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NCMLE Journal, a double-blind peer reviewed journal, is an official publication of the North Carolina Middle School Association. It publishes a wide range of articles related to middle level practice, theory, commentary, and research. Its primary objective is to enrich the understanding of the developmental and educational needs of North Carolina's early adolescents.

Manuscripts should be written in a clear, non-technical style for an audience consisting largely of preservice teachers, inservice teachers, and administrators. Each article should not exceed 15 double-spaced pages, including references and a bibliography when appropriate (APA style). Authors should email a copy of their article with a separate title page that states the author(s), institution, position within that institution, and a contact address and telephone number. Deadline for submission to the fall issue is June 15 and deadline for the spring issue is November 15.

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NORTH CAROLINA ASSOCIATION FOR MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION
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FEATURES

2023 NCMLE AWARDS

DEPARTMENTS

Equitable Learning Through Sustainable Development Goals

by Joey Lord, Kaitlyn Holshouser, and Adriana L. Medina

North Carolina is facing challenging issues when it comes to the achievement gap in middle grades reading and mathematics. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2022), North Carolina failed to meet the national average performance rates in both middle grades reading and mathematics and fell short of meeting the national average for improvement in achievement in both 2019 and 2022. North Carolina's NAEP scores have been dropping for years, since 2013 or 2015, depending on the subject and grade; however the sharpest drops for all assessments occurred between 2019 and 2022. In 2013, in an attempt to combat plummeting scores, North Carolina began identifying teachers who exceeded expected growth in the 2012-2013 school year. Through reported state testing performance data, the state was attempting to help schools identify effective instructional practices in the classroom. Teachers who were exceeding expected growth were raising student achievement beyond the state's expectations for students in their individual classrooms. By examining evidence-based instructional practices and strategies of those effective teachers, North Carolina could assist in raising reading and mathematics academic achievement across the state.

The achievement gap is a complex phrase that is defined as the disproportionate academic performance between students of different race and ethnic backgrounds (Ford & Moore, 2013; Pitre, 2014). However, the achievement gap is often reflective of more subtle environmental contributors and "opportunity gaps" in urban school settings such as lowering academic standards, resources, funding, and teacher quality (Ford & Moore, 2013; Pitre, 2014). Urban school districts with diverse populations often experience more pronounced achievement gaps in both reading and math; however, academic gaps are more prevalent in mathematics and begin as early as elementary school (Pitre, 2014).

Problem

In North Carolina, a disproportionate number of middle school students failed to meet proficiency standards in reading and math on the 2022 end-of-grade (EOG) exams (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDP], 2023). Students who scored above 66.7% in reading and 50% in math in grades 6 and 7, and above 64.6% in reading and 52 % in math in grade 8 were considered proficient (NCDPI, 2023). These overall "cut" score percentages are 5 percentage points lower than those used in 2014 (NCDPI, 2023). The overall reported percentages of students in North Carolina proficient in reading on the 2022 state EOG assessment were 47.5%, 48.4%, and 50.6% in grades 6-8 respectively, and 50.3%, 48.7%, and 42.2% in 6-8th grade math (NCDPI, 2023).

In 2022, the North Carolina State Report Card

showed an undeniable gap in both reading (R) and mathematics (M) existing amongst the target groups, namely, Hispanic and Black students in comparison to their White peers. This report showed that on average in North Carolina, Black students had a proficiency rate of (R) 11.8% (M) 29.2% in grade 6, (R) 14.8% (M)27.9% in grade 7, and (R) 14.6% (M)23.3% in grade 8 on the North Carolina EOG mathematics exam (NCDPI, 2023). Hispanic students' proficiency rates were reported as (R) 14.8% (M)39.8% in grade 6, (R) 18.7% (M)38.8% in grade 7, and (R) 17.8% (M)31.7% in grade 8 while White student scores were reported at (R) 34.9% (M)65%, (R) 39.6% (M)63.5%, and (R) 39.7% (M)55.9% in grades 6-8 respectively (NCDPI, 2023). Therefore, on average, Black students scored 24% lower in reading and 35% lower in math and Hispanic students scored 21% lower in reading and 25% lower in math than White students on the North Carolina EOG assessments in reading and math (NCDPI, 2023). This disparity in proficiency scores shows a gap between more than 50% of North Carolina's minority and White middle school students in mathematics (NCDPI, 2023).

A nation-wide comparison of eighth-grade reading and math scores from the academic years of 2019-2022 showed that no states were successful in closing the gap between high and low-performing students (NAEP, 2023). Thirty-two states reported a decline in eighth-grade reading scores and eighteen states reported no significant change. Additionally, forty-nine states reported a decline in eighth-grade mathematics scores and one state reported no significant change (NAEP, 2023). According to the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS), many North Carolina students were projected to fail on end-of-grade assessments because of ineffective classroom teachers (NCDPI, 2023). However, despite having developed a statistical model that is intended to identify effective and ineffective teachers based on student growth comparisons, EVAAS does not have the capability of measuring or identifying other issues such as curriculum, professional development, or teacher inexperience, which may also be contributing to low student achievement.

The increased emphasis on high-stakes testing is causing teachers to be more concerned with teaching to the test rather than focusing on teaching relevant, aligned, rigorous curriculum (Roach, 2014). While teaching to the test is a relevant concern for school administrations, student achievement is not increasing, and the gap continues to exist. For students to meet proficiency standards in reading and mathematics on the North Carolina end-of-grade exams, considerable changes need to be made to the way teachers deliver instruction and prepare students for high-stakes standardized testing. The International Center for Leadership in Education (2021) stated that the majority of teachers do not use effective instructional strategies that engage students in learning causing some students to have a poorer mastery of basic concepts compared to their counterparts in most other industrialized nations. Gaps in student achievement are growing because teachers continue to have difficulties meeting the academic needs of every student, in particular, those who have historically been disadvantaged (Porter, 2023). Student achievement declines in many schools because teachers are not exposing students to rigor, an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels and is supported so the student can demonstrate learning at high levels (Porter, 2023).

Principles of Equitable Teaching and Learning

Equality in education is providing each student with the same access to resources regardless of their needs; Equity in education is ensuring that each student's needs are met so they are successful in school. Addressing equity and access in the classroom ensures that all students have the opportunity to experience high-quality instruction, learn challenging content, receive the necessary support to be successful, and that high levels of achievement are attainable (NCTM, 2020). To expand more equitable access to learning in classrooms, teachers need to learn how to personalize learning to meet the unique needs of their students. Classrooms that implement an equitable approach to teaching strive to:

● Foster a deeper understanding of content through inquiry, critical thinking, and real-world application.
● Create conditions to thrive by dismantling bias and structural barriers.
● Connect critical intersections by enhancing language learner support.
● Sustain equitable classroom practices by supporting coaches, administrators, and lead teachers.

Equitable teaching is an integrated approach that addresses instructional barriers in content equity that align to grade-level standards and student learning outcomes. Equitable practices in education help lessen opportunity gaps related to college and career readiness and provide access to rigorous and engaging student-centered approaches like problem-based learning (PBL; Lucas Education Research, 2021).

Contextualizing Instruction through PBL

We define contextualized teaching as providing students with opportunities to learn mandated curricular topics in the context in which they naturally occur. In doing this, students better understand the rationale as to why they are learning the required material as they begin to understand its relevance to their own lives. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a useful framework for teachers to situate learning in real-world contexts (United Nations, 2023). We argue that in situating learning in real problems and current events, students will not only be more engaged in learning as they find the content relevant to their lives but also will develop a deeper and richer understanding of the topics being presented.

Sustainable Development Goals

Established in 2015 by the United Nations, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a framework to guide international collaboration on initiatives pertaining to sustainable development (United Nations, 2023). According to the Brundtland Report, sustainable development is defined as "a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations'' (Brundtland-Report, p. 43 as cited in Hoffman & Siege, 2018). The topic of sustainable development has received increased attention in recent years and will likely continue to be a critical issue for generations to come. Given that K-12 students will play a large role in innovating solutions to these pressing real-world issues, it is imperative that educators not only teach the mandated curriculum but ensure that students have opportunities to apply their learning in real contexts and develop the 21st-century skills necessary for innovation. We argue that the Sustainable Development Goals can help teachers achieve just that.

The SDGs are comprised of 17 goals, some of which include No Poverty (Goal 1), Good Health and Well-Being (Goal 3), Quality Education (Goal 4), Affordable and Clean Energy (Goal 7), Decent Work and Economic Growth (Goal 8), Climate Action (Goal 13), and Life on Land (Goal 15) (United Nations, 2023). The United Nations provides a colorful and informative explanation of each goal on their website (https://sdgs.un.org/goals). Viewers can read an overview of each goal, targets and indicators, as well as data pertaining to progress being made towards .

each goal. When originally established in 2015, the United Nations set a target date of 2030 for achieving all 17 goals; however, with 2030 quickly approaching, there is still much work to be accomplished (United Nations, 2023).

Pillars of Sustainability

When most teachers think of the phrase "sustainable development" or "sustainability," environmental forms of sustainability often come to mind (Zhukova et al., 2020). Every spring, classrooms across the United States engage in Earth Day celebrations where students learn about the 3 R's (reduce, reuse, and recycle). Yet, most of the global sustainability crises we are facing can be found at the intersection of the three pillars of sustainability which include: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, and social sustainability (Mensah, 2019; Stafford-Smith, 2017). Economic sustainability is mostly tied to industry and the need for economic growth in all nations. SDGs directly related to the economic pillar of sustainability include, Goal 8- Decent Work and Economic Growth, Goal 9- industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure, Goal 12- Responsible Consumption and Production. However, in order for sustainable development to ensue, all three pillars of sustainability must be viewed in light of each other (Mensah, 2019). For example, a CEO of a big company needs to balance profit (economic sustainability), with the rights of their workers (social sustainability), and the needs of the environment (environmental sustainability; Mensah, 2019). As seen from the previous example, social sustainability is more closely aligned with topics of social justice and human rights (Mensah, 2019). SDGs directly related to social sustainability include: Goal 1- No Poverty, Goal 2- Zero Hunger, Goal 3- Good Health and Well-Being, Goal 4- Quality Education, among others. While many real-world issues have a direct connection to one of the SDGs and one pillar of sustainability, they also have indirect connections to the other pillars of sustainability (Holshouser & Medina, 2021). Because of this, the Sustainable Development Goals provide a useful framework for both students and teachers to

engage students in problem-based learning around both local and global issues that are affecting their own communities. The SDGs can help students analyze problems critically and attend to the complexity of real-world problems all while learning the mandated curriculum.

A Framework for PBL

The framework presented below is intended to guide students through the analysis of a real-world sustainability issue by exploring the cause(s) of a given issue as well as solutions from the lens of the three pillars of sustainability. This framework is designed to encourage students to grapple with the complexity of real-world sustainability issues by forgoing simplistic solutions and engaging in complex thinking. In choosing a problem to center their PBL around, educators should be encouraged to explore the UN's website related to the SDGs (https://sdgs.un.org/goals). Reading the overview and target indicators associated with each SDG can spur ideas for a PBL unit. While the SDGs are centered around global issues, viewers can most likely find examples of local problems that align with each of the SDGs.

Real World Problem OR Scenario	Decline in pollinators
Take some time to research some of the main causes or contributors to the problem. Remember to dig deeply and don't settle for surface level explanations of the problem. A thorough analysis of causes will help later when brainstorming solutions.	
Causes	1. Destruction of Habitats 2. Climate Change 3. Pesticides 4. Invasive Plant Species 5. Diseases and Parasites (North Carolina Wildlife Federation, 2023; The Bee Conservancy, 2023)
After researching some of the causes of the problem, take another look at the SDGs. Which SDG is directly related to the issue? Which SDG(s) are indirectly related to the issue?	
Direct SDG Connection Indirect SDG Connection	Goal 15→Life on Land: "Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reduce land degradation and halt biodiversity loss" (United Nations, 2023, Goal 15). Goal 2→ Zero Hunger: Pollination is responsible for ⅓ of our food supply (The Bee Conservancy). A decline in pollinators is threatening to our food supply and if not confronted could have severe consequences on social sustainability, particularly Goal 2, Zero Hunger. Goal 2.1 states "By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round." (United Nations, 2023, Target 2.1). Goal 11→ Sustainable Cities and Communities: As communities we must attend to how we are contributing to the decline in pollinators. The use of pesticides by both businesses and residential properties has in part contributed to a decline in pollinators. Goal 11.6 states "By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management" (United Nations, 2023, Target 11.6).
Research 3 potential solutions for the problem. If several causes are contributing to the problem you may decide to hone in on one. Consider both how your local community is working to solve the problem and how other countries are navigating similar problems. Calculate the pros and cons of each solution in regard to its implications for environmental sustainability, social sustainability, and economic sustainability.	

Solution #1			Solution #2		Solution #3	
Description	Example: N.C.'s Butterfly Highway		Description		Description	
↑↓	Env. Sustainability	+1	↑↓	Env. Sustainability	↑↓	Env. Sustainability
↑↓	Economic Sustainability	0	↑↓	Economic Sustainability	↑↓	Economic Sustainability
↑↓	Social Sustainability	+1	↑↓	Social Sustainability	↑↓	Social Sustainability
Net	+2		**Net**		**Net**	

Identifying Symptoms and Causes. After framing the PBL unit for students through the presentation of the problem or critical issue it is imperative that students spend time researching the causes or primary contributors to the problem. Teachers should encourage students to forgo surface level explanations, but rather dig deeper to find the root causes of the problem they have been charged with. One activity that might be helpful for students while doing this is engaging in a Root Cause Analysis, which Marschall and Crawford (2022) detail in their book, Worldwise Learning: A Teacher's Guide to Shaping a Just and Sustainable Future. While there are many symptoms to any given problem, the goal should be to identify the root causes. For example, there are many visible symptoms that indicate there is a decline in pollinators. Some of these visible symptoms include such things as yearly loss in hive bodies reported by beekeepers, decreased agricultural production, food shortages, a breakdown in local food chains and webs. Yet, addressing each of these symptoms (or effects) individually will not get to the root of the problem. Further research indicates that some of the root causes responsible for the decline in pollinators include destruction of habitats, climate change, use of pesticides, invasive plant species, and diseases and parasites (North Carolina Wildlife Federation, 2023; The Bee Conservancy, 2023). In addressing these root causes head on, we may begin to remedy some of the symptoms of the problem. While your students may not be able to tackle each of these causes in one PBL unit, they can certainly take steps to address at least one of the causes to make change in their local community.

Identifying Direct and Indirect SDG Connections. While students are identifying both the symptoms and root causes of the problem, they should also be encouraged to think about which SDG(s) their problem has direct and indirect connections to (Holshouser & Medina, 2021). The decline in pollinators is directly related to SDG 15: Life on Land, which reads "protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reduce land degradation and halt biodiversity loss" (United Nations, 2023, Goal 15). Yet, as students engage in identification of the symptoms and root causes of the problem, they may also find indirect connections to SDG 2, Zero Hunger, given that pollination is responsible for one-third of the food supply (The Bee Conservancy, 2023). A decline in pollinators is threatening to our food supply and if not confronted could have severe consequences on social sustainability. Goal 2.1 states "By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round" (United Nations, 2023, Target 2.1). Students may also make an indirect connection to SDG 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities. As communities, we must attend to how we are contributing to the decline in pollinators. The use of pesticides by both businesses and residential properties has in part contributed to a decline in pollinators (The Bee Conservancy, 2023; North Carolina Wildlife Federation, 2023). Goal 11.6 states "By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management" (United Nations, 2023, Target 11.6). By identifying direct and indirect connections to the problem at hand, students are making connections to the three pillars of

sustainable development (environmental, economic, and social), which are essential in moving towards a sustainable future (Holshouser & Medina, 2021). If the decline in pollinators was only seen as an environmental problem, then many of the symptoms and root causes would never have been identified and therefore we would not have a full view of the problem.

