heat for reforming the middle grades. All kinds of supports and flexibility plans were studied, reformed and promulgated by the state Education Department. In July 2003, the state Board of Regents issued a strong policy statement on "Supporting Young Adolescents" that calls on parents, communities and educators to not just recognize the challenges that children ages 10 to 14 face in a rapidly changing society, but to do something about them using a variety of tools.

The Regents issued seven "essential elements" in schools "if young adolescents are to succeed

academically and develop as individuals." They include "an educational program that is comprehensive, challenging, purposeful, integrated, relevant and standards-based"; appropriate classroom instruction and professional training for all staff; a network of academic and personal support for all students; and strong educational leadership in each school building. In February 2005, the Regents issued a three-model strategy, with a host of resources, to give middle schools a choice on how to identify and address gaps.

Progress achievable

The focus on middle-school reform is starting to work. Academic testing — now required every year in grades three through eight — is showing gains. As important, certain schools are becoming "laboratories" for change and innovation that other middle schools should tap and emulate.

Consider the North Salem Middle School. The northern Westchester school was recognized in June as a "School to Watch" at the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, Schools to Watch conference in Washington, D.C. One of only a handful of schools so honored in the last year from New York, North Salem joined 40 other honorees from across the nation.

New York is one of only 16 states that participate in the national Schools to Watch program. The state Education Department has married the Regents' "essential elements" to the program's goals. The effort, according to Marybeth Casey of the state Education Department, "is both a school reform and a recognition program." North Salem, she said, was recognized for excelling in four areas: academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity and organizational structure that supports staff and all students. The honor is not easy to attain, requiring applications, proof and site visits by state officials.

North Salem is to be congratulated, as are other middle schools that are making gains. All middle-level schools in the Lower Hudson Valley should take advantage of the considerable resources the state has to offer. No more excuses, no more "vast wastelands."

The Executive Director's Message

Dennis M. Tosetto



Dennis Tosetto

Probably few New York State educators are aware that just about all of the state's professional organizations work together through an umbrella organization known as the New York State Council of Educational Associations

(NYSCEA). In fact, you probably have never heard of NYSCEA because individuals cannot join NYSCEA; rather, it is an organization of organizations: NYSUT; SAANYS; subject specific focus areas such as math, science, art, home and career skills, guidance, psychology; and, of course, middle level. All are represented as affiliated organizations. While the number changes slightly each year, about forty-five organizations are paid members of NYSCEA and each member organization is allowed to send two delegate representatives to participate during NYSCEA meetings.

NYSCEA was designed to serve some very unique purposes. Although NYSCEA is a self-sustaining, independent organization, the State Education Department (SED) uses NYSCEA meetings to disseminate information, present initiatives, and to generally interface with representatives of the various professional groups who are gathered together in one location at the same time. During these meetings, presentations are given, questions are

answered, issues are discussed, and opinions are shared. As you might guess, at times opinions vary to a considerable degree among and between the various represented bodies. However, everyone present understands that although there are times when discussions may become heated, appropriate professional interaction is the expected norm.

The reason that I have chosen to write about NYSCEA in our middle-level journal is because we are an active part of NYSCEA and NYSCEA has been and will likely continue to be important in helping us to advance quality middle-level education in New York State. NYSCEA does not have the money or personnel needed to actually move programs on a statewide basis or in other ways change the state of learning in our schools. Rather, NYSCEA serves the purpose of bringing together, in meaningful ways, those individuals and organizations that have the resources needed to make positive things happen across New York State.

During the business portion of a NYSCEA meeting, representatives of affiliated organizations present issues, disseminate information, and request support from the delegate assembly. A call for support from the middle-level resulted in a well-articulated NYSCEA position being developed that fully reinforced the very same direction and initiatives supported by NYSMSA. NYSCEA's entire delegate assembly stood together in support and many of the affiliated organizations became actively involved in moving the middle-level agenda forward in a variety of different ways that were mutually supportive and effective.

For example, it was through NYSCEA that educators representing diverse professional organizations, including NYSMSA, met with individuals from SED and the Board of Regents seeking support for advancing those middle-level initiatives that are now formally on the books as regulation. Moreover, a few years ago, when the security of the non-tested middle-level subjects was a foremost concern, representatives of the math, English, and numerous other professional organizations spoke under the aegis of NYSCEA in support of art, music, and the other non-tested subjects at a meeting of the Board of Regents. Over all, these respected and knowledgeable professionals presented compelling factual information outlining the need for a comprehensive real-world curriculum at the middle level that is inclusive, vibrant, and connected.

As professional educators, we need to understand that not everyone is in agreement as to how our schools should operate or how teachers should teach. As you know, there are powerful forces out there that have very different priorities. When it comes to educating children, first priorities are not always in the students' best interest. Rather, they may have to do more with funding, politics, or something else that does not involve a child-centered philosophy.

We live in a competitive world; one where some countries have more "honor" students than the entire current American student population. Consequently, the entire American educational community must stand and work together cooperatively in order to ensure that every child receives the best education possible. I believe that most of my colleagues would agree that all New York State middle-level educators have an obligation to belong to at least three professional organizations: one that deals with conditions of employment, one that is subject/instruction related, and NYSMSA. Moreover, middle-level educators should expect and require that each of these

organizations work together for the greater good — the improvement of instruction at the middle level.

It is my sincere hope that we will be able to begin to vigorously and collaboratively encourage all middle-level educators across the state to put SED's middle-level policy, regulations, and initiatives into practice this school year. Not all of the state's middle-level educators have been informed by SED that the Middle-Level Essential Elements exist and that educators are expected to implement them in their schools and in their classrooms. The research-based Essential Elements have been in regulation for a long time, so it is time to make them a reality in every middle-level school across the state.

Here's the problem: After SED and numerous education-related organizations spent years developing a comprehensive research-based plan aimed at the improvement of instruction at the middle-level, a comprehensive program was fully adopted by the Board of Regents and SED and placed into both policy and regulation. Unfortunately, that's where it ended about two years ago. Since then there has been a steady stream of criticism from those in authority regarding a lack of sufficient improvement in Intermediate (middle-level) Assessment scores with no concomitant push to implement the very programs and processes that would facilitate greatly improved instruction and learning. In fact some seem to be advocating that we do more of what doesn't work, but with more intensity.

Here's the solution: We need to stop both offering and accepting excuses; we must start moving the stalled middle-level initiative forward. The good news is that Marybeth Casey, the SED Middle-Level Liaison to our NYSMSA Board, has reiterated her willingness and desire to work with the NYSMSA leadership to encourage and ensure implemen-

tation of the Essential Elements for all NYS middle-level schools. Toward that end, a significant portion of our fall Board agenda will include a discussion of strategies and the development of a plan for moving this important initiative forward.

NYSMSA does not have the resources needed to take on the task of working with educators across the state to effectively implement the Regents Policy Statement, the Middle-Level Essential Elements, and related new rules and regulations in a systematic, comprehensive fashion. However, NYSMSA does have the resources needed to lead a large group of education-related organizations in

this quest for excellence at the middle level and, I believe, NYSCEA is the key. I firmly believe that if we lead, others will follow.

As the great philosopher Yoda once said, “Do or do not; there is no try.” The question that I keep asking is, “Do we have the collective will to make it so?” And my answer continues to be, “I don’t know.” What is your opinion? I would be most interested in hearing from my middle-level colleagues. If you choose to share your thoughts and opinions, please write to me at: tosetto@nysmsa.org. I look forward to hearing from you.

Membership and Publication Information

In Transition is a benefit of both individual and building membership in the New York State Middle School Association. Annual membership dues are \$50 for individual membership and \$150 for building membership. Memberships are on an “anniversary date” basis; renewal invoices are mailed approximately one month prior to end of membership.

For any changes in membership information, please contact Julie Schwartz at the NYSMSA office by e-mail (schwartz@nysmsa.org) or phone/fax (914-747-9241).

Individual and Building Membership applications can be downloaded from our Web site: www.nysmsa.org. Additionally, new membership applications paid via credit card can be completed online.

