NCMLE JOURNAL

SPRING 2023
VOLUME34 (1)

50TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL ISSUE

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

All manuscripts will be promptly acknowledged upon receipt. They will then be sent to reviewers, and authors will be notified of publication decisions. Articles and other correspondence should be addressed to

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DUPLICATION POLICY

NORTH CAROLINA ASSOCIATION FOR MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION
JOURNAL

FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

Insights From the President

A golden jubilee marks a 50th anniversary. The North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (NCMLE) has been advocating for the middle school concept since 1973. Our 50th Anniversary marks half a century of a commitment to build high performing school communities in North Carolina that are designed specifically for the young adolescent. In affiliation with the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), we embrace the vision of empowering educators who create opportunities to cultivate the potential and possibilities of young adolescents.

Early adolescent education is vital to the life-long development of children. Students in the middle are leaving their elementary years that provided them opportunities to discover learning and entering into a period in their lives where they are not only learning content but also about themselves. Early adolescents need a consistent, supportive educational environment that allows them to experiment with learning and discover life-long skills.

Successful middle schools are soaring despite the obstacles of the past few years. Middle level educators embraced the challenges and developed strategies that continued to support the needs of the early adolescents. In partnership with the National Forum To Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, NCMLE has recognized over 39 middle schools across our state as Schools to Watch©. These schools have demonstrated academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity and organizational structures that create high-performance for students. This is one initiative that we support to recognize successful North Carolina middle schools.

NCMLE has provided educators with professional development opportunities that bring together the best practices of the experts, the professionals in the middle, and share them with one another. Our annual conference moved to a new venue in Charlotte, North Carolina in 2022 where we came back together in person to share what we learned during the pandemic and rekindle our connection created from our passions for middle school. In March 2023 NCMLE is going to celebrate 50 years of amazing growth in middle school education during our conference. In addition, we have re-envisioned our NC Middle School Journal with the insights of our new editor, Dr. Laurie Dymes. Dr. Dymes has the passion for middle level education and providing teaching and learning through print that will reignite all of us.

As our association moves into the next phases of our work, we invite each of you to join with us to ignite passion for middle school. Join us for professional development, present with us at our conference and other events, and share your expertise with our readers. We are excited to have you join us as we continue to advocate for the middle school concept.

Kim Lynch

NCMLE President

NCMLE: 50 YEARS OF LEADERSHIP

Editor's note: We begin this celebratory issue of the North Carolina Middle School Journal with a feature that provides perspective on our 50 years as an association. We invited a group of NCMLE leaders to share their viewpoints on our history and our present mission. We asked them to consider why our organization has been able to thrive and prosper for fifty years. In the first article, Tracy Smith highlights the accomplishments of the visionary men and women who founded and supported our North Carolina Middle Level Education organization in the early years. In the second, Ken McEwin tells the grassroots story of NCMLE and how the Association has always been a space to advocate for young adolescents. In the final piece of this section, four of our current members share their thoughts on our past, present, and future.

Tracy Smith is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and Interim Director of Faculty Mentoring, Career Support, and Coaching at Appalachian State University. Though she has been at the university for over two decades, she still joyfully recalls her years teaching middle school language arts and social studies and is grateful that social media allows her to stay connected to her former middle school students who are now interesting and beautiful adults.

Ken McEwin is a 50-year veteran of the classroom and Professor Emeritus at Appalachian State University, a position he held for 40 years before retirement. His strength and leadership continue to guide not only middle grades education in North Carolina but across the nation. He is largely responsible for establishing NCMLE, the first middle grades program in NC at ASU, and nationwide middle grade licensure and teacher education standards.

David Strahan is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Western Carolina University. He has served as President of the NC Professors of Middle Level Education (NCPoMLE), as a member of the NCMLE Board, and Chair of the AMLE Research Committee.

Holly Henderson Pinter is an associate professor of middle grades education at Western Carolina University, where she teaches methods and pedagogy courses in the elementary and middle grades department. She also serves as the Math 1 teacher and instructional liaison at the university's laboratory school, The Catamount School, and serves as program coordinator for elementary and middle grades education. Holly is the current president-elect for NCPoMLE.

Denise Johnson is an associate professor and program coordinator of middle grades education at Winston-Salem State University. Denise currently serves as the NC POMLE board president and is a member of the NCMLE Board. She also directs outreach in a community-based STEM program for middle school girls.

Nancy Ruppert is a Professor at the University of North Carolina Asheville. She serves on the NCMLE Board and NCPoMLE Board as outreach coordinator, and has served as president of both the AMLE Board and the National Professors of Middle Level Education (NAPOMLE).

Auspicious Beginnings: An Origin Story

By Tracy W. Smith

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has."
– Margaret Mead (n.d.)

Fifty years ago, a young and energetic Dr. C. Kenneth McEwin (Ken) joined the Elementary Education Department at Appalachian State University (AppState). During Ken's first year, Joe Logan, AppState's College of Education dean, summoned Ken to his office and told him he wanted Ken to look into starting a middle school teacher preparation program. Logan had been receiving calls from principals across North Carolina expressing concerns that they were having to re-train teachers to work in their middle-level schools. Neither the elementary-prepared teachers nor the high school-prepared teachers were receiving the training they needed to work with students in the middle schools across the state that were opening or converting from junior high schools. They were asking what Appalachian State University might do to help them.

It is doubtful that Dr. Logan had any idea what that auspicious meeting and his directive to Ken McEwin would mean to the history of middle level education in North Carolina and beyond.

As Ken began his research about the new middle school model of education that was spreading across the United States, he tapped into an emerging network of like-minded educators, scholars and practitioners who were influenced by the social and historical context of the 1960s and 70s.

Ten years before Ken McEwin joined the faculty at Appalachian State, in July 1963, Dr. William Alexander, noted curriculum authority and chairperson of the Department of Education at the George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, Tennessee, delivered a speech at a conference on the junior high school. In what proved to be a landmark address, Alexander proposed "a new school in the middle," one with its own status in the K-12 vertical system of American education, rather than a "junior" version of the senior high school. Many middle level leaders consider Alexander's address the catalyst for the start of the Middle School Movement, and many have named Alexander himself the Father of the Middle School Movement.

Thomas Dickinson (as cited in Smith & McEwin, 2011, pp. xxii-xxiii) described this historical time as "a period where experimentation was something that was going on in the schools" and that Alexander's ideas "found fertile ground" in the social and political climate of the late 1960s. Joan Lipsitz noted that at this time in America's history, the study of early adolescence was a non-field. Early adolescence was not being studied in the context of education, medicine, psychology, anthropology, or sociology. "It was amazing to me," Lipsitz observed, "that you could have an age group that everybody knew was important and that nobody was willing to pay attention to" (Smith & McEwin, p. xxiii).

And so it was at this time that many young education professors, leaders, and practitioners collectively took note of the critical stage of young adolescence. As other social movements focused on the marginalized, it seemed a time of openness to focus on young adolescents and to create an educational reform intended to provide for their unique needs. However, it would be an oversimplification and an inaccurate interpretation of the context to represent the birth of middle schools as a purely dogmatic or altruistic effort. In the context of American history, demographics and politics also influenced the reorganization of schools. Public schools were facing challenges finding space for the offspring of the baby boom in their overcrowded elementary schools. Significantly, in some cases establishing or restructuring schools to middle schools became a way to comply with desegregation mandates. School districts could desegregate their middle schools as they transitioned students from their segregated elementary schools. Though there were certainly logistical, political, and social influences on the making of the Middle School Movement, there was also an ideological awakening as experienced and emerging middle level education leaders began to meet and build a collective identity around a set of shared beliefs.

Central to these early ideological conversations was the formation of national and state middle level professional organizations. When Ken McEwin started looking for information about middle level teacher preparation, one of his first contacts was Dr. Paul George, a young new professor at the University of Florida, who was working with William Alexander. Ken and his AppState colleague, Pat Knight, went to visit Paul in Gainesville after reading an article he wrote. Paul and Bill Alexander were also attempting to design a middle school teacher preparation program at the University of Florida but were having difficulty because of the lack of a distinct middle school teacher license in the state. Paul and Ken became friends and colleagues and worked as consultants together for decades after that visit.

Paul had learned that a new organization named the National Middle School Association (NMSA) was going to hold their first national conference in Ohio. They had asked Bill Alexander to deliver a keynote address, but he was going to be out of the country, so, at Alexander's suggestion, they invited Paul to deliver the address and he did. Ken and Paul both attended the conference and became charter members of NMSA. Ken was the only attendee at the first NMSA conference from North Carolina. This is where he first met middle school founders Gordon Vars, John Lounsbury, and Conrad Toepfer.

Paul encouraged Ken to begin the process of establishing a North Carolina League of Middle Schools. The following year the second NMSA Conference was held In Atlanta, and Ken served on the conference planning committee that John Lounsbury chaired. It was at that conference that Ken asked Lounsbury to announce in a general session that attendees from North Carolina were invited to a meeting to consider establishing a new state-level middle school organization. Ken recalls that about 10 enthusiastic individuals came to the meeting, a first step toward creating the NC organization. They made plans to meet a few weeks later in Boone, North Carolina, where Appalachian State University is located. The small group met at a local restaurant in Boone and discussed plans for beginning a state organization. At the end of the meal, they collected a small amount of money (less than $10.00) to begin their organization. Ken went to a local bank and opened an account, and the North Carolina League of Middle/Junior High Schools was born. Ken agreed to be the first executive director and the first journal editor for the organization.

Over the next few years, Ken and other middle level teacher educators (such as John Arnold from NC State) worked with State Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) representatives and University of North Carolina General Assembly officials to develop middle grades degree requirements that would lead to specialized middle-level licensure. This was a revolutionary endeavor as few states had even considered specialized licensure at the time. In 1984, middle level licensure was enacted, and in 1985 Appalachian State graduated its first group of candidates with bachelor's degrees in middle grades education.

North Carolina quickly became a national leader in middle level teacher education. Ken served on the NMSA Professional Preparation Advisory Board that wrote the first national middle level teacher preparation standards. These standards have since guided program development and review across the United States and have provided criteria for evaluating the quality of middle level teacher preparation programs.

John Harrison, former Executive Director of the North Carolina Middle School Association offered these observations about these initiatives.

> You can't talk about middle school education—in North Carolina or across the nation—without quickly getting around to Ken McEwin. Ken has been a leader, a guide, a mentor, and a friend to me and to countless educators, and his efforts have improved the lives of who knows how many thousands of students. The North Carolina Middle School Association wouldn't be where it is today without Ken McEwin. Ken literally passed a hat around a lunch table to get NCMSA started. Thirty-six years later, the organization includes almost every middle grades school in the state, and has almost 30,000 members. Ken's vision and efforts have made incalculable contributions to middle level education in our state and around the country. (as cited in Smith & Greene, 2010, p. 4).

It's now been fifty years since they passed the hat in Boone to launch the North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education. Those years have seen our organization grow and flourish, guided by individuals who share the same sense of dedication to the middle level.

Over the years, the national and state organizations have been renamed to reflect the educational times and the expansion of the middle level education community. In 2011, the National Middle School Association became the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) to encompass its international outreach. Over the years of its history, the North Carolina League of Middle/Junior High Schools became the North Carolina League of Middle Level Schools, then the North Carolina Middle School Association, and now, to reflect the national organization's change, is named North Carolina Middle Level Education (NCMLE).

In the following section, I highlight a sampling of the leaders who helped guide the early momentum and who positioned North Carolina as a leader in middle level education. These leaders would be quick to point out that, while their positions and opportunities sometimes put them in the middle level spotlight, the school and classroom-level educators are the ones whose consistent presence and passion have made the most direct impact on North Carolina middle school students in the past five decades. (Note: the names of national and state organizations have since changed from NMSA and NCMSA to AMLE and NCMLE, respectively. The earlier names are referenced throughout for context.)

William Alexander

Frequently hailed as the "Father of the Middle School Movement," William Alexander proposed the Middle School in 1963 during his keynote address for a School Administrators Conference at Cornell University. Alexander was an acclaimed curriculum writer and thinker who was respected for his research as well as practical experience as a school superintendent. He mentored Ken McEwin, who became a research partner with Alexander, helping him replicate the comprehensive status studies of middle level schools across the United States. Paul George, Tom Erb, and many others were also mentored by Alexander who eventually retired from the University of Florida in 1977. Alexander was the keynote speaker at the first NCMSA Conference in 1976 and a frequent featured presenter at AppState summer middle school institutes. Alexander passed away in 1996.

John Arnold

John Arnold initiated and developed the middle grades teacher education program at North Carolina State University. In addition, he was the coordinator for the design and development of the Centennial Campus Magnet School, an innovative model middle school focusing on integrative curriculum, extensive student interaction with NC State university campus and community, the use of cutting-edge technology, and the cultural and social forces that affect young adolescent development.

A widely-known authority, he spoke at countless professional conferences in the U.S. and abroad. He published five books. John was also a consultant for children's television, focusing primarily on developmental propriety and values. He particularly enjoyed working with Disney/ABC and Nickelodeon.

John served as president of the NCMSA (1986-87) and as the editor/co-editor of the North Carolina Middle School Journal (1988-1994). He received the NCMSA C. Kenneth McEwin Distinguished Service Award in 1992.

He retired from NCSU in 1997 after serving as professor and director of the middle grades teacher preparation program for 19 years. He retired to Pinehurst, North Carolina, and passed away in December 2022.

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"Along with Ken McEwin, John Van Hoose, Wayne Dillon and others, I helped develop the North Carolina Middle Level Teacher Certification and Licensure Program, which I believe was the first or one of the first such programs in the country. Again, the level of agreement and pleasure that we had doing something of this significance was wonderful." –John Arnold

Nancy Doda

Nancy received her undergraduate degree in English Education from Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1974 and began her career teaching language arts and reading on a team at Lincoln Middle School in Gainesville, Florida. She was an early keynote speaker at the NCMSA Conference in 1976 and was well-known as a teacher-practitioner-leader in middle level education. Nancy delivered the first keynote address given by a classroom teacher at the NMSA Conference in 1977 and received the John H. Lounsbury Distinguished Service Award from NMSA in 2001.

Paul George

Called the "foremost expert on middle schools in the country" by the American Association of School Administrators, Paul George collaborated with Ken McEwin in the early years, when both were trying to begin middle level teacher preparation programs. Paul gave the keynote at the first NMSA Conference and was founder of the Florida League of Middle Schools (1972). Paul received the John H. Lounsbury Distinguished Service Award from NMSA in 1998.

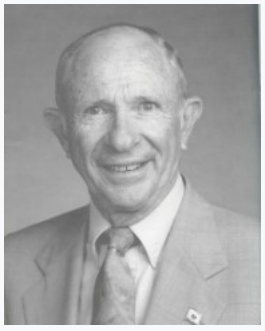
Joan Lipsitz

Author of the classic books, Growing Up Forgotten: A Review of Research and Programs Concerning Early Adolescence (1977) and Successful Schools for Young Adolescents (1984), Joan was a lifelong advocate for the age group. Joan earned her doctorate from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1976, and founded the Center for Early Adolescence at UNC-CH in 1978. This was the first national center to focus on supporting young adolescents in their homes, schools, and communities by providing training, technical assistance, and other services and resources to those who served them. Joan also founded the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform (the Forum) in 1997 and the Schools to Watch program sponsored by the

Forum in 1999. Joan received the John H. Lounsbury Distinguished Service Award from NMSA in 1994 and the C. Kenneth McEwin Distinguished Service Award from NCMSA in 2004.

John H. Lounsbury

Before he became known as one of the five Founding Fathers of the Middle School Movement and the "conscience of middle level education," John Lounsbury began his teaching career as a junior and senior high school social studies teacher in Wilmington, North Carolina. Lounsbury edited the Middle School Journal from 1976-1990. Lounsbury played a prominent role in every edition of This We Believe, NMSA's seminal position paper. In 1978, NMSA created its highest level award - an Award for Distinguished Service to Middle Level Education. John Lounsbury was the first recipient, and thereafter the award was named for him. In 1997, Georgia State College and University named the school of education The John H. Lounsbury School of Education. Lounsbury passed away in 2020 at the age of 96.



C. Kenneth McEwin

Ken McEwin was instrumental in bringing attention and structure to middle level education in North Carolina. He was a founder and the first Executive Director of NCMSA as well as the first editor of the NCMSA Journal. He served as President of NMSA in 1983 and received the John H. Lounsbury Distinguished Service Award from NMSA in 1983. Ken was a member of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) Committee that wrote the Early Adolescence Generalist Standards, one of the first certifications available from NBPTS. He developed the first middle-level teacher preparation program in North Carolina at Appalachian State University.

Wilma Parrish

Wilma Parrish served for 32 years as an educator in the Alamance County School System. She was the founding principal of Western Middle School (late 1970s), where a wing of the school has been named in her honor. Western Middle School in Alamance County was one of four middle schools featured in Successful Schools for Young Adolescents written by Joan Lipsitz, and it was the only middle school selected in NC.

While Parrish was principal at Western Middle School, she was always welcoming to hundreds of educators (both domestic and international) who visited her school to learn how to make their schools more effective for young adolescents. The school was named one of the top four middle schools in the nation. She was awarded Principal of the Year in 1986. Parrish received the Allen Keith Lucas Friend of Children Award from the NC Child Care Association, the C. Kenneth McEwin Distinguished Service Award, and was named the 1986 Principal of the Year on the regional level. Wilma Parrish is representative of the many outstanding middle school principals in North

Carolina who work to provide young adolescents with schools that are effective and responsive to their learning needs. Parrish passed away in 2000.

Chris Stevenson

An important figure in the middle school movement and author of Teaching Ten to Fourteen-Year-Olds, Chris worked with John Arnold and other emerging national figures to provide summer institute sessions for North Carolina teachers for more than 15 years. Chris retired to North Carolina to live near John Arnold, his lifelong friend. They lived in Pinehurst near the NCMSA Headquarters...and a beautiful golf course. Chris received the John H. Lounsbury Distinguished Service Award from NMSA in 2002.

