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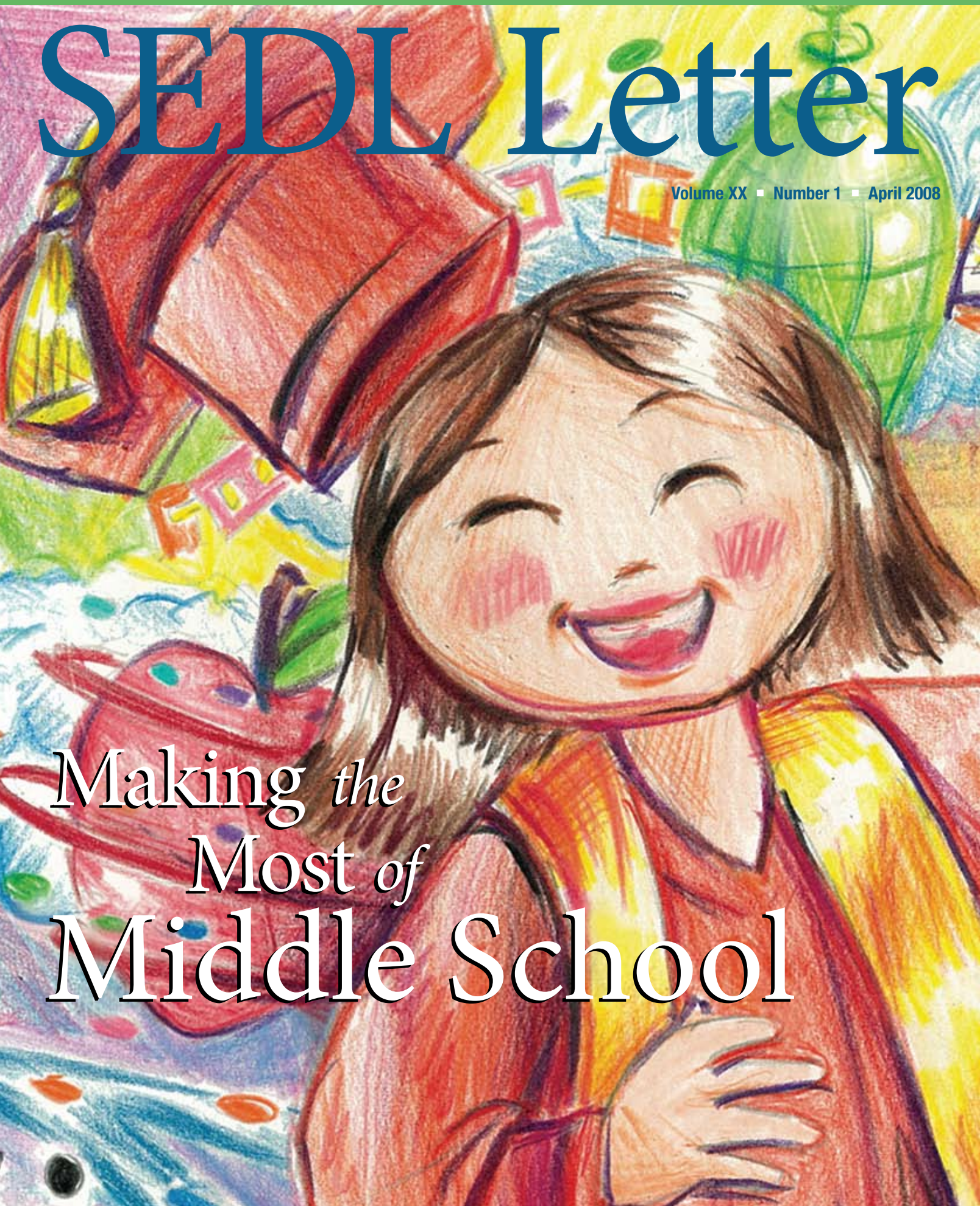

Making *the* Most *of* Middle School

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Middle School *Matters*

Whether you went to "middle school" or "junior high," you undoubtedly have distinct memories of that particular stage of your life. Grades 6–8 tend to be trying years—and not just for students. Educators struggle with teaching children who are rapidly becoming young adults. Gone are the relatively docile and eager-to-please elementary-school children. Within a matter of a year, they are replaced with adolescents struggling with developmental and social issues. Teaching these students is no easy task, and it's not surprising that many middle school teachers find themselves frustrated and overwhelmed.

In this issue of *SEDL Letter,* we tackle some of the issues middle school educators face. We discuss the lack of national policy addressing these years. We learn from a former middle school principal how families can help their middle school students. We look at the research that shows how our middle schoolers are falling behind in math compared to their peers in other nations—and what we can do about it. We debate whether we should revamp middle schools and go back to the K–8 system. Finally, we discuss how afterschool programs can attract and retain this hard-to-reach audience.

This phase will never be an easy one for our children. We can hope, however, that it will become easier for those who educate them. We hope you find this issue informative and helpful, and as always, we welcome your feedback.

Lost in the Middle

Middle Schools Seeking a Place in National Education Policy

By Geoffrey Alan

How are middle school students doing? To find out, Congress looks to the National Assessment on Educational Progress (NAEP). This federally supported measure, commonly called "the nation's report card," leaves little doubt that student achievement falls dramatically, most severely among minority and low-income students, between grades 4 and 8.

In fact, fewer than one third of eighth graders read proficiently, according to the 2007 NAEP. That figure has declined during the past decade, even as NAEP reading scores and achievement levels for fourth graders have climbed. And studies show that while U.S. students do not begin middle school behind their international peers in math and science, they lag as they enter high school.

Given all that, lawmakers might be expected to ensure that middle schools get at least their fair share of support. But federal dollars go disproportionately to the elementary and high school grades. Students at the middle level—grades 5–8, according to most advocates—represent nearly a quarter of the country's public school population and more than half of those tested under federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates, yet only about 15% of Title I funds are appropriated to middle schools.

The rising crisis at the middle level has advocates calling for national policy solutions. Middle schools need their own special legislation precisely because the nation's 15 million middle schoolers have special needs, says Betty Edwards, executive director of the National Middle School Association (NMSA).

"Young adolescents between the ages of 10 and 15 experience more rapid and profound changes—intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral—than at any other time in their lives," says Edwards. "There is a noted interdependence between their academic success and having developmental needs met, so we must provide learning environments that support and encourage the growth, development, and learning of young adolescents."

Legislators are listening. In October 2007, the Success in the Middle Act was introduced in the Senate. The act, which would fund new efforts reaching out to middle schoolers and curbing dropouts (see sidebar), represents the culmination of years of work by an unprecedented coalition. But the proposed legislation has barely begun its journey to become law, and where it will end remains in question.

Success in the Middle Act

- Under the proposed federal legislation, $1 billion a year would be authorized to improve low-performing schools that contain middle grades (5–8).
- States would make detailed plans to improve middle school achievement, including describing what students must know and do to successfully complete middle school.
- Early warning data systems would identify students most at-risk of dropping out and intervene to help them succeed.
- States and school districts would invest in proven strategies, such as research-based professional development for teachers, schoolwide improvement efforts, and student supports such as personal academic plans and mentoring.
- An additional $100 million would be authorized to generate and disseminate research on effective middle-level practices.

The federal government must take the first step in solving these problems by signaling that the middle grades represent a worthwhile investment.

Stepping Up

The movement coalesced a decade ago with the formation of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, which aimed to pool the energy and expertise of interested parties such as NMSA and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). Within a few years, member organizations saw an emerging fervor for reform in secondary schools, says Deborah Kasak, the National Forum's executive director.

But Kasak, previously a state middle school association director and a former middle school teacher herself, says that National Forum members were disappointed to see little mention of the middle grades in the landmark NCLB law passed by Congress in 2001. Aside from testing requirements, federal policy provided only a patchwork of grants for items like professional development and technology, Kasak and other advocates complain. Some suggest that the law has even made matters worse. While some states maintained middle-grades teacher qualification requirements before NCLB, states soon abolished those requirements when they found that the law included no such mandate. So National Forum members began building their case.

In 2006, NMSA released *Success in the Middle: A Policymaker's Guide to Achieving Quality Middle Level Education,* a report outlining policy priorities based on key attributes of effective middle schools, from "challenging, standards-based curricula" to "teachers and administrators who have strong content knowledge and the ability to use research-based instructional strategies and assessment practices appropriate for middle level students." NASSP released *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* around the same time, echoing many of NMSA's recommendations.

