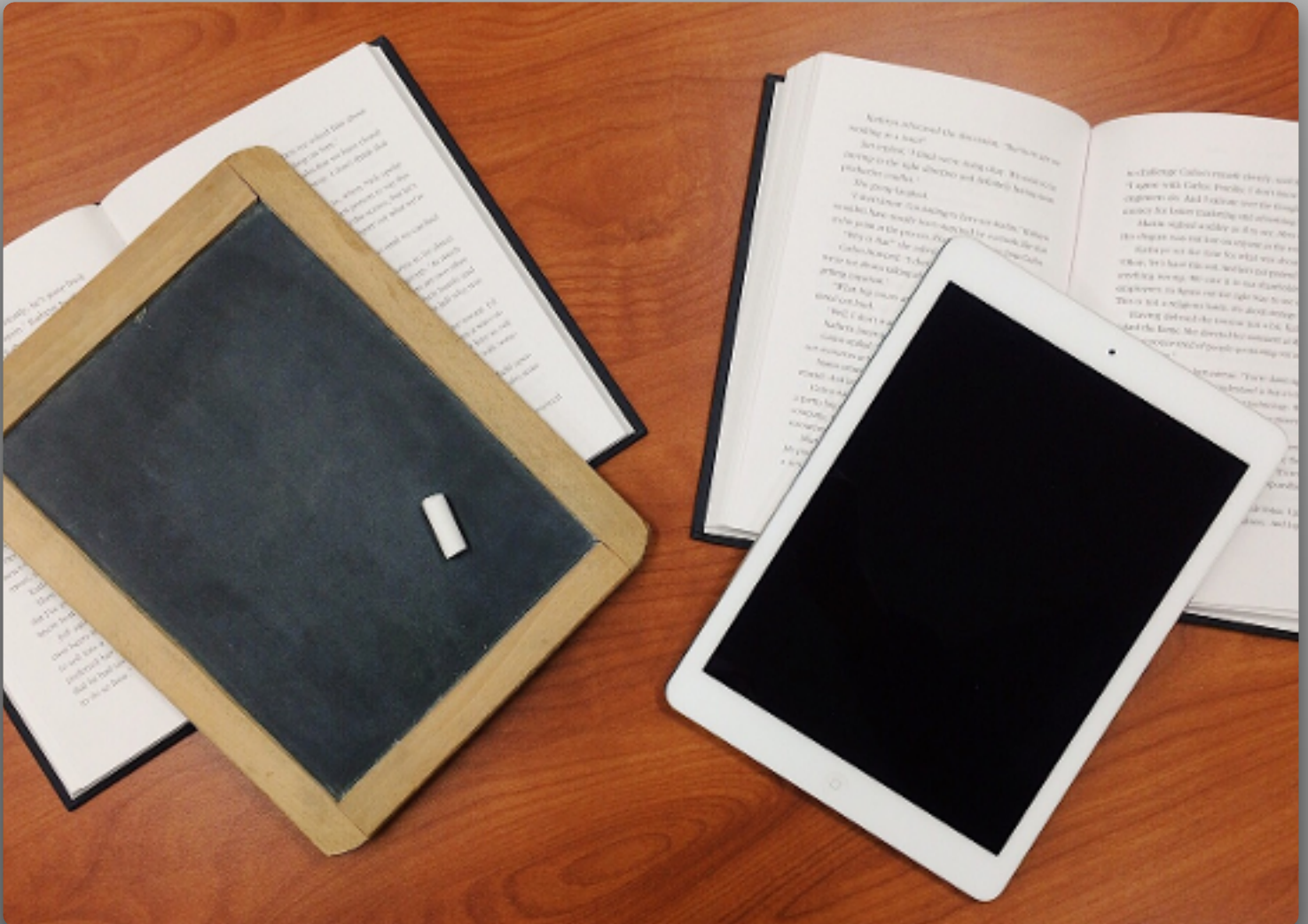


# IN THE MIDDLE

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OHIO MIDDLE LEVEL  
ASSOCIATION

## IN THE MIDDLE

Spring 2017-2018

Volume XLII Number 3

*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.

