

IN THE MIDDLE

OHIO MIDDLE LEVEL ASSOCIATION



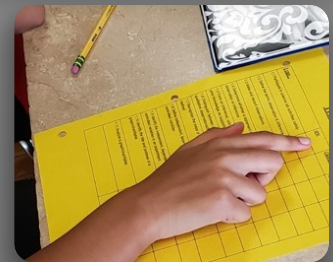
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ASSOCIATION

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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 KristenMSmith223@gmail.com.

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



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President's Message

Nicki Bertke
OMLA President



Every summer the Ohio Middle Level Association Executive Board spends three days in June at Hocking Hills for a summer workshop. This is an opportunity for the board members representing the eight regions across the state to come together to discuss our vision and plans for the year. Morning hikes, professional development, committee meetings, regional planning time, and conversations by the campfire filled our time this year. For one of the professional development activities, the OMLA board revisited AMLE's, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*. Board members joined one of three groups (Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Leadership and Organization; Culture and Community) representing the 16 Characteristics and shared ideas/strategies for how they support the topic in their classroom/school. The many ideas shared allowed for meaningful discussions and learning. As you read through the articles in this issue of *In the Middle*, I hope the insights shared concerning Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment provides you with new or refreshed learning!

Be sure to mark OMLA's Annual Conference on your calendar for November 7-8, 2019! Todd Whitaker, Dave Burgess and Jack Berckemeyer are the keynote speakers for the two days. In addition to three nationally-recognized, dynamic speakers, #OMLA2019 will feature over 100 breakout sessions presented by practicing middle level educators covering a variety of topics from social-emotional learning 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 October 4 to take advantage of the early registration discount.

OMLA hosts a number of regional events across the state in addition to our annual state conference. These regional events include professional development, networking, student recognition and student leadership opportunities, all of which are often provided to members at no cost! Check our website or your inbox for the next scheduled OMLA regional event in your area.

I hope to see you in Columbus November 7-8!



Why Just Teach When You Can Tango?

Carey G. Block

Director of Federal Programs

Caldwell Exempted Village Schools

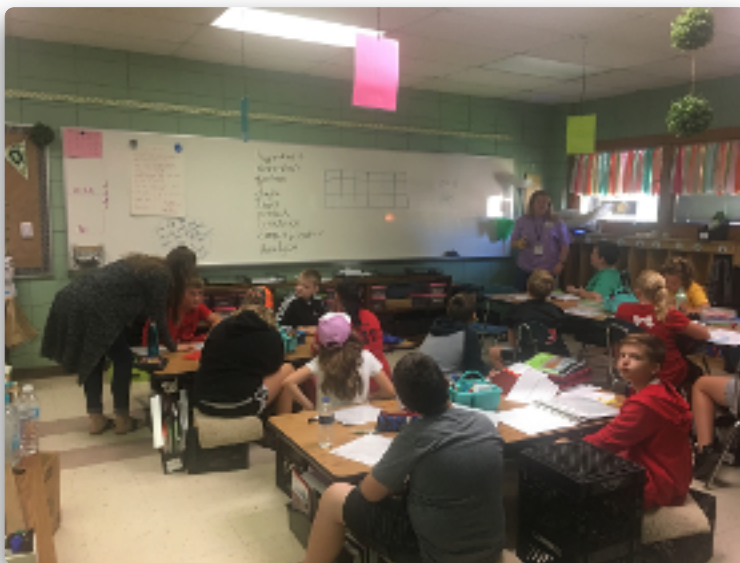
It is no secret that two heads are better than one. So when it comes to teaching, I couldn't imagine a scenario in which it would not be beneficial to have two sets of eyes, two sets of ears, two great minds, and two hearts swelling with compassion in a classroom full of future Redskins. With this in mind, a plan was developed in the fall of 2018 to make the dream of Co-Teaching a reality at Caldwell Exempted Village School District (CEVSD).