**NYSMSA gives permission to its membership to reprint
any portion of this publication.**

Research at a Glance

Jeff Craig, NYSMSA Director of Research and Technology



Statewide Research Efforts

The last *Research at a Glance* presented a collection of research summaries about student achievement in middle schools and middle-level programs (Craig, 2007). The studies that were summarized seemed to suggest that implementation of the concepts within the *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle Level School and Programs* (what NYS tells middle schools they ought to be doing) does make a difference on student achievement. It was also pointed out that there weren't any large-scale studies that measured all of the principles that have been identified to be important according to New York State in the *Essential Elements* (Craig). In fact, very few large-scale studies have been done at all (Mertens, 2006), anywhere in the country. There are things that can be learned from the aggregate of small studies and the few large-scale studies, but the principles that have been studied do not completely correspond to the *Essential Elements*. Thus, the sum total of research about implementation of the *Essential Elements* is inadequate.

What about other states? Have any other states embarked on a large-scale research project to assess the impact of middle school and middle-level programs on student achievement? Some states have undertaken such large-scale research. Or, rather, researchers in some states have undertaken large-scale, statewide research efforts. These efforts can point the way for researchers in New York.

A large-scale study of more than 60 middle schools in Illinois occurred in the late

1990s (Felner, et al, 1997). The findings of this research project, sometimes referred to as "The Felner Report," are frequently mentioned. Schools that participated in this longitudinal project were observed and identified to be at different levels of implementation of middle-level principles. The degree of implementation was based on the *Turning Points* criteria. Felner's data indicate that reform causes a significant amount of disruption in its first year or two. The project compared the level of implementation to student achievement among fully implemented, partially implemented, and not-implemented groups and found the average student achievement to be higher in fully implemented schools. The study showed that the first year of implementation of a reform results in a chaotic state for the institution that is trying to reform. As time went by, schools were grouped based on the degree of implementation. Their data, they conclude, shows that highly implemented schools had higher achievement than those schools with lesser implementation or without implementation. Discipline data also improved in highly implemented schools, as did the self-esteem of students within highly implemented schools. The authors suggest that the most significant conclusion to be learned from Felner's study is that implementation of the reform must be comprehensive if the promised achievement gains are to be realized.

Arkansas conducted a statewide research study about its middle-level schools and programs that was initiated by then Governor Bill Clinton via the *Arkansas Middle Grade Policy and Practice Task Force* (Meeks &

Stepka, 2005). In 1990, that task force commissioned a study of the implementation of the middle-level concept across the state. The results of that study led to the middle-level movement in Arkansas (Meeks & Stepka). More than ten years later, in 2004, this statewide collection of data about middle-level programs was repeated by the *Arkansas Association of Middle Level Education* and the *Arkansas Association of Middle Level Administrators*. The data from 1990 and 2004 were compared to see if a statistically significant difference was observable. The authors concluded that there has been progress in Arkansas in implementing the middle-level concept, but also pointed out that the implementation was far from complete. The authors report that 50 percent of principals report having implemented middle-level programs, which is certainly a less-than-complete level of implementation. Armed with the data from the 2004 study, Meeks & Stepka were able to provide baseline data, trends in implementation, and recommendations for middle-level educators and policy makers in Arkansas. In fact, specific advice was provided to staff developers, schools, districts, and to the State of Arkansas.

More recently, a statewide study was conducted in Arkansas' neighbor, Missouri. A composite construct of middle-level principles was synthesized from *Turning Points, This We Believe*, and *Schools to Watch* (Goodman & Valentine, 2006). A survey was developed for middle-level principals that measured the extent to which the tenets of the middle-level construct were implemented. The survey was given across the state and data were collected from more than half of the middle schools in the state, providing a large sample size for the subsequent analysis and a more than adequate level of statistical power. The researchers used statistical tools such as factor analysis, calculations of correlation, and multiple regression to make statistically significant conclusions

about the implementation of the middle-level construct in Missouri (Goodman & Valentine). As a result of this study, the researchers were able to provide sound, defensible recommendations for educators and policy makers in Missouri. The study provided concrete evidence that different aspects of the middle level construct impacted student achievement differently: achievement in mathematics is most strongly correlated with the school environment and relationships components of the middle-level construct, while ELA achievement was most closely correlated with a rigorous curriculum (personal communication with Goodman, August 27, 2007).

Both the Arkansas and Missouri large-scale studies are examples of the kind of research that is needed in New York State. These studies, and other survey-based research studies, prove that such efforts are both feasible and productive. Educators and policy-makers in New York can learn from these studies, but neither study is completely aligned to the *Essential Elements* and therefore the generalization of Arkansas' and Missouri's conclusions to New York is tentative. The conclusion is obvious: a large-scale study of the implementation of the *Essential Elements* is critical. No one knows the extent of implementation of the *Essential Elements* in New York State. Extrapolation of the results from other states, in this case Arkansas and Missouri, to New York suggest far from complete implementation. The results from those states also indicate that the State Education Department ought to be pushing for implementation via education and accountability. A statewide study of middle-level programs in New York State is not just warranted, it is absolutely necessary in order to provide accurate context for judging the progress of middle-level programs and it is absolutely necessary in order to accurately plan for the future.

References

- Craig, J. (2007). Research at a glance: Misplaced criticism. *In Transition*, XXIV (3), 7-12.
- Felner, R. et al. (1997). The impact of school reform for the middle grades: A longitudinal study of a network engaged in Turning Points-based comprehensive school transformation. In R. Takanishi. & D.A. Hamburg (Eds.), *Preparing adolescents for the twenty-first century: Challenges facing Europe and the United States*. (pp. 38-60). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Goodman, M., & Valentine, J. (2006, November). Middle school programs do make a difference: An analysis of significant relationships between program implementation and student achievement. Presented at the conference of the National Middle School Association.
- Meeks, G. B., & Stepka, T. H. (2005). State-wide middle level implementation: Lessons learned. *Research in Middle Level Education Online*. 29 (3).
- Mertens, S. B. (2006). The relevancy of large-scale, quantitative methodologies in middle grades research. *Middle Grades Research Journal*, 1 (2), 1-13.

Share YOUR Best Practices.



NYSMSA is interested in collecting examples of Best Practices from middle-level teachers. These will be distributed in paper publications and posted on NYSMSA's website.

SHARE the wealth!

Submit your experiences to editor@nysmsa.org.

Lea's Lessons

Lea Macdonald



Homework, Homework, I Hate You!

As we start another school year, the issue of homework once again will become an area of contention with students, parents, and administrators. Homework has been a topic of debate in education for decades. Throughout the first decades of the 20th century, educators believed that homework helped create disciplined minds. By 1940, a growing reaction to homework as an interference with home activities increased. The trend was reversed in the late 1950s as the United States faced competition from abroad and looked toward rigorous homework as a solution. By 1980, the trend had reversed again, with educators claiming that homework could be detrimental to a child's mental health. Since then, arguments for and against homework have continued to exist. Today, arguments against homework are becoming more popular; however, at the same time a number of studies have provided growing evidence of the positive results when quality homework is implemented.

What is homework? Why the recent homework overload? How much homework is too much? How much homework is too little? Are there justifiable reasons for assigning homework? How can teachers incorporate homework as a useful tool? Is homework important? I'd like to explore some possible answers to these questions in this article.

First, homework is defined as out-of-class tasks assigned to students as an extension of classroom work. There are four types of homework: practice, preparation, extension,

and integration of new skills and knowledge. Homework has increased over the last decade for several reasons: focus on academic standards, state assessments, NCLB, and the general consensus that U.S. students don't stand up to their international counterparts. Teachers have difficulty covering the content and the skills without assigning work to be completed at home. In some cases, homework is used to introduce new concepts and skills rather than to review material taught in class. Lastly, parents often are concerned that if there is very little homework, their children will fall behind and do poorly on state assessments.

Research in the last decade has begun to focus on the relationship between homework and student achievement and has strengthened the case for homework. However, studies have found homework assignments to be most helpful if they have direct meaning for the students. In addition, there are many valid reasons for teachers to assign homework. Homework can provide the following benefits:

- Prepare for complex lessons
- Develop better study habits and time management skills
- Reflect on prior learning
- Review and practice concepts or skills
- Provide additional time for exploration of a topic

Research provides strong evidence that, when used appropriately, homework benefits student achievement. According to the nation's best-known researcher on homework,

Duke University's Harris Cooper (2006), if a school district discards homework altogether, it will be throwing away a powerful instructional tool. He conducted a series of studies on the relationship between homework and student achievement and found that purposeful homework increased academic achievement. To enact effective homework policies, schools and teachers should follow these guidelines:

- Assign meaningful homework
- Create homework that matches a student's ability level
- Monitor the amount of homework assigned so that it is appropriate to students' age levels and fosters independent work
- Involve parents in appropriate ways that do not require parents to be teachers or to police students' homework completion

Homework must be realistic in length and difficulty, given the student's ability to work independently. A student can usually demonstrate his understanding of a new concept if he solves 10 math problems rather than having to do all 30 questions. Assigning too much homework can be counterproductive. Teachers must carefully plan and assign homework in a way that maximizes the potential for student success. For example, teachers need to give clear guidelines to parents, spelling out their role. Have parents act as a sounding board as they help their children summarize what they learned from the homework, rather than assisting them with completing it. Lastly, once teachers have determined the type of homework to assign, thought should be given to ways to maximize the benefits to be gained from the assignment. Consider the following:

- Length: Evaluate the length of the assignment with thought. Consider the rule that no more than 10 minutes per grade level should be assigned.
- Purpose: Design activities that have meaning and support classroom learning. Com-

municate the purpose to the students.

