



MIDDLE LINK

Maine Association for Middle Level Education

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CSR School Step Out

Jill Spencer

In 2005 one high school and fourteen middle schools across the State of Maine were awarded three-year Comprehensive School Reform Grants. It was the first time that middle schools in Maine were eligible for these grants. The grant requires that schools concentrate on student learning and achievement and they must implement:

- a “post-secondary education preparation strategy” that focuses on the elimination of tracking and development of a challenging curriculum for all that is differentiated,
- a school-wide adolescent literacy plan that includes research-based literacy strategies across the curriculum and provides targeted interventions for students reading below grade level and significantly above grade level.

Each school has been working at a fevered pace this past year to make the most of the advantages provided by the grant funds. The grant requires that the schools work in a truly collaborative manner. Each school’s leadership team attends Team Leadership Collaborative meetings that focus on developing everyone’s capacity for leadership. Past CSR cohorts have shown that schools are most successful in improving student learning when the entire staff is actively involved in the initiatives; therefore the leadership teams work hard to develop their staff’s capacity to dig deeply into the factors that effect

learning. For example, Telstar Middle School in Bethel instituted peer observations and Maranacook Community Middle School piloted combined administrative/teacher teams for literacy and differentiated-instruction walk-throughs. Wiscasset Middle School spent faculty meetings in text-based discussions and using protocols to look at student work. Searsport and others began Professional Learning Community work this past year. The schools are using different approaches but with the same outcome in mind—becoming more successful at helping students achieve at higher levels.

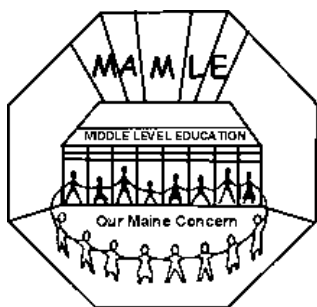
Another major initiative for the CSR schools is to become adept at data-driven decision-making. As a part of this work, many schools are using NWEA as an assessment tool. The Middle School of the Kennebunks, Mt. Ararat Middle School and Lake Region Middle School are three that are using the data from the NWEA’s to guide interventions with students who are not succeeding.

One of the major tenets of *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* is that curriculum should be relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory which is in complete alignment with the requirements of the Grant. Once again, the schools are pursuing the same outcome via different paths. Millinocket Middle School has tackled inclusion this past year – students that were formally pulled out of many classes have been mainstreamed and the results have been very

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Annual MAMLE Conference!

October 19-20, 2006
Sugarloaf USA



Middle Link

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Middle Link editor: Dr. Wallace Alexander

From the President's Desk

Dear MAMLE Colleagues,

I hope that you are refreshed from the summer months and enjoying the start of the school year. There is no better time to build the relationships with students and colleagues that will help you to lay the groundwork for a successful school year. Many teachers are tempted to dive right into the academic work before they build the culture that helps to promote trust, establish clear expectations and to learn about their students backgrounds and interests.

Whether you are a veteran or a new middle school teacher, you will find a variety of sessions to hone your teaching practice at the annual MAMLE Conference. We are pleased with the large number of middle school practioners that have signed up to present at the conference and we hope you will plan to attend. With the host site being Sugarloaf USA, the mountain condominium housing is the ideal place to meet with your middle school teams. The dates are October 19 - 20, 2006. Keynote speakers include Patti Kinney, current President of the National Middle School Association and the principal of Talent Middle School in southern Oregon. Also keynoting is Maine's Chris Toy, former teacher, principal and consultant on middle school programs.

The MAMLE Board of Directors is always looking for new ways to help you and to share best practices. Please think about writing an article for an upcoming newsletter or journal. Help us to spread the enthusiasm and joy in our work with young adolescents. Wishing you a happy and successful school year.

Sincerely,

Carol A. Weeks
MAMLE President

We are the
FUTURE!
Middle Schools



The Learning Curve

A column by Todd Nelson

Bird by Bird

Anne Lamott, a peerless inspirer of good writing, tells the story of her brother, age 10, agonizing over his science report on birds. "He'd had three months to write [it]. It was due the next day," she writes. He was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird."

We've all been there, either as the report writer, the parent, or the teacher trying to coach and coax the project to completion. I remember my daughter struggling with just such a report, an English assignment requiring her to go beyond a synopsis of the plot of *April Morning*, to delve deeper than a mere summary of the list of characters and their actions. She had to step outside of her reading and writing comfort zone.

A seventh grader, Hilary was in a fairly typical, bumpy transit from her competent, concrete summaries of the text to the sub-textual observations her teacher was training the class to do. The time had come in her growth as a reader and writer to explore the abstract sense of things, the figures in language. It was a painful struggle. It seemed to her like an unfair trick-words could be about something other than what they say. Go figure!

"I can't interpret what happens," she moaned. "It just happens. There's no interpretation. It's about what it's about. That's all there is to it!"

The parallel scene in my own schooling was also seventh grade, working long and hard one night to make the usual time-honored book report poster by pasting a collage of magazine photos on oak tag. Summarize the plot, illustrate the trials and tribulations of the characters in *The Outsiders*, add a few photos clipped from the newspaper – voila! Done.

