

Title Page

Title: Exploring Exemplary Middle School Practices

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Bios

Nancy Ruppert and Reid Chapman teach at UNC Asheville. They have been colleagues for over 15 years. They teach the middle school principals and practices course and work with middle school licensure candidates for UNC Asheville. "While we teach other courses in our department, we always address them through the lens of middle school practices." UNC Asheville is a public liberal arts undergraduate institution.

Abstract

This we believe (2020) is a document created by the Association for Middle Level Education. In the document is a list of 16 characteristics of exemplary middle schools. The 16 characteristics fall into three categories: Curriculum, Instruction and assessment; leadership and organization; and culture and community. This article provides an exercise for Middle Level leaders to consider when analyzing the strengths of their Middle School.

In 1973 the National Middle School Association was formed. In 2011 the name was changed to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). The goal of the organization has always been to promote the development of students ages 10-14 and to provide leadership in helping leaders design and implement schools that support young adolescents. At the heart of this middle school ‘movement,’ was and still is that middle schools should be developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable. These essential attributes hold true today and are described in AMLE’s document *This We Believe* (2010).

While attending the North Carolina Middle Level Education NCMLE 2019 Annual Conference, we heard a great deal of conversation and consternation over the drift away from many of the middle school concepts and indeed middle schools themselves. There is a shortage of middle school trained teachers in our state suggesting we need to examine more articles on what exemplary middle schools look like. In fact, middle school licensed teachers are considered a critical need licensure area along with math, science, and special education teachers (Cross, 2017). In McEwin and Smith’s (2010) *Legacy Leaders*, interviews with the original middle school advocates revealed concerns that middle school practices such as teaming, and interdisciplinary instruction were at risk of being eliminated because of legislative practices associated with testing. Furthermore, the onslaught of K-8 schools without any differentiation and intermediate schools without a focus on developmentally responsive teaching worried our founders that junior high schools could be returning. These schools may not be based on what is appropriate for young adolescents, but rather may be designed to simply accommodate children for testing. The other issue confounding this is the habit of school systems to train future high school

principals in middle school settings without giving them the education on what makes middle schools and middle school students unique. Recently, in a workshop created by the Association for Middle Level Education, in a small group session of about 30, when asked how many had heard of *This We Believe*, only one participant raised their hand, an elementary teacher who was going to be a middle school principal. This article addresses one strategy for advocating for middle level education using the characteristics of exemplary middle schools.

We know much more now than the middle school founders about the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs of our youth. Brain growth (Tate, 2016), the need for young adolescents to belong (Barron & Kinney (2017), the mental health needs of young people (Paris, 2019), and the importance of healthy living (McEwin & Greene, 2010) have been researched and shared by agencies, practitioners, and researchers that focus specifically on young adolescents.

At the North Carolina Middle Level Education state conference last March, we took a broad view of the work of *This We Believe* to provide an overview of three basic elements that exist in exemplary middle schools. We recognize that even in schools that have all of the elements we think of as “middle school components” that these might not be implemented with fidelity. However, we believe that if schools keep the needs of early adolescents at the forefront of every decision, many practices could uplift middle schoolers.

We engaged teachers, administrators, and district personnel in a conversation about current structures that address the 16 characteristics. We asked our participants to think about the practices in their schools and to categorize them in one of the three following categories: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Leadership and Organization; and

Culture and Community. From there we examined the 16 characteristics of exemplary middle schools. Finally, we asked participants to consider what elements, as described, were areas they could consider developing in the upcoming academic year. The following is a way for Middle School advocates to use the 16 characteristics to engage in conversations to enhance their practices.

The 16 characteristics are split into three categories. The first category represents

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. There are five specific references for leaders to consider including “educators value young adolescents and know how to work with them; students are involved in active learning, curriculum is challenging, educators use multiple approaches to teach, and use multiple ways to assess student learning” (AMLE, 2010). Participants agreed that they did have faculty that support young adolescents but were in need of different ways to challenge their teachers to meet the needs of all students. They shared their use of Professional Learning Communities, and the value of instructional coaches. This category was most familiar to our participants.

