

**TWB**

THIS WE BELIEVE Focus Area  
**Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment**

This is going  
to be an  
amazing year!

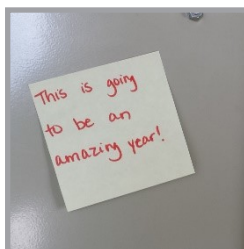
In the  
**middle**





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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 [jclark@vbschools.net](mailto:jclark@vbschools.net)



## from the **cover**

In the Middle focuses on AMLE's *This We Believe* throughout this year starting with **Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment**

For details on TWB, go to <http://www.amle.org/AboutAMLE/ThisWeBelieve/tabid/121/Default.aspx>

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## in their **words**

How amazing that our kids can literally save lives just by using their brains! I love to do the math with my students and reinforce the impact we can make as a class and as a team. In just ten minutes most students can earn over 200 grains of rice. When you multiply this by a grade level the numbers blow them away.

*Free Rice! —Page 16*

## Opportunities, Shifts and Focus

As you set your sights on a new school year and you are filling in your planner, please make the following opportunities part of your plans.



### October 2015

Learning from other middle level educators is the richest professional gift you can give yourself. This fall, middle level educators in Ohio have an incredible opportunity for such learning right here in our own backyard. You can join more than 4,000 educators at the **42nd Annual National Conference for Middle Level Education**.

On **October 15-17, 2015**, at the Greater Columbus Convention Center, you can enjoy a choice of more than 300 sessions, in-depth workshops, hands-on technology sessions, and hundreds of exhibits—and *everything* is totally focused on doing what's best for students in grades 5-9. No need for an airline ticket, and for those in close proximity to Columbus, no need for lodging. Also note that this event includes the third Friday in October, a traditional date for

inservice activities in our state, making it easier to leave your classroom.

OMLA will hold the Thursday night social featuring Disco Inferno and the Spazmatics in a battle of the bands format. Dance the night away to your favorite tunes from the 70s and the 80s. This is an annual favorite for all OMLA conference goers.

Visit [www.amle.org/annual](http://www.amle.org/annual) for more information, and [www.amle.org/funding](http://www.amle.org/funding) for ideas on funding your conference experience.

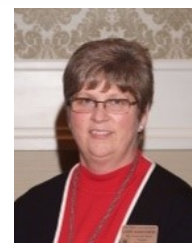
### October 2016

The **Ohio Middle Level Association** is shifting the annual state conference to October. Our hope is that this move will take the worry of snow and ice out of the picture. Our **next state conference** is scheduled in **Cincinnati October 27-28, 2016**.

### Middle Level Advocacy

I invite you to become a member or renew your membership to the Ohio Middle Level Association. Why join OMLA?

- Receive ***The Ohio Middle Level Journal & In the Middle Newsletter***
- Reduced State Conference Rate
- Access to Regional Conferences
- Networking Opportunities with Exemplary Schools
- Access to On-site In-service Programs
- Mini-grants/Awards Opportunities
- Timely Position Papers
- Access to Liaisons from other Professional Organizations
- Voting Privileges



Lorrie Kubaszewski

President

*Continued on page 4*

**Focus**

Message from a parent:

*I know a lot of teachers, and I know that a lot of their energy goes into things like setting up classrooms, finding new materials and activities, learning new technology, and downloading beautifully designed templates and worksheets. All of that is good and important: The more efficiently your class is run, the more hands-on your activities are, the more welcoming your classroom is, the better the year will be. But all of that pales in comparison to this one thing. The thing you could do in a bare cinderblock room with no electricity and no more technology than a stick for writing in the dirt floor. The one thing a teacher can do that makes a bigger difference than all those other things combined:*  
**Know my child.**

This is an excerpt from a post by Jennifer Gonzalez on blog titled *Corkboard Connections*. As a former middle school teacher and now a teacher of aspiring teachers, Jennifer provides important focus as we prepare for another school year.

There is much talk today concerning education, however, more times than not, the conversation excludes or dismisses the point made by this parent.