When Mr. Katz returned my dutiful work, his comment suggested that I needed to interpret the story, think about "the why" of the story; think about the writer's motivation in telling the story. Apparently, the story meant something other than

what it said. The writer had been saying one thing and meaning another. It was about more than it was about. Go figure.

"It's about" is a constant refrain, as if meaning were something obvious, declarative, visible, agreed upon.

But what a thrill I felt in the subsequent moment of revelation when the "inner meanings" became clear to me and I left behind the illustrated book report (with fancy cover and huge titles) forever. A writer actually has control over this stuff? A writer isn't just recording the way it happened? The story is something imagined! I realized. I took a giant leap towards critical examination of the craft of assembling words in a particular order for a particular reason.

We're accustomed, of course, to a world that is carelessly worded. "It's about" is a constant refrain, as if meaning were something obvious, declarative, visible, agreed upon. And what Hilary was encountering, as we all do at some point, is the opening of the mind's eye to the more that's there. I don't think even she thought it was just "about" a book report in 7th grade. The transition takes time, timing, and patience, like anything learned.

What would Mr. Katz's progress reports have said about me, I wonder? "In Language Arts, Todd is taking it "bird by bird." They're probably still filed away somewhere in my mother's archive, and still classified. Parent-teacher conferences? "Now, about his handwriting." Some things haven't changed.

*Todd Nelson is Principal at the Adams School
in Castine, Maine.*

**She Wrote THE Book on Student-Led Conferences!
Patti Kinney @ Annual MAMLE Conference
Sugarloaf USA October 19 - 20, 2006**



Eye On Research

Using the latest information to shape and validate our practice

Effective Teaching is THE KEY to Student Learning and Achievement

...force us to confront the fact that the single greatest determinant of learning is not socioeconomic factors or funding. It is instruction. A bone-deep, institutional acknowledgement of this fact continues to elude us. (Mike Schmoker, Results Now)

Over the past twenty years an incredible body of research has emerged on how people learn and what strategies are particularly effective in increasing student achievement and learning. Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering, and Jane Pollock in their book *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (ASCD) describe nine strategies that are effective in helping students master new ideas and concepts. Three of these strategies (1) examining how things are similar and different, (2) summarizing, and (3) non-linguistic representations were detailed in the spring 06 newsletter. We will explore two more strategies in this column: *reinforcing effort and providing recognition*, and *homework and practice*.

1. Too many students do not see the relationship between effort and achievement and are apt to believe that success in school is due to luck, ability or other people's actions.

- Work to help students understand that effort pays through explicit teaching about effort. A study in 1990 found that “students who were taught about the relationship between effort and achievement increased their achievement more than students who were taught techniques for time management and comprehension of new materials” (51).
- Share with students stories of ordinary people who achieved great feats through sheer effort. e.g. Lance Armstrong, Oprah Winfrey
- Help students discover the connection between effort and their own achievement through effort rubrics and graphs that chart students' effort and success.

2. Recognition is very effective in very specific circumstances.

- Recognition should be tied explicitly to meeting a specific standard.
- Recognition should be personalized as much as possible.
- “Abstract symbolic” recognition is more effective than tangible rewards like candy. However if the tangible rewards are attached to a specific accomplishment, they also can be effective.
- It's vital to teach students that success and effort are linked.

3. Homework is connected to increased levels of achievement, though there is a larger correlation between homework and achievement in high school than there is in middle school.

- The amount of homework assigned in middle school should be more than what is given in elementary school but less than what is assigned in high school. Unfortunately, there is no magic formula as to how much is effective.
- Parents should be discouraged from helping their children do their homework. Instead they should encourage student's effort in their studies by restating how students will benefit from these efforts, by providing time and space for students to work, etc.
- The purpose for the homework should be very clear to everyone. For example: homework is given as a practice to help students increase speed and accuracy or to prepare for the next day's class.
- Students should receive feedback on their homework assignments.



- Schools should have clear homework policies.

4. Practice is a good thing, but effective practice that makes a difference in student achievement is a complex process.

- To become proficient at a skill, students need to practice it 24 or more times to apply the skill correctly 80% of the time.
- Teachers need to be continually checking students'

level of mastery and provide “focused” practices for the part of a skill process students are finding difficult to grasp.

- Teachers need to plan instruction that provides the students time and experiences to understand the targeted skill at its conceptual level.

Next newsletter: cooperative learning and setting objectives and providing feedback.

Eye on Research is written by Jill Spencer

Fundamentals for Student Success in the Middle Grades

**Fantastic NEW Resource
from NMSA**

<http://www.nmsa.org>

Do you need to educate your school board about the unique characteristics of young adolescents? Are your new sixth grade parents mystified about the changes they are seeing in their children? Perhaps you have a batch of new staff members who do not have a clue about the students with which they will be working? NMSA has just published an online presentation entitled *Fundamentals for Student Success in the Middle Grades* that can become an on-demand resource for your school.

The presentation has three components: characteristics of young adolescents (6 minutes), national recommendations (3 minutes), and a summary of recent, compelling research (6 minutes). These components can be combined into one presentation or used separately. The information is clear, concise, research based and presented in an engaging, visual format.

