

# MIDDLE LINK

Maine Association for Middle Level Education

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## Ten New Year's Resolutions (with help) for 2008

Ed Brazee

University of Maine

The holidays are over and it is time to settle in for a nice long, productive stretch – the perfect time of the year to commit to school improvement. Here are 10 resolutions to consider, with resources to assist you – or better yet – build one of your own.

1. In middle level schools, the old real estate axiom of location-location-location becomes kids-kids-kids. When so many other things vie for our attention, we need to remember that middle level schools are for and about young adolescents, not their teachers, their parents, or anyone else. **Bottom line:** To find out what young adolescents think about their learning, working together, and challenging assignments, simply ask. **Resource:** *Coming of Age: The Education and Development of Young Adolescents* by Ken Brighton.

2. Celebrate success in your school, both the big things and the common, everyday details. Take time to recognize students' and teachers' achievements in advisory, teams, clubs, at faculty meetings, or school assemblies. And not always the obvious ones – athletic victories, plays, concerts, or grades. Celebrate those things that are tied to your mission of educating students and building good citizens. **Bottom line:** Don't forget those students who may not be star basketball players but who volunteer at the food co-op, read to the elderly, or shovel snow off a neighbor's walk. **Resource:** Your local newspaper and keeping your ear to the ground.

3. Read (or re-read) one or more of the four major documents that describe what middle level schools can and should be. From the philosophical to the very practical, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003,); *Turning Points 2000* (2000); *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (2006), and; National Forum for Accelerating Middle-Grades Progress *Criteria for High-Performing Middle Schools*. **Bottom line:** Each of these documents makes the same suggestions for middle level schools. That is the good news! We know what makes a difference. **Resources:** See below.

4. Visit another middle level school in Maine to see how they are meeting the varied needs of their students. Take a team that can report back to your school. Remember that you want to observe not what they are doing so you can replicate it, but what they are doing to meet the unique needs of their school. There are many excellent middle level schools to visit in Maine, so ask around. **Bottom line:** You may find out that your school is more progressive than you think. **Resource:** Call MAMLE for some suggestions of schools to visit.

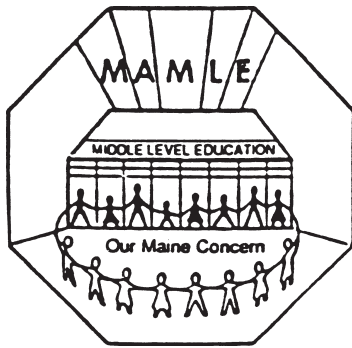
5. What is the mission of your school? Do you have one? Does anyone inside or outside the school know what it is? Does it really represent what your school is about? If you can't find it, don't know what it is, or that it doesn't reflect what your school is now, it may be time to rethink your mission? **Bottom line:** It is

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Annual MAMLE Conference!

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For more information, contact Wally Alexander at [wallace.alexander@umit.maine.edu](mailto:wallace.alexander@umit.maine.edu).



## Middle Link

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*MAMLE Editor:* Wally Alexander

## From the President's Desk

At this time of year, we're probably all thinking much more about the energy level of our middle grades students (and surviving until Winter Break!) than we are about being strong advocates for young adolescents, or about meeting their needs! This is one of those times during the year (together with March and May), when I really can use some help remembering how to be the best middle grades teacher and advocate for young adolescents I can be.

And that's when I remember the National Middle School Association.

Maine (and MAMLE) were well represented at the recent NMSA conference in Houston. Not only were there attendees from Maine, but many of us presented. It's a great conference (in Denver next year – Oct. 30-Nov. 1, 2008 – so plan to join the other Mainer's attending!), but is only one of the many ways NMSA works to assist those who care about 10 to 14 year olds. As a leading advocate for young adolescents and middle level education, National Middle School Association develops resources and tools you can use to champion middle grades education and successful schools for young adolescents.

Want to keep up with what's going on with middle grades education? Check out NMSA's periodicals: *Middle School Journal*, *Middle Ground*, and *RMLE Online* (Research in Middle Level Education). Or browse through the books available through NMSA's online bookstore.

Need to know what research supports what you and your school are doing (or to give you some direction to continue to improve your program)? Check out their Research Summaries on topics ranging from advisory, to achievement, to bullying, to grouping, to scheduling, to technology, to parent involvement.

Need presentations to share with your parents or staff? Access *Fundamentals for Student Success in the Middle Grades* or *Middle Grades Education: Fundamentals and Research*, a collection of presentations, with presenter notes, about general middle grades education topics, including an overview of the characteristics of young adolescents, national recommendations for their education, and current research on middle level education.

Do you need help building support for your middle level program? Use NMSA's Public Relations Resources to help you in taking action to gain visibility for successful middle grades programs and practices by helping you become a successful public relations practitioner.

Need help in your building with professional development? NMSA can provide schools and districts with quality on-site staff development that focuses on the needs of your educational community, with a long list of well-known consultants (including several Mainers!). Or check out NMSA's suggestions for using *Middle School Journal* in your professional development.

So take a few minutes this winter (if the kids give you a few minutes!) to look at all the resources available to you from the National Middle School Association ([www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org)).

