

“It’s all about learning!”

**Assessment Report
of
Amherst Middle School
Amherst, NH**

**Visitation Dates:
February 12, 14 and 20, 2008**

New England League of Middle Schools
460 Boston Street, Suite #4
Topsfield, Massachusetts 01983
Telephone: (978) 887-6263
Fax: (978) 887-6504
www.nelms.org



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NELMS Visiting Team

William Downey, Team Leader
School & Focus Assessment Coordinator
New England League of Middle Schools
Marlborough, MA

Margo Fraczek
Boston College
Lynch School of Education
Haverhill, MA

Michael J. Mahoney
Pennichuck Middle School
Nashua, NH

Sarah M. Reinhardt
Pennichuck Middle School
Nashua, NH

Jeffrey F. Solan
Dodd Middle School
Cheshire, CT

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The NELMS Assessment Process

The New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS) designed its school assessment program to help schools become even better at what they do for young adolescent learners. It is based on research summarized in *Turning Points 2000*, a validation of the original report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, *Turning Points*, and a document that was first published in 1989. This report outlines best practices for young adolescent learning and was written by Anthony W. Jackson and Gayle A. Davis with the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. It was published by Teachers College Press, New York, New York.

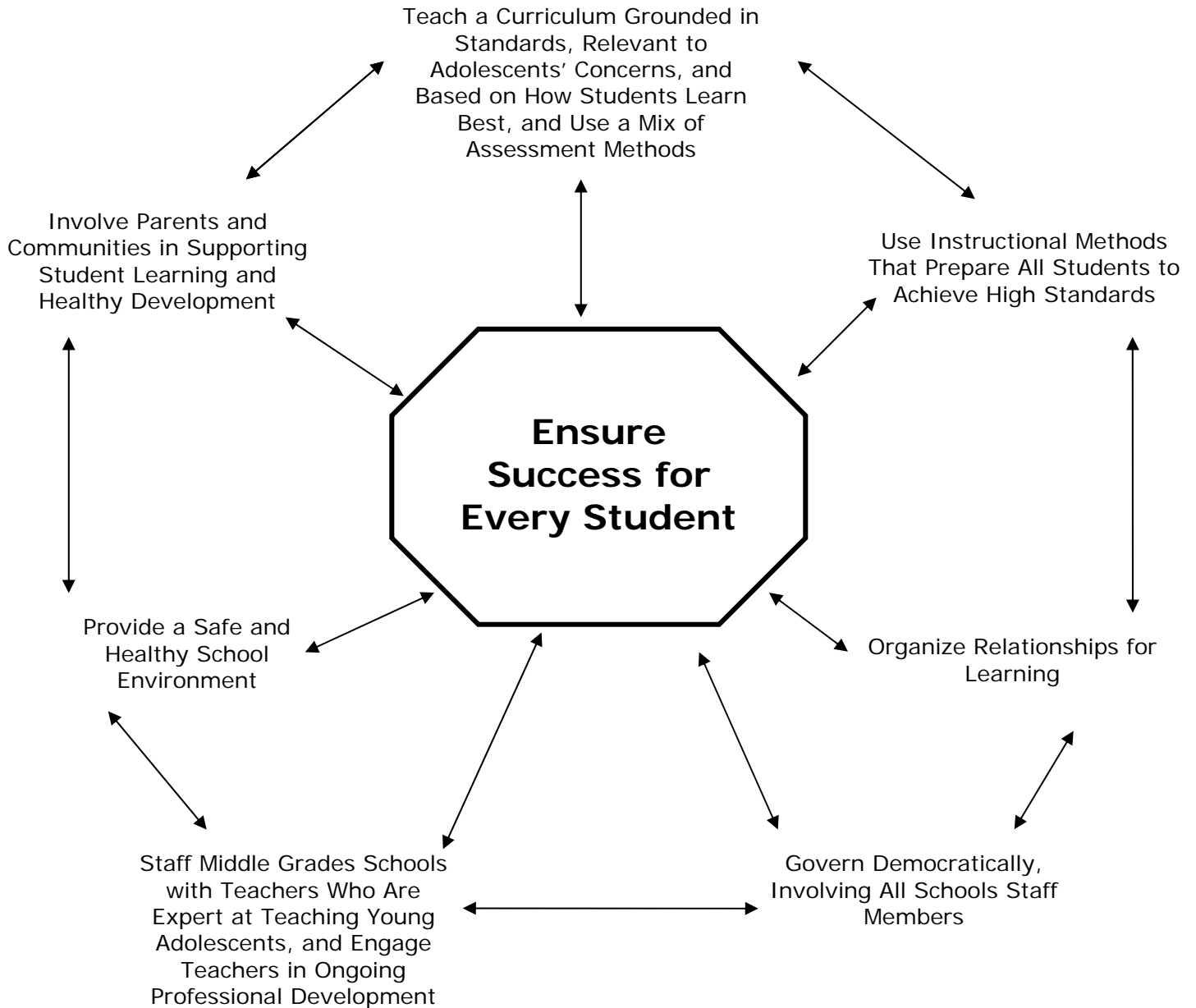
The Director of Curriculum and Professional Development at School Administrative Unit #39 contacted NELMS in July 2007 to discuss the whole school assessment process for Amherst Middle School (AMS). The school and the district were mutually agreeable to the whole school assessment process. Work toward the assessment began in October 2007. The school was provided with surveys to be completed by faculty, support staff, parents, and students. This data is the school's self-study and is extremely important information that should be used in conjunction with this report.

