MANUSCRIPTS

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 May 15 and deadline for the spring issue is November 15.

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Keeping the Cutting Edge Sharp: Professional Learning and Leadership the Winkler Way

by Daniel G. Maxwell and David James

What words come to mind when you hear Professional Development? If you're like many in education, it may not be the most positive thoughts right off the bat. All too often, professional development in education can feel like an imposition, another box to be checked, a hurdle to be cleared, or worse, a dreaded waste of time that could be better spent working on another task.

Ask yourself another question: How often do you have the opportunity to attend professional development sessions hosted by a current classroom teacher? Critically reflect on who is responsible for professional leadership in your school, district, or organization. Are teachers empowered to be leaders in their classrooms, in the school, and the profession? What opportunities do teachers have to advocate for schools and students? Simply put, do teachers have opportunities to have their voices heard?

In recent years across the state of North Carolina, the answer to these and other questions about teacher leadership and professional learning is increasingly becoming 'No'. From 2018 to 2022, North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (NCTWS) results reveal a gradual decline in teacher agreement averages in the areas of Teacher Leadership and Professional Learning Opportunities (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022). Within the Teacher Leadership construct of the NCTWS (2022), agreement with the following statements declined by 2% statewide, "Teachers are recognized as educational experts," "Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction," "Teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues," and "Teachers have an appropriate level of influence on decision making in this school" (2022 Historical Agree Analysis - Teacher Leadership section).

Individual item analysis within the Professional Learning Opportunities construct of the NCTWS (2022) reflected even greater declines than those of Teacher Leadership, with a 6% decline in teacher agreement with the following statement, "An appropriate amount of time is provided for professional development," and a 5% decline in agreement with "Professional development is differentiated to meet the individual needs of teachers" and "Professional development provides ongoing opportunities for teachers to work with colleagues to refine teaching practices" (2022 Historical Agree Analysis - Professional Learning Opportunities section).

Declines in the NCTWS Teacher Leadership and Professional Learning Opportunities constructs should concern stakeholders statewide, especially when considering that teacher leadership and professional learning are critical to the success of North Carolina public schools. So critical, in fact, that the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2013) aptly placed "Teachers Demonstrate Leadership" as Standard 1 of the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards, which serve as the foundation for educator preparation, teacher evaluation, and professional learning in North Carolina public schools (p. 3). When explaining the importance of the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2013) specifically cast a vision where "Teachers are valued for the contributions they make to their classroom and the school" (p. 2).

Professional Learning and Teacher Leadership Research

When reviewing the data, it is clear opportunities for growth related to teacher leadership and professional learning exist in North Carolina. So, what does the research say about the relationship between teacher leadership and professional learning opportunities? First, we must define what a teacher leader is. Researchers define teacher leaders as those who "lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of that leadership" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 6), a definition shared by Nguyen et al. (2019). In essence, researchers echo the sentiment that leadership is an action, not a title, and for school organizations to foster a community of learning effectively, teachers must first be recognized as the leaders they are (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2019).

However, teacher leadership was not always seen as the cornerstone of professional learning in schools. Historically, professional development featured one-off sessions often hosted by an external presenter serving as an expert in that area, but research suggests this top-down approach perpetuated a deficit view of teachers as leaders (Bergmark, 2023), positioning teachers as lacking the knowledge or skills that must be otherwise provided by external experts (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). This type of traditional professional development–conducted externally, without the input and expertise of teachers–will not effectively address declines in teacher leadership and professional learning opportunities ratings noted statewide from 2018 to 2022.

To begin addressing declines in teacher leadership and professional learning opportunities, a broader definition than the historical top-down one-off professional development lecture or workshop format is required (Bergmark, 2023). Sancar et al. (2021) share additional suggestions that should be defined as professional learning opportunities for teachers, including opportunities for collaboration between teachers, teacher educators, and administrators within and across organizations. Sancar et al. (2021) encourage the creation of a culture of continuous learning by coupling professional learning with collaboration and communication opportunities and implementing these strategically over time. With this more diverse definition of professional development, the playbook of professional learning opportunities is much larger and can encompass many innovative strategies like instructional rounds, peer observation, co-planning and co-teaching, and professional learning communities, among others.

Lloyd and Davis (2018) proposed that a pragmatic approach to professional learning for teachers is possible through a strategic balance that is responsive to the need to provide specific, targeted professional learning to address identified needs while also fostering teacher ownership in the professional learning process. Building on the importance of teacher ownership in Lloyd and Davis's (2018) findings, Bergmark (2023) explicitly states that teachers play an essential role in professional learning opportunities. Bergmark (2023) reports that successful professional learning opportunities must be teacher-driven, with teachers actively facilitating and collaborating with colleagues in these experiences. This teacher-driven model does not mean that administrators are absent from the professional learning process, though. Fostering a teacher-driven professional learning model requires administrative leadership to create the ideal conditions for the success of a teacher-driven professional learning environment.


Teacher Leadership in Action: The Winkler Model

Similar to rating declines statewide, Harold E. Winkler Middle School (HWMS) also saw declines from 2018 to 2022 in Teacher Leadership and Professional Learning Opportunities within NCTWS results. From 2018 to 2022, HWMS noted a 7% decrease in teacher agreement with the statement "Teachers are recognized as educational experts" and a 9% decrease in agreement with "In this school, we take steps to solve problems" (Phillips & James, 2024). HWMS also discovered teacher agreement declined more than 20% to "An appropriate amount of time is provided for professional development" and "Professional development is differentiated to meet the individual needs of teachers" (Phillips & James, 2024). Additionally, HWMS experienced setbacks in student academic outcomes during this period. In 2022, HWMS students did not meet academic growth expectations as reported by the Educator Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS), a significant departure from students either meeting or exceeding expected growth from 2014 through 2019 (Phillips & James, 2024).

During this same period and as part of a district-wide book study of Jimmy Casas' (2017) book Culturize, HWMS asked teachers to share their responses to the question, "Where are we average?" Once again teacher leadership and professional learning opportunities emerged as teachers provided feedback that included suggestions such as "Motivate each other to be teacher leaders," "Use/embrace each member's skills/talents," and "Need some leadership modeling of professional development" (Phillips & James, 2024). As HWMS weighed the NCTWS results and teachers' suggestions, it was clear that a creative solution was needed that could address a variety of challenges simultaneously, including improving teacher leadership, providing opportunities for professional learning, building a culture of learning and community, and personalizing these experiences to suit the needs of HWMS teachers.

In response to these challenges, David James, a seventh-grade teacher leader at HWMS relied on his previous professional experience and began work creating an in-house professional development series called Wolfpack Workshops. Wolfpack Workshops are a series of short, voluntary, and practical professional development sessions led by HWMS teacher leaders. The goal of these workshops was singular: foster a culture of learning amongst the educators at HWMS that, once established, would create consistent opportunities for teacher leadership and professional learning personalized to the needs of the HWMS community.
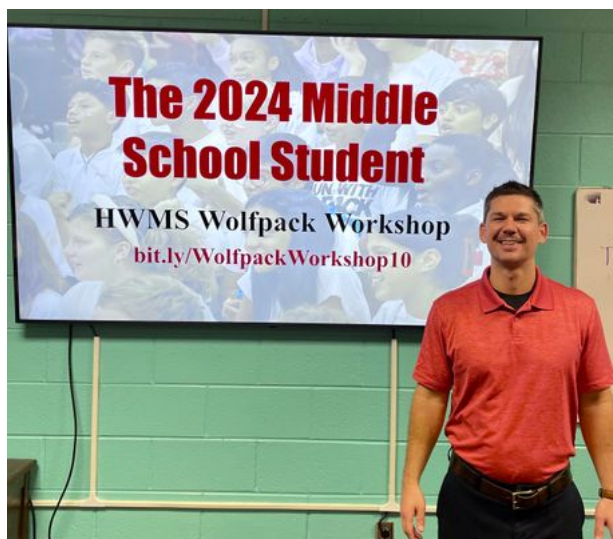

The Wolfpack Workshop model begins with a call for proposals delivered to all teachers at the beginning of the school year. Teachers submit their professional development workshop proposals, which are then reviewed and strategically scheduled throughout the academic year. Time for these teacher-proposed workshops is carved into the schedule each Friday at 8 am before students arrive.

James and the HWMS team recognized that teacher participation and buy-in would be critical to the success and sustainability of the Wolfpack Workshop model, so to promote the sessions, slide decks, and other materials are shared through weekly staff note communications. Participants earn Continuing Education Unit (CEU) credit for each Wolfpack Workshop led or attended, and HWMS leadership has devised other creative ways to incentivize teacher participation including session-specific giveaways offered by individual presenters and Wolfpack Workshop Bingo. Wolfpack Workshop Bingo is a deceptively simple yet effective method for encouraging voluntary participation, as teachers create their own bingo board and label the board with numbers at the beginning of each academic year. Bingo numbers are then randomly generated and shared at the end of each weekly Wolfpack

Workshop, so the more times you attend, the more opportunities you have to win bingo prizes like a Wolfpack Workshop T-Shirt.
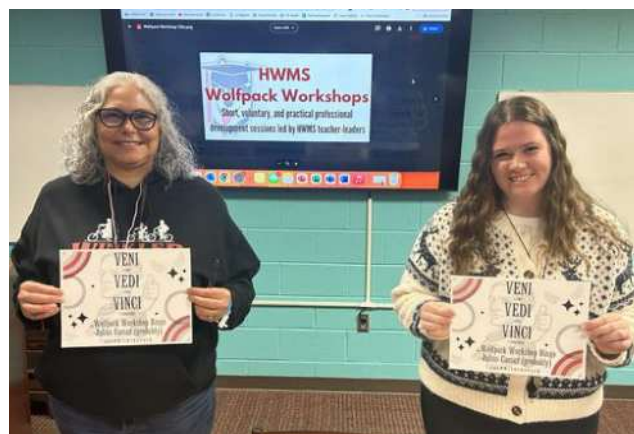
The success of the Wolfpack Workshop model in achieving its goal of creating a culture of learning and teacher leadership was evident almost immediately, with HWMS teacher leadership soaring to the district and state levels. HWMS led all Cabarrus County Schools in the total number of presentations at the 2023 Cabarrus County Schools RISE Conference, with HWMS doubling the number of presentations from any other school in the district (Phillips & James, 2024). HWMS also featured three beginning teacher presentations at the North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Inspire 2024 Conference, hosted in Charlotte in March of 2024 (Dack et al., 2024). The Wolfpack Workshop culture of learning also benefitted HWMS students with 2023 EVAAS growth data revealing a nearly 20% improvement in academic growth for HWMS students, as HWMS once again met expected academic growth (Phillips & James, 2024).
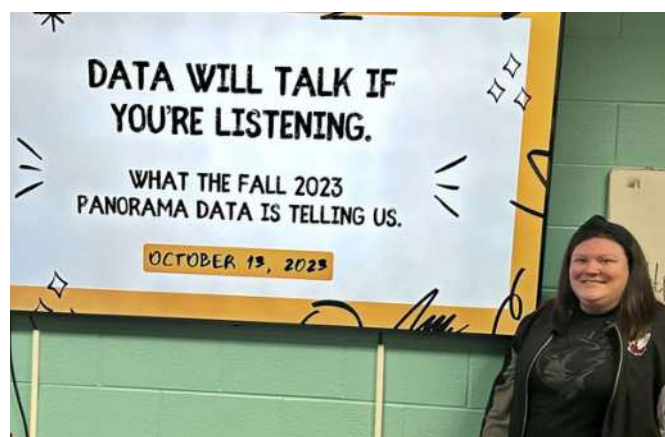
The data points are clear, so how do HWMS teachers feel about the Wolfpack Workshop model? When asked, they love to share their experiences of how these creative workshops have inspired them.

"Wolfpack Workshops help create an inclusive environment that fosters teacher growth and support. I am extremely grateful for the knowledge I have gained from my colleagues and for the opportunity to start each Friday with fellowship and learning" (M. Liddle, HWMS EC teacher, personal communication, March 3, 2024).

"I have found Wolfpack Workshops to be incredibly beneficial to my teaching practice. The small group setting really adds a special element to the learning experience. The sense of fellowship and community that is fostered during these times is truly invaluable" (A. Leslie, HWMS teacher, personal communication, March 3, 2024).

"Wolfpack Workshops have created a sense of connectedness between the staff at Winkler. We look forward to learning from each other every Friday" (D. Pannell, HWMS teacher and beginning teacher mentor, personal communication, March 4, 2024).

"Wolfpack Workshops have effectively created opportunities for leadership at Winkler in the sense that every staff member is encouraged to teach, learn, and grow from them. As a first-year teacher, dedicating my Friday mornings to time spent with other professionals discussing educational topics that directly impact my own students and teaching practices motivates me to pursue my goals constantly. These meetings allow for all staff to have a voice and share their insight, therefore strengthening not only our school culture but our confidence as professional educators as well" (H. Washburn, HWMS beginning teacher, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

"It's refreshing to hear similar victories or challenges our colleagues face and provide clear moments of fluency among staff members in the same building. When we align ourselves as a group, we grow stronger both individually and as a team" (D. Newman, HWMS teacher, personal communication, March 8, 2024).

"I look forward to our Wolfpack Workshops every Friday. I enjoy learning about new topics (or refreshing my brain on old ones) and getting the opportunity to see and visit with colleagues that I may not run into during the school day" (C. Sloan, HWMS EC Teacher, personal communication, March 5, 2024).

"Wolfpack Workshops cultivate a positive community culture at Winkler, providing teachers the opportunity to learn from one another as experts in their pedagogy and share research-based best practices. This allows all teachers–whether you are a special education teacher, art teacher, content-specific teacher, or interventionist–to have another entry point and point of view on a certain topic. As a beginning teacher who presented a Wolfpack Workshop session, I have found it to be a great space to collaborate as constructive stakeholders within our school to address patterns and solutions" (T. Gabriel, HWMS beginning teacher, personal communication, April 16, 2024).