Gifted middle level educators understand that to know and understand their students is to lay the foundation upon which all academic growth is built. Teachers and administrators must make difficult decisions concerning what takes precedence in a crowded school year. This parent's message serves as a reminder that time taken to get to know students is not wasted time, but rather is vital to their academic growth.

The new school year brings with it great promise and endless possibilities. Enjoy!

Lorrie Kubaszewski

OMLA President

A big **thank you** to our business partners for their support of middle level education!





# Finding the Right Exploratory Course

Matt Triplett



Great educators are in a constant state of examining their curriculum for more effective ways to meet the needs of all of their students. Effective middle school curriculum has many different looks to it. As noted in *This We Believe in Action* from the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), we find that there are four basic tenants of effective curriculum. Middle level curriculum must be challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. The focus of this article will be on finding an exploratory course that fits a need in your building.

Adding exploratory courses can be a useful means to inspire the intellectual curiosity of your students. Ask any teacher who has taught for at least one day in a middle school and he or she will tell you that middle level students are the most inquisitive creatures on the planet! A few years ago, my school was considering adding more elective courses. Some students and parents suggested that we look into adding a theatre course and perhaps some sort of STEM course. As the building principal, I initially brushed the theatre course suggestion aside because I knew that there was already enough “drama” in our school! However, my staff and I researched similar courses from other schools and developed these new courses. A curriculum was established and the rest, as they say, is history. The positive feedback from students, as well as parents, regarding the implementation of these classes has been fantastic; Parents and students are appreciative of these enriching opportunities that are geared toward students’ interests and expose them to new ways of thinking.

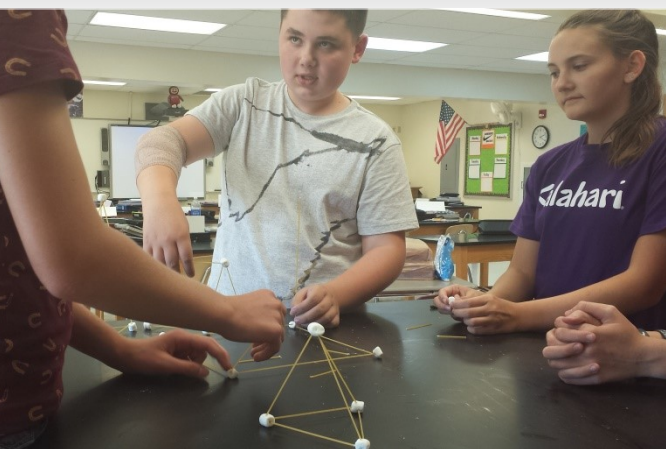
I would argue that the success of our theatre and STEM courses could be contributed to two factors. First, our school is fortunate to have “rock star” teachers leading the way. They have taken these courses to new heights. Simply put, we would not have experienced this amount of success had it not been for them. I have learned that when a school adds a new course, it is vital to have the right teacher in place. If you do not have a teacher who is excited, passionate and supported, then you can forget about any opportunity of inspiring the young minds in your building. The second reason we have had success is because we listened to our stakeholders. Our county continually has the lowest unemployment rate of any county in the state, yet the area



manufacturing and farming industries are thriving. Area parents, schools and business leaders in our community and the surrounding communities, know that to keep a good thing going, we have to adjust and change with the times. We strive to expose our students to both current industry trends, as well as those emerging markets. Adding courses in the STEM area allows our students to be better prepared for their futures.

If you are interested in adding exploratory courses to your class offerings, I would encourage you to do a few things. First, find out what your stakeholders want in new courses. If you ask, they will tell you! Second, be diligent in ensuring that you have the very best teachers in place to work

*Continued on page 8*



# Apply for Designation as an Ohio School to Watch!

Schools to Watch® is an initiative launched by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform in 1999. Through the Schools to Watch initiative, the National Forum identifies schools across the United States that are well on their way to meeting the Forum's FOUR CRITERIA for high-performing, middle level schools.

- Academic Excellence
- Developmental Responsiveness
  - Social Equity
- Organizational Structures and Processes

If you believe your school is a model for others and is on the move toward success that supports middle level school reform, we encourage you to complete the School Self-Study and Rating Rubric and apply to be an Ohio School to Watch.