Identifying Solutions and Weighing Solutions. Once students have identified the cause(s) contributing to the problem, it is time to start researching solutions. If several causes are contributing to the problem students may be encouraged to hone in on one. Students should spend time researching how the local community is working to solve the problem and how other countries are navigating similar problems. Depending on time constraints, educators can task each group with coming up with three different solutions or with one solution to present to the class. Regardless of which approach is taken, the most fruitful part of this activity comes from weighing each solution in terms of its contribution to environmental, economic, and social sustainability. This portion of the activity forces students to think complexly about their proposed solutions to ensure they are moving all three forms of sustainability forward rather than taking one step forward for one pillar and two steps back for another. If students find that their solution improves a form of sustainability they should circle the up arrow and add a point (+1) to their net score. If students find their solution hampers another form of sustainability they should circle the down arrow and subtract 1 point (-1) from
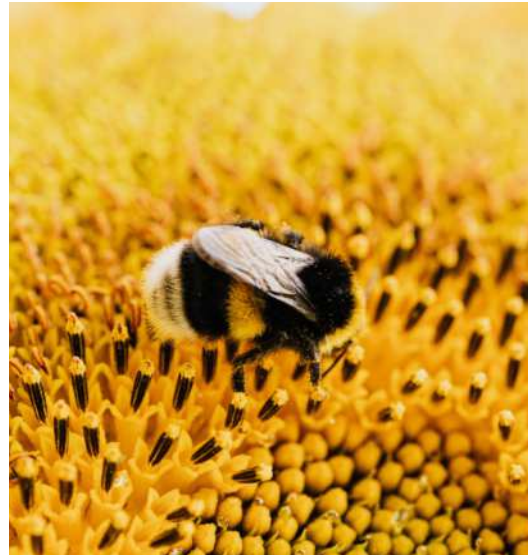

their net score. Students may find that a given solution does not impact one of the pillars of sustainability, in which they can put a 0 in the designated column. After students have weighed their solution in light of the three forms of sustainability they should calculate their net score. Analysis of each solution's net score should spur discussion on which solution is most sustainable.

For example, one way in which the North Carolina Wildlife Federation is tackling the issue of declining pollinator populations is through the establishment of the North Carolina Butterfly Highway Initiative. This solution directly addresses one of the primary causes of declining pollinators, which is habitat destruction (North Carolina Wildlife Federation, 2023). While this is a state-wide solution to the problem, its success is dependent upon local participation and implementation. Essentially this solution encourages private landowners to create pollinator gardens on their properties and register them with the North Carolina Wildlife Federation. Through participation in this collective effort, the initiative is "creating a network of native flowering plants to support butterflies, bees, birds and other pollen and nectar dependent wildlife" (North Carolina Wildlife Federation, 2023, para. 2). From the above description it is evident that The Butterfly Highway is making a positive impact on environmental sustainability (Environmental Sustainability = +1); however, this solution must also be weighed against the other three pillars of sustainability. Upon further analysis, it appears that this effort could increase social sustainability as it is in line with SDG Target 11.7, which aims to provide individuals with access to green spaces (Social Sustainability = +1) and seems to have little to no effect on economic sustainability (Economic Sustainability = 0). While businesses may decide to participate in the initiative, it is not mandated,; however, those who do participate may find unintended benefits. When viewed in light of the

three pillars of sustainability, the N.C. Butterfly Highway Initiative earns a net score of +2, thereby making it a viable solution for the problem at hand.

While we do not contend that innovating solutions for some of the world's most critical sustainability issues is as simple as going through the process outlined above, we do believe that this process provides students with a starting point for critical thinking through the lens of sustainable development. The topic chosen for this particular PBL has connections to several middle grades science standards (native plant species: 6.L.1, 7.L.1; ecosystems: 6.L.2, 8.L.3), while also offering a myriad of math and social studies connections. One of these connections is the use of the Pollinator Pit Stop Map offered on the North Carolina Wildlife Federation's website. Through researching and critically examining each proposed solution based on the implications it has for each pillar of sustainability, students will develop critical thinking skills, all while learning ways they can take action in their own community.
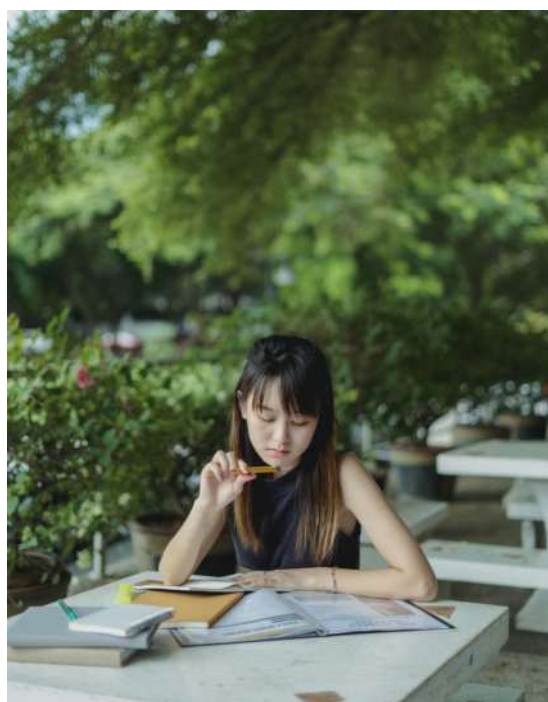
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Handle With Care: Generative AI in the Classroom

By Daniel G. Maxwell

"The emergence of generative AI is already having far-reaching implications...It seems like we are in the early stages of a seismic shift"

-Cooper, 2023

When was the last time you asked Alexa to play some music while you cooked dinner or had Google Maps recalculate the fastest route for your road trip? How about the last time you selected a movie from the 'For You' suggestions on Netflix or accepted an autocorrect suggestion while drafting an email? You may not have thought much about it then, but we've been sharing our lives with Artificial Intelligence tools for quite some time – decades, really. Only now, though, have AI technologies moved into the common-use spotlight, leaving educators justifiably concerned about their use for things like homework, data analysis, creative writing, and more. We see it on social media and hear it from students, parents, and other community members, even our school and district leadership, and it certainly feels as though we are experiencing what Cooper (2023) describes as a "seismic shift" (p. 451) when considering the potential impact of generative artificial intelligence in education. But how prepared are we, as educators, to leverage the powerful capabilities of these technologies in ways that are safe, ethical, and responsible? How prepared do we feel in our capacity to support our students to use these tools in productive ways? What steps can we take now to position ourselves to capitalize on this technological shift in ways that will positively impact our students' lives?

Emerging generative AI technologies include Large Language Models (LLMs) like OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google's Bard, and Microsoft's Bing Chat, but they also include additional generative tools like OpenAI's Dall-E image generator. Because of their current popularity, this article focuses on generative AI chatbot technologies, which have the capacity to greatly benefit education by supporting equitable learning, inclusive teaching, and facilitating the planning and feedback process for teachers. Still, educational institutions remain divided on how to best integrate these technologies in ways that are safe, responsible, and ethical.

This article is intended to provide a starting point for any educator wanting to learn more about generative AI tools, beginning with an explanation of what generative AI is and how it works, including the benefits and concerns of these tools. Finally, we'll conclude with suggestions for next steps as we all learn more about this evolving technology and how to safely integrate it into effective classroom practice.
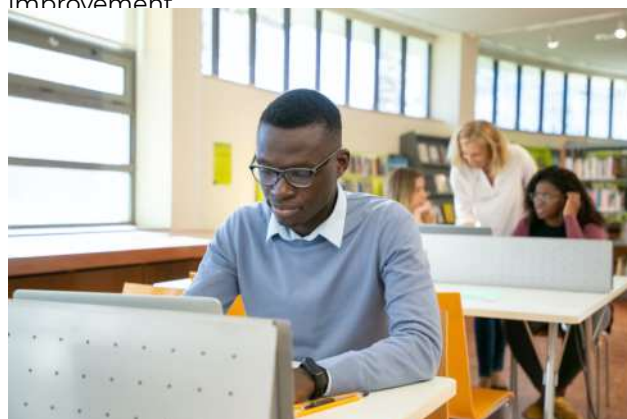
What is generative AI?

Generative Artificial Intelligence chatbots like ChatGPT, Bard, and Bing Chat are a new development that present many opportunities and challenges for education. Although the theoretical method of how generative AI uses a process known as deep learning to operate is generally known, the exact process of how deep learning operates within programs remains murky (Hardesty, 2017; Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019). In general, a generative AI system is trained on a set of data, and, when prompted, the system uses the deep learning process to identify patterns between the prompt and training data, enabling it to generate an output to satisfy the prompt. With a Large Language Model (LLM) like ChatGPT, Bard, or Bing Chat, this process looks like a user inputting a written prompt and receiving a natural language, human-like text response from the generative AI in a conversational style (Tlili et al., 2023). One distinguishing feature of generative AI is the deep learning process, which allows the system to recall and learn from user inputs, increasing the accuracy and capability of AI-generated responses over time (Haque et al., 2022).

So how might the use of these tools look in the classroom? In essence, an individual prompts the AI with a typed question or statement, and the AI tool generates a written response within seconds. For example, to facilitate the planning process, a social studies teacher may prompt ChatGPT to create ten discussion questions for the upcoming 7th-grade class discussion on the American Revolution in order to instantaneously obtain a list of ten potential questions for that upcoming class. But on the other hand, a student may just as easily use the tool to generate a written response to their take-home essay prompt. Considering the diverse potential of their use in the classroom, as teachers we must handle these tools with care in order to leverage their benefits while remaining aware of their limitations and concerns. Let's get started.

What are the benefits of generative AI, especially for teachers?

There are many potential benefits of generative AI chatbots to the field of education. For example, generative AI chatbots can be used to quickly summarize complex texts to assist struggling readers, create outlines or ideas to serve as a starting point for the writing or research process, and even compose emails or other text-based content (Subaveerapandiyan et al., 2023). Teachers can also use these tools in more advanced ways to support equitable learning and inclusive teaching. A teacher

seeking to support a student who is an English Language Learner can integrate a generative AI chatbot like ChatGPT with text-to-speech technology, effectively allowing the chatbot to be used as an interactive voice assistant for language translation purposes to support the student's needs (Subaveerapandiyan et al. 2023). Generative AI also has the potential to reduce planning times for teachers by 20 to 40 percent (Bryant et al., 2020) and can be used by instructors to create model answers that challenge students to advance their knowledge on a subject, generate lesson plans and other resources, write objectives that are tightly aligned with content-area standards, and generate discussion questions for class (Tlili et al., 2023). Teachers might also use generative AI to produce many varied examples of one concept, provide multiple explanations of a topic, develop assessments, and even facilitate the feedback process by evaluating and providing feedback on the quality of a written work (Mollick & Mollick, 2023). A teacher or student wanting to facilitate the feedback process might input a prompt and a written draft and then prompt the AI for feedback by asking How well did I respond to this prompt, and what areas are unclear? The AI will then provide the individual with detailed, individualized feedback and suggestions for improvement.

What about the concerns of generative AI in the classroom?

Chief among the concerns of generative AI tools in education are the ethical questions surrounding their use in the classroom. Opinions are divided as to whether and to what extent the use of generative AI is a violation of academic integrity. Still, the capability of generative AI to produce written tasks on behalf of human users has led to significant concern regarding student use of these tools (Haque et al., 2022; Mollick & Mollick, 2023).

Let's think about it for a moment: To what extent should the use of a generative AI tool be acceptable

in the classroom? Complicating our ability to definitively answer that question is the difficulty in detecting when and to what extent generative AI has been used to perform any given task. Tlili et al. (2023) indicated that when GPT-2 – a tool developed by OpenAI to detect whether text is likely generated by a human or AI – was tested on an entirely ChatGPT-generated paragraph, the alteration of one word within that paragraph changed the GPT-2 prediction from 99.26% AI-generated to 24.14% (p. 11). These findings reflect the near impossibility of using software to monitor for violations of academic integrity when generative AI use is suspected. As such, ethical questions will persist regarding the extent to which generative AI can or should be used for certain tasks. Is it okay for a student to use ChatGPT to create an outline, provided the student writes the essay? Is it okay to have ChatGPT generate research questions for a future study, or must those be human-generated? How about if ChatGPT is only used to correct a student's spelling in the final draft of a written essay?

Additionally, although generative AI chatbots are capable of remarkably accurate outputs, they remain prone to "hallucinations," which are inaccurate statements produced by the AI when accurate information is either not readily available or accessible to the program (Mollick & Mollick, 2023, p. 3). OpenAI, the creator and owner of ChatGPT, recognizes the potential for chatbot hallucinations, stating, "ChatGPT sometimes writes plausible-sounding but incorrect or nonsensical answers" (OpenAI, 2022, Limitations section). The tendency for generative AI to hallucinate requires meticulous human oversight and cross-checking to ensure any inaccuracy produced by the system is corrected. Further complicating the risk of hallucinations is the struggle of some generative AI tools to support their outputs with evidence, occasionally providing false references in addition to hallucinations (Cooper, 2023).

Concerns are also present in the idea that an LLM's pattern-seeking nature "considers to be true what is repeated the most" (Darics & Poppel, 2023, para. 4). Any biases present in the data used to train an AI tool will persist, and risk being further promoted, through the outputs generated by that system (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019). OpenAI also admits that ChatGPT is a model that works best and is most heavily trained in English, resulting in outputs that tend to reflect Western perspectives (OpenAI, 2023a). ChatGPT's bias toward Western perspectives amplifies concerns about its ability to accurately cite sources and its tendency to hallucinate in outputs, creating significant challenges for education where the need

to produce accurate, original, and verifiable results is essential.

How are educational institutions responding?

Understandably, the potential benefits coupled with tangible concerns of generative AI in education resulted in organizations taking divergent paths in response to these tools. Some organizations have embraced the new technologies, including the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, whose Provost released a statement noting that "Charlotte has no plans to holistically restrict the use of ChatGPT or other AI tools" and even going as far as to state "these tools provide unlimited potential here at Charlotte as we rely on innovation and collaboration to solve problems" (Bertone, 2023, para. 2). Other organizations have not been so open to these new tools, as public school districts in New York City, Baltimore, and Los Angeles rushed to ban access to

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> *"These Tools Provide Unlimited Potential Here.... As We Rely On Innovation And Collaboration To Solve Problems"*
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> *–Bertone, 2023*

ChatGPT on school networks in December 2022 and January 2023 (Shen-Berro, 2023). In May 2023, however, New York City public schools reversed course and rescinded their ban on ChatGPT (Rosenblatt, 2023). David Banks, the Chancellor of New York City Public Schools, stated that "while initial caution was justified…New York City Public Schools will encourage and support our educators and students as they learn about and explore this game-changing technology" (Banks, 2023, para. 8). At the time of this article, North Carolina school districts represent a mixed bag of generative AI acceptance, with some districts blocking access to tools like ChatGPT or Bard while the district right next door is publicly advertising the innovative ways their teachers and students use the tools through social media.