A growing body of research has linked the middle years with declines in student motivation, self-perception, and achievement. Kasak, for instance, says the National Forum's cause gained significant traction following a 2006 study by Johns Hopkins University's Robert Balfanz and Douglas MacIver. The study, which tracked more than 12,000 Philadelphia students from sixth grade to a year after high school, found that many in high-poverty schools became disengaged at the start of the middle grades and thus were less likely than peers to graduate.

Armed with such findings, several National Forum organizations rapidly assembled what they call the Middle Grades Coalition in early 2007 to advocate for federal legislation. Coalition members worked first with aides of Representative Raúl Grijalva, a former school board member, to draft legislation.

"It was so refreshing to go into a legislator's office, and we didn't have to convince him of anything—he already knew it all," Kasak says of Grijalva, who introduced the Success in the Middle Act in the House of Representatives in August. "We probably are better organized than ever before. We have a vision."

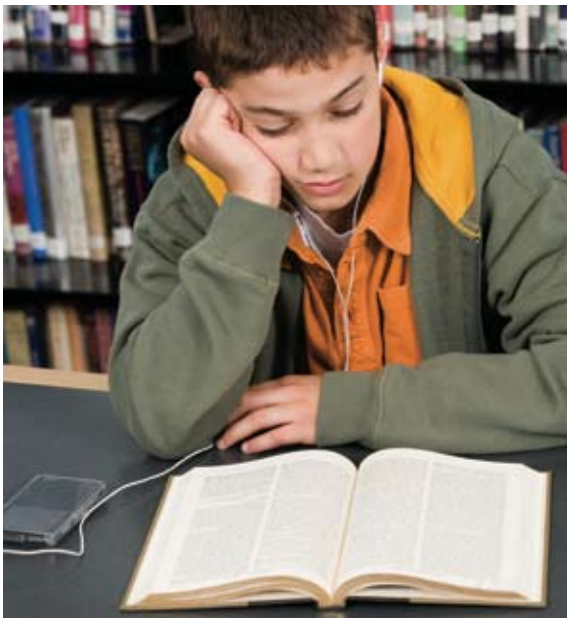
Serious Challenges

Many in the middle school community say today's problems are rooted in the conventional wisdom manifested in NCLB—that if students are given basic building blocks for a sound education in the early grades and made to meet high standards of accountability before graduating from high school, what happens in the middle takes care of itself. But it's not that simple.

"Learning is continuous and must be supported along each step," says Edwards. "Further, if you lose students in the middle level, it is too difficult—and more expensive—to reengage them and expand their learning."

Edwards also sees problems in the way the middle grades are served in facilities variously called elementary, middle, intermediate, junior high, and high schools. "Middle-level educators have felt left out for years, and they often don't even see themselves in existing policy that addresses elementary and secondary education," she says. "It is not the grade configuration that makes a difference. It is the program that is offered to students in grades 5 through 8 that makes the difference. There are distinct needs that must be addressed, both in policy and action."

Peter Murphy, executive director of the California League of Middle Schools, blames challenges partly



on the bad reputation of the student population. Because young adolescents often are seen as difficult to teach, public education systems have faced hurdles in attracting qualified instructors to this level.

The federal government must take the first step in solving these problems by signaling that the middle grades represent a worthwhile investment, says Murphy. "Kids are going to stay in school and do better if they feel that someone is interested in them," he says.

Seizing the Moment

Advocates say a message must be sent to struggling educators and the public as well. "The Success in the Middle Act not only would provide the funding to address the needs of underachieving middle-level schools, but it also would help underline the needs," says Edwards. "If you could see the looks on the faces of middle-level educators when I tell them about this proposed legislation, you would know that it would have a positive impact. This is the first time that the middle level has been addressed in federal legislation, and that means so much."

Rather than targeting children from low-income families, the legislation focuses on low-performing middle schools, including those feeding nearly 2,000 so-called "dropout factories" nationwide. Dropout factories are high schools where 60% or fewer of freshmen become seniors 3 years after ninth grade. These schools account for roughly half of the nation's dropouts.

"It's time for middle school supporters to step up to the plate and say there's some major things to fix here," says Kathy Christie, vice president of Education Commission of the States, who taught in one of the country's first middle schools in 1973. She says that a top priority must be gaining back public confidence in the structure.

"Passing the legislation will be the first step," says Edwards. "We will have to work together to implement the actions that lead to success, but I already hear so much discussion about what needs to be done and how we will do it. Representatives from NMSA, our state affiliates, state departments of education, and local school districts are already talking about what they can do with the assistance of this legislation."

Over the Horizon

Reauthorization of NCLB, currently underway, is widely seen as a crucial opportunity for the movement. The Success in the Middle Act has been paired with NCLB. Hopes for a quick victory are fading, however, as Congress increasingly appears unable to resolve key issues on NCLB soon. Negotiating a revision of the controversial law would be difficult at any time. In a campaign season, the process is especially thorny. If the House and Senate do not pass NCLB bills soon, the impending arrival of a new president is likely to further delay development of a compromise version for the two chambers to approve. NCLB reauthorization could take years.

"But they're all talking about the middle grades now," says Kasak, voicing a common belief that the introduction of federal legislation already is sparking conversation and action at the state and local levels. "We're not going to go away."

"It is a really important time for adolescents, and we really do need to get it right," Christie insists. "At stake is a lot. The criticism from the public has been all about rigor and discipline." All this cannot be lost on lawmakers, who must decide sooner or later what emphasis to place on middle schools in federal legislation.

"Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, 57% of the students tested annually are in grades 5 through 8," former NMSA Executive Director Sue Swaim noted on the release of *Success in the Middle.* "Much of the success of No Child Left Behind will depend upon the success of young adolescents."

"If middle-level education is improved, K–12 education as a whole will be improved," says Swaim's successor, Edwards. "I don't want that to sound arrogant or simplistic—it's just that a comprehensive look at the middle level as it connects elementary with high school education is logical. It just makes sense."

> "National attention has focused almost exclusively on the early grades in the belief that giving students a strong start would put them on a path to success. More recently, policymakers have sought to improve high school education by raising graduation requirements and aligning curricula to better prepare students for college and careers. Yet the United States still does not have a cohesive national policy for the middle grades.... [T]he continued failure to recognize middle level education as the crucial link in the K–12 continuum is jeopardizing the efforts to improve America's schools."
>
> — *Success in the Middle,* National Middle School Association

Geoffrey Alan is a freelance writer who writes frequently about education issues.

Putting Parents in the Middle *(School, That Is)*

By J. Michael Hall

Teachers and administrators often overlook a great source of critical support—parents.

As I speak to fathers and families around the country, I introduce myself as a "recovering" middle school principal. The remark always elicits a collective gasp from the audience. It's as if I told them that I had just returned from some catastrophic experience. No matter what age of parents I am talking to, they all live in fear of middle school.

The vast majority of middle schools serve grades 6–8. Middle schools are built primarily to address the distinct needs of this age group (11–13) and over the years have developed fantastic practices to manage the roller coaster years of the middle grades, both academically and behaviorally. As middle schools have become more and more refined to better engage their students, however, they have developed fewer and fewer ways to engage their students' parents.

As an educator, I have seen an interesting phenomenon take place concerning parents of students in the middle grades. For most of my teaching and administrative career, I was around sixth graders. If the sixth graders were a part of an elementary or an intermediate campus, then the parents were involved in much the same manner as parents typically are in elementary schools. They were still very active in parent organizations, they still volunteered, and they would still walk their children into the building on occasion. When the sixth graders were a part of a middle school, however, not only would you not see parents get involved, but it seemed they barely stopped the car to let their kids out in the parking lot. This mystique of the middle school has been an impediment for parent involvement.

Entering middle school is a big change for students who are already faced with multiple challenges. These students are dealing with tremendous physical changes as they enter puberty as well as many social changes as they encounter a more intense social experience consisting of boyfriends, girlfriends, sports teams, and the dreaded cliques. They are also becoming more involved in school activities like sports, academic competitions, and performing arts. On top of all of this, students are learning a totally different way to do school. Instead of remaining in the same classroom with

the same teacher all day, students are now attending 4–8 classes during the day with a different mix of students, subject matter, and teaching styles. They also have to contend with new rules of engagement, new freedoms, new responsibilities, and those blasted combination locks on the lockers in the crowded halls.

With all of these new issues and stresses in their lives, middle school students need help—even if they don't ask for it. One of the challenges of middle school teachers and administrators is ensuring that students are well supported during this trying time. Unfortunately, teachers and administrators often overlook a great source of critical support—parents.

Parents of middle schoolers change almost as much as the students. When students enter middle school, they and their parents tend to believe all of these myths they've heard about middle school. But there is a reason these are called "myths." To better involve parents in the middle school we must understand the difference between fact and fiction. I've encountered the following myths—and the corresponding truths—based on my experiences as a middle school principal.