John Van Hoose

John was a Professor of Education at UNC Greensboro from 1983-2001. He worked with others across NC to develop Middle Grades Licensure and began the program at UNCG. He served as an advisor to more than 50 doctoral students, many of whom became middle grades professors. He was passionate about improving the lives of young adolescents and authored many publications on middle school improvement, one of which was Promoting Harmony: Young Adolescent Development and School Practices, an AMLE best-seller, with David Strahan and Mark L'Esperance. He served as president of NCMLE and received the C. Kenneth McEwin Award for Distinguished Service. John was always a popular presenter for professional development with his deep knowledge, vast array of stories, and unquenchable sense of humor. While he often joked that he "thought like a kid," his thinking was well grounded in study and research. Van Hoose passed away in 2001.

Gordon Vars

Significantly, Gordon Vars, known as one of the five Founding Fathers of the Middle School Movement, noted the middle-level education leadership of North Carolina: "I think North Carolina has been the model of a state where they did that [established middle grades licensure] and as a result, all of the colleges and universities, I believe, in North Carolina have programs and they have support from the Education Department" (personal communication, November 2003). He also credited the University of North Carolina system and its branches for their progressive thinking: "There must have been something going on there in North Carolina to make it possible for them to get the kind of state regulations and certifications that made it the model for the rest of us." Vars passed away in 2012.

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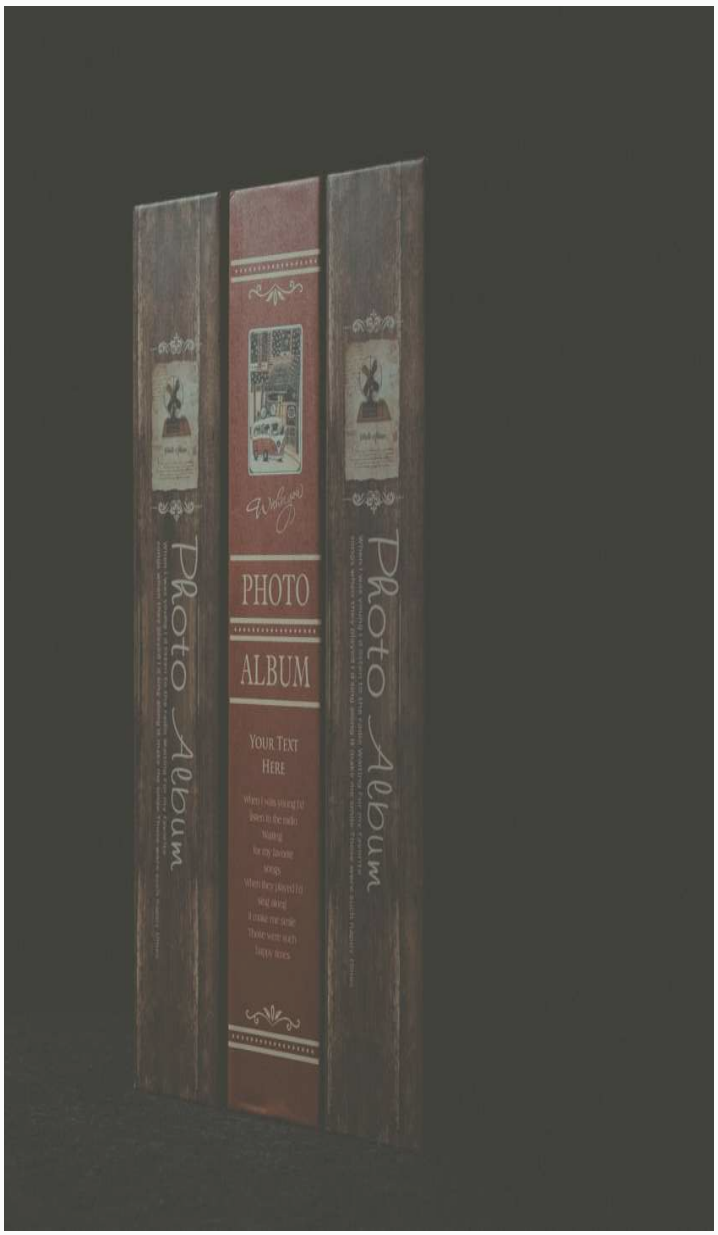
Memories and Reflections about the Founding and Early History of the North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education

By C. Kenneth McEwin



As context, this piece was written in response to a request that I place in writing some of my memories and reflections about the founding and early years of the North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (NCMLE). The intention is not to present a comprehensive history of NCMLE. Rather, it is to provide descriptions of selected occurrences, the environment surrounding those occurrences, and their effect on the design of NCMLE. This new association was unique in North Carolina in that it centered directly and exclusively on providing developmentally responsive teaching, learning, and schooling for young adolescents.

I have purposefully not used a research format because of the nature and purpose of this paper. I have included some selected actions taken during this time period, and, in some cases, briefly addressed the underlying rationales behind those actions. Some attention is also placed on the prevailing middle level environment during this time period. I have only occasionally used names of individuals because there are so many who volunteered their time and expertise to establish this new association. The efforts of dedicated middle level leaders, both past and present, offer hope for achieving and maintaining excellence in middle level education with the ultimate beneficiaries being the young adolescents of our state.

Early Memories and Reflections

The memories and reflections represented here began approximately 50 years ago and I am now 80 years old. I retired from Appalachian State University in 2013 after completing 50 years as an educator. It has been my distinct honor to have been a part of NCMLE since its establishment and to have worked with North Carolina middle level educators for 40 of those years. During my career, I was blessed with opportunities to teach sixth-graders and middle level teachers, serve as a middle level consultant, be a school principal, and engage in middle level research and professional publishing. However, one of the highlights of my career has been my involvement in NCMLE. I hope my memories and reflections contribute in some small way to increasing awareness of the importance of the work of NCMLE and encourage others to join in its efforts.

I am honored to be considered a founder of NCMLE. However, I want to make it clear that although I called the first meeting and proposed the formation of the Association, the real heroes and heroines that made NCMLE a successful and influential professional association are North Carolina educators, NCDPI personnel, and others who contributed to its founding. NCMLE has always been, and continues to be, a grassroots professional association that depends heavily on the unselfish actions and dedicated efforts of middle level educators and other stakeholders.

Influences Leading to Proposing the Creation of a Middle Level Association in North Carolina

Multiple influences led me to propose the establishment of a new middle level professional association in North Carolina. One factor was a growing realization of the low priority that was being given to the welfare and education of young adolescents in North Carolina. This low priority and the resulting neglect were apparent not only in education but also in other areas that affected the lives of young adolescents (i.e., child welfare agencies, the judiciary system, state and federal government programs, and the medical profession). This neglect was frequently accompanied by negative attitudes and stereotyped views of the age group. I recall people telling me they were sorry that I had to teach those crazy, hormone-driven kids rather than teach young children or older adolescents. I had, in fact, chosen to teach young adolescents and greatly enjoyed doing so. I believed that a new middle level professional association could work to help negate these negative perceptions of young adolescents through advocacy efforts and the implementation of developmentally responsive programs and practices.

Additionally, it seemed that if middle level reforms that benefited young adolescents and their teachers were to be successfully accomplished, the new middle level association should be open to all educators and other stakeholders rather than being a traditional individual membership organization designed to primarily serve only one educator specialization (i.e., teacher association or principal association). I thought that if the goals and objectives of the new association were to be achieved, a unified approach that involved a cross section of all middle level professionals was required.

Another reason I thought a new middle level professional association was needed was that I conducted an extensive review of professional literature related to young adolescents and middle level education. The knowledge base confirmed that major changes in educational plans for the teaching and schooling of young adolescents were needed. I believed a new middle level association could assist in informing educators and others about this knowledge base and its implications for reform.

This research review was conducted because Dr. Joe Logan, Dean of the Appalachian State University College of Education, asked me to provide leadership for developing a new middle level teacher preparation program. This new program was designed to help assure that Appalachian State University (ASU) graduates had the specialized middle level knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be highly successful in teaching young adolescents. Representatives from school districts had contacted him and requested that this new preparation program be initiated. As a result, ASU implemented the first undergraduate and graduate middle level teacher preparation programs in North Carolina in 1974.

An additional stimulus for recommending a new middle level professional association was my attendance at the first annual conference of the National Middle School Association (NMSA), now the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). I learned about the power of the emerging middle school movement and the promise it held for improving the educational opportunities of young adolescents. It seemed to me that North Carolina should have its own middle level association to focus directly and exclusively on young adolescents, their teachers, and other middle level professionals responsible for their learning and development. It could also encourage the utilization of new models of schooling that support and promote developmentally responsive middle level teaching and learning.

The potential of the league of schools model also influenced my decision to recommend that a new middle level professional association be established. This plan links middle level programs and schools together in ways that provide increased opportunities to strengthen teaching effectiveness and increase student learning. Schools can share resources, attend conferences together, and move beyond their specializations to create effective learning environments and increase learning for the young adolescents under their care. All school personnel become members by the school or school district paying one reasonably priced membership fee. The league of schools model also allows teachers and administrators to continue their individual memberships in teacher and principal associations and become members of NCMLE without incurring additional membership expenses.

The Context of North Carolina Middle Level Education in the 1970s and 1980s

To promote a more comprehensive understanding of the educational environment during the time period when NCMLE was founded and during its early years, some selected examples of the circumstances that prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s follow. The thoughts and recollections of this period remain fixed in my memory because NCMLE, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), the middle school movement, and middle level educational reform have been such an important part of my professional life.

School Names and Grade Organizational Plans During the 1970s and 1980s

From its earliest conception, the North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education was focused on improving the education and welfare of every young adolescent enrolled in North Carolina middle schools, junior high schools, and other school organizations that include the age group. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the majority of young adolescents in North Carolina were taught in separately organized middle level schools with some combination of grades five or six through eight or nine. Grades 7-9, found in the junior high school, was the dominant grade organization pattern. However, there were also large numbers of young adolescents attending grades P/K-8 elementary schools, grades 7-12 junior/senior high schools, and a variety of other schools with different names, philosophies, and grade organizational patterns.

During this period, there were even some schools in North Carolina that housed only one middle grade, for example, Seventh Grade Centers. In these schools, it was a major challenge for educators to offset the difficulties their young adolescent students experienced because they attended three different schools in three years. In other districts, an individual young adolescent might attend fifth and sixth grade in an elementary school, seventh and eighth grade in a middle school, ninth grade in a Ninth Grade Center, and grades 10-12 in a senior high school. It was not uncommon during this period for school districts to have multiple grade organizational plans and school names within their individual districts.

Factors underlying the reasons for a wide variety of grade organizations and school names are not fully presented here. However, some examples of these influences included: (a) increased school enrollments and resulting overcrowded schools; (b) court orders and the reorganization of schools as a result of desegregation efforts; (c) a growing dissatisfaction with junior high schools; and, (d) calls from middle level authorities to convert junior high schools into developmentally responsive middle schools housing grades five or six through eight.

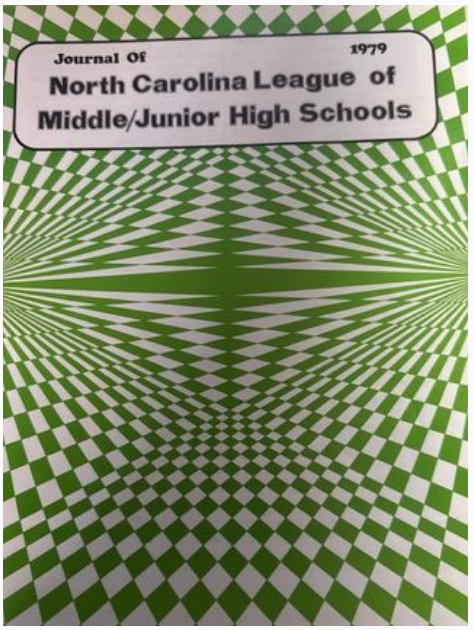
The purpose of my including this information is not to claim that grades six through eight middle level schools are always superior to other middle grades organizational plans. Rather, it is included here to point out that young adolescents were enrolled across a wide variety of schools during the period when NCMLE was established and during its early years. These diverse patterns often resulted in barriers to full success in school districts that genuinely wanted to establish developmentally responsive grades 6-8 middle level schools within their district. Sometimes the barriers to implementing these plans were apparent and substantial. For example, overcrowding of facilities and related factors prevented some districts from reorganizing until multi-year building programs were completed.

In summary, in the 1970s and early 1980s, young adolescents were enrolled in many different kinds of schools with different names, different philosophies, and a wide variety of grade configurations. It was a period when there was a growing consensus that ninth grade was a senior high school grade and should be housed in the senior high school building. There was also an increasing dissatisfaction with the "miniature senior high school" model of schooling that was often experienced by young adolescents during this time period.

Pressures Experienced by School Districts for Reorganization

Unfortunately, some reorganization plans in North Carolina and the nation were based on what was convenient and less expensive for school districts and did not adequately address the developmental needs of young adolescents in ways that increased their learning and enhanced their overall well-being. Many pressures were placed on school districts during this time period. For example, some school districts were under court-ordered desegregation plans that affected grade organization decisions. One result was that some school districts were forced to reorganize by moving ninth grade to the senior high school and the sixth grade to the middle school without sufficient time or resources to provide targeted middle level professional development or indulge in advanced planning.

These and other realities resulted in many middle level schools struggling with successfully implementing and maintaining the middle school concept. Having so many young adolescents housed in so many different kinds of schools with so many different grade



configurations is one reason NCMLE began as the North Carolina League of Middle/Junior High Schools. This new association could provide avenues for middle level personnel to work together to improve the effectiveness of their schools. This could occur whether their school was a newly reorganized middle level school, a long-established middle level school, a junior high school, or some other grade organization that included young adolescents.

The Challenge of Overcoming Tradition

During the period when NCMLE was established, the majority of schools for young adolescents were traditional in their approach. There existed a general lack of understanding on the part of many educators, school board members, policymakers, parents, and community members about the rationale for, and benefits of, the establishment of developmentally responsive middle level programs and schools. The proposed changes that accompanied this new approach were sometimes viewed as controversial and even radical, which fueled some resistance to proposed reforms.

The Lack of Teachers and Other Professionals with Middle Level Professional Preparation

Another reality that contributed to some resistance to middle level reform was that very few middle level teachers, administrators, and other personnel had received specialized middle level professional preparation. The majority of those teaching at the middle level were professionally prepared to teach older adolescents in senior high schools or young

children in the elementary grades. This meant that, for the most part, those charged with implementing developmentally responsive middle level schools were faced with assuming new roles and responsibilities (i.e., team teaching, teacher- based guidance, integrated curriculum, diverse teaching strategies). The purpose here is not to imply that these newly organized schools were ineffective or that the teachers and other educators were inferior in some way. In fact, the dedication and efforts of those involved should be appreciated and celebrated. The point of the preceding discussion was to describe some of the challenges faced during the time period when NCMLE was founded and during its early years.

In summary, the environment in middle level education made it clear that professional development should be a major part of the service delivered by the new middle level professional association. NCMLE needed to provide opportunities for people with similar professional roles and interests so they could come together to share their experience and expertise with their colleagues. An early commitment to accomplish this mission of providing high-quality professional development geared directly for middle level educators was made early in the history of NCMLE and continues today.

Positive Accomplishments During this Time Period

The purpose of the preceding discussion was not intended to make it seem that opposition to middle school reform was insurmountably difficult, but rather to describe some of the challenges that existed. During this period, some individual schools and school districts in North Carolina established exemplary middle level schools and received national recognition for their success. As an example, Western Middle School in the Alamance County School District offered not only the exemplary organizational features considered ideal for effective middle level schools but also placed a strong emphasis on innovative teaching strategies and a more exploratory and integrative approach to curriculum.

Schools like Western Middle School served as important models for other schools to learn from as they implemented their own newly organized developmentally responsive schools or sought to improve practice in existing schools. There were, in fact, many North Carolina educators who were dissatisfied with the nature of middle level education at that time and were searching for more viable alternative approaches. From these ranks came many of the educational leaders who provided the support needed to create NCMLE and allow it to become an influential force in the state.

NCMLE and the Middle School Movement

Intermingled with this profusion of diverse grade organization plans that predominated in North Carolina was the lack of a high priority on developmentally responsiveness in some schools. A relatively new and growing reform effort, commonly referred to as the middle school movement, was gaining momentum nationally when NCMLE was being planned and during its early years. This reform called for a major reorganization of middle level schools and the nature of teaching and learning in those schools. This initiative advocated moving away from the then-common grades 7-9 found in junior high schools, which would reduce dependence on rigid programs and practices.

This junior high school model reflected components such as strict departmentalization, inflexible scheduling, and limited teacher-based guidance, and it was dominated by the “lecture, take notes, and be tested” teaching strategy. It was, in effect, the “miniature senior high school” model that was largely inappropriate and ineffective for young adolescents. Those schools rarely provided opportunities for teachers to plan and work together in order to increase their teaching effectiveness and maximize student learning.

Components of the middle school concept were viewed with skepticism and even feared by some educators. The basis of this skepticism and fear of the unknown resulted in some who resisted the proposed changes. This was, at least in part, because of the fear of being less successful in schools operating with a new philosophy, changing teacher roles and responsibilities, a focus on individualized instruction, and a more interdisciplinary and integrated approach to curriculum. By contrast, components of the new middle school included, but were not limited to, interdisciplinary team organization, teacher advisory programs, flexible scheduling, common teacher planning time, intergraded curriculum, exploratory curricula programs, and a strong focus on instructional strategies that are most effective for increasing young adolescent engagement and learning.

This major reform movement, the middle school movement, was a major catalyst that influenced me to recommend the creation of a new state middle level association in North Carolina. This new association could advocate

for this often overlooked and undervalued age group and serve as a major resource for teachers and others responsible for their education and welfare. The middle school concept extended well beyond grade organization issues and advocated for developmental responsiveness in all matters involving teaching, learning, and schooling for young adolescents. For this reason, many of the tenants of the middle school concept are reflected in the priorities of NCMLE.