Fundamentals comes in three formats: streaming video, PowerPoint, and PDF file—anyone can access this resource no matter their computer or techno-expertise. The streaming video can be stopped and restarted at will. This compact resource is a ready-on-the spot presentation that gets to the heart of what effective education for young adolescents is all about.

Check out *Fundamentals for Student Success* by going to NMSA.org and look for *Fundamentals* in the left hand menu.



NMSA Update

Kathy McAvoy, NMSA Past President

Just recently I was watching as Katie Couric said her goodbyes on the Today show. As I watched them do a retrospect of her time there, I realized I would be saying goodbye to my Maine friends in a couple of months. Katie was leaving after 14 years and I will be leaving after 27 years as a Maine educator. Of course, I am not leaving for a \$15 million new position. In fact, at this point I am unemployed, but looking forward to going back into a middle level classroom.

As I do my final NMSA update for MAMLE, I also wanted to take this opportunity to say goodbye to all my middle level colleagues. Through my work with MAMLE, NELMS, NMSA, and MLEI, I have had the wonderful opportunity to work with so many dedicated middle level educators in Maine. From my first class with Ed Brazee to my “reign” as President of NMSA, it has been a wonderful experience. I can only say thanks to all of you for being a part of my life these past years and for all you do for middle level students in our state.

Things have been exciting at NMSA recently. In early May, we released *Success in the Middle: A Policymaker’s Guide to Achieve High Quality Middle Level Education* at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, published by NMSA in 2003, gave us the philosophy and understanding of young adolescents that support the conditions that make effective middle level schools. *Success in the Middle* takes what we know about successful schools for middle level students and shows the steps that need to be taken by leaders at the federal, state, and local levels. Included in the policymaker’s guide are five goals, followed by recommendations for policymakers at all levels to help achieve the goals. In addition, each goal is supported by rationale and research. Using *Success in the Middle: A Policymaker’s Guide to Achieve High Quality Middle Level Education*, NMSA calls on federal, state, and local governments, as well as colleges and universities, school boards, unions, and business leaders to help lead a national effort and give every young adolescent the opportunity to achieve to the highest standards.

This important work needs to be shared with education leaders in the State of Maine. If you would like more information on this publication and how you might communicate with your local and state leaders, check the NMSA website-www.nmsa.org.

While visiting the website, check out this new feature: *Fundamentals for Student Success in the Middle Grades*. This presentation tool is a free resource to use in your advocacy work with schools, boards, parent/family groups, school staff, and community members. NMSA realizes educators don’t always have time to take the information they have and put it together in an effective presentation for various audiences.

NMSA has done the work for you and put together this 17-minute overview of characteristics of young adolescents, the national recommendations for their education, and current research on middle level education. As a web presentation and advocacy tool, Fundamentals can be viewed in its entirety, or in segments – whatever works for you. The presentation can be downloaded as a *PowerPoint* with accompanying handouts. If you need a boost in your advocacy work, this tool is for you.

As you continue on in this school year, remember that you are making a difference in the lives of the students you teach and advocate for.

NMSA continues to enhance its professional development activities. The On-Site Professional Development offerings are growing. This project matches the needs of middle level schools with the professional development cadre and brings the professional development directory to the school. Our other professional development program is the NMSA School Improvement Toolkit. This toolkit does a self-survey of each staff member and then offers recommendations based on the responses. Many Maine educators are involved in providing services for both of these professional development activities. Once again, Maine middle level educators are leading the way.

Please take the time to look through the NMSA website. There are many new things to check out, as well as your favorites. The Month of the Young Adolescent (MOYA) will be coming up in October. Check the website to see suggestions for celebrating in your school and community. Share some of your activities with other members.

Don’t forget the two upcoming opportunities for expanding your middle level knowledge and networking with other educators. The Maine Association for Middle Level Education will hold its annual conference at Sugarloaf USA on October 19th and 20th. In keeping with tradition, it will be a wonderful opportunity for middle level educators in Maine. You are also invited to join NMSA, and many of your Maine colleagues, in Nashville for the NMSA Annual Conference on November 1 -4. We look forward to seeing you at both events.

As you continue on in this school year, remember that you are making a difference in the lives of the students you teach and advocate for.



New for 2006! **MLTI Strand @ Annual MAMLE Conference**

This year's Annual MAMLE Conference at Sugarloaf USA will feature a special MLTI strand to help teachers and principals learn how their new laptops are even more powerful tools for teaching and learning. New software and how it relates to middle school curriculum will be discussed. Attend any or all of the six MLTI sessions and be sure to stop by the Thursday evening MLTI Chat session to meet and talk with Apple and MLTI staff.

Sessions in the strand are listed below. For more information, check out Conference Brochures at your school, in your mailbox, or at the MAMLE website - www.mamleonline.org.

Hello my name is *NoteShare* – a tool for developing, organizing, and sharing curriculum content and student work (this session will be repeated)

Hello my name is *StudyWiz* – a virtual learning environment for your classroom, your school, and for the State of Maine (this session will be repeated)

MLTI Leadership Challenges – how the success of MLTI depends on an effective leadership team in your school

The New MLTI Image – an exploration of what's new on your MLTI laptop

CSR School Step Out (Continued from Page 1)

promising. Other schools like Biddeford and Wiscasset are exploring integrated units as a way to engage students and make the curriculum more relevant as well as challenging. Wiscasset will be in their second year of the Expeditionary Learning model and are pleased with the level of engagement and effort of their students. Hodgdon High School has created a schedule that allows for common planning time for departments and provides students with extra support in any area they are having difficulty.

