

Reflections Courageous

There is no easy consensus.

There isn't a single shining example that defines it, exemplifies it, or provides the perfect model.

But educators at middle schools across the country say courageous leadership is an attribute needed more than ever in today's middle school. They perhaps can't define it succinctly, but they know it when they see it in their schools—and they see it a lot.

Examples of courageous leadership can range from a cancer-stricken teacher who inspires a whole school, to an educator who makes little strides by modeling the art of “hanging out” for students for whom social interaction is an anxiety-laden mystery.

Courage is evident in teachers and administrators who fight in big struggles to keep schools adhering to the important tenets of middle school philosophy and to the goals of education they believe in. And it is revealed in the teacher who visits students at home to help them with math.

The Essence of Educators

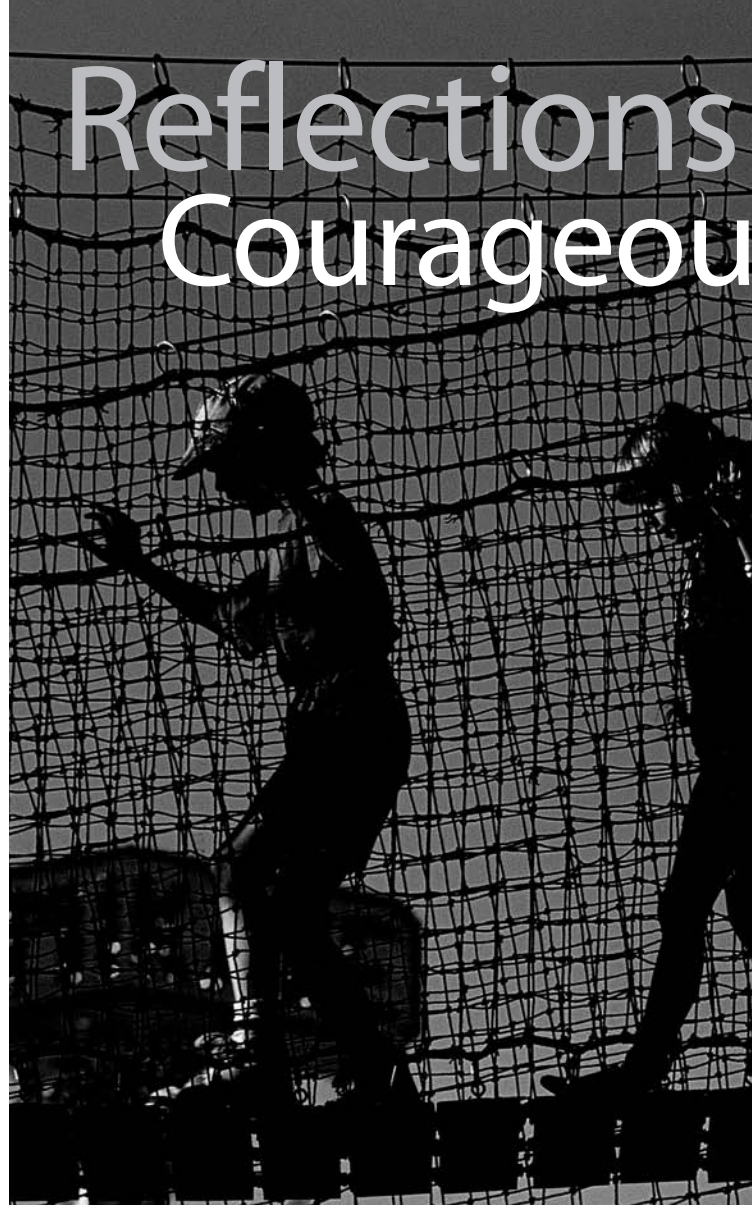
“I think courage is a quality inherent in the very essence of being an educator,” says Patti Kinney, principal of Talent Middle School in Talent, Oregon.

“It just takes courage to work in a profession that is not always supported by the public. I think teaching requires a tremendous amount of courage that goes unrecognized,” Kinney says.

Annette West, an eighth grade teacher at North Cache 8/9 Center in Richmond, Utah, believes educators show courageous leadership every day by doing what they think is best for students—trying new approaches and defending their positions with parents and colleagues. She says having such courage is difficult, but not without rewards.

“The best part about having the courage to teach in a way that you feel will do the most for kids is seeing the end result—seeing the growth that has taken place at the end of the year or hearing from a student years later and realizing that you did make a difference.”

Lori Gardner is principal of Hunter Junior High School in West Valley City, Utah, an area where school rosters are showing more and more diversity every day. She says that limited funding for schools in Utah creates a huge challenge and that it takes persistent courage to “implement effective middle level practices in a state with the lowest per-pupil expenditures and some of the highest class sizes.”



“Principals and teachers in many schools have worked tirelessly to create smaller learning communities in schools with 1,500 or more students to foster positive relationships,” Gardner says. “The challenge is to create optimum programs to meet the needs of the young adolescents when funding is minimal.”

For the Students

After 37 years in the classroom in East Lyme, Connecticut, Eunice Taylor has seen many courageous acts, but she, too, focuses on the effort the average educator makes every day.

“Teachers show great courage just showing up. In a profession that is constantly getting pummeled and being held responsible for many of society's ills and deficiencies and is asked to do more and more each year, it is not easy to maintain a positive perspective,” she says.

But Taylor, like many others who talked about the challenges of educating our nation's youth in today's society, in the next sentence begins talking about the rewards of teaching. “It was always the kids and so many wonderful colleagues who kept me going.”

on s Leadership



By Jim Paterson

says Taylor, who is now a teacher-in-residence for New England League of Middle Schools.

