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This past year has presented all of us with many challenges. Educators across the country have had to reinvision teaching all while keeping students at the center. Once common teaching practices have been replaced with more electronic versions due to virtual/hybrid learning. While the shift in education has been met with many obstacles, educators have continued to persevere and problem solve to better reach their students.

As we move into the second half of the school year, we will continue to be called upon to navigate obstacles using our creativity and problem-solving skills to deliver the very best teaching practices to our middle level students. We know you will be ready for a reenergizing professional development opportunity in the spring. What better way to do this than to spend a couple of days with other dedicated middle level educators at the Ohio Middle Level Association (rescheduled) 2020 Conference.

The health and safety of all is a top priority of OMLA. As a result of the global pandemic, OMLA has decided to postpone the #OMLA2020 Annual Conference from March to May 6-7, 2021. Kalahari is a sprawling conference center with large meeting rooms and plenty of outdoor space to spread out during the beautiful May temperatures. We hope with the additional time and extra health and safety precautions Kalahari Resort and Conference Center has in place, it will be a more safe event for all.

Weston Kieschnick will be the keynote speaker both days! Weston is an award winning educator, best-selling author, and TEDx speaker. As a keynote, Weston will push the thinking of educators to move beyond the ordinary and reach their potential as true innovators for learning. Follow Weston on Twitter @Wes_Kieschnick. As a featured presenter, Jack Berckemeyer incorporates his passion for middle level education and his humor to offer educators a number of strategies that they can implement immediately in their classroom.
On Twitter follow Jack @jberckemeyer. In addition, #OMLA2020 will feature breakout sessions presented by practicing middle level educators covering a variety of topics. The deadline to submit a presentation proposal is February 15, 2021.

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 March 31, 2021 to take advantage of the early registration discount.

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

Looking forward to seeing you at Kalahari Resort and Conference Center May 6-7, 2021!

Yes, you can be a prophet in your own land!

Jay Clark
Northwest Region

We’ve all heard the phrase, borrowed from biblical references, that “you can never be a prophet in your own land.” As much as I believe wholeheartedly in the connections we can make at an in-person conference and recognize the importance of seeing what others are doing outside of your corner of the world, we often overlook the strengths of those lurking among us each and every day.

There are a number of advantages to building professional learning connections within a school or district. When attending a conference, you typically lack follow-up communication and your learning on a topic is constrained to the session or conference timeline. Conversely, when you’re learning from your colleague in the classroom next door, there are follow-up conversations, problem-solving and brainstorming sessions. Many ideas shared out at a conference are not one-size-fits-all and require some adaptation for your school or classroom’s specific needs and your colleagues would understand those considerations.

Another advantage to building a professional learning network is the building of capacity - in both teams and individuals. A level of vulnerability is necessary to hold honest conversations - where we can share our weaknesses and needs or be critical of a colleague’s ideas. It can be a long and somewhat difficult journey, but I can testify that when a team achieves this level of trust, they constructively push one-another and are willing to take risks they wouldn’t have otherwise.
When educators work at this level, our students see the adults in their lives as lifelong learners and are part of the “failing forward” journey. This leads to powerfully modeling reflection. Finally, by empowering teachers to deliver professional learning, we are providing them a leadership role and valuing their voice. In a small district like mine, there aren’t formal leadership roles for teachers. However, we have a number of unofficial leaders who serve as the resident expert in everything from scheduling to English language learners strategies.

Prior to the pandemic, our district hosted a speed learning session during which our K-12 staff presented short sessions on everything from formative assessment to trauma-informed practices. We were able to provide our staff with an opportunity to share and lead. This also connected our buildings, because best practices are best practices - whether a student is 6 or 16 years old. This specific structure allowed even the most reluctant presenter to feel at ease as the learning sessions lasted only twenty minutes and required the presenter to lead a group of educators gathered around a table in a discussion.

Last year, our district embarked on a personalized professional learning initiative that promoted choice, provided flexibility, and allowed for customization. This initiative mirrored what we are asking of our teachers in their own classrooms - to allow for student voice and choice, divorce learning from a strict schedule, and build relationships with students so that you know their interests and can help them build on their strengths. Structured on a few foundational learning strands, educators were able to swap two scheduled in-person professional development days for learning activities they completed on their own time. The activities included book studies, Google educator certification, peer observations, and other self-paced options.
What did we notice after making the shift away from large group “sit and get” inservices? Our teachers were willing to invest more of their time - some well beyond the requirement - in topics that interested them. Teachers moved out of their silos, away from departments or grade level teams, and connected with colleagues. Reflections were all done on teachers’ individual portfolios, which are public websites.