As a staff, we wanted to take our time and "do it right". In January, the administrative staff attended a Literacy Academy at the Pritchard Laughlin Center in Cambridge. One of the presenters was a team of high school Co-Teachers from Warren High School. These ladies were "doing it right". They were making gains, teaching in tandem, and most importantly, were learning from each other how to work as a team. When asked where they received their training, Warren's very own Angie Erb-Gentile and Terri Welsh, referred to the Bureau of Educational Research. Several years ago this team had attended a BER training and gathered the tools they needed to get started. I decided that if BER could get Warren started on this journey, it could certainly do the same for Caldwell; so I found the next available training and registered one very strong and eager team.

Seven members of the Caldwell Exempted Village School District Co-Teaching team traveled to Westlake, Ohio in April of 2019 to spend two days with Ms. Anne Benninghof, BER trainer. The team was comprised of the high school principal, two intervention specialists, two general

education teachers, one district administrator, and a supervisor from the Ohio Valley Educational Service Center. During two days of intense instruction, the team gathered the tools needed to teach, plan, grade, discipline, and intervene as a TEAM. Everyone left Westlake with the reassurance that we were headed in the right direction for our students.

The stage was set for a district training. Our Westlake team of seven worked together



throughout the months of May and June to put together a customized training for our staff here at CEVSD. We wanted to add our personal touch to the foundations of Co-Teaching we gleaned from Anne Benninghof. Our goal was to be engaging, inspiring, and purposeful. For two days in June, our class of future Co-Teachers came together to see what all the hype was about. There was

laughter, collaboration, excitement, and most importantly - there was learning. Our intervention specialists learned that they have a place in the general education classroom, and our general education teachers learned that anyone can intervene with a student.

Fast forward to September of 2019. A year later and our dream of Co-Teaching in Caldwell has become a reality. There are Co-Teacher teams at every grade level in grades 3-10. We have every expectation that there will be hiccups and bumps in the road as we navigate this process. It has even been said that too many cooks in the kitchen will spoil the broth, but it takes **TWO** to tango and at CEVSD we believe you should learn to dance.

Formative Assessment is More Than a Buzzword: It Works!

Nick Wysocki
6th grade science teacher
North Royalton Middle School

Sixth-grade North Royalton Middle School science teacher, Nick Wysocki, exemplifies the idea of using student data to inform instruction. Equally as important are the relationships that he establishes with his students. Nick works in small groups with students or conferences with individual students to provide feedback and build confidence. In the following article, Nick explains his approach to reaching the needs of all learners in his class with the help of technology and formative assessment.

I believe it is critical to understand where each student is at in relation to his or her own learning. Below you will find apps and tools that have helped aid the learning process in my classroom.

Plickers

Plickers lets you poll your class for free, without the need for student devices. Just give each student a card (a "paper clicker"), and use your iPhone/iPad/Chromebook to scan them to do instant checks-for-understanding, exit tickets, and impromptu polls. Consequently, I start by using Plickers. I utilize this tool during the lesson warm-up or from an exit ticket from the previous day's lesson. This data allows me to identify who I need to pull for re-teaching in either a small group or in a one-on-one setting. Additionally, I use the data to decide if I need to completely re-teach a concept to the class because the majority of the students got a question(s) wrong. To ensure that the students know how to use Plickers, so it is not a barrier to learning, I start the year with a simple question such as, "Who is your science teacher?" I also explain to the students early in the year that they will show their learning through a digital portfolio.

Digital Portfolios

The portfolios are used as a content check-in to measure student understanding of major concepts and/or labs. The students also use the portfolio as a way to review concepts before their end of year assessment. I frequently meet with students to monitor their progress on the portfolios. It is vital that I go step-by-step at the beginning of the year to show students how to demonstrate their learning through the portfolio process. To aide in this process, and to also know where each student is at in the learning process, I utilize Screencastify.

Screencastify

Screencastify is used for students to show me what they learned during an activity or lab. It is part of the Student Choice Board options for students to record songs/raps and/or skits about a topic. These videos allow the students to demonstrate their learning in a fun, engaging and differentiated manner. I am also able to evaluate their progress and intervene immediately based on how well they are demonstrating their learning through the video or song. This tool is available in the Chrome web store and is something that I allow the students to utilize early in the year to get familiar with it.

