

# IN THE MIDDLE

OHIO MIDDLE LEVEL ASSOCIATION



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OHIO MIDDLE LEVEL  
ASSOCIATION  
**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 newsletter co-editor  
KristenMSmith223@gmail.com.

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



## *President's Message*

**Michelle Koussa**  
**OMLA President-Elect**



Greetings!

It is hard to believe we are beginning to wrap up the 2020-2021 school year! In a year and time of uncertainty, educators and administrators across the state have continued to stay strong, persevere, and step up the plate no matter what the challenges in order to meet the needs of middle level learners. On behalf of the OMLA board, THANK YOU! Thank you for your constant hard work, dedication, and perseverance. The accommodations, innovation and creativity seen during this time of virtual, hybrid and in-person learning has been incredible, and has surely paved the way for great new learning opportunities. I have witnessed Tik Toks, parades, virtual game nights, Zoom reading nights, and so many absolutely amazing lessons, programs and events created to focus on the whole child.

Your ability to adapt and accommodate in such a graceful fashion is to be commended. I encourage you to check out our website, [www.ohiomla.org](http://www.ohiomla.org), and nominate a colleague, building, or program for one of our many awards. Or, check out our mini-grant applications and apply for funding to support your new innovations from this year. Mini-Grant applications are due June 1, 2021.

This spring we are super excited to host an in-person state conference where we can recognize and celebrate educators across the state! This conference was originally planned for October 2020 but has been rescheduled to May 6-7, 2021 at Kalahari Resort and Conference Center in Sandusky, Ohio. Join us for 2 days as we reconnect, refresh, and learn new ideas as we begin to plan for next year. Weston Kieschnick, award winning educator and author, will keynote both days as he encourages educators to move beyond the ordinary and reach their potential as true innovators for learning. We will also have Jack Berckemeyer with us hosting a college strand and also providing sessions that are sure to refresh your soul. On top of our general session speakers, we have over 100 educators presenting and sharing best practices on everything from tech and virtual learning to trauma and meeting the social emotional needs of students.

This issue of our newsletter is full of amazing accomplishments, stories of innovation and perseverance, and a celebration of what we are all looking forward to this May at Kalahari. I hope to see you at our state conference

in May, but if you can't make it I encourage you to continue to do what's best for kids and be YOU! Let your gifts and talents shine in a way that brings out the best in your students and colleagues. Together, we can learn, grow, and continue to be champions for middle level students and education.

Sincerely,

Michelle Koussa

President-Elect, Ohio Middle Level Association

## *Gaining Perspective*

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**Shannon Snee**

**Northeast Region**

The COVID crisis of 2020 was impactful to many. Our school year was no different. We began our year at Coventry Middle School utilizing remote learning. After a short stint back in person, learning remotely became our life once again. This was a difficult time for both students and teachers alike.

Around Christmas time, our 6th grade team knew we had to do something to connect with these students to whom we barely knew. After brainstorming various ideas, we decided to have students construct Gingerbread houses. Because remote learning was in full force, we had no way to distribute supplies to all of our students. Then an idea began to form. How could we make this meaningful to students who we barely knew? We decided the only answer to our question was to visit each and every one of our 6th graders' homes. We split up the routes amongst all of our team and surprised our students that morning on Zoom. Little did we know that our surprise of "No school today," would turn into a life changing event.

As a teacher, being able to see where our students call home really puts into perspective what we are dealing with on a day to day basis. It is more than just the academic connection between the child and teacher. I myself grew up in this town, and had no idea that some of these neighborhoods existed. This small feat only took about two to three hours of our time, but made an impact on myself and my colleagues that we will never forget.

We had students waiting for us at the door with smiles on their faces and an eagerness that I have never experienced before. We had 12 year olds showing excitement for the first time all year. This is something we rarely received during our daily Zoom lessons. The positive outcome of our day paved the way when we returned after break. There is a saying, "Small steps lead to big changes." This small step was easily the best day I have ever experienced in my 19 years of teaching.



# *OMLA State Conference, 2021 Bring It On!*

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## **Mindy Fulks**

### **West Region**

“The Floppy Disc and YOU!!” “Lessons and Latchkey Kids,” and “Organizing Your Week Around Dodgeball Fridays,” were just some of the offerings at my first education conference back in the 1980’s. Glamorous acid washed jeans, boxy shoulder pads, neon tracksuits, and crimped perms filled the seats, but the excitement of being at a conference was undeniable. Here are three reasons why I am so looking forward to shaking off the COVID Crud and regaining some normalcy at OMLA, 2021!

### **Networking with Other Middle School Teachers in Ohio!**

As we have all recently learned there is nothing like in-person learning. Although it is pretty funny when someone’s husband runs by in his underpants during a Zoom meeting, nothing replaces connecting with other teachers and engaging in instruction first-hand. Generally, teachers seek sessions they want to learn more about, and I often look for sessions outside my West Region for a variety of points of view. I found a hilarious PBL that involved dressed up Star Wars characters, pumpkin catapult building, and caveman rubbings, ideas for taking your students outdoors in different weather conditions, and useful literacy tools based on local town history...all under one roof. These teachers become valuable resources and offer handouts and websites so you can stay connected for help and questions. And did I mention The Social?

