

# IN THE MIDDLE

OHIO MIDDLE LEVEL ASSOCIATION

*As One Year Ends...*

*...A New One Will Begin*



Making the Last Day Count



Laying out the Red Carpet  
In the Middle 1



OHIO MIDDLE LEVEL  
ASSOCIATION

## IN THE MIDDLE

Spring 2016-2017

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*In the Middle* is the official newsletter of the Ohio Middle Level Association and is published three times per year.

Submissions on topics relevant to middle level education are encouraged and should be submitted to newsletter co-editor kristen.lavric@gmail.com.

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# President's Message

Jay Clark

OMLA President

Principal, Van Buren Middle School



With the mild weather throughout January and February, it seems that our students began preparing for summer much earlier than normal. While it may seem cliché, I do feel we are tasked with making the days count rather than counting the days. Make a promise to yourself and your students to stop with the end of year countdown! Give your students a reason to look forward to coming to your classroom, even on those warm April and May afternoons. Collaboratively plan units that will engage our students, provide real world problem-solving opportunities, and allow students to create. While this should be happening all year, it's especially important as summer break grows closer. If you're looking for resources to help facilitate collaboration, check out our mini-grants. Applications are due June 1 and are available on our website, [www.ohiomla.org](http://www.ohiomla.org). During our March #OhioMLA chat, moderator Mike Janatovich led a discussion on how we can extend our classrooms. We discussed both physical and virtual field trips, but also talked about how we can use space outside of our classrooms. Take advantage of a grassy area full of sunshine outside your school to read or write. Change things up with a simple change of environment. Learn more about a variety of topics by joining us for our #OhioMLA Twitter chats the second Tuesday of each month at 8:00pm.

The Ohio Middle Level Association has hosted a number of regional events throughout the state since our fall state conference. Our board members work hard to ensure that we offer more to our members including professional learning, networking, and even student recognition opportunities. If you have ideas, please reach out to your regional representatives who are listed on our website under the "About Us" link.

Plan now to put your gears in motion at our 2017 state conference! Eric Sheninger, Manny Scott, and Jack Berckemeyer will highlight the conference. Our attendees rave about the break-out sessions led by Ohio educators. If you are interested in sharing knowledge, experiences, or ideas as a conference presenter, those proposals are due June 15. We hope to see you November 2-3, 2017 at the Columbus Hilton at Easton!

# May's Celebrations & Motivation Challenges

## *Ideas for Boosting Engagement*

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**Stephanie Snyder**

Southeast Region

Having taught in a parochial and public school during my time serving middle level students, I know that PK-8 buildings do a magnificent job of celebrating the near decade long accomplishments of their students before the transition from middle grades to high school. The district where I teach has a rich history surrounding one special night in May, 8th Grade Recognition (in our neck of the woods it is on equal footing with high school commencement, truly). When so much anticipation surrounds end of the year events, we as educators know it can be challenging to keep students engaged and growing throughout the month of May. And so, once the sunshine comes out and the weather warms up here in Ohio, students know this celebratory time is approaching. How do we keep them engaged and motivated right up until the end?

As educators, we all know that “I’ve run a marathon because it is the end of my teaching day and it is the month of May feeling” and this is on top of all that comes with these year-end celebrations for committed teams: a great deal of preparation to properly honor and send off students. I teach in a small, rural district so it is a lot of work in our setting where facilities and resources are shared as is administration meaning teams of teachers coordinate, plan, and prep events putting in hours upon hours in addition to our normal duties with unwavering support of our principal who oversees grades Pk-8. A few years back I decided that to boost engagement and work right up until end of year celebrations commence I needed to try something new in my classroom during this stressful time.