Myth #1: Middle school students don't want parents to be involved.

FACT: Middle school students do in fact want their parents to be involved. More importantly, they need

them to be involved. It's not that students don't want their parents around; they just don't want them around in the same way that they were before. Now, as students try to gain more independence, they want to be able to focus on their social relationships and their incubating identity without a lot of interference from their parents. Even though they seem to resist it, students need guidance and boundaries as they continually try on more and more independence. They also need support and structure in order to handle all of the new and unfamiliar academic requirements that come with middle school classes.

Myth #2: Parents of middle school students don't want to be involved.

FACT: Middle school parents typically fall into one of three categories. The first type of parent has been very involved in the past but may have finally burned out or been turned out. The second type of parent has never been very involved in the school. These parents either may not have been involved due to life or work circumstances or they did not fit the clique or caste system that many times exists in elementary parent organizations. The third type of parent may or may not have been involved in the past but is now so shell-shocked about having this adolescent middle schooler in the house that he or she can barely be involved in the child's life, much less his or her school.

Middle schools need to reach out to parents to help them through this stage of their child's life. Parents need to be on the same page with the school. They need to understand how these children are changing, how the school is built to work with those changes, and how they can partner with the

Three Keys to Involving Parents in the Middle School

1. **Give plenty of notice:** Parents of middle school students usually don't have just that one student, so they are busy with both their middle school student and other children in the house. A month's notice and a 2-week reminder of events will help them manage their time so they can plan on being involved.
2. **Don't trust students to get the message home:** Because it is such a challenge to get information to parents through their students you must use a new set of tools. You either offer incentives for students to get their parents to attend certain events (e.g., homework passes, free tardy passes, pizza or ice cream cones at lunch) or use tools that circumvent the student as a channel of communication. Such tools include e-mail blasts, computerized phone calls, and school Web sites. Many parents have e-mail and Internet access, and almost every parent has a phone number. Schools must be diligent in keeping up with current e-mail addresses and phone numbers of parents. Ask for them to be updated on a regular basis. One of the most successful ways we have found to communicate with parents is through mail-outs. The attendance at our father events in middle school has almost doubled in some schools when we mail out the flier instead of sending it home with the students.
3. **Provide the parents help in understanding their middle school student:** Even though middle school teachers are professionals and know all about students at this grade level, many parents are flabbergasted. Provide materials about adolescent development, explain how your middle school is built to deal with developmental issues, and encourage parents to stay involved through these trying times. By letting parents know that you understand both them and their child, you will more easily gain a partner in helping their child succeed.

school in all facets of the students' development. Now instead of volunteering for field trips and office tasks, parents are needed to chaperone dances, work in concession stands, and stay in constant communication with the school about their child's progress. For parent involvement to be different in the middle grades it must be defined differently for parents so that they can partner in the appropriate manner.

Myth #3: Middle school teachers don't want parents' help.

FACT: Teachers need parent involvement so their students can be successful. In the elementary school, a teacher may have 20–30 students and therefore can provide more care and personal communication with the parents who desire or require it. In the middle school, many teachers have as many as 90–150 students per day and cannot possibly reach out to every parent. Because of the sheer number of students, the teacher must now simplify the teacher-parent relationship (which is no easy task considering parents now have multiple teachers to communicate with). Teachers still need parents, however, to help them keep track of the student's progress and help set standards for the child. If parents will check homework assignments, graded papers, progress reports, and report cards and hold the student accountable, then they are providing the teachers a tremendous amount of help.

In order for parents to do all of this, however, schools must set and communicate these expectations to parents in an effective manner. Parents cannot meet expectations that are not explained. Schools should publish a list of ways that parents can help and then standardize as many of those ways as possible. For instance, many elementary schools send a folder home with students on the same day of the week every week. There is no reason that this type of standard practice couldn't be continued in middle school. It helps the parents stay on track and keeps the students accountable.

Myth #4: Middle school students don't communicate with their parents.

FACT: Actually, this myth is pretty much true. Middle school students don't communicate with their parents. Even when they do talk to them, they don't talk about what is important to parents or teachers. Students talk about what is important to themselves, like social situations, their apparent mistreatment by teachers, other students, and bus drivers. They talk about everything except their academic endeavors. Students at this age are much less likely to bring home fliers, to convey messages from teachers or principals, and to understand why these actions are more important than discussing student romances taking place in the lunchroom. To add insult to injury, students may exaggerate when they talk. In my tenure as a middle school principal, there were many times that I would initially offend parents by discounting a student's account of a classroom or hallway incident. I had to explain to parents that I didn't think that the student was necessarily lying (even though that has been known to happen from time to time) but rather that there was what really happened and then there was what was reported after it passed through the filter of a middle school student.

Parents and teachers have to learn to communicate with each other instead of relying on the student. Students should be accountable for communicating with both their parents and their teacher as a practice, but parents and teachers should not count on information that they send via students. By communicating directly, parents and teachers can save themselves the hassle of trying to decipher information from students.

Although the middle school years can be a trying time for both parents and students, they don't have to be the nightmare many parents envision them as. Parents can educate themselves and provide indispensable support to their child by connecting to and communicating with the school. Together, schools and parents can help students succeed academically, socially, and personally as they progress through the middle school grades.

J. Michael Hall is the founder and executive director of Strong Fathers-Strong Families. He is a former teacher and middle school principal. You may contact Mike at mikehall@strongfathers.com.

Muddle in the Middle

Improving Math Instruction at the Middle School Level

By Debbie Ritenour

Twenty years ago, the Internet didn't exist as we know it today. Fifteen years ago, cell phones were rare. Ten years ago, no one had heard of an iPod. With technology expanding at an astounding rate, it's becoming more and more important for students to learn—and understand—science and math. Unfortunately, this is one of the biggest issues educators are struggling with today.

Studies have indicated that U.S. students begin to fall behind in math once they reach middle school (Beaton et al., 1996; Schmidt, McKnight, & Raizen, 1997). Researchers have cited various reasons for this lack of achievement. Some say the curriculum in the United States isn't focused, coherent, or rigorous (Beaton et al., 1996). Some say students aren't motivated (Bishop & Mane, 2001). Still others point to the difficulties of teaching middle school students in general due to their emerging adolescence. Increasingly, however, researchers are focusing their efforts on determining not just students' ability to learn or teachers' ability to teach but what exactly teachers are teaching.

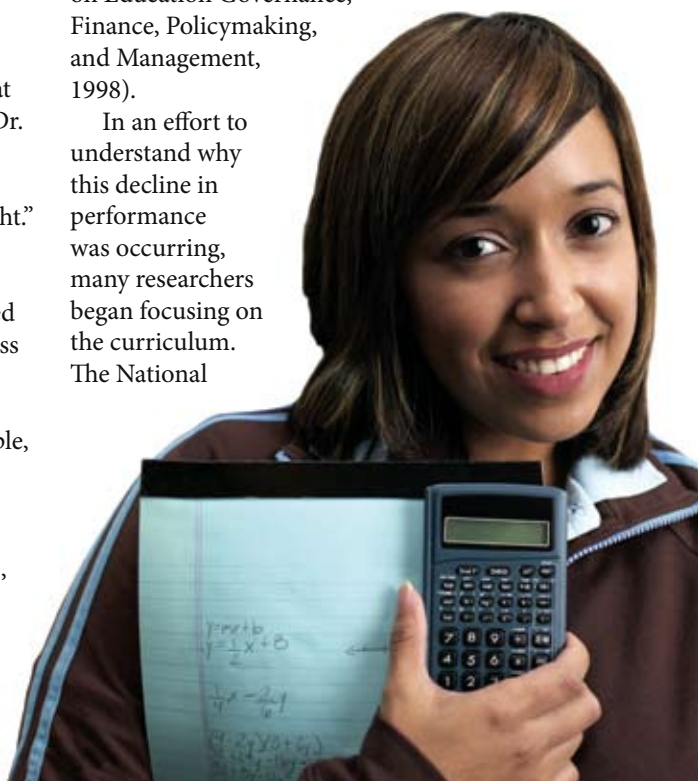
"There has been a lot of research on how to improve teaching. The research clearly indicates that teachers tend to teach how they were taught," says Dr. Concepción Molina, a program associate at SEDL. "But what we have neglected is the hypothesis that teachers will also tend to teach what they were taught."