Choice Boards

Student choice is something that is valuable for students so that they can show what they know throughout the year. Different choices allow my students to demonstrate their knowledge of the content in meaningful and engaging ways. Students love the fact that they get to choose how they

represent their learning and this also helps to decrease classroom management issues. Choice Boards are an easy tool for differentiating content. As my students are working on their choice boards, it allows time for me to check their understanding of a topic in a variety of one-on-one or small group settings. It also provides time for re-teaching or enrichment for those students that need it. Finally, we all know that reading and writing in the content area is critical for young adolescents.

Blogger

I utilize Blogger so my students can have a voice in their classroom. It also allows them to comment on the work of their peers. I use Blogger on my choice Boards and as a warm-up or exit slip. Specifically, in my sixth-grade science classes during our cell unit, I use the book called Fuzzy Mud, which correlates directly to our unit. On Blogger, I post a section each week where students can recap the book and/or make predictions about what will happen in the book. Please feel free to email Nick at nick.wysocki@northroyaltonsd.org or click [here](#) to view a Slide Presentation that Nick presented at the 2018/2019 OMLA State Conference if you have any questions or would like to discuss how he inspires and empowers his learners.

Appreciate, Advocate, Advise

Justin Ames

Middle Childhood Education Major

Wright State University

Take a moment to just breathe, relax . . . find your personal quiet place. The magic place where you can let the “on-goings” of the world around disappear. While in this magic kingdom of solitude, take a moment to think back to your days in middle school and high school. Yes, that’s right, that young pile of messy, awkward hair and bones was you. As educators we all need to take a moment to remember what it was like to walk in those shoes– albeit a bit different style of shoe from those we are teaching, though a valuable reflection nonetheless.

While reminiscing, we would most likely recall at least one adult who “had our back” and probably many more that didn’t. Reliving those awkward days can help us to appreciate our students for who they are, who they will be and will also give us a greater appreciation of who we are ourselves. Unfortunately, there are the few who may not recall having a “champion” to help them forge their way through the education system and life itself. They may think of only a few people who “helped ‘em out” a couple times. As educators, we need to look to ensure each student has their “champion”.

Today we know more about middle level students than ever. We are re-evaluating processes, reviving solid past concepts and reinventing ourselves to meet the needs of our students today. If we take so much time and effort to make sure we are on top of our game, then we should take just as much time, if not more, to be the stewards of tomorrow and be the voice for the needs of our students yesterday, today and until the time the world decides robots would be better educators (let’s hope not). Setting the tone and building relationships with our students is a great first step in being that voice, the champion, for our students. Creating the environment where students know that they have, for good, bad, or otherwise, the one adult who truly cares and challenges them to be the best they can be, inside and outside the classroom. It seems more times than admitted, people as a whole are hesitant to raise their voices above the daily grumbles and speak for those who need to be heard. This is also true of educators. Whether it is lack of experience or knowledge, the fear of reprisal or blind acceptance of the status quo, we must first know and appreciate who we are.

As educators, we cannot be afraid to challenge the status quo for the benefit of our students. To try to turn the system, or some small cog, to better meet the needs of our students. A great way to ensure we have the whole student picture is the use of teams and advisory programs to further foster the one on one relationships with our students. Yes, some advisors “phone it in”, and I would dare someone to prove me wrong when I say that these people most likely have not invested the time to appreciate themselves, their advisee nor picked up the reins to build the relationship necessary to be the champion the student needs.

In the end, anyone serving students or fulfilling any position of responsibility has an obligation to their success in life; not just in school.

I believe sometimes educators forget the long-term effect and power they have in the success of students’ lives by shifting focus away from the student’s needs, and failing to appreciate their uniqueness. This momentary lapse in excellence may stem from an unspoken shift in district, school or individual mission to angle the spotlight from students’ needs to test driven, result based policies and procedures. It is within these dark moments that we need to take a moment to just breathe, relax, find our quiet place. The magic place where recharge our battery, regain our appreciation, accept the weight of being the advocate and build the relationships to propel our students successfully out into the world.