For the past several years in my eighth grade language arts classroom, I have found a way to balance it all! I developed a plan to close out the year with a highly personalized unit guided by a broad theme: Reading is empowering. We explore this idea first together then move into the month of May when things really get going for this unit. Each student develops his or her own highly engaging and challenging young adult literature book

selections; plans/plots out a reading schedule for use the final month, selects from choice menus the differentiated work to do while reading; then presents a culminating project one of the last days of school to our team. As a side note, the clerks at the desk in our county library system know me and my color-coded crates well because each year I go in the first weekend of May and pick up students’ personal book selections and return to school with them where they are kept in my classroom— otherwise we would have limited choices working only within our school library to select books and/or inability to acquire the books due to limited funding (students and school), lack of transportation for students to go pick up their books at the county library, and numerous other issues often unique to urban and rural schools alike.

The work my students will do with these young adult books is unique to one’s individual needs and tied to pathways I have developed to strengthen a weak area; these paths are tied to data I collect all year and their personal input shared during personalized conferences but can work with any novel they select— so there is high buy in. They are also differentiated tied to readiness and learning style. Through a series of surveys which examine the affective domain of readers in my classroom, their preferences, interests, and preferred sub-genres with young adult literature I am able to come to know my students early on in the year; so, by the last month of school during quarter four, it comes easier than many might expect to assist students in this process— all the while supporting and watching them spread their wings and fly to accomplish and manage it!

I have blocked language arts periods, roughly 90 minutes, and they have independent reading days (days where they work at their own paces using their calendars to meet reading goals and complete their differentiated during and after reading work), conference days, and project work days. We have a trip to Washington D.C. thrown into the mix too in

May each year at our middle school, so depending on if students attends the 8th grade trip or not they have to still ensure they are meeting their reading goals and adapt and plan accordingly. The rest is totally up to them as to how they accomplish their goals with much scaffolding and guidance in place on my end through organizations systems, routines, and establishing ground rules for where we work in the room depending on the task and how this can happen allowing for all of us to achieve our goals in one space.

Then last, when all students have returned from the 8th grade trip to D.C., they give final book cover project and book talk presentations during school. Later, that evening, we celebrate them in our 8th Grade Recognition Program. One of my favorite parts of the 8th Grade Recognition Ceremony that night at our school is when students arrive— each having put their own spin on the formal event, each unique personality shining through in their style and outfits as they walk into the room where we meet and greet one another and their teachers. These are the same personalities reflected in their book projects, selections, and work during this unit which I purposefully developed and teach leading up to the culmination of their time in middle school.

I would encourage my colleagues working in the middle level to ask, “How could I structure a project for students similarly?” keeping in mind the unique needs, constraints and challenges for the month of May and the end of the year. Consider what this might look like in light of *This We Believe* which runs throughout my structuring of this project and don’t be afraid to take risks to try something new!

Young adolescents rise to the occasion when given the chance to exercise agency and choice in their work, and when they are supported, challenged, and highly engaged— being given the tools and supports to succeed independently! May can be *very tiring* but when I see my students walk across that stage to be honored, every year it is absolutely worth it to run this project in my room. Not only do students continue to grow rather than plateau in the last month, but I actually have the energy to get out on that dance floor at their celebration and share in the fun with my students because both they and I have had fun learning and staying productive in the month leading up to it through this project in my classroom.

## Ohio Middle Level Association

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# Making the Last Day Count

Lisa Nemeth  
Central Region

When a student is in eighth grade they seem to get everything! A trip to Washington, DC, High School Tours, special assemblies, and a cookout at the pool on the last day of school! For years, seventh grade teachers tried their best to make the last day of school fun and engaging. So when seventh grade math teacher Cheri Wimmers came across an interesting article while reading an Ohio Education Association magazine, she immediately shared it with her colleagues. It explained a team-based competition similar to a field day, adding in a component to challenge students academically. The grade level ran with it and it has now become a yearly tradition for the school, aptly named SchoOlympis. "SchoOlympis is the perfect way for our seventh graders to end their year," says Katie Silcott, choir teacher. She goes on to say, "The students spend all year building camaraderie on their teams and they carry out their pride and competitive spirit through exciting middle-school-style Olympic events."

