

The Middle School Concept Meets the Age of Assessments: How One Middle School Has Adapted to the New Age

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The Middle School Concept brings together good teaching practices with the unique needs of pre-adolescent students. Since the passing of the NCLB, more and more attention has been generated on the results of high stakes testing. The question of what happens to the middle school concept when it confronts the demands of this new age of testing is critical in understanding how to meet the multiple needs of the students and the school's need for accountability. This qualitative study follows a previous quantitative study conducted to determine the state of the middle school concept in Tennessee. The school with the highest interest in and implementation of the middle school concept was visited by the authors. They found that despite the pressure from escalating accountability and standardization efforts by the state and federal governments, the principal and staff at this school still believe that the middle school concept best meets the educational needs of young adolescents.

Introduction

The middle school concept brings together good teaching practices with the unique needs of pre-adolescent students. Since the passing of the NCLB, more and more attention has been generated on the results of high stakes testing. The question of what happens to the middle school concept when it confronts the demands of this new age of testing is critical in understanding how to meet the multiple needs of the students and the school's need for accountability.

A little over a year ago, The Tennessee Professors of Middle Level Education (TPOMLE) conducted a statewide survey of middle schools. The first target of the survey was to determine the degree to which the principles of the middle school concept are considered important to middle level educators. The second area of interest was the degree to which those concepts were implemented at the respondents' school settings. Based on the work of George and Alexander in *The Exemplary Middle School* (2003), the middle school concept was defined in this study by 17 themes. See Table A for a side-by-side comparison of these themes to the characteristics laid out in the recent position statement *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010). The survey had three components: curricular characteristics, instructional and advisory issues, and governance. Responses to the questionnaire came from 684 educators, both administrators and teachers from 64 school systems across Tennessee. Although not all systems participated in the survey, the responses were widely distributed across the state.

Initial findings from the survey found that respondents generally found the principles of the middle school concept of great to greatest importance. In general, the majority of

respondents felt that their school implemented middle school concepts at least moderately well. When we examined rankings from the schools that yielded the highest means for importance and implementation of the middle school concept themes, one school stood out. It was this school that was targeted to visit.

The Visit

This rural West Tennessee middle school sits in the middle of rolling fields of soybeans and cotton. There are 575 students—the majority Caucasian, with a stable population of about 80 African-American students and 80 Hispanic students. The Hispanic students are not from the families of migrant workers, but have permanent homes in the community. The special education program uses the inclusion model, with the exception of a small developmental classroom for students with severe disabilities.

"If it benefits the students, we'll do it" stated the principal of this rural county middle school.

The principal is a former high school assistant principal who took over the reins of the middle school 3 years ago. He said he had to change his focus from athletics and discipline to 100% instruction due to the vast range of ages and abilities at the middle school. When he first arrived at the middle school there was tremendous staff turnover. One year he had to introduce fifteen new faculty members at the start of the school year. Now there is some stability.

There are thirty-four (34) faculty teaching 6, 7 and 8 grades core curriculum and related arts. The school is organized into hallways by grade level. In years past (10 years ago) the grade level hallway also functioned as a team—

each grade having common planning times and teaching using thematic units. Because of lack of classrooms and teaching personnel and conflicts with schedules (several teachers also coach at the high school next door), this model is no longer used. However, it is apparent that the teachers on each hallway worked closely in other ways and have formed close bonds. The principal, who is relatively new to the school, consults with his teachers regularly and values their input. He gives each group of grade level teachers decision making authority to shape schedules and the structure of their teaching.

This retreat from the middle school concept of teaming stems from structural difficulties with the school and scheduling difficulties. To overcome these physical hurdles, the principal asks each grade team to make common decisions which affect all of the students in that grade. This requires that they plan together on a variety of issues. The grade level teachers all work with “a common group of students in a block of time” (NMSA, 2010, p.31) so they are very familiar with the characteristics of their cohort of students. It is clear that high stakes testing has taken the driver’s seat; as a result instruction is more reflective of state standards in each subject area and not the result of integrated thematic units and teaching. The planning which the teams do revolves around the needs of the school to have successful testing results.