Another piece of this assessment is a three day on-site visit by a team of middle level educators, referred to as the Visiting Team, (VT) who represent different states in New England and various professional backgrounds and roles. During the visit, they analyze themes raised in the self-study and make their own observations before creating a report for the school to use in conjunction with its self-study. These observations reflect three days in the life of a school which may or may not accurately represent the learning that takes place on the other days of the school year. However, generally themes that arise in the self-study tend to be visible during a school visit, and this is true of AMS.

The final, and most important piece of the school assessment process, is how the school decides to use the information it has gathered in this work. The self-study combined with the report of the NELMS VT provides a roadmap to school improvement. "Good and getting better" is a positive theme to use in implementing some of the recommendations contained in this report. The change process is neither speedy nor painless, but our focus should always remain on improving learning opportunities for young adolescents.

NELMS and this VT hope that the information contained in this report, in addition to the data in the self-study, will provide direction for growth so that Amherst Middle School will become an even more effective learning community for the young adolescents of Amherst and Mont Vernon, New Hampshire.

The *Turning Points 2000* design



Jackson A.W & Davis, G.A. (2000) *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*; Carnegie Corporation of New York, Teachers College Press, p. 25

Introduction

Members of The New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS) Visiting Team (VT) arrived at their hotel to find a welcome packet from Amherst Middle School (AMS). The following morning the VT enjoyed breakfast with members of the Steering Committee who prepared for the three-day whole school assessment. The administrative team then shared their overview of the school and the purpose of the assessment.

At the time of the visit, AMS had a student population of 815 students in grades 5, 6, 7 & 8. There are 83 faculty members and 100% of the faculty is highly qualified. In addition there are 28 special education assistants, 4 administrative assistants and 4 grade level aides.

AMS has been an inclusive school since 1988. Currently 166 students (20.3%) are identified as special needs students. There is a very small number of English Language Learners.

The school is organized into teams at each grade level. Space is at a premium, literally every area is used. One grade five team is housed in portable space and two more portable units are under consideration.

Students from Wilkins Elementary School enter AMS in grade five while students from Mount Vernon Village School enter in grade seven. The majority of students at AMS attend Souhegan High School.

Members of the Student Council provided a tour of the school. The students were well informed and shared much information about their school. They are proud of AMS and spoke of the many activities they enjoyed. Students also indicated that AMS was a safe place and that they enjoyed coming to school. They were also very clear that their teachers always expected them to do their best work.

Following the tour the VT began to visit classrooms and also had the opportunity to visit grade six in the lunchroom. The VT enjoyed lunch with the eighth grade faculty which was celebrating the annual "Chili Cook Off" and then began the process of interviewing faculty and staff of AMS. As the end of day approached, the VT met with the building administrators in anticipation of a possible snow day!

Snow, rain and ice arrived as predicted and school was cancelled. The VT took the opportunity to review and discuss results of the self study.

On the second day at school interviews and classroom visits continued. The VT also had the opportunity to observe the "Wells Speak" program.

Three members of the VT returned the following week to complete the interview process and classroom visits.

Curriculum and Assessment

Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards, relevant to the concerns of adolescents, and based on how students learn best.