In the *Opening Ceremonies*, a student from each team gathers to sing the National Anthem. Students sign up for and participate in *Brain Games* in the morning ranging from board games, puzzles, trivia contests, a cookie bake off, to design challenges in classrooms. In the afternoon, all four teams gather in the gymnasium to participate in the *Field Events*. Each team adopts a different color to wear for the day. "Some kids take it to the extreme with face paint, bandannas,

or head to toe colors!" added Silcott. Relay races, a limbo contest, and dribble tag are intermixed with many unorthodox events. Some of the more silly events include, boy with the hairiest legs, a *Fear Factor* relay, tallest and shortest student, and a lip sync contest. Sarah, a former student of Bunsold Middle School said, "The dance off was the best! It was a great way to end the year and allow us to step out of our comfort zones."



*Dressed according to teams, students participate in an Egg-Roll Relay and enthusiastically cheer one another on during this SchoOlympis event.*

**Join OMLA for a monthly middle level education Twitter chat!**



# #OhioMLA

**Second Tuesday of each Month | 8PM EST**

**Co-Moderators: @mjsedlak & @mjnatovich**



## Putting Your Gears in Motion **OMLA 2017 State Conference**

November 2 & 3 ★ The Columbus Hilton at Easton

Registration Form & Information at: [www.ohiomla.org](http://www.ohiomla.org)



## Reflecting at the End of the Year

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Tiffany West

East Region

The school year is almost over. There, I said it. Read on to find seven creative ideas for year-end lessons that will get your students reflecting about all of the great things they accomplished in the last nine months.

1. **Science-Inspired Art.** Head outside with paper and art supplies such as watercolors, colored pencils and chalk. Ask your students to create a wall-worthy piece of art that reflects something they learned in science. Did you study plants? Maybe a watercolor of flowers. Or if you studied space? A cosmic-inspired number. Dirt?
2. **People of the Year.** Time Magazine can't have all the fun. Help your students to compile a book of the "People of the Year" for your class. Make sure to include important people to your classroom (the custodian, the principal and even the lunch lady.)
3. **Teach Me.** Flip your classroom upside down AND backwards. Have each student prepare a video lesson on a topic they learned about during the year. Then have them (re)teach the class what they learned.
4. **Count 'Em Up.** Get students counting by having them use a calendar to figure out how many Mondays you've had this year, how many Fridays, how many P.E. days and how many Jello-in-the-cafeteria days. Then work together to make a bar graph and hang it on the wall.
5. **Dear Next Year's Class.** Have your students write letters of advice to next year's students.
6. **Middle School Musical.** Break your students into groups and have them create (and perform) musical numbers commemorating the year.
7. **Book Hall-of-Fame.** Have each student write (or draw) a reflection on the best book they read over the year. Then, save their reflections and post them on a bulletin board so that next year's students can glean reading ideas.

*Note: Ideas were originally taken from We Are Teachers.*

# How fast is too fast? Who sets the pace? How can the wrong pace make problems worse? How can the right pace facilitate meaningful change?

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**Tom Burton**

OMLA Southwest Region Representative

Leading a middle school through a school year is much like preparing for a race—before it begins you are filled with questions about how the year will unfold—am I ready for the challenges, both known and unknown that I will face throughout the year?

Like running a cross-country race, you head into a school year with a fast start, settle into a good pace, face a few challenges, and finish quickly. I offer here a walk through of snippets from my cross-country experience, blended with their application to middle-level education.

*The First Leg: More than 200 runners were preparing to make their mark at the first cross-country meet of the year. I was not a gifted runner and knew that I would not be competitive in a big race.*

*Once the starter raised the pistol, I was on my mark. For that moment, the silence was deafening; I couldn't hear anyone breathing. As the sound of the starter pistol echoed through the valley, I took off, sprinting to the turn. After all, my coach always said that we should start fast, settle into a good pace, and save a little extra for the end.*

Lesson: Pace yourself. While the start of each year is exciting and is most often met with

great enthusiasm, setting goals and having specific action steps for any new initiative will help you stay focused for the year. As a runner, I had to find the balance between falling behind and burning out. The same is true in education.