A number of schools such as Oxford Hills Middle School are revisiting their advisory programs as vehicles for improving school culture, providing an adult advocate for each child, and as a way to help students set and track academic goals because they know that their students must be invested in their own learning if their achievement is to continuously improve.

Finally, each school is addressing literacy. Literacy skills are becoming integral to their curriculum and instruction in all disciplines. Massabesic Junior High School has been using the work of Cris Tovnani as a model and sponsored a workshop

with her this summer. Other schools like Messalonskee Middle School, Madison Junior High School, and the Fred C. Wescott Junior High School in Westbrook are also developing the capacity of all of their staff members to use research-based literacy strategies in their teaching. Students are practicing similar strategies across the curriculum and hearing the same language concerning literacy no matter what class they are in. This consistency of approach is proving to be beneficial for their students. Early results are indicating that student reading levels are improving.

These schools' hard work will benefit all Maine schools that teach middle grades students. Their efforts with adolescent literacy, providing a challenging curriculum for all students that will allow them to be successful in college-prep courses in high school, and differentiation of instruction will provide excellent information on successful practices for all of us. Finally, these CSR schools are blazing the trail of genuine collegiality where teachers learn with and from each other in true professional learning communities.



Must-Read Books:

21st Century Skills – Are We Ready

Reviewed by Jill Spencer

Here it is 2006 and we are more than half way through the first decade of the 21st century. We all know our students are growing up digital and that they will face a world that will require them to master an ever shifting set of new skills. How do we, who grew up in the twentieth century, adapt our curriculum and instruction? Fortunately there is a tremendous resource available free to each and every one of us – *21st Century Skills for 21st Century Learners* at www.ncrel.org/engage. This electronic “book” is a publication of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL).

The authors point out that most state and national standards fall short of ensuring that high school graduates will possess all of the skills needed to flourish in the 21st century. They suggest that schools embrace an extended view of the necessary proficiencies – EnGauge 21st Century Skills. They are divided into four components.

Digital-Age Literacy

- Basic, scientific, economic and technological literacies
- Visual and information literacies
- Multicultural literacy and global awareness

Effective Communication

- Teaming, collaboration, and interpersonal skills
- Personal, social, and civic responsibility
- Interactive communication

Inventive Thinking

- Adaptability, managing complexity, and self-direction
- Curiosity, creativity, and risk taking
- Higher-order thinking and sound reasoning

High Productivity

- Prioritizing, planning, and managing for results
- Effective use of real-world tools
- Ability to produce relevant, high quality products

This document is actually a short book and provides research, statistics, examples and a multitude of sources to back-up their model. There is, naturally, an emphasis on technology as an integral part of teaching and learning. The authors suggest that technology is a “bridge to more engaged, relevant, meaningful, and personalized learning” and provides the necessary data to make meaningful decision about learning. They recognize that there is a need for a tremendous redefining of the curriculum and instruction priorities in American schools and hope their model will guide schools as they

make future decisions about teaching and learning.

Each of the skills in the four major components has a complete description which includes a definition, attributes of a student who has mastered this skill, background information and a lengthy bibliography.

An example that might be of interest to MLTI teachers is the description of students who are technologically literate:

- See themselves as skillful users of technology
- Are ethical users of technology
- Use many technology tools well
- Communicate with the world at large via technology
- Are able to use technology to get information from different sources and to determine the quality of the information as well as create their own meaning from the information found.
- Solve real-world problems

These descriptors provide a lens for looking at how we are using the laptops in our curriculums and instructional practices.

The other components/skills are in alignment with many aspects of middle level philosophy. Middle level educators have always advocated for a curriculum that provides opportunities for the thinking qualities listed in the Inventive Thinking and High Productivity components. The emphasis on advisories and safe learning environments in middle grades schools certainly parallels the skills delineated in the Effective Communication component. *21st Skills for the 21st Century Learner* validates the beliefs of middle level educators and provides guidance for revisiting and refining curriculum and instruction to meet our students’ educational needs for the new century,

The document closes with several descriptions of classrooms that exemplify these skills. These classrooms are from all levels and all curriculum areas. Finally, the authors provide a process for schools to use to implement these ideas and also supply several cross reference guides that connect the 21st skills with national programs and initiatives.

This website, www.ncrel.org/engage, is a free, well researched and documented resource that helps us focus our thinking about the way our classes ought to be different in 2006 than from those we taught in 1996. The world is changed and our students are growing up with a whole new set of experiences – will we be able to catch up?



Ability Grouping and Tracking

(P.S. They're not the same thing!)

Melissa A. Lacey
University of Maine

Ability grouping and tracking... tracking and ability grouping... who can tell the difference? Aren't they both bad for our kids? Don't they both pigeonhole students who fall outside the box of so-called normalcy or stereotypical academic achievement? Answer: not necessarily.