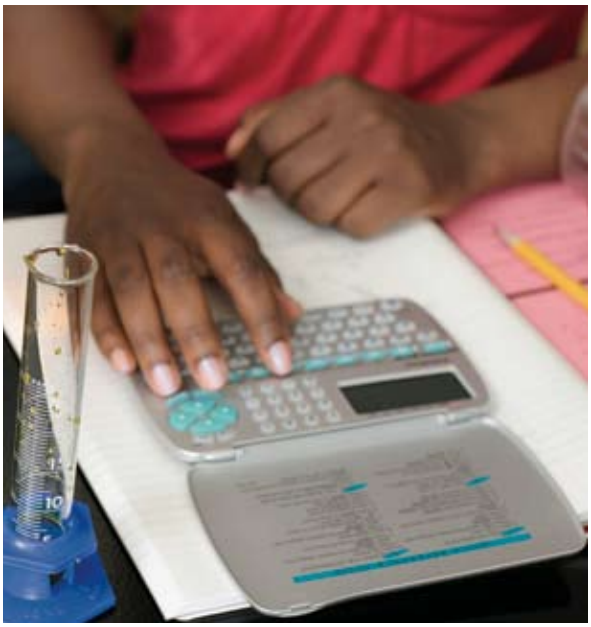
The Mathematics Teaching in the 21st Century (MT21) study (Schmidt, 2007) found that middle school teachers in the United States are less prepared to teach math than many of their counterparts across the globe. The study, which surveyed 2,627 future teachers from 34 institutions in 6 countries, found that teachers in Taiwan and South Korea, for example, whose students perform well in international tests, take twice as many math courses as U.S. teachers during their training. These findings are consistent with those of the National Research Council (2001), which determined that U.S. elementary-school and middle school teachers have a limited knowledge and understanding of mathematics. These findings lead to an obvious question: Is a lack of teacher subject-matter knowledge causing our middle school students to fall behind in math?

How Bad Is the Problem?

There is no shortage of research demonstrating U.S. middle school students' lack of achievement in mathematics, especially when compared to that of their peers in other nations. The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) examined the math performance of students in 41 countries. The study found that there is a clear drop in performance by U.S. students between the fourth and the eighth grades (Schmidt, McKnight, & Raizen, 1996). Perhaps more alarming, U.S. students went from above average in math in fourth grade to below average in eighth grade—and were the only students in the study to do so (the National Institute on Education Governance, Finance, Policymaking, and Management, 1998).

In an effort to understand why this decline in performance was occurring, many researchers began focusing on the curriculum. The National





Teachers tend to focus on showing their students how to do math as opposed to explaining what mathematical concepts are and why they function as they do.

Research Council (2001) described the U.S. middle school mathematics curriculum as "shallow, undemanding, and diffuse in content coverage" (p. 4). In particular, U.S. teachers often focus on "the execution of paper-and-pencil skills in arithmetic through demonstrations of procedures followed by repeated practice" (p. 4). In other words, teachers tend to focus on showing their students how to do math as opposed to explaining what mathematical concepts are and why they function as they do. Students know how to compute, but they don't know what all that computation means and why it works that way; they can do the procedures but do not understand the associated concepts.

Research has shown that teachers, too, are more familiar with procedural math than conceptual math. According to the National Research Council (2001),

> . . . recent studies have revealed that U.S. elementary and middle school teachers possess a limited knowledge of mathematics, including the mathematics they teach. The mathematical education they received, both as K–12 students and in teacher preparation, has not provided them with appropriate or sufficient opportunities to learn mathematics. As a result of that education, teachers may know the facts and procedures that they teach but often have a relatively weak understanding of the conceptual basis for that knowledge. (p. 372)

Researchers point out, however, that it's not simply a matter of knowing the subject better or taking more classes. Schmidt (2007) states, "The obvious solution of having U.S. future teachers of middle school take more mathematics appears to be the answer, but it is only part of the answer" (p. 1). In fact, the MT21 study was designed to examine how middle school teachers are prepared in other countries, not their content knowledge. "It is quite revealing that the countries whose students continuously perform well on the international benchmark tests have the teachers who have been trained with extensive educational opportunities in mathematics as well as in the practical aspects of teaching mathematics to students in the middle grades," Schmidt concluded (p. 42).

What Can Be Done?

Molina, a former mathematics teacher, has worked with mathematics teachers through his work at SEDL. He agrees that teachers' lack of subject-matter knowledge in math is hurting middle school students, noting that while there has been a lot of research on how to improve teaching, there hasn't been enough on how to improve what is being taught.

"If the teachers were only taught math based on procedures, then that is the mathematics they are going to teach," Molina said. "They're a product of the system. The whole idea of teachers not knowing the math as well as they should has flown under the radar."

Conceptual knowledge refers to an "understanding of what a mathematics concept is, how and why it works the way it does, and what situations in real life model it" (Molina, 2004, p. 16). Molina cites the definition of pi as an example of procedural knowledge versus conceptual knowledge. A student might define pi as "3.14," and this is certainly one answer. Defining pi as the ratio of the circumference to the diameter of a circle, however, involves a more thorough understanding.

"Even after three semesters of college calculus and other higher-level mathematics, I still only knew pi as the value 3.14. Of course I could plug it into formulas and get the correct answers, but it was not until I started teaching that I realized I really didn't know what pi was conceptually," Molina said. "We teach facts and procedures that are disconnected. Later, when students have to connect them, that's when it starts getting tougher."

Molina attributes this to three factors. First, when a teacher finishes college, it is assumed that he or she has the necessary subject-matter knowledge even though there is no guarantee that the required higher-level courses enable him or her to teach fundamental math. In fact, he notes, these courses often don't go over many K–8 grade-level math topics because a deep understanding of those fundamentals is assumed or taken for granted. Second, once in the classroom, teachers are evaluated more on instructional strategies and classroom management than on content knowledge. Third, and most important according to Molina, teachers are not aware that they are lacking in knowledge.

"In their minds, they know it well," Molina said. "In essence, they do not know that they do not know the mathematics. They have reached a false ceiling that they are not aware of because the system has not taken them to the top level of understanding of many critical math topics."

For his dissertation, Molina (2004) conducted a

case study to determine the depth of the subject-matter knowledge of four middle school mathematics teachers in Texas as well as their own perceived depth of knowledge. After a series of interviews and classroom observations, he determined that two of the four teachers had an inflated perception of their expertise. The educational system "failed to advance two of the four participants—and a third teacher to a partial extent—to a conceptual understanding of the mathematics topics tested" (Molina, 2004, p. 293).

Although he notes that the small sample size does not allow the conclusions to be generalized, Molina found his study reinforced the earlier research on teachers' lack of mathematics content knowledge at the elementary school level. He found that ". . . the suggested conclusion is that college education failed to improve the middle school content expertise of the four teachers in this study. . . . middle school mathematics topics were, for the most part, ignored in the college preparation programs that certified these four teachers" (p. 292).

"It's not the teachers' fault," Molina said. "What's even more alarming is that the campus administrators went through the same system. They see nothing wrong with the shallow procedural mathematics that is being taught. When combined with a teacher appraisal system that has little if any focus on content knowledge, one can see why this issue has flown under the radar for so many years."

Through his work at SEDL, Molina has conducted professional development for middle school mathematics teachers. He focused on improving the content knowledge of the mathematics they were teaching while simultaneously modeling research-based effective teaching practices such as the use of physical manipulatives. He says that by providing different perspectives, teachers can help students learn differently. He received good feedback from the teachers, and he would see a difference when he would follow up with them later.

"My participation in Dr. Molina's Lesson Study Summer Institute for 2 consecutive years was an intense study of math that has allowed me to grow as a teacher of mathematics by first gaining a more profound understanding of fundamental mathematics as a learner," said Lynda Francis, a fifth-grade teacher at Bale Elementary School in Little Rock, Arkansas. "Using physical models to represent many key concepts, Dr. Molina asked us to solve problems, justifying and communicating our reasoning through writing and group discussions. I believe by knowing more math, I have become a better teacher of students investigating mathematical ideas."

Teaching middle school students is no easy matter regardless of the subject. Math in particular provides its own unique set of challenges. By teaching for deep conceptual understanding that connects to and supports the associated skills and procedures, middle school math teachers will provide their students with a more thorough grounding and foundation in fundamental but critical mathematics topics. In the process, they will help prepare their students for the more complex mathematics that awaits them in the higher grades.

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By providing different perspectives, teachers can help students learn differently.

