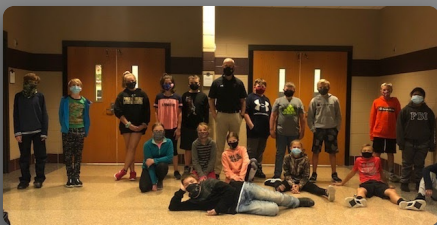


IN THE MIDDLE

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OHIO MIDDLE LEVEL
ASSOCIATION
IN THE MIDDLE

Fall 2020-2021
Volume XLV Number 1

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 KristenMSmith223@gmail.com.

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



United Fundraising



President's Message

Nicki Bertke
OMLA President



"Difficult roads lead to beautiful destinations" ~Author Unknown

The end of the 2019 -2020 school year and the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year have presented many challenges to educators. At the end of last school year, teachers across the state transitioned to online learning in just a moment's notice. Whether you are teaching this year in a: hybrid, virtual, in-person setting or a combination of the three, some things remain the same —Educators across the nation have continued to transform, adapt, and innovate as they tackle the difficult task of keeping students connected and engaged all while continuing to focus on the whole child. Many of us may be feeling like a first year teacher again this year with all of the changes. During challenging times, I think it is important for us to remember our "why". Why are you an educator, why did you choose to teach middle level students? Take some time to think about your "why" —Remembering our "why" will help remind us of what is important and why each of us chose this amazing profession.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, OMLA is hosting a number of virtual professional development opportunities for middle level educators this fall. Check our website or your inbox for the list of scheduled OMLA virtual workshops. OMLA recognizes teachers and educators are going to want to be with their students for the start of the 2020-2021 school year. As a result, OMLA has postponed the 2020 OMLA Annual Conference originally scheduled for October 22-23, 2020 to March 4-5, 2021. #OMLA2020 will be held at the Kalahari Conference and Resort in Sandusky with three nationally recognized, dynamic keynotes.

On Thursday, March 4th the keynote is Weston Kieschnick, the award winning educator, best-selling author, and TEDx speaker. As a keynote, Weston will push the thinking of educators to move beyond the ordinary and reach their potential as true innovators for learning. Follow Weston on Twitter @Wes_Kieschnick. Kevin Honeycutt, a former educator, author, and motivational speaker will keynote on Friday March 5th. Kevin will share his expertise on technology, education, and cyber-bullying prevention in his keynote. Follow Kevin on Twitter @kevinhoneycutt. As a featured presenter, Jack Berckmeyer incorporates his passion for middle level education and his humor to offer educators a number of strategies that they can implement immediately in their classroom. On

Twitter follow Jack @jberckemeyer. In addition, #OMLA2020 will feature breakout sessions presented by practicing middle level educators covering a variety of topics from being trauma informed to technology.

Members enjoy a discounted registration fee for our annual state conference. To encourage schools to send multiple attendees, the sixth registration from a school or college/university is free! Be sure to register by January 29, 2021 to take advantage of the early registration discount.

If you are not yet a member of the Ohio Middle Level Association, please consider joining 9,500 educators from across the state to take full advantage of quality professional development, networking and other opportunities.

I hope to see you at #OMLA2020 March 4-5, 2021 at the Kalahari Resort and Conference Center!

Middle Level: Where I Belong

Brain Woods

West Region

I wish I had an inspirational story about why I became a teacher. Many educators knew from an early age that teaching was their destiny. That was not me. I never had a “calling” to teach. My parents weren’t teachers. I didn’t have friends going into the profession. Actually, I never really even liked school all that much. It’s a long story, but the truth is, through a series of unexpected events, I sort of fell into teaching.

As I begin my 27th year as a middle level educator and my 9th year as a middle school principal, I can’t imagine having ever done anything else. Teaching was my calling. I just didn’t know it. And middle level? Yes, that’s my groove!

What excites me about middle level education? After 27 years, I am somewhat embarrassed to say the answer to this question doesn't come easy for me. Most days I come home completely exhausted with all the stressful moments of the day weighing on my mind, along with the seemingly unending list of things to do the next day.

Over the years, after some of my most stressful days, I have browsed the local Help Wanted ads to see what else I could do. Besides discovering that there are very few well-paid jobs outside of education that I am qualified for, I have also discovered that there is nothing else I would rather do.