Keeping the Cutting Edge Sharp: Ensuring Effective Professional Learning

Despite troublesome data at the school or state level, it is possible to flip the paradigm on teacher leadership and professional learning opportunities and create a collaborative culture of learning within a school, district, or other organization, just as HWMS accomplished through the Western Workshop model. However, establishing a functional model of professional learning at the organizational level is just the start. Next, we must intentionally and consistently evaluate our professional learning experiences to ensure they are and will remain effective in an ever-changing landscape of middle grades education. What steps, then, can be taken to ensure that professional learning opportunities are, and will continue to remain, effective?

Thomas R. Guskey (2016) distilled five essential stages for an effective evaluation model of professional learning for organizations, providing an essential guide for this process.

Level 1: Gauge the participants' reactions after participating in the professional learning experience. In essence, did the participants enjoy the experience?

Level 2: Gauge participant learning within the professional learning experience. What new knowledge and skills did participants gain after participating in this experience?

Level 3: Shift the focus here to organizational characteristics that either help or hinder the success of professional learning experiences. Are the professional learning experiences aligned with the organization's goals? Are resources made available to ensure effective professional learning? Is the appropriate amount of time provided to encourage professional learning?

Level 4: Gauge the extent to which participants used the knowledge and skills gained from the program in their professional practice. This requires some time to pass before this evaluation can take place, reflecting a need for strategic planning related to the evaluation of professional learning within organizations.

Level 5: Gauge the impact of the professional learning experience on student learning outcomes. How did this professional development benefit students?
Using Guskey's (2016) framework of professional learning evaluation, we can take intentional steps to ensure that professional learning experiences are effective, efficient, and most importantly, positively impact our school communities consistently over time.

Conclusion

Teacher leadership is essential to the success of public schools in North Carolina, and the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (2022) results are clear: Teachers want to be recognized as the experts they are and have their voices heard when it comes to making decisions at the school, district, and state levels. However, developing solutions in response to the noted declines in teacher leadership and professional learning opportunities requires creative thinking and strong leadership, and traditional methods of professional development will not effectively address these challenges. Just as Harold E. Winkler Middle School has experienced a surge of teacher leadership at the school, district, and state levels through its implementation of the Wolfpack Workshop model, we believe a scalable solution to foster teacher leadership and increase access to professional learning opportunities is possible in every school. Leveraging the latest research on effective professional learning and appropriately positioning teachers as essential leaders in developing and delivering professional development can foster a strong and continuous culture of learning that inspires teacher leadership at all levels.

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Teachers are Professionals: Making Decisions Around Literature

by Erica Neal

Abstract

With book banning on the rise in the United States, this is a call for our teachers to become familiar with their state and community rules and requirements around censorship. As licensed professionals, teachers and administrators need to understand their rights and responsibilities around choosing appropriate literature for their diverse student populations in the classroom. Learning about the history, legislation, and data surrounding book challenges is the first step to combatting this critical issue in education.

”The goal of reading teachers should be to allow students the opportunity to read interest-based books to which they can relate, learn from, and connect.”

Book banning has been a rising issue throughout the United States, with increasing numbers of books targeted. According to reports published each year by the Office of Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association (ALA), there were 2,571 unique book titles challenged in 2022. This is an increase from 2021, when a total number of books challenged was 1,858 (ALA, n.d.a.). When discussing books challenged, the focus is on specific titles that have been targeted, rather than the total number of challenges made by all books. The students most affected by book banning and censorship are those students who are already marginalized in education (Ginsberg, 2024.).
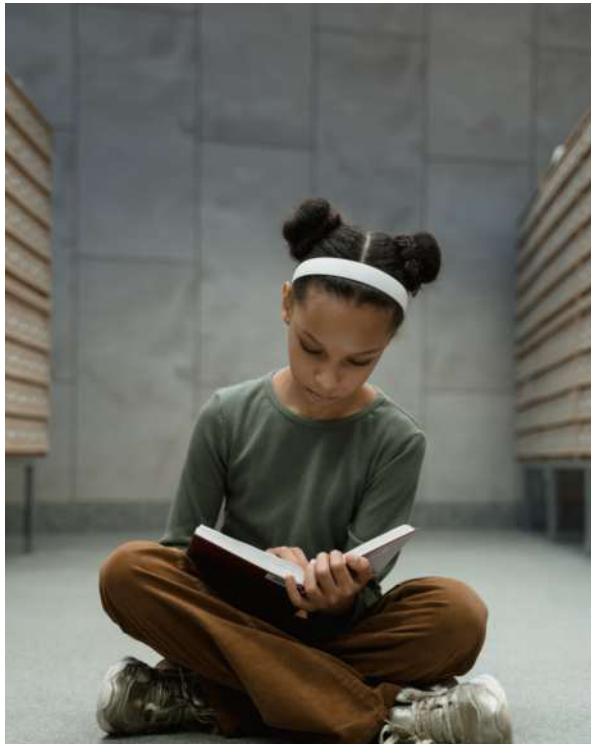
Based on the reports from the ALA, most of the books being targeted were written by or about people who identify with the LGBTQIA+ community, Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. Collins (2023) says that the book itself is not harmful, "It's about refusing to see the value in the perspectives of people on the margins" (p. 59). According to the International Literacy Association's (n.d.) fundamental right number 4 on the Children's Right to Read list, students should have the ability to choose what they are reading. The movement of book banning hinders that right, especially for students who identify with the topics being challenged. Book banning quiets the voices of students typically underrepresented in education, while also limiting an educator's ability to offer students a well-rounded curriculum, denying students the right to a complete educational experience (Alleyne, 2022). Removing these books causes those students to feel removed from reading education.

Not only does this pose a problem for students, but it also affects the teachers, who are professionals in the field and need to be able to make curriculum decisions on a regular basis. It has been reported that teachers believe that book bans have a negative impact on their profession, the classroom experience, and student learning (First Book Staff, 2023). According to First Book Staff, two-thirds of educators feel that the book censorship that is happening in schools negatively impacts their ability to teach their students. Among those teachers, the majority are working in low-income communities with the populations that are underrepresented in the curriculum. First Book Staff (2023) found that 72% of teachers believe this has direct implications on student reading engagement, with 78% of students being more likely to read more given the option of reading a banned book. Therefore, this is an issue that educators need to familiarize themselves with, understanding their rights to make curriculum choices that best meet the needs of their students.

Background

Throughout history, book censorship has been an issue, dating back centuries in the United States, as well as in other countries. In the past, censorship was connected to the idea of obscenity (Steele, 2020). Steele discusses how censorship also stemmed from racial or ethnic background of the authors in public libraries, as well. Previously, the main goal of censorship was to diminish the voices of people, focusing on religious views, race, and LGBTQ materials (Pickering, 2023). According to Pickering, "The tipping point, however, was probably the

move toward publishing children's literature that was not designed solely to morally prime children into being good children" (p. 2). This is when the schools began to feel the effects of censorship, only continuing to increase throughout the United States during movements, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement and the growth of the LGBTQ+ community.

Teachers need the ability to design instruction that is tailored to all students' needs and interests. According to Gallagher and Kittle (2018), a well-rounded reading curriculum involves a mixture of independent reading, book clubs, and whole-class texts, giving students the ability of choice reading most of the year. Access to diverse texts is needed for this to occur. The book-banning movement has a direct effect on not only students but also the teachers. Knowledge of the current censorship climate could restrict new teachers, who are worried about the impacts of these issues within their school district and classroom from going into the field (Sachdeva et al., 2023). Based on the study conducted by Sachdeva et al., new educators viewed themselves as having the role of protecting students' right to read (2023). These teachers could use their knowledge of the instructional material and school district policies to defend the freedom of choice with literature. Sachdeva et al. (2023) state, "These educators understood that the symbolic battle was for the rights of young people to choose what to read and to

have access to materials that are relevant" (p. 51). One teacher in this study spoke directly of the LGBTQ population, saying that she could not turn her back on them.

The learning environment that students are in has an impact on their ability to learn and understand experiences other than their own, and, without an inclusive space, students will disassociate the classroom from real life (Gay, 2018). According to Dougherty et al. (2022), teachers can create a safe, inclusive environment for students by allowing the classroom to become a community of readers. The author continues by explaining that giving students choice builds autonomy and a sense of belonging, which ultimately increases reading engagement. Therefore, teachers need to have knowledge of their rights around the curriculum to support themselves when determining the literature introduced in the classroom, protecting themselves from resistance from parents and community members.

Data

Each year, the American Library Association (ALA) releases information on banned book data in America. Based on the data reported, book banning and censorship is a growing issue throughout the country. According to the ALA (n.d.a.), in 2014, there were a total of 183 reported book challenges across the United States. This number increased in 2021, totaling 1,858 (ALA, n.d.a.). The newest data presented by the ALA shows that in 2023, there were a total of 4,240 books challenged for censorship (ALA, n.d.b.). When focusing on book challenges, it is important to note that this is the total number of unique books challenged. The increase from 183 to 4,240 has been dramatic from 2014 to 2023, showing this is a growing issue in our country.

PEN America writers Friedman and Johnson (2022) note that 41% of books banned include LGBTQIA+ themes, characters, and authors. The second highest topic targeted was characters of color at 40%. Following these, the next three subject matters include sexual content, titles with

issues of race and racism, and titles focusing on themes of activism. The newest report from the ALA (n.d.b.) reports that, in 2023, 47% of the titles challenged are representative of the LGBTQIA+ population and BIPOC population. Young adult material is the most frequent type of book banned, taking up 56% of materials challenged (Meehan & Friedman, 2023). Based on this data, it can be concluded that materials of underrepresented students are typically a target for book banning and censorship, showing that teachers need to provide diverse reading material, meeting the needs and interests of all students.

Federally, the banning book law is primarily governed by the *Board of Education v. Pico* (1982). In this case, the Supreme Court held that the materials presented in school should have value to the school's educational mission while meeting the needs of the students. It was also stated that school boards should consider the First Amendment rights of students, ensuring books cannot be removed based on the premise of disagreeing with the content. This should be a basis used when teachers are looking to discuss books that are being used in the classroom.

At the state level, regulations vary from state to state. As an example, North Carolina has policies surrounding book censorship at the state and district level. Childress (2022) discusses the pushback against censorship within the state. The author shares that there are opposing viewpoints surrounding book titles and how censorship should be handled. In the article, it is discussed that the increase in issues appears to be an extension of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) bans that have been employed in education recently, as well. The article focuses on a specific case where a teacher chose a book list from the approved book choices and still received backlash from parents, consisting of complaints to the administration and the board of the school district. The parents felt that the book chosen was inappropriate for students to read. This is why it is essential for the district to have a specific policy surrounding book choice so that teachers are familiar with what it requires. Senate Bill 90 (2023), which has a section focused on curriculum with a definition of "harmful to minors" speaks to the issue of censorship. The bill states:

> G.S. 14-190.13 defines 'harmful to minors' as the quality of any material (defined as picture, drawing, video recording, film, or other visual depiction or representation not consisting entirely of written words) or performance that depicts sexually explicit nudity or sexual activity (Senate Bill 90, 2023).

The criteria in the Senate Bill includes specifics regarding if the average adult would find it offensive and if the material lacks literary, artistic, political, or scientific value for students. Therefore, the suggestion would be for each school district to have a specific policy centered around the state policy that is already in place, allowing teachers to have necessary support in place.

Recommendations

To help prohibit the additional rise in the number of books challenged, teachers and administrators need to be familiar with local laws around book banning. Teachers could become familiar with the laws and policies protecting the literature in their school, which

would be helpful when it comes to issues censorship. With reading engagement on a decline, this issue is pressing because, based on research, much of the decline in motivation is due to the educational environment not meeting the needs of students (Alley, 2019). The need for students' autonomy when controlling decisions, including what they are reading, allows students to feel secure and connected to their education. Each state, and typically school district, has rules related to book censorship. In North Carolina specifically, using Senate Bill 90 (2023) as a guide, while focusing on the term "harmful to minors," districts could
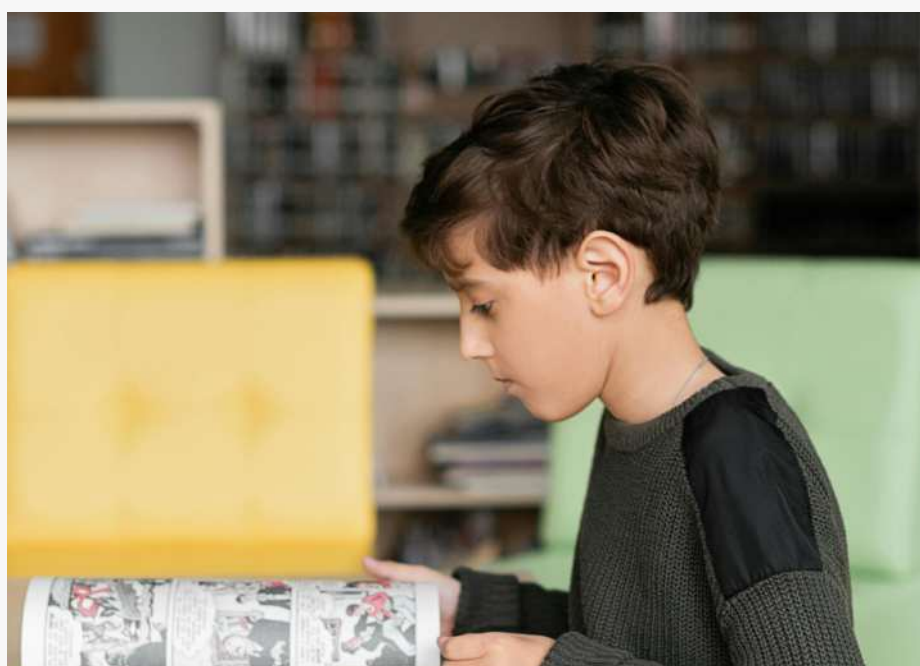
determine exactly what is harmful for minors in their specific buildings, outlining exactly what their policy should look like. Once policies are created, teachers and administrators should become familiar with those rules. If the reasoning for targeting the book is outside those rules, teachers and administrators can use the policy as an argument to stand by their curricular choice.