Further, my relationship to other runners was secondary to my internal struggle to do my best. There will always be a faster runner, just as there will always be another school or district with better resources. An educator's ability to be the best teacher possible is a critical part of pacing; the goal is not to finish first, but to set a personal best.

*The Second Leg: I turned a corner and saw a very steep hill rising out of a field of weeds. As I followed the dusty path and the runners who were ahead of me, I knew my toughest battles were yet to come.*

*Being behind and knowing that I had the majority of the race ahead of me was one thing, but I was just trying to survive and move up a few places. As I got closer to the hill, I realized that some of the runners had slowed considerably. I thought if I attacked the hill and kept moving I could make up some time.*

*After a few strides up the hill, I realized reaching my goal was going to be harder than I*

*thought. It seemed easy enough. I was in good enough shape, had run hills before, and had an excellent coach. However, the incline was steep and the wind, which had been non-existent all day, seemed to pick up as I started my ascent.*

Lesson: Plan for the hills and don't quit. Throughout the year, you will be faced with incredible challenges that in some cases will seem insurmountable. Overcoming an obstacle will take extra work and a focused determination. Dealing with difficult situations is never easy. Part of overcoming an obstacle is gathering information and separating the critical from the superfluous, the helpful from the damaging. Whether the obstacle is a difficult parent, implementation of a new program, a particularly challenging class, or some other unforeseen barrier to optimum practice, seeking assistance, maintaining focus, and pushing through to a positive solution are critical. You can't finish the race without getting over the hill.

*The Third Leg: As I reached the top and took my last step on the hill, I was relieved and relaxed. Just then, I heard my coach encouraging me to "push off the hill. He wanted me to continue to work hard after I made it up and over the hill. I quickened my pace*

*and immediately understood why he encouraged me to do so. Some of the runners were walking after they made it up the hill, while others were barely jogging. It's easy to forget that the race is not over when the first obstacle is overcome; my coach reminded me that, while I had accomplished something, I was not yet finished.*

Lesson: Push off the hill and keep the momentum. After dealing with a difficult situation or implementing a program, there is no time to relax. You maintain focus to ensure the situation is resolved or the program is running smoothly. When facing uphill battles, it is critical to continue moving in a positive direction. Far too often, educators abandon a practice or a program that is great for kids because a few vocal parents don't see the big picture. Todd Whitaker, the author of *Dealing with Difficult People*, talks about one of the worst educational practices we have: allowing negative, non-supportive people to influence the decisions we make. As my coach encouraged

me to do, you must maintain focus and momentum after reaching a goal.

*The Fourth Leg: After following my coach's advice and pushing off the hill, I saw the broad expanse of the rest of the race course in front of me. While I had just finished a difficult task and continued to work hard after its completion, I now saw that I wasn't all that close to the finish line; I had to keep running, uncertain if there were more hills or uninterrupted flat land in front of me.*

*The majority of the remainder of the race was relatively uneventful: a few rolling hills, a gentle stream, and a winding path through the woods. Coming out of the woods, I saw the finish line roughly a quarter of a mile away. I picked up my pace; I knew I must finish strong.*

*As I crossed the finish line somewhere in the middle of the runners, I knew I had given it my all and would take this experience and learn from it.*

Lesson: Finish strong. As with any race, you must finish the

school year strong. The school year passes in the blink of an eye, and before you know it, you are lined up again, ready for another school year, another race. Celebrating the success of the school year and the obstacles you've overcome is necessary and reassuring. You've completed a year with success; now you have to turn your attention, once again, to the next school year, as the process begins again.

### Getting Back Up

At the end of last year, I was preparing my final thoughts to address students participating in eighth-grade promotion, and I needed a little motivation. After coming up empty searching the Internet, I checked some e-mails and ultimately zeroed in on one from a friend in Tennessee. The mail included a link to a video aptly titled "Are You Going to Finish Strong?" In the video, Nick Vujicic talks about finishing strong and getting up after falling down. Born with no arms or legs, he has the strength every day to get up if he falls down.