- Direction: Provide clear directions on how students should complete assignments, how they will be graded, and when they are due.
- Appropriateness: Match assignment tasks to the student's readiness level, interests or learning styles.
- Variety: Keep students engaged by assigning a variety of different types of homework. Give them a choice on how to demonstrate what they learned in class that day.
- Balance: Assign a balance of both short and long-range assignments and remember that too many long-term projects will overwhelm students and parents!
- Feedback: Provide feedback as soon as possible.

Finally, remember that our young adolescents lead busy lives: learning to learn, trying out for a sport, making new friends, and enjoying being a kid. If you give homework, make it meaningful, engaging, and real. One last word of advice to make kids smile and parents thank you: never give homework on the weekend!

Reference

Cooper, H. (2006) *The battle over homework* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lea Macdonald (leamiddle@att.net) is a social studies teacher and curriculum coordinator at Pleasantville Middle School; 40 Romer Avenue, Pleasantville NY 10570. She served as NYSMSA Region VI Director from 1996-2003.

NYSMSA's 27th ANNUAL CONFERENCE

OCTOBER 18-20, 2007

Saratoga Springs, New York

Betting on the Middle



"Dr. Bird"

Thursday, October 18

School Visitations

Full-Day Pre-Conference Workshops

- Differentiated Instruction
- Using the Brain to Inform Instruction
- Designing Assessments that Help, Not Hurt
 - Study Skills for the 21st Century
- Field-Based Interdisciplinary Instruction

Banquet with Keynote Speaker

Stephen "Dr. Bird" Birchak, Ed.D.

"Tapping into Your Best Even When You Feel Tapped Out"



Friday, October 19

General Session with Keynote Presentation

Tom Kane, Jim Burns, and Jaynellen Behre-Jenkins

"The Advisory Chronicles"

Practitioner Workshops

Feature Presentations

Trade Exhibit



Kane, Behre-Jenkins, & Burns



Linda Tilton

Saturday, October 20

Breakfast with Champions Session

Linda Tilton

"Helping All Students Succeed — Practical Strategies for the Differentiated Classroom"

Individual and group registration materials are available online.

Visit www.NYSMSA.org for additional details.



Character Counts

J. Thomas Kane

The October 15, 2006 issue of the *New York Post* reported that half of all teen boys think a person has to lie or cheat sometimes in order to succeed. According to a survey conducted by the Joseph & Edna Josephson Institute of Ethics in Los Angeles, 82 percent of all kids admit they lied about something significant to a parent within the last 12 months. Of the 37,000 youngsters surveyed around the country:

- 57 percent say they lied two or more times
- 62 percent say they lied to a teacher
- 23 percent say they stole something from a parent or relative in the last year
- 33 percent copied an Internet document within the last 12 months
- 60 percent cheated during a test at school within the last year

But the good news is that teenagers earnestly believe that ethics and character count in life and business. There is a major disconnect between beliefs and behavior.

Middle-level educators frequently refer to early adolescents as being “in the process of becoming.” Our fond hope is that, among other things, they are in the process of becoming ethical individuals.

Middle-level educators have a major venue to cultivate ethical decision making and behavior through a well-established advisory program. Unfortunately, too many middle schools do not expend the energy to orchestrate a vibrant advisory program; nor are staff development hours dedicated to producing skilled advisors. If we are faithful in establishing genuinely developmentally responsive

middle schools that are staffed by “teachers who are expert at teaching early adolescents” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p.23) then among the repertoire of skills such teachers need is training and skilled ability in delivering advisory sessions for their students.

The Joseph & Edna Josephson Institute of Ethics survey was given to high school students — students who moved up from middle schools. These students had just come through the fabulously formative years of 10 through 15 — years that are malleable, impressionable, and character developing. Discussions and exercises in an advisory program can expose young teenagers to ethical situations that have great potential to enhance character development. Decision-making skills incorporated in an advisory have the potential to bridge the current disconnect displayed in the Institute’s survey of high school students.

Yes, character counts; and what *really* counts is that our middle schools offer students a well developed and vibrant advisory program delivered by skilled advisors.

Reference

Jackson, A.W., & Davis, G.A. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York: Teachers College Press.

J. Thomas Kane (tifkane@aol.com) is a Past President of both NYSMSA and the New Jersey Middle School Association.

Notice, Think, and Wonder: New Pathways to Engage Critical Thinking

Michael Fisher and Nancy Cook



“Why have we spent all of these years answering comprehension questions when we could have been having these deep discussions all along? How many years are we going to have to practice this before someone realizes that it doesn’t teach us anything?”

This is a quote, directly from a classroom conversation, from a sixth-grade student who was sharing his frustration with traditional teaching methods that were not challenging him to think. He didn’t want to spend his time looking up already known answers, and playing hide & seek with question responses was not engaging his brain. He was all but begging for the opportunity to dig deeper, to look for multiple meanings, to share his own experiences that related to what he was learning, and be a listener/learner for other students who wanted to do the same. We were in the midst of a discussion about a song by Annie Lennox entitled “Into The West.” This sixth-grade student had already contributed several deep comments to the conversation when he realized that this was a way he preferred to discover deeper meanings in a text.

Being a middle school teacher often presents special challenges for engaging and motivating students at a very reticent age. Finding ways to transfer information is hard enough without the expectation that students will think critically and transform their learning from passive to active. Synthesis and evaluation of material are often in a completely different orbit than the day-to-day classroom reality we all experience. Sometimes it is easier to plan a concrete activity; but, in the long run, are we really using our time wisely? Are we really doing what’s best for our students?

We know that learning can’t be a rote process; it has to be a right process, with an emphasis on pathways and journeys versus an end product. The journey is where critical thinking occurs and we want to promote the necessity of process over product, of abstract over concrete, of discussion over comprehension questions.

To that end, we wanted to find a way to meet students where they need to be met, involve technology, and increase the level of critical thinking in our classrooms. To achieve that goal, we had to decide what our desired outcome would be and consider the tools that would get us there.

To begin with, we decided that students needed to consider more than just the surface level of the information we were presenting. We knew that the thought-provoking insights and illuminating ideas we would like our students to come up with are dependent on the details with which they can be supported, but we also wanted them to be in a constant state of questioning, critiquing, analyzing, evaluating, and transforming what they are learning. Our goal was to move their existing thinking processes outside of their current zone and help them to recognize that thinking is a skill that must be practiced as diligently as any other skill if you are to be proficient at it.

Then, we created a rubric to both establish a baseline for our critical thinking conversations and as a tool to help students and teachers visualize the level of critical thinking that was going on. Our rubric asked the students to consider what they noticed, what they thought, and what they wondered (see Diagram 1 on the following page).

Level	Discussion	I notice...	I think...	I wonder...
4	Speaking and listening are balanced like in a natural conversation. Responses are related directly to the topic being discussed. Appropriate eye contact is used.	Focuses on subtle facts or details which are related to key understandings.	INSIGHTFUL...identifies key understandings and their significance clearly, sees connections between ideas, supports opinions with persuasive, clear evidence, and sees subtleties and ironies in alternate points of view.	Question invites discussion promoting more than one point of view, personal connections, and understanding of the story or topic.
3	Speaking is balanced with listening. Responses usually relate to the topic being discussed. Eye contact may be limited.	Focuses on obvious facts or details which are related to key understandings.	PERCEPTIVE...helpful interpretation of key understandings, sees more than one point of view, supports opinions with clear evidence, and begins to make personal connections to ideas.	Question invites discussion with more than one point of view. Discussion of the question will increase understanding of the story or topic.
2	Speaking and listening are unbalanced. Responses are not always related to the topic being discussed. Eye contact may be limited.	Focuses on subtle facts or details without connecting them to key understandings.	AWARE...reasonable/sensible response goes beyond facts, starts to look for meaning, and supports opinions with limited evidence.	Question invites discussion and begins to explore key understandings.
1	Unprepared or participates minimally in discussions. Seems distracted, not focused on discussions.	Focuses on obvious facts or details without connecting them to key understandings.	EMERGING...restates what was read or taught, jumps to conclusions without support, simple or superficial understanding of meaning.	Question invites discussion of unimportant facts or details which are not related to key understandings.