What steps can I take now?

So what can we do as educators? Guidance toward this answer is emerging quickly. For example, the United States Department of Education (2023) calls for action from education leaders to frame AI's role in education in safe, responsible, and ethical ways. Districts, including many in North Carolina, have kept a sharp focus on this call to action, and we, as classroom teachers, can comfortably begin to incorporate this guidance into our practice. Here are a few ways to get started:

Experiment with generative AI yourself. Take some time to test the tools to evaluate their capabilities and limitations. For example, ask a generative AI

chatbot like ChatGPT or Bard to create objectives for an upcoming lesson you intend to teach and compare those objectives to your existing objectives, or ask it to help you brainstorm a few discussion questions for an upcoming class activity. You might even test the chatbot's ability to respond to an upcoming assessment prompt in your class, allowing you to determine whether or not adjustments need to be made to your assessment methods. This brings us squarely to the next critical step.

Review the activities and assessments in courses you teach and evaluate whether you should make changes in response to generative AI tools.

A significant concern amongst educators is generative AI's ability to produce work on behalf of a student, so consider ways to prevent students from simply using a chatbot to produce their work. Tried-and-proven methods might include breaking assignments into smaller, incremental steps, asking students to include personal anecdotes or reflections within their work, dedicating class time for writing tasks to ensure student work is their own, and even providing specific opportunities for students to utilize the tools themselves in ethical and appropriate ways.

Stay up to date on current generative AI trends. Read widely, and learn from the experiences of others with generative AI. How are other teachers using the tools effectively? How are they working to ensure they are using generative AI in ethical, responsible ways? What are their concerns with generative AI in education, and how might those concerns shift over time?

Talk with your students, colleagues, parents, and others about these tools. Ask these key stakeholders about their thoughts regarding generative AI tools and their safe, ethical, and responsible use in education. This conversation is especially important if you teach students who are under the age of 18, as OpenAI ChatGPT's Terms of Use dictate that individuals must obtain permission from a parent or legal guardian prior to using the service and that individuals must be at least 13 years of age to use ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023b). You might start this conversation through a class discussion with students, or you might even ask students to conduct research with other teachers, parents, and community members in order to improve students' knowledge about the diverse perspectives, benefits, and concerns of these new technologies.

Start these conversations now so that as we experience this "seismic shift" (Cooper, 2023, p. 451) driven by generative AI tools, we develop the capacity to handle these technologies with care. The relationship between generative AI and education need not be driven by fear. There are actionable steps that can be taken to ensure we have an informed knowledge of the benefits and concerns of these technologies. Generative AI technologies have the capacity to transform education for the better, but it is critical that we, as educators, are the ones to guide the implementation of these technologies in ways that are safe, ethical, and responsible.

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Addressing the Teacher Shortage: One District's Approach to Ensuring Access to Highly Qualified Tachers

By Chris L. Bennett

A myriad of topics keeps principals awake at night. Finding highly qualified teachers now tops the list of the 3:00 a.m. wake-up call. Schools and districts across the country are facing the seemingly impossible task of finding - and retaining - highly qualified teachers to help students navigate a post-COVID world.

A perfect storm has ravaged the teacher pipeline - the number of candidates graduating from colleges/schools of education has diminished (Schaeffer, 2022), those with education degrees regret choosing education as a major (Dickler, 2022), and many choose to leave the profession with very little notice. Following COVID, there are many more opportunities for higher-paying work from the comfort of home that entice educators away from the teaching ranks.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly half (44%) of public schools in the country have full or part-time teaching vacancies (NCES, 2022). In North Carolina, specifically, 40 days into the school year, 111 of the 115 (96.5%) school districts had unfilled vacancies (Quattrocchi, 2022). Couple these findings with the fact that 55% of educators intend to leave the profession earlier than planned (Jotkoff, 2022) and we have a current and future staffing issue we must address and find a sustainable solution to mitigate.

Regardless of the number of vacancies a school/district may have, one thing is certain –even if the teacher seats are emptying, student desks are still full.

As the storm rages, schools and districts are being forced to think outside of the metaphorical box to meet staffing needs. Permanent or floating substitutes, lacking any type of formal education training, are staffing classrooms. Students are working on core content through learning management systems while being supervised by a paraprofessional. Average class sizes have climbed to the upper 30s, 40s, or 'whatever number of students can safely fit into a classroom.' Dispersal plans are in place. Teachers are serving as 'plug ins' - teaching a course during their designated planning block. Non-essential courses are being collapsed. And so on…

While these strategies do ensure students are supervised and have access to core standards they do not always lend themselves to high-quality instruction and often lead to teacher burnout due to compounded responsibilities.

During the 2021-22 school year, our district felt as though we were constantly triaging teacher vacancies

using the aforementioned strategies. This quickly led to teacher (and administrator) burnout. We needed a plan for the 2022-23 school year that could start in August and be maintained through May - but also a plan that we could pick up at any time during the school year and sustain. In order to maximize facetime with a high-quality instructor, the expanded reach teacher (ERT) model was created.

What is it and how does it work?
Our middle schools run a four-block schedule. Students have three core classes for 95 minutes and two elective classes for 45 minutes. Historically, when vacancies exist, a teacher would be compensated to teach another grade level (within their certified area[s]) during their planning. As noted above, this quickly led to burnout as teachers taught the entire day without a planning block and were expected to make up their planning time after school. Equally as important, teaching during one's planning block removed them from the essential formal and informal collaboration focused on learning and teaching.

Expanded reach teachers (ERT) double their teaching load, thereby broadening the scope of their impact. They are paired with a companion teacher (CT), a paraprofessional in most cases. The ERT delivers core, standards-based instruction. They measure and assess learning and ensure students are mastering essential skills, concepts, and standards.

While the ERT is delivering core content to half of the students on his/her course load, the CT is reinforcing concepts through small group work. The CT is trained in the district's intervention protocols, small group work strategies for intervention and remediation. Additionally, the CT monitors student engagement with iReady and other applicable district-supported virtual learning platforms.

Expanded reach teachers get the best of both worlds - they impact a large number of students while maintaining their collaborative time (90 minutes/day). This is essential as these educators are well-equipped leaders on campus.

Breaking down the block is at the discretion of the principal, ERT, and CT. Depending on the grade level content area and school, some utilize split blocks (45 minutes with the ERT and 45 minutes with the CT), others are running A/B day schedules. However, there is flexibility - for example, if science teachers are doing a lab, the ERT and CT work together to create a schedule for the week that may consist of a combination of split blocks and A/B days.

Identifying ERTs
Properly identifying and selecting ERTs is imperative. To do so, principals review a teacher's observation history, EVAAS (value-added growth) data, leadership capabilities, attendance, and growth potential. It is important to note that a teacher should not be 'forced' into being an ERT as this would not create an environment conducive to learning.

Other considerations:
● The CT is a vital part of not only the CT/ERT team but also the grade level content area PLT and should be included in any appropriate professional development offered by the school/district.
● In some cases, pacing guides will need to be adjusted. We have some semester-long classes using the ERT model, therefore, the scope and sequence must be refined.
● Geographically, consider placing the classrooms as close together as possible. Also, if running a split block schedule, consider having the ERT/CT switch to avoid a student transition.

● Finally, the CT needs access to monitoring tools and data sources (Dyknow, SchoolNet, iReady) and should be a co-teacher in PowerSchool.

District Logistics

Communication between the school requesting the ERT and the district is essential. Yearlong ERTs are discussed early in the spring/summer months once a principal has posted a position and cannot find suitable applicants. If a school has a teacher meeting ERT qualifications, the principal communicates with the Executive Director of Middle Schools to discuss the opportunity and then the Executive Director gains permission from the Associate Superintendent. A similar process takes place during the school year when vacancies arise needing to be filled with an ERT. While it can be a quick process, communication and documentation are essential in order to monitor at the district level. Additionally, it is important to communicate with the staff member who is responsible for ensuring prompt payment for the ERT.

For the 2023-24 school year, a Google Form was created and shared with principals so they could request an ERT. Once a request is entered, a follow-up conversation will take place. The Google Form - which will transfer responses to a Google Sheet - will house all data to streamline and organize the process. The form includes:
 - School
- Grade
- Content Area
- Number of additional sections ERT will teach
- Name of the ERT
- A question confirming the ERT meets the criteria
-A question asking if the school will need a Companion Teacher or if they will use a current staff member
- Desired start date
- End date, if applicable
- A section for any notes
As mentioned, an entry will prompt a conversation between the principal and Executive Director, provide information for the Associate Superintendent to review for approval, and allow payroll to manage the ERT supplement. The Google Sheet will also organize grade level/content information in order to connect teachers for collaboration and provide professional development opportunities.

But, does the math add up?

For schools to use the ERT model, they give up one teaching position (that cannot be filled). In exchange, they receive a stipend for the ERT and a paraprofessional position to serve as the CT. In our district, due to the increased workload (essentially doubling the number of students served), the ERT receives an additional $1960/month (prorated if they are absorbing less than three additional sections of students).

While the tangible/monetary elements of the model are important, it is the intangible benefits that are critical. Highly qualified teachers are providing instruction to students. Schools were able to start the school year fully staffed - having 'TBD' on a student's schedule for orientation does not set a positive tone for the school year. Additionally, principals have the option to pivot to the ERT model quickly upon a teacher's resignation.

What are the results?

The school year started with 9 ERTs in 3 (of 11) middle schools. Due to resignations and mid-year retirements, the number has ballooned to 21 ERTs in 8 schools. Only in one case did an ERT have to be disbanded and another option sought out by the principal.

During this year of implementation, we have had a low attrition rate and have found positive outcomes with common formative assessment results and diagnostic results. School-based administrators have recorded high levels of engagement during walkthroughs. Based on preliminary EOG data, ERTs performed at to above the district average for proficiency. Value-added growth data will not be available until the fall.

Student Impacts

Beyond the positive quantitative outcomes, perhaps the most positive impact on learning has been the consistency the Expanded Reach Model has provided for students and schools. Post-COVID, it has not been uncommon for schools to go through multiple teachers in the same position and/or grade level during the year. With Expanded Reach, students have access to high-quality instructors who are familiar with the school and community and dedicated to serving students for the school year. Building relationships is required for success in middle schools and this model accomplishes this. Not only do ERTs understand the students, they know the standards and have a history of delivering them effectively - this is not something that can be easily, nor quickly, taught to a mid-year (or even mid-summer) hire.

What are they saying?

Principal:

"Developing the expanded reach model started as a way to address teacher vacancies and the lack of available teacher candidates. However, it has proven to be extremely beneficial for our school. The ERT model has allowed us to be able to extend the impact of our best teachers from approximately 65/70 students to an entire grade level of 170 in some cases. In addition to this, we are now developing teacher candidates in-house. The Teacher Assistants that serve as co-teachers are learning alongside master teachers. This gives them a very deep and rich experience that surpasses that of typical teacher prep programs. ERTs have evolved throughout the year and we are seeing very positive results in terms of student growth and staff efficacy."

Multi-Classroom Leader:

"I think the extended reach program has made our small group instruction more effective by clearly defining our small group and intervention block during the time students are with the companion teacher. It has benefited our students in academic achievement and has given them the opportunity to build more positive relationships with adults throughout the day."

Companion Teacher:

"The Extended Reach Program has provided me with invaluable experience as an aspiring teacher and given me tools to be successful upon completion of my degree."

What's Next?

While we will continue to work to refine the ERT process at each school, our next step is to move from intra-school work to inter-school work. The goal is to take the best teachers in the district and use the ERT model, combined with an A/B day schedule, to provide instruction to students in schools where the ERT model is not feasible.

Currently, at the time of writing, we are planning implementation for the 2023-24 school year. Principals are submitting ERT requests and seeking Companion Teachers. Additionally, professional development opportunities are being planned for Expanded Reach Teams in order to begin capacity building for the school year.

"The intangible benefits that are critical: Highly qualified teachers are providing instruction to students. Schools were able to start the school year fully staffed".

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Addressing Challenging Issues by Integrating Culturally Responsive Teaching and Project–Based Learning

by Meghan Rector

As our students experience more of life's challenges, we find ourselves trying to create opportunities to support them with meaningful conversations. At the same time, we want to engage them in academic activities that help them stretch their powers of reasoning. We want to integrate these experiences in ways that are culturally responsive. According to Gay (2018),

> Culturally responsive pedagogy simultaneously develops, along with academic achievement, social consciousness and critique, cultural affirmation, competence, and exchange; community-building and personal connections; individual self-worth and abilities; and an ethic of caring ... Culturally responsive teachers have unequivocal faith in the human dignity and intellectual capabilities of their students. They view learning as having intellectual, academic, personal, social, ethical, and political dimensions, all of which are developed in concert with one another (p. 43-44).

Our school's recent experience with a Project Based Learning unit on health and wellness gave us an opportunity to see how much students could accomplish when we helped them identify pressing questions and involved them as collaborators in learning. At our school, we embrace the essential attributes described in The Successful Middle School: This We Believe (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). This whole child, personalized learning methodology promotes school-wide project-based learning (PBL) opportunities.

Project-based learning, or PBL, allowed our student population to attend to the needs of our community. During PBL, students are considered with an asset-based lens and are thus given voice and choice of a product within the theme of a driving question. This year's driving question, "How can we improve our school community health and wellness?" was initiated by ideas and curiosities mentioned by a wide range of our students. Our staff started to notice some health and wellness-themed concerns being mentioned by students at all times of the day in a variety of learning settings. Thus, our school-wide PBL theme was intentional. This intentionality, within a personalized learning structure, is important. It

helps to validate students' interests, concerns, and curiosities and allows for community-building opportunities and connections. This learning structure, and personalized health theme, also allowed us to be responsive to the loss of community and connective learning culture felt by all students during the pandemic.

Once students were introduced to the driving question of our PBL unit, our school hosted a health fair as our PBL entry event. The health fair invited community members from a multitude of health and wellness-related fields to present their day-to-day procedures at work, the population they serve, their individual path to their position, and their purpose at their job. The students then visited, talked with, and questioned the health and wellness professionals that represented or piqued their interests. They used a passport document with four quadrants to record what they learned and their general interactions with each visitor. This exploratory event allowed students to investigate different areas of health and wellness to find a focus for their project that would answer our driving question.

After the health fair, students took a survey to share their interests, topics, and considerations. Students were then grouped by interest and worked together to choose a direction for their project. Focuses ranged from nutrition in school and its importance, garden design possibilities for outside of the classroom, facts and figures of women's health, health-related career exploration, organizing and developing a community clothes closet, the benefits of therapy animals, sexual health awareness education programming updates, LGBTQ+ health and rights awareness, physical therapy and fitness supports that could be implemented within the school day, and outdoor education practices. Mixed-grade-level student groups worked for three months on Fridays for the first four hours of the day to create a product that responded to our driving question.