For example, during preparation for TCAP tests (Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program) last spring the principal approached each of the grade hallways with the idea of a *TCAP Blitz*. The grade levels were challenged to develop an approach which best suited their needs and especially the needs of their students. The sixth grade hallway developed seven 45 minute classes per day for two weeks. The seventh grade decided to cycle through all classes twice each day and had a schedule of 12thirty minute classes. The eighth grade decided on an alternate block schedule program and gave tickets for games and activities that could purchase *fun stuff* at the carnival the last day of the blitz. The teachers based the format of the blitz on their assessment of how their cohort of students learned best. When queried about the details of the blitz, the teachers noted that all the teachers taught, but sometimes they did reviews outside their subject areas. They wanted the students to experience learning and reviewing the content in a different format from a different person. They wanted the students who didn’t understand certain concepts to have the opportunity to learn in a different way—perhaps a way that best fitted them.

The principal reported that the test score results were generally above the state average and the teachers and principal are considering a repeat of the blitz this spring.

Another mutual planning initiative was instituted this fall. The eighth grade decided to combine the literacy program and teach it in 110 minute blocks—reading, writing, and

English. The seventh grade declined, but is considering changing in the future. The principal allows each hallway of teachers to design programs that best work for them.

When asked about the reason for their success with their students the teachers all reply that close relationships between student and teacher are the key. The school has instituted an advisor/advisee program called *Cave Group* which operates in the early morning before first period. At 7:15 breakfast is delivered to the classrooms for anyone who would like it. At 7:40 the base group meets for 20 minutes before first period. During that time the teacher works with the small group of students together and individually in an advising capacity. In sixth grade the emphasis is advising and transitioning; in seventh grade, careers; in eighth grade, education after high school. It is an informal time that is used to connect with the students on a personal level. Because the community is small, the teachers frequently know the students, their parents and extended family. This too helps in keeping the students connected to school.

The guidance counselor has initiated a *bully box*, a box which functions as a reporting apparatus for bullying behavior that has been observed. She intervenes to stop the problems from escalating. She notes that the reports usually come from outside parties and not from the victim.

Several intervention strategies operate in the school as a safety net for at-risk students. The first is the ICU (or No Zeros) program (Hill & Nave, 2009). The intervention focuses on having the students who fail to turn in key assignments actually do the assignments instead of receiving a zero. It is based on the premise that “those who do the work, do the learning” (Wong, 2001, p. 204). When assignments are not turned in, the teachers report that to the principal who assembles an ICU list. The parent is notified and the student is allowed a few days to turn in the assignment. If that does not happen, a specialized teacher called a *Life Guard*, has the student come to see her during his/her PE time. During that time the student completes the work. If help and further instruction is needed the *Life Guard* provides that assistance. In other schools, before and after school options for completing assignments are often choices. However, because of transportation issues at this very rural school the work is completed during the related arts period.

When students do work that is not up to expected standards the teachers can refer the student to Café ReDo, a place to redo the work acceptably during lunch period. On a small stage in the lunch room several small, round tables have been grouped together. This provides the scene for redoing work that was unacceptable.

The final intervention is a program called *Study Island or Discovery Island*. It is located in a computer lab and run by a licensed teacher. Computer programs designed to help students raise levels of reading and math are available in this

area. Students who performed poorly on the TCAP have regular scheduled times to work with the program to improve reading and math skills.

Results

Curricular Characteristics

The school is set up on hallways—6th grade, 7th grade, 8th grade. While there are no official teaching teams, based on comments from the principal and the teachers, these hallways have taken on most of the characteristics and functions of teaching teams. The teachers communicate regularly and are all working toward the same goals—rowing in the same direction. This direction is dictated to a large degree by high stakes testing. Supports for student learning have been built into the school through the use of the No Zeros program, Café Redo, and *Study Island*. These supports serve as remediation for students who are not making adequate progress during the school year. Shared responsibility for literacy and numeracy is illustrated by teachers sharing subject area reviews during the *TCAP blitz*.

Integration of multiple disciplines does not occur regularly due to lack of money to hire three more teachers and lack of space for those classes. According to the principal, curricular integration is, “not as regular as it needs to be.” He did mention that science teachers had worked with other teachers on some project-based learning. The teachers work as team members as they develop and implement the *TCAP Blitz*. This lack of integration also reflects the emphasis on state standards in each of the core subject and grade areas. The teachers referred to multiple strategies implemented in the classroom such as cooperative learning and inquiry. Since time was limited, no lengthy observations were made in classrooms.

It should be noted that this problem of limited interdisciplinary teaming is common to rural middle schools. Douglas D. Thomas (2005, p.13) in his article on middle level education in rural communities notes that, “creating a common planning time for a group of teachers working with a common group of students is extremely difficult in a small school.” (Thomas, 2005, p. 13) Scheduling issues and a smaller faculty inhibit the formation of common planning time.