"Content or academic standards, which spell out what students should know and be able to do, form the basis for the curriculum we recommend. Academic standards provide the link between excellence and equity by setting consistently high, public expectations for every student. As a reflection of the school's broader goal of enabling young adolescents to reach their full intellectual potential, the effort to support every student, in exceeding high academic standards should drive all other aspects of school improvement." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.32-33)

The VT had the opportunity to observe the varied curricula being delivered at AMS. Interviews with teachers and students, as well as classroom observations, provided evidence of the high academic expectations at AMS.

AMS has created a math committee that is working to develop a cohesive math curriculum for the school and district. The purpose of this committee, comprised of teachers and administrators, is to ensure that the curriculum presents students the opportunities to meet the expectations set before them.

AMS also has curriculum coordinators for math, science, social studies and language arts. These educators teach a full class load, in addition to fulfilling their responsibilities as curriculum coordinators. The VT observed that this has placed the coordinators in a compromising position, with them having to choose between responsibilities as a teacher and as a coordinator. Time constraints have limited the ability of these highly skilled professionals to meet with teachers.

An essential component of Middle School philosophy is Integrated Arts. The Integrated Arts program at AMS provides students with a variety of learning opportunities that crosses disciplines and includes community involvement, such as the Adirondack Chair project. Furthermore, the practical experience that the Life Skills or FACS program offers the students is solidly grounded in Middle School teaching philosophy. The VT observed students investigating the effects that different types of oils would have on the properties of cookies. Upon further questioning, the students were able to articulate the purpose of this experiment and predict the outcomes. The Integrated Arts program demonstrated that it is essential to the curriculum experiences of the students at AMS.

The VT observed that AMS has a diverse variety of resources to measure student achievement and the effectiveness of the curriculum being taught. AMS has the ability to measure student progress in reading and math using both the NECAP and NWEA. When effectively utilized, this data would provide teachers with information pertaining to individual student learning and the effectiveness of the curriculum.

An example of how the NECAPs are affecting the curriculum at AMS is the math rubric, "Awesome Math Answers". This rubric is roughly based off the expectations of the NECAPs, and consequently the state GLEs, providing students with exposure to the unique assessment style of these tests. The VT observed that rubrics, aligned with the GLEs and providing clear expectations, could be implemented across the curriculum.

Specific Strengths:

1. Varying forms of assessments to measure student learning were evident in core content subjects.
2. The Integrated Arts programs were diverse and contained a broad range of learning experience for students, allowing them to make cross-curricular connections and maximize their exposure to the curriculum.
3. There was use of rubrics across disciplines and in varying contexts, several even being aligned with samples from the NECAP test.

Recommendations:

1. Maintain the Integrated Arts curriculum and establish a procedure to allow the Unified Arts (UA) program to work cooperatively with other curriculum areas, further augmenting their success.
2. Investigate opportunities to allow the curriculum coordinators to become more available to support teachers.
3. Devote professional development time to the differentiation of assessment for different learning levels.
4. Initiate a plan for reviewing and analyzing data available on student achievement to influence curriculum development.

Varied Instruction

Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher standards and become lifelong learners.

"Effective instructional methods must connect to the curriculum, to the assessments that will allow students to show what they have learned, and to the students themselves." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.68)

"To enable all students to achieve those high standards, teachers must use equitable and excellent instructional methods that meet students where they are and get the students where the standards say they should go, preparing them to succeed on assessments that reveal the students' knowledge and skills." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.65)

The faculty and staff at AMS have consistently demonstrated the use of engaging instructional techniques across all disciplines and grade levels. The VT saw evidence of a variety of teaching strategies in classrooms. The student and parent surveys indicated a dedication among the staff to use instructional techniques that kept the students engaged and on-task.

In observing classrooms throughout the school, the VT noticed some evidence of essential questions and/or student learning objectives. However, this was not consistent throughout the school. The use of learning objectives has been shown to improve student achievement. It creates a partnership within the classroom between teacher and student, leading to greater ownership by the student over his/her own learning.

During the 3-day visit the team saw limited evidence of differentiated instruction in the classroom. This was substantiated through interviews with the staff. However, the VT did observe some examples of lessons that incorporated different learning styles and levels of ability. For example, one language arts class was reviewing vocabulary before a quiz. As part of the review process students were divided into groups and asked to perform a skit that described the meaning of the word. This type of activity provides scaffolding for students of varying levels of ability, while keeping all students engaged in the activity. The VT heard that the school is moving towards a co-teaching model as a method of inclusion for students with special needs. Differentiating Instruction to meet the needs of students with a range of abilities has been proven effective in multiple settings.