Their time on Friday included: reviewing their progress from last week, task management, gathering research and data on their topic,

dividing up work responsibilities between group members, creating and analyzing school-wide survey data, interviewing community members, group conflict resolution meetings, and preparation for presentations by practicing speaking, preparing PowerPoints, and organizing information to be shared. After three months of preparation, they presented their products to the same health professionals and other interested community members who attended the health fair. Our school also extended the invitation to our students' parents and guardians. These presentations allowed students to display a multitude of unseen assets. Attendees marveled at students' presentation skills, technological ingenuity, and direct, fact-based answers to questions from the audience. The community members who witnessed the presentations were impressed by the level of detail, the attention to intentionality, and the professionalism of the student groups.

This intentionality and personalized learning opportunity developed a sense of equity in our school community and in individual students. This focus on a student's individual interests is a practice of culturally responsive teaching. Students shared feelings of empowerment, freedom, and joy during our PBL learning hours. The students felt heard about their curiosities and concerns and looked forward to the opportunity to display their knowledge at the end of the unit.

After the project was over, I was eager to know the student perspective of the PBL unit. As part of my culturally responsive pedagogy, I use journals as an instructional practice. I provide my math students with weekly prompts that help them debunk mathematical misconceptions, enrich or remediate their math understanding, or work to develop a positive math mindset. I decided to use my math journaling space to ask the students some reflective questions about their points of view on PBL. The reflection questions consisted of:

-What topic did you research for your PBL Project?
-What was the most enjoyable part of the PBL process?
-What was the most challenging part of the PBL process?
-What personal, or academic, skills do you feel you improved on during the PBL process?
-What did you learn about our school, or yourself, during the PBL process?
-What would you change about the PBL process for next year?

After reviewing students' responses, a set of common positive themes appeared during the data collection process. Students expressed enjoyment with the additional socialization time with their mixed-grade-level peers. One student commented that their favorite element of PBL was "getting to work with my friends because, although they can get on my nerves, it's still fun and we are always finding stuff to laugh about." Additionally, students felt that the school was providing them with a unique learning experience that was not offered to them previously and allowed them to have a choice in their learning. One student said, "I learned that our school gives all students a chance to learn the way they want to." Some students expressed

pride because their projects were selected to be implemented by our school. The members of one group shared, "Our project is going to be a real thing. It is a closet where people can donate lightly used or new clothes for other students in the school to use if students need it. It will help the student body be more comfortable in school, and that's a great feeling." Furthermore, students felt that they improved particular personal skills. Students mentioned they "...learned that I can present under stress pretty well," "...improved my social skills and how to problem solve because my group had to change our project...," "...realized I'm really good at researching," and "...learned that I could focus if I really try to and it helps if I like the task." Lastly, there also was a shift in personal values and attitudes, which provided some students with a new hobby or interest to explore further in the future. For example, one student "... researched how building a garden is beneficial to student health. I then started a garden for myself." These positive outcomes are just some of the growth possibilities that come from culturally responsive, personalized learning practices.

Overall, this PBL unit allowed our school to recognize the hidden assets that exist within and beyond our school community and reignite appreciation for students' strengths we might take for granted on a daily basis. Providing students access to secondary adults in mentorship roles bolstered our students' mental health, paved positive transitions from middle school to high school, and provided a clearer

future path for some students. This village-like support system for students is how we build school trust with parents and develop a more authentic connection with our local community.

Yet, like all projects and intentional learning structures, there are challenges and things to be improved. Most of the students reflected that the work period was too long. Some suggested having shorter periods, more frequently throughout the school week to work on their projects. Some students got impeded by group dynamic concerns and wished they could have had more choice and voice in their group members. During the presentation day, most of the students wanted to "...be able to see others' project instead of having to present the whole time...." Others were future-focused and wanted to "... do more hands-on and less tech for next year." Some commented, "My most challenging part was making the presentation and making the cards to read." Overall, students realized personal and scholastic challenges, and thanks to student feedback the teachers were able to restructure our future PBL schedule, re-invent how students choose their groups, and brainstorm new possible themes for PBL next year.

Besides concerns from students, I experienced some tension during this project. As a math teacher, my students' success, and my own, is measured based on growth and proficiency on state standardized testing. To complete this PBL unit, every content teacher had to give up a day each week of their content block. This tension between balancing my standards and practicing personalized, culturally responsive pedagogy weighed on me as an educator. I try to remember how nimble, creative, and structured I have to be to cover all the content and teach students using best practices. Despite this tension, I would vote to complete another PBL project next year because of all the personal gains I witnessed my students make. The schools' individualized, interdisciplinary educational elements have helped support me in my practice of culturally responsive teaching,

and I could not be more thankful to have an environment to grow professionally. In conclusion, this personalized learning structure may take more time and more initial planning, but the gains for students and teachers can reach far beyond the school building.

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IRB Number # 1109181-10

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2023 NCMLE AWARD WINNERS

Pam Harris..C. Kenneth McEwin Award
Shejuanna Jacobs..............................North Carolina Middle Level Administrator to Watch
Karl Sain..Central Office Personnel to Watch
Leah Rhodes..Digital Teaching and Learning Educator to Watch
Jonathan McDowell...School-Based Support Personnel to Watch
La'Keesha Faircloth..SEL Educator to Watch
Vinson Biggs..Social Equity Educator to Watch
Heath Barkley...Teacher to Watch
Ian Canary-King, Mindy Mahar, Megan Smith, & Leila Wheless ...Teaching Team to Watch

For more information to nominate "To Watch" please contact us at info@ncmle.org.

In 1986, I walked into a room in Edwin Duncan Hall on the campus of Appalachian State University scared and anxious about this middle school teaching thing. In the room sat Dr. Ken McEwin amongst the many students who would become my team.

I had heard of Dr. McEwin before I even stepped on campus, but to meet and learn from him was such a dream. For my entire academic career at Appalachian State, Dr. McEwin made sure we knew the concepts, ideas, and best practices for middle school students. So, to receive the award on the 50th Anniversary of NCMLE and in his name was so honorable and special. I continue to be in awe with receiving this award as I always thought that I never measured up to the high standards that were exuded by Dr. McEwin. With what was ingrained in my mind and emotions concerning middle school, I fell full throttle into pushing the ideas, practices, and beliefs in my classroom and schools. As the years progressed, I started feeling that the middle school practices were waning. I believe that it is imperative that the educational systems return to what is best for students and their development.

C. Kenneth McEwin Award for Outstanding Dedication to Middle School Concepts

By Pam Harris

Dr. McEwin and other middle school professionals impressed upon me the importance of: Culture and Community; Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; and Leadership and Organization. All these ideas encompass what it takes to lead an adolescent in his or her developmental years. The teenage years for me were horrific and terrifying. I was trying to fit in and think about who I was becoming. The time I entered middle school was when the county I was living in became a middle school instead of a junior high school. Sixth-graders were entering middle school for the first time, and I was a part of that group. The school had teaming and elective classes. I enjoyed being a part of a small group of students belonging to two teachers. So, when I graduated from Appalachian State with my degree in middle school education, I knew I wanted to create an environment where early adolescent students felt they belonged and had someone as an advocate. I am honored and humbled to say that I was considered to have qualities that made an impact on middle school education.

My students were always first and the relationships I formed with them have left an impact on me. I will always fight for the middle school concepts, which Dr. McEwin fought for for many years. I did that for 29 years, having just retired in 2023. I celebrated my students, embraced the challenges, and enjoyed every day.

Over these years, however, I have witnessed the concept become partially misconstrued and less important. I found my heart aching for our state's adolescents as their well-being became less of the focus on the instructional mindset. What is happening to take middle schools back to junior high school models is worrisome. More thought is often about testing over student development. To be a middle school student in the culture/environment we are living in is tough. More than ever, the schools need to get back to the basics of the middle school concept and what Dr. McEwin taught, preached, exemplified, and pressed upon his colleagues, students, and the education world. We can do this! We can stand strong for our students and colleague teachers. Our early adolescents depend on us to get them ready for the world beyond our classroom. They deserve everything good in life, and, like Dr. McEwin, I'm proud to be part of their journey.

Pam Harris is a retired middle school teacher of 29 years. After retirement from the public school system, Pam taught a few semesters at her Alma Mater and has helped students with reading comprehension locally. Pam was a part of NCMLE for 22 years and decided to hang up her hat so she could spend time with her growing family. Pam believes that becoming a Dr. C. Kenneth McEwin award winner was the perfect culmination of her career as a middle school teacher and NCMLE Board member.

2023 Teaching Team to Watch

By Leila A. Wheless

Members of the team:

Ian Canary-King: Social Studies 7 and 8
Mindy Mahar: Science 7 and 8
Megan Smith: Math 7, Math 8, Math I
Leila Wheless: ELA 7 and 8
Marni Flanigan: Teacher Assistant 7 and 8
Ryan Olliffe: Exceptional Children 6-8
Jarad Jeter: Behavior Support K-8
Rachel Barlowe: Social Worker K-8
Kira Broadwell: Counselor K-8
Rob Sine: Principal 5-8

The Best Team in the World: A How-We-Do-It Essay.

Great teams: are they born, or are they made? And how do you become part of one? I count myself the luckiest employee on Earth because I am a member of The Best Team in the World, which is the 7th and 8th Grade Team at ArtSpace Charter School in Swannanoa, North Carolina. How did I get so lucky? Boiling everything down to a cliché: creating a great team is simple, but it ain't easy. We can't really tell anyone else how to forge the perfect team. I would propose that the creation of such a dynamic falls outside the realms of research or specific recipes. That said, here's how we do it. Our experience is that. . .

1.   Like a great marriage, an awesome team starts with a certain amount of organic yet undefinable interconnection (basically "liking each other").

2. Also like a great marriage, a superb team is without a doubt intentionally nourished with really hard work, mostly in the form of meeting a lot so we can decide how to do things.

Research: the Book Kind and the Non-Book Kind

To meet often without wasting anyone's time, you need skills, and our team has them in spades. Skills don't just happen. You cultivate them. Great thinkers can help you hone your skills, and there are new insights being researched all the time that can make you more intentional about the way you approach teamwork. There are certainly mountains of research on communication skills and their importance to success on a team, and there are also some seminal works about education that our team tends to lean on. The (very) short list of authors whose concepts have woven their way into our team's style would probably be these, and some have done TED talks or other videos if you don't have time for the book versions:

*Brené Brown: vulnerability, clarity, kindness
*Jim and Charles Fay: building healthy relationships with children
*Angela Duckworth: passion, persistence, "grit"
*Maria Montessori: follow-the-child mindset

*Dan Goleman: emotional intelligence
*Bruce Perry: trauma-informed education and communication
*Bessel van der Kolk: trauma-informed education and communication

I would argue that one way to begin the process of creating a great team is to first make sure that you, as an individual person, are a willing, capable team member. You can do this by fearlessly taking note of your own habits and communication style. So, that's what I mean by saying the non-book kind of research. Research yourself! For the traditional data-based kind of research, the books listed above are terrific resources. Each shines a slightly different shade of light on human interaction. By the way, have you ever run into a difficult parent and reminded them, "Hey, don't forget: we're all on the same team!" Well, remember that when you work with your adult colleagues, too.

Liking Each Other
It's hard to overstate how important just plain old "getting along" and enjoying each other's company can be on a great team. You're going to be together. A lot. At least, we are. To help ensure that the team members do indeed not just respect but actually like each other, our immediate supervisor and our head of school include any present team members on the interview squad when filling a vacancy on the team (rare, but it happens). So, we have in a sense chosen each other. Also, even though we're all extremely different, we share the following :

> 1. Sense of humor. Boy, do we laugh a lot.
> 2. Sense of honor. We all have strong integrity and know that none of us would ever lie, cheat, or steal from each other or from anyone.
> 3. Sense of community. We sincerely believe in our school mission. We also really, really, really love the children we care for.
> 4. Sense of duty. Others come first. We are here to help children and help each other.
> 5. Sense of trust. I got your back; you got mine.

Even though we have a variety of lifestyles and other differences, it stands to reason that people who share the qualities above have a better chance of liking each other. People who are kind, funny, self-effacing, diligent, loyal, trustworthy, and competent are more likely to get along than people with the opposite qualities, correct? Kudos goes to the ArtSpace school leadership for always waiting patiently in order to hire not just the first people who apply but the best people and for making sure that other team members help make

the hiring decisions. These tactics pay off. The dynamic on my school team actually reminds me of my brother and me, who are on opposite sides of the political spectrum. We disagree on a lot, but we love each other, and that love is not in question. We laugh a lot. We would never try to cheat each other or talk behind each other's back and in fact step up for each other before being asked. We support each other and promote a common goal: our family. So, if you've ever experienced that kind of relationship in your family or elsewhere, you know what I mean. A great team involves more than competence; it involves actual (corny as it may sound) love.

The Work
Now let's talk about the "work" part of being on a gold-star team. Certain coworkers' personalities might gel in an instant, but a gold-star team still needs constant care and attention to maintain the kind of magic that we have sustained here at ArtSpace. Our daily labor is comprised of two main components that overlap: problem-solving and decision-making. All teachers do those two things all day long every day, or at least, so sayeth the research–or the lore, yes?* Problem-solving and decision-making are the two things our team does best. So, let's get down to the nitty-gritty of how the Best Team in the World–our ArtSpace 7th and 8th Grade Team–problem-solves and makes decisions.

1. Instead of lesson planning, we meet every Friday for 60+ minutes during planning time and lunch. Always. Sacrifice of planning time and lunch pays itself back because we solve problems that would create even more planning later and also ruin future lunches. Trust me.
2. Our meeting agenda is co-composed by all team members + boss. Anyone who wants to add items does so and can even add things during the meeting if needed.
3. We always assume good intentions by every team member.
4. We meet as absolute equals.
5. We thank each other out loud and often for a variety of successes, decisions, and favors. We also show appreciation for each other through acts of spontaneity, such as bringing food or helping out with an errand. You'd be amazed how much a chocolate chip cookie or emergency carpool ride can cement a friendship.
6. During meetings, we decide. The boss listens. He intervenes only if absolutely necessary.
7. We tackle each issue, discussing without venting. (OK, OK. Every once in a while, there's a little venting.)
8. We are honest about what we like and do not like about a proposed solution without fear of disagreement or judgment. We may agree, or we may disagree, but we are open, honest, and kind.

We admit it when something we said or did didn't really work, and we compliment each other on good ideas. We are also open to trying things.

9. We implement solutions immediately. We do not wait. Let's say we decide to change a student's behavior plan during Friday's meeting. The change will be implemented that afternoon, or at the latest, Monday morning, as soon as we speak to the student.

10. We implement solutions with integrity–no cheating–and then if they don't work, we reassess and make adjustments.

11. We allow for flexibility in individual classrooms and situations so that we control rules. Rules do not control us.

Not allowed:

1. "The meeting after the meeting" that omits a previous participant.

2. Backstabbing or whining about a decision that was made. After all, we made it. We can't complain about it. If it isn't working, we revisit and change it.