Based on a case study conducted by Sachdeva et al. (2023), focusing on teacher perspectives of book banning, one educator described a situation in which they had been challenged for a book choice that they made in the classroom. This is not an uncommon

situation for educators to face today. It is representative of a fear that many teachers have. According to Sachdeva et al. (2023), the teachers felt that their role should be to protect the readers in the classroom by defending their right to read what they choose. The findings showed that it is essential for teachers to understand their rights as an educator to defend the freedom of choice for reading. Sachdeva et al. (2023) state, "Librarians and educators today find themselves called to become warriors in the current culture wars as they seek to ensure that all students have access to what they choose to read" (p. 52). Therefore, it is recommended for teachers to familiarize themselves with the current policies and laws set up in their state and school district. Teachers are licensed professionals, the experts around the

curriculum, and they should have the opportunity to create instructional materials that meet each students' diverse needs. If there are no policies in place, it would be recommended to follow the federal policy stated earlier related to censorship or help facilitate a committee within a school district to create a school-wide censorship policy for teachers to implement.

Conclusion

In many instances, teachers will still receive backlash for book selections for classroom materials. A suggestion for this circumstance includes providing

options for books when the material could be deemed inappropriate based on events and themes. This will provide those who feel their child should not be reading a particular book option an alternative. This gives the teacher protection, while still exposing students to rich, diverse materials that all students can engage.

Based on the data and information presented, this is a call to teachers and administrators to curb the issue of book banning. It is important to work with the administration when determining book choices, ensuring that the books follow the policy that the district has set up regarding books and book selection. Making this communication ahead of time will help to ensure teacher support if the need arises. As reading motivation continues to decrease (Alley, 2019), the need for student choice and connections to reading is necessary, and it is at the hands of educators and administrators to protect students' right to read. The goal of reading teachers should be to allow students the opportunity to read interest-based books to which they can relate, learn from, and connect.

Erica Neal was a middle school English Language Arts teacher for 14 years. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Curriculum and Educator Development and Literacy.

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Empowering Students: Cultivating Efficacy Through Classroom Leadership

by Bonnie Roop

Imagine standing before a classroom, delivering an awe-inspiring lesson aimed to engage students through relevant and active learning. Amidst the array of angelic adolescent faces, many appear disengaged, distracted, and wholly uninterested. Though hours were spent creating active and engaging learning experiences based on best educational practices, there remains the pervasive challenge of student apathy. Beneath the surface of this disengagement lies the concept of self-efficacy: the belief in one's capacity to accomplish tasks and achieve goals (Bandura, 1977). In the educational realm, self-efficacy influences student engagement, perseverance, and academic achievement. Understanding and cultivating self-efficacy is imperative in fostering a vibrant conducive learning environment.

Understanding Self Efficacy

Albert Bandura (1997) describes self-efficacy as "a major basis of action. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act" (pp.2-3). The definition is simple enough; however, it holds a broad range of important psychosocial implications.

When students have high self-efficacy they do well on assessments, are engaged and proactive in their learning, and show a strong intrinsic motivation to learn from mistakes and overcome obstacles. As such, low self-efficacy becomes a self-limiting factor. The expectation of academic failure overcomes the desire to try, thereby creating the apathy seen so often in our students.

Self-efficacy "affects an individual's choice of activities, effort, and persistence" (Artino, 2012, p.78). Educators gape when our most apathetic student explains how they stay up all night attempting to pass a level in a video game and then stare blankly at the wall when asked to complete an assignment. Students choose these activities because they have a high self-efficacy in these tasks. They believe they can achieve their goal, making it to the next level, because they passed the level before, watched others complete the level, and are immediately rewarded with the pleasurable biofeedback of accomplishment.

As shown in Figure 1, Bandura identified four sources of efficacy as performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal (Bandura 1977). Performance accomplishments include how students interpret results, whether they are grades, achievement recognition, or task completion, and are based on preset goals. One student may struggle to complete an assigned task in a class period. Finishing a task is then interpreted as a performance accomplishment by that student regardless of the assigned grade. Students who watch peers and mentors succeed gain a vicarious experience and a positive source of self-efficacy. 'If he can do it, then I can do it,' is a phrase often repeated in the classroom. Activities such a Peer Review and Expert Students provide a double source of self-efficacy in performance accomplishments and vicarious experience. Verbal persuasion is most commonly used in the classroom setting as teachers beg and plead with students to turn in work. This is also more effective with adolescents' growing understanding of social relationships when peers encourage and assist students. Emotional arousal refers to the state of mind a student experiences when attempting a task. For example, when confronted with a math problem, I tend to sweat, tear up, and get angry, all of which are counterproductive to the completion of the task. In this state, my self-efficacy for completing the task is reduced. On the other hand, providing a relaxing environment can build a student's efficacy in that challenging task as it reduces the heart rate and calms the mind to focus.

Self-Efficacy and Identity

Self-efficacy is tied to our students' growing identity. As our students gain an understanding of themselves in the classroom, they develop their belief in their academic abilities. 'I'm not a reader,' is often the first thing a student tells an ELA teacher when asked to read for a 15-minute block. They have self-identified as a nonreader based on past failures and thus do not have the efficacy to try. "I am not a math person," is the first thing I say when confronted with long rows of numerical data at a data meeting. These examples are based on past classroom experiences that have formed our academic identities. As students move through academics, they begin to identify themselves as learners versus non-learners in specific academic tasks based on past performance assessments. Students who experience repeated successes have a stronger self-efficacy and tend to view failure as a stepping stone to success. Those with lower self-efficacy view success as unattainable and therefore no
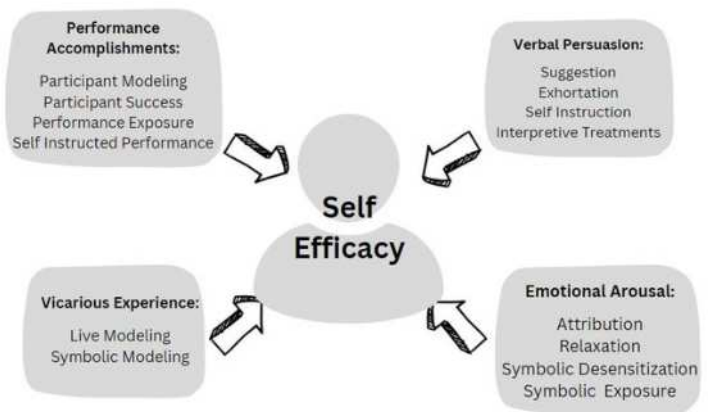
longer make the attempt. Intentionally incorporating strategies to enhance student self-efficacy boosts motivation and engagement while influencing their perception of success. Research by Strahan, Jones, and White (2022) emphasizes the roles educators play as live modelers, shaping student's identity, stating, "the classroom context and teacher's control of it can hinder or enhance identity development in students" (p.116). Studies show that performance assessments are the most influential source of self-efficacy; therefore, including appropriately challenging and collaborative tasks in the classroom can scaffold success, thereby increasing student self-efficacy.

Leadership Implementation Strategies

With this understanding in mind, I was determined to grow student self-efficacy through the 2023-2024 school year. I intentionally implemented strategies that would provide Bandura's (1977) sources of self-efficacy throughout the lessons, assignments, and roles in the classroom. An efficacy survey at the beginning of the year provided the data needed to set forth on the journey to replace apathy with efficacy.

Leading Others: Greeter

By tending to student self-efficacy, integrating classroom roles can serve as a powerful tool. In their book *When Kids Lead* (2020), Todd Nesloney and Adam Dovico offer suggestions that contribute to enhancing both individual and collective self-efficacy among students. One effective approach included classroom jobs. For instance, the greeter. The greeter was tasked with welcoming any person who entered the classroom, introducing themselves, and assuming responsibility for providing information about the ongoing lesson. They maintained their job for one month and then trained the new greeter in the protocol they developed. Initially, only a few students would volunteer for a position like the greeter. After watching others perform and the compliments often rained upon them, interest increased among other students. Through consistent performance in this responsibility, students developed a sense of confidence in their ability to meet with unfamiliar adults and fulfill their responsibilities. Passing on their role ensured a cycle of self-improvement and peer modeling. Through this position, they experienced performance exposure and desensitization leading to a positive performance accomplishment. For others, they provided live modeling displaying a positive vicarious exposure. Through implementing this one position, all students experienced a source of positive self-efficacy.

Leading Others: Mischief Assistant

Todd Nesloney and Adam Dovico (2020) noted, "Leadership can flourish from the most unpredictable of places when fed by passion," and the mischief assistant was born (p. 120). While unconventional, this position served to inject moments of levity and spontaneity into the classroom. This person was chosen as needed and would be responsible for listening for a keyword, phrase, or song to create a little bit of chaos, like spraying silly string or blowing bubbles. Through these breaks in routine, students experienced moments of emotional relaxation and enjoyment while cultivating a sense of agency in contributing to the classroom dynamic. The mischief assistant provided a positive source of emotional arousal allowing students to relax into their learning.

Leading Others: Website Committee

Another form of leading others is committee membership. A Website Committee was created to develop and update a class website. Students were asked to apply and interview for the positions of copy editor, section journalist, and the most popular of all: photographer. Meeting twice a week to update sections and photographs on the website, students were responsible for maintaining all aspects of the site. Positions were held for a quarter before interviewing and training new members. Self-efficacy was scaffolded by having a career photographer provide live modeling and selecting the best pictures to post on the website. Their performance assessment was the final website, and, as they grew in confidence, the website became more detailed and creative. They had the opportunity to present their site when another teacher asked them to teach her Science Club how to create and maintain a website. The website committee came to life as they shared their expertise, modeled the creation and maintenance, and photographed members. For these students, leading others built their self-efficacy in these tasks because they gained positive feedback from all four sources of self-efficacy: performance accomplishments, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and emotional arousal.

Leading Oneself: Standard Dissection

Leading others is an effective model for building efficacy; however, to be a true leader of others, one must first lead oneself. A structured approach to dissecting academic standards proves a foundational step in cultivating student self-efficacy. Deconstructing a complex academic standard into manageable components can empower students to take ownership of their learning and develop confidence in their ability to achieve mastery. This method involves guiding students through the process of rewriting the standard in their own words. For example, using ELA standard RL8.2:

> Determine a theme of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot: write an objective summary of the text.

Figure 2

Standard Dissection
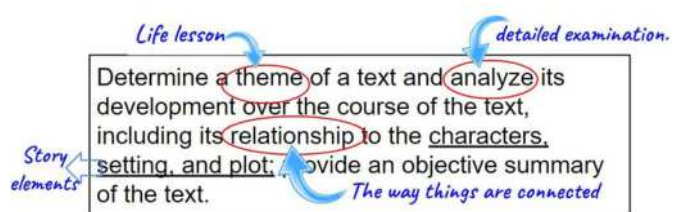
Mastery is using quotes from the story that tell how the characters, setting and plot are connected to the lesson as the story goes from beginning to end.

Students were asked to silently write three words they thought were the most important and why. They picked out words like theme, analyze, and relationship and then defined those words in their terms. 'Theme' was a

life lesson, 'analyze' meant to break something in parts, and 'relationship' was how things were connected. They were given three minutes to discuss with their groups the criteria for mastering the standard. Students responded with insightful answers of, "What is the theme?" and "How is the theme connected to the plot?" This exercise is displayed in Figure 2. With these answers, they rewrote the standard to show what mastery looks like.

Mastery is using quotes from the story that tell how the characters, setting, and plot are connected to the lesson as the story goes from beginning to end.

This became an anchor chart posted in the room for reference and served as their goal as they practiced the skill. Including academic conversation in the standard dissection allowed them to explore the skill, some assuming the lead while others took the first follower position. Through dialogue and peer interactions, students refined their understanding of the standard's components and the criteria of mastery, building their self-efficacy through self-instruction and participant modeling.

Leading Oneself: Learning Opportunity Sheet

The Learning Opportunity Sheet (LOS) is an amalgam of a typical playlist and choice board. An example of my design is displayed in Figure 3. It contains a list of assignments that students must complete by the end of the week and offers options for early finishers.

Figure 3
Learning Opportunity Sheet

The week would begin with a whole class mini-lesson then go over the LOS. This would be the only time questions or instructions were reviewed, and they were advised to rely on resources in the room, e.g. each other or rereading the instructions. Students were given class time to complete the LOS throughout the week. During this time, they could talk with their groups and sit in comfortable seating. This allowed time to work in small groups or conferences with individual students. The LOS included learning opportunities such as viewing an informative slideshow, completing guided notes, and watching an Edpuzzle video that reiterated the mini-lesson. These tasks help students assimilate the information in a variety of ways. The next steps had them demonstrate their understanding of the information such as a sorting activity or a short quiz. The final step would be an application of the skill in a new format. The LOS takes them through all the phases of learning new material and is self-paced. They may take as much time as needed on each activity as long as it is submitted by the due date.

The LOS allowed for easy differentiation for low-performing, English Language Learners and high flyers. Best of all, it gave them ownership of their learning. They were required to take leadership of their time, their understanding, and mastery of the skill. The LOS gave them the power to try, practice, fail, try again, and succeed. Henry, an easily distracted honors student, commented that the LOS helped build their confidence the most, "Because I know I have the ability to complete my LOS even though they are hard," (personal communication, March 28, 2024). While Julia, who glared at the list of assignments every week, stated, "I think it helped me build confidence because I thought I wouldn't be able to complete the LOS's because they were all long and had multiple steps to them until I finally did one," (personal communication, March 28, 2024). This strategy gave students time for self-instruction, while allowing conversation gave students a vicarious experience through live modeling.

Dissecting the standard provided a goal for student self-efficacy, and the LOS provided the sources. Allowing students to use each other as resources furnished the participant modeling, performance exposure, and self-instructed performance, while facilitation and feedback during small groups and individual conferencing provided verbal persuasion. Seeing their classmates succeed in work completion offered a vicarious experience. These strategies were an intentional scaffold for student self-efficacy.