Using Gardner's Multiple Intelligences as a framework for differentiation provides access to the curriculum for a wide range of students. The VT did see the use of multiple intelligences in assessments across disciplines. The "Wells Speak" forum provided students with the opportunity to express themselves orally and dramatically. Interviews with teachers indicated the use of projects as well as traditional testing methods for assessment. The use of multiple intelligences was only sporadically evident in daily classroom instruction.

The VT did not see evidence of how data was used by the faculty and staff as a tool for improving instruction. Data is available for teachers in multiple forms. However, professional development around data use was not evident. The principal indicated a desire to encourage teachers to check current instructional techniques against best practices. In the current age of accountability and under the directive of No Child Left Behind, the ability of classroom teachers to use data to inform practice is a necessity.

The UA program is a strong component of AMS. It incorporates project-based learning, makes real world connections and provides opportunities for heterogeneous working groups. The UA program provides alternative grouping opportunities as students attend these classes with their entire grade level, not just the small interdisciplinary team. This model uses a "Deweyian" approach to learning, which has an established record of success in improving student achievement across multiple curricular areas through interaction, reflection and experience. It is also commendable that the projects created through the UA program are donated to charity, providing students with the opportunity to engage in social justice activities.

The VT observed that students were placed in groups in many classrooms. The use of cooperative learning techniques (diverse skill placement, group work) within these groups was inconsistently displayed. When students have the opportunity and capacity to work collaboratively, they begin to take ownership of the education. Collaborative learning involves students working together on a single project, peer-reviewing materials, and engaging in meaningful discussions around curriculum topics. For example, the VT did observe some classrooms where students were engaged in a thoughtful discussion of the presidential primaries. The students led the discussion, had established norms for speaking and listening and continued to stay on topic with little direction from the classroom teacher.

The AMS staff has successfully integrated writing across all disciplines. The VT saw evidence of poetry in science, writing samples in math and specific writing skills instruction in language arts classrooms. The principal also indicated the support of the PTO in supplying reading materials which support students of all reading abilities in the core content areas of math, science, and social studies. As the team did not observe an abundance of multi-level reading materials across classrooms, this addition will greatly enhance the capacity of AMS to engage readers across multiple reading levels.

Specific Strengths

1. Teachers are using varied instructional methods and activities across disciplines.
2. The school is supported by a strong PTO, dedicated to the academic achievement of AMS students.
3. Writing has been successfully implemented across the curriculum.
4. Teachers are consistently available to help students before, during and after school.

5. All of the surveys (student, parent and staff) indicated that the teaching staff holds all students to a high standard of excellence.
6. Students are being provided with multiple forms of assessment in several curriculum areas.

Recommendations

1. The staff should continue to assess the efficacy of the educational activities and the degree to which the activities are adjusted for varying levels of ability.
2. The staff should consistently display student objectives, using them to guide instruction.
3. Though the staff has been provided with professional development opportunities in the past it would seem opportune to increase the support for differentiated instruction (for all learning levels) at this time.
4. We recommend that the staff continue to foster and support the co-teaching model of inclusion through professional development around inclusion strategies and the use of multiple intelligence strategies.
5. The team recommends strengthening the use of flexible grouping and cooperative learning within the classroom.

Middle Level Teachers and Staff

Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities.

"Middle grades teachers must be well grounded in the development and needs of young adolescents if they are to be successful. Just as middle grades teachers need to know how, specifically, young adolescents are different from young children and older adolescents, they also need to understand that middle grades schools are different from elementary and high school. This difference is much more than the sign in front of the school; it lies in the philosophical foundations of middle grades education and the organizational structure that grows from and supports this philosophy." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.100)

It wasn't long into the assessment process that the VT recognized the passion that the AMS staff has for teaching middle school students. *Turning Points 2000* asserts that "schools should hire staff specifically trained for the middle grades and should provide mentors and "induction" to teachers new to the profession or the school." (p. 23) NELMS reinforces this point in its position statement on Middle Level Teacher Licensure. Therein they state that they believe that students aged ten to fourteen present educators with a unique set of challenges not found at other age levels and call for distinctive certification and training to meet these needs.

AMS meets this challenge with a faculty that is 100% highly qualified. They also offer both faculty and paraprofessionals access to professional development within the district and beyond. The professional development within the building has shifted to address needs identified through NECAPS and other standardized testing. The district-wide professional development committee which includes AMS teacher, paraprofessional, administration, and parent representation has identified a five year focus on literacy. The VT interviews identified a strong desire to tailor this initiative with the aforementioned distinctive needs of the middle school student in mind. Additionally, the faculty and staff were seeking the opportunity to refresh or in some cases become better versed in the tenets of contemporary middle school education. AMS also provides staff access to professional growth through a varied collection of materials housed in the professional library section of the school library. The VT also learned that further resources were available to staff at the Regional District Offices. The staff survey overwhelming recognized the professional development opportunities available to them.