I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the power of social media as a professional networking tool. Moving beyond the themed, scheduled chats such as #MSchat, connecting with other educators who are sharing their classroom practices can be inspiring and affirming. Browsing your professional Twitter feed for a few moments provides the ultimate in flexibility as it can be done as you’re in line at the grocery store or waiting in the parking lot for your child to finish basketball practice.

Engaging our staff in quality professional development should happen both inside and outside the walls of our schools. A conference can plant the seeds, but that learning that is sustained by the work between educators in our schools. Encourage those around you each and every day to become a “prophet” and transform your learning and that of your students’.

**Effective Professional Development**

**Brittany Cioffoletti Marino**

North Central Region

When I started teaching thirteen years ago, I often heard complaints from colleagues when any professional development was announced. I didn’t understand as I thoroughly enjoy learning and networking with others, whether it’s within my own district or with others. However, after thirteen years and countless hours of professional development, I can understand why many teachers had gripes all those years ago: there is a lot of BAD PD out there.

The intentions are always good. Everyone wants to help teachers or promote the latest tools, strategies, and resources, but as teachers, it can be tough to listen to someone who is disconnected from the classroom, passionless, or sharing way too much information for one sitting. The best professional development should mirror the best teaching practices. It’s always ironic to be lectured about the ineffectiveness of a lecture, right?

The good news is that effective professional development DOES exist; however, teachers have to be willing to attend with open minds and implement what they learn. In the last ten years, I
have been to so many beneficial workshops, conferences, sessions, and Zoom classes. My classroom has transformed because of the professional development I’ve had, and the best sessions always have several of the following characteristics in common.

1. **A passionate speaker or presenter.** When the person delivering the message is passionate, one can’t help but listen and soak up as much advice and information as possible. Some of the most passionate speakers I’ve seen are Dave Burgess, Kim Campbell, and Jack Berckemeyer. These presenters teach the adults in the room just like they’d teach their students. They love what they do, and it inspires those watching and listening.

2. **Practical ideas and strategies.** There is nothing better than leaving a professional development session with ideas you can use the very next day. One of my favorite presenters, who is an expert in practicality, is Lori Wilfong, an author and professor at Kent State University. I’ve attended many sessions with her at OMLA conferences, and I always take something away to implement immediately. As a teacher, it’s great to be able to modify what you do with a small change rather than turning your entire classroom on its head. Many teachers are more willing to make small changes anyway, so practical PD is also received better.

3. **Coaching and collaboration.** Even during the pandemic, good professional development is still necessary and possible. Our district recently set up cohorts of volunteers who were eager to learn more about project based learning (PBL). It was run through our ESC by Chris Pelphrey, a former teacher trained in PBL, and it was a breath of fresh air this year. We were in a Zoom session for an entire school day once a week for three weeks. It was an extremely valuable and productive experience. We were given a very useful textbook, shown examples, and taught the basics of PBL. Then we were given time to actually plan. We worked in small groups to plan different projects, and we were given time to work with Chris as well as share with the entire group to brainstorm and help each other. We all felt excited and refreshed by the end, and we were invited back to individual coaching sessions throughout the year to continue to receive feedback.

4. **Networking.** Sometimes the best part of professional development is simply having discussions with other teachers. We can become complacent when we only see or communicate with our own teams or other teachers in the district. It’s eye-opening and rejuvenating to learn from other schools and teachers. Something as simple as a Facebook group of teachers can serve this purpose, but the best place to reignite my flame is always the OMLA conference because I meet so many people from around the state through formal sessions, socials, meals, and conversations at exhibitor tables. A brainstorming session with someone in the same boat can be the most helpful professional development.
The Learning Continues

Stephanie Paul-Tiberio
Central Region

“Professional development . . . Professional development!? Who has time for anything, let alone that?” These thoughts, and perhaps these words, have crept into our minds over the past year; and knowing the spirit of middle level across the state, I am also willing to wager that my own and my colleagues’ better angels have shouted them down, because it is in collaboration with our teams, our leaders and our stakeholders that we grow and support one another, pandemic or otherwise. The Middle Level movement has rested in this notion for decades yet the unique challenges of this year, and in particular being very cautious about social distancing and limiting trips to the grocery store, let alone to professional development events have certainly prompted all of us to take pause; in spite of the pause in the world around us, we as educators know the importance of answering the call– of persevering– and of carrying on, staying current like we always would for the young adolescents we serve.