Articulation with high school curricula is done formally; the school is currently working with the high school to use backward design to develop a sixth grade cohort of students in a few years that will be able to successfully tackle algebra in grade 8. The new standards for Tennessee include introducing algebra in the eighth grade. The introduction to algebraic concepts in grades 6 and 7 is essential to the success of students learning algebra in the eighth grade.

Exploratory courses are called related arts and include: computer skills, teen life and health, PE, art, and music. Except for PE these courses are offered at different grade levels. These courses offer some of the exploratory aspects

of the middle school concept. The exploratory courses give the students some opportunity outside the core subject areas to explore other fields of endeavor. This school is somewhat limited by its facilities and scheduling difficulties; these offerings in related arts show a commitment by the school to principles of the middle school concept, but limited resources inhibit the number of courses. Thomas notes this obstacle as a common one in rural schools as well (p.13).

Student social and emotional growth is not ignored thanks to the *Cave Group* advisor/advisee program and the anti-bullying campaign, *Rachel's Challenge*. Both of these programs require a commitment by the leadership of the school and the faculty. Building relationships with caring adults supports the middle level student in important ways. This age is a time of tremendous change and uncertainty. The mentoring supplied to the *Cave Group*, which meets daily with a teacher/mentor, demonstrates the concern that the faculty has for the students. The addition of *Rachel's Challenge* as a support for students also creates a better sense of community. The principle of this anti-bullying program is the spreading of kindness to the people around you. It has the additional benefit of creating an environment where students and faculty feel welcomed and where individuals are valued. The emphasis placed on these two programs demonstrates a commitment to the middle level principle of support for the whole child in multiple aspects of development. As noted by Thomas, student-teacher relationships often flourish in schools where the faculty and community have close ties (p. 12).

Instructing/Advising

Generally, the teachers are trained for middle level education. While most of the veteran teachers tend to have K-8 or 7-12 licensures, new teachers have 4-8 licensures. The middle school license in Tennessee is not subject specific, although most preparation programs emphasize one or two subject areas. The teachers at the school have subject area training in most cases.

Professional development (PD) appears to be designed explicitly for the needs of the school, not necessarily explicitly for the middle level. PD during the previous year focused on assessment, *Rachel's Challenge*, and library conferencing. The school has supported professional development on a school level by inviting trainers in for faculty development. The recent training in assessment and the presentation done by *Rachel's Challenge* are examples of this type of PD. The school also supports individual PD through attendance at conferences. The state library conference is an example of this type of conference.

Although assessment is not uniquely a middle level issue, middle level education has received scrutiny in relation to assessment issues in the past few years. (Yecke, 2006) Most educators would agree with the statement by Williamson, Johnston, and Kanthak (1995): “Student achievement must be given the highest priority in the mission of the middle

level school.” From conversations with the principal and faculty, it is clear that student achievement is the driving force in the school.

Although not exclusively a middle level need, the issue of bullying is one that accelerates in the middle level years. Addressing this issue in middle school is essential and logical. By addressing the issue head on and creating a more positive environment, the school is creating a place where the pre-adolescent child can thrive.

Scheduling issues with coaches and shared teachers in high school prevent a common planning time. The common planning time is a key middle school concept which is not implemented in this school. The school attempts to circumvent this issue by leaving scheduling and test reviewing up to the grade level faculty. The school has managed to create an involved learning community without integrating curriculum through themed units. However, by not having a common planning time for grade level faculty there is a danger that the teamwork that exists now may diminish.

While there does not appear to be a conscious effort to assess student progress with real life tasks, teachers use *Think/Link* and other assessments related to improving test scores. On display outside one science classroom are news articles written by students describing a fossil find.

The basic schedule for the school incorporates a six period day. However, teachers report that flexible scheduling occurs within the hallways as teachers feel empowered to adapt the schedule according to the needs and learning modalities of their students. One of the most creative school endeavors is the *TCAP Blitz* where each grade level designed its own schedule to prepare their students for the required state testing for the ten days prior to testing.

Except for sixth grade math, all students are grouped randomly; each class has some diversity in ethnicity, race, and gender. Sixth grade math students are ability grouped based on teacher recommendations and TCAP scores. The principle of heterogeneous grouping is a key middle level concept.