### **More Educational Opportunities!**

No matter how many years you have been in education, it is always changing and everyone can learn something new. Working in your own classroom can be isolating, especially if you aren’t on a team. Without exposure to a variety of points of view, you can miss new trends and ideas which can positively impact your students. Google Tools, Educational Technology, STEM activities, Blogging, Break Out Rooms, YOLO Portfolios, all provide opportunities for your students to engage and grow.

### **Laughs and Jack**

OMLA does not disappoint when it comes to keynote speakers. Generous with their time, advice, and selfie opportunities, they bring laughter as well as tears, with their educational stories that inspire and encourage educators of all ages. Those stories, from Teach Like a Pirate - Dave Burgess, Freedom Writer - Manny Scott, and educational visionary, Ron Clark stick to your soul as you work to inspire the lives of the students you work with every day. And I am not gonna lie. I have had a raging level five stalker crush on Jack Berckemeyer with his diaper genie bags and paper plates since first coming under his spell at OMLA years ago. He gave me permission to feel okay about all the silliness and laughter going on in my middle school classroom. Which is exactly what attending OMLA does for me every year.

Being a part of OMLA brings with it many benefits. There is power in being connected to other people who are active in middle level teaching, but it can be easy to talk yourself out of committing to the annual meeting. Many people think joining is enough, but to capitalize on the return of your investment, join us at the conference! You won’t regret it.



# *Do Kids Still Read for Fun?*

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**Jeremy Evans**

East Region

Middle school kids have a lot going on. Many things can contribute to their lack of reading. The real question is do we as teachers contribute to it? How can we encourage kids to read? At Dover Middle School, we ask ourselves this question a lot. Over the last few years, myself and Shelly Ruegsegger have attempted to tackle this question and try to encourage our 6th graders to read.

The idea all started when I found out about a program called March Book Madness. Two amazing Central Ohio teachers, Scott Jones and Tony Kiefer, started a program where they pick 16 books each year and host online voting for a book bracket similar to the NCAA tournament ([www.marchbookmadness.weebly.com](http://www.marchbookmadness.weebly.com)). Schools across the globe can participate by sharing the books and encouraging kids to read. Students can also vote, we vote by class period.

The key to this is getting the books so kids can read them. Our school librarian can scrounge up as many copied as possible from inter-library loans, but we don't always get every copy. So we order them from Amazon, but even Amazon can get pricey.



I applied for the OMLA \$500 Mini-Grant to get copies of titles that are included in the March Book Madness program. We were able to get at least two copies of every title and three or four copies of some. Most books are pretty contemporary titles and very new books. Most books were in hardback and we donated them to the school library when we were finished with the program.

Books flew off the shelf! Kids wanted to reserve copies because they were waiting for books to be turned in. I have never seen kids get so excited for books. The excitement carried over into the voting with 6th graders cheering when their favorite books moved on to the next round.

We have two contests that kids can participate in with the program. When the brackets are released, we make copies and allow students to fill them out similar to an office pool, with the grand prize being fast-food gift cards. The second contest awards gift cards to the kids that read the most books.

So, yes, kids do still read for fun. All we had to do was to introduce the books and talk about them. This never would have been possible without the help of the OMLA Mini-Grant and Scott and Tony.

## **Kristen Smith**

### **Southeast Region**

I'm going to keep this brief because we've all lived an extra stressful life the last year and change. Our lives as teachers, parents, and humans were drastically changed at the flip of a switch. To say that it's been stressful, doesn't quite do it justice does it? However, dwelling on the stress doesn't help me much. When the stressors in my life get to be a bit much, I try to remember the good that still exists. Put another way, I can focus on the stress-OR, I can focus on the successful moments. Let's take a look at a couple stressors that have actually been beneficial!

Videos: Oh the videos. I honestly don't know how the teachers that create dynamic and engaging videos do it every week! I create anywhere from 2-6 videos on a weekly basis, but the time it takes to make even rather simple and straightforward videos is exhausting. I can focus on the stress-OR I can focus on the good. At the end of the school year, I will have made videos for just about every single lesson I've taught. The videos aren't going anywhere; they're in my resource bank for good. When a student next year has to miss class-now I've got a tool that I can offer to keep them in the loop. Yes, the videos are a massive drain on time right now, but next year they are all set to go. Even as standards and textbooks inevitably change, the videos will still be a valuable resource for me to share with students (and parents). That's a big relief!

Relationships: I have been fortunate to be in person with students the entire school year, but I only get to see half my students at a time. It's hard to only see a particular group of students every other day. Tracking down missing assignments, reteaching, and otherwise just checking in on them is difficult. Once again, I can focus my attention on the stress-OR I can focus on what I have gained all the while! We didn't ask for it, but the students that I have this year and I are forever going to remember the "COVID year". We will remember social distancing in a classroom not made for social distancing. We will remember how we laughed over matching masks. There's a certain bond that we share now. I hope that bond is exclusive to this year's students. It's something special that we have; it's *ours*. In a year where everything is "different", how cool to be in it together!