**Thank you to our Business Partners for their support of middle level education!**



# President's Message

Jay Clark

OMLA President

Principal, Van Buren Middle School



Student voice is an essential component of high-quality middle grades instruction. As young adolescents develop their own opinions, coupled with their strong sense of fairness and equity, engaging our students requires providing them opportunities to include their own voice.

As a result of the horrible school shootings in Parkland, Florida, the power of student voice is becoming more and more evident. Regardless of your stance on the issues surrounding this tragedy, we can all agree that ensuring secure and safe schools should be a priority. Even someone with rudimentary knowledge of human needs should understand that we cannot expect high achievement if students don't feel safe in their classrooms. Unfortunately, some are quick to dismiss these Stoneman Douglas High School students. In my opinion, witnessing these adolescents' passion and engagement is inspiring - their courage and synergy is an example for the adults.

There are phenomenal practices, educators, students, support staff, and parents in our schools! I'm so proud that we've had our biggest response of awards nominations in recent years. Thank you to all of our members who took the time to recognize this.

Our board welcomed new associate representatives since the fall conference. We're thrilled to have so many passionate middle level advocates working on our members' behalf. Recently, some of these board members met with state senators to discuss the licensure component in Senate Bill 216. These conversations were very constructive and I'm thrilled that these lawmakers were able to offer an amendment that retains the middle level teaching license in Ohio and provides flexibility to district leaders to ease staffing concerns. It was specifically mentioned that the feedback from our members to the legislators guided this change to the original language of the bill, which eliminated the grades 4-9 license.

We cannot wait to gather for #OMLA2018 October 25-26 at Kalahari Conference Center in Sandusky! George Couros and Kim Campbell along with Jack Berckemeyer will inspire you and leave you laughing! Be sure to highlight your classroom practices and school programs during a breakout presentation. Those applications must be postmarked by June 1 and can be found at [www.ohiomla.org](http://www.ohiomla.org)

Thank you for all you do to continually improve middle level education in Ohio. Finish the school year with strength!



# Meeting Challenges with Challenging, Relevant Learning

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Kaleigh Ruff

Trimble Elementary/Middle School

Southeast Region

I believe 4th grade is one of the most challenging years for many students. The tricky transition from early childhood to middle childhood can be seen in my 4th grade classroom on a daily basis. Fourth grade students are still in elementary school, but hate to be babied and crave more responsibility. Fourth grade is often a forgotten part of the middle childhood grade band, but I believe these students want and deserve to be treated like the middle childhood level students they are blossoming into.

I am a first-year teacher in a high poverty area of southeastern Ohio, teaching fourth grade math; I believe a challenging and relevant curriculum often looks different for my students. Some days, rigorous instruction occurs at a first grade level for students who have yet to master basic addition and subtraction facts. Some days, a challenging lesson may leave my students' hands, faces, and desks covered in chocolate as we learn fractions with Hershey's bars. Some days a challenging lesson involves my students reciting a poem about rounding numbers while they watch their crazy teacher leaping around the room performing the poem with drama to grab their attention. Some days we only have time to focus on the math content that appears too challenging for many of my students, regardless of the school-wide emphasis on improving student writing. Some days the challenging part of the day isn't the instruction, but helping my students learn how to handle the lessons life has taught them too early. Being a middle level teacher is not just about the content, but about the relationship. I believe I am a teacher, a

counselor, a parent-figure, a food-supplier, a structure-creator, and a friendly face to these students who often are lacking some or all of these necessities.

I am also an "outsider," being that I'm not originally from the area in which I teach unlike so many staff members in my school. So, connecting my lessons to content that is relevant to my students has been challenging. It took a couple months to learn the area and the families of the students in my classroom, but I strive to learn something new about a student every day in hopes I can connect their passions to my

passion for math. I found out many of my students are interested in superheroes. Ask any of my students why the number 1 is a superhero when it comes to fractions and they will be able to tell you . .