Tracking Bad – Ability Grouping Good

Tracking entails students being grouped by their ability (usually determined by their performance in an early grade on a standardized test) into different classes with different teachers and set on a specific 'track' until graduation (Fiedler, Lange, & Winebrenner, 2002). Although frequently used in the past, tracking today is predominantly accepted as being unsuccessful in that it does not provide an equitable education to all students. Most research today seems to reconcile itself to the fact that tracking, in the sense that it is defined above, is not a feasible practice.

Although at the outset of researching this article, I thought that ability grouping was just another new, possibly more PC, name for tracking, I learned that ability grouping shares few of the same characteristics of tracking and can be quite beneficial to *all* students if implemented properly. That said, in practice it is still quite controversial.

To fully examine the debate surrounding ability grouping in middle level schools is beyond the scope of this work. The aim of this article is, instead, to offer both sides of the debate surrounding ability grouping.

The Much Anticipated Debate: Pros

Although, a commonly agreed upon definition for ability grouping does not exist for our purposes here I will use the definition I located most prevalently in the research. Ability grouping has been defined as "re-grouping students for the purpose of providing curriculum aimed at a common instructional level" (Fiedler, 2002). These groups do not necessarily represent different classrooms or tracks, as within a rigid tracking system, but instead can be malleable as children's membership in a specific group is not etched in stone, but flexible. Students are placed in varying leveled groups based on each activity or lesson and groups are not isolated from one another.

In order to be successful, teachers must be skilled in

differentiated instruction, as well as in recognizing each student's specific strengths for varying tasks and lessons. It would not be sufficient, for example, for a student to be placed in the higher level math lesson simply because she/he was in the higher level science group for that day. Also, careful measures must be taken to recognize students' varying intelligences, talents, and potential in order to ensure that they are not placed in a group solely on standardized test scores, IQ test scores, or other measures that have proven fallible, specifically for minority and students from a lower socioeconomic status (SES).

The arguments in favor of ability grouping note that research has found that gifted students benefit from working with other gifted students and being given challenging material for their skill level. This research also maintains that if denied these opportunities and "without regular encounters with challenging material, gifted students fail to learn how to learn and have problems developing the study skills they need for future academic pursuits" (Fiedler, 2002). Also, the argument continues, by isolating students by ability group all students are given a chance to be challenged and to work alongside students who are at a similar level, therefore providing a cohort with which to learn and master new skills (Tieso, 2003).

The Much Anticipated Debate: Cons

Arguments against ability grouping stem from its misuse and improper implementation. Opponents argue that children are still grouped using inappropriate measures (i.e. standardized test scores, IQ test scores) and that, too often, the lower groups receive insufficient instruction from under-qualified or burnt-out teachers, for example. These kids are given busy work, rather than truly challenged, and they realize what group they are in and thus get pigeonholed and expect less of themselves. Research has found that these kids also often have less expected of them, which is obviously *not* a good thing.

In a study conducted in six schools in the United Kingdom, researchers found that students in varying ability groups knew fully what group they were in and even though these researchers found no effects on their attitudes toward school, these pupils' "awareness of their place in the pecking order" (Hallam, 2004, p. 515) of the school was completely evident. Thus, it can be rightfully argued that the manner in which ability grouping was implemented in this case was detrimental to



students as they saw themselves as members of a specific group, rather than members within a fluid system where group membership could remain flexible depending on varying curricula.

Richardson and Hines (2002), also report the detrimental effects ability grouping can have on students, in this case, specifically on at-risk youth. The authors do well to point out that many of these at-risk kids come to school with numerous barriers already in place, thus making it difficult for them to succeed in the academic setting. It is most commonly these kids (who disproportionately include minority and lower SES students) who are pegged as lower-achieving kids and thus placed in lower ability groups (Richardson & Hines, 2002). This brings us back to the point mentioned earlier, that stresses the need for students to be grouped on comprehensive and equitable (for *all* students) measures, including possible potential.

So What's The Deal?

It seems to me that the debate surrounding ability grouping is not so much in the practice but in the methodology and implementation. I found, if implemented properly and equitably, ability grouping is nothing more than successful differentiated instruction. Students are given equal access and opportunity to excel and learn as well as to be challenged and grow. This said, equal access and opportunity do not equate to teaching the same thing in the same manner to every student.

Individual needs, learning styles, and speeds are taken into account and the learning process becomes individual and personal to each and every student, whether gifted, average, or working at a slower learning rate. In sum, it seems that we have far to go in implementing successful ability grouping or differentiated instruction and that *that* should be our focus, rather than a continued debate on the theory of ability grouping. When the research-based recommendations are implemented with fidelity, and only when this occurs, will the debate die down, as I argue that the debate is not in the premise, but in its implementation.

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mamleonline.org

Check it out!

The Maine Association for Middle Level Education now has a terrific website offering information and resources related to middle level education in Maine and across the country. Stop in and find:

- Teacher Resources
- News
- Information about MAMLE
- Journal Articles
- Links
- Conference Info
- Maine's Best - Award winners
- Membership Info
- Professional Opportunities & More

Spotlight Your School

We see and hear about many outstanding programs and ideas in our Maine schools. Your Maine Association for Middle Level Education needs your help to spread the word. Please consider sharing your ideas and success stories in one of our publications. No article is too small.