Diagram 1: Notice, Think, and Wonder Rubric (Nancy Cook, 2007)

The top level of the rubric is intended to indicate a “WOW” response or contribution that either synthesizes new information, forms a new theory, or promotes a much deeper discussion.

We introduced our rubric with a task entitled “Making the Video.” Students were asked to bring in a favorite school-appropriate CD and create a PowerPoint music video with a song of

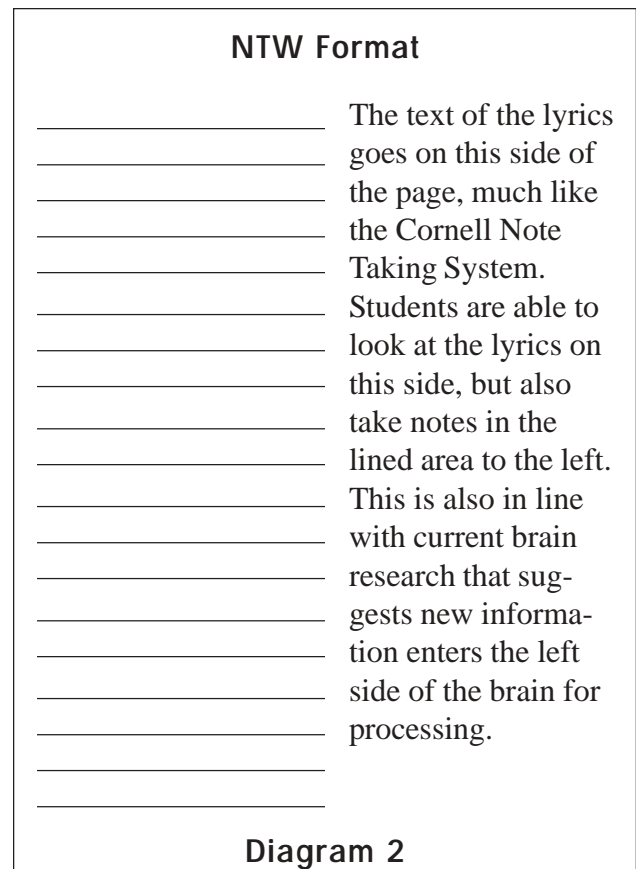
their choice. To create the music video, students were asked to use pictures and graphics to illustrate what their song means specifically without using words. Students were also required to create a handout with the lyrics to their song in the “NTW format.” (See Diagram 2.)

The students took a couple of weeks to prepare their music videos and create their handouts, with the initial understanding that they would be responsible for “teaching” their video to the class in a ten to fifteen minute presentation. The students were quite motivated and engaged by this project, carefully choosing pictures that illustrated the story behind the songs they chose. During the course of the project, the students also created their own rating scales for their personal discussions as well as their picture choices. Their rating scale was known as the “Deep and Duh” scale. They would tell each other that some comments or pictures seemed to be deeper, while others were more duh, and thus should be excluded from use. The deep pictures and comments correlated well with the top level of the rubric, helping the students to self and peer monitor each other along the way.

Furthermore, students were asked to keep track of, and make citations for, the pictures and lyrics that they used in APA format, using an APA citation maker on the Internet through a local university’s library website.

When completed, students presented their music videos and lyric sheets to the class. They initially played the videos through one time, letting other students get a feel for what they had created, then played it again so that students could Notice, Think, and Wonder about the lyrics in relation to the pictures. The students labeled their thoughts with N, T, or W on the lyric sheet and considered the rubric when deciding what their comments would be.

As an example, from our discussion of Annie Lennox’s song, “Into the West,” one student noticed that there was a lot of informa-



tion that seemed to indicate the end of a life. He supported what he noticed with quotes from the lyrics, including, “The ships have come to carry you home / White shores are calling.”

Another student wondered if the song indicated something about immigration. She wrote that “Into the West” may be a journey to a new civilization that would ease hardships, such as coming to the United States. She wrote that she noticed that the song was about a voyage, with people joining together to go to a new world, as depicted in the lyrics and pictures in the video. She thought the lyrics had many meanings, but she decided to commit to the immigration theme based on the evidence she interpreted from the text of the lyrics.

Other students wondered if the water imagery in the song signified freedom or perhaps the circle of life. Several students noticed the repetition of several lines to emphasize the comfort that the author must want the reader to

feel. Many of them thought the author was trying to make the reader understand that there is something better beyond what you fear if you just have the courage to push forward.

When the class finished writing comments about a particular song, the student leading the session would ask students what they noticed, thought, and wondered. In every case, this initiated a conversation that delved into deeper meanings, just like the ones above, for all of the songs, and specifically looked at metaphorical language, connections to other texts or life experiences, critical lenses such as Feminism or Marxism, and much more. Not every conversation was a level 4, but every conversation was strong, and represented the students' abilities to think way beyond their boxes.

The combination of the rubric and the NTW text format transformed our students into the kind of critical thinkers that made us say "Wow!" on a regular basis — and these were middle school students! The music video introduction to the rubric gave us the foundation we needed to jump into other texts using our previous experiences as our prior knowledge base, which we referenced throughout the entire school year. We used the Notice, Think, and Wonder rubric with virtually every text we taught over the course of the year with incredible results. In fact, we introduced it to several colleagues who were able to successfully implement it with their students, as well as students in inclusion and other special education classrooms.

Additionally, the time assigned for students to present wasn't nearly long enough. Almost every student pushed past half an hour and some went the entire period. The level of motivation and engagement was off the charts and it showed in their work, in their presentations, and in their attention to other students. As we pressed forward into the school year, we did more pairing and grouping of students to help

curb the time commitment devoted to each text we read.

When facilitating critical and creative thinking, we cannot plan ahead for the "correct" answer. Our aim is for students to combine new information with what they already know to create an idea or product that is useful and unique. We help students make learning more meaningful and personal by providing them opportunities to gather the content knowledge, make connections to concepts, connect the concepts to their own lives, and create ideas and products that bloom from the seeds of what they already know.

If we want our students to Notice, Think, and Wonder about their learning, then we have to Notice what our needs are, Think of ways to improve them, and then Wonder why we didn't implement these types of strategies before now. Our efforts proved, once again, that traditional or concrete learning methods are no longer the most appropriate teaching choice. Sometimes the teacher has to move beyond the confines of the conventional (and habitual...) and find ways of engaging and motivating students so that learning is authentic and personally meaningful to each student.

Reference

Shore, H., & Lennox, A. (Composers). (2003). *Into the West*. [L. P. Orchestra, Performer, & H. Shore, Conductor] On *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* [Compact Disc]. USA: Reprise / WEA.

Michael L. Fisher (mfisher@starpointcsd.org) is a critical thinking teacher at Starpoint Middle School; 4363 Mapleton Road; Lockport NY 14094; (716) 210-2203. **Nancy Cook** (nancygps@yahoo.com) is technology facilitator at Casey Middle School; 105 Casey Road; East Amherst NY 14051; (716) 626-8585.

An Application of “The Quality Secondary Math Classroom” to Middle School Mathematics Instruction

Jennifer L. Jones, Karrie A. Jones, and Dr. Paul J. Vermette



Introduction

In the book, *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know*, Knowles and Brown (2000) classify the unique needs of middle-level learners in light of four major development categories: intellectual, physical, social, and emotional. Distinctive changes in these areas during adolescence require middle schooling to be thought of as its own pedagogy — one which requires middle-level teachers to be especially responsive and supportive. Donna Kennedy’s article, “The Quality Secondary Math Classroom” (2006), is analyzed in light of these distinctive realities and the constructivist applications explored in the article are applied to the middle school mathematics classroom.

Intellectual Needs

In consideration of Piaget’s theory of cognitive and intellectual learning from childhood to adulthood (1977a), middle school students are in the unique transition from the concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage. While direct experience is still very effective (and absolutely necessary for deep understanding), adolescents are developing the mental capacity for more abstract and hypothetical thinking. Because of this, students at this age are intensely curious and can perform tasks which require use of high-level thinking skills.