Mike Muir  
President, MAMLE



# The Learning Curve

A column by Todd Nelson

## Blink, or You'll Miss It

Blink. I am standing at my father's basement workbench trying to thread twine through hundreds of small holes I have drilled in a two-by-four-foot frame made of a 2" wooden rod. I am weaving the warp and weft of Cleopatra's bed, my project for the fifth grade Egyptian. My plan is working; the weaving is turning out nice and tight. Soon I will use gold spray paint on the frame and woven "mattress," filling our basement with fumes – the gilt is worth it. Then I will attach the uncomfortable headrest that I have carved from balsa wood. This is gonna look good, I thought. It belongs in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum. But how could the queen sleep on that thing? No wonder her neck is so long and skinny.

It did look good at the Egyptian museum we created in Miss Keller's class. And that was the era before the hot glue gun. I remember it clearly, all these years later, especially those wonderful, successful work sessions down in the basement, using dad's tools, and solving the design and construction problems on my own. My deliberative mind made it; my intuitive mind saved the memory of how it felt to make that bed. I suppose I got a grade for it, but I truly don't recall.

*...intuition is a crucial thing, and, as it turns out, an essential tool in decision-making and understanding.*

There is a warp and weft in the tapestry of learning too. I think it is the crossovers between knowledge and experience, or of data and handmade, hot-glued, spray-painted artifacts. Summative and formative are contemporary terms; test scores and grades, versus narrative reports. Or in baseball terms, the stats versus color commentary.

Blink. The memory of the Egypt project came to mind the other day when Mrs. Belyea was describing "a painting that I did a few years ago while sitting on the side of the RiverDee in Chester." The memory of doing the painting is stronger than the painting itself, which hangs in her in-laws' house. "Grandmother from Birkenhead explaining watercolor technique to her grandson behind my right shoulder," she said. "Fishermen on my left, sun burning the tops of my feet, strains of the brass band in the bandstand downstream...."

It's the kind of artifacts and memories we hope we're helping our 8th graders to collect in the senior book project: a handmade, beautiful, bound volume of their recollections and experiences of an Adams School education and childhood. Drawings, paintings, writings, cartoons, pop-up 3-D shapes, poems... no limit to the imaginative contents. One of our writers is already reviewing a future blink moment of her own: "About 180 pencils later, I stand before you as an 8th grader. If only I knew this was how fast it was going to happen."

There's an irony in data collection: sometimes we have too much information to make accurate interpretations, "missing the forest for the trees." Perhaps our scientific, data-ridden age makes us distrust the gut feeling side of perception and decision-making. At such times, Malcolm Gladwell points out, "our unconscious thought process may be superior." He calls this "rapid cognition," or the blink phenomenon.\* It's counter-intuitive to think that more information does not lead to more understanding. But intuition is a funny thing. In fact, intuition is a crucial thing, and, as it turns out, an essential tool in decision-making and understanding.

It pays dividends to examine how we know what we know, and what we're using to make decisions. Collecting the data of school is a good start, and a reliable detector of the presence of crucial patterns, but it doesn't beat narrative reports based on up-close observations. Parent-teacher conferences are for the "blinks" from home and school, and the narrative aspects of the progress we'll report at regular intervals all year. It is our chance to "tell the story of school," something that only teachers and students can do. Combine this with telling "the story of home," something that only parents and children can do, and you have a really great intuitive snapshot of the learning life.

Blink. Today at Adams School we are guessing the weight of our homegrown pumpkins, watching caterpillars at the exact moment that they turn into a chrysalis, learning how to decipher bar graphs and food chains, going to Canada to watch endangered Right Whales, and trying to trap a cute, errant weasel who thinks our basement would be a nice place to spend the winter. We will collect data on the touch-typing speed of grade 5-6 (like a new RBI stat every morning!), and the reading levels of primary grade kids. And we're ready to share preliminary narrative pictures for parents on Friday. What will we all remember when we blink in thirty years? Caterpillar, pumpkin, weasel, whale? Bar graph, typing speed, grammar detail?



## Eye On Research

Using the latest information to shape and validate our practice!

# Critical Vocabulary Instruction

Students possessing shallow vocabulary knowledge will struggle with text because they do not understand the shades of meaning of many words and are therefore limited in their ability to comprehend text written above a fairly simplistic level. Traditional vocabulary instruction does not help students overcome this deficit, and thus they are still unable to comprehend text even though key vocabulary may have been pretaught.

Isabel Beck of the University of Pittsburgh has researched this topic and offers insight into the connection between vocabulary and comprehension and what type of instruction will enable students to acquire vocabulary understanding that improves their understanding of reading assignments.

Beck divides vocabulary into three tiers:

- Tier 1 contains the most basic words (table, pet, mother, run)
- Tier 2 contains “high-frequency words for mature language users” (crucial, permeate, critical)
- Tier 3 contains words that are usually found in very specific types of text and rarely in general conversation (ion, lathe, isthmus)

Tier 1 does not need to be addressed in middle school because the students know these words. Tier 3, the content-specific words, needs to be taught as needed in the content areas classes. Tier 2 words, however, need considerable attention because these words appear often in middle and high school texts; not understanding their meaning hampers comprehension of the text and slows down the internalization of new concepts.

