

An Advocate for Every Student at Millard Central Middle School

This We Believe Characteristics

- Shared vision that guides decisions
- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- High expectations for every member of the learning community
- An adult advocate for every student
- School-initiated family and community partnerships
- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning
- School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Multifaceted guidance and support services

By Beth Balkus

“I am not what I think I am. I’m not what you think I am. I’m what I think you think I am” (Neal, cited in Wormeli, 2003, p. 175). To me, this statement of a middle school student’s perception exemplifies why it is essential for a developmentally responsive middle school to provide an adult advocate for every student. Each of our students needs at least one adult at school whom they know believes the best, knows the best, and wants the best for them. As a seventh grade teacher, I strove to advocate for all of my students, but despite my best efforts, I knew there were students who were missed and days when my lesson objective overshadowed the *people* sitting at the desks.

In *This We Believe in Action* (Burkhardt & Kane, 2005) stated, “If teachers expect students to be engaged learners, they must communicate to those students that they are cared for, respected, welcomed, and appreciated” (p. 67). Research on middle level best practices revealed that an effective student advisory program allows middle schools to meet this objective. Unfortunately, this important component of a responsive middle school still remains largely elusive (Anfara, et al., 2003).

A study of middle level teachers, parents, and students cited in Johnston (2005) found that

although 75% of teachers and 68% of parents believe in the goals of advisory programs, only 32% of teachers and 40% of parents thought the program was realizing those goals. Although 90% of parents and teachers agreed that a student should have an

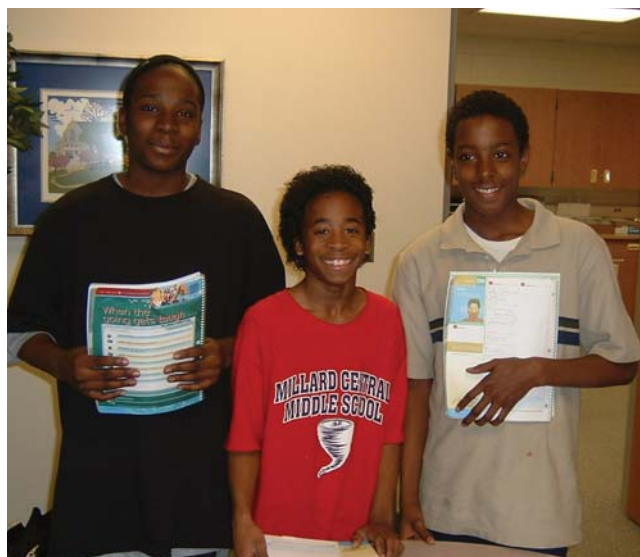


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Parish, Nikee, and Robert are “checking out” at the end of the day with their teacher by showing her their assignment notebooks, homework, and parent signatures from the previous night.

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adult advocate, only about half of the parents and two-thirds of the teachers believed this was a reality for all children in the school (Johnston, 2005).

What Went Wrong?

A Middle Talk (formerly Middle Web) listserv conversation (Johnston, 2005) with input from teachers from all over the country echoed a number of the problems that I have found with various schools' attempts at advisory programs. First, teachers are uncomfortable or ill-equipped to handle what they may perceive as "touchy-feely" content. Some feel personal discussions should be saved for the guidance counselor. Second, the program was mandated from the top without proper training and adequate opportunity for staff buy-in. Third, many middle school teachers are secondary trained with an emphasis on content expertise and little knowledge about the developmental needs of young adolescents, which drive sound middle school practices. This problem is even more pronounced with teachers whose enjoyment of adolescents is secondary to their love of the subject they teach.

Fourth, some scheduled advisory periods turn into unstructured free time. Many teachers, either uncomfortable with their roles in this setting or lacking the skills or time to plan and facilitate meaningful activities, ended up simply supervising kids interacting with each other. Fifth, teachers and parents resented the time taken away from academics, especially in light of ever increasing accountability for student academic progress. Sixth, teachers were working with students from their own interdisciplinary teams, making the groups too large; or special area teachers (art, P.E., etc.) were included but felt that close communication with their students' team teachers was hard to maintain. Finally, many advisory programs lacked student and teacher choice. Some students and teacher pairs just do not "click." Other times, students have a favorite teacher, coach, or staff member with whom they prefer to discuss personal topics. Plainly stated, some teachers have personalities which do not easily lend themselves to building the rapport needed to connect interpersonally with middle level students.