The student to teacher ratios were designed to maximize instructional time for students and to provide teachers the opportunity to become "experts" in their students for all core content areas. To assist this process, the amount of paraprofessional support available continues to enhance instruction for all students despite a recent reduction. While the UA classes had a higher student to teacher ratio they remain relatively consistent to other middle schools in New England.

It is commonly recognized that technology is an essential tool for education in the 21st century. AMS has acknowledged this fact and addressed the need. Eighty-three percent of staff surveyed indicated that an ample supply of varied and up to date resources including technology were available to them. However, the student interviews indicated that they would like to see teachers integrate this technology more regularly into their instruction. This is a common student concern in the digital age.

Finally, *Turning Points 2000* and Breaking Ranks in the Middle both emphasize the development of programs which inculcate new staff with middle school principles. Only one teacher surveyed indicated that specific programs to introduce new teachers to the school culture were always evident. Mentorship opportunities were also identified as something the school could capitalize on to maintain the spirit that has been established at AMS. The existing orientation program was limited to district-wide meetings over the summer preceding a teacher's first year in the district.

Specific Strengths

1. Amherst Middle School is clearly committed to providing professional development opportunities to its employees including library resources.
2. Teachers at AMS are given a better opportunity to know how to reach and teach each of their students through realistic teaching loads.

Recommendations

1. AMS should create the opportunity for new staff to engage in an induction program that is embedded in the school and provides mentorship and direct instruction in the philosophy of the school and community.
2. AMS should continue to push beyond the acquisition of technology and explore contemporary means by which they can integrate technology into their curriculum.

Relationships for Learning

Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.

"To ensure strong teams, schools must pay attention to the nature and quality of interactions among teacher and student team members, ensuring that teams continually concentrate their efforts on achieving high standards for both teaching and learning. Schools should also attend to critical elements affecting team success such as team size, composition, time for planning and continuity." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.24)

"The relationships established in the middle school affect both the quality of student learning and the quality of teaching" (p. 122). This statement from *Turning Points 2000* recognizes relationships as the bedrock of any middle grades learning community. Teaming represents the effort to create deeper relationships between students and teachers for the purpose of learning and belonging. By all measures (interviews, survey, and observation), AMS excels at establishing a relationship with their incoming grade five students through the transition process. Many consider the middle and high school transition processes to be amongst the most successful programs at AMS. An impressive 77% of incoming 5th graders say that AMS ensures that "I always feel comfortable at school." This number balloons to 93% when you include the students who said that sometimes AMS ensures that "I feel comfortable at school." Additionally, 63% (89% when including sometimes responses) of 5th grades indicate that AMS has teachers that like kids my age.

Once students arrive at AMS they are separated into heterogeneous teams. AMS has taken care to give each team their own space in the building turning what is a large school into a collection of many smaller learning communities. The teams are identified by teacher name. There are very few "team based" activities at AMS. The lack of team identity may be a missed opportunity to create the connection that Breaking Ranks in the Middle and *Turning Points 2000* hold dear. The student data may even reflect this. While the percent of students always feeling connected at AMS in 5th grade is 77% that number falls to 38% by 8th grade. The percentage declines each year. Additionally, the feeling of personal connection that teams are designed to foster may actually wane from 5th grade as well. By the time students reach 8th grade, surveys indicate that only 23% of students always feel like teachers at AMS like kids my age.

The teachers on each team have the opportunity to meet on a daily basis. AMS should be applauded for providing teams the time to plan interdisciplinary opportunities to reinforce learning, communicate with one another about students on the team to better inform individualized instruction and mixed ability grouping, and review student work or data each day. However, while some teams engage in these activities the VT learned that many do not. The establishment of a team leader for each team and professional development may allow for growth in this area.

One area where teams shine is communication with students and families. Teachers take care to provide information through conferences, reports, email, and websites. The student, parent, and faculty surveys all cited communication between teachers and homes to be a real strength. This data lends evidence that the educators and families in the Amherst community recognize the importance of their partnership for the success of their students.

Specific Strengths

1. Scheduling that allows for one common team preparation period each day.
2. Academic teams are separated into their own areas despite the demand for space at AMS.
3. School/home communication.