## Eligibility Requirements

The OSTW program seeks high-performing, public middle grades schools in Ohio that are constantly "on the move" toward higher achievement of all students. School must satisfy the following minimum eligibility requirements to apply to be an OSTW:

- Contain at least one of the following grade levels within the school: grades 6, 7 or 8.
- On the most recent building report card the school must earn a "C" or better on the Overall Value-Added or Progress Component.

**For resources and more details on OSTW, search OSTW on the Ohio Department of Education website ([education.ohio.gov](http://education.ohio.gov)). Application deadline is October 16.**

# Building a Culture

Jennifer Seebauer & Michael Kauffeld

Last school year I noticed Mrs. Peters, a substitute teacher, in an animated conversation with our secretary. I decided to walk over in case this spirited exchange had anything to do with one of our “frequent fliers” to the office. As I approached the retired teacher she began retelling her experience.

***“They all read!” she stated. “I have never seen a group of students who all enjoyed reading so much.”*** Mrs. Bobbin Peters, 7th grade ELA substitute teacher

A smile came to my face as I listened to the remainder of this exchange: “We’re doing it!” I thought to myself. Inspired by Donalyn Miller’s book, *The Book Whisperer*, Teays Valley West Middle School (TVWMS) had succeeded in creating a culture of readers.

At the beginning of that school year, Mrs. Seebauer, our 6-8 ELA department and I decided we were going to bring back the joy of reading to our students and staff. Although West had some avid readers, students love of and joy of reading had vanished. Each individual was able to provide examples of how grade level novels, required reading lists and the emphasis on non-fiction had zapped the joy out of reading for our students and in some cases, ourselves. Armed with ideas and motivated by Donalyn Miller’s *The Book Whisperer* we were determined create a culture of readers.

The first step was presenting the 40 book challenge -- challenging our students and staff to read 40 books over the course of the school year. The focus was on getting books in our students’ hands. It did not matter, necessarily, **what** they were reading just that they **were** reading. A Twitter hashtag was set up for students to tweet about the books they were reading. (#tvwmsreads) For students without a Twitter account, our library provided paper copies of the Twitter bird logo allowing students to write about what they were reading; these tweets were then hung from the book on the library shelf.

In order to help guide students as readers, ELA teachers set aside class time for reading. Students had twenty minutes each day to read whatever book they selected, providing not only time but value to self-selected reading. During that time our ELA teachers modeled by reading books of their own. To emphasize that all teachers are readers we invited unified arts teachers into the ELA classroom every Thursday to read with our students; not to read to the students simply to model the joy of reading. A seventh-grade student reported to one of our ELA teachers, “Mr. Tipton (TVWMS health and physical education teacher) read, and he read the whole time.”

As students became comfortable with the independent reading time, our ELA teachers periodically interrupted their own reading to meet with groups of students to discuss their book selections. Teachers also began incorporating time for students to provide written responses. Students would write reflections, reactions, responses or reviews for their independent reading book, sometimes incorporating the class novel into the response. Later, the teacher could read the student's written entry and many times provided comments to the student. Reading journals were also a place for students to make notes about finished books, current books, and books they would like to read next.

*“We begin each day with 25 minutes of SSR reading and I love this time because I have the opportunity to model reading for my students! After four or more weeks of reading right along with my students, I begin to trim down my own reading time so that I can hold individual conferences with students. Our conferences revolve around the students’ reading and what they have documented in their reading binders. Reading binders, formerly reading folders, allow the students a place to log the books that they are reading for the 40 book challenge and also journal their understanding and opinions about*

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## From Our Executive Secretary

Welcome to the 2015-16 school year. I hope you had a great summer and are excited about all the opportunities and challenges this year will present. The Executive Board of the Ohio Middle Level Association worked diligently at our annual summer workshop planning and developing strategies to improve and expand the services offered to our membership.