Indulge me for a moment as I tease out an analogy. Having welcomed a son this past summer, my year has been anything but typical– those first days home from the hospital when you go nowhere and limit visitors was a piece of cake for us, because we had been in lockdown-mode all spring. Those of you with children know, though, that the isolation in those first weeks home with a newborn can cause anyone to grow weary– yet we find peace in knowing it is temporary and when we look back it is only a snapshot in time. We draw upon family, friends, neighbors, to get us through. I share this because the same applies to this period of time, history happening around us. We are tired, we are weary, but we know the work we are doing is of great importance. During normal times it can be easy to put one’s head down and exist in a bubble
so-to-speak—to go into survival mode and to grow even more weary. Amidst the evolution of our classrooms for some over the past (almost) year from in-person, to fully remote, to hybrid and back again, without question, the need for professional development has been resounding. We were thrown into an unprecedented situation; we are making history. Let me repeat that a different way: the work we do with our students is history-in-the-making.

Like many of you, I’ve attended virtual PD opportunities where I can squeeze them in and I regret to tell you I’ve missed some well-intentioned plans to attend others as I balance it all. Recently, I was able to hear how the present OMLA team of the year serves its students; after listening, I started a list of questions for reflection as an educational leader because my biggest takeaway from their talk was that change has been gradual to get to where they are; sometimes it is just stopping and listening or watching which is often the best PD because ultimately it prompts this type of reflection. The reality is that we are all in different places right now and attending anything or being online for five more minutes in a day, may seem unbearable; I share this because I think we need to work smarter, not harder regarding feeding our need as educators for PD.

From my perspective, the best PD we seek out presently, is right around us. For some that may involve opportunities virtually like the PD I attended which OMLA hosted virtually but for others, it may look different and be in their own schools. In listening to last year’s team of the year speak, I started to think about what I can take from this time and carry forward to prompt long-term change that carries back into the new normal. I have been so inspired by the teachers, the teacher assistants, para professionals, and not only to our colleagues across the state from whom we are able to draw inspiration but also those we interact with daily. Here is my list of questions; some may seem like commonsense but I hope that you can draw upon them as you look to opportunities for PD personally in your day-to-day:

- What do I do every day in normal times for the social-emotional wellbeing of my students, and how do I prioritize that now as an adult advocate for my students?
- Have I masked up and walked around my building (or called my team and other teams in the school) to see what others are doing (or arranged to pop onto a colleague’s virtual class)?
- Am I taking on too much, and where can I simplify?
- Have I taken time to just stop and reflect on what I believe as a middle level educator, to recenter myself?
- Am I caring for myself so that I have water left in my own well to pour into my students?
- How do I listen to and honor my students’ voices to boost engagement?
- Have I asked my students what they enjoy in my colleagues’ classes?

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Would my colleagues from other disciplines be willing to share resources, videos, materials, etc. that will help me tackle something in a new way?

Have I started my own list of things I do differently now and talked with my team about carrying these into the future across the curriculum because they work well?

This list of questions is rooted in the idea that if it is too much to seek it out, we don’t need organized PD during this time, but only to look around to the good work happening in our districts, neighboring colleagues’ teaching spaces, or communities to be able to grow professionally. Typically, it is in our professional learning communities, and at our annual events which have had to be postponed that we are able to recharge, to reset, and to escape the normal hustle and bustle for a few days each year; but I challenge you not to give up; continue to grow, continue to learn, and continue to weather this storm because I know we as educators will be better for it, and most importantly our students will reflect on a pivotal time in their lives and, I hope, take pause years down the road once the adolescent fog has cleared, recognizing that they were a part of history as were we because the learning did not stop, not for them nor for us professionals.
All is Not Lost
Lorrie Kubaszewski
West Region

During the shut down caused by the pandemic, my professional development has been heavily reliant on podcasts, virtual workshops, and professional reading. I do miss attending in-person professional development and am looking forward to being with all “my people” in May at the OMLA State Conference (fingers crossed). In the meantime, I am thankful for the generosity of educators who share their insights and wisdom virtually.