Taylor has one especially vivid example of courageous leadership: a colleague who taught as long as he could when stricken with Lou Gehrig's disease.

"His last days in the classroom he could only teach half days, sat on a stool, and had use of only one arm. But he laughed with the kids and taught until he couldn't any more. It was both painful and inspiring to watch. He made us all feel blessed to be healthy and alive, and set a remarkable example for everyone."

Charlie Beard, principal of Napoleon Middle School in Napoleon, Ohio, says his first thoughts about courageous leadership concern a student and a teacher who, despite their own health battles, inspired his school.

"Brad Heinrich was a middle school student who had his leg amputated due to spina bifida. He had a prosthesis, but he desperately wanted to play sports. In little league football he went so far as to put another teammate's equipment and jersey on and tried to sneak out onto the field.

"When he was in seventh grade he went out for wrestling, and although he got beat a lot, eventually he did win several matches in middle school. Now he is wrestling in high school," says Beard.

The teacher, Mary Jo Christ, lost one of her vocal cords to thyroid cancer, Beard says. "She received radiation up until that last day of summer break. She lost a ton of weight and her voice was but a whisper, but she was bound and determined to be standing in front of the students the first day of school—and she did it."

The Extra Mile

For Mary Monsour, assistant principal and director of instruction for Peters Township Middle School in McMurray, Pennsylvania, courage involves an extra effort made by some of her teachers without certainty of success or a positive outcome—simple, thoughtful work beyond their immediate responsibility. Her examples:

- An eighth grade teacher who models "hanging out" daily at one spot in the hall for students with poor interpersonal skills or who are learning disabled. Students blossom, Monsour says. "Last year she took a mentally handicapped student from an introverted, shy boy with no friends to an outgoing, active adolescent who now attends dances."
- A seventh grade teacher who buys pumpkins for every student getting learning support, most of whom he does not teach. He spends his lunch break helping them carve them and celebrates their completion with a pizza party. The same teacher goes to students' homes to help them with history projects.

Such a willingness to help with the overall performance of the school is an area where many educators see courageous leadership.

Scott Osborn, principal of Northview Middle School in Ankeny, Iowa, says courageous leadership often involves "staying the course."

"Time and again I have seen my fellow administrators, often out there alone, fighting the battles to stay consistent, fair, and student-centered. They do that while making tough decisions regarding discipline, high community profile decisions, or supporting or disciplining a teacher or student when others are questioning their judgment or resolve.

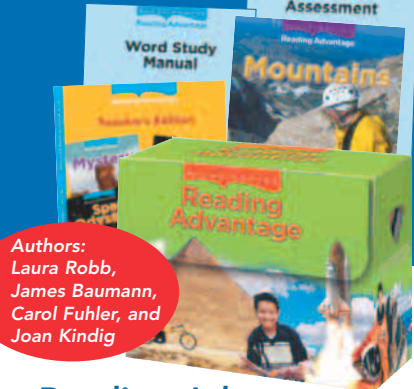
"It takes courage to do the necessary research, to make the best decision in these tough situations and then support that decision when many others may step aside and let the leader take full responsibility," he says.

Osborn also says that the move to a middle school philosophy took courage on the part of advocates, especially when opponents pressured them.

"I admire leaders who can stay focused and move people forward when they start to slip back for fear of change or for other reasons," he says.

Jeff Schumacher, principal at nearby Parkview Middle School

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Courage in Leadership

Donald Clark, a long-time teacher and administrator, believes courageous leadership in a school often involves four things:

- Maintaining a commitment to the middle level concept in spite of pressure of accountability and high stakes testing.
- Monitoring the instruction in the classroom and taking action when it is inferior—making sure effective professional development is in place and ineffective teachers are removed.
- Sharing leadership with teachers and parents.
- Reflecting on teaching and the curriculum.

“In a typical school culture of teacher isolation it takes courage to be in a team that regularly observes each member teach and offers critiques on instructional improvement.”

in Ankeny, says that efforts at his school may not be conspicuous or dramatic, but have involved courage and leadership to handle enormous growth (300 new students last year) and No Child Left Behind requirements. The changes required a new approach.

“We reinvented ourselves and everyone had to have courage within themselves to take on this challenge. It involved a new way of thinking and more work—every teacher teaching an additional section and often teaching in two subject areas. It took courage to let go of some of those things we did—even things we knew had been successful—and try something different.

Drew Hopkins, a science teacher at Proctor Junior Senior High School in Proctor, Vermont, says courage involves being willing to make your case as a school to the public. He sees schools as “the whipping boy,” too often criticized without merit and without a response, and says educators must be more aggressive in explaining their mission and their work.

“It takes courage for a school district to be willing to more often make the case for education,” he says.

Real Threats, Real Courage

Teachers and administrators must be courageous in the face of real threats to themselves or their students.

Rhonda Gentry, assistant principal at Lingle Middle School in Rogers, Arkansas, says the ultimate act of courage was that by Shannon Wright, a teacher who stepped in front of one of her students at her Jonesboro, Arkansas, middle school, when she was threatened by students with guns. She and four girls were killed.

Gentry says the next day one of her students asked her if she would be willing to do the same, and it prompted her to carefully consider her position.

“As an educator, I always thought my job was to teach children the skills they needed to be successful as adults. My job after that became much, much more. First and foremost, I have to provide a safe environment filled with trust for my students, teachers, and parents. Security and safety is always on our minds.”

Marc McCoy, principal at Excelsior Middle School in Marion, Iowa, says that the courage of his staff was tested one spring when three students at the school committed suicide—two within a week of each other.

“The effort to provide comfort and guidance to students, families, the community and each other was truly a Herculean effort. “But together folks pulled through.” ■

Jim Paterson is a school counselor and writer in Olney, MD.