Beck suggests the following criteria for determining what words to teach:

- Words not often used in oral language or conversations
- Words that are sophisticated synonyms for everyday concepts
  - suspicious = leery or wary
  - very hungry = ravenous
- Words that are more apt to be found in writing

Here are some sites with examples of tier 2 words:

- <http://www.uefap.com/vocab/select/awl.htm>
- <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/%7Ealzsh3/acvocab/awlhilighter.htm> (will highlight academic words in a selection)
- <http://web.uvic.ca/~gluton/awl/>

As stated previously, traditional vocabulary instruction that

relies on multiple choice quizzes and tests for checking for student mastery does not improve comprehension. Fortunately there is credible research that provides specific guidelines for vocabulary instruction that impacts reading comprehension. Here are the three critical practices:

- Actively engage students with the words and their definitions (word play, images, skits, etc.)
- Connect new words with familiar situations and ideas (analogies, metaphors, synectics, story telling, pop media, etc.)
- Give students lots of experiences with the words in multiple contexts (word walls, dialogues, Reader’s Theater, etc.)

Here are a couple of strategies that Beck suggests:

1. Use popular media to provide students practice with words in different contexts. For example, think of the words—**evasive**, **pinnacle** & **prevaricate**.

- Find a character in a video or online game who could be described as **evasive**.
- Find some characters on TV who are at the **pinnacle** of their careers
- Think of a character in movie who **prevaricates**

2. Use sentence stems that require students to demonstrate their understanding of a word by finishing the sentence:

- The stairs to the building were **dilapidated** so....
- My little brother has an **uncanny** way of...
- I **scrutinized** my mom’s face because...

3. Create a scenario by connecting vocabulary words in sentence or question and have students respond:

- Would a **contemporary** of George Washington consider allowing women to vote a **radical** idea?
- Would you be **forthcoming** if you were in the process of **dissembling** to your parents?
- Would your level of respect **diminish** if a friend **violated** your trust?

Beck maintains that *robust* or *rich* vocabulary instruction such as that described above is vital to improving student comprehension of text. Middle school teams have the opportunity through common planning and flexible scheduling to provide this type of instruction in a coordinated fashion, thereby impacting student learning in a very positive way. Robust vocabulary instruction should be an integral part of a school’s comprehensive literacy plan.

Here are some additional websites that focus on instructional



practices for teaching tier 2 words:

- <http://www.weac.org/News/2004-05/april05/read.htm> (Doug Buehl)
- [www.michiganreading.org/conferences/2007/Buehl\\_Doug\\_Vocabulary\\_Development.pdf](http://www.michiganreading.org/conferences/2007/Buehl_Doug_Vocabulary_Development.pdf) (Doug Buehl)
- [http://www.cast.org/teachingeverystudent/toolkits/tk\\_modellesson.cfm?tk\\_id=21&tkl\\_id=282&disp=udlapproach](http://www.cast.org/teachingeverystudent/toolkits/tk_modellesson.cfm?tk_id=21&tkl_id=282&disp=udlapproach)
- <http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/content/>

vocabulary (ideas for English language learners)

- [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=993](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=993) (Read,Write,Think!)

#### Reference

Beck, Isabel. (2007) *Rev Up Vocabulary in the Middle Grades* Presentation, NMSA Annual Conference, Houston, TX.

*Eye on Research is written by Jill Spencer*

# Why We Need The Schools We Need

Mike Muir

University of Maine at Farmington

An old friend provided me with a wonderful opportunity recently. Well, really, I did some consulting for her, but I learned something from it. She's the Middle Level Director for a mid-sized city in the South. I've been doing workshops for her schools and teachers for about 10 years.

Last summer, I worked with the teachers at two schools that have high populations of at-risk and hard-to-teach students. I introduced them to several strategies for reaching these students. In January, I returned to the district and got to spend a day at each of the schools. I was able to conduct 8 classroom observations at one school. At the other school I did 4 classroom observations and conducted focus groups with four of the cluster teams.

It's great getting back into classrooms. It's helping me put things into perspective and learn more about this work of creating schools that motivate students. Surprisingly (at least it was an ah ha for me!), I didn't see out of control classrooms or bad teaching.

What I did see was order in the classrooms and a lot of competent (and in some cases outstanding) direct instruction. Even so, I often only saw about half the class "engaged" (showing signs of being on task) and, in conversations and focus groups, teachers indicated that many students don't care, won't do the work or study, and there isn't much support from home. One teacher called this "lazy disease." Teachers relate that they feel that they are tired of trying ways to motivate the students and, according to at least one teacher, it is "time to get the students and parents to do their part."

This makes me think that some students need more than direct instruction. And it reinforces that teachers aren't necessarily to blame when they've done a good job with direct instruction, but students don't learn well. This is about some students needing more than what teachers have generally been trained to do.

The teachers also provided me with the answer to the question, when do you know that you need to do more than direct

instruction? When the students don't care, won't do the work or study, and there isn't much support from home.

The teachers I observed have the right instincts and try to motivate students, but most of the motivators teachers say they use or were observed tend to be "low payoff" motivators such as showing enthusiasm, being nice to students, or using manipulatives. They also used "no payoff" motivators such as grades, "you're going to high school and will need this," or "it's going to be on the state test." These may be motivators for easy-to-teach students, or important to teachers, but they tend not to be motivators for hard-to-teach students. It's no wonder that if teachers are putting a lot of energy into these kinds of motivators that they are frustrated with the results and the students.

But, teaching these students are extraordinary circumstances requiring extraordinary efforts. Teachers need to not just try or work hard; they need to try the right things and work hard at effective practices. Teachers need to be using "high payoff" motivators, such as

- \* project-based learning,
- \* connecting with students,
- \* connecting learning to the community
- \* focusing on higher order thinking activities,
- \* learning by doing,
- \* making learning interesting, and involving students in designing their learning.