Here is a Friday team meeting agenda (with notable responses) recorded recently. I don't expect you to actually scour this agenda–but give it, say, 20 seconds:

4/14/23 at 10:30 am - 11:45 am

- Student Planned AE's will begin after OBX trip. Anyone foresee issues? **LW:** I will put writers just outside door and D&D players inside classroom if that's ok. **Everyone** agrees yes. **ICK:** Painting and 3D. **MM:** Cooking. **MS:** math **KB or JJ:** taking XX, XX
- Fill in your Art For Arts Sake description + help **MF** make Google Form that shows what you're doing. Have kids sign up on Monday if possible. Can we all send out at the beginning of 3rd block on Monday? **Everyone** agrees yes.
- Report Cards sent today? I can do it. Email me when you are ready. **LW**
- Reminder Spring Testing Calendar: MAP and EOGs. **RO** will take sep. setting kids. **MF** will rotate and give breaks
- **MM:** Can someone help me record the CEUs on new site? **ICK** will help.
- Celebration of Specialness? June 5? RS will consider resurrecting but only if we agree. **LW** says yes! **ICK** says "meh." **MS** says "no." **MM** doesn't know what it is. **KB, RB, RO:** no opinion. Probably no, then, unless we change our mind. Table for next time.
- Graduation Planning
  - **ICK** will send invite + call names
  - **MM** and **MS** will get food and decor (order cake a day ahead!) **MS** got stressed before when had to pick up same day.
  - **MM** happy to pick up cake
  - **LW** will give speech unless someone else wants to
- Trip next week
  - 8th Grade Trip; **ICK + LW +KB + JJ + RS**
  - 7th grade when 8th away: **MM + MS + MF +RO**
    Monday for AE–postponed? **Everyone** agrees.
    And all of 7th to PE–should **MF** tell Douglas no MLL group? **Everyone** agrees.
    - 7th schedule during OBX Trip (thank you **MM and MS**!)
    - Sex Ed Schedule **MF.**
      - AR's parents requested she not attend– **MF**
      - XX- Cove w/ **RO or KB**
    What else needs cover? Dismissal? Lunch/Recess? **MM** will do dismissal. **MS** will do lunch
- **LW's** homeroom made signs for bathrooms as service project. **MF'S** idea.
- End of Year Staff Retreat. Please add ideas
  - **MM and MF** will lead art project
  - **LW and ICK:** taco truck
  - Other ideas please add to doc. Table for next meeting.
- Student Issues
  - XX--[**Everyone** reports on this student]
  - XX–Is it time for behavior plan? **Everyone** agrees no after discussion.
  - XX- **JJ** has created. **MS:** can we adjust folder turn-in? **MM** will take at end of dismissal

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All the initials that are boldfaced and underlined are team members. Note how the boss's initials (RS), which are highlighted in yellow, appear only one single time, whereas the team members' initials appear everywhere, both often and evenly. That's because we – the faculty– are doing the deciding. During this particular 75-minute meeting, we planned special 3-day art classes, decided who would send electronic report cards, discussed a testing calendar in case there were conflicts, helped a team member with recording CEU's on a new form, discussed resurrecting a silly talent show, planned roles for 8th-grade graduation, went over the complex 7th-grade schedule in anticipation of five team members chaperoning an 8th-grade trip, decided what to do with two kids who were not going to attend Sex Ed classes with the rest of the group, acknowledged a homeroom service project that addressed vandalized bathrooms, discussed ideas for a faculty retreat, made decisions regarding three very complicated student problems, and finally divvied up who was taking a mandated study hall and who was going outside with the rest of the kids later that afternoon. Notice that no one protested that something was "not their job." We all do everything and split the labor.

Common things team members might say during meetings:
1. I'll do it.
2. Sounds good.
3. Sorry–that was my fault.
4. Can we try something else?
5. What can I do to help you with that?
6. That kid is hilarious.
7. I love that class.
8. Sure, no problem.
9. Hey, guess what? I brought banana bread.
10. Thank you!

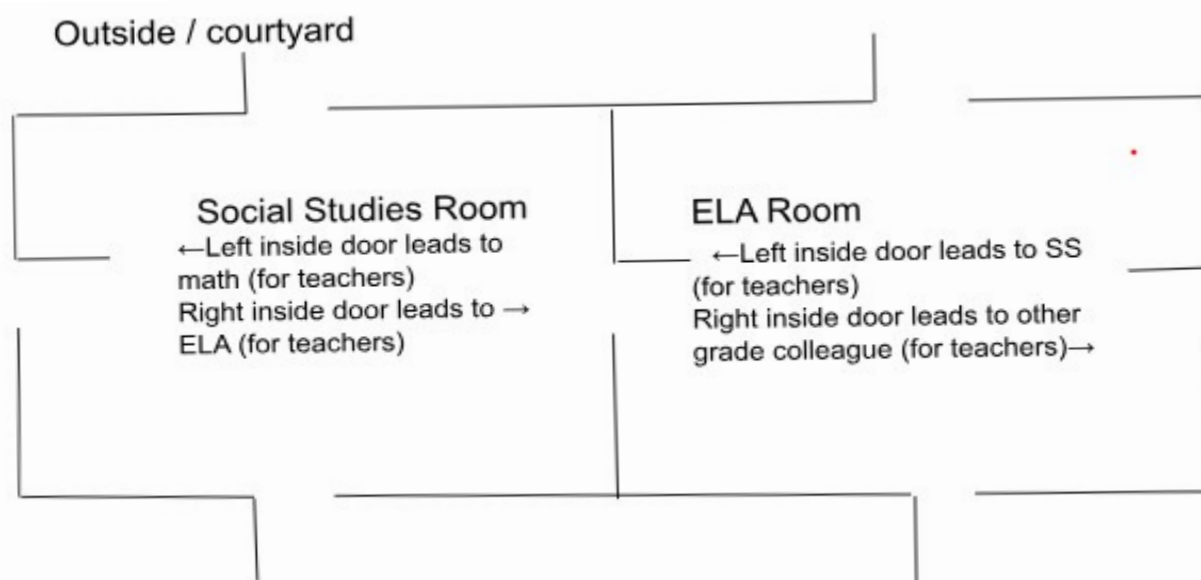When this Friday meeting was over, as per usual, we immediately went to teach afternoon classes. So, we had just eaten lunch while meeting and had no planning time. But, on the flip side, the quantity of problem-solving and decision-making that transpired obviously outweighed 55 minutes of lesson planning + 20 minutes of lunch. And lest you think we didn't have time to laugh during that meeting, know that there was plenty of kidding around while also respecting the short timeline. We keep it light but also tight.

I have taught since 1991 (so, forever) at 4 private schools, 3 traditional public schools, and 2 charter schools. Still, I spend lots of time telling people that "the ArtSpace 7th and 8th Grade Team is the single best group I have ever worked with." Our ten-person team members run the gamut as far as ages, genders, levels of experience, personal beliefs, and more. But identify a problem, and we'll solve it, between 10:30 and 11:45 am on a Friday, usually in ten minutes or less, over homemade chocolate chip cookies and many, many laughs.

How Else Do We Collaborate?
In addition to our formal Friday meeting, the team meets more-or-less regularly throughout the week. We do this several ways. First, through a simple but brilliant logistical decision, we have been given four doors in every classroom–one on each wall: one door leads to the hall where students come and go, a second door leads to the outside for egress, and the third and fourth doors (this is the brilliant part) allow direct entry into the classrooms next door. Kids don't use these third and fourth doors, but teachers do. So I can, for example, poke my head into the social studies classroom next door any time and ask a question, hand over something we're collaborating on, make a quick paired decision about something, or even offer my colleague an extra bathroom break (I just stand in the threshold with the door open and monitor both classrooms simultaneously for five minutes)! All our classrooms are connected this way throughout the building. It's hard to overstate how this simple choice allows and encourages proximity, ease, neighborliness, and fast communication.

Outside / courtyard

Social Studies Room
←Left inside door leads to math (for teachers)
Right inside door leads to → ELA (for teachers)

ELA Room
←Left inside door leads to SS (for teachers)
Right inside door leads to other grade colleague (for teachers)→

Even More Meeting

We also meet here and there, informally in hallways or classrooms, where we can group up and make decisions that cannot wait until the Friday meeting. For example, if a student has a family emergency, we may meet during planning for five minutes in one classroom. There, we would get everyone up-to-speed on the situation, find one point person to reach out to the family by phone or email, and find someone else who could talk to the child one-on-one that day. Or, a pair of us might meet for a few minutes about, say, bringing a salient math concept into a science lesson taking place that day. These kinds of interactions are fast but extremely valuable in that they allow us to communicate often and clearly regarding a multitude of topics. They are stitches in time, and boy do they pay off.

When teachers collaborate this often, the winners are not just those teachers (although it does feel wonderful to understand one another so well and be in agreement on what needs doing on any given day). The ultimate winners are really the students and families who 1. see outstanding modeling of courteous, clear, and efficacious interaction between their teachers; and 2. benefit from quick decision-making regarding student needs, whether those needs are emotional, social, academic, or even financial. Have you ever, at the end of a school year, heard someone regretfully divulge, "I don't know what happened. That kid just fell through the cracks somehow." At ArtSpace, I have never once heard that mournful pronouncement. Students at our school are truly known, and that is thanks to our intentional style of frequent, kind, and clear communication and problem-solving.

I would even go out on a (pretty long) proverbial limb and argue that our ability to keep student EOG scores higher than state averages is due to more than a review of academic material or lesson planning. I would actually argue that even more critical to keeping test scores high is constant communicative adult teamwork. Adults communicate and cooperate constantly about kids ➜ Kids are truly known, valued, loved ➜ Kids feel comfortable at school and want to be there ➜ Kids are more engaged with content ➜ Kids do their best all year ➜ Better EOG scores. Now, that said, if you know our team, you know that test scores are actually near the bottom of our list of priorities. (Wait–what?!) Yes. I mean that. And my administration means it, too. We never forget the notion that it's always and forever "People over Things," and test scores are "things."

Aw, Come On. What about Test Scores?

Ok, ok. Fine. You really want to know? ArtSpace test scores did not suffer the precipitous drop that so many other schools did during and after the pandemic. ArtSpace exceeded academic growth in 2021-22, and in a typical year, we outperformed the North Carolina state averages in reading and math by many percentage points. The kids do well. And sure, we celebrate that. Their success is our success. But believe me when I say the strong test results are not because our team frantically overcompensates for pandemic-induced (or other historic) gaps. No administrator holds a blade over our neck telling us "You better get those test scores up." Rather, our teaching team is trusted consistently by our administration to focus on what students and families really need: they need to know the team knows them and cares about them–which sounds so corny but is the heart of ArtSpace. When you support students emotionally, socially, and academically, the test scores follow. And how do you best support them? Hint: the answer is not by practicing multiple choice questions ad infinitum.

Certainly, we as a public entity owe the taxpayer some proof that we are educating children. That said, our best reassurance to families that ArtSpace is educating their children conscientiously and well is not just by promoting a "school profile score" or EOG run-down on our website. Our real proof is found in the vibe on our campus: kindness, tolerance, inclusiveness, intentional community-building, strong attendance, and smiles–even on the faces of those angsty, irritable teens!** These emanations (and statistics) are truly a direct result of the teamwork we model each day: meeting, talking, parsing out ideas, connecting, changing protocol as needed, and problem-solving. These are actions that cannot be plotted mathematically. We can't say to you, "Here's our graph showing how many times we meet per day and quantitative results of student emotional connection to us" (annoyingly immeasurable to spread-sheet wonks, I know). But why are we teachers in the first place? If our answer isn't a sincere "We adore kids and want to devote our time, energy, and love to them," then we have forgotten why we entered this field. Our team stays on this path, always. The results are, therefore, qualitative.

So, How Do You Create a Team Like This?

Our advice for getting your team to where we are? Approach your school leadership about having your whole team being in on interviews and hiring decisions, and choose only those candidates who truly reflect the very best human qualities–even when you have positions open for longer than you'd like, and, yes, even when the process happens during the summer. Zoom if you have to, but be there and be candid about what you and your team need from new colleagues. Don't settle. Then, once you have your people in place, hold yourself and your team to the highest possible standards of not just competence–which is in our view the bare minimum–but emotional intelligence and integrity. All this business takes time and energy but, boy, it sure pays off. You will create a more joyful teaching experience for your whole school, and therefore for the students in your very own classroom, for years to come.

In Conclusion

This article is an attempt to paint a picture of one successful middle-grades team and how we use courteous, graceful, and competent interpersonal communication to solve problems, educate children, and create a loving, intellectual, and productive school environment. Our purposeful communication is grounded in reading and research, yes–but it's also intuitive and elusive of measure–at least to a degree. If you're a new, young teacher (bless your heart!), then our advice to you is to search for a school where the adults with whom you interact share a high degree of emotional intelligence. They should be kind, flexible, and cooperative–models, in other words, of the so-called 21st Century Skills, which are actually just a list of how people should treat each other so they function

well. Major caveat: watch out for big egos. They destroy teams.

If you're not in your salad days and are instead ancient like me, then you probably remember times when you've worked with people in ways that seem almost magical in their efficiency, discernment, and productivity. If you don't have that currently, but you want it, our suggestion would be to read up on that little list of gems mentioned at the top of the article. Brown (2015), Goleman (2005), Duckworth (2016), Perry (2021) and their research can at least give you some things to chew on. If you have a willing group, you may even be able to construct some goals for your current team members and work to improve the way you function as a group. Ultimately, at ArtSpace, we would argue that great teams are born of great people coming together to pursue a common goal and made through consistent communicative interaction. It works for us.

Footnotes:
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**Note that ArtSpace records 13.23% chronic absenteeism vs. the state's 31.18%; and furthermore, Buncombe County Schools and Asheville City Schools have experienced a 10% enrollment decline, whereas applications and waitlists for ArtSpace charter were at an all time high (22 years) in the 2023 season. WLOS, "Where are the Students?" Nov 22, 2022.

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Leila Wheless has a BA in Comparative French and English Literature from Davidson College and an MAT in Secondary English from Agnes Scott College. She has taught a wide variety of ages and subject matter since 1991 and has been at ArtSpace Charter School in Swannanoa, NC for ten years.

Digital Teaching and Learning Teacher to Watch

Shifting Responsibilities: Learning Environment and the Digital Student

By Leah Rhodes

Positive Learning Environment. What scenario comes to mind when you read those words? Perhaps you visualize a vibrant classroom with engaging decor, colorful education posters dotting the walls and student-made projects nestled on shelves beside stacks of paper and freshly sharpened pencils. Ah, and do not forget the desks neatly arranged into pods for small group collaborative activities! Maybe there are even patterned light filters installed to soften the harsh fluorescent glow from the light fixtures.

On the other hand, now that we have all experienced the brave new world of isolation created by Covid-19, maybe you pictured a student learning on a Chromebook at the kitchen table, wearing a headset and focused on a Zoom class session. Digital Learning has forced many educators to re-evaluate what "Learning Environment" means, and more importantly, challenged our ability to control that environment.

The Appeal of Online Learning

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual learning became a permanent fixture in public education. Enrollment numbers continue to climb each year, and many school districts across North Carolina have implemented their own online programs, 42 of which applied for approval for the 2023-24 school year.