How can this be applied to the middle school math classroom?

- Using technology in the classroom is one way to challenge middle school students to apply mathematics in diverse situations. Kennedy provides an example of this in description of Mr. Dee’s classroom during a

unit on the properties of a circle. In this classroom, students use Geometer Sketchpad to derive the inscribed angle theorem. By allowing students to discover the relationship between the measure of the central angles and the arc of the angle, students must work at the Bloom levels of synthesis and analysis rather than knowledge.

- Ms. Gee is another educator who teaches math according to the unique intellectual development of middle school students. By providing her students with the opportunity to record their thoughts in math journals she encourages metacognition, the ability Caine and Caine (1994) describe as “thinking, about the way we think, feel and act.” This is a very productive activity for middle-level learners, as it provides an outlet for students to record their interpretation of their cognitive process.

Physical Needs

The impact of skeletal and muscular changes for middle school students often drives the young adolescent’s need for physical activity during the school day. In an environment where most students sit for 6 hours a day, responsive middle schooling gives students the opportunity to move around, thereby becoming physically as well as mentally active.

How can this be applied to the middle school math classroom?

- Kennedy provides an example of teaching that is responsive to the physical needs of middle-level learners through her description of a lesson in Ms. Eff’s class. In this class, students categorize figures as circles, el-

lipes, parabolas, and hyperbolas by walking to the designated corners of the classroom. Ms. Eff could have had students classify figures by drawing the shapes at their seats, but by allowing them to move themselves to the different corners of the room, she is responsive to the physical needs of her students.

- The vignette regarding Mrs. Bee's class is another example of teaching that is adapted to meet the physical needs of adolescents. In this activity, students stand in a circle holding hands, and she records the time it takes for them to do "the wave" versus the number of students holding hands. The students then take this information and create a best fit line, based upon the data they just created. Again, this activity allows students to stand and move, building enthusiasm for the lesson and thereby providing motivation for their learning.

Social Needs

Learning to interact with peers and adults is one of the most difficult, yet important challenges facing middle school students. While the social skills learned during adolescence are crucially important for adult life, balancing the need for security with the desire for freedom often proves to be a very difficult task. The role of parents, peers, the greater community, and the media all have an impact on the social development of students of this age group and therefore must be considered as part of appropriate middle school teaching practices.

How can this be applied to the middle school math classroom?

- The vignette regarding Mr. Zee's review session is one example of teaching that is responsive to the social needs of middle school students. In this class, students review a difficult concept by working in teams of three to respond to questions on a dry erase slate. While only one student provides an answer to the teacher, the team

gets a point after first working on the given problem individually and then discussing it as a group. By fostering this positive interaction between students, the students learn to mathematically speak to one another, thereby simultaneously teaching and learning the material.

- Mr. Kay is another educator from Kennedy's article who uses group work to promote the development of social skills among his students. In this case, students create and solve problems written by their classmates as part of the exploration of solving one-step equations. His students perform three roles throughout this activity: they write a problem for a classmate, solve a different student's question, and then check a third student's solution. Through this process, which he calls "send a problem," students learn how to learn from each other, thereby creating a classroom community that supports each student's learning and success.

Emotional Needs

The solidification of one's identity is an aspect of adolescence that is unique to middle school aged students. As Erikson (1950) suggests, at this time in their lives middle schoolers must consider who they are and what they will become, a very precarious and difficult struggle for students who are simultaneously dealing with the physical, intellectual, and social changes that were previously described. Teaching in a way that is responsive to these emotional needs gives students an outlet to explore their identity in productive and meaningful ways. As Mills, Dunham, and Alpert (1988) suggest, self-esteem often suffers as a result of the feelings of confusion and isolation experienced by adolescents and therefore teachers must provide opportunities that promote reflection of one's feelings.

How can this be applied to the middle school math classroom?

- Mr. Kay's classroom, as described during his

lesson on metric conversion, provides one example of how math teachers can be responsive of the emotional needs of their students. In this case, Mr. Kay has his students complete a student feedback form that asks them to communicate their feelings about the unit, provide suggestions for improving their math class, and describe how they feel “at this moment about math class.” By validating student concerns and eliciting suggestions for improvement, Mr. Kay is able to help the students reflect on their own emotional well-being and adapt his teaching to fit the emotional needs of his students.

Conclusion

Educating students at the middle school level requires an in-depth understanding of the unique intellectual, physical, social, and emotional needs of adolescents. When teaching this age group, one must make a conscious effort to accommodate these needs, thereby improving student comprehension and increasing motivation. By analyzing the pedagogical scenarios put forth by Donna Kennedy, in light of the developmental categories as stated by Knowles and Brown, the need for a constructivist approach to mathematics becomes apparent, and its implications for middle school students is confirmed.

References

Bloom, B. S. (1984). *Taxonomy of educational objectives*. Boston: Pearson Education.

Caine, R.N., & Caine, G. (1994). *Making connections: Teaching and the human brain*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison Wesley.

Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Kennedy, D. (2006). The quality secondary math classroom. *Journal for the Practical Application of Constructivist Teaching, 1*. Retrieved May 3, 2007, from <http://www.learnercentered.org/jpact/Archive/Archive%20v1%20Winter%202006.htm>

Knowles, T., & Brown, D. (2000). *What every middle school teacher should know*. Portsmouth, NH: National Middle School Association.

Mills, R. C, Dunham, R. G., & Alpert, G. P. (1988). Working with high-risk young in prevention and early intervention programs: Toward a comprehensive wellness model. *Adolescence, 23*, 643-660.

Piaget, J. (1977a). *The development of thought: Elaboration of cognitive structures*. New York: Viking.

Jennifer L. Jones and **Karrie A. Jones** are mathematics education students at Niagara University, where **Dr. Paul J. Vermette** (pjv@niagara.edu) is a Teacher Educator.



Team Spirit Helps Ensure Success in the Middle

Nancy Morris

While many have spent their lives looking for the Fountain of Youth, middle school educators have always known the true fountain is middle school. Being “13” for your entire life guarantees you will remain youthful. All those individuals, who give middle school teachers a look of pity after asking what they do for a living, would become jealous if they were aware that the way to eternal youth is working in “the middle.” Those looks of pity would disappear and quickly turn to looks of absolute envy. However, those who work in the middle are not quick to share this secret with outsiders.

Eternal youth aside, middle school educators also know that there is a desperate need to not only preserve, but expand programs “in the middle.” This unique population has needs to be answered so that our students become lifelong learners and leaders, and not just great test takers. My professional life has been spent working with middle school students and trying to protect and develop programs to enhance our school. As head of student activities for the past four years, it has been my mission to create, develop, and share programs and activities for our middle school. With the expertise and support of our staff and our administration, many programs and activities are now a part of our middle school program and culture, with the goal of adding more in the future. There are many ways to educate a middle school student; possibly, school-wide programs and activities are an essential part of that mission.

In a climate of testing and publishing results in our newspapers, this has not been an easy road. It seems easy to understand why some are abandoning parts of best middle school practice for more conventional “safe” approaches. However, it is in this climate that it seems more important than ever to preserve programs that enhance what is the core of our middle school beliefs. Although not perfect, our staff has worked hard to create a true middle school climate with incredible activities that help to make our school such a special place.

In the center of our activities is a partnership we create each year with a charity. In the past, we have worked with organizations including Autism Speaks, Special Olympics, and a local hospital. The goal is to raise funds over the year for this organization, share knowledge, and have all of our students learn the importance of helping others and how each of us can make a difference in a positive way. This part of our activities program is one in which we take great pride. Although not every student benefits from this, it is certain some lives have been changed by being involved. Middle school students feel deeply, and this has offered many of our students an opportunity to share their feelings and make a difference.

Our fundraising is the core of our Team Spirit activity, which takes place each spring. Team Spirit has been a part of our school since we became a middle school, twenty-three years ago. In the past, activities would take place before or after school.

Today, our students are so over-programmed that they really don't have time to do anything more. Four years ago this program was changed so most of the activities take place during the school day. The growth of this program has not been without pain, but it has developed into something we are proud of. Our students enter our building each fall anxious to be a part of this.

Team Spirit has some similarity to camp programs such as "Olympics" or "Color War". Our teams compete by grade level against each other in various competitions. Staff members help supervise students in activities during the day and there are paid teacher advisors who work with our students after the school day. There is a grade-level assembly to introduce our theme and to introduce each team's name. This assembly has become a large production, with staff in costumes to represent teams and staff members competing on stage for team points. Our students love cheering their teachers on.