Throughout the school year, it may seem difficult to continue to "get back up" after a difficult day, week, or even month. However, by keeping the example of Nick in mind, we should be inspired to keep the focus on the kids, get up, and finish strong.



# Laying out the Red Carpet

Lisa Ralph

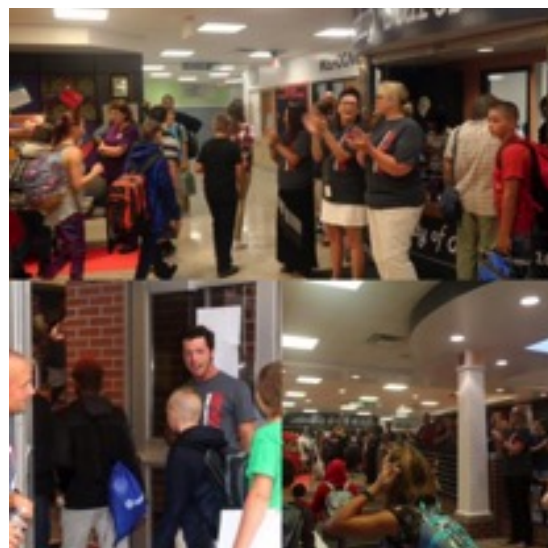
Central Region

Not only do celebrities get the red carpet treatment, but Grant Middle School students in Marion, Ohio do as well.

Grant continued a new tradition to kick off the 2016-17 school year. Students entered the building on a red carpet as they were cheered and clapped on by staff members. You could hear cheers and see hugs as our students returned for another year of learning.

We held a leadership day on the third day of school with the goal of starting the year on a positive note by completing team building activities to get to know our teachers and immersed students in an opportunity to apply the “7 Habits of Highly Successful People.” They had the chance to learn about careers from community members who volunteered their time. The community members represented various careers that exist in the Marion community and led activities to show students how the habits apply to their daily work. Students ended the leadership day by starting their own

leadership data notebooks to track academic, behavior, and attendance progress. Students set their own reading and math goals to help develop accountability and a growth mindset. Students continued to track their goals and add to their data notebooks throughout the school year. They used the notebooks to conduct student led conferences with parents.



The activities showed students that the staff and community care about them and that goal setting impacts success in life. It laid the foundation for our efforts to stress the importance of setting goals and striving to meet them. We continued to work on the habits, goals and careers throughout this school year. We will end the year with another leadership day to reflect on our academic, behavior and future career goals.



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# Practical Ideas for Building Classroom Community Right from the Start

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Jessica Hess and Bethany Saxton

West Region

As teachers, we must do an immense amount of planning in the summer to effectively teach our students throughout the school year. As we plan each lesson, we envision exactly what this will look like: students working cooperatively in groups, students engaged and on-task, students listening quietly and intently when the teacher is talking, and students smiling and enjoying the company of their peers and teacher. Sounds perfect, doesn't it? However, new and veteran teachers alike know that this is not always how lessons come to life. Sometimes, students do not work well in groups. Sometimes, students blurt out responses, and sometimes students do not enjoy the company of their classmates. What is a possible solution? Start your students' school year off right! Effective beginning of the year strategies are vital to ensuring a successful school year.

We've interviewed veteran teachers and done our own independent research to find some of the best ways to not only start your school year off right, but to support a year of success in your classroom.

**Would You Rather Questions:** Break the ice with your students on the first day of school with an engaging game of Would You Rather! You could create your own Would You Rather cards with a 'first week of school' theme or come up with your own goofy questions. To kick off the game, have half of your students form a circle, facing out, somewhere in your classroom. Then, have the other half of your students (yourself included!) face someone in the circle. Make sure each student has a Would You Rather card and let the fun begin! Set a timer for two minutes and have each pair of students share their questions with one another. Once the timer goes off, have the students in the outer circle rotate to the right while the students in the inner circle rotate their cards to the left. Keep going until you've gone through all of the cards!