Central Middle School's Vision

The advisory programs that teachers described on this listserv were constantly in search of the perfect combination of teachers, students, time, and activities that would reach the ultimate goal of an advocate

for every student. At Central Middle School (CMS), we have reshaped our vision of a student advocacy program to work within our district's strategic plan and curriculum, our staff and students' strengths and desires, and our collective vision of a school that meets the needs of adolescent learners.

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Central Middle School, part of the Millard Public School District, is a grade six through eight urban school located in Omaha, Nebraska. Omaha has a metropolitan and surrounding suburban population of approximately one million. Along with approximately 800 students in traditional middle school teams, CMS also offers a Montessori mini-magnet and self-contained multi-categorical and behavior skills programs. Starting the 2005–2006 school year, an English Language Learner Program and the Millard Public Schools' Middle School Alternative Program were added. In addition to adding programs that serve students with unique learning needs, the socioeconomic and ethnic make-up of the school has shifted from a 94% white majority in 2000 to 80% in 2006. The percentage of students on free and reduced lunch was 10% in 2000 and is currently 25%. District projections show a continuation of this trend—a change that demands a structure that will enable teachers to support even the most at-risk students and families.

We began by forming a committee of administrators, teachers, and parents to develop action steps for a strategic plan aimed at providing a supportive environment for middle level learners. This group understood that the biggest impact within the school on students' attitudes toward school is the classroom teacher. Wormeli (2003) pointed out, "Most middle schoolers haven't lived long enough to fully discriminate feelings from truth or hastily generated perceptions from reality. Their attitude toward a subject is often their attitude

toward the subject's teacher" (p. 175). With this in mind, a plan was designed to show teachers the influence relationships can have on learning. Teachers with high rapport, drive, and advocacy skills would help model these skills during consistent staff development and community building over a four-year period. In addition to learning more about relating to students, teachers would learn or review what they knew about the characteristics of middle level learners and middle school best instructional practices. This knowledge would serve as the foundation for a positive school climate and a multifaceted system that would meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of our students.

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Foundation of the Plan: The Homeroom Advisor

All certified teachers have a five-minute daily homeroom as well as a 23-minute homeroom period every Tuesday and Thursday with a group of about 12 students. Interdisciplinary team teachers have their own students, and a few special area teachers are added to the team to create small groups (i.e., the art teachers have students from team 6B). The homeroom period is designed to meet the six advisory program goals identified by Galassi, Gullledge, and Cox (1998): advocacy, community, skills, invigoration, academic, and administrative. The following sections delineate how the Central Middle School program addresses these goals.

Advocacy

For this component of the program, "the relationship between the teacher and the individual student is paramount" (Galassi, Gullledge & Cox, 1998, p. 21). Through group discussions and individual conferences, the teacher gets to know students on a more personal level. Since homerooms are connected to interdisciplinary teams, students have the opportunity to see their homeroom teacher several times a day. From an advisor standpoint,

this connection is important because it allows him or her to have useful information about the team and provides a forum for discussing concerns about students. Parents overwhelmed by the number of teachers their child encounters each day also appreciate this approach. For them, the advisor is an easy contact person when they have a question or concern.

Math teacher Curt Lubbers enjoys the opportunity to know students on a much deeper level: "I have been able to see how hard they are willing to work to achieve a desired goal and even what values they think are important. Learning more about individual students really does help me to better encourage their overall academic and life success."

One of his seventh grade homeroom students, Erin, has benefited from learning more about her teacher. When asked about homeroom she said, "Mr. Lubbers tells us stories about what happened to him. He's a lot more open than he is in math class." Certain subjects lend themselves to interpersonal discussions more than others. Erin and Mr. Lubbers are now enjoying a relationship that might not have been as easily facilitated in a typical math class.

Goal setting conferences are one type of activity that helps teachers develop this personal relationship with their homeroom students. Teachers hold individual conferences with students to help them set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Real, Timed) personal, health, and academic goals and then discuss progress. This one-on-one opportunity allows teachers to connect with students and provide support and encouragement. Ann Gapinski, a CMS computer teacher, said, "In my opinion, the goal setting piece of our homeroom program has created a bond between me and my students. Watching my students identify their weaknesses and helping them create a plan to overcome them not only promotes a sense of ownership for each student, but also inspires me to be their advocate. It becomes personal for everyone. We are taking on the task together. If the student succeeds, I succeed too."