Recommendations

1. Provide opportunities for professional development on how to utilize common team planning time to maximize student achievement.
2. Develop and implement a process to establish team identity.
3. Implement a process which allows teams to share minutes of all team meetings with the administration as an additional opportunity for communication.

Govern Democratically

Govern democratically, through direct representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know the students best.

"A middle grades school should be organized and should function through a democratic governance system with structures and processes that are systematically inclusive, collaborative, and focused on the improvement of student learning. The system should give all "stakeholders" in the school – teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, students, and community members - a primary voice in planning and implementing school improvement efforts. When educators, parents, and students make important decisions regarding school matters, they share responsibility for implementing those decisions and for the outcome of those decisions." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.146)

All decisions in a middle school should be focused on attaining the goal of achieving success for every student.

How does a middle school govern? There are certainly models in place to provide suggestions, but there is probably only one best way, and that is the model a school can develop for itself which is both manageable and effective.

The principal at AMS is in his fourth year of that role, but has been at AMS for twenty seven years. He is only the third principal of AMS since it opened.

The principal and his assistant are both considered to be approachable and have an open door policy. The VT was told that there is a sense of collaborative leadership at AMS and teams are empowered to function independently. At the same time the VT heard that there was a need for more direction from the administration. In fact the faculty survey of the self study indicated 70% of those surveyed felt there was usually or seldom a sense of shared mission or vision.

The VT had the opportunity to meet with members of the Student Council during a tour of the building. This is an active and involved group, which at this time functions to run monthly school dances. The VT heard that they had previously been involved with other aspects of the school. Council members indicated that they could meet with the administration to discuss student issues or concerns as needed, but there is not a regular schedule for such meetings. Such an opportunity would provide a consistent venue for student voice. It would also provide interesting support to the development of school rules which differentiate between rights & responsibility as well as the difference between discipline and punishment.

A Leadership Council meets monthly with the Administrative Team. This group has representatives from all grades and departments of AMS. The group currently has a subcommittee which is reviewing the school schedule to examine methods to increase learning time in the area of literacy.

Communication is a vital link in any community. There are numerous vehicles in place to support communication at AMS. The self study indicated that 86% of the faculty and staff felt that open opportunities for communication were always or usually present. However, the VT often heard that communication could be improved. 79% of those surveyed in the self study indicated that communication was only usually or seldom timely.

Specific Strengths

1. AMS has an active and involved Student Council.

Recommendations

1. The AMS Student Council should continue to investigate ways that student voices can be heard and valued. Perhaps a regular schedule of meetings with the school administrative team would facilitate this process.
2. AMS should establish a School Improvement Team with broad based representation to analyze and implement the results of the self study and this assessment.
3. The School Improvement Team should develop a plan with clear goals and measurable outcomes. The plan should also indicate benchmarks of progress and identify those responsible for goals.
4. AMS must develop and implement a process to better enhance the communication process between the administration, faculty and staff.

Healthy School Environment

Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens.

"A healthy school is one that provides its students and teachers with a secure and supportive environment, free from violence and discord; that promotes intergroup understanding and respect for those who differ in race, culture, gender or religion; and that is strongly connected to the community." (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 168)

Every aspect of AMS, from its staff to its students to its parents, conveyed a true sense of pride, belonging, and security to the VT, which was fortunate to spend three days learning about their school. The steering committee greeted the VT with a warm welcome breakfast each day. Student council members served as the friendliest, most cordial, and articulate ambassadors we could hope to find anywhere as they gave a guided tour through the brightly decorated corridors, teeming with displays of students' work. The VT suspected from this sample of students that we were in a truly wonderful community, and this eventually proved to be absolutely true.

NELMS surveys supplied the VT with a multitude of comments regarding the feelings of students and parents about their school. Comments were overwhelmingly positive about AMS, indicating the impression of a safe, warm, and caring environment. One student went so far as to say, "Going to school here is like going home."

AMS has put in place a variety of experiences for its middle school students to explore. The curriculum itself caters to the unique needs of individuals, sending the message to the students that there is something at AMS for everyone. Beyond the traditional academic day, AMS provides extracurricular activities to spark the interests of aspiring musicians, actors, singers, builders, athletes, scientists, engineers, and journalists alike. The staff is readily available on a daily basis for after school help and enrichment, and this constant at the end of the students' day sends confidence with them as they leave for home each day.