But moving teachers in this direction is a big effort. Teachers need more than informational workshops. They need good models, both the kind they can observe (videos or classroom observations), and the kind they can try out (model units/lessons). They need coaching and support. They need access to the right resources. And they need strong leadership that clearly expects this work and backs it up with how they supervise and evaluate teachers.







# Notes from MiddleTalk

Chris Toy

*Middle Level Educators sometimes find themselves sitting across the table from their colleagues in the role of concerned parents. This can be both a stressful and enlightening experience as this recent online conversation from NMSA's MiddleTalk listserv illustrates. As with many MiddleTalk threads, we begin with a request for assistance from a colleague...*

I am asking for some professional perspective assistance, please. My professional eyes are clouded with the tears of a parent. My child is a struggling student. She works hard for the grades she earns. We work hard together. Every night we do homework together for at least an hour... most nights more. We received her mid-trimester report and saw that she was doing poorly in only one subject, math. This we know and she is receiving help. However, there was no indication that she was failing anything else. Well, she failed science. According to the report card, she has failed all tests. I have never seen nor heard of a science test being given this first trimester. Never signed any tests (all tests have to be signed) at all... not even good ones! This teacher is not a new teacher. She has been teaching for years. I am not sure what type... if any... assessments are being given and how they are being given.

SOOOO... I am asking for your professional assistance. I am going to a conference tomorrow and I am so frustrated and angry and disappointed that I do not know where to begin. What are some questions I should ask? I know in my head but it is all clouded with feelings of a parent who now has a child that no longer wants to go to school. This is my happy go lucky child that sees the world through rose-colored glasses. She now feels that she is stupid and sees no point in going to school. I know what I would tell parents in a case like this. However, I would also not fail a child that is working to his/her full potential. Where is the differentiation?

Any advice or words of wisdom would be welcome!

K from Illinois

In just a couple hours and over the next few days thoughtful responses, support, and advice from the *MiddleTalk* community came in.

I feel your pain Kristie. I might start with the facts. Ask the teacher to recreate the assessment process in Science. Hold her accountable before asking why this assessment process is not adhering to the standards of other subjects, such as having parents signing all tests. I think I would like to leave the conference with a plan for success, including a regular (bi-weekly) phone conference about my child's progress. It's my guess that science was not a priority and there were few grades to base the report card grade on... good luck!

C from Pennsylvania

Wow, Kristine! You must be so totally overwhelmed by this situation. It is frustrating to be a parent, especially when your child is hurting like your daughter is. I don't have a solution, just some thoughts, some as a parent, some as a teacher. First off, breathe, breathe, breathe. Go into the meeting calmly, and at all cost, remain calm. Remind yourself that the teacher has her reasons - listen to them. Let her explain the situation and what happened to justify the grade, before you ask anything else. You might be surprised at what she has to say. Then, think rationally about what rationale she has for the grade, her reasons for not notifying you of failed tests, and her comments about your daughter's performance in class. Try to come across as non-threatening. I think as teachers we are often intimidating parents to deal with, often inadvertently, but we come across to our peers as we are right, and would NEVER have created the situation they have.

If you are unsatisfied with her answers and responses to your questions, ask her what the next step is. IF she does not suggest bringing in an administrator, you suggest it.

One caution I have for your comments - you said you would never fail a child who is working to potential. I have some concerns about that. If your daughter is NOT meeting the criteria for "passing" the class, she deserves a failing grade, even with the chance to meet the criteria. But in today's accountability driven education world, teachers sometimes ARE forced to "fail" a child who is trying their hardest, but just cannot quite make the cutoff. I know as a parent that is difficult to consider, but try to keep it in mind.

Come armed with your own thoughts and plans for what can be done differently clear in your own mind. What do you see as a way to prevent this from happening again? Progress reports? Daily monitoring in a planner? Be reasonable in your expectations of the teacher but stand firm for your daughter and her success.

Good luck... my heart goes out to you and your daughter in this struggle. Please let us know how the meeting goes.

C in Minnesota

Hi Kristine. This sounds like a very difficult situation for your daughter and for you! I'm thinking that you'll want to go into the meeting with wide open ears, but be prepared to express your concerns clearly, strongly, and as calmly as possible. A calm but deep concern, disappointment would seem to be the



“high road” as compared to pointing fingers and expressing outright frustration... at least to begin with.

Think ahead of time what you really want as an outcome for the meeting. Think about how you might move the meeting toward that outcome given a number of possible responses to your concerns. Jot down some notes before the meeting that you might refer to at the meeting. Sometimes in the heat of a situation it can be hard to keep to the issues that you are most concerned about.

As for your question about where to begin, listening and taking notes would be first. Let the teacher say what she needs to say. Then, depending on what you hear, lay out your hopes for the meeting. What are they? Better communication? Help for your daughter? Differentiation?

Then, in the context of your goals and what you’ve heard, talk about what you’ve heard the teacher say, your concerns about your daughter, and concerns you have about the process. (I’m guessing that you have concerns about communication between home and school, right?) Then listen to what the teacher has to say in response to your concerns and your goals for the meeting. See if you can determine what she is prepared to do to address your concerns. Consider what she wants you and your daughter to do to improve the situation. Be prepared for the possibility of complete understanding, acknowledgement, forming a partnership, and addressing of your concerns...or...a need to sit down with the principal to review your concerns.

Hope that helps. I’m sure you’ll get some great advice from other folks.