For more information, contact:

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Month of the Young Adolescent

October is the month of the Young Adolescent, an annual national collaborative effort of education, health, and youth-oriented organizations. Initiated by National Middle School Association (NMSA), Month of the Young Adolescent brings together a wide range of organizations to focus on the needs of this important age range, ages 10 - 15.

Four key messages will be promoted throughout the month of October. They are:

- The importance of parents being knowledgeable about young adolescents and being actively involved in their lives;
- The understanding that healthy bodies plus healthy minds equal healthy young adolescents;
- The realization that the education young adolescents experience during this formative period of life will, in large measure, determine the future for all citizens; and
- The knowledge that every young adolescent should have the opportunity to pursue his or her dreams and aspirations, and post-secondary education should be a possibility for all.

Why should we focus on a collaborative national campaign regarding young adolescents? The general public has lacked an adequate understanding of youth in the transition period between childhood and adolescence. As a result, young adolescents often have been “growing up forgotten.” Unfortunately the English language contains no single word for this life stage, having only the terms infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood to designate periods of life. Yet it is during the period of early adolescence, generally between the ages of 10 and 15, when young people leave childhood and move toward full adolescence that they make major decisions about their values, standards, attitudes, and personal beliefs. Many of these decisions direct their behavior throughout their lives. Through the Month of the Young Adolescent celebration, we are focusing on the developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents and how these impact parenting practices,

health conditions, and educational programs for this age group. Working together, we can highlight the need for strong educational partnerships among the school, parents, students, and community members so that every 10 to 15 year old will have the opportunity to become all he or she can and should become.

All of us are mindful that the issues we are celebrating during the Month of the Young Adolescent deserve year round attention and commitment if we are to accomplish what we must to ensure the well-being of all young adolescents. Therefore, as an outgrowth of this special month we believe the following things will occur:

1. Parents and communities will become more knowledgeable about the needs of young adolescents and how they may appropriately respond to them.
2. There will be increased linkages developed between home and school with the common goal of implementing high quality education for every young adolescent.
3. There will be an increase in mutually supported activities between the school and community. A foundation of common understandings will be developed to enhance further community involvement in the education of young adolescents.
4. Parents, educators, and community members at-large will understand better the need to help young adolescents make wise decisions on a day-to-day basis as well as help them become healthy, productive, and ethical adult citizens.

This collaborative approach continues to be important to the success of this initiative because it will take all of us working together to make a real difference in the lives of 10 to 15 year olds. We invite you to join with us in this important initiative. The young adolescents with whom we work and live on a daily basis deserve our best efforts if each is to have the chance to become all he or she can and should be. Together, we can make a difference ... to insure a bright future for all young adolescents.

Join the Celebration!

Together We Can Make A Difference



Good Sports

Kevin Coombs
Troy Howard Middle School

Sport in American society has become a significant centerpiece for our collective culture. Athletics have always existed, of course, but with today's competition, there exists an alarming pressure on schools and athletes to be *the best* instead of providing scenarios that encourage positive experiences rather than *winning*. This culture of competition has increased concern for the ultimate purpose of sports in schools, especially pertaining to the welfare of student athletes. Middle level athletics are especially vulnerable to this societal pressure. While many middle level programs offer a wide range of activities to include as many students as possible, others exclude students by "cutting" to create teams, and offer athletic opportunities to only a select group of individuals.

Constraints on budget and personnel have created the need for certain *cuts* to take place when creating teams. Schools' athletic programs have their hands tied by the funds each sport is allotted. Each team needs to be coached by at least one or more trained adults who are usually, but not always, paid for their involvement. Finding good coaches to step forward and be involved is difficult if funding an athletic program is not a budgetary priority. In addition, rules and restrictions forbid athletic contests to take place without equipment that is properly sanctioned. Proper equipment is a tall expense, but is critical to athletic involvement. As *Sports Done Right* (2005) states:

Adequate resources include the financial and human resources required to provide every boy and girl with an opportunity to earn a place on a team, and every coach and athletic administrator with the training and equipment to deliver a safe, healthy and developmentally appropriate experience for each student-athlete. (p.16)

Moreover, certain team sports require a limited number of participants to ensure a quality experience. For example, a school that has forty students try-out for one basketball team cannot expect to keep all forty and have the program run efficiently. Certain cuts therefore need to be made to keep the integrity of the program intact. The number of participants is directly related to the budgeting for certain sports. If a team only has twenty uniforms for example, then the number of players cannot, in theory, be greater than that amount.

The fact remains that athletics are good for students, but are being held hostage by society's standards of competition and success. The facts are irrefutable—students are more successful in school when they are involved in athletics. Based on *The Athletes Speak Survey 2002-2004*, a survey of pilot projects

conducted by the National Center for Student Aspirations involving Maine and Massachusetts student athletes, 92 percent of student athletes believe participating in sports helps them be a better person (*Sports Done Right*, p.7).

Athletics provide co-curricular experiences for students who seek avenues for learning outside the classroom. Teams provide students the opportunity for real-life problem solving, choices between right and wrong, leadership moments, moments for compassion, dealing with challenges, constant cooperation, and experience with diversity and growth. In short, middle level athletics provide students with a forum to acknowledge their own emotions, abilities, and identities. This is a critical step in relationship to students' mental and physical health. Equally important is the correlation between co-curricular activity and success in the classroom. *This We Believe* (2003) states, "With young adolescents, achieving academic success is highly dependent upon their other developmental needs also being met" (p.3).