There are two thought-provoking reads that I want to share. The first is a letter essay written by Teresa Thayer Snyder, past superintendent of Voorheesville district in upstate New York. It was posted to her Facebook page and then reposted on Diane Ravitch’s Blog. It is titled, “What Shall We Do About the Children After the Pandemic.”

In this letter, Teresa speaks to the panic educators and parents are voicing concerning the deficits students are facing due to the disruption of their education. Teresa is concerned that when we work to catch students up once everyone returns to the classroom, we will “lose who they are and what they have learned during this unprecedented era.” The big question she poses is what are we trying to “catch them up” on? All of the benchmarks, as she calls them, have been disrupted as well. The points she makes about redefining the work needed to be done with the students is worth the time to explore and ponder.

She calls upon us to understand that the students’ brains did not shut down while working through this disruption in their education. At a time when we are asked to teach the whole child, Teresa’s plea to take the time to listen to them and let them share what they have learned is a relevant plea. Though their newly acquired knowledge may not be from a book or from an activity in the classroom, they have learned some valuable and difficult lessons that instilled knowledge and needs to be processed.

Teresa pleads with educators to resist the urge to hurry up and “fix” things while working to make up for lost time. She states, “The time was not lost, it was invested in surviving an historic period of time in their lives—in our lives. The children do not need to be fixed. They are not broken. They need to be heard. They need be given as many tools as we can provide to nurture resilience and help them adjust to a post pandemic world.”
Here is the link to her entire letter essay:

In an opinion piece titled, “Make Schools More Human,” By Jal Mehta, I was introduced to a video that just made me smile. The piece is worth the read for sure, but the video embedded in the piece is a can’t miss piece of work. Grab a cup of coffee, press play, and just enjoy!
https://vimeo.com/413100268

I hope my path will cross with yours at the OMLA State Conference in May and we can chat about the contents of each of these thought provoking reads.

Meaningful PD: Teacher-Led

Tabitha Mosley
Southeast Region

I learned early on in teaching that professional development is a vital and large part of a career in education. Every year at my school, we gather in the cafeteria or library on waiver days to attend PD on a variety of topics and subjects, all aimed at helping us learn new programs and concepts and become better teachers for our kids.

However, this year was different. We always have a series of waiver days in the spring and at the start of a new school year. Professional development opportunities are always a part of these waiver days. Last spring and at the start of the new school year, Green Local Schools chose to make some of the PD opportunities unique and tailored to the individual needs of each educator. The current pandemic has changed so much in our school days and our PD this year reflected that. We had the option to pursue our own professional development in whatever we needed to help us become ready to teach in a virtual/hybrid learning environment. We had the option to attend a variety of workshops led by teachers in our district in areas such as making Bitmoji classrooms and converting PDF files into files that students could edit. I was able to work with different members of my 5th and 6th grade team to learn about programs and share ideas that allowed me to better serve my virtual students.

My ELA partner, Rhonda Throckmorton, showed me how to set up a Bitmoji classroom and we were able to plan ways to connect our two classes. Matt Blaine, our Social Studies teacher, did an impromptu small session with the early education teachers in their classrooms about how to navigate EdPuzzle. Our Intervention Specialist turned 5th and 6th grade Science teacher, Kerri Davis, and I worked together on our Google Classrooms. I shared information with her about
teaching a general education course on Google Classroom and she helped me discover ways to better serve my students with special needs and accommodations in an online setting. Instead of listening to a series of presentations, we were able to work with each other to plan, learn, and grow as digital educators and gain professional development credit at the same time.

One of the initial characteristics of OMLA that drew me in as a college student was the level of communication and collaboration among teachers. Going to any OMLA conference means getting the chance to learn directly from teachers who are experimenting and growing in their own classrooms and getting the chance to share ideas as well. I have been to many excellent and worthwhile PD, but the one offered by my school this year as an open opportunity for teachers to explore and learn from each other has been one of the most beneficial and rewarding.

Stay connected to OMLA!

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