Leading Oneself: Reading and Writing time

Building student self-efficacy can also come in surprising forms. Reading and writing activities were implemented to encourage independent reading and reflection not with the intentionality of increasing student self-efficacy. All students were asked to read for fifteen minutes at the beginning of class, and then reflect on their reading during five minutes of writing time. This time the goal was to make connections and finish a book. Sometimes they read their independent reading book and other times their chosen book club book. When asked what activity in the classroom made them the most confident, 24 out of 61 students surveyed said the reading time. Mia, a struggling reader at the beginning of the year, noted, "It made me feel more comfortable when it came to reading assignments and tests," (personal communication, March 28, 2024). The focused time spent reading and writing reflections increased student self-efficacy through Bandura's (1977) description of emotional arousal. They were able to relax into the goal of finishing the book because this activity was self-paced and self-instructive. Writing time allowed them the opportunity to assimilate their understanding of their reading and to make connections with the story. Few of my students enjoyed writing at the beginning of the year. Joshua was one of the most reluctant early writers; however, he ended the year by describing the benefits of writing time, "It helped me build my confidence by just looking and seeing the differences between my writing and everyone else's," (personal communication, March 28, 2024). Building students' efficacy is something we all do even without intentionally including strategies. Many students reported this time built their efficacy more than any other strategy. Intentionally including activities that specifically build self-efficacy along with our standard confidence-building strategies, will significantly enhance the effectiveness of scaffolding academic self-efficacy.

Survey Results

I began the 2023-2024 school year with a professional development goal to increase student self-efficacy. I conducted an informal teacher-driven survey of 61 8th-grade students at the beginning of the year as a preassessment of their perceived efficacy levels. To track changes after implementing the described strategies, the same survey was administered at the end of the third quarter. The efficacy survey, seen in the appendix, was anonymous and consisted of eight questions with responses ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' with point values assigned to each answer (5 for Strongly Agree to 1 for Strongly Disagree). On both surveys, the highest efficacy

score stood at 40 while the lowest ranked 1. It is important to note that many of the participating students were labeled 'honors' and already showed a strong academic confidence as evidenced by no student scoring below a 10 on either survey.

As shown in Figure 4, Student Efficacy 2023-2024, the initial survey showed a majority of students falling into the midrange score of 21-30 with a scattering of high and low scores. However, after intentionally implementing the strategies described in this article throughout the school year, students showed a noticeable increase in self-efficacy with the majority of students moving into the 31-40 range.

Students were also asked which classroom activity they thought helped increase their confidence in English Language Arts (ELA) providing the comments in the above sections. These comments provided valuable insight into the effectiveness of the various strategies.

The data presented in the graph shows an increase in student self-efficacy when confronted with academic tasks. This positive trend underscores the effectiveness of providing leadership opportunities (leading others and leading oneself) in cultivating efficacy among students. This survey confirms that intentional application of leadership opportunities can effectively increase student self-efficacy.

Figure 4
Student-Efficacy 2023-2024

Student Efficacy 2023-2024
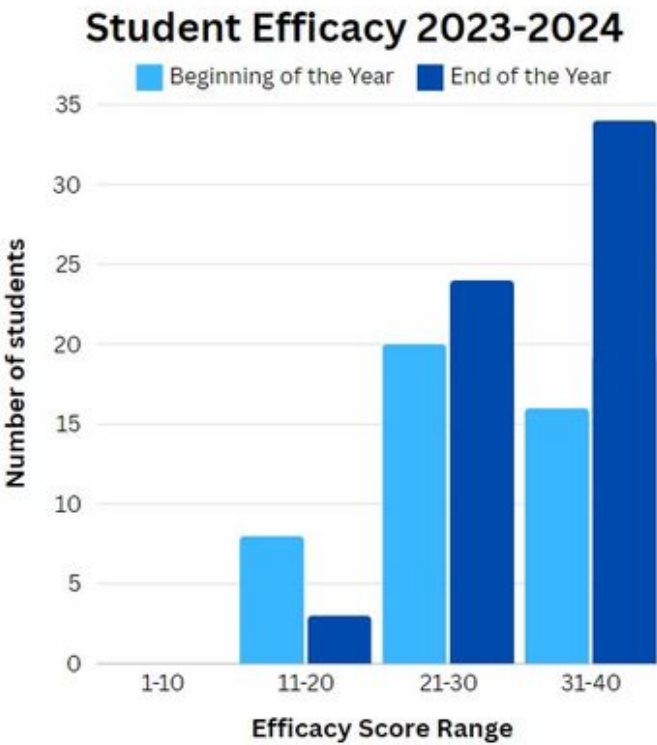
Conclusion

Based on research over the last 20 years, self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of academic achievement and performance (Artino, 2012). It is a powerful force shaping engagement and motivation in the classroom. The implementation of leadership opportunities can catalyze bolstering student belief in their capabilities by providing platforms for performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. Equipping students with the power to lead their learning through standard dissection, self-paced activities such as the Learning Opportunity Sheet, and dedicated reading and writing moments cultivates high self-efficacy in students. More than academic success we want our students to believe in themselves, to believe they can chart their path to success. Principal Baruti Kafele (2013) coined the term attitude gap and defined it as "the gap between those students who have the will to achieve excellence and those who do not" (p. 14). By nurturing students' self-efficacy, through leadership roles in the classroom and in their learning, we can help them close that attitude gap and unlock their inner brilliance.

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Appendix:

Self-Efficacy Survey Questionnaire:

1. I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Agree

2. When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Agree

3. In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes that are important to me.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Agree

4. I believe I can succeed at almost any endeavor to which I set my mind.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Agree

5. I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Agree

6. I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Agree

7. Compared to other people, I can do most tasks very well.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Agree

8. Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Agree

AI in the Classroom:
Revolutionizing Learning or Just Hype?

by Lane Wesson and Joey Lord

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has no standardized definition. However, for this article, AI will be defined as an area of computer science that focuses on building and developing machines with the ability to perform tasks that would normally require human intelligence. There are two levels of functioning AI being used today, ranging from simple machines programmed for specific tasks to more complex systems that can learn and adapt. AI is used in reactive machines, which are the most basic type, where it responds to an environment without memory of past interactions (IBM Data & AI Team, 2023). An example of this would be a chess program that chooses the best move based on the current board state. Limited memory machines can store information about past experiences and use it to inform current decisions (IBM Data & AI Team, 2023). For example, a recommendation system may consider your past purchases to suggest new items. AI is already widely used in many aspects of our daily lives, from facial recognition software on our cell phones to chatbots and self-driving cars. As the field continues to develop, we can expect even more transformative applications of AI in the future.

There is a growing trend of AI being used in PK-12 classrooms across the country, with the potential to benefit both students and teachers. According to an article in EdWeekly (2023), RAND conducted a national survey asking 1,020 teachers and district leaders about their use of AI tools in the field. Overall, 18% of teachers surveyed said they regularly use AI, including virtual learning platforms that use AI, adaptive learning software, chatbots, and virtual assistants. Forbes also surveyed 500 practicing educators and 55% surveyed indicated that AI has improved educational outcomes (Forbes Advisor, 2023). Over 60% of educators surveyed by Forbes indicated that they have integrated AI into their classrooms to improve and streamline daily teaching responsibilities. These teachers then went on to indicate the various types of AI-based tools they have used in their respective classrooms. Fifty-one percent of those surveyed have used AI-powered educational games, while 43% have used adaptive learning platforms, and 41% have used automated grading and feedback systems (Forbes Advisor, 2023).

There are many potential benefits for teachers and students using AI in various educational settings. Teachers can reduce their workloads by automating tasks like grading multiple-choice tests or providing general feedback. AI can also be used to analyze student data identifying areas of strength and weaknesses, allowing teachers to personalize their strategies and provide targeted support. Teachers can also use AI-powered translation tools to bridge language

barriers and foster better communication between teachers and students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Students are also beneficiaries of AI implementation in the classroom. AI can be used to personalize learning by tailoring experiences to individual learning needs. Programs like iReady adjust difficulty based on a student's performance, offering extra practice on challenging topics or accelerating progress in mastered areas. These programs are already being used in classrooms across the nation. AI-powered tutors and interactive activities can be used to make learning more interactive and engaging, fostering a love of knowledge. AI can also be a powerful tool for students with learning and physical disabilities. Text-to-speech software can help with reading difficulties, and AI-powered captioning can improve comprehension for students who have difficulty hearing. ChatGPT recently released an AI tool that uses the camera on a cell phone to "see" around the user, which could be invaluable to the visually challenged. AI has the potential to revolutionize PK-12 education if teachers build an innovative AI toolbox.

AI's Toolbox for Teachers

Experts in the field of AI have developed a framework for incorporating AI into educational settings. For example, TeachAI has developed a toolkit to help "education authorities, school leaders, and teachers create thoughtful guidance to help their communities realize the potential benefits of incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) in primary and secondary education while understanding and mitigating the potential risks" (TeachAI.org, 2024).

TeachAI has developed a three-stage process for launching AI in an educational system (Figure 1), the first of which is to create guidance and policies that address immediate issues regarding AI in the classroom. In January 2024, the NC Department of Public Instruction published a document titled "NC Generative AI Implementation Recommendations and Considerations for PK-12 Public Schools," which is intended to give guidance and policies specific to NC public school settings (NCDPI, 2024). Before teachers begin implementing AI, it is recommended that they read any policy documents written to guide the implementation process.

Most classroom teachers have used AI capabilities without even knowing. For example, teachers have used generative AI like ChatGPT, Google Gemini, or Bing Chat to strengthen lesson plans, assist students struggling with assignments, and provide general feedback. GoogleNotebookLM is an AI interface that allows teachers and students to move from reading a text to asking questions to writing. Using Google NotebookLM, teachers can create a study guide, frequently asked questions, and generate an overview simply by uploading content in text, pdf, copied text, or a Google Drive. Google has also added an audio option where the user can interact with what is, essentially, their own personal AI partner.

Diffit is an AI-powered tool that allows teachers to quickly and easily differentiate instruction in their classrooms. After inserting any text into the Diffit prompt, it then converts the text content to any reading level. However, the experience doesn't stop there. By using Diffit, teachers can also create notes, study guides, and vocabulary lists while providing references to all resources provided (University of Cincinnati, 2024).

Figure 1
A Framework for Incorporating AI in an Education System
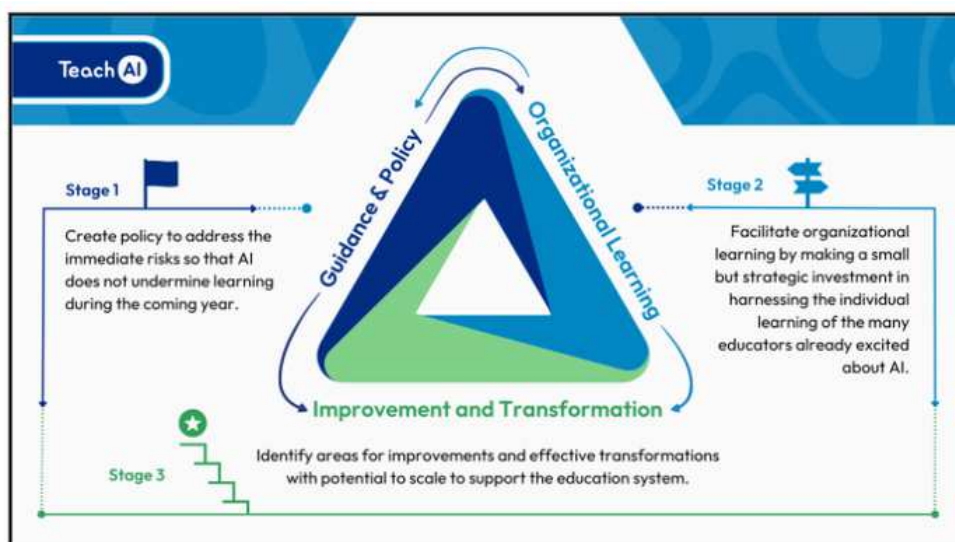
Lastly, Magic School AI can help teachers create lesson plans, design assignments, and develop materials all of which are aligned to standards. This AI has access to more than 25 language supports. Like Diffit, Magic School AI can also rewrite existing content on various reading levels. However, a limitation of this AI is that it only has information until 2021 and could produce false or incorrect results (University of Cincinnati, 2024).

Regardless of the AI source, all users must practice discernment when using generative AI. Teachers must verify content for accuracy before sharing it with students. This is a limitation, for now, with all AI tools being used.

Beyond the Technology

Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies are powerful tools rapidly transforming higher education and quickly advancing into PK-12 teaching and learning. "Since ChatGPT was introduced in late 2022, it's been embraced by college professors for its ability to tailor instruction, earned a passing score on sections of the bar exam, and even completed freshman year at Harvard University with a 3.34 GPA" (Blackburn, 2023, p. 1). According to the RAND survey, the majority of teachers report they are not consistently using AI and are still struggling to comprehend how this new technology might play a role in their classrooms (Diliberti et al., 2024). However, while AI offers new and exciting possibilities for the classroom, one irreplaceable component is necessary to develop, nurture, and cultivate a well-rounded young mind: the human touch. It is imperative not to overlook the role of the teacher in the classroom. This is particularly important in the early grades where the impact of psychosocial development is the greatest. While AI can provide significant learning opportunities for students, human educators are invaluable in fostering essential life skills such as critical thinking, social skills, and emotional intelligence that AI technologies simply cannot match.

The Human Touch

Teaching is not simply just the transfer of knowledge. Teachers are critical-thinking champions. They create learning environments where assumptions are challenged, curiosity is sparked, and students learn to grapple with ideas while asking and answering tough questions, analyzing information, and forming conclusions. Guided by their teacher's experience and awareness, students develop independent thought and critical thinking skills through back-and-forth dialogue and open-ended discussions.

Teachers are social skill sculptors. Classrooms are tiny microcosms of society where students are learning to manage personal interactions, collaborate effectively, and build healthy relationships. By providing opportunities for students to work collaboratively, conduct respectful debates, and engage in activities that build empathy, teachers become coaches and facilitators who play a crucial role in how students learn to appropriately interact with one another. Guided by a human teacher's understanding of social and group dynamics, these interactions are invaluable for students to develop strong social skills.

Learning is an emotional, human experience; therefore, teachers are more than just instructors. Teachers are emotional intelligence masters. Teachers can read a student's body language and sense when a student is frustrated, struggling, or confused and can adapt their approach to accommodate the learner. Teachers also provide a safe place for students to overcome challenges, celebrate achievements, express themselves, and build resilience. This human connection is vital in developing strong emotional intelligence that fosters a love of learning.