Initiatives like Sports Done Right have brought attention to the increasing pressure placed on school sports and student athletes.

Furthermore, athletics produce positive intangibles that cannot be measured in data. Coaches become advisors for life skills. Practices become foundations for later work ethics. Victories become moments to reflect on success and determination, while losses serve to provide perspective. As Dean Smith states in *Sports Done Right*—"Character evolves from the culmination of life experiences and exposures. Athletic participation provides access to some of the most challenging and rewarding experiences to prepare for future success. It helps build the personal foundation from which individuals can elevate mind, body and soul" (p. 5).

So why are these opportunities for learning being ignored or forgotten, and what can be done to provide student athletes with the experiences they need? Too often, athletics is regarded as a privilege, which is why it has always been deemed extra-curricular, or in other words, an extra curriculum program



...schools have the great responsibility to give athletes a forum where each and every participant gains knowledge and experiences outside of the classroom.

reserved for a privileged group. This stigma given to athletics must be replaced with an inclusive determination to include as many students as possible, especially at the middle school level. While there will always be cuts to maintain cohesion for a team; every student who is interested in playing that sport should be given an avenue to that sport. Perhaps it will not be determined by the number of uniforms or the availability of referees, but there must be an organized effort in place for students who want and need involvement.

In addition, coaches, parents, and players must set their priorities straight. Middle level athletics should not be about producing wins and counting losses. It is about understanding winning and understanding losing. There has been many a great athlete that has stated that they have learned more from the losses than they ever did about the wins. The delusions of grandeur that can deteriorate a dedication to sportsmanship, fairness, and teamwork must be replaced with the reality that "12,999 out of 13,000 high school athletes will never be professional athletes" (*Sports Done Right*, 2005, p.22).

Middle level organizations must be especially cognizant of the need to create competitive forums that are learning experiences for everyone involved, and not just those who are athletically gifted enough to be involved. Moreover, middle level schools must not cater to the *feeder system* mentality of preparing athletes for athletic involvement at the high school level. After all, adolescence is typified by dramatic change, both in physical and intellectual development and maturity. Therefore, the starting center for an eighth grade basketball team may be a point guard by her senior year, or she may join the ski team. In any event, to pigeonhole a player in a system serves no purpose other than supplying unneeded pressure.

Initiatives like *Sports Done Right* have brought attention to the increasing pressure placed on school sports and student athletes. Middle level organizations play a prominent role in ensuring sports are used and maintained as co-curricular opportunities for every student to share in. Furthermore, schools have the great responsibility to give athletes a forum where each and every participant gains knowledge and experiences outside of the classroom. With a collaborative effort by schools, parents, and community, sports can be beneficial for all who are involved—and a critical part of every educational experience.

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MAMLE Is Going High Tech!

Recent changes with our printer are allowing MAMLE some exciting ways to better serve its members. MAMLE's publications, *Mainly Middle*, our journal, and *Middle Link*, our newsletter are now going to be available electronically.

For now, we will continue to send you our print copies, but they will also be available in PDF format on our Web site (www.mamleonline.org). Further, over the next months we will be building an email database of our members and soon we will be able to send the PDF version to you, as well!

Imagine being able to share as many copies of the newsletter or journal with any colleague you think may be interested! Now, a principal only receives a couple copies of each periodical to share with the entire school, but soon she/he will be able to forward it to her/his entire staff.



Fair Isn't Always Equal

A Review of Rick Wormeli's New Book

Melissa Welch

Editor's Note: Melissa Welch is a student in USM's TEAMS (Teachers for Elementary And Middle Schools) program. This review is from a book she selected as an assignment in Chris Toy's class in Middle School Community. In addition to required readings about middle level education, students were asked to research, read, and review a book of their choice relating to effective middle level practices. Watch for more reviews from Chris' students in future editions of Middle Link.

Nobody cares what we teach.... It's what our students learn after their time with us that matters. (pg 8)

What a provocative statement to make, and yet how true it is. In his book, *Fair Isn't Always Equal*, Rick Wormeli takes us down the road that shows us why this statement is true and how we as educators can look at the practices we use to help students become effective learners, primarily through differentiated instruction and productive assessment. Wormeli also gives us an honest look at sometimes sensitive subjects like assessments, grades and even report cards.

Useful is the premise behind Rick Wormeli's books. *Fair Isn't Always Equal* is no exception. His writing is meant to be a catalyst to get educators to think. He makes sure readers know that the ideas he presents in may not "mesh" with their personal philosophies, but encourages readers to step out of their comfort zones. In fact Wormeli makes it very clear that a little cognitive dissonance is effective in getting us to remove ourselves from stalemates and ineffectiveness. He even throws in a little appreciative humor by saying, "Don't throw the book out the window because one idea on one page gives you heartburn." This book is filled with clear and concise examples of what to do and what not to do in order to substantiate his points. To accomplish this, he pulls from his own educator experiences. But also, to further drive home his points, Wormeli adds the comments and examples of many other colleagues, producing a wide scope of knowledge from many facets.