Affiliation of NCMLE with the National Middle School Association

From the beginning, it was intended that NCMLE, then the North Carolina League of Middle/Junior High Schools (NCLM/JHS), become an affiliate of the National Middle School Association (NMSA, now AMLE), which shared similar goals and objectives at the national level. NCMLE was the sixth state middle school association to become an official affiliate of NMSA/AMLE. This affiliation and close working relationship between AMLE and NCMLE has resulted in numerous benefits over the years but was an especially important connection and resource in the 1970s and early 1980s when the middle school concept was relatively new. It challenged traditional and widely believed ideas about the appropriate nature of middle level schooling.

Additionally, this affiliation with AMLE resulted in North Carolina educators being elected/appointed to AMLE committees, elected to national offices, and serving as members of the AMLE Board of Trustees. I represented North Carolina and NCMLE on the AMLE Board of Trustees in the early years and as president in 1982. Later, I was an Off-site AMLE Consultant for Teacher Preparation and Licensure at AMLE for 25 years. The reason for mentioning this is to note that AMLE has been an important influence in middle level education not only in North Carolina but in the nation.

This involvement with AMLE led to many other North Carolina educators becoming influential national leaders. Being an affiliate of AMLE has provided NCMLE with a voice in national and international middle level programs and policies in the prevailing years. This involvement with AMLE has resulted in benefits for both NCMLE and AMLE.

Support for NCMLE from National Middle Level Authorities

NCMLE has benefited from the guidance, support, and encouragement of renowned, nationally recognized middle level experts. For example, Dr. William Alexander, who is widely recognized as “The Father of the American Middle School,” provided guidance, authored NCMLE publications, and delivered the keynote address at the first NCMLE Annual Conference. Dr. Alexander was my mentor, close friend, and middle level school colleague for many years. He took a special interest in North Carolina middle level education and served as visiting professor at Appalachian State University for several summers.

Dr. Paul George, a colleague of Dr. Alexander at the University of Florida, was also a valuable resource during the creation of NCMLE. He had provided leadership in Florida for the founding of a new state middle level association there. Dr. George also developed a special interest in NCMLE and North Carolina middle level education. He delivered a keynote address at an NCMLE annual conference, authored articles for the NCMLE Journal, and has been a consulting expert for numerous school districts in the state. Both he and Dr. Alexander were available for assistance and encouragement whenever it was needed. It was my good fortune to work with Dr. George on many occasions, and he remains a friend and highly regarded middle level colleague.

Other distinguished middle level authorities considered founders of middle school education in America supported the founding of NCMLE. They offered advice, wrote articles for NCMLE publications, and made presentations at NCMLE annual conferences. Their participation in NCMLE added prestige and legitimacy to the founding and success of this new professional association. These renowned authorities included, but were not limited to: Drs. John Lounsbury, Gordon Vars, and Don Eichhorn. Additionally, NCMLE has been fortunate to have the support of nationally known middle level authorities from North Carolina; for example, Drs. Jeanneine Jones, David Strahan, John Arnold, John Van Hoose, Tracy Smith, Nancy Ruppert, Theresa

Hinkle and many others. NCMLE has greatly benefited from contributions by many other North Carolina professors from both state and private universities since its establishment.

Contributions of North Carolina Educators

Without the substantial support of North Carolina educators, NCMLE simply would not exist. These North Carolina leaders perceived the potential benefits of this new association and were determined to make it a reality. I will not attempt to name these professionals because there were so many who contributed. I think it is important to note that these educators held diverse titles and had a variety of professional responsibilities. It was truly a team effort from the very beginning. NCMLE is the result of a grassroots movement emerging directly from practitioners. For example, both a central office person, Marie Rudisill, and a teacher, Rebecca Stevens, served as Presidents in the first few years of the Association. The preponderance of those serving on the first NCMLE Board of Directors represented multiple school districts and professional responsibilities. Personally, I am honored to have worked with hundreds of North Carolina practitioners during my career. This includes my undergraduate and graduate students, whom I have always loved and respected. Much of my learning, however, goes back to a group of wonderful sixth-graders who taught me so much and confirmed my career choice during my first year of teaching in 1963.

Early Events that Led to the Decision to Create NCMLE

When asked to write down some of my memories and reflections on the founding of NCMLE, it was requested that I include a description of the very beginning phases of its establishment. Therefore, I have described some of those occurrences. I regret that I do not have a listing of those present at the first meetings, and I cannot recall the names of all who attended and participated.

Attendance at First Annual National Middle School Association Conference

In the early 1970s, I attended the first annual National Middle School Association Conference (now AMLE) and became a charter member. I was the only person attending from North Carolina. While there, I was approached by Dr. Gordon Vars, a founder of the American middle school, and asked to be the North Carolina State Coordinator for NMSA. I agreed, although I was not sure what that meant or what the expectations were. This turned out to be an important occurrence for me as well as for the future NCMLE. While attending the conference, I learned that some states had established their own state middle school associations and were affiliating with NMSA. This introduced me to the possibility of North Carolina having its own state middle level association. Later, NCMLE became the sixth state affiliate of NMSA.

Meetings to Propose a New North Carolina Middle Level Association

The desire to establish a North Carolina middle level association led me to try to determine what needed to be done to make this happen. I was new to North Carolina and unaware of all the steps that needed to be taken to accomplish this worthy goal. I knew for sure it was not something one person could do. I wondered how I could gain the confidence and assistance of middle level educators to accomplish this task. Was this something they would be interested in doing? What were the political implications? Would the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction be supportive?

I wanted to find a way to begin conversations with middle level practitioners. While attending the Second Annual Conference of NMSA in Atlanta, Georgia, I asked Dr. John Lounsbury, a founder of the American middle school, to make an announcement from the podium inviting anyone from North Carolina to attend a meeting at a designated time and place.

To my pleasant surprise, about a dozen people attended and were very supportive of establishing a new state organization for middle level educators. I regret that I do not have a full list of those attending. This group agreed to meet in Boone to start planning for this new state organization. They never questioned whether or not this task should or could be done; rather, they simply focused on what needed to be accomplished.

At this first planning committee meeting, the group had lunch at a local Boone steakhouse where we discussed the fact that this new association would need a bank account. Because we had zero funding, we all contributed our change from lunch so a bank account could be opened. Later, I went to the bank to open an account for this association that did not yet officially exist. The person I

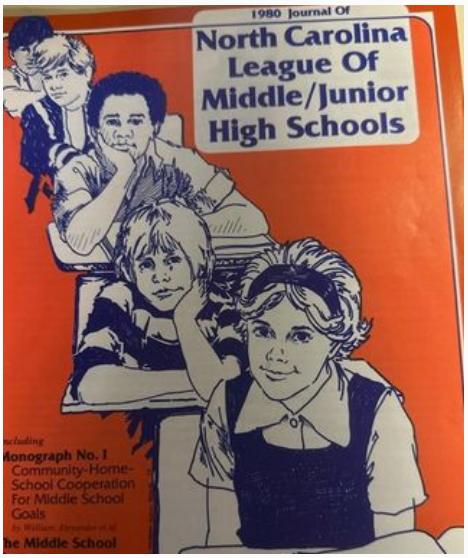
talked to at the bank said they would not typically open the type of checking account requested for such a small deposit. However, the bank official was a personal friend of mine and established the account anyway. The original deposit was about three dollars. The people attending this meeting also got middle level schools in their districts to join the Association which added a few more dollars to the bank account. ASU provided us with a place to meet and supported the efforts of NCMLE in multiple ways for many years.

The second planning meeting was held at a hotel in Greensboro, North Carolina, which provided a more central location for attendees driving from other parts of the state. People attending the first meeting invited representatives from other parts of the state to attend the second meeting, and so our membership began to grow. I do not recall how many attended the Greensboro meeting nor do I have a list of participants. I do recall how enthusiastic everyone was about starting this new association. Participants even started planning the first annual conference, which was later held in Burlington, North Carolina.

One of those attending was Wayne Dillion, who was the middle level specialist at NCDPI. He helped us gain support for NCMLE at NCDPI and provided resources that were helpful. Many other NCDPI officials have played important roles in the success of NCMLE over the years. Another key provider of leadership when NCMLE was being established was Marie Rudisill, an early president of NCMLE. When an attorney was needed to review the constitution and bylaws of NCMLE, funding was not available for this legal work. However, Marie had a brother who was an attorney and got him to do the necessary work for no cost. I include this story as an example of the early leaders who overcame any roadblocks that hindered the success of NCMLE and the benefits it offered for middle level reform. Many young adolescents, their teachers, and others have benefited from the efforts of these early pioneers who unselfishly devoted their time and energies to improving middle level education and enhancing the well-being of North Carolina's youth.

Early NCMLE Annual Conferences

NCMLE has sponsored numerous high-quality professional development conferences and other opportunities for participants to enhance their knowledge and skills. The first annual conference was held in Burlington, North Carolina with Dr. William Alexander delivering



the keynote address. North Carolina practitioners made presentations focused on successful practices, model programs and schools, young adolescent development, middle level resources, developmentally responsive teaching strategies, middle level curriculum, and a variety of other topics.

This first conference was very successful and unique in the sense that it focused directly and exclusively on middle level topics. This was rare in an educational environment that too often neglected the middle level. The word spread that there was a new state association that sponsored middle level conferences featuring topics relevant to their professional roles and responsibilities. NCMLE annual conferences continued to grow in size and quality during the early years. The practice of featuring major addresses by nationally recognized middle level authorities and presentations by middle level practitioners, university professors, NCDPI personnel, and others was a popular model. School visitations were also an important component of the conferences.

NCMLE Professional Publications

The NCMLE Board realized that a North Carolina journal that included middle level topics of interest to the state's educators was needed. This led to the creation of the Journal of North Carolina League of Middle/Junior High Schools. I served as editor for the first ten years with the first issue being published in 1979. It included a dozen articles and book reviews. This issue and those that followed were well received. This journal, now the NCMLE Journal, is published twice a year and enjoys a strong partnership with AMLE and its affiliates.

A newsletter was also published and mailed to members in the early years. Unfortunately, the

copy I had saved was lost when I retired. I remember that it listed the members of the board of directors and charter members, included a membership application, contained some news items, and presented information about the League. I also recall that it was produced by a group of students in the Wilkes County School District under the direction of their teacher, Jerry Fee.

In the early years, NCMLE also began to publish monographs with relevant middle level topics addressed in more detail. The quality of these monographs is high and topics are useful to middle level educators. One early NCMLE monograph, Promoting Harmony: Young Adolescent Development and School Practices, written by Drs. John Van Hoose and David Strahan, was so popular that it was later republished by AMLE and is now in its third edition.

Closing Remarks

This paper highlights only some of my memories and reflections from the founding and early years of NCMLE, then the North Carolina League of Middle/Junior High Schools. It would require a much more comprehensive treatment to discuss the last 40 or so years of NCMLE and would need to include a much more comprehensive and detailed approach to all topics.

One issue not addressed is the rationale for changes that have occurred in the name of NCMLE. These name changes were made to better reflect existing conditions at different stages of the development of middle level education in the state. For example, “Junior High Schools” was included in the first name, but currently, there are very few grades 7-9 junior high schools in North Carolina. NCMLE was selected to emphasize that the Association is open to all schools that enroll young adolescents no matter what the name of the school or its overall grade organizational plan. Coverage of the most recent history of NCMLE would also need to address the many accomplishments and successful initiatives of NCMLE that did not exist in the early years.

The recognition and respect now given to our Association have resulted in NCMLE “having a seat at the table” when decisions affecting middle level education and young adolescents are being made by policymakers and other influential individuals and groups. As an example, several years ago North Carolina was going to eliminate the middle grades teaching license and move to a combined middle and secondary licensure plan. A group of representatives from NCMLE met with policymakers and convinced them to change their plans and to retain the separate middle grades license.

The overwhelming amount of credit for the success of NCMLE over the past five decades goes directly to dedicated North Carolina educators who saw an opportunity to improve the educational opportunities and quality of life for young adolescents. They also recognized the importance of serving those who teach young adolescents and other professionals responsible for their education and well-being. The ultimate beneficiaries of these and related efforts are North Carolina’s young adolescents.

Concluding Statements

NCMLE has played a substantial role in the progress made in North Carolina middle level education over the past 50 years. It has much to be proud of for its many contributions toward improving middle level education, increasing learning for young adolescents, and providing more developmentally responsive learning environments in schools. Clearly, the level of success in the establishment of developmentally responsive middle schools and middle level programs in other school organization plans that include young adolescents has improved over the years. NCMLE has played an important part in the gains accomplished. I base this statement on both research results and personal observations over several decades of involvement in middle level education.

However, some of the challenges that characterized the 1970s and 1980s linger and much remains to be accomplished if all young adolescents are to reach their full potential. NCMLE must continue to provide leadership and advocacy. I hope each of you will contribute to the work of NCMLE and speak and act for the thousands of North Carolina young adolescents who are too young to advocate for themselves. After all, the goals and objectives of NCMLE are unselfish and uniquely focused on the education and well-being of this wonderful developmental age group, as well as those who teach them and serve them in other ways.

WITH HONOR AND SPECIAL RECOGNITION

NCMLE Past Presidents

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Julia Thomason
Marie Rudisell
Rebecca Stevens
Barry Rice
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Barbara Smith
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Hardy Tew
John Arnold
Nancy Farmer
John Van Hoose
Janice Davis
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David Strahan
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Mike Ward
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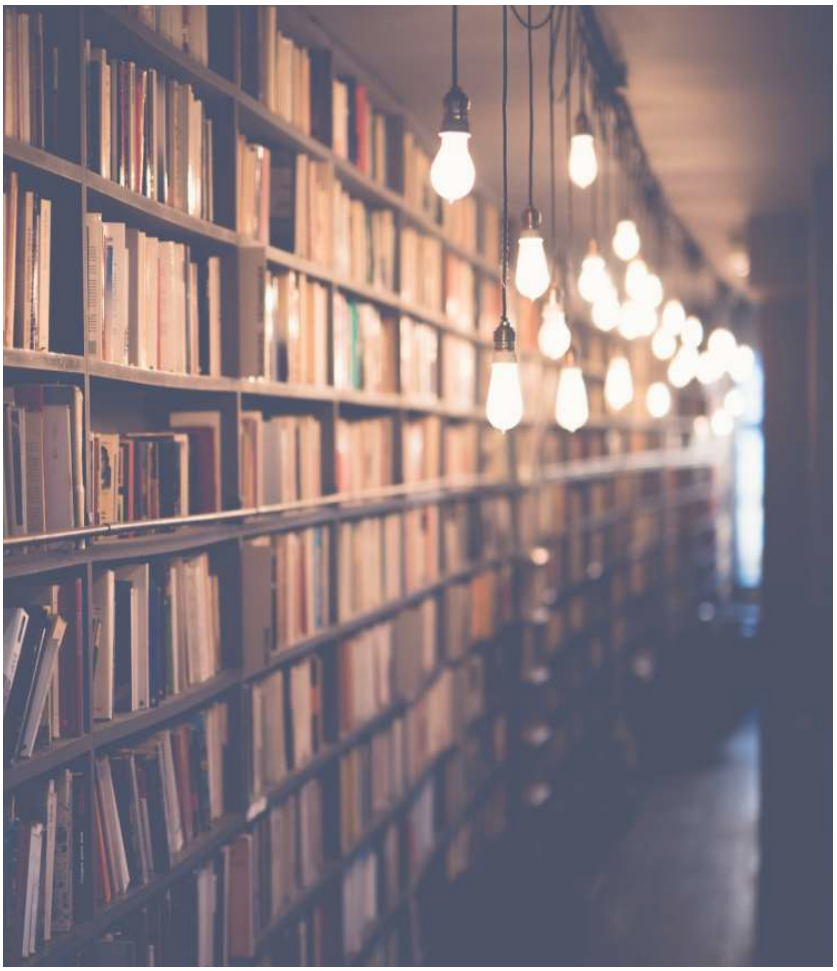
Ronnie Joyce
Hannah Cabe
Sally Austin
Cathy Tomon
Sam Treadaway
Jeanneine Jones
Tracy Smith
James Davis
Todd Martin
Nancy Ruppert



Celebrating the Middle Level: Past, Present, and Future

By David Strahan, Holly Henderson Pinter, Denise Johnson, and Nancy Ruppert

In the previous articles, the authors reported the major events in the founding of NCMLE and highlighted the contributions of some of our early leaders. In this article, four of our contemporaries share their reflections on their experiences in NCMLE, recap the impact middle level education has had over the past 50 years, and consider the opportunities and challenges we are experiencing now.

In the first section, David Strahan recalls how impressed and inspired he was when he found himself immersed in middle school reform in North Carolina in the 1980's. Holly Henderson Pinter offers insights on current issues from her unique dual position as a classroom teacher and teacher educator. Denise Johnson extends this analysis with a focus on contemporary shifts in ways of learning and teaching. In the final section, Nancy Ruppert highlights results from an ongoing study of the passions that drive our most successful middle level educators.

All four authors consider the status of middle level education as we enter our 50th year as an organization. As Tracy Smith emphasized in her lead article, our early leaders shared a vision of transformative education for young adolescents. Inspired by their work, leaders who followed nourished and expanded this vision. For fifty years, this shared vision has nurtured middle level educators who devoted time, energy, and insight to growing our organization. From different perspectives, the authors of this article address the implicit question "Why does advocacy for middle level education matter so much?"

Connecting with a Tradition of Middle Level Advocacy

David Strahan

At this significant juncture in our history, I am grateful I've been part of this association for almost 40 years. I appreciate the fact that the association itself has not just survived for 50 years but has prospered. First and foremost, NCMLE advocates for young adolescents and their teachers. That work is as important now as it was in 1972, maybe more so.

I came to North Carolina in 1984, so I missed the first 12 years. What I know about the beginning is that some really inspiring

people did really inspiring things. One of them was to advocate for specialized licensure requirements for grades 6-9 and get these approved. North Carolina was one of the first states to develop this bold new initiative. I joined the faculty at UNC Greensboro to help enact these new specialized licensure standards. This was an energizing enterprise. I was delighted to join John Van Hoose in developing courses and internships to meet the new requirements.