Students have been provided with a great deal of support from the personnel at AMS. Middle school is a place where many students can flounder and lose their way, but AMS has incorporated teaching teams at all levels as well as a fairly large number of paraprofessionals, grade level aides, and Special Education teachers. This additional presence in class has created a student-staff ratio that lends itself to an intimate and caring classroom experience where all students have their needs addressed by a caring adult. One suggestion might be to enhance this concept by incorporating an advisory program at every grade level in order to ensure that a caring adult connection exists in the building for every student every year.

As far as what makes AMS such a positive place, there are concrete examples to point out. Concerted efforts have been made to keep the environment outside the building positive as well. A massive recycling effort has been undertaken with receptacles around every corner of the building and people have responded. This effort, while good, could afford to extend its message to other areas of the building. It was noted that students, while they loved their school, could afford to take some ownership of it in many areas. Most specifically, the behaviors observed in the cafeteria clearly lacked that of a group of students who have had a sense of accountability imparted to them by the staff. Most students tended to leave a substantial amount of garbage behind on the floor and table at dismissal. Food service has made a wonderful effort to supply a variety of healthy food choices to the students and staff. Also, students have been issued swipe cards to pay for meals and this has made waiting in the lunch lines more expedient. The cafeteria also provide us with an idea of how AMS values physical health, and this was even more evident after visiting with the health and fitness educators.

The physical education department is taught by dedicated staff that goes to great lengths to reach out to all students with an array of activities that provide physical activity at all grade levels. Health class is also on the schedule of every student at each grade level. The curricula and frequency of classes vary from grade to grade. The one concern amongst staff and students alike was the effect of a new schedule that has limited the opportunity for physical education and health class throughout the school year. Perhaps some investigation into an alternative schedule next year for IA classes could bring students to gym more often.

AMS does not provide a false sense of security to its students or parents who send their children on a daily basis. Electronic surveillance has been installed in and around the school. Additionally, visitors must be buzzed into the office as the doors are locked otherwise. Visitors should always continue to be asked to sign in and wear identification, regardless of a familiarity with the visitor. An effort has been made to provide ID badges to teachers and support staff. Further efforts could be made to provide ID badges to all school personnel including food services and maintenance staff. Staff is also assigned to a duty area within the building and rules are understood and conveyed by the school handbook. An effort by the staff to be a bit more mobile would serve to improve hall monitoring, only because the design of the school and its hallways creates limited vision of the endless corners and nooks throughout the school. A School Resource Officer (SRO) has been hired full-time at the school and serves as an educator through the DARE program as well as a safety monitor. The SRO has been well received by staff as a colleague, and has helped to establish a positive relationship between Amherst's police department and its youth.

AMS has made an admirable effort to bring multicultural diversity to a community where there is little. Rather than using this as an excuse to ignore it, the school has embraced the undertaking. Various projects, fundraisers, and co-curricular activities all help to promote understanding and acceptance of various cultures, backgrounds, nations, and creeds. Specifically among these are the AMS Diversity Workshop, the Seventh Grade World Awareness Research Paper, and student documentaries, showing exceptional use of technology, to support the mission of Oxfam International, a foundation committed to working worldwide to fight poverty and injustice.

Specific Strengths

1. AMS has ensured a safe environment through the use of electronic surveillance and door locks.
2. The addition of a full-time SRO has contributed to the well-being of all students and staff through the use of the DARE program to address the consequences of risky behavior.
3. AMS has clear discipline policies which are understood by students, staff, and parents.
4. Parents indicate a strong feeling of confidence that their children are safe at AMS.
5. AMS employs two full-time school nurses whose office is centrally located and easily accessible.
6. AMS employs a large staff for the students to access for academic and emotional assistance.
7. Recycling receptacles are evident around every corner. This gives an indication of students taking responsibility for the safety and future of their school and community.
8. Numerous extracurricular activities are offered to provide a well-rounded middle school experience for a variety of students in all grades. Cheer, drama, music, intramurals, and interscholastic sports are among them.
9. The staff and curriculum demonstrate sensitivity to multicultural diversity, and students benefit from numerous projects and initiatives that address these vital global issues.
10. The AMS Food Service provides a variety of healthy lunch choices to students, including a salad bar and freshly made sandwiches and wraps, in addition to the a la carte item of the day.
11. Electronic message boards are installed to silently page students and to relay announcements during class time. This ensures that classes are not unnecessarily interrupted and conveys important information.