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Positive Relationships Lead to Higher Learning

Andrea Kaercher
Kings Junior High School
Southwest Region

Every day we have the chance to impact hundreds of young minds, all of whom are eager to learn our curriculum; or are they? As we stand outside our rooms greeting students, we are often quickly reminded that middle school is a fragile time in many lives. Middle level students are working through a plethora of everyday tasks and challenges: navigating the unknown hallways, fitting into peer groups, finding a seat at lunch, cracking the combination of their locker, remembering all of their homework and many more. In addition, many of our students are struggling with circumstances outside of their control: no breakfast, living with relatives, no clean laundry, taking care of siblings, and a multitude of other responsibilities. Middle school is a unique time filled with many opportunities for educators to impact lives.

While curriculum is often a driving force in education, curriculum cannot effectively be delivered without first building positive relationships. Relationships are the foundation upon which an optimal learning environment is cultivated. A student who does not feel comfortable will struggle to be open to learning. As teachers we must strive to get to know each student and form a connection that enables every student to know he or she is valued. Relationship can be built through a variety of strategies.

Although simple, greeting students at the door each bell is a wonderful way to form a welcoming environment. For many students, a “Hello” is an opportunity to break the ice. Another powerful tool is a student survey. Allow students to answer a variety of questions through writing and illustrations such as favorite candy, television show, book, hobbies, sports, interests, and more. Place the surveys in a binder and periodically review them to foster individual student conversations based on something you noted from the survey.

Imagine intentionally setting aside 5 minutes every other day of the week to focus on relationships. One day you label each corner of your room: Agree, Strongly Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. Then, spend the first five minutes reading simple statements such as, “Chocolate is my favorite ice cream flavor.” Students then walk to the corner that best represents their feelings for the statement. If not the first five, perhaps the last five minutes of the bell. There are many short activities available for getting to know your students (and for them to get to know each other). The time taken from curriculum will be well spent, and building relationships helps contribute to the development of the whole child.

A different approach to building relationships within curriculum is to plan short, warm-up activities that engage students, but in a less formal, more exciting way. What if when your students walked through the door, you encouraged them to hurry in and be seated in front of the random microwave you brought in to school for the day? As they all sit staring at you with wonder, giggling with uncertainty, you place a bar of Ivory soap in the microwave and turn the microwave on. Excitement and bewilderment build as the Ivory soap expands, filling your microwave. You quickly stop the microwave and throw open the door to the “oohs” and “ahs.” In just three short minutes you have captured your audience for the day, created conversation between peers, and guaranteed the likelihood they will engage with you by asking questions.

In just 5 minutes, you can learn amazing information about your students which will help you foster an understanding of your students as individuals, and help build relationships, both peer to peer and student to teacher. While teaching the curriculum with fidelity is of high importance, it is also important to reach the social-emotional part of your students and connect with them as fellow human beings as well as their teacher. The positive relationships you build with your students can only enhance your ability to teach them to the best of their individual academic abilities.

Kids Like to Move It, Move It!

By Andrew Gibson

Principal, Amherst Junior High School
North Central Region

As a parent, I feel like there are more times than I'd like to admit that I catch myself watching a cartoon movie that my children enjoy even if they are not in the room. This happened recently with one of my favorite children's movies, *Madagascar*. My favorite scene was on: where the lemurs are dancing and singing "I like to move it" and I admit, I watched the entire thing, sans children. It also seemed like perfect timing as we were preparing to start school and movement has become a hot topic in education.

Science is continuing to advance, and we're learning more and more about the acquisition of knowledge. One of the educational focuses over the past few years pertaining to instruction is the benefits of movement on the brain. Eric Sheninger cited in his blog *A Principal's Reflection* on September 23, 2018 Elisabeth Trambley's (2017) work on the impacts of movement in the classroom in relation to student discipline incidents. Trambley found as stated by Sheninger that "once the breaks were implemented the inappropriate behavior diminished, establishing a functional relationship between breaks and classroom behavior" (Sheninger, 2018). This correlation alone should encourage us to consider adding breaks to our instruction, but for many teachers this is still difficult to do.