Families are opting for online alternatives for a variety of reasons, including the very reason we all found ourselves in the digital classroom during 2020 - health. Several of the students within my own program, Caldwell Online Academy here in Caldwell County, enrolled due to health concerns of the student or a family member living in the household. Another aspect of health that makes online learning a better choice for many is that of mental health. Children who suffer from anxiety and mental health issues find solace in the fact that they can still attend school without the emotional triggers that a busy school building may bring. Still, other pupils use the online option much in the way that the traditional school transfer has been utilized, but without the headache of having to drive further to a school beyond their home district. A portion of these young people are using online learning to avoid bullies or other social conflicts that negatively impact their

education. Some students and families may have fears concerning on-campus violence. For others, online school is just more practical.

Perhaps there has been a change in the family dynamic, such as a divorce and the parents now live far apart. Enrollment in an online school allows the child to alternately live with both parents and maintain a consistent school presence. Another practicality would be for students who frequently travel, most commonly our young athletes who play for traveling teams. Many families choose online learning for their children simply because they prefer to have control over their own space. As the old real estate adage goes, "Location, location, location!" Students and families want control over their learning environments.

New Challenges

This student and family-led control of the learning environment has produced a few key challenges to student success in the virtual classroom. For the vast majority of public school history, the primary learning environment has been controlled by the classroom teacher. The teacher in a traditional classroom setting has the ability to control noise volume and other distractions. The teacher can also easily and immediately redirect students. This type of classroom management is a key component of teaching with which all educators are familiar.

For example, if a student is playing on his/her cell phone during a lesson there is a simple fix. The teacher merely confiscates the phone, at least until the end of class. But, what happens when the student is not sitting at a desk in a classroom? What if that student is playing on his/her phone during the lesson while at home? Controlling a student's physical setting (and distractions) from within a window on a computer screen is futile. Kids will be kids. If students know someone has no control over their actions, they will usually exploit the situation. This highlights a crucial difference in the online learning dynamic. Online teachers still maintain control over their content and instructional strategies, but not the learning environment. With online learning, this huge responsibility shifts to the parents and students themselves.

Some parents fully understand this transference of responsibility and work well to provide learning spaces for their children at home, free of distractions. These students usually have successful online learning experiences.

Other parents struggle with these changes, seemingly having difficulty switching to this new paradigm. We see this manifest in several ways: the television is on while learners are in the room, adults carry on conversations with students while they are supposed

to be in live Zoom classes, and students are allowed to game or be on other electronic devices.

Another related aspect to this learning environment alteration is time management. Students in the building have teachers and bells to ensure they arrive at all of their classes on time. However, online learning requires students to be cognizant of their time and schedules. There are no teachers out in the hall beckoning them to hasten their steps lest they be marked tardy for the next period. I have noticed in my own experience as a digital educator that some parents check on their children so infrequently during the day as to be completely unaware of their students skipping mandatory synchronous instruction, until notified of the accrued absences later on.

Solutions

As you can imagine, these obstacles could prove detrimental to a student's educational success. However, these are certainly not insurmountable hurdles! In view of the fact that a substantial portion of the traditional classroom management tasks have been essentially reassigned to parents, this also creates a new function for digital educators and their programs - organizational skill coaching for the families. With a bit of guidance and conscientiousness, students and their families can create positive learning environments that foster focus and productivity, all the while reaping the benefits of location flexibility that online learning offers. It is our role as digital educators to support online learning preparation. A clear outline, both defining a positive learning environment and how to promote one, must be communicated to all families considering enrollment in an online program. Helping families understand this new responsibility of managing the learning space is crucial so they can make clear and informed decisions during the enrollment process.

Positive Learning Environment

In addition to feeling safe and valued, a positive learning environment must support focus and productivity. How do families successfully fulfill this responsibility of creating and maintaining such a setting?

Space - For synchronous learning, a comfortable desk and chair with proper lighting (soft, natural, or indirect is best) is invaluable. A clear, clutter-free kitchen table with a comfortable chair is another suitable option.

Sound - Consider whether complete silence is helpful or if soft ambient sound is better for your learner. Perhaps investing in sound-canceling headphones will be the best option if other family members and noises may be audible to the student.

Time Management - Set daily alarms for synchronous class times and use a planner to keep track of assignments and due dates.

Accountability - Create accounts and gain access to PowerSchool and the school's Learning Management System (e.g., Canvas or Google Classroom). Check regularly to ensure your learner is attending class and staying on task. Review your child's grades at least once a week to check for missing work. Communicate with teachers if you have questions or concerns.

Health - During asynchronous times, encourage your learner to take mini-breaks to move around and get away from the screen. Stretching, dancing, going outside for some fresh air, or even playing with the family pet are good options. Also give your child the proper fuel by providing healthy foods.

If given these clear expectations of what they need to provide for their learners, in addition to other tips and suggestions provided by the teachers, parents can adequately provide an advantageous situation for their online learners to flourish. Not only do students learn their curriculum content, but accepting these new self-management responsibilities provide them with additional real-world skills - not to mention, many colleges are incorporating more digital instruction, even within conventional in-person instruction. Let us also not forget how the pandemic made virtual meetings a new standard within the professional world. Online learning, along with the organizational skills it demands, solidly demonstrates the utilization of 21st-century skills.

We will continue to see growing enrollment in online schools because of the benefits that it provides, most notably the flexibility of location. However, this advantage of location preference creates a new dynamic regarding the student learning environment and places new responsibility on the parents. Control of the educational setting has traditionally been designated to educators in the building, but now parents and students need to be better prepared for how to provide and maintain that positive learning environment at home (or wherever) for a successful experience. Our role as classroom managers shifts to coaching proper habits and strategies to these families, while the parents' role shifts to task monitoring and learning environment supervision. As we all know, with freedom comes responsibility!

Leah Rhodes has been a middle school educator since 2010, teaching a variety of content areas, both core and exploratory. She currently teaches grades 6-8 Social Studies at Caldwell Online Academy in Lenoir, NC.

*In this issue, we embark on a journey into concepts, ideas, and topics that define and support the landscape of middle school education today. The articles featured within these pages not only champion the beliefs of North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (NCMLE) but also provide us with refreshed perspectives and innovative approaches that can lead to a more engaging, effective, and fulfilling educational experience for both students and educators.

Our remarkable state has served as ground for fostering dedicated teacher leaders who are deeply committed to providing the best education for our young adolescents. The important work happening in districts across our state is a testament to the resilience and commitment of educators, administrators, and community members who have come together to shape the future of middle school education.

While some articles look back, others are forward-facing, offering fresh perspectives and solutions to the challenges we face today. Each piece contributes significantly to the continuous evolution of unique middle school classrooms, rekindling the passion for teaching that resides within each of us.

This issue has a lot to offer educators who champion every aspect of middle schools with innovative ideas, encouragement from new teachers to veteran administrators, and support from our partners at North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Our opening articles feature research centered around current topics of Equitable Practice, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Ensuring Highly Qualified Teachers despite teacher shortages across the state, and an example of integrating Culturally Responsive Teaching in a Project-Based Learning model. All of these are written from the perspective of informing educators across our state for the best possible outcomes of teaching and learning that our students deserve. Our authors welcome an opportunity to continue these conversations if our readers have questions about implementation or ideas for extending the dialogue.

A special inset has been included in this issue featuring the recipients of the 2023 NCMLE Award Winners who were recognized at the NCMLE conference in Charlotte this past Spring. Three pieces were written to elaborate on the awardees' particular awards and what this recognition means to them. Teachers across the state are encouraged to nominate the great educators in your life. We hope you enjoy learning more about these awards and their deserving recipients who uphold the values of middle level education.

The featured columns that serve as anchors in our journal also address this mindset. These columns will engage, enlighten, and empower our readers. In this issue Madison Liddle was interviewed by Daniel Maxwell in the 10 out of 10: New Teacher Spotlight column. Madison echoes the importance of relationships and support: Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), greater school community, and administration. Jade Tornatore and Holly Williamson, from NCDPI, begin a series of pieces in Topics, Tech, and Trends, for an MTSS framework and share with educators the resources from the state that are available to support schools in MTSS implementation; Maria Childers shares how the elective Communities In Schools provides various support for our middle school students in her column, Encore, Encore. She reminds us of the importance of relationships that extend beyond graduation. In Between Teachers, a North Carolina Dyslexia Delegate, Stephani Clark, debunks the stereotypes of dyslexia and encourages teachers to utilize resources to continue their knowledge-building to help our readers at the middle school level. David Strahan, a distinguished Professor Emeritus at Western Carolina University and dedicated professional for middle-level education, connects our North Carolina Association of Middle Level Education to our national affiliation, Association of Middle Level Education. In this piece, David highlights AMLE's publication of "This We Believe,¨ as an opportunity to revisit these characteristics within middle schools. In the Admin Corner, Lora Austin shares her insights into "Failing First" and accredits the team of professional educators who made the successes that followed that much sweeter.*

We hope you each find something from our contributors that is relevant to your current practice and procedures or perhaps something you might want to investigate further for the learners in your charge. Additionally, we hope that the research and theories provided here validate your work and stimulate ideas for contemplation as you plan and engage in our state's middle schools.

As you peruse this issue, we trust that it will empower you to embrace equitable and sustainable practices, leverage AI in the classroom, address the pressing teacher shortage, and integrate culturally responsive pedagogy, MTSS, and Dyslexia support into your middle school environment. Together, we can ensure that our schools remain places of excellence and progress, enriching the lives of the next generation. Join us in this endeavor, submit your work, attend our annual Spring conference in March, and share this journal with your colleagues for insightful discussions. When we come together as middle school professionals, we revitalize our schools to be the bastions of knowledge, connections, and achievements they are meant to be for our early adolescents across our beautiful state.

by Laurie A. Dymes

10 Out of 10: New Teacher Spotlight

By Daniel Maxwell

10 Out Of 10 aims to highlight the exceptional work of new middle school teachers across the state of North Carolina. We asked one beginning teacher to take 10 minutes out of their day to respond to 10 questions about the teaching profession.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Madison Liddle is a second-year special education teacher at Harold E. Winkler Middle School in Concord, North Carolina. Madison is a recent graduate of UNC Charlotte with a Bachelor of Arts in Special Education.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO ENTER THE TEACHING PROFESSION?

Going into college, I was not an education major, but I quickly noticed I was not happy with where I was. Once I switched to education, I felt like I found my home, and I found my people. After making that switch, I knew that special education was the route I wanted to take because, growing up through cheerleading, I had an opportunity to coach a little girl with Autism who absolutely changed my life. While I love helping all students, my passion is for helping those students who need extra support that they might not get anywhere else. Through building relationships with all students, I have the opportunity to advocate for them and, essentially, be their cheerleader. Every student should have a cheerleader in their life, and I love that I get the opportunity to be that for them.

TELL US ABOUT A TEACHER WHO INSPIRED YOU. WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THIS PERSON, AND HOW DOES THAT DRIVE YOU IN YOUR WORK WITH YOUR OWN STUDENTS?

My fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Heintschel, has been my biggest inspiration, and it is because I will never forget the classroom culture that she created. Everyone felt welcomed, she celebrated the small victories, everyone had a place, and no matter what happened before school you knew that you would walk into a classroom where you would be loved. It has really influenced me in

showing me how important the relationship aspect is in the classroom, and it also influenced me to create the most inclusive environment I can for my students.

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU WERE GIVEN AS YOU ENTERED THE TEACHING PROFESSION?

The night before my first day of teaching, I remember sitting down with my mom, who has been in education for many years, and she told me to "be a marigold." A marigold is a person who is positive, uplifting, energetic, and kind. She said to stay away from the poisonous walnuts who might bring you down, and find those other marigolds in your school. I have been blessed at Winkler to be surrounded by many educators who celebrate the successes of students every day. My colleagues love our school and continuously push me to be my best self for my students. This piece of advice will stick with me forever because it is your mentality when you walk through the door that is most important, not just for your students but for coworkers as well. So, be a marigold!

WHAT DO YOU WANT VETERAN TEACHERS TO KNOW ABOUT NEW TEACHERS?

We want to learn, but we also want you to be open to our ideas as well. I love that our school provides opportunities to be in Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and professional development sessions allowing us to collaborate with other teachers. One of the best things about Winkler is that beginning teachers' thoughts and ideas are not overlooked. After learning many recent evidence-based practices that can be applied in the classroom, beginning teachers have a lot of fresh knowledge coming out of our undergraduate programs. We want to continue to learn, but we also want you to take into consideration our thoughts and ideas.

WHAT IS A CHALLENGE YOU FACED DURING YOUR FIRST YEAR AS A TEACHER, AND HOW DID YOU OVERCOME IT?

Out of college, I was well prepared for the challenges that naturally occur within a centralized EC classroom. In clinicals, you get to work with so many students and get your feet wet with the practice. What I was not expecting as a BT1 and BT2 was managing multiple veteran Teacher Assistants and BMT's in my classroom. This added an extra layer of challenge. You are taught in great detail how to work with students, but nobody really gives you much advice on how to work with other adults. I've learned a lot of strategies, but ultimately, I have noticed that building relationships within my classroom community allows me to structure my day-to-day routines to the strengths of students and staff.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE WHO IS IN THE STUDENT TEACHING SEMESTER RIGHT NOW?

Soak up every moment! Given the opportunity, take the chance to walk around your building and observe as many other classes as possible. When you observe you are able to witness engaging lessons, different classroom management strategies, and experience different classroom environments. You will become a familiar face in the building, which will help with building relationships with other students and staff. These relationships help you become a part of the school culture and can teach you what resources your school has to offer.

WHAT IS THE BEST LESSON YOU EVER TAUGHT?

When I was in the centralized structured learning classroom, I was consistently looking for feedback on ways to make my reading lessons more engaging for students who had various communication needs. Specifically, non-verbal students, who communicate with visuals, and verbal students, who communicate using expressive language. With the support of administrators, coaches, colleagues, and a former professor at UNC Charlotte, I was able to create a lesson where all types of learners were answering comprehension questions through high-tech, low-tech, written, and verbal communication in small groups. This was a huge accomplishment for students of high needs. It was so rewarding to see a group of students with different forms of communication come together in order to engage in the content with one another.

WHAT IS YOUR BEST CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT PRACTICE AND WHY DO YOU BELIEVE IT IS EFFECTIVE?

Build those relationships! I know I keep saying that, but it is so, so important. I learn what motivates them, and they learn what I expect from them. It builds that critical sense of trust. Ultimately – be a marigold, your vibe really does attract your tribe! It is a mindset that we should all model for our students. Being a positive light and considering what they are going to see and feel when they walk into your classroom allows them to feed off your energy. It creates an environment where they are willing to learn. Show up to the sporting events, make yourself visible, and know that you are more than just their teacher, you are one of their biggest cheerleaders. I find that helps to form a natural sense of respect and rapport with the students in my classroom.

HOW CAN SCHOOLS BEST SUPPORT THEIR BEGINNING TEACHERS?