Governance

According to the teachers, leadership at this school is “far from a dictatorship.” Participatory decision making occurs at this school. The principal consults with teachers on developing programs and instituting schedules. Teachers state that the principal is informative and wants their input. They also mentioned that he is supportive and open to a variety of teaching styles. Their interactions with each other appear warm and professional leading the observer to believe that the school has a positive and collegial environment in which to work.

Data-driven school improvement is the norm at this school. The school uses Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVASS) and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data to improve programs and explores research based practices

to improve teaching and learning. The programs used to support student learning, especially *Discovery Island*, use specific student data to implement remediation. Grade level teachers also use the data from testing results to address learning deficits in students.

Parental involvement is in a state of flux. The PTO disbanded because the state financial laws were too burdensome; however, parents are involved with providing support to athletic teams and invaluable participation during the *TCAP blitz*. The eighth grade parents supported the *Blitz* by setting up and running the carnival. It should be noted that families often live far from the school which is located away from any town; the setting is rural. Bringing parents together in this situation is challenging.

However, the school functions as a center piece for community activities. Sports are the main focus for these activities, but band and music play a part as well. Thomas (2005, p.12) notes that “students in rural and smaller middle schools have a very high participation rate in extra-curricular activities.” This active participation brings families and community members to the school in a more regular way than in urban or suburban areas.

As in all small, rural schools, the community takes an interest; the school board influences policy (Sanders, 2001). Community involvement in governance revolves around the school board. In this rural area, as in others, school board meetings are newsworthy. Issues related to school events can bring residents to board meetings. Thomas (2005, p.12) notes that in rural schools “civic activities are often held in school buildings.”

Lessons Learned

Despite the pressure from escalating accountability and standardization efforts by the state and federal governments, this school still believes that the middle school concept best meets the educational needs of young adolescents (noted in the initial survey). While curriculum integration is rare, most other exemplary middle level curricular practices are in place. Currently, the school is articulating the math curriculum with the high school curriculum. Related arts courses serve as exploratory courses and include: computer skills, teen life and health, PE, art, and music. Student social and emotional growth is aptly dealt with by the *Cave Group* advisor/advisee program and the anti-bullying campaign, *Rachel's Challenge*. Teachers sharing subject area reviews during the *TCAP blitz* illustrate shared responsibility for literacy and numeracy.

Instructing and advising practices also indicate a commitment to exemplary middle level practices. Most teachers, especially newer teachers, have middle level licensure. PD appears to be designed for the middle level. Assessing student progress with real life tasks occurs occasionally. Flexible scheduling takes place within the grade

level hallways as teachers can and do adapt the regular six period schedule according to the needs of their students. Except for sixth grade math, all students are grouped randomly; each class has some diversity in ethnicity, race, and gender. *Cave Groups* serve as advisor/advisee groups.

School governance appears to be an outstanding aspect of this school. Participatory decision making and data driven school improvement is the norm. Parental involvement has increased as seen by the support to athletic teams and enthusiastic participation during the *TCAP blitz*.

Faculty and administration support one another and focus persistently on student achievement, supporting the development of the whole child while pursuing academic excellence. The most encouraging thing was the frequent use of one small word by both the principal and the staff. That one small word was, "fun."

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Table A

Exemplary Middle School Characteristics	This We Believe Characteristics (2010, p. 2-3)
<p>Cunicular</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curricula that integrate multiple academic disciplines • Articulation of middle level curricula with high school curricula/expectations • Exploratory/encore courses in the arts, athletics, or careers • Emphasis on students' social and emotional growth • Concern for students' health, wellness, and safety • Shared responsibility for students' literacy and numeracy skills 	<p>Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them. • Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning. • Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. • Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches. • Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.

Table A continued

Exemplary Middle School Characteristics	This We Believe Characteristics (2010, p. 2-3)
<p>Instructing and Advising</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers specifically interested/trained in working with young adolescents • Professional development explicitly focused on the middle school • Interdisciplinary teams of teachers having common planning time • One or more guidance counselors working intensively with students • Assessment that makes use of “real world” tasks • Flexible scheduling that may span the school day/week/year • Heterogeneous and/or multiage student grouping arrangements <p>Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory and inclusive decision making processes • Parental involvement in student learning • Parental/Community involvement in school governance 	<p>Leadership and Organization Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision. • Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices. • Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration. • Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices. • Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships. <p>Culture and Community Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all. • Every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate. • Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents. • Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies. • The school actively involves families in the education of their children. • The school includes community and business partners.