#### C from Maine

Kristine, you have probably already done this, but I would first ask your daughter about any tests she has taken in science and if any of them were handed back. The policy in our district is that if we do not say that a child is failing at progress report time, we cannot fail a student unless we have notified the parent that the child is failing. Even if we said they were in danger of failing we must notify them that their child is failing before giving a failing grade.

After finding out what you can from your daughter, I would find out whatever you can about the assessments from the teacher. Did she send them home to be signed? How often does she give a test? What is the format? What are the students supposed to use to study for the test? Was her failing grade in science due to test grades only? I would find out how low her grade was and if it is very low see if the teacher will raise the grade to something close to passing if your daughter improves the grade for the next marking period. She should have a chance to pass for the year.

Depending on what you learn then I would decide the next steps. Kids do not like to have planners signed. If your daughter is doing all of her homework then I can’t see having her have the planner signed especially since she now feels that she is stupid. If it is only the test grades causing the failure you need

to know what and how she should study for the tests. Make studying for the science tests another thing that you do together. Set up a time during the day that you can communicate with the teacher so that a couple of weeks into the next marking period you can find out how your daughter is doing. Will the teacher e-mail you to let you know when the next test is? Or to let you know how your daughter is doing?

Kristine, folks have offered good reasoned advice as opposed to me who would shake, rattle and roll and wonder very loudly what the point is for flunking a 4th grader in any subject let alone a subject that should be a cause for wonder and curiosity. Once past the shaking and rolling, I would get very pragmatic and ask the school to provide a subscription to *BrainPop* (\$175 per teacher) so that students could review science concepts as many times as necessary. It’s a combination of visual and verbal descriptions are very helpful. If they won’t then I would consider getting a family subscription so your lovely daughter could review science & other concepts at home. It is also \$175 for 12 months - it’s pricey but I think it might be worth it. If the teacher was willing to share upcoming topics, your daughter could get a jumpstart at home. I hope the conference goes well--looking at the ceiling when feeling tears coming on often works to stop the flow. Good luck.

#### J in Maine

And finally, we all received an update from K in Illinois.

Thank you all for your words of wisdom. I met with these teachers last week and while it was interesting for me to hear what they had to say, it also led to great concern. I was concerned that grades in this class are totally subjective. Homework is not graded, students just ‘get credit’ for doing it. Is this credit noted anywhere other than the teacher’s brain? No. There was a ‘pop quiz’ that led to the mid-trimester grade... which “I was surprised that she did so well because I never think she is paying attention or learning anything.” The final grade was based on paying attention in class (again subjective) and this one test, a test that my child had trouble reading to me that was solely body part vocabulary. When asked if the students had been given these words and definitions together ahead of time... “No, they should have picked it up from all that we do in class.” I asked if there were alternate assessments or rubrics for class participation and homework. The answer was not given... she avoided my question. I left the meeting and typed up what I ‘heard’ them say about my child and what my child needs to do... pay better attention, complete work on time, ask questions, etc. I also typed up goals for the teachers and my child for this next trimester. The teacher in question will be emailing me weekly with progress reports. I am also in contact with the administration regarding this issue. They want to be ‘kept in the loop’ about progress.

This meeting was at 7 am. By 6 pm, while I was meeting with other parents in my grade many that have 4th grade

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# Must-Read Books:

## *Keep Cliques and Bullies From Invading Your School: Six Roads Teachers Can Take to Drive Out a Culture of Cruelty*

Reviewed by Jill Spencer

In your mind, quickly profile the typical bully in today's middle and high schools. Is your profile that of a popular boy who is handsome, athletic, and well liked by teachers? A student who staff members are often quick to dismiss charges of bullying about or who often receives another chance or a mild admonishment to stop "teasing" others? The schoolhouse bully has changed over the years, and many schools have not been proactive in addressing the changing nature of bullying.

Sometimes the truth about bullies is more bizarre and far sadder than fiction. NBC Nightly news reported recently that 14 year-old Megan committed suicide after making an acquaintance on MySpace of a young man who first pursued then rejected her. Then she received many hateful online messages. Unable to cope, she took her own life. After her death it came to light that the messages had been a hoax perpetrated by a PARENT of a neighborhood girl who wanted to see if Megan would write bad things about her daughter. The boy never existed. This unconscionable action by this parent illustrates that bullying is a community issue, not just a school-based problem. The community aspect of bullying is one of the issues that Charlene Giannetti and Margaret Sargarese address in their new book from NMSA, *Keep Cliques and Bullies from Invading Your School*.

Giannetti and Sargarese have collaborated on six other books focusing on young adolescents including *The Roller-Coaster Years* and *Cliques: 8 Steps to Help Your Child Survive the Social Jungle*. Presenting together on topics that address the needs of young adolescents they have traveled the country and have appeared on the *Today Show* and the *CBS Early Show*. They bring a lot of experience to their newest endeavor.

*Keep Cliques and Bullies from Invading Your School* addresses six topics, some of which give us pause and suggest that we examine our own practices and behaviors to explore how we might be part of the problem. The topics are the social hierarchy of the classroom, the siren call of fame and fortune, cyber-bullying, verbal and physical abuse, a child's sense of individuality, and roadblocks to eradicating bullying. Each chapter illuminates the issues from the adolescent's point of view, and suggests actions educators, school communities, and parents might take. These suggestions do not come packaged as *3 easy steps to stop bullying* but rather as ideas or directions a school might pursue in order to address the myriad of

bullying issues.