Winkler Middle School is the place that everyone needs to come to for this one! First, PLC across the board is the big thing you certainly need to attend and actively participate in, but then professional development as well. At Winkler, we have our weekly "Wolfpack Workshops," which are school-wide, teacher-led professional development sessions where teachers present on a variety of topics, including everything from relationship building and student engagement to mental health awareness. I've been given opportunities to both attend and present, so it creates this inclusive environment where we are able to learn from each other and share our ideas as well. Outside of those two things, I would also encourage BT's to get involved by joining committees, coaching a sport if you can, and even attending PTSO meetings. Getting yourself out there beyond the classroom and understanding that your job is not only from 9 to 4 can help you make yourself known and find all of the resources available for support.

IF YOU COULD PROVIDE ANY EDUCATOR WITH ONE PIECE OF ADVICE, WHAT WOULD THAT ADVICE BE?

Never become complacent. Be willing to take feedback, continuously reflect on your practice, but also remain positive. Celebrate small victories that keep you going each day. Whether a student showed improvement on their math assessment or was more engaged during a lesson, we need to recognize and celebrate these victories. We all have room to improve, and if we want our students to show up and grow every day, we need to do the same.

To nominate an exceptional beginning teacher for this column, please write to dmaxwel8@uncc.edu with your recommendation and support.

Daniel Maxwell is a Lecturer and University Supervisor for middle and secondary education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

TOPICS, TECH, AND TRENDS

Maintain that "Back-to-School Feeling" through a Proven Framework for All

By Jade Tornatore and Holly Williamson

As summer vacations turn into fond memories and we continue to grow weary of the unrelenting Carolina summer heat and humidity, the approaching fall season heralds relief from that heat with cooler temperatures and changing leaves. It also brings a thrilling new opportunity with the start of a new school year.

For students and educators alike, there is no experience like coming back to school. The new school year brings new emotions, aspirations, and possibilities. I'm not sure if there is another profession that gets to experience anything comparable to the excitement of getting back into the classroom, giddy with the opportunity to perfect our craft, try new things, collaborate with our colleagues, and get to know a new group of students.

There is nothing like the back-to-school feeling. Once the excitement of back-to-school fades into problem-solving the varied needs of students and families, educators often begin with the essential question of how can we, as educators, maximize teaching by making it more effective and efficient. What systems and supports might we employ to improve the stagnant test scores that we are ultimately held accountable for? Is there a model for this type of school improvement work?

While we may have the commonality of calling North Carolina home, we understand that each district/charter, school, grade, and class has its own specific needs, values, and context that must be considered when determining the best steps for supporting the students we serve.

This is where you may expect to be introduced to a packaged program that promises it all or the professional development that you have been waiting on for years! Unfortunately, that is not going to happen here–there is no silver bullet. However, this doesn't mean that we are not equipped for the task. We have tools
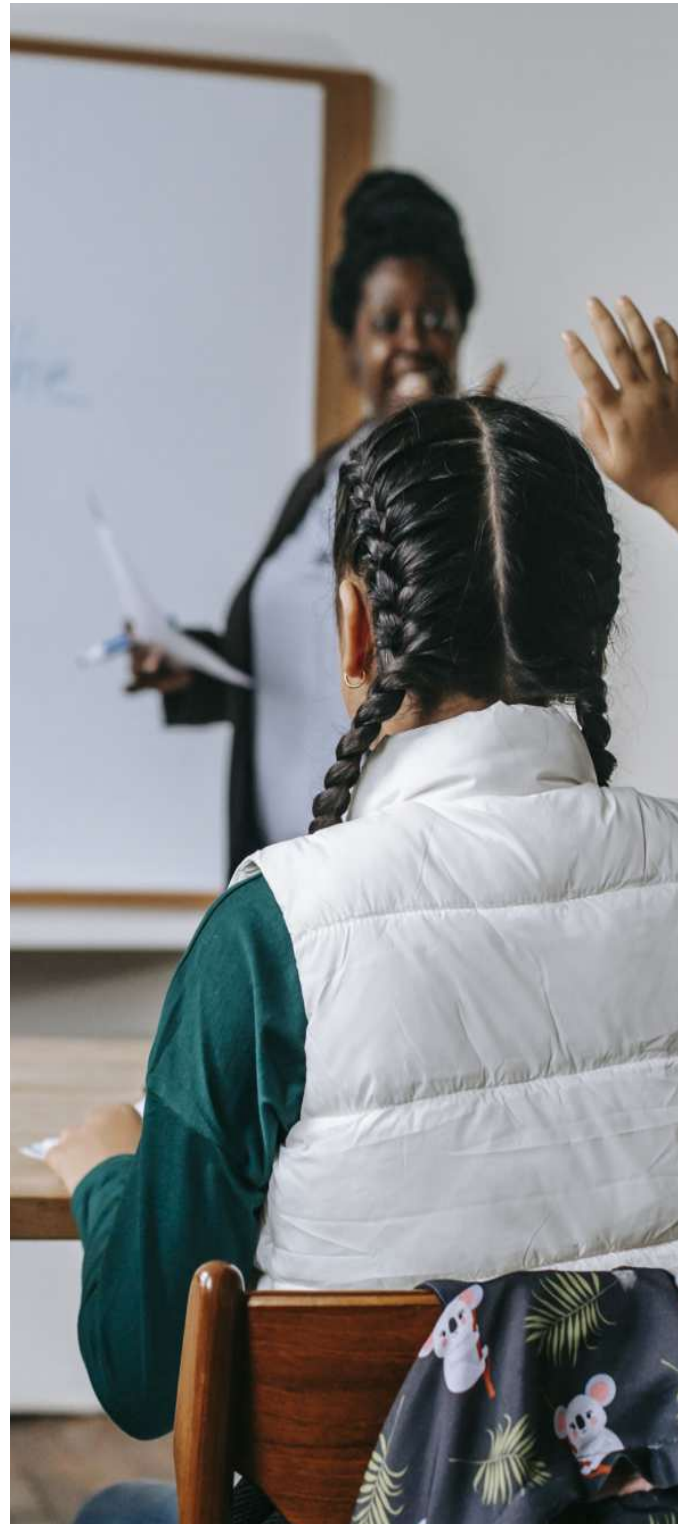
in our tool belt! Our resources include implementation science, school improvement research, and high-leverage, evidence-based practices. These are valuable assets that can help actualize many of the aspirations we have on that first day of school. We are, in fact, well-equipped!

> ## *We Can, Whenever And Wherever We Choose, Successfully Teach All Children...*
> *–Ron Edmunds*

Ron Edmunds, who is a pioneer in research on effective schools says, "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far" (Edmonds, 1979). Collectively we have the knowledge and tools; we need a way to put these into a system that is responsive to student needs.

There is no one way that works for everyone, so a program or a process won't work. We need to implement a system that will support all of our students. With more and more educators leaving the field, coupled with less enrollment in educator preparation programs, the system needs to support adults as well as it supports students.

This system of support which is both effective and efficient for students and adults, has been proven many times over. It is a Multi-Tiered System of Support, or most commonly known as MTSS.

MTSS? That may not be what you were expecting. MTSS, as defined by the North Carolina model, is a school improvement framework that encompasses academic, behavioral, social, and emotional instruction and support. NC MTSS employs a systems approach using data-driven problem-solving to maximize growth for all.

So what does this mean? Simply put, MTSS is the way we do school. Within the school there are resources, there are teachers, and there are students. MTSS is the framework utilized to organize all of these things to best support the needs of our students and staff. At this point you may be picturing the popular Green-Yellow-Red triangle and thinking about tiers of instruction. These tiers of instruction are characteristic of an MTSS but make up only 1 of 6 research-based critical components of MTSS. These interdependent components are Leadership, Building Capacity/Implementation Infrastructure, Communication and Collaboration, Problem Solving Process, Data/Evaluation and Multiple Tiers of Instruction and Intervention Model. The Multi-Tiered Instruction and Intervention Model is not MTSS; the three tiers are just one part of an MTSS.

Let's address a few more misconceptions about MTSS to strengthen our understanding of this school improvement framework and ultimately explain why teachers should want to implement MTSS.

Myth #1: MTSS is a process.

When people talk about MTSS as a process, it implies that there is a locked series of steps to get to an end. MTSS is a continuous improvement framework. We don't ever want to "finish" improvement or put an "end" to supporting our teachers and students. There are no locked steps to implement MTSS, as each implementation is unique to the students and staff that we serve. Instead, MTSS is a conceptual framework with characteristics that are adapted to fit each context.

Myth #2: MTSS is for struggling students.

MTSS is a school improvement framework. All teachers, students, and staff are part of the school and therefore part of the school's MTSS. There are no "MTSS kids". There is no time that a student "enters" or "exits" MTSS. MTSS refers to the entire system. It is the way we do school for ALL. Within this framework, we may wish to describe a student who presents risk and needs intervention. Rather than describing that student as an "MTSS kid" or a "Tier 3" kid, we would simply say "the student is in need of intervention support." The priority focus of MTSS is to proactively improve core instruction to the benefit of all students.

Myth #3: MTSS is just another version of RTI.

RTI or Response to Instruction/Response to Intervention is how we examine students' responses to intervention and instruction. However, MTSS is much broader than this. MTSS is a total school improvement framework for all areas, including academics, attendance, behavior, and social-emotional learning. Utilizing this framework, we first examine adult implementation (practices, behaviors), along with school systems and structures, before we ever look to see if a student responded. We first want to ensure our services and daily instruction are effective and responsive to our students prior to determining if our students are responding to that instruction.

Myth #4: MTSS is just for elementary.

From inception, RTI and MTSS focused primarily on elementary as a way to make changes to address the achievement gap. Elementary traditionally had the smallest gaps. This was also where legislation focused. However, the components of an MTSS, implemented with integrity, have benefits for all students and staff (Pre K-12). All ages and grades benefit when there is stronger leadership, communication and collaboration, use of team-based data - driven problem solving, and differentiated multi-tiered instruction.

For more information on NC MTSS visit: https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/districts-schools-support/integrated-academic-behavior-systems

MTSS is a continuous school improvement framework. This framework has been endorsed time and again as a sound way to organize resources for effective schools. "The District and School Improvement (DSI) Center at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) supports the integration of MTSS as a strategy for schoolwide improvement that meets state school improvement requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)" (School improvement). As such, since 2014, NCDPI's Integrated Academic and Behavior Supports Team has worked with districts and schools across the state to support the use of the MTSS framework for school and district improvement. Recently, a state-wide study regarding MTSS implementation in the secondary setting was launched. In addition, support of MTSS was included as part of the Operation Polaris 2.0 Smart Goals with reference to K-3 literacy (NC DPI). However, MTSS is well-recognized beyond North Carolina. One would be hard pressed to find any school improvement, transformation, or turn-around school initiative that does not explicitly call out implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Support, or utilize the same critical components by a different name.

The aim of this piece is to begin to build an understanding of a Multi-Tiered System of Support and how it makes the difficult job of teaching more efficient and more effective. We will continue to build understanding by releasing a series of articles in partnership with NCMLE's Journal focusing on North Carolina's MTSS Model and practical school-level application of the six critical components. We believe that MTSS is the most efficient and effective model for school improvement and that this well-implemented framework can fuel not only that back-to-school excitement but maintain it throughout this school year and for years to come.

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Jade Tornatore, is a 20+ year North Carolina Educator who has dedicated himself to the "on the ground" implementation of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) serving as part of of the Integrated Academic and Behavior Systems (IABS) Team at NCDPI.

Holly Williamson believes in the implementation of the MTSS framework to support student needs and promote overall school improvement. An educator since 2001, she currently serves as a regional consultant with NCDPI's Integrated Academic & Behavior Systems Team (IABS), assisting districts and schools with this effort.

Encore, Encore

Supporting Students Through "Communities In Schools"

By Maria Childers

Communities In Schools is a program that was founded in 1977 by Bill Milliken in inner-city New York. Milliken wanted to provide support and services to help students remain in school and be successful in life. "It's not programs that are transforming young people's lives, it is relationships," says Milliken.

Communities In Schools (CIS) has an affiliate in Lincoln County, one of 24 across the state of North Carolina. One of the ways that CIS of Lincoln County is different from the rest of the state is the way that program services are delivered. In Lincoln County Schools, CIS is an elective class that is offered in all four middle schools. Typically, CIS Student Support Specialists have a case list of students who are referred to them for a variety of reasons, including school attendance, school work completion, and other issues that impact the success of student in the school setting. CIS staff would schedule time to visit the school and check-in with the student to determine appropriate interventions. The elective class model in Lincoln County offers more support to the students who are referred to participate in the daily CIS class.

Students, who participate in the CIS elective, can be referred by teachers, counselors, other school staff, or by parent request. Sometimes, students can feel overwhelmed by middle school and simply need the extra support that the CIS elective can provide. I use a curriculum in my class that is evidence-based and was recommended to me by a colleague. It is called Executive Functioning, and we focus on those lessons the first couple weeks of school to give students some tools to help them be successful in all areas of instruction. We work on organizational skills, time management, smart goal setting, and team building. Each time the students receive a progress report, we go over the grades they have in their core classes and discuss what they hope to be able to accomplish by the end of the grading period. This helps them focus on exactly what they need to improve to bring up their grades, helps them stay on track, and reminds them that they are being held accountable by another caring adult in the building. One of my favorite things in my class is when we look at our goal sheets, and the students see how far they have come from the

IT'S RELATIONSHIPS, NOT PROGRAMS, THAT CHANGE CHILDREN.

-Communities In Schools Founder and Vice Chairman Bill Milliken

beginning of the year. I love to see the newfound confidence that they build within themselves.

The beauty of the CIS elective is that it can adapt to what the students need at the time. I work closely with classroom teachers, and they let me know when I can do something to support our mutual students. Sometimes it is a planner that is not signed by a parent consistently, a project that needs finishing, or they are struggling with turning in homework on time. These issues can be addressed in my class, and the student can receive some help to get back on track. In our school, CIS is also a place where students who are in the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) program can receive their interventions. The students who are in both CIS and MTSS can work on their supplemental intervention lessons through iReady for up to 65 minutes a week during class. My students have made wonderful growth throughout the two years that I have been involved with the MTSS process. I feel that the

personal connection, coupled with the personalized interventions, give the MTSS students the extra boost that they need, and they want to do well.

One of the most rewarding times is when former students return to walk the halls with their senior classmates before graduation, and they make it a point to stop by my classroom. I am so proud to see them in their graduation caps and gowns and know that they have worked so hard to get to this important milestone in their lives. They hug me, and, through happy tears, tell me they may not have seemed appreciative at the time, but they now realize how all of the lessons and skills they have learned in the CIS classroom during their middle school years have helped them succeed in high school; they are excited for their future. This is my hope and dream for all of my students: realize the potential that they have, and they can do anything they set their minds to!

Maria Childers is the Communities In Schools Student Support Specialist at North Lincoln Middle School. She has worked for Lincoln County Schools and CIS of Lincoln County for 24 years.

BETWEEN TEACHERS

Dyslexia: What Do Teachers Really Need to Know?

By Stephani Clark

The diagnosis of dyslexia is on the rise in North Carolina. Research by Moats and Dakin states that an estimated 5% of the population will have enduring, persistent reading difficulties that are very difficult to treat given our current knowledge. The push for interventions and strategies to improve student outcomes in literacy has been a significant focus in education for quite some time. Literacy is a foundational skill that plays a crucial role in a student's overall academic success and their ability to navigate the world effectively. All 50 states have dyslexia legislation that ranges from awareness to the rights of students with dyslexia. NC passed legislation mandating that the Policies Governing Services with Students with Disabilities add a definition of dyslexia. The legislation also includes reviews of screening and diagnostic assessments when identifying students with dyslexia. There are many myths that teachers and families believe when discussing dyslexia, and hopefully, this article will help dispel these myths.