As part of a recent OMLA Executive Board activity, we were asked to share our “why.” Specifically,

“Why did we become teachers/educators?” For me, the more appropriate question was, “Why did I stay?”

My “why” is to have a positive impact and make a difference in the lives of kids who need me the most. To me, these are the kids in the middle. In the three or four years that we have our middle level students, they are changing and growing more than at any other time of their lives. The transition from child to adult is a battle of hormones and emotions that test us all.

Everything that drives me crazy about middle school kids is also what I love. They can be awkward, ornery, mean, overly sensitive, and rude. They can also be kind, inquisitive, encouraging, fun-loving, and remorseful. We encounter a full range of positive and negative behaviors and emotions, often from the same student on the same day.



The day-to-day stresses can wear on us, but they can’t overcome the feelings of pride and satisfaction we feel as we witness the growth of our students day to day and year to year. Nothing can beat those occasions when former students come back and reflect on their time in middle school and thank you for being there and for helping turn them into respectful, hard-working young adults.

While your path to middle level education may vary from mine, the odds are that our “whys” are similar. In this most challenging of years, I encourage you to revisit your why and remember your impact is real and you are needed now more than ever!

What Excites You about Middle Level Education?

Swanton Middle School Northwest Region

Middle Level Education: Dress Up Days, Creative Engagement, and TikTok Dancing.

“Ugh. I cannot deal with all that teen angst and hormonal drama. Bless your heart for putting up with that all day!” the mom of one of my son’s teammates declared tonight.

I politely chuckled, but quickly shook off the comment and replied, “There is no way I’d teach anywhere else. They save mostly all that drama for their parents. We are too busy laughing, creating,

building relationships, and occasionally we mix in a few life lessons and content standards.”

It really bothers me that people assume that teaching middle school must be a terrifying roller coaster of emotions on a daily basis. It is, but a better comparison would be like a day trip to Cedar Point with your family.

Each day begins with greeting my students, and I especially love dancing them as they walk in on Fridays, even though I have the rhythm of a wounded blobfish. Some students will greet you enthusiastically, and some you can tell need a verbal pick me up from someone safe. Even the “tough” eighth grade boys who will try really hard to avoid the dancing, will ask where you were if for some reason you were not out front. It’s similar to being embarrassed by your goofy dad while walking down the crowded midway. You are thoroughly mortified by him, but secretly love it. This playful start to the day is so important for me, as well as my students.

Creating lessons that the students can make personal connections with, while reaching the content standards, and incorporating how this can apply to the real world is another part of the middle school experience that brings excitement daily. It is essential that students see the worth in doing activities, and being able to connect to their lives and share their experiences. This is the same as the new rides throughout the park. It keeps us coming back excitedly year after year.

Plus, how can you not laugh at the daily interactions that happen at a middle school? Jack Berkemeyer addressed our district to start the year in August and he summed it best. “If you don’t laugh at least five times a day there is something wrong with you. School is funny, kids are hysterical, your colleagues are wack-a-damn doodles. It literally is a funny, funny place.”

Our Swanton Seven and House Competitions bring life to our buildings by teaching students life skills, such as teamwork, sportsmanship, leadership, and responsibility. These are enjoyed as much by the staff as the students. Every event is filled with students cheering (but never booing), helping each other, using strategies, and leading others with positive enthusiasm. This relates to all the extras the park has to offer, such as the delicious foods and laser light show. Cedar Point wouldn’t be the same without those delicious, chili-cheese fries and our school would not be the same without our core values.

There is nowhere else I would rather be. This is not just a job. It is walking in everyday with sheer excitement for what is to come, going up that first hill, going through all the twists and turns, and inversions of the day, to come to the halt at the end of the day as excited as ever, and exclaiming, “I cannot wait to do it again tomorrow!”

For us, teaching Middle School is the perfect fit. It is truly a passion of ours and is the cause for us to eagerly wake each morning to come to work. Students at this age are still eager to learn, show interests in subjects, and listen while we teach. Many of our styles of teaching fit because it allows us

to still feel as young and energetic as our students. Middle School lets us dabble our lessons into both realms of adulthood and early childhood. Students still have a great sense of humor, easily impressionable, and have hope. These attributes of Middle School life excite us and make our work enjoyable, especially when we incorporate fitting activities such as Houses, Competitions, High Expectations, and Consistency. With a team of staff members that support, encourage, and buy into the same views of teaching Middle School, we find a great relationship that embodies the character and culture of our community.