Homeroom teachers keep a folder for each of their advisory students that contains the student's goals, academic progress reports, learning profile, and other pertinent information. Although the student's advisor changes each year, these folders are passed up so that subsequent advisors have information from previous years. The change in homeroom is necessary as a result of new teams that are formed each year to broaden students'

opportunities to interact with as many other students as possible during their three-year tenure at CMS. Although some advisor-advisee relationships continue the next school year, many middle school students prefer to have a new advisor each year (Sardo-Brown & Shetlar, 1994, cited in Galassi, Gullede, & Cox, 1998). At Central Middle School, a student's counselor is the guaranteed constant all three years.

Community

The goal of this aspect of the advisory program is to provide a sense of community (Galassi, Gullede, & Cox, 1998). Although the emphasis on building group identity is placed more on the teams than the advisories at Central Middle School, there are many aspects of homeroom that focus on school pride and the creation of a caring community. For example, homeroom lessons set the stage for school community-building activities such as a "Kindness Wall," "No Put Downs Week," and "Mix It Up Lunch." At least one whole-school and one grade level specific community-building activity are planned each quarter to foster a sense of belonging, community pride, and involvement.

One way that Central Middle School provides an opportunity for homerooms to develop a sense of community is with fun competitions between homerooms. For instance, homerooms may compete to bring the greatest number of cans for the food drive, or they may try to win the Valentine's Day prize by being the first group to call the office via the intercom and correctly answer a trivia question. These activities feed students' need for group identity, competition, and fun. Amanda Parker, a Family Consumer Science teacher enjoys the opportunity to develop community with a group of eighth graders: "I am encouraged and excited that my kids support each other. I feel a real personal interest in their success as student[s] and as member[s] of the community."

Skills

Homeroom is the perfect forum for delivering the Millard Public School District's developmental guidance and life skills curriculum. The focus of these lessons is on everything from decision making and understanding oneself to developing important attributes like integrity and perseverance.

The skills aspect of our program starts during the first two weeks of school when we have extended homeroom (23 minutes) every day to promote a positive beginning to the new school year, to begin

teaching behavior expectations for students, to review the school code of conduct and safety plan, and to teach students how to report bullying and harassment. We feel this committed block of time for orientation helps us set students up for success. Daily activities are developmental within the theme. Sixth grade students are learning the basics, seventh grade students learn about the topic within the context of a caring community, and eighth grade students' activities have a leadership component.

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After this initial orientation, students spend 23 minutes once a week on a skill-related lesson. During the spring semester, homeroom teachers also hold individual conferences to facilitate a student self-assessment on the life skills the group has been discussing and working on all year.

Homeroom activities are planned by the counselors ahead of time so that the teachers can focus on building relationships with students while facilitating a meaningful activity. This prevents the "instructional lottery," meaning that only some students will benefit from creative teachers who are able to plan engaging activities, while also relieving the pressure of "one more thing" for teachers. Staff development prior to each new activity is planned during weekly



Computer teacher Ann Gapinski talks to Stephanie, one of her homeroom students, about her academic SMART goal.

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grade level or special area teacher meetings. This time promotes consistent lesson delivery and program implementation. It also provides support for teachers who are not as comfortable with more personal topics. Lisa Klosner, a sixth grade science teacher, was apprehensive upon learning that she would be teaching lessons targeting the affective domain: "Now that I have been doing this for two years, and I know that the lessons are well planned, I have started to enjoy the conversation with students more." From a counseling standpoint, Carolyn Halpain said, "I have enjoyed listening to teachers take ownership. Teachers are getting to know their students, and they love to share with me what the kids are saying. This is insight that they wouldn't have otherwise. That was one of the things that I disliked most as a math teacher; I didn't really know my kids as people."

Interventions are applied and progress is formally measured every three weeks to help students meet goals.

Invigoration

Due to time constraints, a very small amount of homeroom time is dedicated solely to invigoration; however, a number of advisory activities recharge, relax, and motivate students. As an example, every Thursday, students and staff have "Free to Read" time. This allows everyone to start the day reading something of their choice, which may include a favorite skateboard magazine or comic book. Homeroom competitions and fun activities sponsored by student clubs such as Student Council and Youth to Youth, a drug prevention club, also provide a change of pace. During homeroom on the morning after open house each fall, an activity fair is planned by our athletic director so that students can sign up for a club that will help them explore new interests, make friends, and feel a sense of group identity. Homeroom advisors encourage extracurricular participation and help students get involved.