Team Spirit takes place over five days. On each of these days, we shorten our class periods to add an extra period at the end of the day for our students to prepare for the final day activities. These activities include a presentation with a team dance, cheer, or musical presentation (live or lip synch); a team banner; a team plaque; hallway deco-

rating; a team scrapbook; a team float; and a team bridge built with pasta. Each team is assigned a day of the week to hold a fundraising activity, at the end of the day, to raise money for our charity.

We continually look for activities to add to interest different groups of our students. This is another evolving program. Our sports competitions for points take place during our physical education classes. A special assembly held on the second to last day of Team Spirit has teams with teachers competing against each other in basketball. There are no regular classes on the last day of



Team Spirit in Action



Team Spirit; our entire school participates in this day's activity. For half the day, each grade level views the presentations while another grade is in the gym competing in Goofy Sports. It is an incredible, successful

day in our school.

The culture of our school and the programs we have developed are ultimately our way of creating a place where all students feel they belong and want to be part of our school. Our yearly "Idol Show" is a tremendous success. All profits from our show are for that year's charity. This show is so successful that the 650 tickets we sell are gone within 48 hours.

Other programs we have added include a Club Fair at the beginning of the year, so

all students know what clubs and activities they can join. Although we always assumed our students knew what was available, it seems many students did not know and others were not sure how to join. Students represent each club and classes are brought down to visit the various clubs. Interested students can sign up right there and will later receive a reminder for the first meeting, or they can take a flyer with all the information they need. We have been able to increase participation in our after-school program by holding this fair. This year we will attempt to expand our Career Day in a similar manner.

One of the programs that is outstanding and adds to our school culture is our school store. It is run by our Entrepreneur Club. These students work during lunch periods at a store that is filled with all school supplies needed in classes, small gifts for birthdays, cards, "birthday decorating locker kits", accessories for lockers, and even postage stamps. Under the direction of talented teachers, this store is now a vital

part of our school climate. This year our PTA will be offering school clothing year round. Students will be able to buy items such as sweatshirts, pants, and hats as a way to increase school spirit in our building.

Middle schools need to have programs that invite students to become a part of our schools. Our students need to want to get up each day and come to school because there is nowhere better to be. These programs not only allow students to apply knowledge and develop their leadership skills, but may motivate others to work hard scholastically to achieve. Although this is just an overview of programs developed, it does illustrate the types of activities that need to be part of a successful middle school experience for all children.

Nancy Morris is the head of student activities at Oceanside Middle School; 186 Alice Avenue; Oceanside NY 11572; (516) 678-8518.

Have you visited NYSMSA's website lately?

Go to www.nysmsa.org for...

- the latest information on what's new "in the middle"
- updates on State Education Department discussions
 - articles of particular interest
- Corning Middle-Level Institute and Annual Conference materials
- Schools to Watch information and application form
 - ways to contact your local regional director
 - the NYSMSA book store
 - membership renewal and more

An Efficient Approach to Cooperative Learning

Thomas B. Reardon



A Brief Theoretical Analysis of James Surowiecki's "The Wisdom of Crowds" and Its Application to the Classroom

During a spring vacation bearing no resemblance to the expected mild weather of April, I had some time to catch up on my reading. A fan of social science literature, I was intrigued by a brief blurb that appeared in an April edition of *Time* magazine, summarizing the thesis of James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds*. My interest awakened by a piece that promised to shed light on the positive influence a group of people can have on solving the world's most complex problems, I went to my local library to secure the final copy remaining on the shelves.

Though Surowiecki's piece illustrates (through mathematical and anecdotal example) the influence and almost flawless accuracy a crowd of people can have in solving a problem of great world magnitude, its application to cooperative learning is unmistakable.

Surowiecki begins with the true story of British scientist Francis Galton, a statistician who believed that the mass group had significant resource. Attending a local livestock fair, he was attracted to a particular booth that challenged the fairgoers to "Guess the Weight of the Ox." The individual who guessed closest to the weight would receive a monetary prize. As in most cases, the assumption is made that the sole expert of the group (the person with livestock experience, or individual with great visual estimation skills) would obtain the correct answer. The actual weight of the ox was 1,198 pounds, with the closest guess falling within ten pounds in either direction. However, when Galton *averaged* all of the submissions (taking

into account over 750 guesses, with a wide breadth of range), the communal average guess was 1,197 pounds!

Numbers and statistics aside, Galton and numerous other social scientists have shown a strong correlation in the strength of the group, rather than the few, elite individuals who are superior in a given field. From the stock market to television show ratings, Surowiecki effectively presents the influence a group of people can have, when their **individual, uninfluenced thoughts** are taken into consideration. It is important to accentuate that it is not the mindless leader-leading-the-masses that results in this success, but the process of aggregating the thoughts and opinions of all members of a group (regardless of intellectual and social background) to derive a conclusion.

What does this mean for cooperative learning?

As middle-level educators, we are constantly struggling with the theory and practice of cooperative learning, or group work. Though the research shows that working in groups builds self-esteem, makes learning activities more interactive (and thus more enjoyable), and allows the heterogeneously grouped teaching model to function on a smaller level, almost every teacher has encountered the perils of this teaching style (poorly focused groups, apathy amongst group members, inequity in the grading process, etc.). Though these difficulties vary depending upon the structure of the activity and the class composite, there are applications of Surowiecki's work that would help foster a more academically effective, socially enriching cooperative learning experience.

1. Cooperative Learning Groups Can Be Large(r)

As teachers, we make the assumption that smaller is always best. However, in cases where we ask students to analyze a situation or offer a solution to a problem, the more diverse inputs available will satisfy the mathematical model Sorowiecki proposes, thus leading to a more accurate solution. (Basically, more hands allow for a clearer spread of solutions, rather than narrowing the scope).

2. Individual Reflection Time is a Necessity

Because of the strong social component of cooperative learning, we sometimes assume that the nature of cooperative learning is to always involve interaction. As illustrated in Sorowiecki's text, mass groups that are left to openly discuss everything sometimes fall victim to the more dominant characters leading the pack (which we see many times in group work when the dominant character leads, and the submissive character resentfully follows). Regardless of the task, allow students ample time to individually (and silently) record their thoughts and possible solutions to the cooperative learning task. Once recorded on paper (which prevents students from feeling the pressure to change their opinions once conversation begins), students should then use this reflection as a springboard for interaction. It is in these diverse reflections and their compilation, taking the best of all contributing members, where the solution exists.

3. Grading Should Remain Predominantly Individual

As a teacher, I often use the threat of the "group grade" as a motivation for all members of the group to commit ample energy to the activity. Usually, this threat seems to fall upon deaf ears, with very little change in affect after such a comment is made. Sorowiecki attempts to explain the apathy of certain group members by using a term called *strong reciprocity*. Much like those who feel no pressure to pay taxes despite their communal benefits (roads, govern-

ment programming, etc.), *strong reciprocity* is "the willingness to punish bad behavior even when one gets no personal benefits from doing so" (Sorowiecki, 2004, p. 116). Basically, the benefit to excel in a group situation depreciates when the group is considered one entity. If everybody receives the same grade without distinction, why should particular students distinguish themselves? In the case of students who are detracting from the experience, what is their motivation to raise their level of engagement, if the others are equally responsible? Though a group grade can be a part of the task, the weight of the scoring should account for individual work and contribution, thus keeping all members motivated to engage.

Maintaining motivation and focus in the middle-level classroom is vital. Refining our group work practices not only ensures a better experience for our students, but allows the experience to be academically beneficial, producing results that supercede the temptation to remain within the safe boundaries of whole group instruction.

Reference

Sorowiecki, J. (2004). *The wisdom of crowds*. New York: Doubleday.

Thomas Reardon (reartms@bcasd.neric.org) is an English teacher at Bethlehem Central Middle School; 332 Kenwood Avenue; Delmar NY 12054; (518) 439-7460.

Student Perceptions of a Middle School Video Advisory Program: A Critical Analysis

John Christie and Timothy P. Martin



Introduction

During the open forum at the New York State Middle School Conference in October 2000, Tom Kane and Jeannette Stern stressed the need for an advisory program. Kane took this a step further and suggested that it not be called an “advisory program,” because this sounded too much like a “band-aid” approach. He would call it an “advocacy program” instead, since this was the purpose of the program. Kane asked, “If we don’t advocate for these children, who will?” (NYSMA, 2000). In the current era of national and state mandates, which emphasize *academic* excellence, it is easy to lose sight of the human factors that build character and citizenship.