### Membership Renewal

There are several convenient ways to renew your OMLA membership. The simplest way is to return the membership renewal notice that was recently sent to all individual members and building members who expire this fall. If you don't have a renewal invoice, please visit the membership section of our website at [www.ohiomla.org](http://www.ohiomla.org) and complete the membership form. After completing the membership information, you have two options. You may use a credit card to pay and submit the form online (please make sure you follow the process all the way through to ensure payment gets submitted) or you can print the membership form and send it with your check to OMLA, P.O. Box 18790, Erlanger, KY 41018. A copy of the membership form has also been included in our fall newsletter for your convenience on page 18.



**Dona G. Klein**  
Executive Secretary

## Join OMLA at AMLE2015!

The AMLE2015 conference is in Columbus this October! The next OMLA state conference will take place in Cincinnati in October 2016. For details on registration, go to <http://www.ample.org/annual/Home/tabid/244/Default.aspx>



**AMLE 2015**  
**Annual Conference**  
**for Middle Level Education**



October 15–17 | Columbus, Ohio  
#AMLE2015 | @AMLE



## Have a story to share?

### Contribute to



E-mail editor Jay Clark  
[jclark@vbschools.net](mailto:jclark@vbschools.net)

*Finding the Right... —continued from page 5...*

with those students. Passion and enthusiasm are contagious! Exploratory courses are a wonderful way to give students options and to help them carve their future paths.

**Matt Triplett** is the principal at Fort Recovery Middle School in the west region.  
[triplettm@fortrecoveryschools.org](mailto:triplettm@fortrecoveryschools.org)



*these books. The journals provide an opportunity for me to respond to their thoughts and encourages a running dialogue between each student and myself. In addition, the binder provides space for students to record books that they would like to consider reading because they have been shared by their peers during our Friday book commercials. This list provides guidance to the students when they visit the library and are searching for new books. Finally, the binder is a place to store resources for reading, writing and word study. These binders are stored in my classroom and are used daily by the students."*

Mrs. Melinda Sauerbrun, 7th grade Language Arts teacher

Throughout the school year the librarian & ELA teachers collaborated, focusing the biweekly visits on what the class needed most. The year began with many, many booktalks by the librarian and the "test drive" activity which allowed students to spend no more than 5 minutes with a book, complete an evaluation and then move onto the next book. The booktalks became a student-led activity, after the librarian and ELA teachers had sufficiently modeled it as well as provided opportunities for students to create their own rubric for book commercials. Many students took this opportunity to add books to their "I would like to read next" list in the reading journals.

**"I really liked talking about a book I enjoyed."**

Austin A., 7th grader

By the end of the first semester more and more students were carrying independent reading books with them to class. To our delighted surprise, students were rushing through assignments to get back to reading their book! Each grade level team created "a good time to read" policy. This outlined for students when they could read and when they should be focused on the task at hand.

Reading was becoming a part of our school culture... and within a semester! Students had books with them all the time. TVWMS students talked about books. Our staff talked about books. Students were providing teachers with books they must read. Students trusted teachers to recommend books as they knew their teachers were readers. The library's Blind Date with a Book exemplified this student trust and willingness to take a risk. Blind Date with a Book required students to take a chance on a title, selecting the book based on nothing more than the snippets written upon the wrapping paper that the book was encased within.

Fourth quarter, April most specifically, should have been the worst month in the school year for both staff and students, as they dug into the new PARCC testing. However, at TVWMS, April was a month full of reading -- and lots of it was poetry. Every morning a poem was read during the morning announcements with both students and staff signing up to share a poem they found or had penned. TVWMS celebrated "Poem in a Pocket" all month. The library lessons all focused on poetry, sharing poems and recitation activities. The culminating event at the end of the month was the first PoeTea -- a poetry tea.

**"I saw this book in the library and I was kinda like maybe, but then I saw another student's book commercial on the same book so I decided to read it."**

Aubrie M., 7th grader

As the year concluded, TVWMS staff knew we had to keep books in our students hands to continue this culture. To meet this need, students were able to not only take home books from teacher's classrooms but from the school library. Reading is important to our students. Access to books can be difficult in the community as we do not have a library within walking distance for the majority of the TVWMS students. Opening the school library during the summer and providing summer long checkout kept books with students.