Several chapters highlight issues that either have not been addressed in traditional anti-bullying programs or are recent entries into the spectrum of bullying issues: social hierarchy of the classroom, the siren call of fame and fortune and cyber-bullying. Giannetti and Sargarese hold a mirror up to the classroom teacher and ask us to reflect on classroom practices which may exacerbate the bullying issue by establishing a not-so hidden classroom hierarchy that subtly anoints some students as the "favored" ones. Students with less status in the class are more likely to be picked on and made fun of. None of us likes to think that we might be contributing to a bullying problem in our school, but the authors offer some compelling evidence to the contrary. They also provide a checklist for each of us to fill out as a way to check the reality of our classrooms. It is certainly worth faculty or team meeting time to work through this little assessment together and discuss the results. Minor changes in teacher behavior might have far-reaching results in creating a healthier school culture.

*It's awfully easy to be complacent here in Maine and think, "Yeah, we have some bullying here, but it's not like in other parts of the country."*

Giannetti and Sargarese also focus on how the pop culture of starlets, party girls, rap and hip hop stars, and young, wealthy athletes has shifted the emphasis of success away from making a difference in a community or working hard to achieve influence and wealth to fame and fortune gained rapidly and seemingly with few restrictions. The potty mouths and irresponsible behavior of some pop culture icons often suggests to adolescents that getting in someone's face or responding to disagreements with violence is acceptable, and thus the ugly behaviors caught by the paparazzo's cameras find their way



to the school yard. The authors suggest a variety of ways for schools to counter the unhealthy influences that seep out of the nastier fringes of pop culture and urge schools not to turn a blind eye to this phenomenon.

One last chapter I will highlight is the one on cyber-bullying, an issue all schools need to think through carefully because of the implications for discipline policies. In this chapter the authors alert school staffs to this growing concern. They give several compelling reasons why schools must be proactive about cyber-bullying including that students don't learn when they feel unsafe, incidents that begin on a home computer may end up being acted on in school, and there have been too many sad outcomes from this type of bullying similar to one described in the beginning of this review. Sixteen actions are suggested including an emphasis on working with parents to address this issue. As we know, many parents are reluctant to believe their child would participate in this type of behavior. It makes sense to become partners with parents to educate together the children and other community members about the power of technology before it is necessary to meet them in the conference room as adversaries during a discipline conference. Although Maine middle school staffs are fairly sophisticated

in this area because of the MLTI Project, there are still ideas to be gleaned from this chapter.

It's awfully easy to be complacent here in Maine and think, "Yeah, we have some bullying here, but it's not like in other parts of the country." A visit to a holiday craft show held at a local high school provided a vivid reminder to me that bullying and harassment live very close to home. As I walked through the hall up to the main part of the show I noticed huge pieces of colored poster paper with body shapes outlined in stark relief. Inside of each outline was a 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative of an adolescent's horrifying experience with physical and verbal harassment right here in Maine. The bullying occurred in and out of school, once again making it clear that bullying is a community issue and needs community-wide action.

Charlene Giannetti and Margaret Sargarese's, *Keep Cliques and Bullies from Invading Your School* is a short book (68 pages) that can be used with staff and/or parents to begin or continue the discussion of bullying in your community. They don't duck issues, but more importantly, they suggest multiple actions a school community might explore and implement that will make schools and communities safer and more productive for the children.

# Middle Level Education Institute

Middle Level educators know what works... The 2008 Middle Level Education Institute is designed for schools wanting to improve—veteran middle level schools renewing their commitment to young adolescents' learning, schools new to the middle school concept, schools balancing middle level philosophy and mandates, and those working to integrate technology to improve learning for all students.

**SAVE THESE DATES**

**JUNE 22-26, 2008**

For more information, contact...

**Gert Nesin at [gert.nesin@umit.maine.edu](mailto:gert.nesin@umit.maine.edu)**  
**or Ed Brazee at [ed.brazee@umit.maine.edu](mailto:ed.brazee@umit.maine.edu)**  
**or #207.581.2412**



## Ten New Year's Resolutions

(Continued from Page 1)

critical to have a living, breathing mission statement that guides and directs every decision your school community makes. **Resource:** See *This We Believe in Action (TWBIA)* for more information on mission statements and more importantly, the process of re-considering a new one

6. Invite parents and community members into your school. Let's stop pretending we can ignore parents and operate effectively without them. Use time when parents are in your school for other events or purposes, such as games, concerts, or meetings. Take a few minutes to talk about young adolescent development and middle level education or add some information to any handouts you distribute (athletic or concert programs). **Bottom line:** Parents are always interested in learning more about their own children and appreciate the advice from us – whom they consider as experts. **Resource:** *HELP for Parents*, an inexpensive brochure to buy in bulk to give to parents. They will love it.

7. Assess your school, in parts or as a whole. When was the last time you stepped back to consider if you were successful or not? Of course not, there is never time to do that kind of work. But, being on or off AYP doesn't tell us much about whether we are being successful at addressing the comprehensive goals middle schools set for themselves. **Bottom line:** How can we know where we will go if we don't know where we've been? **Resource:** Investigate school assessment through *NMSA's School Improvement Toolkit*.