Purpose

The video advisory program utilizes a closed circuit television to promote the monthly themes of the advisory program. Video clips emphasize monthly themes. Clips include: motion pictures, web-links, faculty made videos, and student produced news segments. Advisors are provided with discussion questions related to each video. For example, the monthly theme for January was “Goal Setting and New Beginnings.” A video clip of the Hoyt family, father and son tri-athletes, was shown as a web-link. In recognition of Constitution Day, a building-level video was created asking the question, “What does the Constitution mean to me?” A quantitative analysis of the video advisory program can support the soft or verbal data received.

The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of the video advisory program on students. The video advisory program was

implemented during the 2004-2005 school year. In the three years since its inception, it has become a staple of the middle school advisory program. Feedback received from advisors and students tell those involved with the program that meaningful messages were reaching students. Children expressed enjoyment of seeing themselves and their peers on television. A quantitative analysis of the video advisory program examines the following:

1. Identify student perception of the video advisory program.
2. Examine the relationship between the video advisory program, the advisory program, school climate, and student self-reporting of behavior.

Related Literature

New York State, in 2003, adopted the *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs*. The seven essential elements — which include 1) Philosophy and Mission; 2) Educational Program; 3) Organizational Structure; 4) Classroom Instruction; 5) Educational Leadership; 6) A Network of Academic and Personal Support; and 7) Professional Learning — are a balance between the academic, social, and emotional needs of the young adolescent. Element Six recommends explicitly the need for an “adult mentor in addition to a guidance counselor, either formally through a teacher/student, advisor/advisee program or informally through a school culture of caring in which teachers or other adults assume responsibility for individual students” (2003, p. 7). An advisory program allows an adult to

develop an individual relationship with a small group of students. Effective advisory programs can address the academic and social needs of children through both structured and non-structured activities.

The middle school organization provides students with “access to at least one adult who knows and cares for him personally, and who is responsible for helping him to deal with the problems of growing up” (Lounsbury & Vars, 1978, p. 41). Meaningful relationships between adults and children in middle school are fostered by daily advisory programs.

Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century, the follow up to the Carnegie Foundation’s 1989 report of middle-level reform, promotes an advisory program that meets a minimum of three times weekly. Research in support of the *Turning Points* recommendations found: “A significant adult who provides support and direction during difficult times is an important factor in helping students avoid academic failure and a variety of other problems” (2000, p. 143). Advisory can also foster character building activities and time for personal goal setting and social development.

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) is a leader in middle-level advocacy and research. Its 2003 position paper, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, is the result of the growth in researchers’ collective knowledge of how middle school children function. NMSA states: “Each student must have one adult to support that student’s academic and personal development” (2003, p. 16). The research literature supports a middle school program that places an emphasis on academic success without excluding the developmental needs of the child. The current reality of high-stakes testing fails to place the same emphasis on the social and emotional needs of young men and women. *This We Believe* asserts that advocacy

needs to be rooted in the culture of a school system; advisory programs are a part of the advocacy system.

Despite the fact that there is a volume of literature that addresses the importance of advisory programs, “few researchers have systematically probed the subjective experiences of participants in advisory programs” (Anfara, 2006, p.2). *The Video Advisory Student Survey* quantifies the impact of the program on advisory in general.

Historical Growth of the Video Advisory Program

Dr. Martin had the opportunity to analyze the advisory program for several years, when he was assistant principal of the middle school. During that time, the infrastructure for an effective advisory program was put in place. Each day began with a twenty minute advisory. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday were dedicated to advisory activities and Tuesday and Thursday were set aside for relax and read. We had a 13:1 student/teacher ratio. Even with all these pertinent elements in place, it seemed that our advisory program was not living up to its potential.

As middle school principal and with the same infrastructure in place, Dr. Martin seized on the capacity of the CCTV, soliciting teachers for an advisory committee. The first-year goal of the committee was to bring a character-education program to our children using the multimedia platform. We began by using age-appropriate videos and showing them throughout the building on the CCTV. We tried to follow monthly themes, but our goals seemed over-ambitious at times.

The following year, a new assistant principal organized a formal committee that had the right players. This voluntary committee included academic teachers and exploratory teachers from each grade. The current advisory committee has both first and twenty year

teachers, which provides just the right mix. They now make their own student videos, include Internet downloads, and on occasion go back to the roots of store-bought videos. There are activity sheets for the advisor to follow, which include pre-video overview as well as follow-up questions. Each video follows monthly themes and lasts approximately five minutes on a “Video Wednesday” advisory.

Survey Participants

Students were selected to participate in the survey based on their grade. All grade level advisories were placed in a lottery and individual advisories were selected to take the survey. Advisories selected were placed back in the lottery to ensure all advisories had an equal chance of being selected. The survey participants included boys and girls from grades 6-8. A total of 114 students participated in the survey: 45 sixth graders, 34 seventh graders, and 35 eighth graders.

The survey was crafted by the advisory committee and placed on surveymonkey.com. *The Video Advisory Student Survey* consists of four demographic questions and 26 Likert scale questions. The 26 questions were broken into four major variables that assessed the advisory program, video advisory program, school climate, and student self-reporting of

their behavior. Thirteen students took the survey to measure the validity and reliability of the questions. A Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 14 (SPSS) Chronbach’s alpha reliability test was conducted on the four major variables.

The survey was administered to students during advisory. Students came to the computer lab and were given instruction to access the survey from a web link to surveymonkey.com. The advisories dragged and clicked their responses on the computer. Following the completion of the survey, an item analysis and the 114 individual reports were printed. Student survey responses were placed in SPSS and analyzed.

Results

The 26 Likert scale questions were divided into four major categories: Video Advisory, Advisory Program, School Climate, and Student Self-Reporting of Their Behavior. Table 1 (*below*) provides descriptive statistics for the four major variables.

110 people answered the survey. Video advisory has an $N=110$ with a $M=35.63$ and a $SD=5.95$ with a minimum of 16 and a maximum of 46. Of the survey responses analyzed for all grades, 84% fell between the range of slightly agree to strongly agree that video advisory sends meaningful messages. More

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Video Advisory, Advisory Program, Behavior, and School Climate

	N Statistic	Minimum Statistic	Maximum Statistic	Mean Statistic	SD Statistic
Video advisory	110	16.00	46.00	35.63	5.95
Advisory program	109	11.00	24.00	18.09	2.82
Student behavior	111	13.00	25.00	20.64	2.44
School climate	111	14.00	30.00	22.90	3.38
Valid N (listwise)	109				

Table 2*Bivariate Correlation of Four Major Variables*

		Video Advisory	Advisory Program	Student Behavior	School Climate
Video Advisory	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 110			
Advisory Program	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.693(**) .000 109	109		
Student Behavior	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.325(**) .001 110	.234(*) .014 109	111	
School Climate	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.411(**) .000 110	.420(**) .000 109	.213(*) .025 111	111

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

globally, an analysis of the advisory program with an $N=109$ and a $M=18.09$ with an $SD=2.82$ and minimum of 11 and a maximum of 24 showed that 82% of all children surveyed had a favorable impression of the advisory program. Student self-reporting of their decision-making reveals that 96% of students slightly to strongly agree that they have good moral compasses ($N=111$ with an $M=20.64$ and an $SD=2.44$ with a minimum of 13 and maximum of 25). Students expressed a positive view of their school climate with an $N=111$ and $M=22.90$ with an $SD= 3.38$ with a minimum of 14 and a maximum of 30. The mean for each of the four variables created from the survey illustrate a positive student response to the video advisory program, advisory in general, and their perception of a good school climate.

The bivariate correlation shows a positive correlation between the video advisory activities and the advisory program with an $r=.69$, $p<.01$. The variance between the two variable

is $r^2=.34$ or 34%. The video advisories have a significant effect on students' positive perception of the advisory program. The video advisory activities are positively correlated with student self reporting of behavior with an $r=.32$, $p<.01$ and an $r^2=.16$. Video advisory activities have a 16% variance on student self-reporting of behavior. On a related note, our school has experienced a decrease in formal discipline referrals the past two years. School climate has an $r=.41$, $p<.01$ and an $r^2=.20$. School climate is positively correlated with video advisory activities, with a variance between the variables of 20%. Responding to a single item in the survey, 95% of children agree or strongly agree that their teachers care about them.