Wormeli's books are well structured in a logical format that makes it easy for the reader to follow and understand. In section one, in fact, he uses several key examples to define and

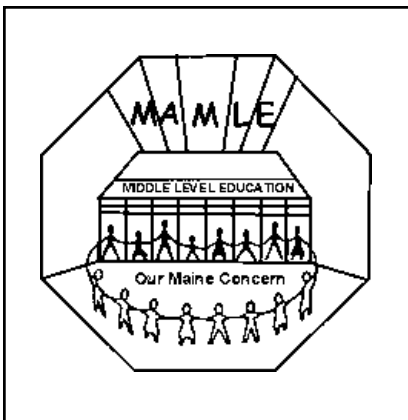
show how differentiation is used in the classroom. Differentiated instruction is defined as "doing what's fair for students. It's a collection of best practices strategically employed to maximize students' learning at every turn." (pg 3) He points out that, "differentiated learning does not make learning easier for students, it provides the appropriate challenge that enables students to thrive". (pg 4) He then proceeds throughout the book to explain why differentiation is important and shows us some of the best practices to use in order to obtain it.

While Section II examines the principles of successful assessments with several chapters on assessment types and best practices, Section III is a plethora of samples and examples on grading in the differentiated classroom. He offers several chapters on different aspects of grading; from why we grade, what we grade, grading traps to avoid and how we grade to grading issues, grade book and report card formats. While reading the book, there were times I was unsure and wanted to disagree with his statements, but then Wormeli would go into the rationale behind it and follow it up with very clear and thoughtful examples. I found that I believed in most, if not all, the statements presented in this book. It is helpful and nice to know that there is a book out there that gives an educator, whether new or experienced, sound advice and techniques to use. I shall have it rested on my shelf as a valuable reference tool as I proceed on my journey of becoming an educator.

Rick Wormeli does such an extraordinary job laying the groundwork for implementing differentiation techniques, it would be hard not to be excited about applying it in your classroom. I encourage everyone to read *Fair Isn't Always Equal* and try out the techniques he has offered in this book. I think you too will make it a valuable reference book on your shelf.

Top Educator Named

Mathematics teacher Margaret Southworth of the Troy A. Howard Middle School in Belfast, has been honored with the 2005 Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, the nation's highest honor for teaching in these fields. Southworth is the only mathematics winner from Maine and one of 100 seventh- through 12th grade teachers nationwide to receive the award. As an award winner, Southworth received a \$10,000 grant from the National Science Foundation and an all-expenses paid trip to Washington, D.C. for a week of celebratory events and professional development activities. "I think the most valuable part of this experience so far was the application process," Southworth said. "By videotaping a lesson, I was given the opportunity to reflect on my own teaching practices."



MAMLE Membership

MAMLE, Maine Association for Middle Level Education, is the professional association of teachers, administrators, and parents who have joined together to support the development of quality programs which serve the needs of young adolescents. MAMLE exists to promote a better understanding of middle grades education in our state. It is a source of ideas, information, and support.

MAMLE Membership Benefits Include:

- Mainly Middle* (annual journal)
- 3 issues of *Middle Link* (newsletter)
- Reduced rates at Annual Conference and regional conferences
- Voting eligibility
- Periodic mailings of information pertinent to middle level educators

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Annual MAMLE Conference!

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The 2006 MAMLE Conference will feature two full days of sessions, workshops, exemplary team presentations, keynote addresses, networking among teams and schools, exhibits, and special events.

This year's Conference will feature two outstanding keynoters, Patti Kinney and Maine's own Chris Toy. Patti Kinney is the principal of Talent Middle School in the Phoenix-Talent School district in southern Oregon. She served six years as West Region Trustee on the NMSA Board and is currently president of the organization. In 2003 she was selected as the Met-Life/National Association of Secondary School Principals Middle Level Principal of the Year. Along with numerous articles, Kinney is co-author of, *A School-wide Approach to Student-led Conferences*; *The What, Why, and How of Student-led Conferernces*; and a chapter on courageous and collaborative leadership in *This We Believe in Action*.

Chris Toy has enjoyed 27 years in Maine as a teacher, principal, and advocate for young adolescents. With his leadership, Freeport Middle School was named a New England Spotlight School. Chris' school is recognized as effectively implementing Maine's one-to-one technology learning initiative. When visitors from other states and countries ask where they can find a great example of a working middle school in Maine, they are invariably directed to Freeport. Chris serves on a variety of state, regional, and national middle school committees and is an active member of the MiddleWeb listserve. A recipient of the New England League of Middle School's outstanding administrator award, Chris consults with middle schools in Maine, New England, and Canada.

Spend two exciting days with Patti Kinney, Chris Toy, teachers, principals and other practitioners from excellent middle level schools to learn more about: Using Computers in Classroom Instruction – Implementing Learning Results – Student-Led Conferencing With Parents – Teaming – Portfolios & Performance Reporting – Inclusion Issues – Gifted & Talented & Middle School – Doing More With Less – Advisory Programs – Involving Parents & Community – Middle Level Programs in K-8 Schools – Integrated Curriculum – & More.

For information:

E-mail Wally Alexander at wallace.alexander@umit.maine.edu.

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