By the time I came to UNCG, I had been attending the national middle school conference for several years. To me, it had become an annual "jamboree" of inspiration and enthusiasm, hundreds of like-minded educators sharing one purpose. At my first conference, I recognized this spirit as the same sense of energy I felt while working with fellow teachers who genuinely liked our students and were committed to making connections with them. When we met at our school to think of ways to better understand students and engage them in lessons, there was a palpable vitality in the room, one that often extended into late afternoon planning sessions. I was surprised to experience such vitality at a large national conference. I left the Denver sessions in 1977 knowing that I would try to attend the next year - and I was able to do so every year until the pandemic hit in 2020. To date, I have enjoyed 43 years of jamboree - and plan to attend in National Harbor, Maryland in 2023.

I did not expect to feel this rare level of engagement at the North Carolina state conference as well, but I was wonderfully surprised. In the spring of 1985, we gathered in High Point, probably 500 or so of us. Presenters of the sessions were enthusiastic in their support for the concept of a middle school and for responsive ways to teach young adolescents. It was great to meet so many kindred spirits. Exciting things were happening in North Carolina. I realized that this middle level spirit, one of vigor and optimism, was one that we could hope to inspire in our middle grades courses. Our candidates readily embraced the commitment to connect with young adolescents and often found themselves inspiring their mentor teachers to learn more about the middle school concept. It was especially rewarding to take teacher candidates to the state conference and see them join in the jamboree.

At this same time, our organization was working year-round to support teachers and administrators as they engaged in middle school transformation. With Ken McEwin, John Van Hoose, Jeanneine Jones, Theresa Hinkle and others, I offered sessions at workshops and institutes. Teams from middle schools around the state joined us to learn more about collaborative planning, lesson engagement, enrichment activities, and advisory sessions. I especially remember our final events when each team presented a skit about student engagement. One year, John Van Hoose's teammates dressed him up as the Energizer Bunny, and he marched repeatedly across the stage with a big bass drum. Somewhere there may be a VHS videotape of this event. I wish I had one in my archives.

Through this work directly with teachers and administrators, NCMLE supported a wave of school reform that improved the school experiences of thousands of young adolescent students across the state. The mission of our organization was stated clearly: "to advocate for the middle school concept." Looking back, it was a remarkable time. The "middle school movement," as it was sometimes called, transformed classrooms and hallways in meaningful ways. Bold districts embraced these progressive efforts through investments in professional development. While some schools became "middle schools" in name only, hundreds of schools across the state embraced authentic changes. In those schools, teachers collaborated more purposefully in team planning sessions, provided students more social and emotional support, and encouraged stronger parent and community connections.

In the 1990's, when Schools to Watch became a powerful force for reform through funding from the National Forum, NCMLE was one of the first state organizations to join this initiative. We have since been a leader in identifying and verifying schools that have fully implemented the middle school concept. I have been fortunate to be able to visit some of these schools who meet the rigorous criteria for membership. I have met hundreds of inspiring teachers and observed firsthand the impact of their efforts with students. The middle level spirit, one of vigor and optimism, is thriving in these schools. Enthusiastic teachers and students are exploring real-world issues, engaging in problem-based learning, creating

artwork, serving in their communities – all with a vitality that is contagious.

One of the most powerful applications of the Schools to Watch framework has been its potential as a system for school reform. Funded by grants from the National Forum, teams of NCMLE school reformers worked with middle schools in challenging settings for extended periods of time, identifying areas of concern, gathering information about students' needs, organizing more supportive team configurations, and enhancing lesson designs. These successes provided ideas to share with other schools and prompted ripples of reform in several districts. Ken McEwin's detailed case study of transformations at Hamlin Middle School, published by NCMLE, provides vivid illustrations of the impact of this initiative.

The network among reformers that grew from our efforts was especially important in 2007 when the state department was considering eliminating specialized licensure for the middle level. Members of our organizations advocated continuation and worked with public school leaders to support middle level specialization. We invited a representative from the Department of Public Instruction to meet with us at our state conference to discuss issues face-to-face. Our efforts were successful and association leaders led the Panel to develop New NC Specialty Area Standards for Middle Grades in 2008.

These experiences, and many more, gave me recurring doses of the middle school spirit I have tried to describe. I know how much caring teachers can mean to students. I know how much engaged students can accomplish. I know how good students and teachers can feel about themselves when they leave their buildings at the end of the day.

Looking back, I realize that it is this middle school spirit of collaboration and collegiality that has kept me engaged in our profession, even in retirement. When I work with teams of teachers to think about students and ways to engage them, there is always an energy in the room. Bringing students into the conversations ups the wattage. When everything comes together in lessons, that's when the magic happens. This energy is contagious when teachers meet at conferences. We like talking about our work and sharing notes about ideas to try.

In several research projects, we have documented this power of collaboration. Teachers have shared inspiring stories of times they have connected with students and how these connections have lifted their spirits, as well as their students. Sometimes it has been this spirit that draws them to school on days when they don't feel like going. Colleagues nurture and sustain each other. I am sure that if we ask any career teacher - someone who has taught for thirty years or more - what kept them in the classroom, their responses will feature two words: students and colleagues.

NCMLE and AMLE enrich these connections. The middle school spirit draws us to conferences, sometimes at significant cost, always with uplifting outcomes. I'm hoping a little bit of this spirit has shown in this article. Moving forward, I think we can support our organizations by sharing stories of joyful times in teaching. Such stories can remind us of the reasons we appreciate our profession and each other. Our North Carolina Middle School Journal will feature as many of these stories as possible. Please read them, forward them to colleagues, and send one to us. While an online community may lack some of the wattage of face-to-face interactions, we can strengthen community, even at a distance. I hope to participate.

Connecting Advocacy for Young Adolescents in the Classroom with Teacher Education

Holly Henderson Pinter

I have worked in middle level education since 2005 when I graduated from Western Carolina University's program in middle grades education and started teaching seventh grade math in a traditional middle school. To improve my practice, I attended professional conferences and completed a Master's Degree in Middle Grades Education. After five years in the classroom, I continued toward a doctoral degree in mathematics education. Since completing that degree, I have worked as an associate professor in an elementary and middle grades program and have helped to create a laboratory school in partnership with a local school district. The laboratory school serves sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students who either come from a low-performing school or are low performing themselves. I have a wonderful position in which my teaching load is split between teaching a section of eighth-grade math for

lab school students and teaching pedagogy courses for the university. The most wonderful part of this position is the ability to bring teacher candidates into my eighth-grade classroom for an immersive experience of learning to teach.

Observing the ways young adolescents bring college students into their world and the ways the preservice teachers bring middle schoolers into mathematical understanding gives me a unique perspective on middle level education. When I look around my classroom and reflect on what I see, I notice several factors that affirm what we've always known and advocated for in middle level education. I also see new trends that make me think of how we should do things differently.

In my middle school classroom, I see kids who are showing confidence in their skin-- they wear what they want, they explore with radical colors in their hair, they find fashion that highlights their personal traits. Some of them try on a new name or a new pronoun, just exploring to see what fits them. All of these things are still fluid. We see kids seeking approval (from peers and adults), seeking identity, and floundering along the way until they find the right fit for them. We also see students battling anxiety and depression at levels we haven't seen before. Recent studies have shown that there is an increased prevalence of anxiety in teens, particularly in subcategories of adolescents in the LGBTQ community. Of the eight students who were in math one last year, three of them changed their names and pronouns at some point within the school year. By the start of their ninth-grade year one of them had decided that wasn't the right fit and went back to their original name. Their teachers supported them throughout this process by respecting their wishes and consistently checking in with them to make sure they felt visible and heard. These examples and many others remind us that supporting the social and emotional needs of young adolescents has become even more the priority in our classrooms. We've always cared for our students, as individuals and as groups, but now that caring seems more urgent. We want students to feel safe and healthy. We also know that kids aren't likely to be successful in academics if they don't feel whole as persons.

I see a generation of students who care deeply about the world around them. They recognize injustices easily, and they are resolute in their desire to make things better. They don't accept the status quo and they use their resources like social media to voice their thoughts. They are perceptive to big issues and they have big opinions, particularly to issues of social justice and equity. At one local school for example, a student advocate group has worked alongside teachers to write grants to make period products free and available in all bathrooms. Topics that once were shied away from are addressed by these students in a head-on matter-of-fact fashion.

Watching my colleagues in the flow of their lessons, I see that we have worked hard to change the way we teach so that students are engaging in critical problem solving skills, research, and inquiry. We see them finding sparks of interest. As we have implemented restorative practices and modeled strategies for collaboration and conflict resolution, we see students approaching situations with a vocabulary that helps them call out issues they see and advocate for themselves.

Middle level education must continue to focus on this engagement and harness this power to create students who are armored with information to defend their opinions, who have access to sources to investigate. It is no longer a simple, "can you solve a two-step equation" but more, "do you have lots of strategies for approaching a problem and a toolkit to utilize when you are stuck?" It is not just learning that antibiotics become resistant over time; it is creating a public service announcement with evidence and strategies to prevent antibiotic resistance. Our job as middle level educators must be to help these adolescents, who are very much still in the awkward middle, to channel their passions, to find avenues towards social, emotional, and academic success by using problem solving and critical thinking skills.

I am glad I am now in a position to advocate for better middle level education as President-Elect of The North Carolina Professors of Middle Level Education. Our organization and the rest of NCMLE will enhance middle level advocacy in our university classrooms and field experiences by continuing to support teachers in their professional development in areas related to social and emotional support and restorative practices. We will re-visit and re-imagine what 21st-century skills mean and

what they look like in contemporary classrooms to help students use resources and tools to channel their activist energy into productive conversations and actions.

Connecting Our Classrooms with a Changing World: A Letter to Future Teachers

Denise Johnson

As a young, beginning teacher, I remember being filled with both angst and excitement during my first days of teaching middle school. A plethora of unknowns and "what-ifs" swarmed my head. Who are my students, what if they don't like mathematics, what if they don't like me? What if I can't help them understand? — It was, in fact, my job for them to learn mathematics and learn to appreciate its role in our society. It was important for me to get my students to see that learning these mathematics concepts was essential to becoming a productive human being, that what we learned in school would help provide them progressive knowledge and experience that could not be duplicated outside of my classroom. I now realize that so much of our understanding about the products, outcomes, and experiences of teaching and learning at that time focused entirely around the "WHAT" of school. What is teaching? What is school? What should students learn?

I am reminded of the early works of famed modern American philosophers such as Dewey, Booker T Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois and how these educators worked to frame the aims and goals of education at the turn of the 20th century. Education was debated to be a right of every citizen and should be used to advance the livelihood of families, whether that livelihood be aristocratic or industrial in nature. The purposes of education for women were even more highly influenced by societal norms and attitudes. In many environments, education for women was to prepare them to be wives of important men.

Even in the world of mathematics education, we have long engaged in discourse about the role of mathematics in the K-12 classroom. The mathematics curriculum for classrooms has been modified and extended many times since my early years as a teacher. Mathematics that was once reserved for complex schools of thought are now sampled in early elementary classrooms. The need for rigor in mathematics has been informed by societal needs for students once their formal K-12 education is complete. Societal interests have always influenced education in ways that determined what was taught in school or even who could attend school. I begin to think about the five interest groups that Paul Ernest (2000) discusses in his work, "Why Teach Mathematics" (Industrial Trainers, Technological Pragmatist, Old Humanist Mathematics, Progressive Educators, and Public Educators) and which of our current educational interest groups are defined by these same categories. Are these groups still represented in 21st-century education? Which group(s) play a more influential role in shaping our educational goals? Do our educational goals still fulfill the needs of these groups or stakeholders? Have new groups emerged that now need to be considered?

I would give a resounding YES to these questions. The one group not acknowledged and often omitted from discussions about education is — the students. I believe that future teachers and decision-makers may need to focus a little less on the WHAT of education and transition our focus to the WHO of education. For WHOM are we spending countless hours in professional development, curriculum reviews, cycles of assessment, and mounds of data? Are we meeting the needs of the young people we teach?

I would encourage new teachers to embrace those first day, week, month jitters and use it as inspiration. Be less concerned with WHAT to say and more excited about learning WHO to say it to. Classrooms of yesteryear reflected the makeup of communities, as do classrooms of today. Modern technological advances have helped to diversify our communities and schools. Technology has brought more global awareness to our homes and our schools. People now have opportunities to see and experience others with similar interests, cultures, and languages, even if they are far away. Teachers are now equipped to send students on virtual field trips to locations we didn't know existed twenty-five years ago. Today, students can experience changes in our environment in real-time. Cameras, monitors, and sensors are now attached to almost all facets of life and can be used in teaching environments. How can these experiences not shape our perspectives of the importance of the student? If we aren't cognizant of the changes in the needs of our

students, how can we possibly prepare them for the ever-changing world we live in?

Hopefully, teachers will now feel comfortable exploring the passions and interests of students in and outside of the classroom. We now realize the importance of getting to know our students and understanding their experiences and using that knowledge as an asset in developing learning opportunities for them, particularly during the middle years. I am lucky to be able to work with such a committed and dedicated group of teachers and teachers-to-be in North Carolina. I am excited for those individuals who are choosing education and are recognizing teaching as an honorable profession. I am looking forward to working alongside teachers promoting 21st-century learning knowledge, skills, and dispositions in student-centered classrooms.

Connecting Our Past and Future: Leaders Share a Middle School Mindset and a Passion for Supporting Young Adolescents

Nancy Ruppert

Among our current educators in North Carolina is an amazing group committed to working with young adolescents. We currently have over 800 middle schools in North Carolina. Thousands of teachers, counselors, administrators, district personnel, community members, custodians, cafeteria workers, parents, full-time substitutes, and volunteers dedicate their lives to young adolescents every day. In March 2023, middle level advocates will convene in Charlotte to ignite their passions and explore and share innovations and inspiration in support of young adolescents. We will share our 50th year as educators who carry an unwavering commitment to our youth. This portion of our feature article is a tribute to middle level educators who are living their passion.

For the past few years, I have been working with colleagues to learn more about the passions of teachers. In 2019, middle level advocates were invited to share their responses to "What drives your spirit and commitment to middle level education?" Findings, exploratory in nature, suggest that those who become middle level advocates are trained in many different fields (engineers, artists, human resources personnel) and licensure areas (elementary, high school, a specific content, exceptional children, middle school), yet once they land in middle school, they stay in middle school. They share that "hope and inspiration" are key characteristics of the young adolescents they work with. They share that they learn much from their students and believe that helping young adolescents find their purpose is a magical, often collaborative experience. They share "hope, commitment, and joy" as their middle school mindset, and describe a middle school mindset as "a belief and trust in the potential of young people." I believe that these educators speak for most middle level educators across our state.

Recently (post-COVID) to find out more about this middle school mindset, I interviewed middle level colleagues across the state and distributed surveys to our North Carolina Board of Directors and our NC Schools to Watch Principals. I also sent surveys to alumni of our program at UNC Asheville. I asked each of them what it means to live the dream as an educator. They responded with the same spirit of commitment, hope, and joy found earlier. When I coded the responses, I found four topics participants emphasized.

1. Middle school advocates see their role as much more than just academics. All the respondents shared insights into their commitment to helping young people "become better people."

My dream as an educator was always to help kids to grow and believe in themselves. I think living the dream is seeing the difference that you make in the life of a child (STW Principal).

I am passionate about helping kids learn their passion. Having this opportunity to build a middle school I felt really fortunate to have put a school in place that centers around student voice and choice (Principal).

To me living the dream is seeing the fruits of our labor (STW Principal).

2. A community of care exists in middle school advocates' commitment. Getting to know students intellectually, socially, and emotionally is critical to their overall success.

Living one's passion is bigger than fulfilling any individual desire; it is working toward something bigger than oneself. It is fulfilling a purposeful role in a larger equation. For me it is connecting with the youth, helping them learn the skills to communicate, and validating their desire to create. It is encouraging them

to simultaneously grow roots and wings, so they can feel grounded in their unique, powerful, and innovative perspectives, while also flying to new heights, reaching for new challenges, and participating in this amazing human dialogue (Art Teacher).

As far as education goes, my joy is teaching children. I do not really care whether I teach math or science or any other subject. Curriculums are only vehicles to get to teach tiny humans. I got into teaching because I thought it would be fun. After 27 years, it still is, so I plan to keep doing it. When it becomes no fun, I will change and do something else. The last thing I want to be is "the worst part of a child's day" (7th-grade teacher).

My favorite part of education is people. In my career, I have loved getting to know my students, my coworkers, and the families of my students. Interacting with people is what makes my job fun. I also love the challenges that working in a school system brings. There are always new problems to solve and new challenges. I love being able to work through these and being able to see students succeed (District Middle School Coordinator, NCMLE Board Member).

3. Schools in North Carolina are places that inspire innovation and risk taking. These middle school advocates see teaching as a life work that is built around creativity and vision.

It means not being afraid to try new things, to express and be grateful when things are hard, to double-down on gratitude and to try to ground yourself that you are changing the world (Principal).

Recognize that knowledge in our profession grows from the classroom up. We need to elevate the knowledge teachers build everyday (University Professor).

To see teachers find their passion and watch them realize this is their life work (Support Personnel, NCMLE Board Member).

[We] help kids make sense out of themselves and the world they live in (Retired NCMLE past-president).

[We give] our kids opportunities to help them live their dreams, even if they don't know what that is yet. Education is right there with faith that will propel us forward (Principal).

4. This work is challenging, and yet advocates view their roles as problem solvers, innovators, and advocates for young people, and that throughout it all, students are worth it.

We all recognize the impact COVID-19 has had on our students. In spite of it, or perhaps because of it, teachers are having to support students through a social-emotional lens as well as an academic lens.

Living your passion means doing what you love daily. There will be speed bumps and difficult times, but you come back to the center by reminding yourself that your purpose and passion drive your attitude and daily perspective. Working with students through their academic and social-emotional development is rewarding and never goes out of style (Teacher, NCMLE Board Member).

Living my passion means being excited for each day. While I don't like everything about my job, I am passionate and love what I do. I think finding joy helps spark passion. It means taking time to be silly and laugh. The world can be a dark place and I want to find the light (5th-grade teacher).

Living your passion means that even when the job is hard, you see value in what you do and persevere. You may not love every aspect every day, but you KNOW what you do matters and that is where your love/passion lies (Principal, NCMLE Board Member).