Conclusion

Advisory programs are an essential characteristic of middle school. The survey results show that students have a positive perception of the video advisory component of the advi-

sory program. Student responses identified a significant relationship between video advisory, advisory program, school climate, and student self-reporting of behavior.

The video advisory program supports the affective domain of the middle school child. Furthermore, messages in the videos provide character building experiences. A school can enrich its advisory program with a component similar to video advisory.

References

- Alexander, W.M., Williams, E.L., Compton, M.H., Vynce, A., & Prescott, D. (1968). *The emergent middle school*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Gallassi, J.P., & Gulledge, S.A. (1997). The middle school counselor and teacher-advisor programs. *Professional School Counseling*, 1 (2). Retrieved April 13, 2007, from Academic Search Elite.
- Jackson, A.W., & Davis, G.A. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kane, T., Mitchell, K., Payton, D., Stern, J., & Toepfer, C. (2000, October). Middle level forum. Presented at the conference of the New York State Middle School Association.
- Lipsitz, J. (1984). *Successful schools for young adolescents*. New York: Transaction Books.
- Lounsbury, John H., & Vars, Gordon F. (1978). *A curriculum for the middle school years*. Harper & Row.
- MacLaury, S., & Gratz, Z. (2002). Advisories led by trained facilitators: The impact on middle school students. *Research in Middle Level Education Online*, 26(1). Retrieved April 14, 2007, from <http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/RMLEOnline/tabid/101/Default.aspx>
- Meyer, H. (2006). A student speaks...Teacher advisory programs in middle school. *In Transition*, XXIII (2), 26-30.
- New York State Department of Education. (2003). *Essential elements of standards-focused middle level schools and programs*. Retrieved April 13, 2007, from <http://www.nysed.gov>
- This we believe: Successful schools for young adolescents*. (2003). Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Wilson, C. (1998, March/April). The real meaning of middle school advisory programs. *Contemporary Education*. Abstract retrieved April 13, 2007, from Academic Search Elite.

John Christie and Timothy P. Martin, Ed.D., are assistant principal and principal, respectively, of Islip Middle School; 211 Main Street; Islip NY 11751.

Submission of Articles

In Transition accepts manuscripts for publication consideration. Our journal is produced by the New York State Middle School Association and is dedicated to those teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and others serving the needs of students aged 10-15. *In Transition* is a juried publication; all manuscripts are reviewed and approved for publication by a panel of members from the NYSMSA Board of Directors.

Manuscripts describing successful programs, stimulating projects, exemplary teaching techniques, unique team concepts, action research, and promising practices are welcome! We are particularly interested in articles on implementing the new Standards, teaming, interdisciplinary instruction, authentic assessment, flexible scheduling, integrating technology into instructional programs, and application of the *Essential Elements*.

Please note the following format guidelines:

LENGTH: 400-2,000 words (two to eight pages)

FORMAT: MS Word or compatible, double space, Times New Roman 12, 1-inch margins. Citations of referenced works should follow current APA standards.

ILLUSTRATIONS: All illustrations, tables, charts, photographs, etc. must be high quality, black and white or grayscale. Photographs must be in JPEG format and include captions identifying subjects, activity, and source or photographer. All illustrations become the property of NYSMSA.

COVER PAGE: Each article submitted **must** include a cover page with the following information: Title, Author, Position, School and/or Home Address (please indicate which), School and/or Home Telephone Number (please indicate which), E-Mail Address, and (optional) a brief synopsis of the content of the manuscript.

SUBMIT TO: All documents must be submitted as e-mail attachments to:
editor@nysmsa.org

Please note: Only e-mail submissions will be considered; do not send fax or paper copies of manuscripts.

DEADLINES: To be considered for publication, manuscripts must be received by August 15 for the fall issue, January 15 for the winter issue, April 15 for the spring issue.

NYSMSA Board of Directors 2006-2007

Officers

President

Jeannette Stern
Wantagh MS
3299 Beltagh Avenue
Wantagh, NY 11793
(516) 679-6350
stern@nysmsa.org

Executive Director

Dennis Tosetto
NYSMSA West
2201 Pine Avenue
Niagara Falls, NY 14301
(716) 282-6511
tosetto@nysmsa.org

Vice President

Susan Allen
East Irondequoit CSD
600 Pardee Road
Rochester, NY 14609
(585) 339-1210
allen@nysmsa.org

Secretary / Historian

Brian Sherman
Schoharie CSD
P.O. Box 430
136 Academy Drive
Schoharie, NY 12157
(518) 295-8132
sherman@nysmsa.org

Treasurer / Conferences

Linda Ruest
NYSMSA West
2201 Pine Avenue
Niagara Falls, NY 14301
(716) 282-6511
ruest@nysmsa.org

Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch Program

David Payton
payton@nysmsa.org

Professional Development

James Tobin
tobin@nysmsa.org

Research and Technology

Jeff Craig
Jamesville-DeWitt MS
6280 Randall Road
Jamesville, NY 13078
(315) 445-8360
craig@nysmsa.org

SED Liaison

Marybeth Casey
NYSED 319EB
89 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12234
(518) 474-0059
casey@nysmsa.org

Regions & Directors

Your region is determined by your school's BOCES; for retirees and businesses, it is based on place of residence or business location.

Region 1 BOCES

Monroe #1
Monroe 2-Orleans
Wayne-Finger Lakes
Steuben-Allegany
and ALL Livingston County

Region 1 Director

Terry Quinn
Twelve Corners MS
2643 Elmwood Avenue
Rochester, NY 14618
(585) 242-5100
quinn@nysmsa.org

Region 2 BOCES

Cayuga-Onondaga
Madison-Oneida
Oneida-Herkimer-Madison
Onondaga-Cortland-Madison
Oswego

Region 2 Director

Bruce MacBain
Moravia MS
P.O. Box 1189
Moravia, NY 13118
(315) 497-2670
macbain@nysmsa.org

Region 3 BOCES

Hamilton-Fulton-Montgomery
Herkimer
Washington-Saratoga-Warren-
Hamilton-Essex

Region 3 Director

Chris Reed
Glens Falls MS
20 Quade Street
Glens Falls, NY 12801
(518) 793-3418
reed@nysmsa.org

Region 4 BOCES

Broome-Tioga
Delaware-Chenango-
Madison-Otsego
Schuyler-Chemung-Tioga
Tompkins-Seneca-Tioga

Region 4 Director

Tom Phillips
Watkins Glen CSD
303 12th Street
Watkins Glen, NY 14891
(607) 535-3220
phillips@nysmsa.org

Region 5 BOCES

Capital Region
Otsego-Northern Catskills
Questar III

Acting Region 5 Director

Mark Fish
Oliver W. Winch MS
99 Hudson Street
S. Glens Falls, NY 12803
(518) 792-5891
fish@nysmsa.org

Region 6 BOCES

Dutchess
Orange-Ulster
Putnam-Northern Westchester
Rockland
Sullivan
Ulster
Southern Westchester

Region 6 Director

Jim McIntyre
Crispell MS
PO Box 780
Pine Bush, NY 12566
(845) 744-2031
mcintyre@nysmsa.org

Region 7

ALL New York City Districts

Region 7 Co-Directors TBA

Contact: NYSMSA President
Jeannette Stern

Region 8 BOCES

Nassau
Eastern Suffolk
Western Suffolk

Region 8 Director

Shawn Robertson
Lynbrook North MS
529 Merrick Road
Lynbrook, NY 11563
(516) 887-0282
robertson@nysmsa.org

Region 9 BOCES

Cattaraugus-Allegany
Erie #1
Erie #2-Chautauqua-
Cattaraugus
Genesee Valley (except
Livingston County)
Orleans-Niagara

Region 9 Director

Nancy Sampson
Pioneer MS
P.O. Box 619
Yorkshire, NY 14173
(716) 492-9376
sampson@nysmsa.org

Region 10 BOCES

Champlain Valley
Franklin-Essex-Hamilton
Jefferson-Lewis
St. Lawrence-Lewis

Region 10 Director

Teal Abel
Theresa Primary School
125 Bridge Street
Theresa, NY 13691
(315) 628-4432
abel@nysmsa.org

Administrative Assistant

Julie Schwartz
NYSMSA
P.O. Box 53
Pleasantville, NY 10570
(914) 747-9241
schwartz@nysmsa.org

NYSMSA
is your source for
Middle-Level Staff Development

27th Annual Conference
Betting on the Middle
Saratoga Springs NY
October 18-20, 2007

Information is available at
www.nysmsa.org



NYSMSA
P.O. Box 53
Pleasantville, NY 10570