Academic

Guidance curriculum, life skills lessons, and goal setting are important to the academic component of the homeroom. Fundamental to helping all students reach their potential academically are progress checks every three weeks. Progress reports are

completed by teachers via our student management software and are mailed home. Copies of the reports are then generated for homeroom teachers for discussion with their advisees. The teachers are able to guide students in self-evaluation of progress, provide encouragement and praise for a job well done, and spend time working one-on-one with students who need assistance. Since homeroom advisors know their students' history and are connected to their interdisciplinary team, they can effectively help students who are at risk.

Central Middle School staff also created a leveled intervention system that is used in conjunction with three-week progress checks to ensure that all students receive what they need to be successful. This "Pyramid of Interventions" was modeled after that used by Adlai Stevenson High School, as illustrated in *Whatever It Takes* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). We concur that "Any system of interventions for students will only be as effective as the process that is in place both to monitor student learning and to respond when students experience difficulty" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). As a result, we have a plan that allows homeroom teachers to systematically help their advisees when they are struggling. Some possible strategies from the Pyramid of Interventions include: attendance at one of our after school homework clubs, participation in our tutoring program called the After School Advantage Program (ASAP), daily parent contact via e-mail, a more structured study hall time, extra help when assigned to Night School for homework completion, and a daily behavior or homework card. Interventions are applied and progress is formally measured every three weeks to help students meet goals. At each subsequent checkpoint, interventions may change depending on student progress.

Another positive aspect of three week checkpoints from an administrative standpoint is the opportunity to meet with students and discuss their goals. The team administrator or counselor meets with all students who have multiple fours or fives (Ds or Fs) at a checkpoint and calls home to discuss the intervention plan. This has allowed me to have insightful conversations with students while getting to know them better as individuals. When eighth grader Jaden was asked about his SMART goal during a recent conference, he said, "My goal is to be on Blue Honor Roll because I've never been on Honor Roll and neither has my brother or my sister. I need to get my math grade up to do that."

The Pyramid of Interventions has had specific success. First, all students are keenly aware of their grades and can talk with teachers about what they need to do or what help they need to improve a grade. Second, parents are aware of their child's progress and appreciate the frequent communication. Third, teams have put privileges in place for students who are successful. For example, eighth grade students who are not on the four and five list at a three-week check earn the reading lounge privilege and extra lunch time. Finally, data shows that grades are improving! As an example, during second quarter of the 2005–2006 school year, 116 out of approximately 250 sixth graders had at least one four or five on a three-week progress check. By the end of the quarter, 95% of these students had improved their grades. Eighty-seven percent of the 76 seventh graders with fours or fives improved their grades by the end of the quarter and 90% of the 99 eighth graders with fours or fives had better grades by report card time.

Administrative

This final component of our program is for general housekeeping (e.g., daily announcements, fund-raising money collection, distribution of materials). Items such as student participation in making announcements and revealing the Random Acts of Kindness recipients makes this time a little less mundane and helps contribute to the affective goals of the homeroom period.

What Makes This Work

The advisory program at Central Middle School defies the obstacles previously set forth for a number of reasons. First and foremost, parents, students, and staff all understand the objectives of the program and why it is necessary. Once agreement was reached, a great deal of staff development took place before the program's inception and has remained ongoing.

Before school starts each year, Central Middle School administrators and counselors meet to set the topics for homeroom, along with staff development needed during weekly grade level and special area teacher meetings to prepare teachers for these activities. Make-up sessions are included for staff members who are absent to ensure that all staff receive the same information. Although the calendar is flexible based upon unexpected student needs or schedule changes, the plan helps make homeroom an organized endeavor, which is something that teachers appreciate.

In addition to the initial planning, administrators and counselors have weekly meetings to review the program and discuss relevant student issues. Counseling groups and other upcoming counseling-related activities are also on the agenda. These meetings provide invaluable time to ensure that administrators give the advisory and guidance programs needed support.

Van Hoose (1991, cited in Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox, 1998) asserted that "the quality of the relationship between teachers and students is the single most important aspect of middle level education" (p. 7). Staff education about the value of this relationship helps teachers understand why they can't leave the affective domain to the counselors alone. In fact, relationships developed during advisory can provide a great deal of satisfaction for teachers as well as students. Meanwhile, advisees are provided resources that are more immediate and different from that provided by a counselor, parent, or other caring adult (Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox, 1998).