Professional Development

As AI technology continues to advance and take root in society, it is essential to equip classroom teachers with the most current resources, knowledge, training, and skills to appropriately integrate them into schools. To effectively integrate AI into PK-12 requires more than just introducing new technology; it involves an intentional approach that enriches learning and fosters human connection. Professional development opportunities are essential for the success of AI implementation, providing educators with the knowledge and skills to select appropriate AI tools, analyze data, and foster student relationships.

Not all digital tools are created equally, and the AI tools at our disposal today can be as harmful as they are helpful. Educators must be trained to discern the difference. AI tools should be evaluated based on their pedagogical value-added, alignment with learning objectives, and ability to meet student needs. It is also important that teachers are supported in understanding the capabilities, limitations, and potential biases of AI, so they can select the appropriate tools that will align with their personal teaching goals. Ongoing professional development is essential to staying relevant with new AI tools, best practices in technology integration, and student engagement methods.

AI tools often generate an abundance of student data. AI data can provide invaluable insight into student learning, and teachers should be trained on how to evaluate and use the data to inform their instructional decisions. Leveraging AI-generated data can assist teachers in identifying learning trends, analyzing student performance data, personalizing instruction, and targeting specific learning needs. Additionally, AI can also be used to identify early learning gaps allowing teachers to provide more targeted interventions and personalized instructional support. AI data can be a powerful tool if teachers can interpret it effectively.

Educational AI technologies are often created to offer personalized learning paths for students; however, they should not be used to replace the human element in a classroom. Fostering student-teacher relationships is still incredibly important. Teacher training should emphasize the importance of maintaining strong student-teacher relationships while integrating appropriate AI technologies into the classroom. This can involve balancing technology and human interaction by using AI tools to enhance efficacy, freeing up time for more one-on-one interactions, and providing teachers with strategies to leverage AI data for meaningful conversations with students about their learning journey.

The benefits of focused AI training far outweigh the costs. Teachers who have a solid understanding of AI tools feel more confident integrating them into their lessons. This leads to a more effective classroom learning environment. Teachers who can effectively use AI can identify struggling learners, personalize their instruction, and create engaging learning activities that lead to improved student outcomes. Finally, integrating AI can reduce the time burden by freeing up valuable teacher time for more student-teacher interactions.

Investing in teacher training and professional development is key to unlocking the true potential of AI in education (Dené Poth, 2023). Listed among the top reasons for teachers who are not currently using AI in the classroom are concerns about the role of AI in society, concerns about data privacy, and the lack of professional development available to teachers (Diliberti et al., 2024). By empowering teachers with the knowledge and skills to select appropriate AI tools, analyze data, and nurture student relationships, teachers can create a robust learning environment that benefits all learners.
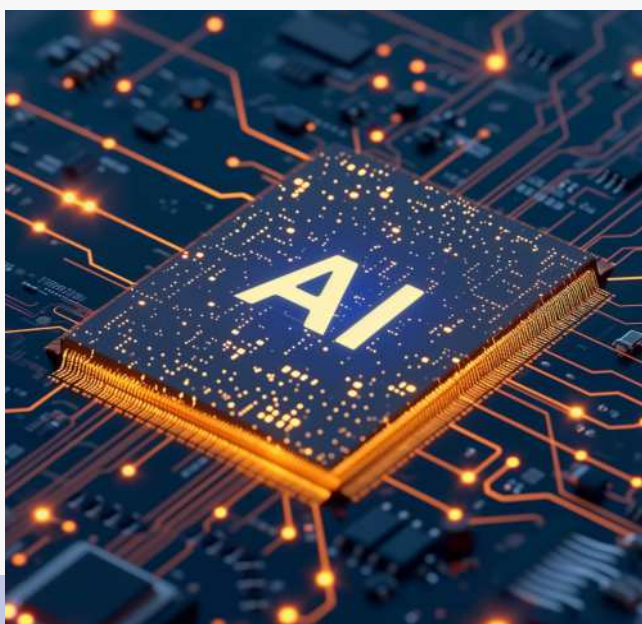
Ethical Considerations and the Road Ahead

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly redefining daily aspects of our personal and professional lives, and the field of education is no exception. While AI technologies unlock new and exciting possibilities for creating individualized learning and discovery experiences for students, ethical considerations regarding data privacy, potential bias, and responsible use demand our attention before AI becomes fully integrated into PK-12 classrooms. Professional educators must pave the way by building a future that leverages the potential of AI while safeguarding student well-being.

Safeguarding Student Data

AI technology offers endless possibilities for PK-12 education, but it is critical to address potential concerns. One of the fastest-growing concerns with using AI in the PK-12 classroom is data privacy and the collection of personal student information. Most AI tools rely on the collection of student data, raising concerns about how data is collected, stored, and secured. Educational institutions must have policies and procedures in place to ensure that student data is collected, stored, and used responsibly with clear parental consent.

Student data and educational records are protected under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). When using AI technologies, there is always the potential for a data breach that could include the unintentional release of sensitive student information such as academic performance, behavior concerns, or even health records (University of Alaska, 2024). Therefore, it is essential to ensure that any data fed into an AI system follows FERPA guidelines (University of Alaska, 2024). To maintain the safe and responsible use of student data, educational institutions should obtain clear and informed consent from both students and parents. All parties—teachers, students, and parents—should understand what data is being collected, how it will be used, and who will have access to it. Additionally, students and parents should have control over their data and be able to request its removal if desired.

Building Trust with Transparency

AI holds tremendous potential for the field of education. In harnessing its potential, transparency and responsible use are fundamental for both parents and students to understand. Imagine a student using an AI tutoring program that recommends resources and/or generates feedback. Without transparency, the student (and their parents) might wonder:

● How does the AI arrive at its recommendations?
● What data is it using, and could there be biases in that data?
● Is the AI simply regurgitating information, or is it fostering critical thinking?

Transparency builds trust. Educators and parents need to understand how AI technologies operate and how student data will be used. This basic knowledge allows them to make informed decisions about integrating AI into student learning and establishes a sense of security around this new technology.

Mitigating Bias for Equitable Access

AI algorithms are only as good as the data they are trained with, and they can inherit unnecessary biases from their training data (Miller, 2022). For example, if the data used to train an AI system is biased (e.g., reflecting historical prejudices in standardized tests), the AI itself will be biased and perpetuate those inequalities. The AI tool might recommend different learning paths for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, perpetuating existing inequalities and leading to unfair outcomes for students from certain backgrounds, further marginalizing them. Responsible use of AI technologies means that identifying and mitigating bias needs to be deliberate. AI should be a tool used to bridge learning gaps, not widen them.

Conclusion

AI can be a powerful educational tool, but a computer cannot replicate the human touch. Educators can ignite a child's curiosity, nurture a love of discovery, and foster a student's social-emotional well-being. "Today's education professionals are watching a technological revolution unfold in real-time, as AI-enabled learning platforms, educational games, chatbots, virtual tutors, and organizational tools become more widespread every day" (Hamilton, 2023, p.13). Educators have an optimistic outlook about the potential of AI use in the classroom. Acknowledging that AI will likely be expanding its role in PK-12

education, school districts have already started testing the waters with AI. According to the RAND survey, "by the end of the 2023–2024 academic year, 60% of districts plan to have trained teachers about AI use, and urban districts were the least likely to deliver such training" (Diliberti et al., 2024).

While human educators are, and will remain, the foundation of a well-rounded education, it is unlikely that AI will ever completely replace human educators, especially in early PK-12 education (Diliberti et al., 2024). While challenges still exist with current AI technologies, when used purposefully, they have the power to transform PK-12 education into a systematic approach that can effectively personalize education for each student. The future of AI holds endless possibilities to empower all students to reach their full potential.

Dr. Lane Wesson has recently retired from a small private university in NC and has accepted a position at Winthrop University in South Carolina. She is now an Assistant Professor in the College of Education, Sport, and Human Science. This is her 30th year in education with specialties in Literacy, Classroom Management, Curriculum and Instruction, Methods, and edTPA.

Dr. Joey Lord is the Instructional Coordinator of Hickory Education Programs for Appalachian State University. She is also a full-time faculty member of the Reich College of Education. This is her 24th year in education with specialties in the areas of Mathematics, Science, Curriculum and Instruction, and edTPA.

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$\mathcal{A}$s we embrace a new season of growth and connection, we are thrilled to present the NCMLE's fall journal reflecting the focus of our upcoming conference, Middle School Matters. This theme highlights the unique needs and potential of middle school students and emphasizes the crucial role educators play in shaping their growth and success. Through curated content, engaging discussions, and collaborative initiatives, Middle School Matters aims to inspire educators to make a lasting impact in their classrooms and communities. Our journal serves as a resource and a starting point for the meaningful conversations and ideas that will come to life at the conference.

This issue features a diverse selection of topics that resonate deeply with our professional community. As educators, we are committed to ongoing professional growth, holding ourselves and each other accountable for teaching and learning across our campuses. However, this journey is not one we undertake alone; we need one another as valuable stakeholders in this process, as highlighted in the pages found within this issue.

From examining one school's impactful approach to professional learning to encouraging educators to actively participate in text selection for classrooms, this issue centers on our middle school learners. We explore ways to cultivate student efficacy and expand on our previous discussions about AI in the classroom. Each article delivers powerful insights and practical strategies that enrich the middle school experience, empowering educators to inspire and engage their students while underscoring the vital role we all play in shaping the future of education during these formative years.

Our journal's featured columns serve as anchors to engage, enlighten, and empower our readers. In the '10 out of 10: New Teacher Spotlight,' Daniel Maxwell interviews Aminah El Youssfi about the challenges faced by new educators. In our 'Topics, Tech, and Trends' series, Jade Tornatore and Holly Williamson from NCDPI explore the significance of Core Instruction in the MTSS process. Aubrey Spizzo offers insights from the perspective of school social workers in 'Encore, Encore,' while Jennifer Queen discusses how one county is responding to Senate Bill 193. Jessica Marion Young shares research on fostering peace in the classroom, and in 'Admin Corner,' Chasity Szabo highlights how schools can excel in building community. We believe these columns will not only provide valuable insights but also reinforce that Middle School Matters, fostering collaboration and connection among educators as we commit to enriching educational experiences for all learners.

As we celebrate the rich insights and contributions within this issue, I want to take a moment to reflect on my time as editor and express my heartfelt gratitude for the journey we've shared.

Even as I write this, I am filled with a mix of emotions —gratitude, pride, and a bit of nostalgia. For several years, I've had the distinct honor of serving as the editor of the North Carolina Middle Level Education Journal, a role that has held a special place in my heart. Through multiple issues and the reintroduction of the journal in a new format, this work has been one of my most cherished professional endeavors. I am profoundly grateful for the unwavering support of the Association's Board, which has enabled us to stay true to Dr. C. Kenneth McEwin's vision.

Over the course of my tenure, I have been privileged to support talented authors whose voices have added depth and insight to our field. In doing so, I have also grown as an educator, a writer, and a leader. I have had the great fortune to work alongside and learn from so many dedicated professionals, none more inspiring than Dr. Jeanneine Jones, whose wisdom, guidance, and friendship have profoundly shaped my journey.

As I pass the editorial reins to two trusted colleagues, I do so with confidence and excitement for the future of the Journal. Daniel Maxwell and Joey Lord share NCMLE's passion and dedication to the Journal and will be fantastic in their new roles. Their vision and dedication will undoubtedly propel the publication to new heights. I am excited to see how they will bring fresh ideas and perspectives to the Journal, continuing to elevate the conversation around what truly matters in middle school education. I look forward to witnessing the continued growth of this publication and the voices it will continue to amplify.

Thank you for allowing me to be a part of something so meaningful. It has been a privilege to help bring your stories, insights, and innovations to life on these pages.

Forever Yours in Education,
Dr. Laurie Dymes

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 her day to respond to 10 questions about the teaching profession.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Aminah El Youssfi is a second-year middle grades science teacher at Maureen Joy Charter School in Durham, North Carolina. Aminah is a recent graduate of UNC Charlotte with a Master of Arts in Teaching Middle Grades Science.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO ENTER THE TEACHING PROFESSION?

I chose to become a teacher because, quite simply, I love being around children. Originally, I earned a bachelor's degree in Biology and intended to conduct research, but while I was working in different labs and doing a field research internship, I was also volunteering at a school and doing an after-school program. I found that I enjoyed working with students so much more than what I was getting paid for with the internship, so I decided to go into the classroom. I just love the energy of students, their sense of humor, and their need to be seen. I feel like I'm fulfilling more of a purpose in the classroom than I was in a lab.
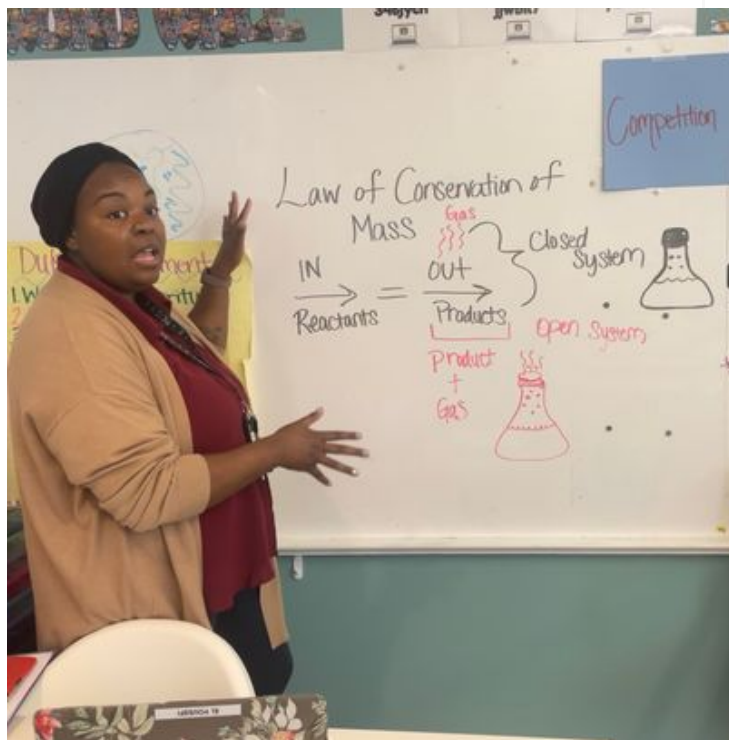
TELL US ABOUT A TEACHER WHO INSPIRED YOU. WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THIS PERSON, AND HOW DOES THAT DRIVE YOU IN YOUR WORK WITH YOUR OWN STUDENTS?