We feel anxiety about adding breaks to an already busy curriculum that most of us struggle to cover over the course of the year. "You want us to add 5-8 minutes of breaks when I already don't have enough time to cover my current curriculum?" I do! It doesn't have to be just breaks though.

Incorporating movement into learning can also positively impact instruction and retention for students. Eric Jensen, in his book *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, reminds us that "We know exercise fuels the brain with oxygen, but it also feeds it neurotrophins (high-nutrient chemical "packages") to increase the number of

connections between neurons. Most astonishingly, exercise is known to increase the baseline of new neuron growth" (Jensen, 2005). If we know this, why don't we prioritize movement more in the classroom?

Once we commit to incorporating movement into our classrooms, how and when do we do it? Paula Kluth of www.paulakluth.com and

www.differentiationdaily.com suggests it can happen at anytime, but also gives some tips. They include:

- Before a challenging lesson or after introducing complex materials.
- After any long period of direct instruction or whole class activity.
- When you observe restless, fidgety or uncomfortable students.
- As a sponge activity when you have 2-3 minutes remaining in the period.

While these are not the only times, these are some suggestions to help get you started. For more ideas, you can visit <https://brainbreaks.blogspot.com/> Have a great school year and thank you for all that you do for middle level learners.



Our Standards-Based Learning Journey

Jay Clark

Principal, Van Buren Middle School

Northwest Region

“It’s not about the thing you’re headed toward. It’s about the work you do along the way”. This statement was shared at the 2017 ISTE conference by presenter Jad Abumrad and embodies what Van Buren Middle School has experienced as we set a course toward standards-based grading. While we’re reaching our destination, I am confident every staff member would share that they’ve learned more about instruction, assessment, and their content. The most impactful part of our journey is that we’ve reshaped our school’s philosophy.

Starting in 2014, our school began critically examining our grading practices. Prior to this point, we were the “wild, wild west” of grading. Teachers graded anything and likely everything and trivial points were given for boxes of tissues, canned goods, and I once heard about a teacher who would give bonus points to students who would fill her water bottle between classes. It was apparent that our grading practices completely lacked integrity.

We began with small, structured staff discussions with big picture questions centering on this point of inquiry: “What does a grade mean?” We embraced Rick Wormeli’s words of caution during this leg of the journey: 90% of our energy should be focused on the beliefs while 10% is focused on implementation. We also intentionally moved slowly to allow us to continually reflect and change course to ensure our entire staff understood *why* we were making changes.

Many of our discussions referenced Rick Wormeli’s work. Many of us had heard Rick speak and he rightfully made us question many of our long-held practices. He first was changing the metaphor of a grade from compensation to communication. As a young principal, I would herald the end of the quarter by announcing to students that their report cards were their “paychecks”. Yes, even administrators had to change.

Grading guru Tom Schimmer also played a role in our journey. Tom promoted the idea that it’s not necessary to jump directly into standards-based grading. If we picture a continuum of grading practices, why not create fidelity first, then layer-on the standards-based components? This made the shift accessible for all staff - even those more hesitant to make changes. Thus, we focused on broad ideas related to grading in some way: Attendance, student behavior, extra credit, cheating, homework, group projects, grading scale, and reassessment. With the exception of homework, grading scale, and reassessment, our staff was able to agree upon common beliefs as a full group.

