

The Implementation of Middle School Concepts in a 7–12 Junior Senior High School

J. Abramovitch, J. Christie, C. Costanzo, D. Cruet, M. Heaney, G. Fine, M. Freddo, K. Kaiser, J. Steimel & C. Tedesco



Initiatives and Obstacles

Eastport-South Manor Junior Senior High School (ESM) is located in Suffolk County, Long Island, New York. Following the merger of Eastport and South Manor School Districts, students in grades 7-12 entered Long Island's newest Junior/Senior High School in 2003-2004. The Eastport-South Manor Junior Senior High School, under the leadership of building principal, Joseph Steimel, and with the support of faculty and staff, has successfully created a common vision for the building. Currently, the Eastport-South Manor Junior Senior High School has an enrollment of 1850 students, which include 630 seventh and eighth graders.

Creating a unique identity for our seventh and eighth grade students is both a short and long term priority for administration and faculty. This article describes the steps taken in 2010-2011 to implement middle-level concepts and program components within a 7-12 junior-senior high school. Working as a team, we built the foundation for continued growth and development of a unique "middle school" experience within the broader 7-12 grade configuration. Professional and staff development in support of our goals includes: regularly held grade-level meetings, participation in a regional Middle Level Collegial Network, staff development in differentiated instruction, Seventh Grade Interest Survey and qualitative study, development of a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) committee, an Outdoor Environmental Educational Experience, and a revised seventh grade orientation for 2011-2012.

Team Meetings

In developing the master schedule, providing common-planning for all seventh grade core teachers is a priority. The seventh grade has three teams with approximately 100 students per team. Each core teacher (ELA, math, science, and social studies) has common-planning period one. Common-planning periods at ESM are set-up primarily by department. This past year we began dedicating common-planning periods to the development of our interdisciplinary teams. It was important for us to begin the team building process as a grade level. We began our year-long discussion with two guiding questions: "How can we create a school that is responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents?" and "How do interdisciplinary teams address the needs of children, curriculum, and professional development?"

In response to the question, "How can we create a school that is responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents?" we identified the following: create small learning environments, develop consistency in expectations, conduct team building activities, work as a team (all teachers), hold an advisory period, eliminate tracking, stress the development of organizational skills, implement common-planning, and hands-on learning activities. When answering the second question, "How do interdisciplinary teams address the needs of children, curriculum, and professional development?" it was clear that there was convergence among the three independent variables identified. Common-planning, clear expectations, developing meaningful relationships with students, knowledge of curriculum

timelines, flexibility in instruction, and interdisciplinary activities were the themes that emerged. Throughout the year, in each of our common-planning meetings we referred to our guiding questions to focus our discussion. During our meetings we implemented team-building strategies learned from participation in a regional Middle Level Collegial Network sponsored by Eastern Suffolk BOCES and facilitated by Dr. Nancy Doda.

The Middle-Level Collegial Network

A team of five teachers and administrators participated in a regional Middle Level Collegial Network with Dr. Nancy Doda in 2010-2011. We attended four full-day workshops throughout the year. Approximately 80 people participated from several Long Island schools. The four sessions addressed an overview of quality middle-level instruction, the development of teaming and advisory, the creation of active and engaging learning, and the development of interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum. One member of our MLCN team reflecting on our work stated:

While discussing with teachers of students from the same and different disciplines, administrators from varying sized middle schools as well as teachers and administrators from my home district, it became more and more evident what practices were most effective in meeting the students' varied needs under certain conditions. A few practices discussed were to involve students in their education process, make them feel comfortable so as to encourage risk taking in the classroom, and getting to know them individually.

Some of these ideas we immediately put into practice both in our classrooms and/or throughout our building, while others such as a revamped student orientation day for the incoming seventh grade are currently in the planning stages.

We recognized the benefits of working with the collegial network and wanted to expose all of our seventh grade faculty to the tools and strategies we learned. This past April, Dr. Doda came to ESM. We enjoyed a day of staff development that included practical applications for working with and meeting the needs of young adolescents.

The Sunken Meadow Experience

In an effort to foster team identity, we wanted to provide students with a meaningful educational experience that would build relationships and trust among students. For many years ESM seventh grade students attended the YMCA instructional center at Frost Valley. The overnight excursion was no longer viable, and we worked in our team meetings to find an appropriate alternative. As each of our initiatives illustrates, we put a team of teachers together to research and identify a field trip experience for the entire seventh grade. The committee included science teachers, physical education teachers, and grade level leaders. We worked closely with a liaison from Western Suffolk BOCES and developed an Outdoor Environmental Educational Experience at Sunken Meadow State Park. The day-long field trip itinerary included a "properties of water" lab, soil studies, orienteering along the Greenbelt Trail (which overlooks the Long Island Sound), and a project adventure challenge course. The challenge course was developed and facilitated by our own physical education staff. One seventh grade teacher noted:

Having been to Frost Valley, as a student and a chaperone, I can honestly say it is a trip that creates great memories. However, I understood the problems with the trip and was ready for an alternative. Sunken Meadow is a great alternative to the Frost Valley experience. Long Island is a beautiful place with wonderful history. It is great

for young adults to experience what their home has to offer and learn things about Long Island that they never knew.