I am living my current professional passion because I chose to go back to school as an older, non-traditional student. While teaching has its frustrations, I have never regretted my decision (7th-grade Teacher).

I am passionate about fostering student leadership. This does not mean necessarily leadership in a formal sense, but simply coaching students into taking ownership for their learning and helping to realize that they can do important things that they haven't even imagined they can do (Principal).

In the last few years, our students were often left to their own devices, literally and figuratively. Their experiences have been unprecedented: to stay in school, to work remotely, to be safe in the trauma of an international pandemic, to witness racial violence, to know economic challenges. Yet, their teachers, administrators, counselors, and professors are caring for them in multiple ways. These insights are a testimony to teachers' imagination, their inspiration, and their vision. I hope you hear your own voice in the voices of educators. We truly are guiding young adolescents toward resilience and providing communities of care.

The art of caring and community permeates middle schools in North Carolina. At our state conference in March, we will highlight and celebrate innovations, as well as ignite ways to support academic and social/emotional needs of young adolescents through systemic and collaborative avenues. Our teachers, staff, administrators, and district leaders invite you to join in this important work. I hope to see you there. https://ncmle.org/2023-conference

Conclusions: A Mission and Spirit Continue

While varied in time and perspective, the experiences David, Holly, Denise, and Nancy have shared show how a vision of transformative middle level education continues to sustain and inspire us.

- David's experiences illustrate the dramatic impact of specialized middle level licensure on teacher education, professional development, and research – and on teacher educators themselves.

- Holly's passion for understanding middle school students and responding to them – as individuals and groups – permeates her work and connects her classroom with teacher education.

- Denise shows us some of the important ways our thinking about academic content and learning experiences are constantly improving and suggests applications to become more responsive.

- Nancy's research documents the feelings of commitment and joy that drive successful teachers and administrators.

In different ways, these authors share the vision of transformative middle level education that is the hallmark of our organization. As with thousands of others across North Carolina and the world, advocacy for middle level education drives their sense of mission and passion for supporting young adolescents. Our 50th-year celebration is a good time for us to reignite this spirit of advocacy and commitment.

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Social Equity In Your School Starts With YOU!

BY KIMBERLY J. HAZEL, KIM LYNCH, AND TONI PERRY

The importance of equitable school systems, which nurture students' ability to thrive, is an evolving conversation in education today. Nurturing the social-emotional needs of students through socially equitable school structures has become essential to developing and sustaining highly effective schools. This article will define social equity, discuss its importance, and outline strategies to increase social equity while highlighting Albemarle Road Middle IB Academy's application of socially equitable school structures.

Today's schools must provide access to opportunities, create a sense of belonging, and establish shared experiences as the groundwork for providing educational equity to all students These three domains of support ensure all students are welcome and expected, creating the foundation for authentic engagement and academic success.

The societal norms we strive for begin in schools and must be used as a demonstration of social equity, promoting inclusivity and fostering success for every individual. While modeling an equitable environment for communities, schools simultaneously eradicate the achievement gap and increase society's capacity to mimic equitable structures.

What Is It?

Fairness, justice, and impartiality are often and easily used interchangeably with equity. However, do these words speak to the depth and true meaning of the educational equity we so desperately desire? Within schools and classrooms, educators are arduously working to make this "new" equity tangible and visible to families, students, teachers, and the community, yet too frequently, this work rests in the notion of equality. We would argue, along with many educational scholars and experts, that equity is not equality...but what is it?

Equity provides people with resources to fit their circumstances. The World Health Organization (2021) describes social equity as "the absence of avoidable or remediable differences among groups of people." According to the article, schools that prioritize equity versus equality are more in tune with their students' needs and provide resources to overcome their specific challenges. Waterford.org (2020) provides this concrete example of equality vs equity: A school that focuses on equality will make sure that every student has a laptop to take home. A school that focuses on equity will also make sure that every student has internet access at home as well as the laptop itself. Equality offers everyone the same rights and resources, but equity provides students with the resources to overcome specific challenges, which create obstacles to success.

Equity is the heartbeat that pumps excellence and creates access to educational opportunities from which all students benefit. This resultant flow of access ranges from rich curriculum, high-performing engaging teachers, and an endless unifying force that advocates for student achievement. As equity is newly realized as an educational ideal, it makes space for a crucial conversation of what it is, what it is not, why it matters, and what paths lead to its interdependence of preparing students for a globally competitive experience.

Why It Matters

It is debatable if national educational acts of the last decade have been effective for public education. As equity has become a prevailing and impactful approach to address district systemic gaps and individual student needs, while improving outcomes, it brings to question how much more dynamic the No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act could have influenced student achievement had equity been the basis to determine resources, access, and opportunity for every student.

Furthermore, when reflecting, "Achievement gaps and disparate outcomes have shown that educational equality (the attempt to treat every student the same) has failed students from certain backgrounds, while the evolution to educational equity (addressing each student's individual needs) can improve education for students who have been neglected" (School of Education Online, 2020). Well-shared illustrations have circulated journals to emphasize why equity matters in education-students of different heights standing or not standing on a box to look over a fence and diverse animals being asked to climb a tree as an assessment, whether they are naturally adapted to climb a tree or not. Essentially, these images and

Equity Is The Heartbeat That Pumps Excellence And Creates Access To Educational Opportunities From Which All Students Benefit

newfound discussions bring attention to one of the most foundational tenets we believe as educators: do we hold all students to the same high expectations for learning? If the overwhelming response is yes, then the equity in education causes us to create systems and structures that provide opportunities to maximize all student outcomes, regardless of circumstances or differences in how students learn or the zip code associated with where they live.

Equity, done well in schools, has immediate impacts on resources, access, and opportunities- all of which are essential to a sense of belonging for all children, but are there also long-term effects? Absolutely. Karen A. Baquiran (n.d) once said, "Our children will one day lead the world, but it is our responsibility to show them that the world can be a beautiful one." Education, as a system, exists to create space to present students with multiple and varied experiences which are analyzed by students, to shape their own belief systems. These belief systems will eventually permeate our society as students matriculate through adolescence and young adulthood. Having been immersed in multiple educational systems where equity was prioritized, these young adults are more likely to continue the cycle of equitable practices in their careers, with peers, and throughout the community. "A fair and inclusive system that makes the advantages of education available to all is one of the most powerful levers to make society more equitable" (Field et. al, 2007, pg. 1). Ultimately, educational equity's most impressive outcome will be the elimination of systems and structures, which intentionally and systematically limit resources, access, and opportunities.

One School's Intentional Journey

Albemarle Road Middle IB Academy, located in the midst of a conglomerate of communities in east Charlotte, North Carolina, was named a 2020 National School To Watch. Affectionately called ARMS, Albemarle Road Middle IB Academy nestles approximately 1100 students and 73 certified staff under a Title 1 designation of 51% Hispanic, 33% African-American, 8% Asian, 6% White, 26% English Language Learners, and 15% Students With Disabilities. After umpteenth years of intentional implementation of systemic approaches to cultivate enriching experiences, ARMS has found a productive niche of planning, practicing, reevaluating, and repeating in order to accelerate student achievement.

Access to Opportunities

Aside from the committed and invested teachers at ARMS, access to quality instruction is achieved through a PLC instructional framework and an International Baccalaureate program. Common unit plans using the backward planning, or Understanding by Design (UbD) model (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) contribute to high-quality cross-curricular experiences for every student in all areas. The diversity at ARMS transcends student representation from 25 countries! Its diversity is inclusive of students demonstrating various levels of learning, socio-emotional functioning, and targeted intervention responsiveness. When the curriculum fails to address the learning needs of specific students, they are referred to the MTSS leadership team, which collaborates to determine appropriate actions to support and expedite learning for identified students. Students are monitored as the MTSS team meets regularly to determine the impact of interventions along with the next natural steps necessary for success for each student to subsidize the curriculum; targeted students participate in interventions based on gaps in learning. Students are flexibly scheduled into learning labs and academic enrichment courses according to their individual needs identified through historical data reviews. Trends in student performance are examined, beginning with third grade, to ensure appropriate interventions are provided. Identified skills that are below mastery are retaught through tutoring and

regrouping to match students with teachers whose data reveal expertise in the most impactful standards.

Can You Hear Me, Now?

The instructional leadership at ARMS realizes that student voice and leadership are essential for students to develop a pathway to their passion that impacts the world around them. Extracurricular choice activities are offered to all students in the form of interest clubs, which meet bi-monthly during academic enrichment time. Opportunities for school leadership are available as activities students may pursue: apply to be a media assistant, morning news anchor, student ambassador, or member of our student government association. The termination of our school uniform policy and responsiveness to e-cigarette trends across secondary schools are just two examples of ways student voice is amplified at Albemarle Road Middle IB Academy. Quintessentially, Albemarle Road Middle IB Academy allows students to use their voice and influence to shape their surroundings through their leadership endeavors and decision-making.

Sense of Belonging

Positive relationships and a sense of belonging are at the core of 'The Road'. To assist students in making personal connections to the school, the master schedule offers a variety of programs such as Project Lead the Way and performing arts (band, orchestra, dance, drama, chorus). Musical concert performances occur throughout the year in Band, Orchestra, Dance, Chorus, and Drama. All performances are thematically designed to celebrate diversity and multiculturalism. With anticipation and zeal, the ARMS community looks forward to the collaboration and assembling of the annual student performance events: Latin Block Party Night, International Night, and Black History Month Celebrations.

Everybody Can Be Great Because Everybody Can Serve

Service learning (community service) at Albemarle Road Middle IB Academy has avowed itself as a compelling and fulfilling practice to create a sense of belonging as positive relationships among students, families, school staff, and the community are sustained. School beautification events, outreach activities, "Light the Night" or "Soctober" in partnership with organizations such as Samaritan's Feet, Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, and WeHelpTwo, are service-as-learning opportunities that are regularly organized by ARMS. The school stakeholders participate in these shared experiences immersed in making a difference in the world. Eighth-grade students engage in an IB community project through direct or indirect service, advocacy, or research. They identify a problem and present a solution to the school community during a symposium event. Students foster their sense of belonging to the school and community through real-world experiential learning.

Shared Experiences and Inclusivity

Each morning, for 45 minutes, equity meets empathy and perspective with all students during school-wide Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons. These lessons are taught during the SEL block/homeroom time to introduce students to developing healthy attitudes about how they view themselves and interact with others. Students discuss relevant issues of friendship, coping mechanisms, bullying, and social justice in a safe place facilitated by a teacher who has a relationship with the students outside of the subject area they teach. Also, completed once a year as part of the SEL time, students join in One School, One Book activities. A common novel is read amongst the students at each grade level and lessons that center around the character's experiences are completed.

As a partial IB school, nothing speaks to inclusivity more than providing the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program to all students regardless if they hold a seat in the magnet program. Every student, through support systems, is provided the same learning experiences in each year and subject area. The master schedule is developed after a deep dive into student data is performed so that heterogeneous groupings are utilized to the best extent possible and supports are embedded in the student's schedule as needed. This method of scheduling also provides an equal representation of the student population across all classes and in all things at the school.

Albemarle Road Middle IB Academy strives to prepare students to embrace challenges with a growth mindset of problem solving and achievement. Student support is equitably and intentionally administered, tailored to the individual needs of the students, in order to produce positive student performance outcomes. ARMS understands this work is never finished and continuous improvement is the pursuit of excellence for every student. This work is an ongoing, complex, and exciting journey with outcomes that are residual today and beyond.

How to Achieve it

Achieving equity involves systematic approaches. “The national drive toward equity in education is grounded in the belief that our school systems must offer all students a real chance to succeed and should do so in ways that reflect an understanding of individual and group culture, circumstances, needs, and challenges” (Tate, 2020). Schools’ responsiveness to data is at the forefront of academic decisions for the student’s individual learning experience. In addition, the school program should embed a strong sense of belonging for students, complemented by shared experiences and inclusivity. Quality instruction opens the door for meaningful, shared experiences, which provide opportunities for real-world engagement and student success.

Dr. Kelly-Ann Allen (2910) accredits strengthening students’ personal sense of belonging to schools to success. At the root of well-being, and academic achievements, she cites “Belonging is a fundamental human need, yet one in four students around the world do not feel a sense of belonging to their school, and numbers are steadily rising. A low sense of attachment to school can also increase the ‘academic achievement gap’, particularly for the most vulnerable students, including Indigenous students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds." Further, students who do not feel they belong at school are more likely to experience truancy, anxiety, and depression. Allen provides five ways to boost a sense of belonging that schools can use as a checklist to ensure their sites are providing foundational elements of learning:

1. Encourage positive relationships with teachers and school staff
2. Create a positive peer culture of belonging
3. Value learning
4. Take proactive steps toward mental health
5. Don’t neglect parents

Final Thoughts

The urgency of educational equity transcends the schoolhouse and raises expectations of equitable practices throughout industries and organizations. Achieving equity in schools can often seem like an elusive endeavor or a challenging undertaking but we can no longer delay this pivotal focus on ensuring equity for every child in every school. Schools must go beyond the belief that equity lies in the provision of equitable access to resources, materials, and facilities. We invite you to consider your own school context and how systems such as these may support your efforts to provide equitable experiences for your students. In order to achieve equity within schools and districts, we must courageously embrace systems and structures that maximize every student's outcomes. The imagination of societal equity is the hope that compels educators and students forward in their pursuit of academic achievement. Our commitment to educational equity is imperative; our future depends upon it. The time to get started is now!

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Becoming a Successful Beginning Teacher: Advice from One BT to Another

By Madalyn Day

William Arthur Ward wrote, “Teaching is more than imparting knowledge; it is inspiring change. Learning is more than absorbing facts; it is acquiring understanding” (Marcum, n.d.). That was what Dr. Bennefield did for me - she inspired me to change. She pushed me to be the best version of myself and to fearlessly take leaps that would fulfill me.

My story is probably much like many teachers who arrived at the schoolhouse door discouraged and unsure of their career choice. Becoming a new educator who moved immediately into Covid protocols was not easy, and it still is not, but one thing is for sure: I have learned that our students need us. Part of that growing understanding was shaped by a strong professor, one who was passionate about her craft. When Dr. Bennefield met me at my lowest in college, I was in the midst of what I considered a "quarter-life crisis" and the catalyst to my confusion was burnout. At the time, I was an undergrad jumping around to different majors and when I was asked what I wanted to do as a career, I just knew I wanted my voice to be heard for what I was passionate about; the only problem was that I didn't actually know what I was passionate about.

I was taking a required sociology course that was approaching the end of the semester when Dr. Bennefield singled me out to ask what I had planned for the upcoming term. I was reaching the end of my sophomore year, with no intention of coming back to school. "Dropping out," I replied, expecting to hear the same response I had heard from every other adult in my life, things like "don't do it!" and "stay in college!," but Dr. Bennefield, to my surprise, was the first person who encouraged me to do what was best for myself. She ended our brief conversation by telling me she was proud of me for taking the time I needed and that I would come back when I was ready. At that moment, I knew I would strive to be like Dr. Bennefield—impacting and changing lives just as she did mine that day.

Needless to say, I took a semester off. My college job was at a retail clothing store that I was surprisingly very passionate about. As the assistant manager, they sent me all up and down the east coast to help other stores and teach other employees, all while onboarding and getting to know the new employees. While college-me loved getting the 40% discount on clothing, what was most fulfilling about the job was being in a role that allowed me to teach the people around me. In that semester of time off, as I traveled to other locations and fulfilled those responsibilities, I came to the realization that shaping and teaching individuals were what I was truly passionate about, which led to my journey of becoming a proud Beginning Teacher (BT).

I returned to college the following year and finished my degree. In fact, I changed my major to sociology because I found Dr. Bennefield's research so compelling. With the idea of pursuing a career as a teacher, I knew a deeper understanding of sociological concepts and science would benefit me further as an educator. I allowed this to be the foundation for my pedagogy in the classroom and set out to become the best teacher I could be as I shaped the lives of children.

Today, I have used many hard lessons to shape who I am as an educator. While the journey has not been easy, it has absolutely been fulfilling. My hope now is to uplift and guide other BTs as they take the steps necessary to establish and manage a rigorous classroom filled with compassion, love, and equity for all students. It is with this spirit of sharing and teaming that I offer this advice:

1. Do not start on the first day of school with rules, rules, rules!

While this may sound mild, it sets the tone for the year. Adolescents already have a pretty good idea of school rules–they've been following them (or ignoring them) for years, after all. I recommend starting the year with an activity that gets them into learning groups on the first day. This will also be your first informal assessment because you can see how students work together, while quietly observing a few of their strengths and needs. Why not start the first day getting students emotionally and academically active in your classroom? They will engage in a variety of emotions such as excitement for the activity, maybe nervousness about meeting new peers, and feelings of belonging and bringing value to the classroom community. Emotion drives attention and attention drives learning and memory. Generally, teachers deal with emotions when they involve misbehavior, but beginning the first day in this manner sets a tone for how you expect your students to engage in group activities, and you then can begin redirecting any of those

small inappropriate behaviors on day one. I open my year with a "history mystery" to get them excited about our first module. In this, students work with a group of assigned peers on solving a crime in which someone “stole” the famous Mona Lisa painting. A mentor of mine in my PLC developed this years ago and introduced the activity to me. The students love it because it taps into their emotions and senses while ensuring them that they bring value to their team, all setting a great tone for the year.

I do eventually need to establish classroom rules and expectations, of course, so I turn to that within a few days. Rather than give students a long list of what a functional and successful classroom may look like in my opinion, I have them write their ideas for expectations on sticky notes and group them into different categories. To accomplish this, I first give individual students five minutes to write down things they think make a classroom functional. Next, I have individuals turn to their table peers and compare their notes as a small group, pulling out those common characteristics and discussing the ones that are different. Students typically see an overlap in things like being kind, being respectful, and entering class prepared and on time. After this table discussion, they categorize the rules they have written down and agreed upon, setting labels for the different categories. Each table puts its categorized sticky notes onto a large piece of paper and posts it on the wall. The entire class then enjoys a gallery walk of all the table posters. Finally, and to wrap this up, we make one very large visual where all categories are seen on a single poster, thus creating our own description of what our classroom should look, sound, and feel like if it is to be effective and equitable for all. By the time we finish this, our classroom rules have been established and discussed, and students sign off on the large poster-size paper to commit to membership in our successful community.