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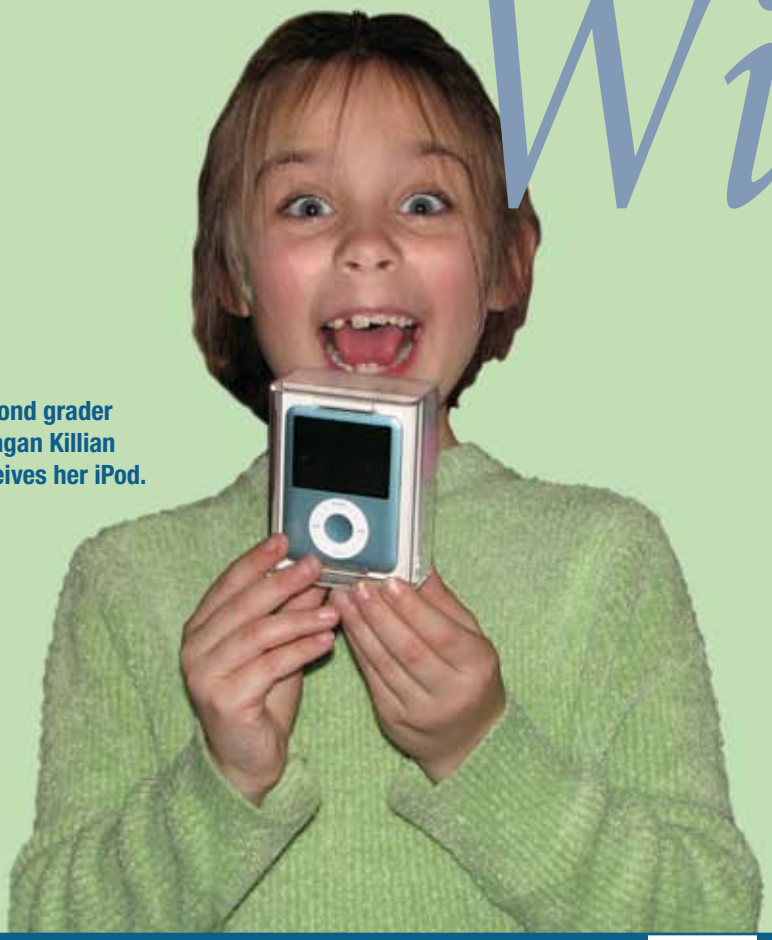
SEDL National Art Contest *Winners*



Second grader Meagan Killian receives her iPod.

Lucy Wang, a sixth-grade student from Holmdel, New Jersey, is the grand prize winner in SEDL's national student art contest. Wang's colorful drawing, titled "Education Makes a Difference," was one of 178 entries.

SEDL held the contest to celebrate the organization's move into a new headquarters facility in Austin, Texas. The contest's theme was "Education and My Future."

"This contest reflects SEDL's emphasis on education as critical to our future as individuals and as a society," said SEDL President and CEO Wesley A. Hoover. "In our work with schools, communities, and state departments of education we strive for a bright future for all students, and the winning artwork beautifully illustrates that future."

The artwork of the 13 student winners is on display in SEDL's new building as well as online at www.sedl.org/artcontest/index.html. The grand prize winner received an iMac, and the other winners received iPods. Each winner's school received $100 in commemoration of the student's achievement.

Grades PreK–2

My stairs to the space
1st place, grades preK–2
Wenyi Ouyang, 2nd grade
Highland Park, New Jersey

Bright future
2nd place, grades preK–2
Meagan Killian, 2nd grade
Whitehouse, Texas

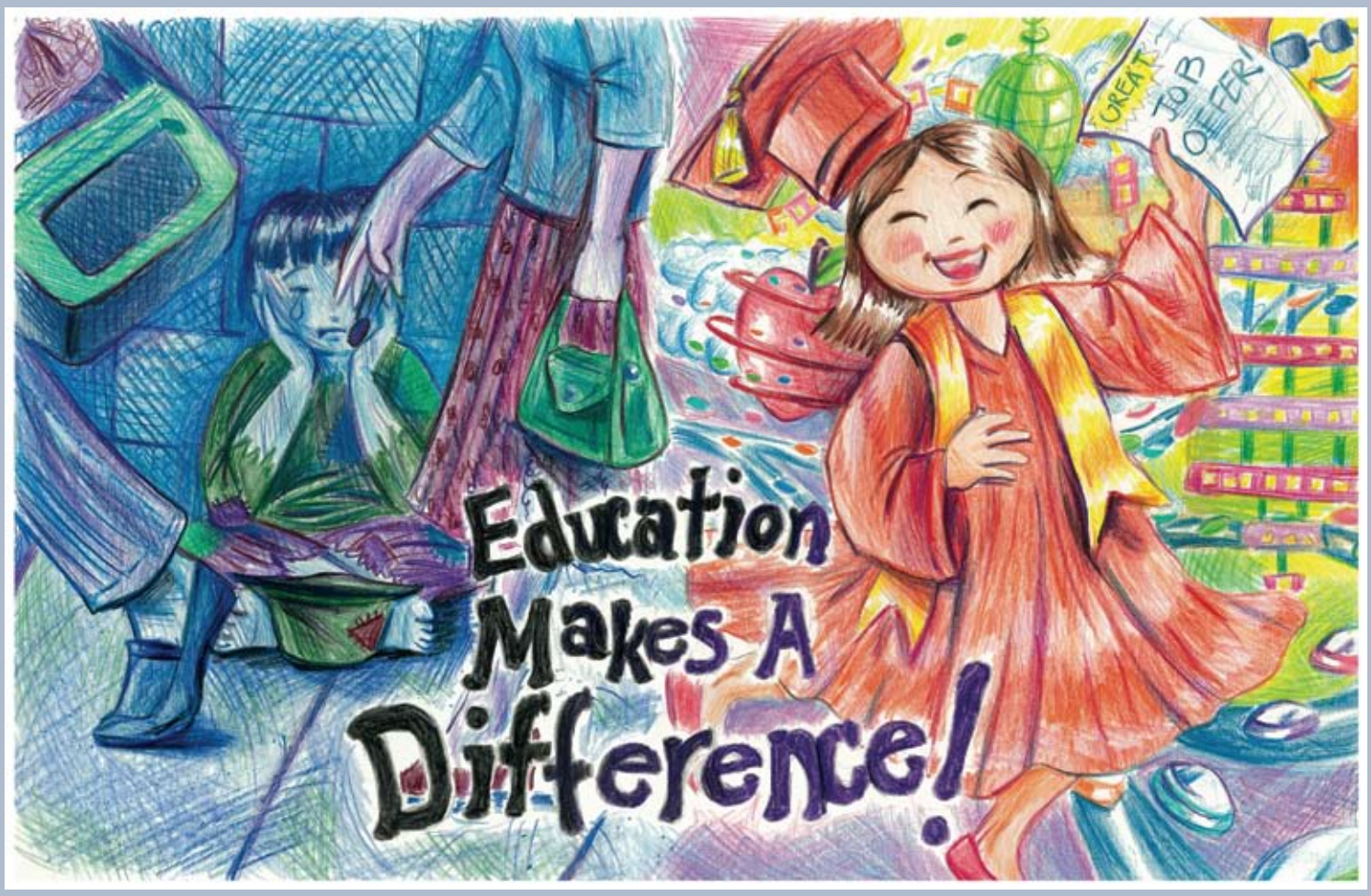
Education is important to farmers
3rd place, grades preK–2
Andrea Rhea, 2nd grade
Medford, Oklahoma

Grades 3–6

Education is vital to my future
1st place, grades 3–6
Tiffany Guo, 3rd grade
Hillsborough, New Jersey

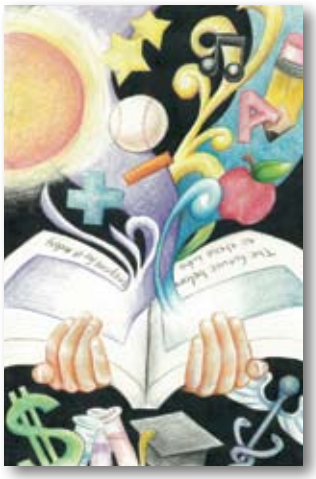
Education: It makes my mind view far and fly high
2nd place, grades 3–6
Katherine Liu, 4th grade
Saratoga, California

My hands — with an education my future is in my hands
3rd place, grades 3–6
Mia King, 5th grade
Fairburn, Georgia



Grand Prize Winner
Education makes a difference, **Lucy Wang**, 6th grade, Holmdel, New Jersey

Grades 7–9



Open the possibilities
1st place, grades 7–9
Alicia Feng, 8th grade
West Windsor, New Jersey

Apple tree screensaver
2nd place, grades 7–9
Grace Li, 7th grade
Monmouth Junction, New Jersey

Our time line of learning
3rd place, grades 7–9
Sean Underwood, 9th grade
Wichita Falls, Texas

Grades 10–12

Everything we learn today is related to our future
1st place, grades 10–12
Athena Xie, 11th grade
Plainsboro, New Jersey

Cogito ergo sum
2nd place, grades 10–12
Katelyn Dacus, 11th grade
Jacksonville, Texas

Thinking ahead
3rd place, grades 10–12
Arturo Hernandez, 11th grade
Dallas, Texas

Back to the Future

The Shift to K–8 Schools

By Leslie Blair

It may not be extensive enough to be called a trend, but there has been a definite shift in the number of schools containing kindergarten through grade 8 in the United States. In urban areas especially, districts have been doing away with middle schools, which traditionally contain grades 6–8, and moving toward K–8 schools. A national database maintained by Missouri State University indicates that since 1994, 1,759 schools in 49 districts throughout the country have either adopted, are preparing to switch to, or have considered switching to a K–8 or 1–8 configuration. Most of these are academically struggling schools in inner cities (Viadero, 2008). Since the late 1990s, Baltimore, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, New Orleans, New York, and Philadelphia have blended middle schools and elementary schools. Those cities will soon be joined by Washington, DC, which recently announced plans to convert middle and elementary schools to preK–8 schools.