In Peter H. Johnston's book, *Choice Words*, he mentions addressing the class in a way that affirms: "What are you doing as a writer (reader) today?" As we enter year two, we want to continue to affirm and validate our students as readers. "You are readers and this is what readers do."

On the second day of school this year, one of our students was sent to the office for disrupting study hall. He wanted to sleep, doodle and talk back to the teacher. TVWMS Assistant Principal Allison Swanger, with Sean C. in tow, headed to the library. Mrs. Seebauer, knowing the student, suggested a book that he might enjoy, *Middle School: The Worst Years*

*Continued on page 13*

# The Devil's in the Details

Tom Burton



When people struggle to explain a complex situation, they often fall back on a familiar phrase: “The devil’s in the details.” This common nugget is a shorthand way of saying that if we don’t pay attention to the minute details when planning something, we are not likely to be successful. Now more than ever, the details drive what we do on a daily basis. One example of the complexity of details is described in Malcolm Gladwell’s book, *Outliers* in which he describes the complexity of flying a plane. He emphasizes the importance of a pilot being detail-oriented. As Gladwell illustrates, one pilot made seven discrete errors that led to a plane crash. Avoiding even one of the seven errors would have averted the tragedy. In the field of education, the devil is actually in the data. Using required tests to judge districts and schools means that we need to be clearly focused on the meaning of the data and how we can use data to reach each student. When we lose focus of the meaning of the data that is available to us, we lose our education focus. A focus on data and its uses means different things for different professionals in school settings.

## Data and Building Administrators

Building administrators must be the experts in data and be committed to doing whatever is necessary to learn what data shows about classroom practice and student achievement. When building administrators have a functional understanding of the data that is available to them, it is easier to use that data effectively. By giving teachers access to that data, administrators and teachers can work together to produce positive results. Often we think about using data solely to drive instruction. When we fall prey to this mentality, we lose sight of the power of using data in all aspects of leading a school or team. When I was in my first year as a principal, I received many great tips and much good advice. By far the best advice I received was from a survey I did of the staff I was going to lead.

## The Devil's in the Data

After receiving a near perfect 98% return rate, I reflected on the results. It was evident that the vast majority of the teachers wanted an inclusive middle school: a middle school that was responsive to the developmental needs of the young adolescents we served. We had many veteran teachers and several new teachers, so the school was primed for a major change. As we moved from a junior high to a developmentally responsive middle school, I talked throughout the process about the survey results and what the data showed. The school became a much more inclusive learning environment that met more of

*Continued on page 11*

our students' needs. Consequently, the students performed significantly better on state tests. This is one example of practical data use that resulted in functional transformation at the building level. Too often, administrators hear the word "data" and think only of state test results and short cycle assessments. Visionary leaders, at the middle level and elsewhere, must be willing and capable of using data in innovative ways to drive effectiveness. For example, if you want to change the way you report grades to parents, get data to help inform your decision. Survey parents to ask them how they would like grades reported. Survey other school districts to see how they report grades. Use the survey results to help determine how to change your grade reporting system. Obviously, we have student data in the form of standardized testing. But we have other critical pieces of data that we use in a school. For example, how many parents attended parent/teacher conferences? Did they fill out a survey afterwards that helped you plan next year's conferences? Attendance data is important, too. Many states rate schools and use attendance as one of the aspects. Are there ways you can improve student attendance by looking at the data? Before implementing any new program, it is important to gather baseline data first, so we can later examine whether the program is effective.

### **Data and Classroom Teachers**

Classroom teachers need to be familiar with all of the available data about each student. What data are important? What do you do with the information you are given about your students? What extra data do you seek? What data do you collect through instruction and assessment for your own use? Do you use the data formatively to drive instruction? Remember that no student is a number, but all students have numbers associated with them. Use the data to understand where your students are at all times. It is important to devote enough time to be able to monitor data effectively.

As we continue to juggle our various daily responsibilities, it is critical that we use data to help drive our educational practices. After all, in the absence of data, all we have is opinion, and as we know, opinions can differ and can paralyze schools. Let's use the data to make the difference in meeting the needs of young adolescents.