Young Blood: What Excites New Middle Level Teachers

Jeff Cicerchi

Northeast Region

Young adolescents truly are the lifeblood of any middle level school, regardless of configuration. Their sense of humor, impulsivity, and big hearts all help to create learning environments where students, teachers, and staff alike can thrive. So it goes without saying that it is the kids who excite us about middle level education no matter if the learning environment is a Google Meet, a Zoom, or an actual classroom.

Equally as exciting to me as a middle level principal, is the enthusiasm that new teachers exhibit about their kids, classrooms, and the school community. Throughout the hiring process, our team is always looking for potential new hires to talk about their love and passion for kids and middle level in general. A potential teaching candidate's ability to communicate this effectively and then live it when he or she is with the kids is what makes our level special. So when I Asked a few of the newest North Royalton Middle School teachers what excites them about middle level education, this is what they had to say.

Second year teacher Victoria Charvat, who will be teaching her first year of 8th grade science at NRMS said the following.

"I am extremely passionate about middle level education because I get to see my students enter middle school and blossom into their own individual personalities by the time they get to high school. I get to be part of their journey in their most formative years. I also love how much my students teach me. My students are inquisitive and insightful and consistently keep me learning more, and push me to be the best teacher so I can provide them with the best education possible. I love what I do because middle level education is fun, the students always keep me on my toes and keep me laughing."

Randy Radtke is equally as excited to start his first year at the middle level after spending the last few years teaching high school English. As a 7th grade English teacher at NRMS, Randy is excited about the following.

"Though I am certified to teach grades 7-12, and I have loved teaching grades 9 and 10 for the last two years, I am excited to get back to middle education. In my previous positions in 7th and 8th grade language arts, I thoroughly enjoyed working for and hearing the ideas of middle school students. I look forward to the energy and excitement that students bring into the classroom first thing in the morning. I love their enthusiasm and energy. I look forward to the unique responsibility of guiding students through a time of intense discovery and reinvention. The possibilities laid before them are endless, and it is my privilege to ensure that they have all that they need to develop into amazing people."

Troi Dotson had the opportunity to serve 5th grade students for one semester during the Global Pandemic at NRMS and will continue on in that role during the 20/21 school year.

Dotson recently shared, “As a recent Early Childhood graduate I am most excited to explore what it takes to fully be a Middle Childhood educator. I have seen in my few short months as a 5th grade teacher there have been incredible benefits working with Middle Childhood students. I am excited to see how students adjust and adapt to the new transition of being in middle school. I am eager to guide students through this time of change but also cultivate and grow their confidence and independence in themselves that will help them in future schooling and beyond. Watching students grow throughout the school year is the biggest reward of being a teacher of any level. I also look forward to collaborating with other grade levels and learning about the uniqueness that middle childhood brings.”

So, as we embark on another school year, reflect on the changes that we are all confronted with, and make adjustments to best serve our students, I hope and trust that the student’s excitement will be seen in all of us as well. I am confident that as middle level educators, we will continue to serve the students in our state in a manner that exemplifies the 16 Characteristics of *This We Believe*.

Ohio Middle Level Association

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Six Reasons Why Middle School Rocks

Cheryl Mizerny

This article originally appeared on the A New MiddleWeb Blog on 09/06/2015.



The majority of my 20-plus years of teaching have been at the middle school level. When people ask what I do and I tell them “teach tweens,” their response is generally something along the lines of “better you than me, sister.”

If that’s how they feel about ten to fourteen year olds, then they’re probably right. And it’s okay.

Just as I cannot fathom how difficult it would be to pursue a career as a soldier or a nurse (or a kindergarten teacher!), they cannot understand why I would willingly subject myself to a room full of hormonal adolescents on a daily basis.

At times, I’ll admit, I’ve asked myself the question. I’ve even tried something else, but I’ve always ended up back in front of middle school children. I’ve had to face the fact that this is where I am meant to be, and I must be getting something out of it or else why would I return year after year?

6 reasons why middle school rocks

In truth, as much as I like to think I am making a significant impact on the lives of children (and I am confident that I am), this job completely fulfills me. There is no other job that aligns so perfectly with my personality and skill set. I get as much as I give, and I get excited every fall. (I'll resist inserting a selfie here.)