The stress of this school year isn't going to magically disappear. Even as we head into May, the stress will continue. In all likelihood, some of these stressors might just follow us into next year too. But what a relief to know that even in the midst of chaos, we still found joy. We still laughed together. We didn't just survive, in many ways we actually found ways to thrive!

### **Kelli Izzo**

#### **Northeast Region**

As we look back on a year of middle level education during a global pandemic, it's hard to believe that anyone could have anticipated the twists and turns that occurred as districts tried to navigate the waters of remote, hybrid, and in person learning. The terms "synchronous" and "asynchronous" are now deeply ingrained into our educational system, yet were virtually unknown before March of 2020. While there is so much about this experience educators will leave behind, there are also a number of valuable lessons to be learned (and even maintained) long after COVID-19 and Zoom parties are a distant memory.

For our students, they have found comfort in routines. With so much in their worlds changing from minute to minute, our students have thrived when they're given structure and clear expectations. Our student discipline numbers have never looked better. Some say that of course numbers are down- you only have half of your students! On the surface- sure. But a deeper dive into the data shows us that even when we look at discipline with proportional view on lower in person students, the numbers still tell the same tale- our students are being respectful, responsible, and safe at a higher rate than ever before. When our students returned to our building from remote learning, we had to make sure we reinforced our newly established protocols for the health and safety of everyone in the building. We had clear signage, made Google Slide presentations to reinforce the protocols, and even an Oscar worthy video featuring our building administrators to demonstrate specific examples on how the building was going to operate. There wasn't a doubt in our students' minds about how to walk in the hallways, enter and exit a classroom, sit on the bus, and follow cafeteria procedures. Additionally, our teachers made a point to reinforce classroom expectations explicitly. Our building had always had PBIS expectations posted, but now, the renewed focus on the health and safety protocols in our building made those expectations more visible than ever before. Middle schoolers don't live well in grey areas from adults- they thrive on knowing exactly what to do and when to do it. As our building has now gone to a full return to in person learning for the overwhelming majority of our students, we've still maintained much lower discipline numbers than previous years. When looking at what's changed, the answer keeps coming back to the incredibly clear expectations we've set forth for our students. When life returns to "normal," our building has made a commitment to never stray from setting forth those clear and explicit expectations for our student behaviors.

Of course, the most important lessons we've learned from COVID is the importance of keeping in touch with our students' social emotional well being. During the totally remote days of Spring 2020 to our students being in person, our staff has been able to see more than ever the importance of knowing our students' feelings, needs, and what role we play in ensuring they feel safe and cared for. Our district started a Titan Team initiative during our remote learning this fall in which every certified staff member had a small group of students to check in with weekly, and do some social emotional lessons and check in. This connection to a small group of students soon became the highlight of the week for many of the group members, staff included. As we look at our building schedule for next year, one of

our goals is to keep this Titan Team in some way. The social emotional needs of our students don't become any less important as we ease our way of COVID restrictions.

While COVID did so much harm, even in the darkness, we've seen glimmers of light shining through. If we keep our focus on the well being of our students in times of "normal," we can continue to make strides towards ensuring our middle school students grow and learn to be the best people they can possibly be.

## Ohio Middle Level Association

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# *Ohio's Middle Level Classrooms are Not Just Surviving, They are THRIVING!*

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## **Lisa Nemeth** Central Region

As the secretary for The Ohio Middle Level Association, I am tasked with coordinating all of the breakout presentations. Though it can be an arduous task, each year I continue to be amazed with the talent of our Ohio educators. This year was no different. As I read through the different proposals, I was blown away by the capacity we, as middle level educators, have to be resilient in this year of ups and downs, unknowns, and frustrations.

For instance, Swanton Middle School, from which the 2020 OMLA Team of The Year hails, will present three times this year. Come learn about their students' experience collaborating in multi-grade groups during their week-long, multi-grade level STEM project. Hear how a language arts teacher skillfully integrates content standards and issues of social justice (specifically race) in her classroom. She will share an anti-bias framework, instructional design, and classroom resources. Finally, Swanton Middle School will highlight The Amazing Shake, a competition that places an emphasis on teaching students manners, discipline, respect, and professional conduct. The goal is to prepare students so that they are able to present themselves exceptionally well for opportunities today as well as those that will come in the future.



Mayfield Middle School is sending a team to highlight their successes in their classrooms. In one session, they will share blended learning strategies that grab students' attention, maintain engagement, and creatively assess, using technology, literacy and inquiry-based activities from their history classrooms. In another, a team shares how they reimaged time, space and instruction for student personalization.

Presentations range from relationship building and teaming to STEM learning. You can learn about literacy skills, blended learning, PBIS, and many more topics! Go to [www.ohiomla.org](http://www.ohiomla.org) and click on the 2020 conference link to register - it's not too late!

Interested in presenting at our 2021 conference in Columbus? [Click Here](#) to submit a presentation proposal or visit [www.ohiomla.org](http://www.ohiomla.org) for more information!

# Stay connected to **OMLA!**