.because I was able to make that information relevant. Something as simple as using

my students' names in wild word problems makes them really motivated to solve them because they REALLY want to know how many watermelons Gavin was able to juggle for instance. Making connections to my students' lives has made my "boring" math curriculum more intriguing, which has motivated my students to learn. And you know what? It has been small things that can be done with ease.

While teaching is always a challenge, my first year in fourth grade has been my biggest challenge yet. I believe my students keep me on my toes, often need a little extra help both in math and in life, and have taught me much more this year than I have taught them.



# *Lessons of the Holocaust - Learning Together as a School*

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Kimberly Cockley, PhD  
Hudson Middle School  
Northeast Region

Learning about history through the stories of someone who lived it – what a gift for those who have this opportunity. In December 2017, Hudson Middle School was humbled to host Mr. Stanley Bernath, a Holocaust survivor, who presented to our students his story, with a message of tolerance, acceptance, and hope.

## **Lessons Prior to the Presentation:**

Prior to Mr. Bernath's visit, as teachers began discussing the opportunity in team meetings, some shared materials and activities they had used previously to teach students about the Holocaust. This led to the insight that all 1100 middle school students would benefit most from Mr. Bernath's story if they were able to participate in lessons related to the Holocaust. A small group of teachers volunteered to create lessons to provide a common understanding, for our students and staff, of what occurred and opportunities for meaningful reflection.

Collaboratively, these teachers created five half-hour lessons, to be delivered the week prior to the Holocaust presentation, by all teachers at the end of each day. The Pyramid of Hate, developed by the Anti-Defamation League as a curricular tool, formed the foundation of all five lessons. With its five levels (Bias, Prejudice, Discrimination, Violence, and Genocide), it demonstrates that each level, if not addressed and stopped, can lead to the next level of hate. The lessons, then, focused on a specific level of the pyramid, yet with a hopeful, action-oriented discussion each day of *"What are some things we can do to stop this level of hate and promote acceptance instead?"*



As we know, middle school students are engaged and passionate when they have an emotional connection to the topic and when they can make a difference. The stories and discussions in our lessons were designed to educate, create connections, prompt reflection, and inspire action, toward an inclusive culture where we celebrate our similarities and our differences.

## **Sharing the Lessons with Staff:**

As staff members entered our early-December staff meeting, each was handed a playing card, face



down. When prompted, they held it on their forehead so that others could see it, but so they could not. The instructions were to treat one another based on the value of the card they were dealt, using body language and facial expressions. After two minutes, they silently placed themselves in order based on the value they believed their card to be. The conversation that followed was where meaningful connections were made to how we treat one another. This powerful activity would be the very first activity in our week of Holocaust lessons with our students, and our staff appreciated the opportunity to experience it together beforehand.

The core group of teachers then presented to our staff the theme and purpose of the five lessons. All staff members were paired with a core team teacher, as a co-teacher, to support the learning of students in their homeroom groupings. We discussed the importance of *all* of us, not just Social Studies teachers, leading these lessons with students. We felt it was important for students to learn in a comfortable group with a team teacher, and we valued the idea of the whole school learning alongside of one another.

The lessons were shared in our Google Team Drive for all staff, and we also copied materials for staff for ease and convenience for all levels of comfortability.

Lesson 1: Pyramid Level 1: Playing card activity; Tribe activity (celebrating differences and similarities)

Lesson 2: Pyramid Level 2: *A History of Anti-Semitism* article

Lesson 3: Pyramid Level 3: Nuremberg Race Laws; *The Yellow Star: The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark* story; *The Paperclip Project* video

Lesson 4: Pyramid Level 4: Kristallnacht “Night of Broken Glass” fact sheet and discussion

Lesson 5: Pyramid Level 5: Holocaust facts; Gerda Weissmann Klein’s story; Promise card activity

### School-Wide Sock Project:

As a culminating activity and connection to the powerful story about Gerda Weissmann Klein, whose warm socks and winter boots were a key to her survival, we asked our entire Hudson Middle School community to donate a pair of new socks to Akron Snow Angels, whose mission is to spread warmth and connect “with the most vulnerable in our community by providing basic essentials and fostering compassionate friendships while inspiring others to do the same.”