Activities prepared in detail by counselors and administrators protect teachers from an ever-increasing workload while providing a supportive structure for teachers less comfortable discussing personal topics. Some teachers, more experienced or at ease, often facilitate the activities with a personal flair. The crucial aspect is that our advisory program is a truly operationalized part of the school culture.

Along with staff development and a well-organized and structured plan, minimizing the amount of time taken away from academics while increasing communication with parents has helped Central Middle School overcome obstacles that have halted the success of such programs at many middle schools. For example, in conjunction with the Central Middle School Parent Organization, we



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Wendy, Hannah, and Marcus discuss peer pressure during a homeroom activity in seventh grade math teacher Curt Lubbers's class.

are in the process of initiating a Homeroom Parent Program in this school year.

The purpose of this program is threefold. First, parents often feel overwhelmed and left out after being involved in their child's elementary school classroom. Parents who want to maintain this level of involvement may be invited to become the homeroom parent for their student's class. Training will be held for all homeroom parents so that they understand this important role. Second, homeroom parents will become key communicators for the school. They will be invited to attend specific homeroom lessons on topics such as goal setting and bully prevention so that they may share what is happening in the school with other parents. As key communicators, they will also contact the parents in their child's homeroom to remind them about Open House or conferences, invite them to a parent social or session sponsored by the Central Middle School Parent Organization, or relay other important information. Finally, homeroom parents will be models and caring adults for our students by participating in programs like Free to Read.

If the student has bonded with a particular teacher or has an interest in common with a teacher in the Good Friend Program, the student is matched with him or her.

A final, but crucial aspect of the Central Middle School program that allows us to provide an advocate for every student is this: Some students need more than an advisor with whom they may or may not "click." Many at-risk students need a supportive mentor relationship with someone who is handpicked for them. For this reason, we have another level of support and advocacy for students—Good Friends and TeamMate Mentors.

Good Friends and TeamMate Mentors

The title "Good Friend" was taken from Adlai Stevenson High School, but the concept of having mentors for students at Central Middle School is not a new one (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Karhanek, 2004). Prior to the start of the new school year, information about the top 10 students most at-risk on a team, as determined by previous teachers, counselors, and administrators, was reviewed with team teachers,

and each student was matched with a Good Friend. The job of a Good Friend was to take a special interest in forming a relationship with the student. To facilitate this, the student was moved to the mentor's homeroom and study hall to provide more opportunities for interaction.

When we first started the Good Friend program, success was marginal for two reasons. First, students needed a mentor with whom they had potential to relate, instead of simply being assigned to the teacher on the team who still needed to choose a mentee. Second, some teachers had greater motivation, interest levels, or skills to be a successful mentor than others. This information resulted in changes that have made this program more successful.

Currently, team teachers receive information about their top 10 students, but they are not required to be a Good Friend. Instead, all teachers have the opportunity to be a Good Friend and participate in program training. Next, as the year progresses, students at-risk are matched with an appropriate Good Friend and any schedule changes to promote this relationship are made. If the student has bonded with a particular teacher or has an interest in common with a teacher in the Good Friend Program, the student is matched with him or her. As an administrator, I have participated in and witnessed good matches. The difference they can make in a student's success at school is unparalleled.

Although students with Good Friends are unaware that they are benefiting from extra support

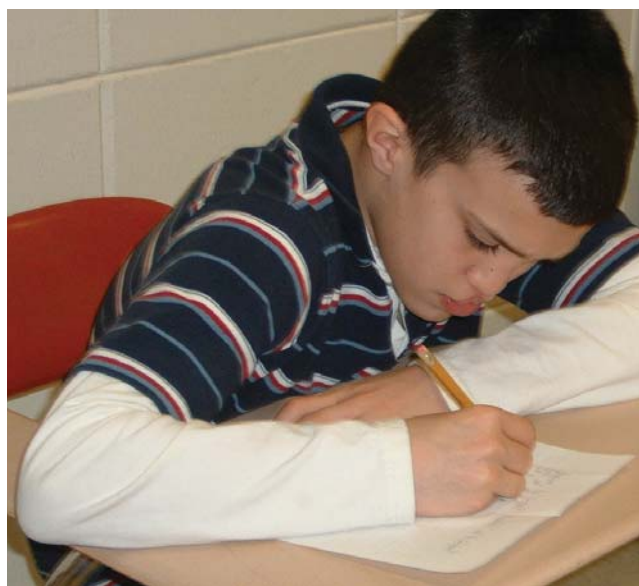


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Connor completes a self-reflection during a homeroom activity about self-esteem.

and attention, the relationship may also develop into more overt support, if needed. For instance, each year we have teachers who work closely with students to do things like help them get organized in the morning, check their assignment notebook and homework folder at the end of the day, or contact their parents on a regular basis. This job may be taken on by a Good Friend or by a team teacher if the Good Friend is unable to provide this kind of assistance. Ideally, this person is the student's home-room advisor, Good Friend, classroom teacher for one period a day, and study hall teacher. This provides for consistent interaction and encouragement throughout the student's day.