The teacher I remember most was my 11th-grade history teacher, Mrs. Willett. I remember that she would always make the lessons so engaging. Every day the classroom would be staged in a particular way. When we walked in, it was always something different, and she'd have all these costumes; yes, it was just so engaging. At the time, I hated history because I could never remember the dates, timelines, and names, and I just really did not care for it. But in her class, it just felt safe, it felt fun, and the learning just came naturally. It was my first experience with a student-centered environment, and I really enjoyed her class and want to create that same safe, fun, and engaging environment for my students.

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

I want veteran teachers to know that new teachers are trying their best. We have the greatest intentions. We know we don't know everything, but we are trying to figure it out. Sometimes beginning teachers feel like it's not safe to ask or answer questions, and it is hard to feel trusted as a new teacher. So I think that it's important for veteran teachers to help include new teachers in their community. Encourage them, involve them, give them opportunities to offer ideas, to answer questions, to ask questions, and just really make sure that new teachers feel like they are included, supported, and valued. We need our new teachers to stick around.

WHAT IS A CHALLENGE YOU HAVE FACED IN YOUR TEACHING CAREER, AND HOW DID YOU OVERCOME IT?

A challenge that I faced in my teaching career was not being very proactive in prioritizing my time. I would have so little energy when I returned home from work and I was feeling really frustrated. I always had something to do, and I felt like every minute was for work. I just wanted to have a break or some quiet time to be able to rest. It was frustrating because I never had the energy to do things that I enjoyed like spending time with my daughter or being outside or reading.

So I reached out to one of my former professors, Dr. Dymes, about what I was experiencing, and she explained that she also faced similar challenges when teaching full-time while completing her doctorate. She told me that she essentially split everything into a pie chart of sorts, and just made sure that work time was prioritized for work things and home time was prioritized for home things. The pie chart explanation was helpful for me because it put work and home life on a more balanced footing. It helped me to adjust my perspective from a hierarchy where work was becoming a priority at the expense of my home life, so that shift in perspective helped me achieve a greater balance in my priorities.

"Teaching is hard, being a student is hard, and being a middle school student is especially hard. So we need to approach each day with positivity, looking for the best in each other, and making school a great experience for ourselves and our students."

AS AN EARLY CAREER TEACHER, HOW DO YOU FIND AND MAINTAIN A WORK/LIFE BALANCE?

As an early career teacher, I've learned that it is very important to be proactive and prioritize every minute, especially when I'm in the classroom or during my planning. I am a huge believer in making lists and planning my tasks throughout the day. There is always an agenda on the board for my students and then a checklist when I'm planning to make sure that every minute is being used effectively so that I can also prioritize my personal time at home.

WHAT IS THE BEST LESSON YOU EVER TAUGHT?

I remember one day I taught a lesson about earth history that I worked so hard on, and then it just completely flopped student engagement-wise. I was so frustrated because I felt like I had done everything possible to create these cute little articles and these nice groups and I worked so hard to laminate things, and I just really wanted them to care and be engaged. So after this experience, I talked to the social studies coach, and I asked him "How do you get students to engage without forcing them to engage?" His advice was to write a plan so I could be as prepared as possible. In other words, don't just plan what the students would do, but also plan how I could engage them myself.

So the next time I did that lesson, I scripted everything that I was going to do from the moment I walked into the door until the moment we left. I went in there with all this energy, I mean I was shouting, and it was exhausting but hilarious. I really felt like I had to be in character, it was this huge show. I had this fly swatter, and I was slapping the maps I had placed on the walls around the classroom–instead of just giving it to them at their desks, I enlarged it and put everything around the walls–so I was slapping the different evidence, and I was all over the place. The kids just thought it was so funny. In fact, I'm pretty sure they thought I was crazy. But they were so engaged, and they wanted to talk to me and to each other.

I found that scripting out everything I needed to engage the students made me feel a lot better, knowing what I was going to do and how I was going to respond, as opposed to expecting it to work out. It was such a great moment for me, and the engagement level was so high that I bought them all pizza as a thank you. It was so expensive, but I was so proud of them.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PASSIONATE ABOUT IN NORTH CAROLINA MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION TODAY?

I'm passionate about the recent standard revisions. I find the new standards are pointing us in the right direction for students to be able to actively do science as opposed to just sitting and passively learning about science. This is something that I have really been trying to do with my students by trying different instructional methods, whether that be inquiry-based learning or project-based learning, just trying to make sure that it's my students who are doing the work and doing the science. I'm excited about new standards and the direction that our state is going for our students

YOU ATTENDED THE NCMLE INSPIRE CONFERENCE IN CHARLOTTE, NC EARLIER THIS YEAR. WHAT IS THE MOST VALUABLE THING YOU LEARNED AT THE CONFERENCE?

It was such a joy to attend the conference! I'm grateful for each session and took away valuable insights from each one that I attended. The most significant lesson I learned was how I can positively contribute to my school culture by providing my students with opportunities for autonomy in their learning. However, doing this requires us to trust our students. Unfortunately, we often expect them to make mistakes and hesitate to grant them more autonomy.

One session stood out to me when the presenter said, "You will find exactly what you're looking for every time." In other words, if we focus on expecting mistakes, we will inevitably find them. This shift in perspective encourages me to contribute positively to the environment, avoid feeding into negativity, and do everything I can to ensure that my students, colleagues, and I enjoy coming to school. Teaching is challenging, being a student is challenging, and being a middle school student is especially tough. Therefore, we must approach each day with positivity, seek the best in one another, and make school a great experience for ourselves and our students

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

I would advise them to be open to all feedback and even ask for more feedback. Lean on people who have the knowledge, skills, and tools. Teaching is challenging enough, and you do not have to make it any harder by isolating yourself and not being willing to ask for help. That was a mistake that I made during my first year of teaching. I went in as a lateral entry teacher, and I felt like I needed to prove myself and establish a strong sense of control; however, I quickly realized that just having control and managing a classroom did not necessarily mean that my kids were learning anything. They were just doing what I told them to do. It gave me a lot of headaches because it was not a positive environment for my students or me. The students and I weren't working together; we were working against each other, and it was not fun. So I started asking for help, asking administrators and colleagues to observe my teaching and share strategies, and I would try to add extra creative things to get the kids engaged. I think that learning as much as I could from others with more experience made things much better for me. Therefore my advice to any resident or current student teacher is to find people that they can rely on for advice, tools, and feedback.

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

HOW CAN SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS BEST SUPPORT THEIR BEGINNING TEACHERS?

I think it is important for new teachers to feel supported. I think that the greatest struggle that I've had is uncertainty at times about who to turn to for answers. Who do I turn to with questions about what strategies I use for this or that, what's the best method of giving an assessment, how do I deal with the student who is not interested, or how do I deal with the student who struggles to read or a student who doesn't speak the same language that I do? Answers to these questions aren't just readily available for new teachers; it is very hard to know how to connect the dots in the classroom. So I think it's important that there are strong mentors, who are dedicated to that teacher, whether it be for providing feedback, observations, or resources. It is just so important to make sure that new teachers feel supported and always know that they have someone strong they can approach for support and feedback.

TOPICS, TECH, AND TRENDS

Creating a Solid Foundation Through Core Instruction

By Jade Tornatore and Holly Williamson

This is the third article in a four-part series aimed to help North Carolina Middle Level Educators conceptualize North Carolina's Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. In our previous two articles, we discussed myths associated with MTSS and the recommended teaming structures to support the NC MTSS framework. As we continue our informational series to support MTSS implementation in the middle school setting, we will now focus on creating a solid foundation through Core instruction. The key points of this article are to (1) reinforce the framework of MTSS as a continuous improvement model; (2) affirm that all students are a part of MTSS; and (3) emphasize the importance of Core instruction as the first layer of support.

MTSS is a school improvement model that begins by addressing school-wide needs, then tailors support to small groups and individual students through collaborative, data-based, problem-solving. While educators often default to thinking of small group interventions when discussing MTSS implementation, it is what we do in the first tier, our Core instruction, that truly makes all the difference for the students that we serve.

Core Instruction is the Foundation of MTSS.

Within an MTSS framework, all teachers have a role in supporting Core (tier 1) instruction, and all students receive Core instruction as part of MTSS. Core instruction is the daily academic, behavioral, and social and emotional instruction that is provided to all students. Aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS), Core academic instruction is what we teach as 6th-grade math, or 7th-grade ELA, or 8th-grade science. Core behavioral and social and emotional instruction should be aligned with locally developed expectations.

Students spend the majority of their instructional day receiving Core instruction. It is where grade-level standards are first delivered to all students. Therefore, it is imperative that this instruction is robust. The delivery of instruction at this level should include evidence-based, whole-group and small-group strategies, as well as differentiated instruction based on the learners in the group. Absent strong Core instruction, a tiered system of interventions and support cannot be effectively designed to meet the various needs of students.


It is helpful to think of an analogy of building a house or a school. The first and most important step in the construction of the school is to build a strong foundation. The foundation holds up the walls and supports the roof, protecting the systems of plumbing and electrical wiring. Without a solid foundation, our walls would cave in, the roof would collapse, and our electrical system would consist of piles of tangled wires.

Similar to constructing a building, the development of a multi-tiered system of support requires us to first establish a strong instructional foundation.

Supplemental and intensive supports are dependent on the existence of high-quality Core instruction, as each layer of intervention builds upon the previous to create a continuum of well-aligned, cohesive supports. Without solid Core instruction in place, we cannot confidently determine which students are in need of additional support or intervention.

Continuing with the school construction example, if a crack develops in one of the school walls, we may initially attempt to repair the wall with sealant, a patch, or new sheetrock. However, if the underlying problem is a poorly constructed foundation, those surface-level repairs will do no good, and we will continue to see the negative effects of the weak foundation. This is the same concept with MTSS. In the event that Core instruction is not solid, school-wide data analysis is likely to reveal large numbers of students identified for potential areas of academic, behavioral, or social-emotional risk, inflating the numbers of students requiring interventions. In many cases, the identified need for intervention exceeds a school's resources and capacity to support students through supplemental and intensive interventions. To attempt to address student needs through intervention alone, without first making the necessary adjustments to ensure effective Core instruction, is not an efficient use of time and resources. It is the responsibility of school MTSS teams to continually evaluate and adjust Core instruction to optimize the impact of instruction for all students.

To ensure our Core is robust enough to support our students, school MTSS teams work to thoroughly define Core instruction. By defining, we mean to indicate what instruction should look like, and determine what the things are that everyone in the district and/or school should include in their academic, behavioral and social and emotional programming. Oftentimes, districts provide guidance on defining Core academic instruction or Core behavioral expectations in alignment with district policies or instructional frameworks. From here, schools may then further refine Core expectations and practices based on their unique culture, resources, and needs. Defining Core instruction can happen at any time, but it is common to see MTSS teams engage in this work over the summer as schools are analyzing end-of-year data and planning for a new academic year. Once MTSS teams have developed Core guidance, it is important that instructional expectations are communicated to all school staff through team meetings, professional development, and coaching with feedback opportunities.
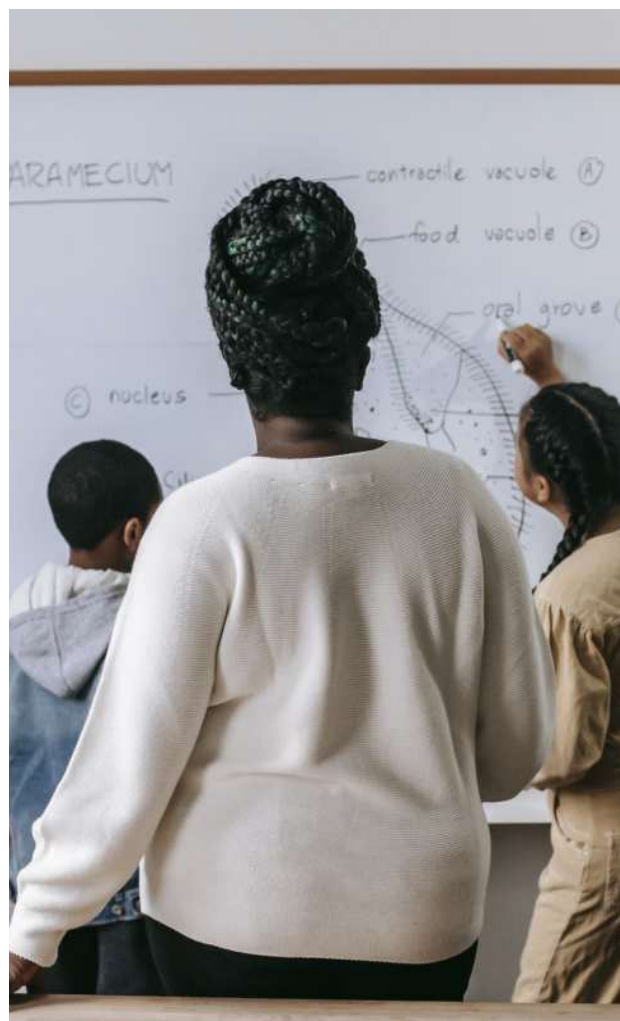
Why do we define Core?

Defining the Core for academics, behavior, and social and emotional skills is essential in an MTSS. NC MTSS recommends district and school teams undertake this through the lens of Environment, Curriculum, Instruction, and Data-Evaluation across all content areas and grade levels. In an MTSS, we have school-based MTSS teams that problem-solve our Core data to set goals for Core, intensify Core if it needs to be strengthened, and monitor those changes for effectiveness.