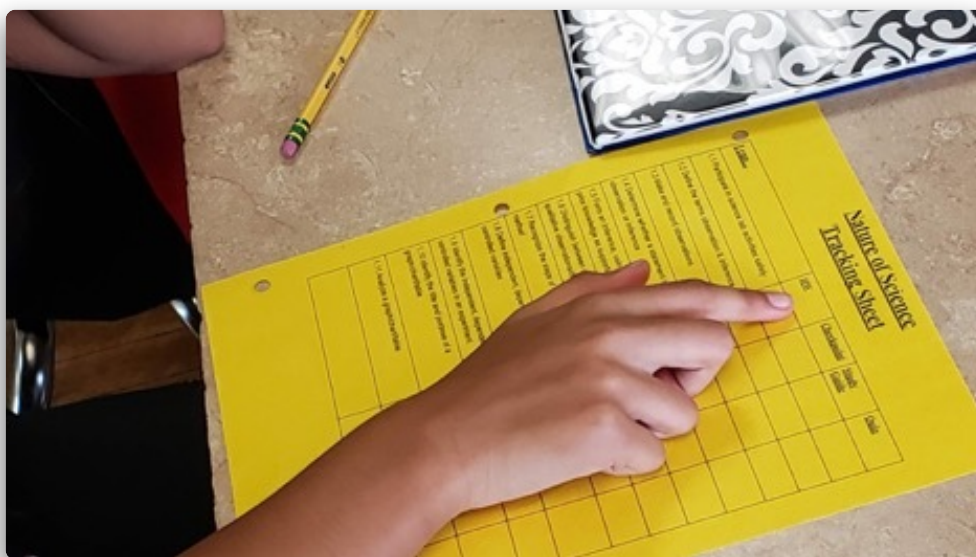
A professional learning community representative of the entire staff was tasked to formulate our building-wide beliefs and practices with homework, the grading scale, and reassessment. The PLC researched and then made recommendations to the full staff. We implemented what we referred to as “Evidence-Based Grading” the following school year. Students’ content grades were based only on summative assessments, which could be attempted more than once. We also added a “work habits” grade that each team maintained based on student behaviors. Work habits was initiated by the opinion of our parents who still wanted to be informed of their students’ ability to be responsible.

On the administrative side, we made many changes to school policy: Academic dishonesty became a discipline issue, not a grading matter. When a student cheated, he is expected to redo the work for full

credit because it's all about measuring student achievement. In the past, a student with an unexcused absence received zero credit for anything done in classes. That shifted completely. And, we no longer award any extra credit - and we still have kids bring in extra boxes of tissues and contribute to the canned food drive.

One of the toughest changes, especially for our math teachers, was no longer including homework in a grade. As expected, there was concern that students would stop doing homework if it wasn't graded. However, our homework completion rate is the same today as it was ten years ago. And, we had to accept the fact that educators created the myth "if it's not graded, students won't do it". That fueled the next leg of our journey: Focusing on learning, not collecting points.

In order to "connect the dots" for students, we had to be transparent in what and how we were teaching and assessing. We began piloting different methods of students tracking their own progress on learning targets. Teachers began aligning assessments to learning targets, which eliminated some of the unnecessary trivia of the content. We started to experiment with how we represented our grades in the online gradebook. As a staff, we were taking risks, learning, researching, reflecting, and networking. Looking back, this represented some of the best professional learning I've seen in my 20 year career. It barely cost the district anything and promoted collaboration. Collegial respect improved greatly and educators were seeking each-other out to learn more about the practices they had implemented.



We continue learning and have a team with the goal to determine ways to improve our work habits reporting this year. By the end of the 2019-2020 school year, all educators will have learning targets in place, students tracking their progress, and represent those learning targets in our grade books. We still average student grades and assign letter grades. Those were changes that our community wasn't quite ready for- and, our elementary and high school are still utilizing mostly traditional grading. Making that change for three years wouldn't contribute to our overall K-12 experience.

The changes to our grading is a byproduct of the change of philosophy and mindset throughout our entire school as a result of this work. We are able to act upon the idea of a growth mindset because we allow reassessment and we work to improve and grow. A student's first attempt is not their only attempt. This also facilitates quality feedback and looking at our students as individuals. There's nothing better than looking at our traditional factory model of school in the rearview mirror.

Meeting Kids Where They Are

By Stephanie Paul-Tiberio

Assistant Principal, St. Matthew the Apostle Catholic School
Central Region

Intervention/Enrichment Period, Flex Time, Growth-Mindset Time, Insert-Gitchy-Mascot-Name-and-Action-Verb Here . . . you know it well, the period for meeting kids where they are—call it what you may. Whatever you name it, the positive is that middle level grades are using tiered instructional strategies and giving credence to the importance of it through time set-aside in the master schedule. However, weaving this time into an existing or new schedule purposefully can be a change for some schools; and, change can be hard, especially in the early months of the school year when time is of the essence to: establish routines, implement curriculum, and begin gathering data. Not to mention, learning new personalities and leaders' expectations.