**Tom Burton**, Associate Superintendent of Princeton City Schools in the southwest region, was the Mark of Leadership columnist for the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) for five years. This article is republished with permission from both Tom and AMLE.

*tburton@princetonschools.net @tomtalksmiddle on Twitter  
Tburton50 on Instagram*



### **Using Data Effectively**

1. Create time to work with data. Administrators need to be creative in making sure that teachers get time to work with other teachers to collaborate in assigning meaning to the data.
2. Time may come in the form of common planning time, staff development time, or time before the school year. If administrators in a building do not see the value of sharing data with teachers, teachers need seek out the data and create their own time to work with it.
3. Start small with the data that is readily available. If you do not have access to state or national assessment results, use your own data. Be certain that when you assess students, you use the assessment data to meaningfully inform your instruction. Construct an evaluation instrument that provides you with information you can use to compare students' strengths and weaknesses, then change instruction as needed.
4. Do whatever is necessary to understand the data. Whether you work with a colleague in your school/ district or outside your school/district, it is imperative that you are able to understand the data well enough to use it wisely.
5. Teachers should work collaboratively to interpret data. It always helps to have another person with whom to discuss ideas because that person usually sees things a little differently than you do. Develop a trust that allows sharing of personal data without fear of judgment or punishment.
6. Finally, don't use data to place blame; use it to understand and drive instruction. It is critical to use data to find patterns of strengths and weaknesses in each student. Having data that are accurate and meaningful to all stakeholders is a key to an excellent middle school.

# Launching a New STEM Curriculum

Tiffany Shaw



Tuscarawas Valley Intermediate School has “launched” a brand new STEM curriculum from Project Lead The Way. This curriculum, focused for both elementary and lower middle level grades, is appropriately named “LAUNCH”.

Through PLTW’s LAUNCH curriculum students become problem solvers. They learn to use structured approaches, like the engineering design process, and employ critical thinking skills. They apply STEM knowledge, skills, and habits of mind, learning that it is okay to take risks and make mistakes. As teachers and students learn and discover together, education becomes far more engaging.



PLTW's rigorous and relevant curriculum was collaboratively developed and is continually reviewed and improved by PLTW staff, teachers, university educators, industry experts, and school administrators. It leverages an innovative, project-based approach that fosters collaboration and builds critical thinking skills.

From the beginning, PLTW Launch was developed to work with current standards. It aligns to Common Core State Standards for Math and English Language Arts, Next Generation Science Standards, and other national and state standards.

PLTW Launch curriculum includes 24 modules aligned to grade-level standards. The 10-hour modules are presented in pairs that combine to create a thematic unit. Teachers and schools have the flexibility to introduce the modules that they want, when they want, at the grade level they want.

**For more information on Project Lead the Way  
visit [www.pltw.org](http://www.pltw.org)**

**Tiffany Shaw** is a fourth grade science and STEM teacher in the Tuscarawas Valley school district in the east region.

*[tiffany.shaw@tvtrajans.org](mailto:tiffany.shaw@tvtrajans.org)*



of *My Life* by James Patterson. End of the story? Just two weeks after the office referral, Sean came to the office beaming with pride. “I finished it,” he said. Sean claimed it was the first book he had read cover to cover and he could not contain his smile.

This year we have asked all staff members to post current reads on their door. This sparks conversations between staff and students about reading. It also continues to support our statement that everyone is a reader -- from the school secretary to the health teacher to the math teacher. We are beginning “Mix-it-Up Vikings!” every Thursday during our Viking period, all staff members in our building will be able to sit in a classroom and share self-selected reading time with students.

West is now the host of two Little Free Libraries. These two libraries provide our immediate community access to books. Within the first two weeks of “opening”, the libraries have had an incredibly successful circulation.