This is very easy to reference across the school year. Saying to a student, “Do you remember when we signed a classroom contract and discussed what it looked like to be in a productive environment?” allows them to recall things they committed to in this community rather than giving the impression that “these are my rules–remember when I talked at you and told you exactly how it will be in here?” The difference between these two conversations is democracy in a classroom where every adolescent feels valued, respected, and important.

2. Admit when you make a mistake and are in the wrong.

This is probably the most important piece of advice for you. We cannot command respect from students without respecting them in return, and there will be times when you are in a bad mood, anger easily, or misunderstand a circumstance and need to apologize to the student. That is one of the hard things about teaching. In another career, having a bad day and being able to sit in an office where the temperature and success of the environment are not dictated by how much you are able to mentally give that day may not be of huge significance. As teachers, however, we have to be our most energetic and emotionally open selves for students. In the article "10 Ways to Sabotage your Classroom Management," Gonzalez (2019) states, "No matter what is going on, taking student misbehavior as a personal affront can only make things worse. But not taking it personally is a lot easier said than done." Let me illustrate that for you.

After I began my second year of teaching, I had a student in my classroom that I taught in summer school. This student was a bit goofy and the class clown type, and, to be honest, college doesn’t teach you how to handle a tough student who may not respect boundaries that may (or may not, as was my case) be in place. Needless to say, we did not have a great relationship. One fall day, I was speaking to students about going to college as part of College and Career Day, telling them not to be afraid, sharing my story, and announcing proudly that I was the first in my family to graduate from college and will be the first with a Master’s degree—showing them through me that they can do anything they strive to do! After finishing my speech and answering questions, my summer school student called out, “You’re not smart; you’re young and stupid!” Looking back now, I know I should have asked this student to have a private conversation with me outside after not drawing attention to his comment. What I did do, though, is something I cringe about to this day. Without thinking, I snapped back to this student—in front of the class, no less—that “I don’t know how you’re going to say I’m stupid when I taught you last year in summer school.”

This was humiliating, for myself and for this student. I had been sure to never expose this student's summer school needs in front of peers. I immediately wanted to take it back but, once released, words can't come back to you in that way. The lesson here is that, as humans, we have all taken something out on someone unfairly in the midst of a bad day. You can clearly see the picture, and the problem, here. I wanted to gloss over it and pretend the next day that it did not happen, while still expecting the student to give me respect as an adult and a teacher.

Instead, I swallowed my pride. I explained that my comment was unacceptable and, while I knew I could not take that back, I would intentionally never call him or anyone out like that again. The student was also apologetic, and I could feel the awkward air becoming breathable again after this. I will be honest, it was a tough conversation, but I knew it would be harder to look students in the eye knowing I made that mistake without accounting for it. Middle schoolers have yet to learn emotional regulation, firm up willpower, and solidify their ability to control their outbursts and urges. This all explains a huge piece of why middle schoolers can be so challenging to understand (Sousa, 2022). Now, years later, this student still comes back to see me and lets me know what is going on in his personal and academic life. Admitting to your mistakes and showing students how to come back from this is a lifelong skill students need as they graduate into high school and adulthood beyond. Holding ourselves accountable is one of the best models we can provide for our young adult students.

3. Learn at least one thing about each student, authentically.

When I say getting to know your students, I do not mean their favorite color or tv show. I mean get to know a piece of them, something they really care about. Ask about it occasionally when you feel you haven't talked to this student in a while. I once heard a teacher say to me, "If you are worried that someone in your class is being overlooked, sit down and write down all the students' names in that class period from memory. Compare it to your actual roster. The one you forgot to write down is the one you need to connect with and build a bond with–that's who is being overlooked."

I started out so confident that there would be no student I would forget! I began that memory list with my homeroom, and, sure enough, there was one student whom I missed when I compared my list to my roster. I thought about it, and I knew nothing about this student other than they were from a Hispanic family and spoke little English. I knew I needed to find some way to connect with this student, so I began to dig a little deeper and try to get to know her. This student had a low grade in my class and all her other classes, and it took this exercise to get me to realize that she likely felt invisible and lost in the cracks of our education system, one that favors English-speaking students.

In my Master's level courses, I studied the brain in adolescence. The more sense and meaning the learner can attach to new learning, the more likely it is that it will be stored in different networks. I thought about how I had differentiated my class activities to make more sense and provide something "meaningful" to students like her but realized that I had not actually followed up to confirm that this was a meaningful learning experience for each student as an individual. For example, I assumed the same Google Slides with neutral-colored text and minimal visuals were perfectly fine. I worked with an ELL teacher who taught me it does not have to be difficult or exhausting to make learning equitable for everyone. A simple fix to that issue was putting key terms in bold red letters while including many visuals that fit the desired learning I was creating for students.

Now, I look for ways to connect with my students, asking them appropriately about their lives, and having a sincere conversation or hallway in-the-moment connection. I have found my Spanish-speaking students love to share their culture with me and are helping me learn conversational Spanish! This is a great way to get to know students who may not be engaging in class. After this, they will give you their best, because they want to do well for you, which, of course, opens the door for strong learning outcomes in your content.

One final note on this: Enjoy laughing with your students as you get to know them. Studies show that teachers who use humor in their classrooms are more likely to pique the interests and tap the senses of their students, making their course material more likely to be retained (Sousa, 2022).

4. Don't focus on small, annoying behaviors.

Focusing on low-level issues that are not distracting to the learning process will hinder relationships with students immediately. For example, the student who is constantly called out for small things that may annoy you will cause him or her to see you as a nuisance rather than as a supporter. Creating community and relevance to the subject matter often calls for overlooking the occasional annoyance in class, the pencil that was forgotten, the hood up, or a random blurt-out.

For example, instead of getting angry with a student for not having a pencil, give them a pencil! A course I recently took in my Master's program introduced me to the poem "Cause I Ain't Got a Pencil," by Joshua T. Dickerson (2014). In this poem, Dickerson describes some of the daily challenges children face through no fault of their own. After my first year in the classroom, I decided to create an Amazon classroom wish list and keep items I typically need on there, sending the link out to homeroom families at the beginning and middle of the year. Parents are often happy to help support your classroom if they have the financial means to do so, so I gather many supplies this way. While this is a small example, and you will still need boundaries in place so students understand the importance of accountability, this goes along with many aspects of "not sweating the small things."

Parental support is an essential part of maintaining positive behavior in the classroom. Making positive contacts at home is a great way to praise students who are going above and beyond in the classroom. I especially like to do this with students who maybe don't always portray the best behaviors or grades, so I know that parents of these students are still hearing the wonderful things their students are doing. Making contact with parents often throughout the year with general updates is essential to making them feel you care about that child's success in the classroom. For example, throughout the week I try to add two to four students to an ongoing list, students who have been working hard in the classroom. I will then send a positive email or make a phone call home about them. Parents absolutely love this, as we know that teachers become much less involved with parental contact as students progress through grade school. This is also fantastic because if a student's behavior does get past something minimal and becomes something needing support and attention from their guardian, this guardian is more likely to be supportive knowing that you support their student and have expressed praise for them formally. In doing this, it is important to keep note of the students whom you are sending home praise for to ensure you are not creating any gaps within the classroom community.

Expressing positive behavior first makes an impression that shows you care and does not blindside parents when the first time they hear from you it is something negative. For example, I recently had a student who received a lot of negative feedback from the previous year of school. The guidance department gave his team of teachers a warning he may be disruptive, but to our surprise, this student is mostly well-behaved and very much striving to do his best this year. I sent a positive email home to his mother from all the teachers, a note that was happily received. A few months later when this student did give his teachers some issues, it was great to have the support from his parents when addressing it, and the misbehavior very quickly turned around for this student in the class. In the first few years, discipline may feel like a challenge, but taking the action steps beforehand is bound to minimize them.

5. Provide an inclusive and inviting classroom.

Students come to school ready to learn, and often, class discussions can spark different facets of their minds and open the floor to questions. Invite students to ask questions about the real world rather than you shunning them if they ask something you did not plan for. Embarrassing a student is never the way to fix a problem or answer a question. Embarrassing a student for answering a question wrong or asking a question you feel is not relevant to the material is never appropriate. I learned this quickly in my classroom when I got into a "power struggle" with a student. I handled it in front of the class because I did not know any better, and I cringe looking back on it. Luckily, I was able to take my own advice above and apologize to this student by taking ownership of my actions, and we rebuilt the relationship immensely. If they ask a question you feel uncomfortable answering or don't know the

answer to, tell them that kindly and use it as an opportunity to research or invite other students to share! Including all ideas, cultures, and languages in your classroom will be a great way to build relationships with students.

One of my favorite types of lessons comes from students going deeper into a topic or subject than I originally intended. This often ends up being a fantastic learning experience for students. As teachers, we must become skilled at recognizing these “a ha!” moments and really tuning in to them. During my second teaching year, my students and I were discussing the Renaissance and talking about the “rebirth” in Europe. Students, coming back from two years of COVID-19 inconsistencies, were able to relate the rebirth in Italy and Europe to what we are experiencing in the world today with such things as booming technology and medical advancements. They were even able to relate it back to propaganda and how we see this portrayed in the media!

Part of providing an inclusive classroom that is equitable for all students is using lessons that peak students' five senses. Sight, hearing, and touch contribute the most to learning and retention. Engaging them in lessons that pique their senses will help maximize inclusion academically and emotionally for students. Things of little importance fade into short-term memory or immediate memory; therefore emotions constantly affect learning–avoiding emotions in lessons can lead to the information not “sticking” with a student. (Sousa, 2022).

In conclusion, there will be amazing veteran teachers at your school who will help lead you through hard conversations with parents, classroom management techniques, and who will be there for advice–lean on these teachers. There will also be teachers who tell you “don’t smile until Christmas!” “there are no excuses," "I do not take late work,” or other old-school ways of teaching. That is fine, but I think we all could admit that education needs a facelift, and something has to improve for educators and students alike around the country. At the end of the day, the only opinions that truly matter are those of your students, their families, and your administrative team. While we want schools to be inclusive communities among teachers, students, and families, we need teachers who are willing to repaint the norms of our school systems to make this happen. Take action! Our students are depending on us to continue giving them our best.

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from the editor

It is a great honor to introduce myself as the next editor of NCMLE Journal. My own sixth-grade classroom is in Lincoln County, where I have taught for 17 years across a variety of roles. At my school site, I am the literacy coach, new teacher mentor, School Improvement Team chair, MTSS lead teacher, and a member of the Media and Technology committee. I have also worked as a foreign language teacher through a summer English program affiliated with Jiaotong University, and I currently serve as the lead coordinator for the same international program. Over the past year, I have started a language academy that supports bilingual education for immigrants in my community, and I proudly work with teachers as an adjunct for The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I wear many different hats to support and advocate for successful teaching and learning, and I am excited about middle-level education across our state. I am equally excited about the future of this journal and am honored to work with you, our state's middle-level educators, as we craft a publication that is filled with cutting-edge ideas and contemporary understandings about our remarkable schools, successful instruction, and of course, the early adolescents we serve. Welcome to this issue!

NCMLE's theme for this year, our 50th anniversary celebration, is **Reignite**, a powerful word with multiple connotations. Merriam-Webster.com (n.d) lists a number of synonyms for the reigniting of something: **renew, reinvigorate, rekindle, brighten, reawaken, revive, and ablaze.** Our NCMLE Board and contributors for this issue hope these terms guide and inspire each of you through honest lessons learned and shared, some easy, others difficult. We recognize the challenges of the past few years and feel that common bond deeply, as it has affected all of us, our students, their families, and our communities. The timing of these featured articles and columns is intentionally designed to address and assist. We hope to help you reignite your passion–our passion–for teaching and learning as we simultaneously shoulder the residual challenges that have been left in the wake of the pandemic. As a professional community, we are dedicated to this theme of reigniting as a guidepost for the coming year.

The opening articles in this issue champion NCMLE and provide a look back at the association's milestones and the guidance it has provided across North Carolina and the nation. Our state has contributed many strong leaders in our quest of best educating our early adolescents, and we have solidified our role as a national frontrunner in this work. Other articles are forward-facing and add to the conversation by discussing dilemmas and successes. When combined, these articles contribute heavily to the continued development of unique middle school classrooms, and they begin to **reignite** the passion for teaching that lives in each of us.

We move from featured articles to several columns that will provide anchors for each issue to come. The first engages us in a **renewed** vision of teaching and learning through first-year educator Katie Wilson, who was interviewed by the column's author, Daniel Maxwell. The 10 out of 10: New Teacher Spotlight column offers insights into those first years of teaching and includes suggestions to all members of the school community as we learn to better support one another. For Topics, Tech, and Trends, Brianna Tieber highlights the multifunctional aspects of Canva as an organizational, presentation, and academic tool in her column, "Five Ways to Incorporate Canva into Your Classroom." She shares her desire to **reinvigorate** the tools that her students use to showcase their learning. Encore, Encore focuses on "Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students" in a regular education classroom with tips from Christie Collins to help middle school teachers **rekindle** their vision for an inclusive learning team of parents, teachers, and learners. Avid reader, Dawn Brown, leads our column Between Teachers by suggesting middle school books that will **brighten** your classroom library and spark conversation for purchasing materials for the school media center. Two collaborating middle school teachers, Stacy McClain and Stacy Pruitt, recently completed NCDPI's course in Blended Learning to highlight "Playlist in Action." This look at how educators translate the column Research to Practice **reawakens** one approach to personalized learning in a middle school classroom. The column in our Admin Corner by Heather Myers takes the readers on a personal journey as a middle school principal post-Covid who understands the challenges of education over the past few years and remains dedicated to her staff, students, and community. Her commitment to **reviving** the purpose and passion for middle school learning is relatable on many levels.

We trust that the content of this issue sets **ablaze** new thinking for you about your practice, classroom procedures, instruction, and relationships. We hope that the provided research and theories validate your work and create topics for you to ponder as you go about planning and working in our state's middle schools. In turn, we hope that you will engage with friends and colleagues by sharing those ideas and your applications of them via our Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter media, as well as our NCMLE webpage. Join us by posting your work, submitting an article for publication, attending the 50th anniversary conference in March, and sharing this issue of the journal with your faculty for discussion. If we all interact with other middle school professionals in this way, we will once again fan the sparks of teaching and learning, reigniting our schools to be the places of learning, relationships, and success they can always be.

10 Out of 10: New Teacher Spotlight

By Daniel Maxwell

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

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Katie Wilson is a first-year teacher at East Lincoln Middle School in Iron Station, North Carolina, where she teaches sixth-grade science. Katie is a recent graduate of UNC Charlotte and is certified in kindergarten through sixth grade.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO ENTER THE TEACHER PROFESSION?

I've always loved working with kids! I used to work at the YMCA years ago and had the opportunity to work during summer camps and after-school programs. I knew that no matter what I did in the future as a career I wanted to continue working with kids. I wanted to become a teacher to build students up and push them to succeed daily because not every student has someone in their life who tells them they are capable of anything. I have truly loved being a teacher so far and can't wait to see what lies ahead.

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?

To be honest, I never truly had a teacher from elementary through high school that really inspired me to become a teacher. I personally had a really difficult time in middle school because we moved here as I was going into the fifth grade, so I was very much the outcast going into sixth grade. This experience really drove me to become a teacher whom these kids could rely on and look up to. I've met some amazing teachers since then, of course, but for me, I wish I had that in school and because I did not, I strive to be that now.

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

The one piece of advice that stuck out for me was to never stop trying to look for ways to grow as an educator. Never be content with where you are in a classroom. The world and the kids around you are growing, so you have to make sure that you are doing the same.

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

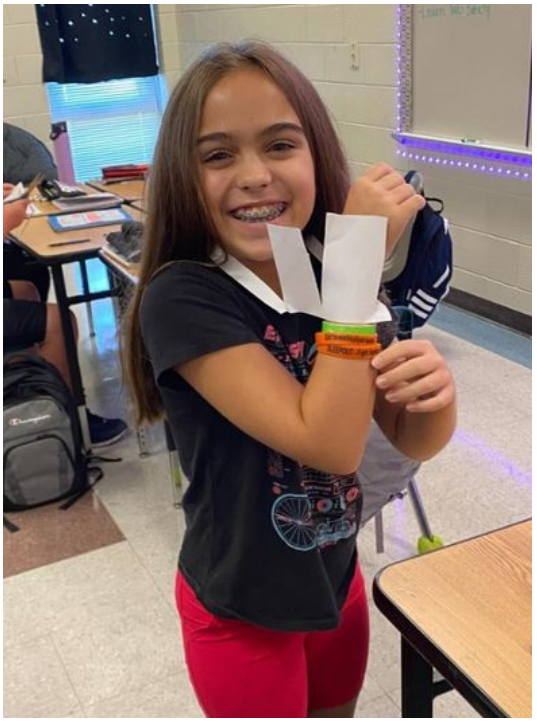
My first initial thought is, “we’re trying, I promise!” because we really are! I’ve talked to some other new teachers about what they would want veteran teachers to know about, and we’ve all mentioned that sometimes the way we may teach or run a classroom is completely different than what some veteran teachers do. I would just want them to be open-minded about what we may bring to the table and possibly be willing to work with us on both ends, for us to learn from them and maybe for them to learn from us as well. Because one thing I have definitely learned from teaching so far is that it takes a village to truly be successful.

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU WISH YOU HAD LEARNED PRIOR TO TEACHING?

One thing I wish I had learned prior to teaching would be learning how to handle all of the additional tasks that come with teaching. In college, they teach you how to do just that, teach (the content), but they don't really talk about how to also handle the IEP meetings, 504 meetings, taking up money, and writing receipts for any fundraiser or field trips, and so much more. There's so much that actually goes into teaching that I think a lot of people don't realize until they have a classroom of their own.