**Your Job/My Job Chart:** As all teachers know, setting expectations the first week of school is essential for a successful year. Why not include your students in the process and create a classroom Your Job/My Job Chart? This activity can be carried out in multiple ways, so do whatever works best with your teaching style. One way you could do this is by splitting the students into groups of four or five and having each group write their own chart on a poster. Explain to the students that the 'Your Job' side should be made up of expectations they have of you as their teacher and the 'My Job' side is reserved for expectations the students have for themselves to be successful throughout the year. Make sure you create one yourself! When all groups have finished their posters, hang them up around the room for the day. Then, that evening put together a final Your Job/My Job Chart based on the charts your students created to keep hung up in the classroom during the school year.

**Six Word Memoirs:** Students in the middle level love to write about themselves; they have so many stories they want to share with others. Give your students a unique opportunity to express who they are through Six Word Memoirs! The goal is for students to describe themselves using exactly six words—no more, no less. Some students might be hesitant to create one if they do not feel comfortable with others in the class yet. To encourage those more reserved students, make sure you create your own Six Word Memoir and share it with the class before they get started. Once all students have written theirs, you could compile them all into a Slideshow or have the students write them on a piece of card stock and decorate them to go on the classroom door. If I had to write a Six Word Memoir about this activity it would be, "While students write, teachers gain knowledge."

*Continued on page 11*

**Classroom Vision:** Guide the students in creating their own classroom vision. Often times, there are misinterpretations between what the teacher expects and what the students think the teacher expects. The two are not always the same. This can lead to a frustrated teacher and students feeling like the teacher isn't being fair. To solve this problem, help your students create a classroom vision. A classroom vision is similar to rules for the classroom. The difference is, students help create these rules. The rules are not general, but very specific, so teacher, and student are on the same page. Implement the classroom vision within the first week or two of school. Before the class creates the vision, think about what you want your classroom to look like and feel like. As a teacher, what do you want your classroom environment to look like when you are teaching to have a fulfilled day, rather than a stressed out day? Jot these things down. Use your list later to influence the students' rules for their vision. Then, grab a poster and a set of markers. Tell your students just like them, you want to have a fun, happy, classroom, while at the same time learning something new. To do this, both teacher and students need to all be on the same page. Express to your students this is their classroom, they should help decide what the classroom will look like, feel like, and sound like. Label the chart 'Classroom Vision', make four columns, labeling them: See, Hear, Do, Feel. Students will list the things they want in their classroom for each column. Be sure to add your rules as well, and encourage the students to participate. Have your students sign the poster. Be consistent with the rules decided, and watch your classroom of students flourish all year.

**Scavenger Hunts:** A school day seems so much longer and less is accomplished when students are constantly asking questions like, "Can I go to the bathroom?" "What time is our Special, today?" or "Do you have a Band-Aid?" Save your classroom instruction time for classroom instruction time, instead of wasting valuable seconds answering these questions by having a scavenger hunt the first few days of the school year. Give students a handout that guides them on a hunt through the classroom, halls, and bathrooms, to learn how

procedures will work in the classroom, and where to locate things the students may need. Students will enjoy the socialization and game-like nature of this activity, and you will love the results! For example, don't like students raising their hands in the middle of your well-planned lesson to go to the bathroom? Create a bathroom sign-out sheet for your classroom. Students will get so many bathroom breaks a day. They don't ask when they need to go, they just sign out. Place this on your scavenger hunt sheet, so students can learn how this process works. The scavenger hunt activity will have your classroom running like a well-oiled machine.

**Student Interview Sheets:** Create an interview sheet for each of your students to fill out at the beginning of the year. Then, have a similar sheet for parents to fill out about their child. Ask questions that not only lend to how the student excels academically, but also include the student's interests, hobbies, dislikes, personality type, motivations, and home life situation. Ask quality questions of the student's and parents without being too invasive. The more you know about your students and their families, the better chances are you can reach them, and if you can reach them, you can teach them!

Start your year off right by trying one of these activities in your classroom! Not only will your relationship with your students start off strong, but also you and your students will be establishing a safe, comfortable, and fun learning environment that will carry on throughout the rest of the year.