For some, even the mention of these purposeful periods' names for meeting kids where they are, can spurt grumbles and or comments raising concern from teachers, "I don't have time for another prep." I challenge that thinking by saying that in preparing for this time, you are saving time; you are meeting students where they are, and you are (likely) supporting contexts for interdisciplinary study and exploration. Moreover, when this time is reduced to a study-hall, the time and energy that could have been spent planning for purposeful tiered activities tied to learning is exerted/wasted on managing behaviors from students whose behavior is really a cry for help, academically.

As instructional leaders or teacher-leaders in our buildings, we have to use this time, not to offer feedback in response to students, but to be advocates for our young adolescents, empowering them to take ownership; then we use the data to "feed-forward." Furthermore, we have to be purposeful in supporting our colleagues who are new or have not been supported in the past in planning for intervention/enrichment periods and as a result have gotten into some bad habits or habits that are mere survival.



This is where instructional leadership comes in; just as students need to know the "rules of the game" to be successful, so too do our faculty members and our role as leaders is then to support, support, and support. One way to do this is to frame it in the context of our instructional practice and curricular choice's effectiveness by having set time with teachers, leaders, and specialists to develop and refine these periods.. When we examine data (qualitative and quantitative) and talk about students, the accountability piece naturally increases buy-in from the faculty members who may at first be skeptical, even resistant but with support see the value in tiering instruction during set periods of the day that are not for teaching new content but rather for meeting all learners where they are. The key here I would argue is that we never reduce students to numbers on a spreadsheet, and we empower teachers in light of the data to creatively tailor these periods as a team or individually to meet learners where they are right now, today. If students are to be empowered, teachers must be too.

One idea being implemented this year in my building are set times when teachers and specialists can sit to discuss students: classroom teachers alongside specialists, buildings aids/tutors, and teachers of specials who support these periods as members of the team; one difference is having an instructional

leader at the helm to facilitate the discussion, establish expectations, ensure all voices are heard, and from time to time make the tough calls. When new initiatives are implemented, the instructional leader needs to be in the room with teachers, supporting.

The “rules-of-the-game” matter, and all must play by them. I’ve included a sample of an Expectations, Tips, and Tricks page meant to serve as a catalyst for teachers who throughout the year will be supported in reviewing and examining their intervention/enrichment periods as they first develop then evolve, change, and grow through fine-tuning this year. When implementing a new concept, leaders must remember: it is a marathon, not a sprint!

Expectations

Who: All Children, of diverse ability-levels and the facilitators of learning: Teachers, Tutors, and Intervention Specialists

What: Intervention/Enrichment Time

Purposeful time for differentiation/tiered instruction, intervening to meet each child where he or she is through refinement and/or extension of skills. You are facilitating learning and meeting students where they are during this set time. For students of high ability level on a given standard or important developmental piece this may be inquiry/exploratory based.

What it is Not: It is not a time for introducing brand new content because students who need more intensive time/small group work or tutoring outside of the room will miss important new content.

When: Daily in our school– *in the class’s set time*

communicated to all who serve the children providing support they need: students with an IEP, students on a support plan, talented & gifted students, and general education students.

Optional Read if you Like on Tiered Instruction in light of RTI:

rtinetwork.org/essential/tieredinstruction/tiered-instruction-and-intervention-rti-model

Tips & Tricks for Consideration

- The Name:

Rename it if you like. It is nice to give it a name so that students associate it with a different feel from the rest of the day: whether the student goes to a reading Specialist, works with a tutor, or stays and works in a group or independently. In some schools, the name coincides with a mascot or motto, is a creative name determined by students rooted in a value or ideal, or the name is a clever piece of a concept tied to Growth Mindset.