Why is this shift occurring? And is there evidence that the K–8 configuration is better for students in the middle grades?

Both Middle School, K–8 Configurations Have Advantages

Middle schools first evolved in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The middle grades movement extended into the 1980s in an effort to better meet the needs of young adolescents, who face a unique set of psychological, emotional, and social challenges. By the late 1990s, however, many districts were dissatisfied with achievement levels and discipline problems in their middle schools. Districts began to look for guidance from successful private schools—many of them Catholic schools—that had K–8 configurations.

Dr. Anthony Recasner, former SEDL board chairman and principal of a K–8 school in New Orleans, believes both configurations have their advantages. Recasner should know—he has been a principal for 15 years, operating New Orleans Charter Middle School, which serves grades 6–8, and S. J. Green Charter School, which serves grades K–8.

"The main advantage of a middle school is you can focus on the nature of adolescence, which is consuming because to be effective you have to respond with the right strategies to meet students' academic, physical, social, and emotional needs. These strategies take time to figure out because they depend on unique needs of the students and the skills and knowledge of the faculty and staff," Recasner said.

The focus of a K–8 school, he explained, is different, and therefore so is its primary advantage. "When you have kids who make it all the way through your K–8 school, you provide a wonderful sense of continuity. You can create a family environment, a community environment around kids you know really well. You can get optimal emotional and social outcomes because you know them and their families really well," he said.

There are challenges with the K–8 model, though. Recasner noted that few teachers can teach the complete range of grades, and often teachers of young children feel uneasy interacting with the older students. "The challenge is that a K–8 school can really spread you thin," Recasner said. "Everyone has to attend to the needs of big kids—even kindergarten teachers."

SEDL program manager Dr. Robin Jarvis, who formerly served as the head of New Orleans's Recovery School District (RSD), believes the middle school model—properly implemented—is best for middle-grade students.

"The middle grades are critical for preparing students for high school and college," said Jarvis. "This is the time students begin to go deeper into each content area and to apply the reading, math, organizational, and study skills they learned in elementary school to the content area courses. It is really important at this point that the teachers have strong content knowledge in the subjects they are teaching."

Jarvis said the well-implemented middle school model should include community-building strategies that help children feel like they are part of a smaller community within the larger school and develop trusting relationships with adults in the

school. While she was conducting research for her dissertation, Jarvis worked with several successful middle schools. She noticed that these schools split faculty members into cross-content area teaching teams, with each team teaching a specific group of students.

"The intent is that these teams will meet frequently to discuss strategies they have used successfully in working with students who may be having difficulties or posing problems in the classroom," Jarvis said. "Where I have seen this model work best, the team concept was taken to the point where each team was housed within the school building in a common area that is painted in a specific color signifying that team. Each team has its own colors, mascots, and mottos. While this may seem a bit extreme, these types of strategies help young adolescents who are moving from the elementary school setting where they pretty much spent all day with one or two teachers to the larger middle school setting where they move from class to class throughout the day and may have difficulty connecting to and developing relationships with the adults there—adults with whom they spend much shorter periods of time each day than they did their elementary school teachers."

Recasner, on the other hand, prefers the K–8 model if the facility is suitable. He believes separating the children into groups of K–3, 4–6, and 7–8 is the best way to group students in a K–8 school. "Kids in those age groups are more alike than they are different," said Recasner. At Samuel J. Green, the children are divided into those grade-level units.

"This school design gives us the benefit of being able to work with smaller numbers of students within an academic unit," he explained. "As a result we are better able to create the unique experience that best meets the needs of those students. This approach is consistent with the way successful independent schools are organized."

What Should Parents Look for in a Good Middle-Grades School?

Nancy Ames, a senior advisor at the Education Development Center (EDC) and an active member of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, said that parents should know that high-performing middle-grades schools need to be academically rigorous, responsive to the needs of young adolescents, and socially equitable. "These qualities are possible in any grade configuration," she said. "Simply changing the school's structure will not guarantee their presence."

Ames explained that schools that are highly tracked, where some students have access to a rigorous curriculum while others do not, are not socially equitable. "Too many so-called good schools are failing significant numbers of students," she said. "Typically these are English language learner students, students with disabilities, students from poor families, or students that simply fall through the cracks. If parents look at everybody's child as their own, they'll have a better way of judging the overall quality of their child's school."

Both Ames and SEDL program manager Robin Jarvis say that parents should look for an advanced curriculum that helps prepare students for high school. "Algebra or pre-algebra should be the norm in eighth grade, along with exploration of geometry and statistics," said Ames. Students should be studying science in the middle grades, too—not just mathematics and language arts. Good middle-grades programs should also include counseling in preparation for high school and career exploration.

High on Jarvis's list of things parents should look for in a good middle-grades setting is the opportunity for such extracurricular activities as academic clubs, intramural sports, music/band programs, and art/drama programs. "Students at this age need opportunities to develop their other interest and talent areas, so if these are not provided in school, parents may want to look for them elsewhere," said Jarvis.

Ames said that it is also important that students have multiple ways to learn and multiple ways to demonstrate what they have learned. "Students should be able to tell their parents what they are learning and why," she said.

A recent study noted that students in K–8 schools felt safer than they did in middle schools.

Recasner's ideal K–8 facility would include separate buildings for each of the units. Each building could create the ideal environment for its particular grade-level unit. "Because of the difference in sizes and developmental needs of students in a K–8 school, it is nearly impossible to create a single environment that meets all of the needs of every grade," Recasner said. He added that students could still share some common areas. He also believes that the percentage of students at each grade level is important. Many schools that have begun using the K–8 configuration have struggled as students in the middle grades have overtaken the lower grades in number.

Jarvis observed a related issue at the K–8 schools in New Orleans's RSD. Many students in the RSD were out of school or moved numerous times during the tumultuous months following Hurricane Katrina. Students were older than normal when they returned to school and picked back up at the grade level where they left off.

"One of the biggest concerns parents and teachers had was based on the fact we had a large number of overage students in the middle school grades," Jarvis said. "This meant our preK–8 schools included students ranging in age from 4 to 15 or 16 years old. It is very difficult to have an age range this broad in a single school, and that can create some potentially unsafe situations for the younger children." Regarding the safety issue, she said the K–8 model works better if the different age groups are housed in separate buildings on the same campus, the same physical setting that Recasner advocates. Jarvis said this had been done in New Orleans at those schools where the facilities allowed it.

A recent study (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006) noted that students in K–8 schools felt safer than they did in middle schools. This is consistent with fewer discipline problems seen at K–8 schools.

"When you've got little kids, their presence tends to temper a lot of the more robust adolescent issues that can consume a school staff. And in general, issues of student safety is also given more attention," said Recasner. "For example, in most K–8 schools, significant planning time is devoted to making sure that the two trains miss by a few minutes each day, thereby providing each group its own room to roam. This may be a large part of why kids feel less vulnerable."

Implementation is Key

According to Hayes Mizell, senior fellow with the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) and former director of the Program for Student Achievement at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, many of the middle schools that consider switching to a K–8 configuration never actually changed from being a junior high school. Often school systems were not truly committed to the philosophical, educational, and operational reasons for establishing a middle school. "The district leadership in most school systems does not provide the clear direction and oversight that middle school educators deserve and must have to educate young adolescents effectively," Mizell said.