There are many reasons why I believe teaching this age is the best job in all of education. Here's some of why I ♥ middle school.



1. Variety

Teaching middle school is never the same day twice. Sometimes, it's not even the same from the beginning of class until the end depending on what drama has erupted in the interim. Middle school students have very little control over their bodies and their emotions, and they can be completely different children from day to day. I enjoy the challenge of working with whatever personality a particular child chooses to show me M-F. It keeps me on my toes.

In addition to variety in the students, I am able to experiment with any fun lesson idea I come up with on very willing guinea pigs. I get bored easily (just like they do), and we enjoy having a wide range of novel experiences in class. Although they know the general structure of the class, they never quite know exactly what is coming. It keeps them excited and keeps me energized.

2. Laughter

Middle school students have a ready sense of humor. They are not yet so jaded that they are too cool to crack up at something corny. They have no filter and say any old thing that pops into their heads, often with unintentionally hysterical results.

My sixth graders are at the age where they still think I am funny and not embarrassing. It gives me a little ego boost when I hear them tell their friends, parents, or my colleagues that I am funny and my class is a good time. I can't imagine having a job where I don't get at least one, deep belly laugh every day.

3. Honesty

If you aren't sure about whether the new haircut you tried is flattering, you will find out in 0.2 seconds if you teach middle school. Some kids may come right out and tell you to your face, and others will stage whisper it to a friend, but you will always know how they feel. Most have not yet mastered the poker face, and I can truly read them like a book.

They are not good at keeping secrets either, so eventually they spill the beans, even if they implicate themselves in the process. If they love a lesson, I will know immediately, and if they are bored, I hear that too. Whether their



sentiments are positive or negative, I always understand where I stand. It's a beautiful thing that they are able to open themselves up to the world and say what they are truly feeling.

4. Quirks

I love how middle school students are caught in between wanting to blend in to the crowd and wanting to be their authentic, quirky selves. Middle school time is like dog years in terms of development and the students that enter in sixth grade barely resemble the eighth grade graduates. In between, it is fascinating to watch the endless permutations that everything – from their hairstyles to their handwriting – goes through.

Because I was an awkward adolescent who never quite felt comfortable in my own skin, I empathize with what they are experiencing. I bond with the underdogs and outcasts, find that special something inside of them, and try to bring it to the forefront. I was also bullied by a couple of mean girls, so I know how treacherous it can be to navigate the complexities of popularity and friendship. Middle school kids, with all of their strange and wonderful idiosyncrasies, are my people.



5. Curiosity

Middle school students often seem to be going through a second toddlerhood (including some “terrible two”). However, instead of learning how to walk and feed themselves, they are learning how the world works and trying to find their place in it. They are naturally playful and experimental and can still feel joy in a new experience.

They are not yet too cool for school. They are existential dreamers still willing to take risks. Most days, I am in awe of some insight they have shared, and it reminds me that I am witnessing profound learning happen in real time. It's quite a thrill.

6. Impact

Middle school students are in the necessary developmental stage of separating from their parents and establishing their own identity, but they still need adult guidance to get there. As a result, middle school teachers function in loco parentis, but without the arguments or slamming of bedroom doors.

Many of us have even had the experience of a student accidentally calling us mom or dad. They are still seeking their parents' approval, but they also want that from their teachers. They have not yet decided that they know more than I do, and they are willing to listen to what I have to say. This puts me in a powerful position and I don't take that responsibility lightly. I know that I have the power to harm or heal.

My words and actions define me and I take being a role model very seriously. They are looking to me to see another example of what it means to be an adult, and I can think of no greater honor.



It's destiny

It is true that middle school is generally considered the most difficult age to teach, but I feel as if I am destined to be here and I can't imagine my life without seeing "my kids" every day. It's the toughest job I've ever loved.

The logo for the It's Not Easy Being Tween blog is the result of a collaboration between Cheryl, who has an art background, and her former student Daniel, now in his late 20's, who "is an amazing artist—the best I ever taught."

Cheryl Mizerny

Cheryl Mizerny (@cherylteaches) is a veteran educator with 25 years experience – most at the middle school level. She began her career in special education, became a teacher consultant and adjunct professor of Educational Psychology, and currently teaches 6th grade English in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Cheryl writes about student motivation and engagement at The Accidental English Teacher.



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