8. What is driving you crazy? Sometimes we are overwhelmed about where and how to start in the face of so many things to do. Why not start by picking ONE issue to focus on. Are cliques and bullies an issue in your school (aren't they everywhere?). Why not decide to focus on that issue and make some improvements? **Bottom line:** Decide on a process for seeing this issue through – and as important – someone to take responsibility (and not always the principal). **Resource:** See the

new publication *Keep Cliques and Bullies from Invading Your School* (2007). Perfect as an easy and quick read with lots of ideas to implement yesterday!

9. Don't wait until late spring to start talking with your elementary and high school colleagues about transition into and out of your middle level school. The transition into 9<sup>th</sup> grade just may be the biggest issue around! **Bottom line:** Both middle level and high schools must meet face-to-face to talk about transition issues, Historically, neither group has understood the perspective of the other. Too easy to play the "blame game". **Resource:** Your own colleagues in your district – talk to them today.

10. Never enough time? Make it your business to make time to work for you. Of course, others set our schedules for bus runs, lunch, testing, and more. But we can control time better than we do. **Bottom line:** Middle school teacher teams need at least four periods each week to operate effectively. Why not consider a later start to the school day or some other creative way to gain time? And why not more time for students and adults to reflect and think during the day? Where does that happen? Where could it happen? **Resource:** Hit the Internet, tons of good resources and examples from schools tired of trying to do it all – and with no time. The best resource, however, is teachers who think creatively about this issue.

Imagine what would happen if every middle level school in Maine tried one of these ideas between January and May 2008? Take this as a challenge and let me know what you did and how it turned out; more importantly, what else did it lead to? Good luck...

- Resources mentioned above are available through...
- Maine Association for Middle Level Education (MAMLE) ([www.mamleonline.org](http://www.mamleonline.org))
  - National Middle School Association ([www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org))
  - NASSP ([www.nassp.org](http://www.nassp.org))
  - National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Progress ([www.mgforum.org](http://www.mgforum.org))

## 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 Wally Alexander at [wally.alexander@umit.maine.edu](mailto:wally.alexander@umit.maine.edu).



# An Issue That Should Not Be Overlooked

Kathryn Leeper  
USM Undergraduate Student

Middle level students are going through the most amount of change in the shortest period of time than they ever will in their adult lives. They are becoming much more concerned about their image and social status. Many times, school is one of their last concerns. It wasn't too long ago that I remember being at this age, and "image" was the most important thing to me, and seemed to be on top of many of my peers' minds as well.

At this age of crucial development and vast change, it is important for teachers to be in tune with and realize that students may be having difficulty adjusting. Many students at this age are fixated on how they appear to others. With the social aspect of life being their main concern, students may have a hard time concentrating and putting forth their best effort in school. It can be seen as "un-cool" if students try hard and do well in school, depending on what image they are going for and what kinds of friends they have.

Due to the many changes that occur physically, and their utmost concern being their social status or "image;" a major issue that often arises is bullying. I want to address this particular issue because many times it can be easily overlooked and seen as an inevitable issue that one can't do much about. Bullying occurs more often than many teachers may think, due to the fact that it often occurs behind the teachers' backs. Bullying is an inevitable issue that's bound to happen, especially among students at this age; but something can and should be done about it. Young adolescents are often competitive and pick out those who are different, and poke fun at them. This can be to make-up for an inadequacy they feel they have, or just for their image, so that they look "cool" to others.

This can be a challenging issue for schools to deal with, because it often happens at times when teachers are not present. Bullying may start more often and more severely at the middle level age because there are such obvious differences among students. They are developing and changing at very different rates. Students often see differences as negative aspects, rather than natural, positive occurrences. If a student is teased and bullied a lot at this age, it can really affect his or her emotional growth, and hinder one's self-esteem. Young adolescents are starting to develop their sense of "self" and should be gaining self-confidence. They are becoming more autonomous, and this process should not be hindered.

Middle level students need to feel comfortable in their own school. If they are uncomfortable and feel threatened, learn-

ing will not successfully occur. When there is bullying going on, students who are victims of it are not worrying about their homework or what the answer is to what the teacher is asking. Bullying can have an immense negative impact on students' physical, emotional, or psychological developmental needs. If these needs are not met, then their educational needs can not successfully be met.

*With a proactive approach to bullying from the first day of school, a lot of emotional turmoil and personal difficulties can be prevented.*

There needs to be an awareness of the issue of bullying among faculty in a school system. From my experiences in middle school and from what I have heard in talking with current middle level students, bullies are very tactful in when and where they do it. They purposefully do it so teachers and other faculty do not see or notice it occurring. One small action that could help would be for faculty to be more available and aware. If teachers are visible during lunch breaks, between classes and before and after school, bullying would hopefully be prevented.

There are other ways teachers can address this problem and take preventative action against bullying. With teachers being around more and available outside of the classroom, they should try to make it a point to make small talk with students when they can, even just a simple greeting and checking in to see how they are doing. This will hopefully help the students to feel more comfortable around their teachers and let them know that teachers do care about the students and that they are available to talk to if there is an issue going on.

In NMSA's, *This We Believe*, it is pointed that, "Everyone in an inviting school works proactively to eliminate harassment, verbal abuse, bullying, and name-calling." (p. 13) When everyone in the school community works at putting a stop to bullying, there is more chance that it will be prevented from



*If bullying decreases among students, the educational experiences will be more beneficial and enjoyable for all involved.*

happening. It would also be beneficial in the classroom for teachers to “celebrate” and “respect” differences. If differences are acknowledged and supported, as one’s uniqueness and individuality should be, students will not tend to see being different as a negative aspect. Setting a positive, inviting, classroom community and doing activities to learn about one another’s culture and background would be beneficial for students to get to know one another better and be more comfortable around one another. They will hopefully appreciate and understand the differences among them; which will contribute to decreasing the need to “poke-fun” at one another.