In honor of Mr. Bernath’s dedication to sharing his story of survival during the Holocaust and hope for our future, we came together in this one project as a symbol of collaborative action to encourage tolerance through acts of kindness.

### Outcome of the Lessons:

The student dialogue in our daily lessons was sincere and emotional. Many made personal connections to the topics and shared stories they had witnessed or experienced. Several discussed actions they could take, or that our school could take, to make a positive difference. One group, with an insight that was so simple yet so profound, created a Pyramid of Love, to counteract the Pyramid of Hate, with steps on the pyramid depicting a positive, compassionate culture. How beautiful and inspirational!

At the presentation by Mr. Bernath, students were attentive and respectful, with a common understanding of the events of the Holocaust and the moments of compassion, leadership, and hope that occurred. Mr. Bernath posed three important requests: to never give up, to remember that we are not better than anyone else and no one else is better than us, and to help others.

As one of our students eloquently shared: “It was a wonderful experience, especially because these people won’t be around forever. It is so important that we learn about the problems of the past so we can prevent them in the future. In school, everyone is so diverse, and to avoid these catastrophic events, we have to respect and understand everybody’s strengths...”

The generation of survivors of the Holocaust is a treasure for our society. We were so appreciative of the opportunity to learn together as a school family, from a survivor, about acceptance, perseverance, and hope. Our mission is to help our students grow to be more empathetic and compassionate young people, and this school-wide learning has encouraged our students to continue to be leaders of today and tomorrow who look for opportunities to make a difference for others.

A sincere thank you to our teachers Cathy Kantin, Linda Leventhal, KC Nemec, Sheila Pressler, and Becky Reiter for designing these lessons of hope for our students!

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# Podcasts for Teachers 101

Lisa Nemeth

Bunsold Middle School/Marysville Middle School

Central Region

The [Education Podcast Network](#), whose goal it is to “encourage you to think about your profession and succeed in the world of education,” provides a list of podcasts for any educator at any level. If you are an “education junkie” longing for professional development on your own terms, this website is for you. Most of the podcast episodes are between twenty and forty minutes, making a commute or jog a chance to be reflective about your practice or hear about something great going on in another school. Below is a short list of four podcasts along with episode suggestions within the network that may be of special interest to middle level educators.



[The Cult of Pedagogy Podcast](#) with Jennifer Gonzalez

Jennifer Gonzalez is a former middle school language arts teacher who has earned National Board Certification. She has prepared pre-service teachers at the college level and has since transformed her passion for supporting educators into this podcast. The Cult of Pedagogy Website contains a blog filled with topics to explore, a link to podcast episodes, a library of videos and even an online store. Each episode of the podcast is an interview with educators, students, administrators or parents about a range of educational topics.

Episode 83: What is an Innovation Class?

Episode 58: Six Powerful Learning Strategies you MUST Share with Students

Episode 30: How One Teacher Manages a Self-Paced Classroom

In his podcast, [Transformative Principal](#), Jethro Jones, a middle school principal from Fairbanks Alaska, interviews principals and educational leaders to help inspire listeners to be the best principal they can be. However, you don't have to be a principal to find this podcast interesting, helpful, or inspiring.