Another member of the seventh grade team reflecting on the field trip said:

Students were challenged in different ways. For starters, student groups were integrated and diverse. The atmosphere was safe and nonjudgmental. Through a student driven, democratic process, they had to problem solve collaboratively, self-evaluate and persevere. This allowed students who may not excel in the normal academic or sports world to stand out and demonstrate a different ability they had of which others may not have been aware. The Sunken Meadow field trip provided a great opportunity for the students, (as well as the teachers and students), to get to know each other outside of the traditional classroom.

Each team went on a designated day in April of 2011. It was a rewarding experience for all, and now that we have completed the organizing of the trip we plan to move the experience to early October to gain the long term benefit of the emphasis on team building.

Seventh Grade Interest Survey and Qualitative Research

ESM has two junior high guidance counselors. Students remain with their counselors for seventh and eighth grade. To ease the

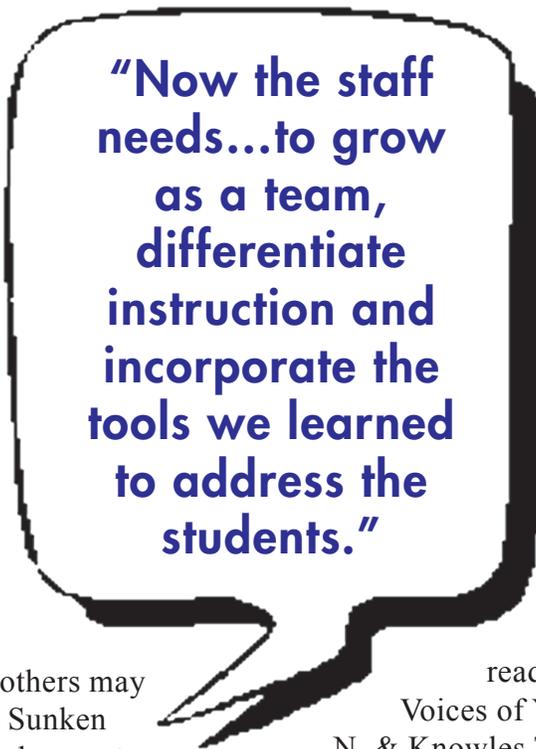
transition from elementary school and to build a rapport with their students; guidance counselors developed a Seventh Grade Student Survey. The survey assessed students' feelings about their seventh grade experience to include their ability to: find their classes, use

lockers, organize their agenda books, and manage academic and extra-curricular activities. The guidance counselors organized the surveys and met with small groups of students who shared common interests and identified similar needs on their surveys. The counselors were able to meet with every seventh grade student and establish the groundwork for building a strong relationship with each student.

Participating in the Middle Level Collegial Network, we read a portion of "Listening to the Voices of Young Adolescents," (Doda, N. & Knowles T., 2008) published in the National Middle School Association's *Middle School Journal*. The qualitative research used the prompt, "What should middle school teachers know about middle school students?" We adapted the research at ESM and surveyed 261 seventh grade students. Out of 261 respondents, 129 male and 132 female students answered the prompt. Responses were grouped by academic and social needs. The findings will be used in 2011-2012 to deepen our understanding of the needs of young adolescents.

Orientation

When a seventh grader enters ESM, it is our job to ease the tension and anxiety he or she feels. Previously, seventh grade orientation was conducted in August. Students sat for



a brief presentation, received t-shirts, their schedules and a tour of the building; culminating with a barbeque. During the year, in our interdisciplinary team meetings we discussed ways to provide students with a more comprehensive and meaningful orientation.

We met this summer; each interdisciplinary team was represented by two members. As a group, we agreed to make the first day of school an orientation in lieu of an August orientation. Team members discussed the challenges new students face the first weeks of school. We identified a list of the basic needs students had; they included: locker issues, getting lost, organizational skills, and questions they had about routines and procedures. This year, each discipline will address one of the four needs identified on the first day of school. The day will be dedicated to student transition to their new school.

PBIS

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) was piloted at South Street Elementary School (grades K-2 building in the district) during the 2010-2011 school year, and so far it is proving to be successful. A committee was formed at ESM and we are well on our way toward implementing PBIS this school year.

The system consists of acknowledging positive behavior. Students will receive gotcha tickets that they can cash in for tangible and nontangible rewards. All staff members will be looking out for positive behavior and acknowledging the students with positive reinforcement.

PBIS is not something that can change the climate of a school overnight. We are completing a district-wide PBIS manual for Board of Education approval. It takes a lot of data collection and analysis, but we think we are

moving in the right direction. We look forward to our September kickoff activities.

Next Steps

In 2011-2012, the seventh grade faculty looks forward to continuing our work in the development of our interdisciplinary teams. Utilizing the framework outlined by the New York State Middle School Association to include the completion of *The Essential Elements: Self Survey*; we want to continue to reflect on and improve our instructional program.

Meeting more regularly as interdisciplinary teams to create unique team cultures is a priority this year. We also look forward to the implementation of PBIS in the junior high.

A natural synthesis among various staff development is another goal for 2011-2012. We want to embed the team-building strategies of Dr. Nancy Doda with the differentiated instructional strategies shared by Judy Dodge into integrated team projects.

One of the seventh grade team members, reflecting on a full year of work, stated: "Now the staff needs to see how to grow as a team, differentiate instruction and incorporate the tools we learned to address the students' learning styles." We look forward to the work ahead this year.

References

Doda, N., & Knowles, T. (2008). Listening to the voices of young adolescents. *Middle School Journal*, 39(3), 26-33.