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

I have two things; the first one is to breathe and to be kind to yourself because you are learning. There is so much for you to learn and you are not going to come right out like a thirty-year veteran, you are going to make mistakes, and that’s okay. The second thing is to build relationships not only with the students but with other staff in the school building. I have had other work experience before, and I know the value of building relationships with your colleagues, so something I really strived for when I was doing my student teaching was to build those relationships with other teachers, the administrators, the lunch staff, anyone who is willing to talk to you, to give you advice, or just to be your friend. Because when you have your interview for your future job, they don’t ask you about your edTPA score, but you will have references and you can talk about the experiences you have made. Word travels fast in the teaching profession, so if you go through your student teaching and don’t make those relationships, that can potentially impact you. So it is important to do more than just sit behind a desk and be there.



B WHAT IS THE BEST LESSON YOU EVER TAUGHT?

The best lesson that I have ever taught, so far, was actually a lesson back when I did my student teaching in kindergarten. On April 1st, I gave a reading lesson about this elusive bird called a Lirpa Loof, which is just April Fools spelled backward. We read a short paragraph together that told us information about this bird. As we read, we learned that the Lirpa Loof was the color orange because its favorite food was a carrot. We also learned that it migrates to North Carolina only on April 1st, and you can find one if you go outside and sing its favorite song while waving around its favorite food. I held a straight face the whole time, which was super impressive because they were so into it; they were asking so many questions. It was fun to see how they were making connections from their previous knowledge like, "Flamingos are pink because they eat shrimp, so Lirpa Loofs are orange because they eat so many carrots!". The best part was that I took all of my students outside to have their chance to see this elusive bird. Every student was outside, waving around a carrot high in the air, singing "here Lirpa Loof, here Lirpa Loof." After a few minutes I surprised them by saying "April Fools!" At the very end of it, we told them it was just an April Fool's joke, but that one was just so much fun. It built in their reading skills and comprehension skills but also got them out of their seats and moving, so it was fun for them.

H WHAT IS YOUR "HIDDEN GEM" FOR TEACHING RESOURCES?

One hundred percent, other teachers. Veteran teachers, new teachers, and any teacher who is willing to share and collaborate with you.

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

Number one, for me, was building relationships with the kids. Because if they don't trust you, respect you, or know that you're really there for them, it doesn't matter what you set in place. So for me, I started from the very first day of school and continually worked on building relationships with the kids.

I've tried to do different things, too. For instance, I started off with this Jolly Rancher War idea because it was cool and the "thing to do" based on what I saw on TikTok. It's currently up there on my board, and I haven't done anything with it since the third week of school. So knowing that, sometimes you're going to have to change things. They liked the Jolly Rancher Wars in general, but there were so many other things going on in the classroom that it just wasn't fitting for me or the kids. Now we have tickets they can "spend" in the team store. They can earn by doing little things: being kind to others, helping out, or if they get their work in on time/ have no missing work. They can purchase things like a technology pass, lunch outside with a friend pass, and so much more. This is something we do as a 6th-grade team and seems to really work well.

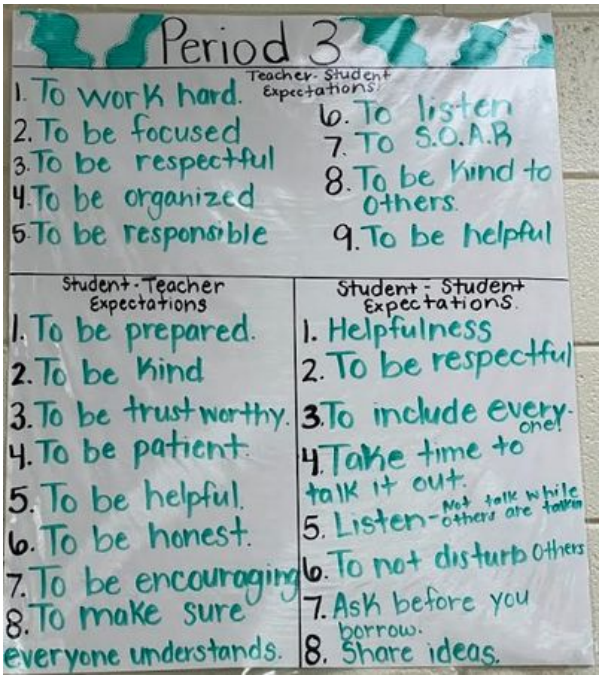
One other thing that I have done is at the beginning of the year I had each of my four classes come up with our own set classroom expectations. We talked about our expectations between student to teacher, teacher to student, and student to student. We wrote them down and then finalized it by voting that all of the expectations written were fully agreed on as a whole class. I made each poster look nice, and laminated them. Each poster is now hung on the classroom wall and holds them to the high expectations that we came up with as a group. I will refer back to the posters if I need to reinforce any rules or expectations in the classroom. All that I will have to say is "do you believe that you are meeting your own expectations right now?" and they will fix their behaviors immediately.

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

As a first-year teacher, it can be hard to think of solid advice to give to someone, especially since I still have so much to learn myself. But one thing that has stuck with me throughout my journey so far came from a video. I remember watching this video about a teacher who talked about her experience with one particular student, who just consistently had bad behavior and was rude to the teacher and other students. She explained how hard it was to build a relationship with this student and that every day was a struggle.

The teacher described a time when she had to take a step back and reevaluate the situation, including herself as an educator. She said she looked down at that student's hands, and as she looked she realized just how small they were and she said, "I had to remind myself that they are just kids."

So, my one piece of advice would be to try to remember that they are just kids and sometimes they don't have that positive role model in their lives. Yes, there will be kids who get on your nerves and give you struggle. The thing is though, when you are in that classroom, you are their safe keeper, and you have to remember that they are still growing and trying to figure out this world, too. They need that guidance from you because you may be the only one they have who can give that to them. It's okay if you have to take a step back and even tell your students that you need a moment. I do that for my kids sometimes now; when they are just off the chain, or if I am just in a bad mood, I will be honest with them, like "Hey, I just need a couple of minutes." I've learned that my students really do appreciate it when I'm honest with them because we all make mistakes and have bad days.



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

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

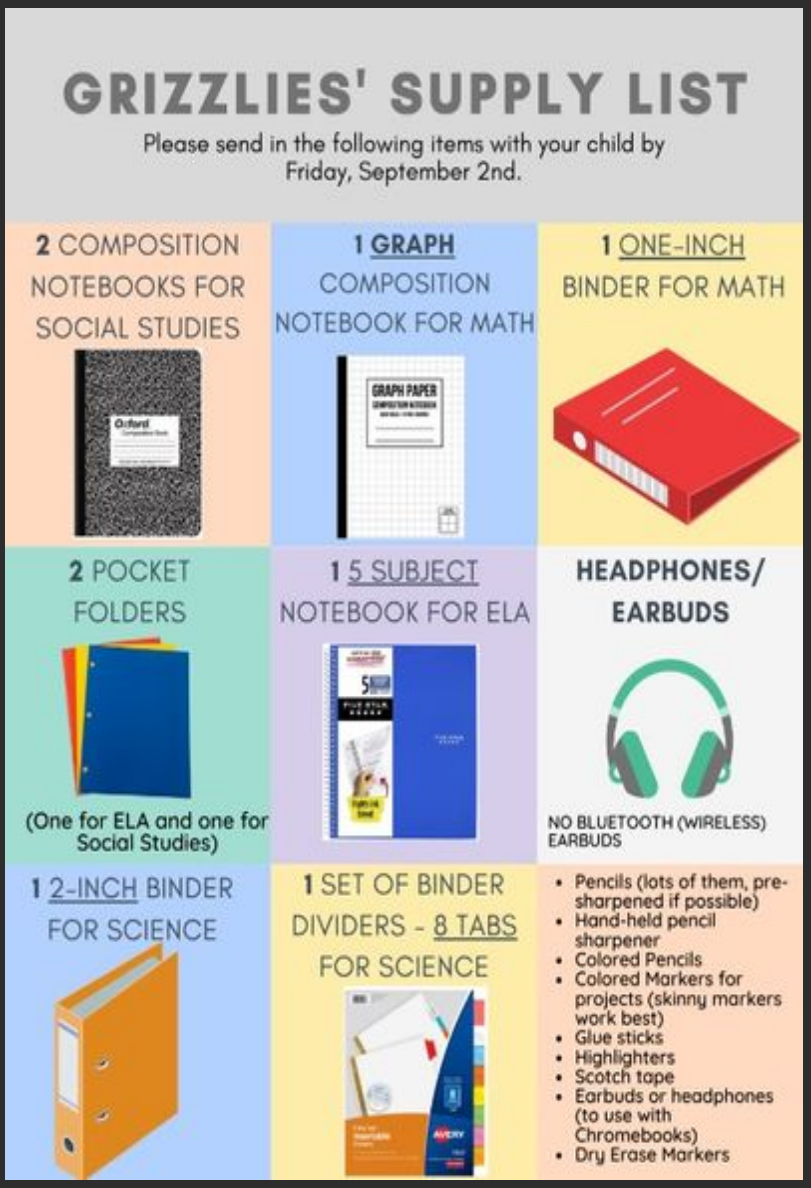
Topics, Tech, And Trends

Five Ways To Incorporate Canva Into Your Classroom

By Brianna M. Tieber

As educators, we have access to endless forms of instructional technology. These resources can be both exciting to use and beneficial to the classroom. Though, it can become frustrating when resources are pricey or hard to access. Luckily for us, Canva is not only an easy-to-use application, but the premium version is free to all educators and students. Here are five significant ways I incorporate Canva in my classroom.

The first way you might use Canva for your classroom is to create unique assignments. I have used both premade templates and created my own from blank documents. Although I prefer other creators' templates as a framework, I do find it entertaining and satisfying to create my assignments from scratch. Once you have your assignment created, you can add it to the "classwork" tool. This tool can be accessed by your students if you connect Canva to your LMS (Learning Management System).



In the picture example, Canva allowed me to create a supply list that has visuals and neatness. This was attached to our first newsletter this year.

Another resource through Canva that is simple to navigate is the ability to create engaging presentations from scratch or, again, one could use another creator's template. This is just like creating a Google Slide or a PowerPoint presentation. It just has a broader list of options for fonts and animations. Students really respond well to these improved visual effects. The best part is that you can present straight from Canva instead of downloading it to present. I primarily utilize this option in Canva to introduce new concepts to my students.

If you use newsletters to go home with students, this is a great resource to use. Canva can be used to create both digital newsletters and paper newsletters. The Canva newsletters are more visually appealing than Google Doc Newsletter. Naturally, the majority of people will be more likely to check out something that looks appealing. Having newsletters that have this fresh look may result in more parents reading the newsletter, rather than overlooking important classroom updates. Again, Canva has several newsletter templates to get teachers started!

My favorite reason to use Canva is for decorations in my classroom. If you start on blank documents you can make posters, schedules, bulletin board items, etc. I have a color scheme for my classroom, so I like all of my decorations to match. For example, I like to blow up individual letters in certain fonts to create letters for my bulletin board. The creative options within Canva are limitless. I am proud to say that some of my Canva decorations have even grabbed the attention of colleagues, encouraging them to check out the many features of this program, too.

Lastly, when students have to create digital projects, they need a resource that is easy to use. Since some students are not as confident in their own creativity yet, they can use a creator's template to build projects that look wonderful. Confident, creative students may use this application to thrive and create their own unique content. Keep in mind that student creations vary just like they may if they were asked to draw their project. Introducing students to this program as an academic tool provides another resource for them to approach projects across the content areas.

In conclusion, I highly encourage you to claim your free premium account and test it out, if you haven't already, especially since educators do not have to worry about pricing points or accessibility. Canva's difficulty levels can range from simple to moderate, based on how you use it. If you choose to use other creators' templates, it can allow you to familiarize yourself with the design options the program has to offer. However, it may become more complex when creating your own material depending on how familiar you become with the application. I have found Canva to be one of the most multifunctional applications an educator has access to.

Last year, in my class, I had my 7th-grade students create infographics on Canva. I received great feedback from students. They especially liked that they could use templates to get an idea of what they wanted to create. The image to the right illustrates one infographic that was especially creative using the Canva tools.

Brianna M. Tieber is an English Language Arts and Science teacher in Lincoln County Schools. She is currently receiving her Masters in Learning, Design, and Technology.

Encore, Encore

Supporting Culturally And Linguisitically Diverse Students

By Christie Collins

When I was growing up, America was called "the Melting Pot," a nod to the country being comprised of different cultures and peoples who shared and exchanged values and traditions that "melted" together into one common culture: American. However, it was not until I was much older that I realized this idea of a shared exchange of ideologies and cultures did not always exist. Some migrant and minoritized groups did not always have a choice in whether they assimilated or not. In order to be a part of the Melting Pot this meant people of different heritages, languages, and cultures not only had to adopt the language and the traditions of the dominant group of the United States but also had to abandon theirs.

> HOW CAN WE ALLOW OUR MIGRANT, AND CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE (CLD), STUDENTS TO KEEP THEIR UNIQUE IDENTITIES, WHILE ALSO ENSURING THEIR SUCCESS IN A NEW SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT THAT ULTIMATELY BEGS THEM TO ASSIMILATE TO THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE OF THE U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM?

This criticism of the Melting Pot, along with other consequences of this mindset, and the fact that there are distinct cultures within American society, has led many to discard this old Melting Pot phrase and begin to support the Salad Bowl analogy. Just as each unique ingredient of a salad contributes to the overall whole of the salad, so too do the different cultures/peoples within America contribute to the whole, while trying to maintain their own identities. The only question now is how we, as teachers, can allow our migrant and culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students to keep their unique identities, while also ensuring their success in a new school environment that ultimately begs them to assimilate to the language and culture of the U.S. public school system?

Each student's experience is unique no matter where they are from. I've found that while elementary school students love sharing their thoughts and experiences, it's a bit more difficult to get middle school students talking and sharing for a multitude of reasons, including embarrassment. The following suggestions for multicultural education are compiled from different educators/authors that I have used and have found to be successful in getting CLD students to participate.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Hold all students to high expectations and include them in all small-group and peer work. Once your CLD students realize that you expect the same from them as everyone else, they'll have more respect for you and invest more in the classes.

LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES

Ensure to include not only a learning objective but also a language objective in each of your daily lessons. Differentiating instruction and teaching students how to use these supports is key to accessibility if you want all of your students involved in the lesson. Plus, noting the specific language you'd like to see used will more clearly communicate the requirements of the assignment for all students.

RECRUIT PARENT SUPPORT

Get parents involved in the decision-making process. Reach out to parents by sending letters home in their home language asking what cultural celebrations they'd like to see at school. Make sure to send translated flyers home whenever there is a parents' night at school. The free Remind app supports over 90 languages to translate classroom news for parents.

CELEBRATE AUTHENTICALLY

Celebrate cultural festivals by integrating them into the curriculum, but ensure that the students who celebrate these festivals are aware of, and involved in, the planning of the celebration. Give them the opportunity to volunteer to explain the celebration to the class so that the correct information is given.

MULTILITERACIES WELCOME

Allow students to use their home language/dialect and preferred way of speaking in class and/or with a same-language peer. Have conversations about pragmatics but also accept multiliteracies and translanguaging. In addition, learn cognates in their language and show an honest interest in learning greetings and typical phrases. Students love teaching others their language when there is a genuine interest.

REPRESENTATIVE MATERIAL

Try not only getting classroom books with characters from different cultures but be sure that the book characters from the same cultures are not all the same. It is important that students are able to see their cultures represented in different media.

PATIENCE IS ESSENTIAL

Be patient and allow for a longer response time. Before becoming fluent in a language, your students have to organize their thoughts and sentence structure, translate vocabulary, and concentrate on pronunciation. Taking the time to have one-on-one conversations with CLD students, even if it's through Google Translate at first, will bring trust to your relationship.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Use inclusive language. Terms like “immigrant” and even “English Learner” can have negative connotations; try using “migrant” and “multilingual learner” instead. But, be mindful of labeling. Ensure your language and tone demonstrate a positive attitude and mindset. Stay up-to-date and informed about new terms like “Latinx” vs. “Latine,” and take note of your students’ preferences and use of terms.

SINCERITY

If you realize you’ve made a mistake in how you have presented any materials, or an exercise you planned to be inclusive ends up singling students out, make it a point to sincerely apologize and ask for student feedback on how to make the lesson more appropriate the next time.

FINAL THOUGHTS

One last thing I always try to remember is that middle schoolers have access to so much information in this day and age that they already have their own opinions and voice. They’ve seen and experienced more than I had when I was their age, and they’re passionate about issues facing today’s society, especially CLD and migrant students. By allowing all students space to voice their knowledge, showing them respect by listening, feeding their curiosity and interests through creation and autonomy, and supporting equity by having an asset-based mindset while giving proper support, they will begin to interact and engage more in the classroom, leading to positive student outcomes.

LEARN MORE

To learn more about linguistic competencies, language families, and the theory/research behind language learning, consider a 120-hour online TESOL course. Bonus: You get a print-out and digital certificate that can be added to your Continuing Education Units (CEUs) and Curriculum Vitae.

Christie Collins has her MAT in Teaching English as a Second Language. Originally from North Carolina and having experience teaching multilingual learners in our state, she is now an English teacher in Mallorca, Spain.

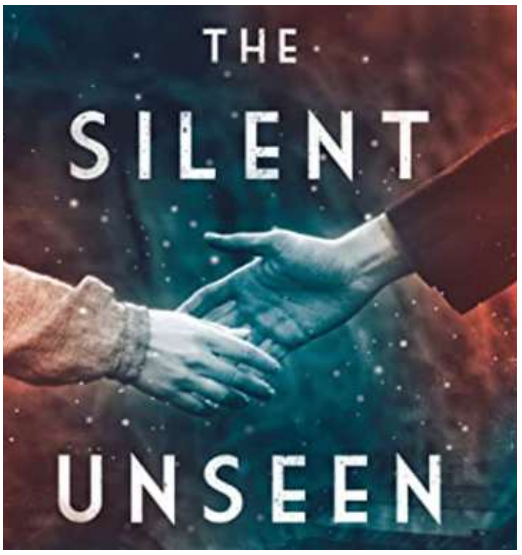
BETWEEN TEACHERS

By Dawn Brown

As an eighth-grade math teacher, I know that when others are looking for a book recommendation, math teachers are not normally who people seek first. However, when I have free time, one can definitely find me reading. One of my favorite genres is middle grades and young adult fiction, which comes in handy as a middle school teacher, no matter the content area I teach.