- Consider Variety:

Some teachers use choice menus, online work assigned based upon areas of need for each unique child, a file system with re-dos, anchors and extension packets assigned to a student’s given folder, a small group model, conferencing and student monitoring of goals, or alter the available options on different days of the week, establishing a system. Keep in mind that for many students you serve, this time becomes extended time for an assessment or time to work on their individualized education plan goals. For others who remain in your room, work with the “hidden curriculum,” developmentally sound practice and/or growth mindset in tandem

with content may work well in this time. Variety is key so that you can meet students' needs week to week/unit to unit.

- Establish Expectations:

This time of the day will likely look and feel to the children different from other times. They may be used to more formal settings where the teacher is modeling to a whole group or may be used to direct, whole-group instruction; students need to know the “rules of the game” for moving around the room, transitioning between choices, working in or leaving a small group you, a tutor, or an aid runs, transitioning to work with a tutor on a given day, etc. Also, be mindful of providing variety and teaching routines within that.

- View it as an Opportunity:

When small groups are created, they should be fluid based upon students' mastery levels (or work toward attaining it). Be empowered to use this time to work in groups with students: re-teach, refine, challenge, and extend/enrich the students who crave more and are mastering information (provide opportunities to go deeper into already taught concepts). Ask, how does this extend the work we are doing as a team? This is an opportunity to meet all learners where they are in a smaller setting as students with IEPs and Tutors are met where they are too.

- Track Growth:

This is an opportunity to support students in developing metacognition: thinking about their thinking/learning. We can gather rich data through this set time allowing us to drive future instruction during other times of the day/content areas; as well, this time can be fruitful for gathering data/collaborating to gather data to support a child who is brought to the RTI team. For your students as a whole, though I wonder... Could a graph or conferences showing the student/prompting the student (depending on age) to reflect on improvement in a targeted area be effective? Could this be an opportunity for work with Growth Mindset that could be collaboratively woven into the work for all learners done during this set time? How do we send the message that we are all in different places but all grow during this time?

Embracing Assessment

Kristen Smith
Southeast Region

I remember several years ago a high percentage of parents at my school refused to allow their students to take the state assessments. Their refusal was in response to a seemingly excessive amount of testing. While I certainly see their perspective, it is a shame that assessment has become such a negative term in education. The reality is that assessment is a part of teaching and learning. We cannot adequately instruct our students if we never assess them. So, what can we do to change the tone, specifically with mandates out of our control? We can decide how to introduce and discuss assessments so that students and parents see their value. Throughout my career, I've had the opportunity to observe several ways of doing so in a positive, uplifting manner.

I recently heard a teacher set the stage for a benchmark test by saying “today, you have the chance to show how big your brains are”. Now, in full disclosure, this comment was made in an elementary classroom. However, I absolutely believe it has value for young adolescents. The heart of the statement is about students showing what they know. Indeed, assessments are supposed to inform us about student abilities, so let’s focus on those! Instead of viewing assessments as punitive, let’s encourage our students to show all the amazing things they *do* know.

Another teacher recently told her students, “before you begin, take a deep breath. Clear your mind. Then press start when you are ready.” We all know students who can’t sit still. What about the entire class right after lunch? Although it may feel like they need 20 minutes to settle down, we usually don’t have the luxury of allowing for that on “test days”. I like the idea, then, of encouraging students to take a brief moment to settle themselves. It can help calm them down and it allows them to take ownership of their mindset. It puts the power back in their hands, where it often belongs!

Finally, I’ve met a number of teachers who encourage students to retake assessments as needed. In an era where mastery of learning is the focus, it makes sense that students would have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding. Knowing that a retake is available can take the edge off any singular assessment. A retake can go a long way to release pressure and calm anxiety. Plus, retakes get back to the ultimate goal: mastery. Unfortunately, very few of mandated tests allow for retakes. To address this, I suggest reminding students that no one test will decide everything. Ensure that they know multiple opportunities to show their knowledge will be readily available, and make sure that as a teacher you look at the whole picture when making decisions about student learning, understanding, and growth.

The bottom line is that assessments are not going anywhere. While teachers often have little control over mandated standardized assessments, we do have control on how we discuss them with students. We have many opportunities to shape the conversation. Let’s take advantage of those moments to make the best of it. Let’s embrace assessment and all that it offers us.

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