There are also several programs that should be prevalent in all schools at any level. “Peer Mediation” and/or “Conflict Resolution,” for example. Making these programs part of middle level schools was brought up in *Turning Points, 2000*. In this book, the authors state that, “Middle grades schools have found that peer mediation and conflict resolution programs are

effective in defusing conflicts between students and in teaching anger management and communication skills.” (p. 177) These programs can be helpful because students can take their problems to peer groups, rather than just adults. This could be important for students who may feel they can’t open up to an adult, especially one they don’t know very well.

If teachers and administration can address the issue of bullying and be proactive about it, rather than only acting on it when they see it occurring, it will hopefully decrease the number of cases of bullying. With the effects of bullying often being mostly emotional, it can be hard to tell if one is hurt or not. So it is crucial for faculty to be active and aware of this very common issue, especially among middle level schools. With a proactive approach to bullying from the first day of school, a lot of emotional turmoil and personal difficulties can be prevented. If bullying decreases among students; the educational experiences will be more beneficial and enjoyable for them.

#### Resources

Jackson, A. and Davis, G. (2000). *Turning Points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Teachers College Press.

National Middle School Association. (2003). *This we believe: successful schools for young adolescents*. Ohio: National Middle School Association.

### *MiddleTalk continued from Page 9*

parents were commenting on these grading questions. They would say things like, “I love that the fifth grade has such definitive grading criteria...fourth grade seems to be falling apart.” The teachers in 4th grade are veteran teachers who seem to be losing their way. The teacher in question was apologizing to parents all evening for lack of communication but not changing grades. She is going to be very busy emailing many parents this trimester.

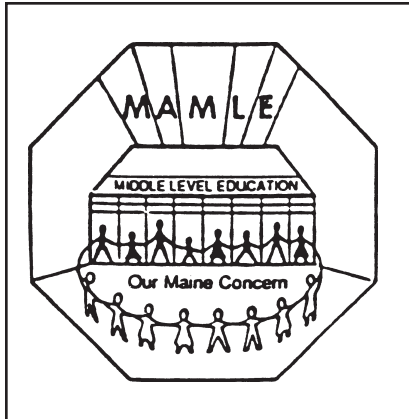
Again, thank you all for your insight and ideas. I went in to this meeting more confident than ever and I listened. I asked questions. I heard what they had to say and was still able to communicate my concerns. I think that this will be a

year that we will just have to ‘get through’ and move on. I will continue to work with my child to build her up and find ways for her to become successful. I will also continue to communicate with the teacher, as well as all of you, on the progress of this year. Thank you again!

I learned so very much from all of you every day that I am happy to be able to finally give back in some way. The experience has been eye opening for me. I am a better parent to all of my children from this experience. I am also a better teacher after going through this. The view from ‘the other side of the desk’, while not pretty this time, was one that I will remember each and every time I sit down with a parent.

*mamleonline.org*  
*Newly Redesigned*

*The Maine Association for Middle Level Education website has a new look. We have tried to provide you with information and resources related to middle level education in Maine and across the country. Stop in and find great information and resources, including 2008 Conference information.*



# 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:**

*Mainely 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

Undergraduate Student Membership (\$5.00)	1st Year Teacher/1st Year Member (\$15.00)
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Institutional membership entitles the member school to 6 copies of *Middle Link*, 2 copies of *Mainely Middle*, conference discount for all staff in that building, and 2 votes eligibility.

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# *Annual MAMLE Conference!*

*October 23 - 24, 2008*  
*Sugarloaf USA*

The Maine Association for Middle Level Education invites one and all to our Annual Conference at Sugarloaf U.S.A., October 23 - 24, 2008. The conference will feature two full days of concurrent sessions, workshops, team presentations, keynote addresses, exhibits, and networking among teams and schools. The Annual MAMLE conference is designed to allow teams of teachers to attend sessions and meet with their team for staff development time. Teams and schools use this conference as a beginning-of-the-year staff retreat, a great way to set goals and direction for the rest of the year. Low-cost, overnight lodging in Sugarloaf condominiums makes it possible for teams to stay and work together. Special features will include:

- A flexible conference format that allows you to attend two full days of conference activities, one day, or some combination.
- A variety of practical and useful sessions, break-out groups, and meetings on topics that are most important in Maine's middle level schools. The conference includes sessions for administrators and team leaders, as well as teachers of all grades and content areas. You will take home many great ideas to help improve your school!
- Exemplary Practice Winners and Janet Nesin Reynold Outstanding Middle Level Educators will be announced and recognized.
- The latest resources from MAMLE, NMSA, NELMS, and other fine exhibitors.
- Networking opportunities with teachers and principals from around the region.

Spend two exciting days with teachers, principals and other practitioners from excellent middle level schools to learn more about: Using Computers in Classroom Instruction -- Implementing Learning Results -- Student-Involved 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](mailto:wallace.alexander@umit.maine.edu).**

**Registration materials are available at [mamleonline.org](http://mamleonline.org)**

### **Group Rates Available!**

**MAMLE is happy to offer special registration rates for groups of 12 or more. Groups of 12-20 receive a discount of 20% off regular registration fees. Groups of 20+ receive a 25% discount.**