A few years ago, I got involved with several different companies that give people Advanced Reader Copies (ARCs) of books. With these ARCs, I voice my recommendations to our school librarian for new, good books to purchase for our school. Once I began that, my fate of providing regular recommendations was sealed.

Looking back over my data (remember I'm a math teacher), I narrowed it down to a list of top recommendations albeit hard to choose. Here are my recommendations for you to have in your classroom and school libraries.



1. The Silent Unseen by Amanda McCrina

Synopsis:

Set in Poland during WWII, two teenagers are trying to find their way back to their families. They are on opposing sides of the war and deal with spies and counterspies along the way.

Why you need it:

This book is full of danger and intrigue. I found myself constantly wondering/predicting what was going to happen next.

The book is rich in history. I'm sure there were liberties taken with specific instances but the book does give a more personal insight into what happened during WWII.

There is an open ending. While the two youth did find their way back to their families, a lot was left unsaid about what happened after.

Themes:

War, survival, family

2. A Duet for Home by Karina Yan Glaser

Synopsis:

Faced with losing their family home, a family moves into housing for the homeless in NYC. Once there, the mom is struggling with depression, and the children with acceptance. The city is also trying to move people out so they can claim to have a lower percentage of homelessness. The children try to get to the bottom of what is going on with the new rehoming program.

Why you need it:

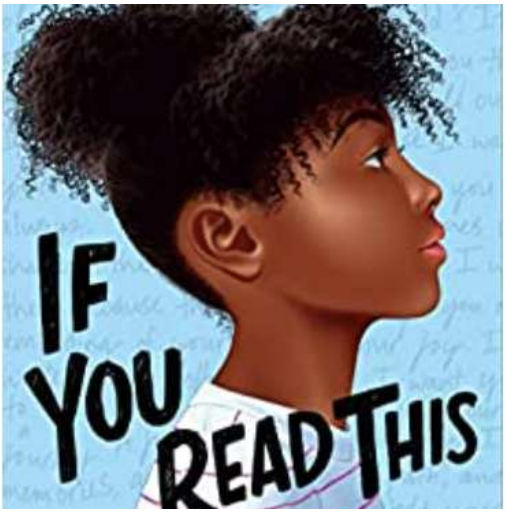
There is a strong sense of community. Most of the other residents help the family to be accepted and to accept what has happened. The children also work together to defeat the new program.

It is a harsh reality that many of our students face. By reading this, students have more empathy and understand that one disaster can change their life.

Themes:

Community, homelessness, hope, family

3. If You Read This by Kereen Getten



Synopsis:

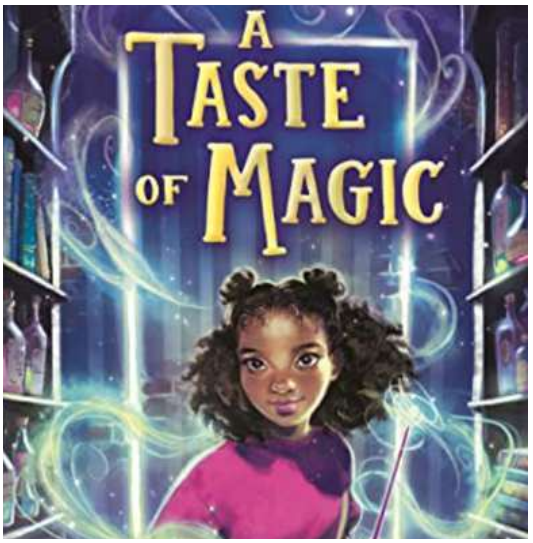
Brie is given a gift on her twelfth birthday, a set of letters from her mother who passed away years ago. These letters send her on a treasure hunt.

Why you need it:

This book is emotional. Reading this had me go through all the emotions in my bank. Tears were shed, and laughs were given. It is a great book to provoke emotions in kids. It shows that kids' eyes do not see all. Brie's understanding of her dad after the passing of her mother was off. By the end, she realizes he is not the villain she thought he was.

Themes:

Family, adventure



4. A Taste of Magic by J. Elle

Synopsis:

At age 12, Kyana discovers she has magic. With this knowledge comes schooling. She must attend Saturday school every week. However, she lives in the poor section of town and the witch council needs to shut down a school. Her school is picked. Many of the students cannot afford to travel to other schools. Kyana steps up to find a solution.

Why you need it:

This book shows students they can make a difference. Kyana is able to save her school with the help of the other students. She is key, though, in the solution.

It is just a fun book. This book is the start of a magical series that has great promise. The number of comical events that happen makes the book flow quickly.

Themes:

Magic, community

5. Hazard by Frances O'Roark Dowell

Synopsis:

Hazard is the child of two soldiers. His dad has just returned home from Afghanistan but is in the hospital. Hazard is not allowed to play football because of his rage. He must see a therapist before he can return to the football field.

Why you need it:

The author is a North Carolina resident. This always gives me tingles, and I want to support the residents of NC in any way I can.

The writing style is unique. The book is written in emails back and forth between Hazard and his therapist. This style of formatting makes it easier to read and more intriguing to read for readers of all abilities.

The book addresses and normalizes therapy. Many more students are in therapy now than when I began my teaching career. This makes the book more relatable to students.

Themes:

War, therapy, football/sports

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Dawn Brown is a math teacher in Lincoln County Schools and a proud Army veteran.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

PLAYLIST IN ACTION

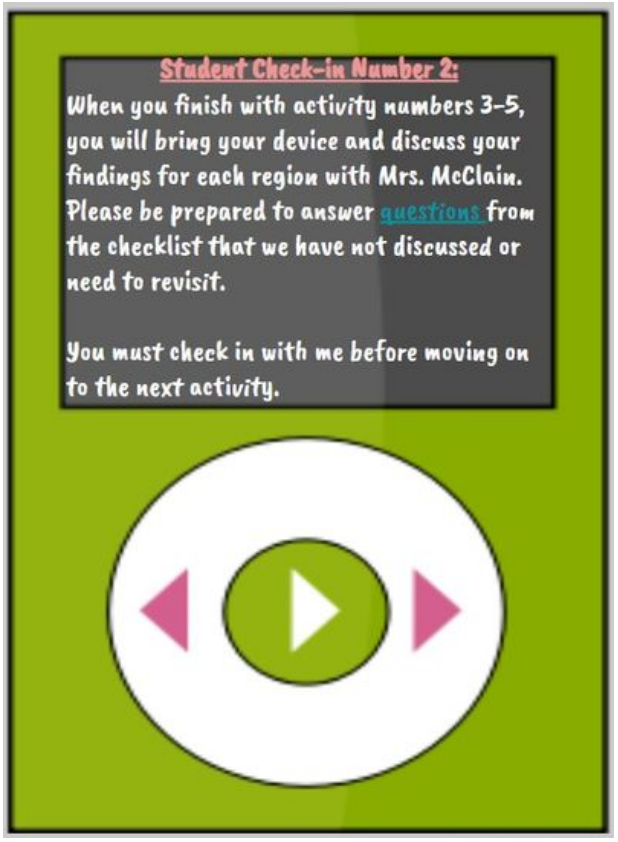
By Stacy McClain and Stacy Pruitt

When you hear the word "playlist" you probably think about music or a list of your favorite songs from a streaming service such as Spotify or Pandora. Our selected music playlist typically is organized by our needs and the purpose of the songs. For example, on a long road trip, one might want to hear upbeat music to keep them alert during their travels or to reminisce on the good old days when life was much more carefree. A playlist in the classroom is very similar in concept. You design your learning needs around a specific purpose that offers you measurable student learning. Let's think about that word in a different way and how a "playlist" can be used in a classroom to improve student engagement and differentiation. Let's start with the basics:

ReThinking a Playlist

Think of playlists as a roadmap to learning about addressing specific skills or standards. Each stop along the way will contain activities and lessons that are centered around a learning goal or standard. The activities can be a combination of online and offline learning experiences, which support the blended learning model. Playlists can look different depending on the grade level, learning level, types of activities etc. Within a playlist, students are provided structured and personalized learning that allows them to work at their own pace, have regular teacher check-ins, and provide immediate feedback to hold them accountable for their work.

"I love doing playlists because we can work at our own pace and use our own understanding." -Deanna



Target Audience

Playlists can cover a wide range of grade levels and content areas. Students at a younger age can work through a playlist with teacher guidance as well as high school students controlling their own learning with teacher assistance when needed. When teachers implement playlists in the classroom, it provides an opportunity for teachers to differentiate discretely and increase time spent between teacher and student. The students' learning environment is transformed into a student-centered environment and not a teacher-centered environment. The teacher role in a playlist is a facilitator of learning, which translates to empowering students to take ownership in their learning.

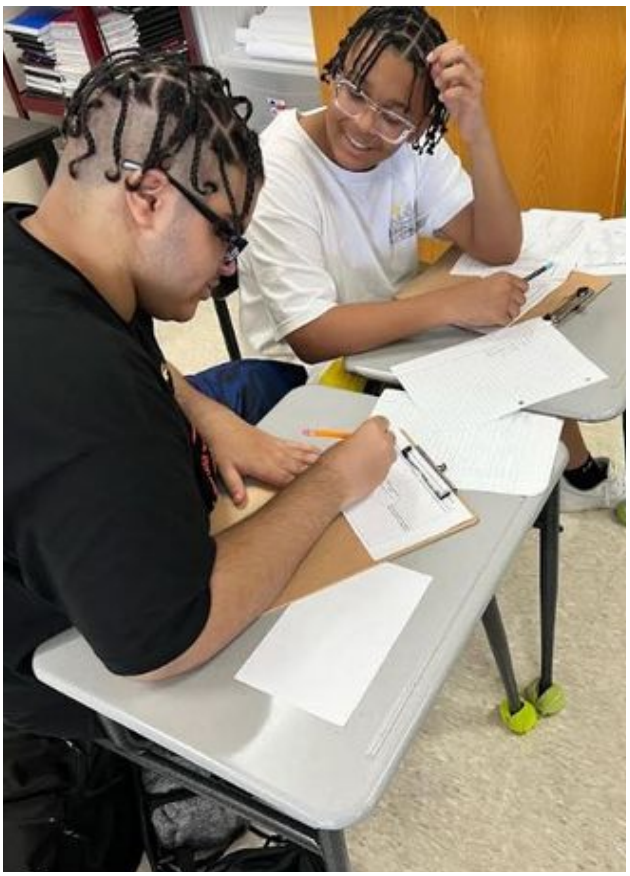
When to Use a Playlist?

A playlist can be used in face-to-face classrooms, remote learning, and hybrid-learning environments. When using a playlist in face-to-face classrooms, the playlist can be structured for the teacher to track progress through student check-ins and possibly provide interventions. For students who cannot be in the brick and mortar classrooms, a playlist allows them to have access to the same standards to reach the same learning target that other students are covering in a classroom. The playlist could be asynchronous or could include some parts that are synchronous depending on the objective of the playlist. Virtual check-ins with the students are as important as the face-to-face check-ins.

"I like when we use playlists in the classroom because it gives us the freedom to work in any order and at our own pace." -Isabella

Nuts and Bolts

First a learning objective or standard needs to be stated. Then, the teacher decides the format of how the students are going to achieve that learning target. For example, the teacher records herself teaching a lesson or modeling a problem, students complete a self-paced NearPod assignment, an Edpuzzle assessment, Flipgrid responses to a prompt and respond to classmates' videos. In addition, students can complete a lesson through IReady or IXl to monitor student progress. As for offline options for students, they can practice teacher created activities such as sorting or manipulatives, interactive word wall games or provide written responses to content-based questions. The amount of activities or steps that the students need to master the learning target is at the teacher's discretion. One important factor to remember is teachers are still engaged with their students' learning.



"I like using playlists because they are fun, and I was able to move at my own pace." -Sawyer

Final Thoughts

At the end of the day, you know your students; you know their work habits, their challenges and strengths. Plan your playlist to benefit all of your students. You have spent your school year building relationships with your students by establishing a classroom community. In designing your playlist, build on the meaningful relationships that you have created to get students to buy into a playlist. Please keep in mind a playlist is not a one size fits all approach to learning but allows students a voice in how they learn and creates a path for students to take control of their learning.

Tips and Tricks

- Start small--use a template that you feel comfortable with and include easy-to-navigate learning activities
- Maintain low stakes with high engagement
- Give clear, explicit directions--think about recording yourself using Screencastify or Flipgrid and post it into your playlist
- Know firm rules and expectations lay the groundwork for your students' behaviors while working on their playlist
- Designing a playlist takes time--WORTH IT IN THE END
- Be intentional
- Consider independent, pairs, or groups
- Plan for motivating the unmotivated
- Track student progress

Stacy McClain is an 8th-grade Social Studies teacher in Lincoln County Schools, and Stacy Pruitt is the MTSS Intervention Specialist and ELA coach at Lincolnton Middle School.

Admin Corner

By Heather Myers

Each year my district sets a thematic hashtag to serve as a compass point for our district focus. While I am grateful for the site-based leadership approach of our local school board and central services office, the unifying theme is a helpful reminder that we do exist and function as a community—not only as a local LEA but also as an essential service provider in the community. However, rolling into this year, "intentional" felt too hard, and I admittedly added a few biting comments in my head about what intentional actions I was considering. For the first time in 25 years as a middle school educator and administrator, I began to ponder early retirement as an option.

Like many of my colleagues in education I was tired after two years of whiplash from the changing educational landscape and what I perceived as waning support and increasing scrutiny from outside entities of what they thought public education should be; I was rethinking my own role. Between shut-downs, remote learning, hybrid learning, soaring discipline, and the next Tik Tok challenge, I was mentally, emotionally, and physically done.

It didn't help that every time I logged into my social media feed, it was populated with articles about toxic positivity and the "great resignation" of teaching staff. Forums that I had originally joined for new ideas and creative problem-solving were overwhelmed with posts from unhappy admins, teachers, and parents. Then when I began to see that same outcome at my school with multiple resignations, despite one of the most positive teacher working conditions survey results in the district, I was even more defeated. I have always considered myself a staff-focused principal. I cannot realistically take care of 730 students every single day, but I can model staff expectations for grace, growth, and care that I expect staff to give back to their students. That methodology has always served our community well, but it could no longer compete with all the other voices coming at my staff from outside influences.

I recently came across an article on the Bored Teachers social media platform calling out people for gaslighting teachers with inspirational memes at such a challenging time in the profession (Moshman, 2021). Gaslighting is often defined as manipulating others into thinking their reality isn't as bad as they think. My first thought was guilty - guilty as charged. How often had I searched for a positive meme to include in the weekly staff newsletter to lift them up—all the while scoffing at the ones my superintendent often included in his weekly message to administrators? It would cross my mind—does he even know what we are really dealing with? Does he really think a cute saying and meme graphic will make the difference or make any of us work harder than we are already doing?

And no...he probably didn't, any more than I did when I sent them to staff. However, what is the alternative? Ignoring the challenges wasn't the answer, but neither was wallowing in them. We must break through the constant negativity.

• Yes, the last two years have been two of the most challenging years of my career. Even this year brings new challenges...BUT...constantly verbalizing all the negatives does not make things any better than inspirational memes. So, instead, I am trying to re-frame and think about the BUTS (yes, you have permission to embrace your inner middle school student and giggle about embracing buts — 25 years in the middle will do that to you!).

• Yes, I had to hire 19 new staff members this summer due to community growth and resignations. Nine of the 19 are beginning teachers, and four of those are first-year teachers...BUT, a quarter in, I can tell you that the new energy in the building is positively infectious.

• Yes, discipline last year was a challenge…BUT many parents were supportive partners even if the unsupportive ones were louder. It also brought the staff a renewed focus on school-wide procedures and positive behavior strategies. Discipline this year is already half of what it was this time last year.

• Yes, we dealt with the challenges of masks and hybrid instruction in 2021 as only one of a handful of schools to have in-person learning in August of that year….BUT we made academic growth that year and became a 1-to-1 district after years of cookie dough fundraisers just to afford one computer lab.

• Yes, we didn't have any subs, and teachers had to cover classes…BUT the district found a way to pay teachers for something they had always done without compensation in the past. It wasn't much, but at least it was something.

So much has been made about teachers leaving the profession, and yes, hiring is more of a challenge now than it used to be. However, I have to wonder if that is because the job is "worse" or are the negative voices louder? Go ask anyone who works in the private sector if the grass is always greener. Problems with customers, pay, bosses, and workload exist everywhere. If someone is unhappy as a teacher, by all means, look at your options…but don't expect happiness to appear magically in the private sector. Anyone looking for problems will find them.

So, here I am starting my 25th year as a middle school educator and administrator, and I will be focusing on a balanced diet of BUTS. I still roll my eyes at the occasional inspirational meme, but I also try to model a focus on problem-solving. Yes, when things are bad, I may complain with a selective audience….BUT acknowledging the problem doesn't mean I have to stay there. What can I do to HELP? Where can I alleviate the problem? What barriers can I remove so we can focus on what matters most?

While I had to intentionally snooze most of my educational social media because the negativity was dragging me down, I did save one quote from Ralph Marston (AZ Quotes, n.d.). As is often the case with the internet, I do not know who he is or even if he's a real person, but the quote stuck with me: "Being positive in a negative situation is not naïve. It's leadership." For me, the choice is being intentional in my mindset -- am I leading people out of the profession…or am I leading them to recognize problems, stay positive, be proactive and work together to overcome them….exactly the way we prepare our students to do as productive citizens.

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Heather Myers has been the principal at East Lincoln Middle School since 2015. Her entire 25 years of experience as an educator has been at the middle school level.

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An invitation to join the North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education

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

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

NCMLE has both individual and institutional memberships-

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

Institutional Memberships are based on a sliding scale and determined by the number of teachers listed in the North Carolina Directory:
*1-20 teachers, $100.00
*21-50 teachers, $120.00
*51 and more teachers, $150.00
All educators on the school roster enjoy the benefits of the school's membership.

Membership is available at annual rates and in 3-year increments. The opportunity to join NCMLE and AMLE as a dual membership is available for a reduced rate.

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

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