Ready to Blend With Heather Staker (January 28, 2018)

League of Innovative Schools with Mary Wegner (December 31, 2017)

Imagination Creativity Innovation and Entrepreneurship with Don Wettrick (January 29, 2017)



**TRANSFORMATIVE  
PRINCIPAL**  
With Jethro Jones





The [StartED Up Podcast](#) prides itself on providing educators, innovators, and entrepreneurs with an opportunity to connect with one another. Don Wettrick and Hunter Stone interview experts to discuss the power to change the world and live life to the fullest. This is a podcast for those who crave inspiration!

A3House: Students Producing Not Just Consuming

Jason Vest: Middle School Innovation

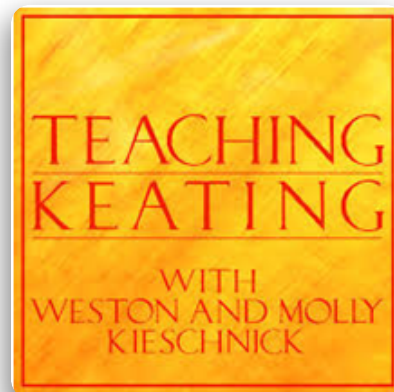
Dave Burgess: Disrupt Like A Pirate

Educators Weston and Molly Kieschnick “coach” fictional characters from movies and television on this unique podcast. [Teaching Keating](#) challenges educators to reflect on their own practices by examining the methods of a Hollywood version of a teacher or other character. Some episodes feature a guest co-host to provide another perspective. Grow professionally by identifying a fictitious character with whom you relate and hear how the Kieschnicks would help them be the best version of themselves.

E36: Modern Family (Being effective instead of being cool)

E31: Parenthood (What we look for in our own kids’ school)

E27: Scrubs (The art of self-evaluation)



## Challenging and Engaging Practices

Maggie Davis  
Yellow Springs Schools  
West Region

One of the 16 characteristics of *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* is that middle level education should be challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. One instructional method that promotes rigorous, inquiry based learning for any content area is Project-Based Learning. Project-Based Learning allows students to develop skills and knowledge through investigations of authentic, purposeful, and thought provoking questions, problems, or challenges. The overarching frameworks for *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* and Project-Based Learning strongly connect and support the ideals of deeper learning and high quality education.