The second category describes **Leadership and Organization** of exemplary middle schools. This category invites leaders to consider their vision, their commitment and knowledge of young adolescents, their structures that illustrate collaboration, professional development, and organizational structures that foster purposeful learning. When middle school leaders organize students on teams, and teams develop structures and experiences that are appropriate and equitable for all learners, the school is considered to be developmentally appropriate. Again, participants identified their use of School Improvement Teams and Professional Learning Communities as the most prevalent structures. And while our participants talked about PLCs, these were more likely to relate

to content specific discussions rather than team meetings about students' needs beyond academic performance. Professional Development was also more likely to relate to technology implementation and assessment than considering ways to develop their knowledge of how students learn. This section challenged our participants most.

The third category relates to **Culture and Community**. Exemplary middle schools foster inclusivity, safety, and support as key elements. In addition they establish advocacy by having an adult who looks after a group of students as well as having comprehensive counseling services for students. Exemplary middle schools focus on health and wellness, look after and include families and community and business partners. Many of our participants shared practices such as PBIS celebrations, parent nights, and using technology apps like Class Dojo to communicate with families, which make communication between school and home easier. Few of the participants referred to advisory or service learning components which have been shown to enhance young adolescent development.

Closing.

By looking at the three components (Curriculum, Instruction, and assessments, Leadership and organization, and Culture and community) that make up the 16 characteristics of exemplary middle schools, we found our conversations enriched by using the AMLE handout from *This We Believe*

<http://www.amle.org/AboutAMLE/ThisWeBelieve/tabid/121/Default.aspx#122516-the-16-characteristics> . Every group found strengths and considered areas to grow based on this exercise. By inviting teams to look at what their school is addressing, this format allows for deeper conversations of what practices are taking place to support young adolescents.

By working in small groups, leaders will be able to gather from one another ideas of practices to consider for improvement.

We encourage schools to use the three subheadings of the 16 characteristics to identify what structures already exist and to consider areas they may want to develop. The key to meeting the needs of young adolescents and their advocates is to embrace all 16 of the characteristics. Across schools in North Carolina, principals, assistant principals, school counselors, and teachers work daily to meet the needs of young adolescents. We hope to share the great things that are happening in middle schools across our state that relate to these keys to educating young adolescents.

Resources to share.

We would like to share three organizations that provide middle school leaders with knowledge, research, and opportunities to grow as middle school advocates. Our state is an affiliate of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). It also supports Schools to Watch, a designation of exemplary middle schools based on academic success, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organization. NCMLE also provides support for preservice teachers, classroom teachers, administrators, and professors who advocate for middle level education. Each one hosts conferences and professional development opportunities. We encourage you to get involved with us.

The following resources are available free of charge to inspire leaders to advocate for middle level education.

AMLE research summaries at:

<http://www.amle.org/Publications/ResearchSummaries/Archive/tabid/799/Default.aspx>

and an overview of the 16 characteristics can be found at:

[https://www.amle.org/portals/0/pdf/twb/TWB_colorchart Oct2013.pdf](https://www.amle.org/portals/0/pdf/twb/TWB_colorchart_Oct2013.pdf)

In 2015-2016 I kept a blog of my experience using the 16 characteristics of exemplary middle schools. It is at: <http://middleschool2015-2016.blogspot.com/search/label/04.%20Multiple%20Learning%20Approaches>

STW provides a description of how to assess the various components of exemplary practices. Currently in North Carolina, we have the second highest number of STW designated middle schools in the nation. A link to these resources is at:

<https://www.middlegradesforum.org/schools-to-watch>

NCMLE has a middle school journal that provides educators with current best practices.

Articles and information about their annual conference can be seen at:

<https://ncmle.org/>

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