Other school systems implemented structures and processes that are associated with middle schools but didn't have the needed focus on student learning or pay attention to the fundamentals. "By fundamentals," Mizell said, "I mean meeting the academic and developmental needs of students; increasing the expectations, support, and accountability of teachers and administrators; and engaging students in meaningful learning experiences."

Dr. David Hough, who is the dean of the College of Education and director of the Institute for School Improvement (ISI) at Missouri State University, agrees with Mizell that the effectiveness of the school—whether K–8 or middle school—lies in implementation. Hough has studied middle-grades education and existing research related to the middle grades for more than 15 years. He coined the term "elemiddle" in 1991 while a research scientist at the University of California to denote K–8 schools that effectively implement best practices for middle-grades students who attend school alongside elementary-grades students. In a 2005 *School Administrator* article, he wrote:

> My position is that schools more fully implementing the middle-level concept are the ones outperforming those that are not. I believe the successful K–8 elemiddles are the ones buying into this philosophy most fully and completely, and that's why their test scores are higher, their attendance rates improved, discipline referrals reduced and dropout rates lowered.

A current ISI research project examines data for more than 500 public schools that contain grades 6–8 and more than 500 public K–8 schools. Hough's team has found that the primary reason schools are considering the conversion to a K–8 configuration is because they have not met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks.

"The few schools that have studied the pros and cons of switching to a K–8 and have stayed with the 6–8 have made the decision because they didn't have the facilities to accommodate the K–8 conversion and/or the community didn't want to make the move," Hough said. "Interestingly, in the states of Georgia, Florida, and Texas, the most common reason cited for not switching to K–8 often has to do with sports programs that they don't want to change."

Hough has found that districts studying the issue and making the conversion are largely high-poverty, inner-city communities with large ethnic populations. "So this is not a movement of suburban America or rural America. It is happening in cities like Portland, New York, Kansas City, Cleveland, and Cincinnati," he said. "They believe the K–8 configuration provides smaller learning communities, fewer and more supportive transitions, and a more nurturing learning environment—all the so-called 'soft stuff' that critics have used to blame middle schools for their relatively poor student outcomes. My data suggest, ironically, that if middle schools were actually doing what they were being criticized for, they might be producing more positive results."

In the ISI study, the population of K–8 schools is generally smaller than that of 6–8 schools. Though the schools in both groups they have studied range in size from 200 to 2,000 students, the size is skewed for each configuration. The 6–8 schools tend to be larger schools with 900–1,200 students; the K–8 schools tend to be much smaller (there are some very large K–8s). Hough has also found that the K–8 schools tend to have more economically disadvantaged students, higher attendance, fewer discipline problems, and higher academic achievement overall, considering AYP and other factors. However, Hough noted that the K–8 schools in the database have been K–8 schools for an average of 2.6 years; the 6–8 schools have been around more than 9 years. "It would be reasonable to assume that these relatively youthful K–8s might produce even better student outcomes over time. Most whole-school reform initiatives need to have a few years' practice, say 4 or more, before reliable outcome measures can be documented. This is why we have already begun a 2008–2010 longitudinal follow-up study replicating the same data collection methods used for the 2004 data," he said.

"This is not a movement of suburban America or rural America. It is happening in cities like Portland, New York, Kansas City, Cleveland, and Cincinnati."

— Dr. David Hough, Missouri State University

What Does Recent Research Tell Us?

Although it seems there has been a recent wave of conversions to the K–8 model, there hasn't been a great deal of "gold-standard" scientifically based research (i.e., research that uses randomization and controls) comparing middle schools with other configurations. As Hough wrote (2005):

> This is not to say that middle schools have not been the subject of study. To the contrary, my research team spent almost two years examining 3,717 studies that addressed a variety of middle-level education issues, topics, and questions over a 12-year period from 1991–2002.

Two recently published studies have employed sophisticated statistical analysis, including multilevel modeling, however. Weiss and Kipnes (2006) used data from the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study (PELS), an ongoing study of public high schools students. Using the first wave of data collected in the PELS, the researchers compared eighth-grade students from middle schools to those from K–8 schools. Philadelphia was an ideal district to study because not all of the middle schools in the district were converted into K–8 schools: some of the middle schools were left intact. The findings of Weiss and Kipnes did not support improving achievement in the middle grades by eliminating middle schools. According to the authors, "The environment of the middle school is no more detrimental to students' performance than that of the K–8. Although much has been made about the negative consequences that middle schools have on students' performance in the middle grades, we find little effect" (p. 264). However, Weiss and Kipnes found statistical differences in feelings of self-esteem and safety between the two groups of students. The middle school students had lower levels of self-esteem than those who attend K–8 schools; they also perceived their school environment as significantly more threatening.

Byrnes and Ruby (2007) also studied the Philadelphia City School District, comparing middle schools to K–8 schools to determine if the two different configurations had any effects on students' reading and mathematical achievement. They found that the older, more established K–8 schools did outperform the middle schools but the newer K–8 schools did not. Similar to Hough's early findings regarding K–8 schools, Byrnes and Ruby note ". . . smaller size may also enable K–8 schools to more effectively implement the very set of 'best practices' that were originally thought to be an advantage of middle schools, and the greater use of these practices

Schools to Watch Program

www.mgforum.org

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform has established a set of criteria for identifying high-performing middle-grades schools and has set up a "Schools To Watch" program. The program includes schools serving a variety of grade spans, including K–8, 6–8, and 7–9. These are schools that are academically excellent, responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents, and socially equitable. The forum also calls for enlightened leadership, use of data for decision making, a professional learning community, and other supports to enhance teaching and learning. Later this spring the forum will release a policy statement.

may also be the reason why K–8 schools tend to perform better" (p. 107). The two researchers plan to follow up on the newer schools in time.

Although Byrnes and Ruby found that K–8 schools on average have higher levels of achievement, they state the advantages were due partially to differences in the populations of the K–8 schools and partially to the structural differences. They conclude:

> In the end, the advantage is multifaceted and not easily replicated. Districts and schools eager to convert to the K–8 structure because of this advantage should not rush into any such policies but rather should reflect upon history. K–8 schools, once the dominant school structure in the U.S. middle-grades landscape, have fallen out of fashion before, and they may yet do so again as the rush to revert to them is likely to leave many reformers disappointed. (p. 134)

Perhaps they are right. Michael Fullan has written a great deal about how it is much easier to restructure a school than to reculture a school. Just moving the middle-grades students into a K–8 setting won't help unless unwavering attention is paid to high standards, aligning curriculum and instruction with those standards, making sure there are good teachers, and creating an atmosphere conducive for learning with a strong sense of community.

As Mizell said in a speech before the National School Board Association's Council of Urban Boards of Education (2004), "There is reason to worry that these school systems may be no more conscientious and vigilant about meeting the unique needs of young adolescents in K–8 schools than they have been about meeting the needs of this age group in 6–8 schools. . . School boards and superintendents need to know that the wholesale conversion to a K–8 structure is not a matter of 'set it and forget it.' Under any grade configuration educating young adolescents well is hard work."

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Motivating Middle School Students *to Attend Afterschool Programs*

By Wendy Jones

Afterschool programs across the country face a unique challenge when it comes to middle school students.

At an afterschool program at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, middle school students experiment with combining their movements with an artist's images and a rapper's music. The project, MiX TAPEStry, is part of an effort to engage middle school students in science and technology by incorporating those subjects into an interest of the students, hip hop music.

"The point is not only to show them cool stuff, but to show them that it isn't rocket science. The fact that we're using webcams makes it very accessible," said Rachel Brady, Duke research scientist and director of the visualization technology group.

Afterschool programs across the country face a unique challenge when it comes to middle school students. These students aren't as easily engaged as younger ones, and they often are less disciplined. In order to ensure participation and success, afterschool programs must find activities that appeal to these students while acknowledging their new and unique developmental needs. Activities such as cooking, filmmaking, photography, Web page design, music, dance, drama, team sports, and fashion design allow teachable moments in math, reading, technology, and science as well as in character education and team building.

If You Teach It, They Will Come

At Duke, students spend their time in a windowless black studio equipped with computer monitors situated along the walls and sensors wired to the ceiling. The sensors capture motion and channel it through the computers to trigger sounds. The result is a room students can "play" like a musical instrument—just by moving around.

Hip hop recording artist Robi Roberts, who teaches in Duke's music department, contributed an original rap called "Lemonade." Roberts, whom the students know as "J Bully," said he is excited about the mixing of hip hop and science.

"If these kids can find an interest in science, if it gets them interested in the practical applications, then great," he said. "I have a solid, applied understanding of these things, but if I had gone to school for it, I would be that much better at everything that I do."