TVWMS staff continues to demonstrate in many ways the importance of modeling reading to students. As a result, students are reading; they are helping to create a culture of readers in our school and community and Sean is right there with them. His current book? *Middle School: Get Me Out of Here!*

**Jennifer Seebauer** is the librarian and **Michael Kauffeld** is the principal at Teays Valley West Middle School in the central region. [jseebauer@tvwsd.us](mailto:jseebauer@tvwsd.us)  
[mkauffeld@tvwsd.us](mailto:mkauffeld@tvwsd.us)

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# Reallocating & Realigning Resources to Better Serve Middle Level Learners

Kelli Cogan

For as many years as I can remember, Olmsted Falls Middle School offered a wheel class called “Life Skills.” The focus of Life Skills was sewing, cooking and financial literacy. While I would bet that most of us agree that those are skills everyone should have, it was difficult to justify spending nine weeks on just these three items. However, the teacher had always taught this class, we had always offered it and kids expected to take the same class their older brother and sister took.

Then the perfect storm happened:

- A policy was developed as prescribed in Ohio Revised Code 3313.6020 and the State Board of Education’s Model Policy that focused on a Career Advising Policy for students in seventh through twelfth grades. This policy included opportunities for students to have access to comprehensive resources and supports to prepare for their future success. Students were to be given career-related learning experiences, and a program of counseling and advising that would enable students to discover their interests and explore academic and career pathway options. The policy also included language that addressed those students who were identified as at risk of dropping out of school.
- Our district had just hired a new Career and College Counselor for grades six through twelve at the beginning of last year in an effort to realign our resources to meet the needs of our students and to prepare them to be successful *after* they graduated from our High School, in either college or career. We were confident we had a strong foundation to address the elements of the newly developed Career Advising policy.
- Our teacher for the Life Skills course decided to resign at the end of last year and we had an opportunity to redefine the position and the course content.

We immediately posted the position seeking a teacher for a new “College and Career Advising” class for students in grades six and seven, as well as a class called “Issues in Global Context” for our eighth graders. The teacher we hired to replace the

former Life Skills teacher had a fresh focus – to design a class for sixth and seventh graders that would still allow them to learn about sewing, cooking and financial literacy, while at the same time providing them opportunities to take interest surveys and to find out what careers they might want to research. The new class would also provide students with opportunities to further explore academic and career pathways. In eighth grade, students would select a potential career, identify a global issue that is tied to that career, and conduct more in-depth research on how that career may be used to solve a global issue.

This isn’t a canned curriculum, it doesn’t exist. The new teacher collaborated with the College and Career Counselor to find resources that would assist her in building a robust program to ensure that those eighth graders leaving our middle school and heading to high school would have a stronger understanding of where they were headed as it relates to academic choices and class scheduling.

With no influx of additional funds, school districts need to take the “old” and revamp it into something “new” in order to be sure that we are offering our students the opportunity to be successful in a global environment. What better place to start than Middle School?

**Kelli Cogan** is the assistant superintendent in the Olmsted Falls School District in the northeast region.

*kcogan@ofcs.net*

**What does ORC say about career advising?**  
Visit <http://codes.ohio.gov/orc/3313.6020>

# Teaching Math with Changing Expectations

Kristen Lavric

*This We Believe* (2010) encourages teachers to make interdisciplinary connections in meaningful and consistent ways. While I have long recognized the importance of this for middle level learners, I have, admittedly, found it difficult to implement fully. With the introduction of Ohio's New Learning Standards, I have been forced out of

my content-focused comfort zone. As a seventh grade math teacher, I must make more conscious efforts to address other content areas in my classroom. The simple reality is that expectations have changed. Recently, I have put considerable effort into incorporating more writing in my math instruction. Although this integration is still a work in progress, the use of application assignments and self-reflections have already positively impacted the teaching and learning in my class.

The first way that I included more writing in my class involved application assignments that required students to write one to two page papers. My students wrote "how-to" papers, apology letters, and magazine articles throughout the year. These assignments asked students to explain the "why" behind various topics with detail and intentional organization. The writing prompts were taken from a list (given to me by my principal two years ago) of writing forms students are expected to know by the end of eighth grade. The greatest benefit to this strategy was learning more about student understanding while also exposing them to a greater variety of writing prompts than their ELA teachers had time to address. Unfortunately, the strategy had its drawbacks as well; namely, the time that it took students to write their articles and letters. I was not adequately prepared for how long the genuine writing process would take. Thankfully, however, once students recognized that I valued the writing process as much as the math content, their work quality improved dramatically.