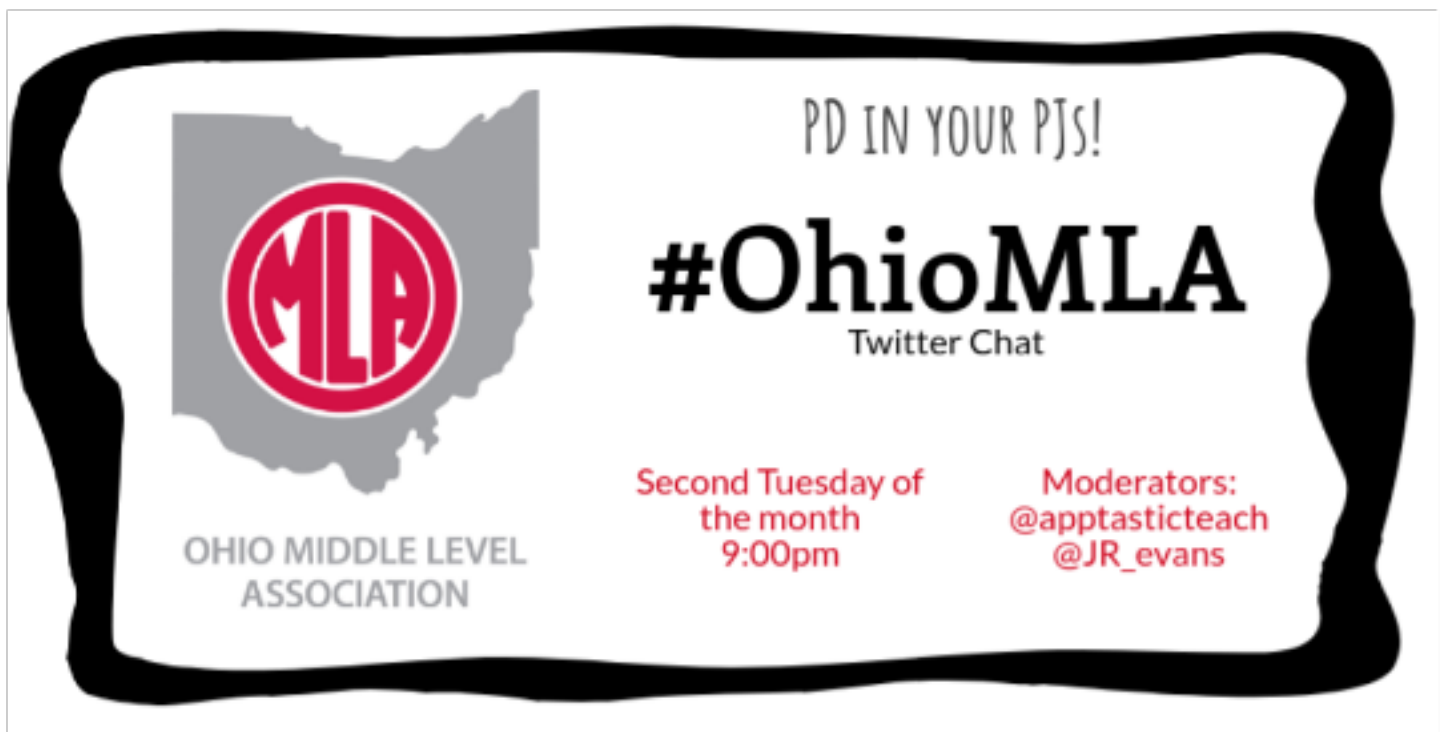
*This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* is a publication that was created by the Association for Middle Level Education that outlines the essential attributes and characteristics of successful schools. This resource describes research-based best practices with the categories of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leadership and organization; as well as culture and community. The overall focus for this paper is educate teachers on how to effectively meet the social, emotional, and physical attributes of middle level students.

Project-Based Learning is an instructional method that focuses on developing 21st century skills while deeply investigating standards and instructional content. Within PBL, there are eight essential elements: key knowledge and understanding, challenging problems or investigations, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision, and public product. The goal for successful implementation of PBL practices is to continually blend these attributes as students follow an inquiry based learning model so students can learn through the project, instead of learning to complete a project.

*This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* and PBL support each other in a variety of ways. Best practices for curriculum, instruction, and assessment for middle level educators include providing varied assessment methods, as well as challenging, rigorous, and active learning strategies. PBL instruction supports this as students are engaged in real-world dilemmas that require students to critically think about all aspects of the problems they are investigating, while working with their peers and community. Additionally, successful implementation of PBL requires flexible, invested, supportive, and strong leadership and organization. Transitioning from traditional education to PBL teaching methods require leaders and educators to consider long term investments in systems that support deeper learning. For example, scheduling, funding, partnerships, collaborative teams, and professional development are all aspects that must be heavily considered and highly organized. Lastly, the culture and community of PBL teaching methods require teachers to participate in cycles of critique for their own work in a safe space for sharing, as well as setting up the same growth mindset environment for their students.

Middle level students and educators alike need to be reflective in their practice and work to truly consider how the work that we do in our educational system supports and promotes positivity in our local communities. When we as educators are thoughtful about our instructional

methods and how we educate our students, we learn to take action based on knowledge gained and how it can reach beyond our classroom walls.



# Help Them Check In, Not Out!

Rachel Klinger  
Caldwell Elementary School  
East Region

Getting our students focused and eager to learn is seldom an easy task. This becomes especially difficult once state assessments are over and some students have a checked out mentality when it comes to the learning process. Here are some ideas to help them check in!

**1. Get them moving.** Learning stations are a great tool to use in the middle school classroom and they can be used in any content area. Games are another great tool to use in the classroom. Whether student created, teacher created or popular board games, they are a wonderful way to promote cooperation and practice essential cognitive skills, like problem solving. My students enjoy a game we created called “Literary Pictionary” where they draw scenes from various novels we’ve read throughout the school year. They love trying to stump each other!