The activity manages to connect science and technology to students' real-world experience in a way that excites the students. Students participating in MiX TAPEStry have a personal connection to the interactive, networked performance of music and graphics. At a time of their lives when students are learning about themselves as much as about any subject in school, such personal connections can help afterschool programs attract and retain middle school students.

The potential impact of middle school afterschool programs goes far beyond the recognized benefit of providing safe, supervised environments in the hours after school. In addition to facing more demanding academics, middle school students are dealing with the challenge of meeting social and developmental benchmarks as they transition from elementary to middle and middle to high school. Afterschool programs can provide an avenue for helping those students successfully navigate these challenges while building skills necessary for academic success, learning to get along with others, and fostering positive attitudes toward community and school. Of course, the first step is getting students involved with afterschool programs.

"Participation matters," says Priscilla Little of the Harvard Family Research Project, who serves on the steering committee of SEDL's National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning, "but participation is lower than what we would like." The next generation of studies, she says, rather than continuing to focus on outcomes, will examine program quality (i.e., "What works well for which kids under which circumstances?" "Who is—and is not—participating?").

The computers at Duke University take data registering the amount of motion from the cameras and map it onto musical sound.

Little identifies three stages of middle school student motivation to attend afterschool programs: (1) amotivation (extrinsic motivation), (2) personal connection, and (3) intrinsic motivation. In the first stage, amotivation, students enter the program for extrinsic reasons such as family pressure, fulfilling a service requirement, having friends in the program, and so on. Peer relationships are typically a priority among middle school students. In some cases, this can benefit afterschool programs in the form of word-of-mouth advertising and positive peer pressure. Friends in the program present a potentially strong influence on a middle school student's initial decision to join an afterschool program.

A personal connection is formed in the second stage when students find a link between the program's mission and what matters to them. Unlike younger students, middle school students are able to "vote with their feet." If afterschool programming bores students or doesn't meet their needs, participation—and therefore success—is unlikely. Afterschool programs with activities based on youth choice and voice, culture, individual needs, multiple intelligences, and personal engagement are usually the ones that keep students engaged and coming back for more.

Finally, intrinsic motivation occurs when students become interested in and enjoy the program and its activities. Participants in the TeenzArt Fashion Forward program in Tucson, Arizona, for example, learn about the principles of fashion design, including the properties of colors and seasonal fashion trends. Students receive sketchbooks and portfolios, and discuss fashion concepts such as layering, accessories, and when to wear certain fabrics. The class also supports mathematics and gives students a foundation in case they want to pursue a career in fashion design. Students are offered as much guidance as they need but are encouraged to be self-directed and to take ownership of their projects. This practice strongly supports intrinsic motivation and an interest in and enjoyment of the program.

Creating a Quality Afterschool Program

Quality afterschool programs for middle school youth often focus attention on students' psychological development and support an age-appropriate sense of independence.

According to the Harvard Family Research Project, program quality is the pivotal issue around which all other factors, including recruitment, participation, and retention, revolve (Little, 2006). Without a quality program, efforts to recruit and retain middle school students can be futile. Quality afterschool programs for middle school youth often focus attention on students' psychological development and support an age-appropriate sense of independence. Negative outcomes are more likely when students perceive that their educational experiences are artificial, remote, alienating, and unrelated to their life experiences. Middle school afterschool programs should include opportunities to link school learning with real-world experiences and peer associations.

For example, the GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) afterschool program was created by the U.S. Department of Education to provide emotional, academic, and social support for students on the brink of falling behind. At GEAR UP sites, public school students are matched with students from institutions of higher education for intensive mentoring and tutoring.

Donna Schnorr, an associate professor at California State University, San Bernadino, and project director for GEAR UP Inland Empire, said that the program's results have been astounding. Academically, GEAR UP students are more likely to have good attendance and to take college entrance exams and are less likely to be suspended, she said. Developmentally and socially, students who struggle with difficult home lives get immediate help at schools where counseling interns work. "These problems, which happen at any school, range from having been sexually molested to seeing someone shot," Schnorr said.

The program is divided into two blocks: reading and math. Students engage in such activities as writing sentences using selected vocabulary words, creating fictional stories, writing checks, and balancing a checkbook. The program also features sessions where the university students talk to their middle school counterparts about preparing for college. GEAR UP has been successful because the program is designed to build positive relationships between the college student leaders and middle school students with activities that relate to future decisions and life experiences of individual students.

Quality programs also acknowledge that middle school students are beginning to show more autonomy in their lives. Middle school youth need to be given opportunities to make decisions, take on leadership roles, help construct program offerings, set personal goals, and develop their potential as role models (Lauver & Little, 2005). For example, programs in Tampa, Florida, and Coatesville, Pennsylvania, introduced cooking classes after students demonstrated an interest in cooking and nutrition. The program in Tampa showed a 25% increase in regular student attendance after the new afterschool classes began, and the Coatesville program discovered an avenue to increase family involvement as well as student participation when cooking activities evolved into events such as preparing meals with families. Both of these programs began with an informal student poll or brief questionnaire regarding the types of activities students would like to see in the afterschool program.

Students may even seek leadership roles within activities. Hearing students' voices and implementing their ideas helps students make personal connections to the program. Afterschool programs that pay particular attention to hiring, training, orienting, supporting, and evaluating staff based on their relationships with youth, not just on their administrative or supervisory capacity, are most successful with recruitment and retention.

Gail Pippen, program director at the Coatesville afterschool site, reported that student and family participation increased dramatically after students became directly responsible for planning their own programming and family events. "[Students] met to plan the event and worked with the staff to tell them what support they needed," she said. "They wanted to look good."

Afterschool stakeholders nationwide agree that programming can be a challenge for middle school

students, who are too old for traditional daycare but too young to be left to their own devices after school. A 2005 summit cosponsored by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the Harvard Family Research Project, and the National Institute for Out-of-School Time revealed that while there is general agreement on key areas of program quality (e.g., health and safety, administrative practices, human relationships), there is wide variation in how national, state, and local organizations have articulated standards for middle school afterschool programming and indicators used to track progress. Nonetheless, afterschool programs that provide engaging activities directed at learning and improving school achievement attract more interest than programs that lack either fun or direction. Students will be more likely to attend regularly if they are engaged in learning activities designed around their interests and connected to their real lives. By providing opportunities to learn through experience in real-world contexts as well as to develop personal responsibility, self-direction, and leadership skills, afterschool programs can help middle school students prepare for their future, academically and otherwise.

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Former SEDL Employees Release New Book About Leading Professional Learning Communities

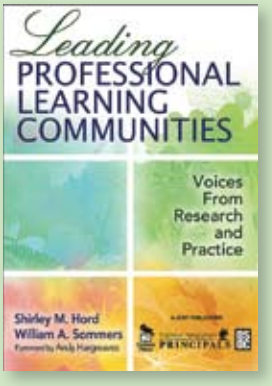
The past few years have brought a proliferation of books about professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs are often seen as a way to increase student achievement, heighten teacher reflection and collaboration, and even enforce compliance with prescribed programs. Shirley Hord and Bill Sommers, former SEDL employees, believed many of these books provide only part of the picture of what a PLC is and how to establish one.

"Some of the recent books focus almost entirely on collaboration, which is certainly part of a PLC, but there is so much more to a professional learning community, especially for the principal or other leaders," said Hord. "Bill and I saw that many of these books weren't thorough in their discussion of what a PLC really is, the learning that must take place within the community, and what it takes to lead a staff to become a PLC."

Thus, Hord and Sommers wrote *Leading Professional Learning Communities: Voices From Research and Practice,* recently published by Corwin Press. The book explores the critical role of the principal and other leaders in the development of a PLC by discussing what research literature says as well as what really happens in schools. It also discusses the constant focus needed on student and teacher learning and the commitment and courage necessary to lead a PLC.

In the forward of *Leading Professional Learning Communities,* Andy Hargreaves, the Thomas More Brennan Chair at Boston College, explained that the book addresses the paradoxical nature of PLCs. "In essence, leadership entails working with and indeed thriving on paradox, not merely trying to eliminate or endure it," he wrote.

The book illustrates how PLCs can help increase leadership capacity, embed professional development in daily work, create a positive school culture, and develop accountability. It also addresses how to manage the conflict that arises, the creativity needed for problem solving, and the courage to challenge existing systems and ways of thinking when necessary.



Leading Professional Learning Communities was published by Corwin Press in conjunction with the National Staff Development Council and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. It may be ordered from SEDL's publications department either online at www.sedl.org/pubs/ or by calling 800-476-6861. The cost is $30 for the paperback.

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