While the application assignments were targeted toward specific learning standards and units, student self-reflections occurred throughout the year on a biweekly basis. These



reflections focused less on content explanations and more on student understanding and concerns. I learned a great deal about student comfort levels; indeed, many students felt far more comfortable asking questions and raising concerns through the privacy of their reflections than they did in class. Since the reflections occurred

on such a frequent basis, I was able to intervene and address confusion and misconceptions quickly. The frequency also helped students learn to articulate their understanding at a deeper level by the end of the year. Once again, time was an issue as writing reflections requires more than 1-2 minutes at the end of class. I also had to work with students to more carefully identify their levels of understanding. Initially, most students insisted they fully understood everything in class, which contradicted what I observed throughout the week. Eventually, though, this improved as students became more comfortable and honest in their responses. Having large group discussions and more concrete examples of understanding levels also improved the quality of student self-assessments.

The application assignments and self-reflections were my first foray into intentionally incorporating more writing into my math class. I am not naïve enough, however, to think that I can stop there. This year, my students are maintaining math journals that will require them to explain a multi-step problem every week or so. It is my hope that the journals improve both written expression and math understanding. I plan to provide feedback that addresses essential writing traits in addition to mathematical reasoning. The year is new, so I may be biting off more than I can chew, but I am willing to try. After all, if I want my students to push themselves, I must do the same.

**Kristen Lavric** is a seventh grade math teacher at New Lexington Middle School in the southeast region.

[nl\\_klavric@seovec.org](mailto:nl_klavric@seovec.org)

# Free Rice!

## Improve Your Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening Skills While Saving Lives

Michelle Koussa



As teachers, I know we are always looking for ways to make learning real and connect topics and themes to life. One program I love using with my sixth grade students is a website called Free Rice. Free Rice was founded in 2007 and is currently run by the United Nations World Food Program. The main goals of the site are to provide free educational opportunities to people and to end world hunger by providing free rice to starving nations. I instantly fell in love with the site and knew my game-loving, “techy” and compassionate students would love it as well.

Free Rice offers a series of questions in over 21 subject areas ranging from Italian and Chemistry to Famous Paintings. There is even SAT Test Prep and so many other subjects that can help students review information in a fun, educational and time-worthy way. For every question you answer correctly, ten grains of rice are donated to starving countries. If you continue to answer questions correctly your questions will get harder, and if you answer a question incorrectly your questions will get easier. I love that the site automatically adjusts to exactly where my students need to be.

One of my favorite subject areas for my students is English Vocabulary. There are over 60 levels of vocabulary and over 12,000 words and definitions. This subject is fun for kids and adults, as the questions honestly get really hard! I love having challenges in my class to see “who can earn the most rice” or “who can get to the highest level.” There is a warning on the site that if you play it may just improve your reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Again, win-win situation! I have the kids keep track of the rice they have earned and their highest level because it also provides good data to show growth or areas of improvement. The possibilities for using Free Rice are endless. There are posters, teaching resources and tools to set up classes on the site. You can tie this to service learning and just about every subject in school. I have used the site to work on informational text, key ideas and details, geography, research, narrative writing, and so much more!



How amazing that our kids can literally save lives just by using their brains! I love to do the math with my students and reinforce the impact we can make as a class and as a team. In just ten minutes most students can earn over 200 grains of rice. When you multiply this by a grade level the numbers blow them away. There are formulas on the website that students can use to calculate how many grains it takes to feed a person for a day. Again, what a great way to tie math and learning to life!

I hope you take a moment to check out [www.freerice.com](http://www.freerice.com), answer some questions, save some lives, and ultimately share this opportunity to make a difference with your students!

Michelle Koussa is a sixth grade teacher at Independence Middle School in the northeast region.

[mkoussa@independence.k12.oh.us](mailto:mkoussa@independence.k12.oh.us)



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