Explore local history with mini field trips to local places of interest that are within walking distance of your school. Or, invite the organizations to set up displays in the gymnasium or hallways to show students what they are all about. Many of these organizations have summer programs for kids - what a great way to spread the word!

**2. Go outside.** Conduct a science lab or a physical education class outdoors. My students love to draw giant plot pyramids with sidewalk chalk when the weather is nice. The art classes can create a beautiful mural for all to enjoy. If your school is fortunate to have an outdoor pavilion, simply have students grab the materials they need and head outside for some fresh air and a change of scenery.

**3. Team up.** This is a great time of year to work

collaboratively with your colleagues. Students can complete a project that combines language arts and history - students can presenting a dramatic interpretation of an historical event, for example. Exploring the Fibonacci sequence that occurs in nature is a great way to combine art and math. Understanding the physics behind baseball is a great lesson for both science and physical education. Having students present their projects to their peers is an excellent way to hit those communication standards as well. The possibilities are endless with effective teaming.



**4. Tap into their creative side.** Spring is an excellent time to explore nature’s beauty. Combine some student photography with their poetry or short stories....or have them try to tell a story using only photographs they’ve taken. These student created projects are also excellent examples to showcase at future open

houses, PTO meetings, conferences, etc.

**5. Host a Mini-Course day.** Mini-courses are meant to provide students with experiences that are exploratory and educational. It is a day for students to explore activities that could become a lifelong hobby or interest. Exploration is important for middle schoolers because it ensures hands-on, participatory, meaningful, and engaging experiences.

These are just a few suggestions to help keep students engaged in the learning process, which increases their attention and focus, motivates them to practice higher-level critical thinking skills and promote meaningful learning experiences - no matter the time of year!



# Gifted and Talented

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## Kent State University

Once again, the pendulum has swung—placing gifted education at the forefront of conversations around the state. For years, Ohio is a leader in gifted education, having launched one of the first gifted education programs in the country. With respect to gifted education, Cleveland’s Major Works Program (1921) is generally considered “the greatest experiment in education.” Later, in 1952, Ohio became the second state in the country to have a state-level gifted organization called the Ohio Association of Gifted Children (OAGC), which has served as a model for other states. Ohio remains a leader in areas such as gifted education training and state-level advocacy.

Over the past few decades, trends have changed, placing gifted children on the back burner under the pretense that their giftedness eliminates the need for special instruction, and myths persist. For instance, it is not uncommon to hear that since teachers challenge all students, gifted kids will be fine in the regular classroom. Others claim that gifted students make everyone else in the class smarter by being role models, yet others disagree, labeling gifted education programs as elitist, because they believe *all* children are gifted. But perhaps what a student endures, whether it’s the emotional overhead of being tested, institutional accountability, No Child Left Behind, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and various school improvement programs, gifted students have been largely ignored.

But perhaps what a gifted student endures, whether it’s the emotional overhead of being tested, institutional accountability, No Child Left Behind, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and various school improvement programs, gifted students have been largely ignored.

Throughout the tumultuous times of testing, accountability, school improvement, No Child Left Behind, and the Every Student Succeeds Act, gifted students have been largely overlooked and ignored.

Finally, after four long years of negotiations at the state level, Ohio has a new set of gifted operating standards outlining everything from identifying to providing services for students who are gifted. Although Ohio’s school districts are not required to serve gifted children by law, they are required to identify students as gifted in grades K – 12. According to the Ohio Department of Education, for districts who do serve gifted students, “teachers of gifted education services are required to obtain specialized training in gifted education and ongoing support to meet the academic and affective needs of students who are gifted”. Furthermore, general education teachers “who are designated providers of gifted education services and do not otherwise have licensure or endorsement in gifted education must receive professional development in gifted education covering eight competencies from qualifying providers to receive high-quality professional development in gifted education”. This means that teachers of gifted students must have licensure or an endorsement in gifted education otherwise they are required to participate in 30 hours of gifted professional development this year, another 30 hours of professional development next year, and additional professional development the following year – as determined by the district.