The first reason we do this comes down to equitable access. When you don't have a defined Core, you have a greater chance of denying students equitable opportunities to learn. When the Core is well-defined, all students have access to quality classroom instruction and experience consistency in the application of clear expectations and fair disciplinary practices. This in turn promotes learning and reduces behavioral difficulties.

Finally, having a defined Core allows more professional learning and growth among staff because we are speaking the same language. Teachers know the expectations. Teachers are better able to collaborate and learn from one another as they can be assured they are using the same strategies, materials, pacing, and procedures that were defined as part of Core support. This also allows MTSS teams, administrators, and coaches to monitor instruction and provide feedback as part of a continuous cycle of improvement.

By defining Core, district and school teams set instructional expectations to ensure all students consistently receive the proper instruction. This should happen with teacher input, discussion, and feedback so that everyone is on the same page and feels equipped to deliver Core instruction. Teachers then bring their skills, craft, and experience to tailor instruction to meet the needs of the students they teach. A defined Core ensures that teachers are supported to deliver high-quality Core instruction and that there is a foundation for which teachers can reach all learners.

How to define/refine Core?

NC MTSS recommends that district MTSS teams ensure evidence-based Core academic, behavioral, and social and emotional practices exist and are defined across grade levels and grade spans by the essential components of curriculum, instruction, and environment. Districts are responsible for communicating with schools regarding instructional content and standards, materials for teaching, what teaching methods to utilize, and guidance for the design of the instructional environment. Oftentimes these may be framed as "non-negotiables" or district "instructional priorities," aligned with a district's vision, mission, and strategic plan.

Integrated Academic and Behavior Systems
Comprehensive Support Plan Template
Core & Intervention Matrix

This resource should be used in conjunction with the resources and learning provided through the NC MTSS Professional Learning Center and NC MTSS Implementation Guide as districts and schools develop their standard treatment protocol.

Core Support

Core support is the instruction provided to all students. Core support is evidenced-based. Within core support, teachers differentiate to meet the needs of all students in the classroom. Core support is defined through the environment, curriculum, and instruction:
Environment: Include daily instructional time, physical environment, group size, and classroom routines.
Curriculum: Materials and resources utilized, scope and sequence of delivery, and skills/standards addressed.
Instruction: Instructional design, student engagement, methods for feedback, and opportunities for practice.

Core Matrix

Grade Level/Grade Span: 8th Grade		Content Area: 8th Grade Math
Environment	**Curriculum**	**Instruction**
90 minute Math Block: 40 minutes reserved for whole group instruction (lecture should be no more than 20 minutes) 30 minutes reserved for small group and differentiated support on math concepts and skills based on teacher observation as well as assessments Remaining 20 minutes can be spent on review, spiraling of concepts, authentic learning opportunities, application to real world context, writing in math, extensions, assessment, etc.	All instruction will be aligned to NC 8th Grade Math Standards Teachers will follow district 8th Grade Math Scope and Sequence to ensure skills are taught following a progression of skill development. Flex days are built into calendar should teachers need adjust pacing Teachers will utilize district provided Math curriculum resources for direct instruction of skills/concepts. The 8th Grade Math team has flexibility to supplement (add to) district resources as needed to meet the needs of their students.	All students receive whole-group direct, systematic and explicit instruction on Math skills following district scope and sequence. Teachers provide multiple opportunities for response: whole group, peer to peer, using technology, group consensus. Teachers will intentionally encourage math discourse using identified math vocabulary through peer conversations, group consensus conversations, examples vs non-examples, statements & justifications, etc. Teachers will utilize assessment data to provide small group/individual direct instruction based on student need. Provide immediate and specific feedback

As previously mentioned, in addition to the district guidance, school MTSS teams further operationalize Core guidance with details specific to their unique data, resources, culture, and context.

Using the NC MTSS framework, schools define Core by examining and detailing instruction through the lens of the instruction, curriculum, environment, and data evaluation:

· Instruction- Defining instruction includes identifying the evidence-based, culturally responsive teaching strategies and methods teachers will use including explicit instruction, differentiation, scaffolding, and opportunities for practice and feedback.

· Curriculum- By defining curriculum, we outline the instructional programs, materials, teaching resources, relevant standards, pacing guides, skill scope, and sequence guides that are used to support teaching.

· Environment- When schools define the environment, they are defining how the setting should be structured. This work would include examining grouping options, time allocated for instruction, the frequency of the instructional session, the location for instruction, etc. (See Defining Core 8th Grade Math Example).

· Data Evaluation- Refers to the data that we will collect and analyze to determine if our Core instruction is effective. These data sources include both implementation data (what the adults are doing) as well as student outcome data.

MTSS is a continuous improvement framework.

Using their defined Core Instructional framework, school teams deliver instruction, continuously monitor the impact of that instruction, and make adjustments as necessary to promote student learning. Through the use of a systematic problem-solving model, the School MTSS Team analyzes this Core instructional data first at the whole school level to look for patterns and trends across grades and content areas. The school MTSS team then also supports grade-level teams and content PLCs to look at their specific Core instructional data and make adjustments as needed to ensure Core is effective. We can consider Core instruction effective if we are able to meet the needs of 75-80% of students with Core instruction alone.

Data collection and analysis typically occur at benchmark periods; however, school teams may identify areas to problem-solve at any time. Core behavior and attendance data in a school is often collected daily and therefore can be analyzed more frequently. For example, a middle school may notice an attendance issue in the first month of school where less than 80% of students are meeting attendance requirements and expectations. The School MTSS Team could begin to problem-solve as this is occurring, analyze the attendance problem, create a plan to implement, and further monitor Core attendance.

As another example, after the first few weeks of school, the school MTSS Team may identify a problem with increased discipline referrals. They analyze the data to identify frequent behavioral incidents by type and the location of these behavioral incidents, comparing these behaviors to what they have defined as their Core behavior expectations. Teachers in PLCs/grade level teams take an active role as problem solvers working with School MTSS Leadership Team members to create and implement a plan to refine or strengthen Core behavior instruction and then monitor the plan moving forward. Monitoring the plan consists of collecting behavior data (or academic, attendance, etc.) and providing ongoing feedback to the MTSS Team about implementation as well as finally evaluating whether the plan was successful. If it is successful, great! The school can then focus on another area. If it is not successful, teams will revisit problem-solving and try new strategies to enhance Core instruction.

All of this problem-solving and improvement cycle happens continuously as part of a well-functioning Tier 1. If this work is not happening within the context of Core instruction, other tiers of support within an MTSS will function much like the wall built on the shaky foundation mentioned earlier. Schools will continue to experience cracks in their system of support, investing valuable time and resources for intervention when the issue at hand is within Core instruction. If your district or school is looking for where to start to make systemic improvements or even where to start MTSS, start with Core instruction.

This piece about the teams in MTSS supports the MTSS Critical Component Leadership. We will continue to build understanding by releasing a series of articles 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 help middle school administrators, teachers, students, and families work together to spring forward maximizing outcomes for all.

**It is important to note that when individual students are discussed, the problem-solving team has an obligation to consider whether the student is suspected of having a disability. If so, the continuum of teaming extends/expands to include the IEP Team for an initial referral.

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

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Integrated Academic and Behavior Systems, NC DPI., School Teams in an MTSS:https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XtPWf-oKttI9N_ruw0iUd8Fr5c82QRMV/view

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

School Social Workers: Bridging The Gap Between Home And School

By Aubrey Spizzo

Editor's Note:

In our schools, the support we provide to students extends far beyond traditional classroom instruction. It's the contributions of school social workers, counselors, intervention specialists, and other support staff that often make the difference in a student's day. These professionals help address the challenges students face, from mental health and emotional support to navigating personal and social issues. Their role is integral in creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment, allowing every student to thrive. This column explores just how vital their work is in our schools, shining a light on the value they bring to the educational experience.

I currently serve four schools ranging from elementary through high school, which equals roughly 2,651 students in Lincoln County Schools. The recommended ratio of social workers to students is 1:250 (NASW, 2018). This will be my eighth year as a school social worker and year ten as a social worker in general. I have a background in completing forensic investigations for the Department of Social Services. This experience comes in handy as I encounter children in need in our school system today. I completed both my Bachelor's and Master's in Social Work at Appalachian State University.

Why Are School Social Workers Important?

School social workers play an important role in the lives of students and their families in schools across the country. Social work in a specialized area and school social workers work with families to analyze barriers to learning in the classroom (NASW, 2018). When a child's basic needs are not being met, it can be difficult for them to focus on learning. This often looks like students who are hyperactive, who may sleep in class, who cannot focus, or a variety of other behaviors. Teachers may view this behavior as "defiant" but that may not be the case. School social workers work with children who are hungry, who lack adequate housing, who may be abused or neglected, whose parents are struggling with addiction, or who need behavioral support in their learning. In short, it is important to recognize that individuals' needs are best understood by looking at their social environment (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). In Lincoln County Schools, we have access to clothing, housing, and food resources. We want families and school staff to know that school social workers are willing to work with families to provide these basic needs. Lincoln County Schools utilizes an old school building that has been converted into a clothing closet for students and families to use when they are in need; it is called the Asbury Resource Center. School social workers can access this at all times and we can shop with families. We also host two "shopping days" during the year for families to come shop for items. All items have been donated and this is free of cost to all families. This has been a great addition to our school system.

Who Else Can We Help?

In addition to supporting families in need, school social workers also collaborate with teachers and school staff. As social workers, our mission is to help others, and teachers and staff can greatly benefit from these partnerships by gaining a broader understanding of students' circumstances. Advocacy plays a key role in many success stories involving students who are actively engaged with school social workers (NASW, 2018).

Our role is to advocate for students in ways that support their success, and this advocacy begins with teachers and administrators. It starts with honest conversations involving parents, caretakers, and students to determine how we can help, whether through phone calls or home visits. School social workers have the unique opportunity to make home visits, which often provide valuable insight into the challenges a student may face. Understanding a child's living situation can shed light on their daily struggles.

From there, we can connect families with community resources to meet basic needs and offer appropriate assistance. School social workers also play an important role in parent-teacher conferences and IEP/504 meetings, serving as a support system for families who may not know where else to turn.

Issues Schools are Facing Today

School Social Workers are now grappling with issues that were not as prevalent even a few years ago. When I first started in this role, my primary focus was on improving school attendance. While that remains a key part of my work, school safety has increasingly become a central concern in the interactions social workers have with schools.

Not all schools are equipped with a full-time social worker. In Lincoln County Schools, for example, we have only six full-time social workers serving 23 schools. This means each social worker is responsible for managing three or four schools, making it difficult to maintain a consistent and visible presence on each campus. As a result, we are often called in primarily for crisis situations, most of which now involve a student threatening to harm themselves or others, creating a heightened sense of urgency.

In my experience, the number of threats to school safety has steadily risen. Over the past three years, the volume of threat assessments, suicide assessments, and behavioral crises has increased significantly. Our data from January 2024 shows that we conducted 98 suicide assessments, 56 threat assessments, and responded to 231 other behavioral crises—figures that represent only mid-year data. We anticipate these numbers will nearly double by the time the school year concludes.

These crises not only disrupt classrooms but also severely impede student learning and overall academic progress. In these critical moments, School Social Workers step in as mental health professionals and collaborate with external agencies to ensure that students receive the necessary support and care they require to recover.

Working with Local and Outside Agencies

As school social workers, we regularly collaborate with external agencies such as local law enforcement, the Department of Social Services, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and various community resources. When situations escalate to the point of involving these agencies, it is crucial to balance protecting children's rights to education with ensuring the safety of others (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). This responsibility can be particularly challenging in today's complex environment.

For this reason, it is essential to foster relationships with students and staff before crises arise. Proactive relationship-building allows us to be better prepared and more effective when addressing serious situations in our schools.

What are the Barriers?

One of the primary challenges facing school social workers today is underutilization (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). Frequently, we are assigned to multiple schools, which limits the time we can dedicate to building meaningful relationships with students at any one campus. As a result, some students may "fall through the cracks," particularly if teachers, counselors, or administrators don't inform us about a student's situation.

When I first began working as a school social worker, there were three full-time social workers in our district. While that number has since doubled to six, it remains insufficient compared to neighboring counties. With the growing mental health needs across schools, it is crucial for local and state legislators to recognize the importance of increasing the number of school social workers in our schools.

As school social workers, our ultimate goal is to shift from reactive to more proactive interactions within the school community. This can be achieved by focusing on building trusting relationships with students and their families before crises occur. By fostering these connections early, we can identify potential challenges sooner and provide the necessary support to address them effectively. This preventive approach not only benefits individual students but also enhances the overall well-being of the school environment.

The growing need for mental health professionals in schools should be monitored and addressed by local and state decision-makers. Currently, with only a few school social workers serving multiple campuses, our role can be overlooked, and our presence can feel inconsistent. The rise in mental health crises underscores the importance of having more social workers dedicated to early intervention and ongoing support.

We hope schools will recognize the value of our skill set, not just in handling crises but in strengthening community involvement in the educational process. By involving us in everyday interactions, such as parent-teacher conferences and safety initiatives, we can help create a safer, more supportive learning environment for all students. Schools must prioritize family engagement as part of a holistic approach to education, and school social workers are key players in making that happen.

In the future, we envision a school system where social workers are integrated into the fabric of the school community. By working alongside teachers, administrators, and external agencies, we can ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. This can only be achieved if our profession is given the resources, visibility, and support needed to meet the increasing demands we face.