Mary Kok-DeVries, a seventh grade special education teacher, sees her Good Friend, Dustin, several times a day: "He has really matured and grown this year. He used to just want to tell me about his problems but not solve them. Now he has more academic and social confidence, and he knows where to go if he needs help." In fact, the Good Friend program has met with tremendous success this year. Eighty-one percent of the 31 students with Good Friends have not had a four or five on a final report card this year.

Some students need additional support from a caring adult. These students are assigned a TeamMate mentor. TeamMates is an in-school mentoring program started in Nebraska by Congressman Tom Osborne and his wife Nancy. TeamMates has been in place at Central Middle School for five years. Community members agree to come to the school and spend one class period per week with a mentee matched to them based upon common interests. The pair spends their time doing a variety of activities

such as playing board games, drawing, or working on a service project. The students look forward to this weekly connection as well as the quarterly TeamMates program activities like bowling and miniature golf. On average, Central Middle School has about 20 TeamMate matches, and they prove to be extremely beneficial to both the student and mentor. Cody, a seventh grade student said, "I can talk to Byron about anything. I look forward to seeing him on Monday. He's really cool." The TeamMate program adds another dimension to the advocacy concept and provides yet another caring adult and role model for our most at-risk students.

"I've never been so proud of my boys. They've never had so much help at school, and I've never had so much communication."

—parent

What Is Ahead

Central Middle School's goal to provide an advocate for every student will never be completely achieved, but we have come a long way. Assessment of the program using informal feedback as well as an annual school climate survey administered to staff, parents, and students has shown that satisfaction in the school has improved (Figure 1).

Discipline statistics also demonstrate a more caring community. In 2003–2004, 846 office referrals

Figure 1
CLIMATE SURVEY COMPARISON

Percentage of Those Surveyed Who Answered <i>Almost All of the Time</i>	2003–2004	2004–2005	2005–2006
PARENT QUESTIONS:			
Teachers inform me of my child's progress in class.	47%	63%	92%
If I have questions, the staff will answer them.	68%	76%	96%
Staff at the school keep me well informed.	47%	67%	87%
STUDENT QUESTIONS:			
If I have problems, I can talk to teachers at this school.	37%	40%	42%
If I have a personal problem, I can ask teachers or counselors for help.	39%	43%	45%
Teachers at my school care about me.	47%	48%	49%
If students need extra help, it is available.	48%	51%	54%
I know academically where I stand in my classes.	38%	47%	51%
This school keeps parents informed.	48%	54%	56%

were written compared to 621 in 2004–2005. The type of referrals has changed as well. For example, in 2003–2004, 12 referrals resulted in long-term suspensions, and 144 resulted in short term suspensions. These numbers were down to one long-term suspension and 71 short term suspensions in 2004–2005.

Parent feedback has been positive as well. Ms. Tolbert, a parent of three Central Middle School students, said, “I’ve never been so proud of my boys. They’ve never had so much help at school, and I’ve never had so much communication. They really like it here, and I am so thankful to the teachers for what they do.”

We will continue to reflect upon and revise our efforts to ensure that every Central Middle School student knows an advocate at our school. It is understood that applying the best practices to help middle school students achieve their best is a work in progress. When you are in the business of helping adolescents reach their dreams, failure is not an option.

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Call for Manuscripts

Deadline for submissions: **March 1, 2007**

Middle School Journal is interested in manuscript submissions that focus on how the precepts of *This We Believe* are being addressed in your middle school. In addition to topics related to the 14 characteristics noted in *This We Believe* (2003), we encourage manuscripts dealing with the following issues:

Topics:

- 21st century literacy
- Formative assessment to inform instruction
- Success stories of educating young adolescents
- Safe school environments

For more topics, go to
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MiddleSchoolJournal/CallforManuscripts](http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/MiddleSchoolJournal/CallforManuscripts)

Manuscripts should be submitted to:
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