Gifted learners deserve services provided by professionals who have specialized training. To help district’s meet the challenge of having qualified educators to serve students who are gifted, Kent State University offers a Gifted Intervention Specialist Endorsement consisting of 6 classes that can be completed in one year. The gifted endorsement courses were created in compliance with the Ohio

Department of Education (ODE) guidelines with competencies aligned with ODE standards.

All learners deserve the highest quality of instruction possible. Such instruction only occurs when teachers are aware of and able to respond to the unique qualities and characteristics of students they instruct. According to the Ohio Department of Education, gifted children are those who perform or show potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared to others of their age, experience, or environment. Of all students in America, gifted children have traditionally made the fewest gains each year in school. Some gifted children walk in the door the first day of school knowing nearly all the material they are supposed to "learn" that year. And when gifted children are introduced to a new topic, concept or idea it takes 1 - 2 repetitions for mastery once they truly understand it. The Kent State gifted endorsement program provides the opportunity for teachers and administrators to learn about strategies, curriculum, and researched based practices so gifted students can achieve social, emotional, and learning success in a school setting. The six required courses are sequentially designed to increase the level of knowledge, expertise, and understanding of educators working with students who are gifted and are designed to foster implementation of appropriate academic curriculum, differentiation strategies, current best practice, educational interventions and support for this unique population of students.

The Kent State gifted endorsement program is offered as a cohort model at off-campus locations at a significantly reduced cost. Classes are offered in a blended format meaning that classes meet both face-to-face as well as asynchronously on-line. All of the instructors are certified gifted education experts who have extensive experience working with gifted children: all have presented at national, state, and local conferences. The next Gifted cohort will be hosted by Orange City Schools. Classes begin June, 2018. For more information, contact Dr. Carol Feldman-Sparber at [csfeldma@kent.edu](mailto:csfeldma@kent.edu) or 330-672-0723.



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# Kids First, Then Content

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Amy Peck, Principal  
North Ridgeville Academic Center Middle School  
North Central Region

The most successful middle-level teachers realize that to be effective, they have to teach kids first, then they are able to teach their content. Middle-level classrooms aren't a place you find yourself without a true desire to be there. Spending your days with adolescents is not an easy task; our students can try the best of our patience in the blink of an eye.

When hiring our teaching staff, candidates must convince the interview team that they know and understand middle-level students, and they want nothing more than to be with them. In every interview, we frame one of our most important questions by stating that most people are afraid of middle-school kids because all they know of them is what they see in the mall on the weekends, and they want to run far away, as fast as they can. Others gravitate toward them. Our candidates are then charged with telling the committee what they know about this age group, academically, socially and emotionally.

When we teach kids first, taking into account all of the idiosyncrasies of adolescents, sometimes our content is slowed by everyday drama. Sometimes conversations of an organic nature lead the class into directions one could never plan. Taking time to recognize the value in students' thoughts, experiences and opinions will naturally lend to better depth of knowledge in content delivery, understanding and retention of skills. Students are willing to learn once they realize they are valued and respected as individuals.

Challenging and engaging classrooms are rarely teacher-centered. Students have a voice in their education. They are empowered to show their knowledge in a manner that best suits them. This can be done through enrichment and exploration of our content standards. When we let students drive, they may not all take the same path to get to the final destination, but in the end, the roads don't matter, mastery of content does. Let kids be kids first; with guidance, allow them to perform; enable them to organize a service project, present a slideshow, create a Kahoot quiz for their classmates, teach a lesson, or do whatever they desire in your student-centered classroom to show you what they know. Always remember, kids first, then content, and you will see the benefits day after day.

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