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Aubrey Spizzo has been a School Social Worker for eight years. She received her Bachelor's and Master's Degrees from Appalachian State University.
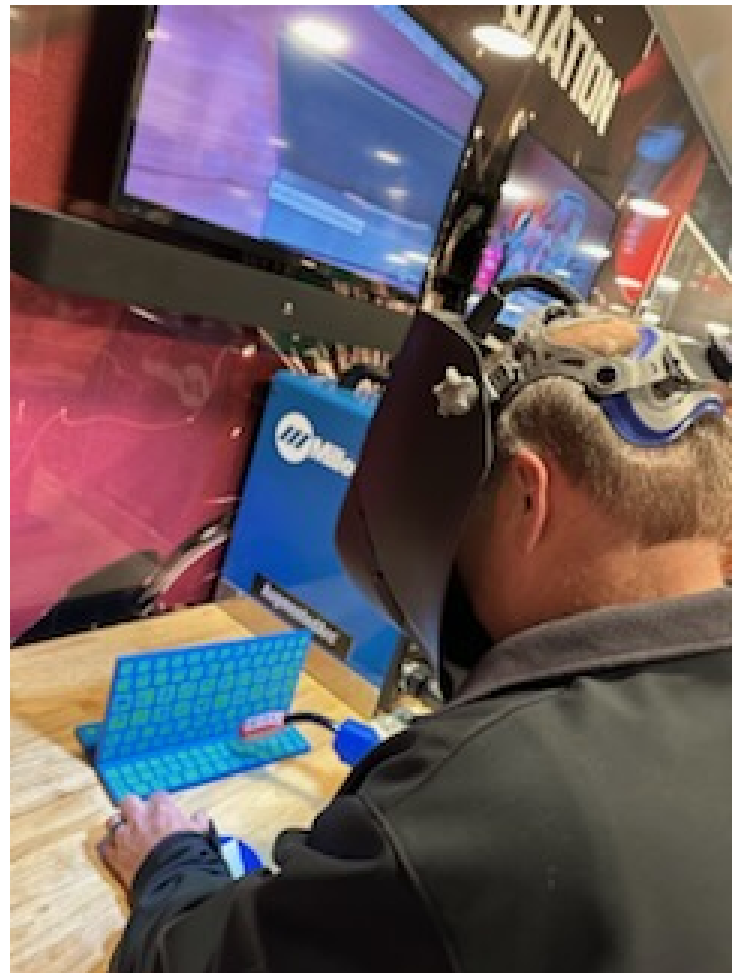
EMPOWERING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS: LINCOLN COUNTY SCHOOLS' IMPLEMENTATION OF SENATE BILL 193

By Jennifer Queen

This article highlights the pivotal role of Lincoln County Schools' Middle School Career Development Coordinator (CDC) in implementing Senate Bill 193. The bill aims to empower students through early career planning, emphasizing the creation and revision of Career Development Plans (CDPs) starting in the seventh grade. Through a range of initiatives led by the Middle School CDC, students are guided in self-discovery, career exploration, and educational pathway selection, laying a solid foundation for their future endeavors.

Senate Bill 193 has emerged as a beacon of proactive education reform, designed to equip students with the tools and foresight necessary to navigate secondary course selection and career readiness. This legislative initiative mandates the creation and continuous revision of a Career Development Plan, ensuring that students embark on a journey of self-discovery and goal-setting early in their educational experience. The Career Development Plan serves as a guiding framework that assists students in charting a clear course toward future success.

At the heart of Senate Bill 193 is a fundamental recognition: the importance of instilling a sense of purpose and direction in students' educational journeys. By requiring students to craft a career development plan by the end of seventh grade and revise it by the end of tenth grade, the bill sets the stage for a deliberate and informed approach to career exploration. The intent is to help students make meaningful connections between their interests, strengths, and future opportunities.

To support the implementation of Senate Bill 193, Lincoln County Schools established the position of Middle School Career Development Coordinator (CDC). The CDC spearheads initiatives across all middle-grade levels, enriching students' career exploration experiences by integrating the Career Development Plan into every student's academic journey. Through this process, students are encouraged to reflect on their personal interests, skills, and values, gaining insights into their unique strengths and aspirations. These reflections guide students as they begin aligning their educational course choices with future career goals, ultimately helping them select pathways for high school that match their long-term ambitions.

Major Clarity as a tool for personalized career exploration. One standout event was the "Careers on Wheels" program, where professionals from various industries visited all four middle school campuses to increase students' career awareness and broaden their perspectives on the possibilities ahead.

In both sixth and seventh grades, students were provided career suggestions based on personality and learning style assessments. They had opportunities to explore these careers by watching interviews, participating in online activities related to their career matches, identifying the education required for their potential careers, and researching colleges that offer relevant degree programs. This early exposure equips students with practical knowledge about the paths available to them.
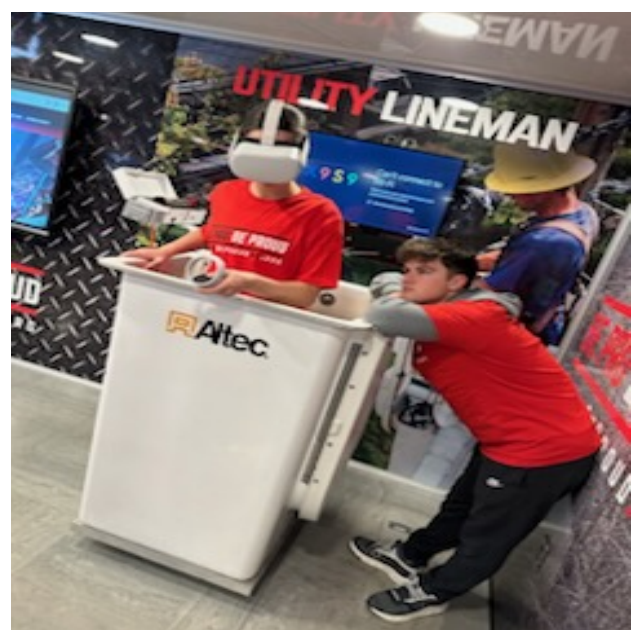

Lincoln County Schools provides a wide array of opportunities for students, including Advanced Placement courses, Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, community college dual enrollment, apprenticeships, and internships. These varied options offer students practical, hands-on experiences that connect classroom learning with real-world applications.

For sixth-grade students, the Middle School CDC facilitated the use of Major Clarity for Personality Assessments and organized Coding Career Awareness Activities. These initiatives introduced students to diverse career pathways while fostering technological literacy at an early age. In seventh grade, the Career Development Plans (CDPs) were formally initiated, again utilizing

As students transition into eighth grade, the Middle School CDC organized School-Based Career Fairs and coordinated tours to students' feeder high schools and the Lincoln County School of Technology. These experiences provided students with immersive insights into the relationship between classroom learning and real-world career opportunities. Eighth graders also participated in the "Be Pro, Be Proud" initiative, engaging with hands-on and virtual simulators representing 17 skilled trades and professions. Additionally, they were introduced to a range of CTE programs, with teachers explaining how these high school courses align with diverse career paths.

Lincoln County Schools (LCS) is committed to ensuring that every student engages in the processes of planning, creating, and adjusting their educational course selections to effectively prepare them for post-secondary endeavors, whether that involves further education, military enlistment, or immediate entry into the workforce. This focus on career exploration supports the district's mission to equip students with the necessary resources and guidance to make informed decisions about their futures.

Looking Ahead: A Future-Oriented Educational Vision

In essence, Senate Bill 193 represents a paradigm shift in education, elevating career exploration and planning to the forefront of students' academic journeys. The bill is a testament to the transformative power of proactive legislation and the dedication of education professionals in shaping students' lives. By beginning with the end in mind, this initiative ensures that students are empowered to take control of their future pathways, making informed and intentional decisions as they progress through school.

As Lincoln County Schools continues to implement Senate Bill 193, the district is laying the groundwork for a future where students are equipped not only with academic knowledge but also with a clear sense of purpose and direction. Through early career planning, ongoing self-reflection, and alignment of educational choices with personal goals, students are better prepared to navigate the ever-evolving landscape of post-secondary opportunities and workforce demands. The ultimate goal is a generation of students who are empowered to shape their own destinies, armed with the skills and insights needed to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

Jennifer Queen is in her 18th year of teaching. She began her career in high school math before transitioning to Career and Technical Education. She attributes her background in core content areas to helping her make valuable connections in CTE.

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE

BUILDING PEACE THROUGH EDUCATION

By Jessica Marion Young

While some educators may crave 'peace and quiet' in their classrooms, a more peaceful world will not be achieved through silent complacency. Over the past 15 years, the world has become a progressively less peaceful place (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2023). The United States ranks low on the Global Peace Index (2023), while schools across the nation and within our state report more instances of violence each year (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2023). Many view teaching peace in schools as the solution to violent conflicts and systemic injustices (International Alert, 2018). Peace education can change attitudes and behaviors and teach skills that benefit individual students and society as a whole (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

The definition of peace varies within different cultural, historical, and social contexts. One framework from the National Peace Academy explores peace in five overlapping spheres: personal, social, political, institutional, and ecological (Jenkins, 2018). Physical violence is an obvious sign of unrest no matter the context, but unjust systems and the biased cultural narratives that perpetuate inequality are just as harmful (Galtung, 1990). Negative Peace, or the absence of violent conflict, is just one indication of a peaceful society. Equally, if not more important, is the presence of Positive Peace or "the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies" (IEP, 2023, p. 5). According to the Institute for Economics and Peace (2023), Positive Peace has eight pillars: well-functioning government, sound business environment, equitable distribution of resources, acceptance of others' rights, good relations with neighbors, free flow of information, high levels of human capital, and low levels of corruption. While violence in schools is on the rise, today's students are not the problem. Youth want to be part of the solution and deserve to be involved in determining their future (Simpson, 2018). Schools should provide students with safe spaces to interact with diverse groups of people, navigate difficult situations, and practice peaceful conflict resolution (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). To support peacebuilding in middle schools, educators should:

Practice Empathy: Encourage calm and safety to help students communicate better. Get to know students, share multiple perspectives, and emphasize active listening. Offer frequent opportunities for questions and ideas. Journaling can provide a safe space to process information. Students feel more comfortable speaking up after reflecting.

Embrace Discomfort: Ignoring injustice perpetuates it. Don't shield students from hard truths. Teach them to differentiate between disagreement and violence. Set rules for respectful communication and use accountable talk stems in formal discussions.

Encourage Critical Thinking: Peace education should be relevant, participatory, and focus on teaching critical thinking instead of telling students what to think. An effective way to do this is through student-led inquiry like peace and conflict mapping, where students identify areas of harm and safety in their schools or communities, recognize patterns, and find potential solutions.

Empower Students: Peace education equips students with the tools to become agents of positive change. Students can create change through service-learning projects that strengthen critical thinking skills, mental well-being, and empathy. By integrating peace education into every classroom, we can inspire compassionate, inquisitive, and justice-driven global citizens.

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Jessica Young is a first-year doctoral student in Curriculum & Instruction at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She is also an AVID elective teacher with experience teaching multiple grades 2-8 subjects. Her research interests include peace education and critical service learning opportunities in urban middle schools.

Admin Corner

By Chasity Szabo

Northwest Cabarrus Middle School: Fostering a Community of Excellence Through STEM and Collaboration

In today's fast-paced and ever-changing world, it has become increasingly important for schools to not only provide a quality education but also to prepare students for the challenges they will face in the future. Nestled in the heart of a vibrant and growing community, Northwest Cabarrus Middle School stands as a beacon of educational innovation and inclusivity. For the past five years, the commitment to STEM education has propelled them to exceed growth expectations, earning them the esteemed title of a North Carolina STEM School of Distinction at the Prepared Level. Northwest Cabarrus Middle School has risen to this challenge by focusing on STEM education and fostering a culture of collaboration and excellence.

With approximately 830 students spanning grades 6 through 8, Northwest Cabarrus Middle School serves as a melting pot of ideas, perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds. The demographics closely mirror those of Cabarrus County, with about one-third Caucasian, one-third African American, and one-third Hispanic students. This diversity enriches the learning environment, fostering a sense of understanding, empathy among the students, and is an essential component in preparing students for success in the real world. They pride themselves on nurturing a strong culture of family and community, where every student feels valued and supported. With a diverse student body, including 60% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, they embrace the richness of their community and celebrate their differences.

Northwest Cabarrus Middle School believes every student deserves an educational experience tailored to their unique needs and abilities. That's why their approach to scheduling goes beyond simply assigning classes—it's about carefully crafting learning environments that foster growth and success for each individual student. Led by their dedicated team of administrators, student services professionals, and instructional leaders, their master scheduling process is a meticulous endeavor. They understand placing students in the right environment with the right teacher is crucial to ensuring students are challenged and supported at their appropriate level. Through collaborative efforts, teachers meticulously analyze student data, academic performance, and individual learning styles to make informed decisions about course placements and teacher assignments. Whether a student excels in STEM subjects, thrives in a collaborative setting, or requires additional support in certain areas, they work tirelessly to create schedules that meet their needs. The staff's commitment to personalized scheduling extends beyond academics, considering factors such as extracurricular interests, social dynamics, and special accommodations to create a well-rounded experience for every student. By investing time and resources into the master scheduling process, staff strives to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment where every student has the opportunity to excel.

They believe when students are placed in the right environment with the right teacher, they can achieve greatness.

The curriculum is designed to foster critical thinking, communication, creativity, and collaboration—the cornerstones of 21st-century learning. The school's commitment to STEM education has been a driving force in its success, with students consistently exceeding growth expectations in the last five years and earning the prestigious title of North Carolina STEM School of Distinction. Through hands-on projects and real-world applications, students develop the skills they need to thrive in an ever-changing world. One of the key pillars of Northwest Cabarrus Middle School's success is its focus on personalized instruction through small-group teaching. By tailoring instruction to meet the individual needs of each student, the school ensures that all students have the opportunity to excel and reach their full potential.

As a PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) school, they believe in teaching students expectations and recognizing those who go above and beyond. By promoting positive behavior and creating a supportive environment, Northwest Cabarrus STEM Middle School staff empower their students to succeed both academically and socially.

In recent years, Northwest Cabarrus Middle School has doubled down on its commitment to personalized instruction through small-group teaching and collaboration among students and staff. Teachers work together to design interdisciplinary units that encourage students to think critically and creatively, while students are encouraged to work together on projects that require teamwork and problem-solving. This collaborative approach not only strengthens students' skills but also fosters a sense of community and belonging within the school. This approach allows the school to meet the unique needs of every student, ensuring that each individual receives the support and guidance they deserve for success in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Northwest Cabarrus Middle School is more than just a place of learning—it's a community where students, teachers, and families come together to inspire, innovate, and thrive.

Chasity Szabo is principal at Northwest Cabarrus STEM Middle School in the Cabarrus County Schools District. She has 22 years of experience in middle school education, 7 years in school administration.

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