Myth: Teachers cannot use the term dyslexia in the school setting.

Fact: You can use the term dyslexia. It is strongly recommended that awareness of the term and its impact is used when discussing reading difficulties with parents as well as students.

Myth: Dyslexia is just about reading letters backward.

Fact: Dyslexia is more than just reversing letters. It's a neurological condition that affects a person's ability to read, spell, write, and sometimes even speak. It can involve difficulties with phonological processing (connecting sounds to letters), working memory, and language skills.

Myth: Dyslexia is caused by laziness or lack of intelligence.

Fact: Dyslexia is not related to laziness or intelligence. People with dyslexia often have average to above-average intelligence. It's a specific learning difference that affects certain areas of learning, but it doesn't reflect a lack of effort or intelligence.

Myth: Dyslexia only affects reading.

Fact: While reading is a common area of difficulty for people with dyslexia, it can also impact spelling, writing, and sometimes math. Dyslexia can affect various aspects of language processing and information retrieval, making these tasks challenging.

Myth: Dyslexia is something you can outgrow.

Fact: Dyslexia is a lifelong condition, but with the right strategies, support, and accommodations, individuals with dyslexia can learn to manage their challenges effectively and succeed in school and life.

Myth: Dyslexia is rare.
Fact: Dyslexia is actually quite common. It's estimated that about 5-10% of the population has dyslexia. This means there are likely classmates, friends, and family members who might have dyslexia.

Myth: People with dyslexia see words differently.
Fact: People with dyslexia don't see words differently; rather, they may have difficulty processing and connecting the sounds of words with their corresponding letters. Their brains process language differently, which can lead to reading and writing challenges.

Myth: Dyslexia can't be treated or managed.
Fact: While dyslexia cannot be "cured," it can be managed and supported. Various interventions, teaching strategies, and assistive technologies can help individuals with dyslexia, improve their reading and writing skills, and thrive in school and beyond.

Myth: Dyslexia only affects children.
Fact: Dyslexia is a lifelong condition, so it continues into adulthood. However, with age, individuals may develop coping

strategies and strengths that help them navigate their challenges more effectively.

Myth: Dyslexia is the same for everyone who has it.
Fact: Dyslexia can manifest differently in different individuals. Some might struggle more with reading, while others might find spelling or writing more challenging. Each person's experience with dyslexia is unique and dyslexia exists on a continuum.

It's important to foster understanding and empathy among middle school students regarding dyslexia. By dispelling these myths and sharing accurate information, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all learners.

If you are interested in gaining more knowledge about dyslexia, North Carolina has trained Dyslexia Delegates that offer self-paced and in-person professional development. To find dates in your district please visit the North Carolina State Improvement Project site (https://www.ncsip.org/).

Stephani Clark is an instructional coach with the Exceptional Children Department in Lincoln County. She has taught exceptional children for 22 years and serves as a NC Dyslexia Delegate.

1.0 CEU

DEEP DIVE INTO DYSLEXIA
THE SCIENCE OF READING AND EXPERT TEACHING

This virtual course is intended to increase the capacity of educators to understand the characteristics of dyslexia and to provide evidence-based instructional practices for students experiencing core difficulty with word recognition, fluency, spelling, and writing.

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RESEARCH TO PRACTICE
POWERFUL TOOLS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

By David Strahan

A hallmark of a good school is that they always want to get better. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) has developed a set of powerful tools to assist schools as they work to become better. In this issue of Research to Practice column, we highlight the resources and the research that supports them.

AMLE's foundation for school improvement is *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop and Harrison, 2021). Based on a comprehensive synthesis of research and consultation with AMLE experts, *The Successful Middle School* presents a detailed description of the conditions necessary to provide a supportive school environment for students and teachers. As summarized in The Successful Middle School at a Glance graphic, the authors describe five essential, evidence-based attributes and 18 defining characteristics.

The Successful Middle School: This We Believe

Essential Attributes
AMLE affirms that an education for young adolescents must be:

Responsive
Using the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school are made.

Challenging
Cultivating high expectations and advancing learning for every member of the school community.

Empowering
Facilitating environments in which students take responsibility for their own learning and contribute positively to the world around them.

Equitable
Providing socially just learning opportunities and environments for every student.

Engaging
Fostering a learning atmosphere that is relevant, participatory, and motivating for all learners.

Characteristics
Successful middle schools exhibit the following 18 characteristics:

Culture and Community
— Educators respect and value young adolescents.
— The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.
— Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.
— School safety is addressed proactively, justly, and thoughtfully.
— Comprehensive counseling and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.
— The school engages families as valued partners.
— The school collaborates with community and business partners.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
— Educators are specifically prepared to teach young adolescents and possess a depth of understanding in the content areas they teach.
— Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse.
— Health, wellness, and social-emotional competence are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.
— Instruction fosters learning that is active, purposeful, and democratic.
— Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.

Leadership and Organization
— A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.
— Policies and practices are student-centered, unbiased, and fairly implemented.
— Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about young adolescents, equitable practices, and educational research.
— Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.
— Professional learning for all staff is relevant, long term, and job embedded.
— Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

*From **The Successful Middle School: This We Believe**, published by the Association for Middle Level Education. Build your own professional development plan with the Successful Middle School program.*

Visit **amle.org/sms**

This publication from AMLE provides great resources for learning more about middle school students, teachers, policies, and practices. Teachers who have organized book clubs with this text have reported meaningful conversations.

To support initiatives with *The Successful Middle School*, AMLE launched the Successful Middle Schools Assessment and Research Project. To learn more about these resources, I studied the AMLE website and conducted telephone interviews with Stephanie Simpson, CEO Of AMLE, and Dr. Sarah Pennington, director of the research project.

In our conversation, Stephanie emphasized the importance of good research to guide *The Successful Middle School* assessment resources.

> I knew if we were going to make a tool like this for schools, we were going to partner with researchers to make sure that it was valid. It was really important that the student voice was in the loop. I wanted to make sure that we were true to 'today' in this assessment tool. To baseline implementation of the essential characteristics, we created instruments for parents and students so that we could see a 360 view of how the school was interacting with these characteristics and best practices.

As described in the introduction:

> The Assessment is comprised of a series of 139 exemplars based on decades of research into the nature of young adolescent development, school culture and community, instructional practices, and school leadership and structures, all focused specifically on the middle grades. Additionally, we offer parent/family and student surveys to give you a 360 view and insight into areas of alignment. Your assessment includes a detailed report of your results, including recommendations for continued implementation and improvement, delivered by an AMLE coach.

Stephanie is encouraged by the responses from schools and school districts to these resources.

> I thought, out of the gate, maybe, we'll get a couple of schools to take it and it'll slowly catch on. It really caught wildfire, so we're closing in on close to 300 schools that have taken it and we have several large districts that are planning to start, like Hawaii is rolling it out across their schools.

To provide a sense of the survey process, the website shows three exemplar questions.

From Culture and Community items:

9.1b: Teachers understand the impact of current youth culture (e.g., technology the arts, media) on the learning environment.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

From Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment items:

64.9.d: Teachers develop learning tasks that are perceived as achievable, even if difficult, and reflect high expectations for all students.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

From Leadership & Organization items:

107.14.b: School policies are created with the engagement of students and staff voice.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

As these items suggest, surveys are designed to assess perceptions of expectations defined by *The Successful Middle School*, and to do so with precision. In contrast to some of the other school surveys on the market, items have been validated with careful research. Led by Dr. Sarah Pennington, AMLE's research team has examined and refined the *Successful Middle School Assessment*. The team gathered surveys from 72 schools and scrutinized them in detail. As reported in AMLE's *Focus on the Middle* in May 2023,

> This is the first time that we've had a tool that actually measures the characteristics of *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* framework. That's huge! For researchers, this is going to inform future work by providing a more nuanced understanding of how these characteristics work together and interrelate, as well as opportunities to examine the perceptions of different community groups to see where there are gaps and disconnects.

In our phone conversation, Sarah reported that the next phase of research will build on the growing survey data base.

> We will be looking at qualitative data to see what some of the schools are doing that are reporting good alignment from all three groups: students, staff, and parents/caregivers. We want to see what they are doing that can be used to inform other schools of practices and policies.

Everyone involved with the research recognizes the need for up-to-date information. Today's students' and teachers' experiences differ in many ways from those of their counterparts a decade ago, or even five years ago. Sarah is hopeful that the insights from qualitative additions to the research will be especially productive.

> The good news is that we have a set of schools that can give us the best information. They have already opted into the process by sharing their surveys. They have shown a commitment to continuous improvement within the walls of their own buildings. We will be messaging them to say "we are seeing really good things based on your data and would like to see these good things in action so we can learn from them and share that learning with others."

If you and your colleagues would like to be part of this initiative and learn more about your students and their parents/caregivers, check out the information on the AMLE website:
https://www.amle.org/the-successful-middle-school-assessment/

References

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David Strahan is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Western Carolina University. He has served as President of the NC Professors of Middle Level Education (NCPoMLE), as a member of the NCMLE Board, and Chair of the AMLE Research Committee. With Jeanneine Jones and Madison White, he recently authored Teaching Well with Adolescent Learners, co-published by AMLE and Routledge.

Admin Corner

By Lora Austin

Importance of FAILing First

Seek first to understand, right? In order to understand where I am coming from, it is important to know that my school is 87% Free-Reduced Lunch, 80% minority, 47% Multilingual Learners or monitored former ESL students, and approximately 70% Hispanic. And the most important thing that I had to come to understand post-Covid is that my personal mantra had to be: I Must Fail! FAIL, though means First Attempt in Learning. And FAILing is what I did a TON of over these last three years. I had to think outside of the box when trying to get us back on track. Here are some of my EPIC FAILs from the life of a middle school principal that may speak to others:

FAILure #1- NOT delegating enough. You cannot be EVERYTHING to EVERYONE. Students and staff need principals who are "in it" with them, but we don't have to do it FOR them. Knowing the strengths of our own people and putting those strengths into action makes the entire school stronger!

FAILure #2- NOT slowing down when everything is so hectic. The day is jam-packed with meetings, parent calls to return, and students' concerns, and there is an important meeting at the end of the day where you will have to present important information. I should have taken a few moments to go over my presentation one more time and not solely rely on memory because I was flying out of the parking lot to get to the meeting. It is okay to take a minute to get everything in order.

FAILure #3- NOT eating healthy or eating at all during the day. This may seem trivial, but it is true. There are many days when lunch sits on the desk (if you had a chance to pack it) at the end of the day. Then, being ravenous when you get home at 7:30 in the evening is NOT what you need to do for your body. Yes, you get the steps in during the day per your health app data, but you haven't consumed anything since the cup of coffee in the car rider line in the morning. Having snacks that can be those you grab and go, and not potato chips, are helpful. You can eat an apple and walk down the hallway at the same time.

These last three years have also allowed us to explore and truly try things to see what works. One thing is for sure is that it is impossible to make up for the learning losses and close the learning gaps in one year when foundational concepts are lacking. Here are some of the successes that came from multiple FAILs to get things right:

Success #1: Even though so many of our teachers were adept in all things Google Classroom, it was time to move to a uniform Learning Management System that would benefit the students' understanding for future studies. We migrated everyone to CANVAS. It was also time to try out Mastery Pathways and the ease of Canvas interfacing with Power School. The teachers had many parts to work out and frustrations to share, but the Mastery Pathways within Canvas let us focus on what we needed the most - VOCABULARY! If a student can apply the concept terminology, then they have gained the ability to master concepts.

Success #2: Don't stress the other stuff! The state of North Carolina published what students had to know and show in order to be a Level 5 in each of the tested areas (called the Achievement Level Descriptors) after the results of the 2021 EOGs. Those became our focus. We considered these standards our Anchor Standards and the ones on which we would focus. We tore them apart and identified the most important prerequisite skills needed to reach Level 5. We assessed our students to see which skills they needed to hone in order to reach these benchmarks. Giving my teachers the freedom to focus on just the most important standards helped ease the anxiety of trying to fill all the gaps and the breadth of all the standards. What we saw, though, is that this helped our students go deeper and work on mastering those skills. We still have a long way to go, but the freedom of these focus standards really helped!

Success #3: Encouraging staff to FAIL and try new strategies. This goes with successes 1 and 2 as well. Some teachers really embraced the good ol' Thinking Maps/graphic organizers while others worked both independently and collaboratively in their own organic PLCs to explore new ideas like those found in Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics by Peter Liljedahl.

Success #4: Reimagine the media center! We wanted our media center to really become the hub of our school and get every area to utilize it. Our general music classes used the media center to research world music and musical instruments and how to build their own instruments. Using trash found from around the school, the students created their own instruments. Each of our core academic teachers scheduled at least one week of research and collaborated with our media specialist to come up with a product from their week of reading and research.   The FAILs came when the end product/process did not work and had to be reimagined even on a day-to-day basis.   The important part was, though, that the team didn't stop the REIMAGINING process.

Success #5: Make and take time for your people! Make it a point to meet with the student support team (e.g. counselors, social workers, nurses) each week to know and understand the heartbeat of the hallways. Doing this led to our counselors having minute meetings at the beginning of the year with each student, noting specific themes, and designing small groups to tackle the themes that emerged from seeing where our students were. In 2022-2023, it was the theme of grief, as over 10 students had experienced the death of a caregiver/parent within the last 18 months. Building those relationships is key, and this comes from your faculty and staff being heard and valued in the building, too.

 These are just a few of the successes that we had. I cannot take credit for these successes. My team of talented educators made these successes happen. I just had to encourage them to TRY, FAIL, and understand that we weren't there YET until we were pleased with the outcome for our students.

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Lora Austin is a recently retired principal of Burke County Public Schools. She has 28 years in education and is now pursuing teaching after having learned so much from fantastic educators over the years.

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Web page Address: ncmle.org

Visit our website:
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An invitation to join the North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education

The purpose of the North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education is to foster excellence in education for emerging adolescents. Membership in the Association enables one to become well informed about middle level education in our state, to meet colleagues who share similar interests and concerns, and to work to improve our schools through varied activities.

Members received annually:
   *Access to editions of the Journal
   *Access to virtual workshops in collaboration with other
      Association for Middle Level Education affiliates
   *Discounted registration to the annual NCMLE conference

NCMLE has both individual and institutional memberships-

Individual memberships:
   *Full-time educators are $50.00
   *Retired teachers, retired professors, active undergraduate
      college students, and first-year teachers are $25.00

Institutional Memberships are based on a sliding scale and determined by the number of teachers listed in the North Carolina Directory:
   *1-20 teachers, $150.00
   *21-50 teachers, $170.00
   *51 and more teachers, $200.00
All educators on the school roster enjoy the benefits of the school's membership.

The opportunity to join NCMLE and AMLE as a dual membership is available for a reduced rate.

We welcome your participation! To join, simply complete the form and payment options at https://ncmle.org/school-based-membership

We look forward to seeing your ideas and experiences in future issues of the Journal and at our annual conference!

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