Recommendations

1. If recess for fifth graders is to be part of the daily schedule at AMS, the district and the PTA may consider lobbying community resources for its help in establishing a playground area.
2. More opportunities for physical activity during the entire school year should be explored amongst teams if physical education can only accommodate each student for a fraction of the year.

3. AMS should employ the use of Identification Badges for all staff, including maintenance and food service employees. Additionally, all staff members should display ID badges at all times. AMS should insist that all visitors, whether expected or not, wear identification and sign in and out of the building.
4. AMS should institute a student advisory program for all students in order to further enhance student-staff relations and to ensure that all students have a personal connection with an adult at AMS.
5. AMS should provide support at lunches to enhance the cafeteria aides' efforts to monitor student behavior.
6. Staff should be more visible to the students in the hallways during passing time as there are many unsupervised "blind spots" in the halls due to configuration of the building.

Involving Parents and Community

Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development.

“Schools and families must collaborate to establish continuity and communication between home and school; to monitor and support students’ schoolwork and academic progress; to create opportunities outside the school for safe, engaging exploration; and to improve the school itself through parent and community involvement on site.” (*Turning Points 2000*, p.24)

It was very clear to the VT that in Amherst there is a strong sense of community pride in their schools. The team observed an effort on the part of the AMS faculty and staff to provide parents with on-going quality communication. A Student Parent Handbook is distributed at the beginning of the school year. Also, the school web-page provides valuable information, and the local newspaper (The Amherst Citizen) features the school system on a consistent basis. In addition the school has a monthly newsletter and a weekly e-mail notice to maintain communication. Global Connect is also available to contact the school community as necessary. Student grades are reported to parents by mid-term Progress Reports and a final Report Card for each of the three terms. Parent conferences are held on a regular basis and are also available by appointment.

The self-study survey results indicated a very high level of parent satisfaction with opportunities for communication with the school. Survey results also identified that parents feel welcome at the school and that AMS provides them opportunities to be engaged in meaningful ways.

There is a strong active Parent Teacher Organization at AMS. This group has developed an active Volunteer Program and consistently provides strong financial support to enhance text material, provide additional technology and offer enrichment programs.

The Amherst Junior Women’s Club has provided financial assistance for the purchase of lighting and sound equipment for the Drama Club. More than one hundred students participate in this after-school program.

The Lions Club uses AMS for activities and has provided support when requested. The local Boys and Girls Club provides after school programs at AMS for interested students and the recreation department also uses the facility on weekends.

The Technical Education department works with students in Grade 7 to build Adirondack chairs as part of their curriculum. The P.J.Currier Lumber Company works with the school to keep material costs reasonable. When the chairs are sold, the purchaser makes the check out to the charity of their choice. During the past four years, this project has raised over nine thousand dollars in support of more that thirty charities.

AMS should continue to explore opportunities for students to engage in community service and service learning activities. It is evident from the survey results, and VT interviews, that AMS should continue to strive to tap the creative potential of the community as an educational resource for adolescent learning.

Specific Strengths

1. Amherst is a community which is supportive of education. Parents are actively involved in both the academic and extracurricular components of their child's learning experience.
2. The active and involved PTA provides significant support for AMS.

Recommendations

1. AMS should continue to work cooperatively with the community to provide opportunities for community service and service learning projects.

Summary

AMS is characterized by its dedicated and caring staff which is committed to providing the best educational opportunities for students. The school continues to support a safe school environment as demonstrated by the recent hiring of a School Resource Officer and the installation of cameras and a security system to gain entry. The message from the students was clear that they feel safe while at school.

While space is at a premium, AMS has utilized what is available to best support student learning needs. The addition of portable classroom space for a fifth grade team has been helpful and the proposal to add more portable space seems to be a sensible approach.

Teams should continue to take advantage of the opportunities they have to meet as both an individual group and as a grade level to enhance and strengthen existing practices. An agenda for team meetings and notes reflecting work done are helpful and when shared with the administration can improve communication and share areas of both success and concern.

Team planning time is also valuable to provide opportunities for development of interdisciplinary units of study, looking at student work and analyzing test data.

As life-long learners, continuing professional development is an essential element for teachers as they seek to provide optimal learning experiences for their students. Ongoing information about differentiated instruction, inclusion and co-teaching move these concepts from strategies to a philosophy of how to best support the young adolescent learner.

Communication plays an integral role in how a school functions. Timely, clear and consistent information is the glue which holds together the many facets of a school learning community.

AMS demonstrates an effective partnership between students, teachers, parents, administration and the community. It is obvious that there is a clear expectation for all to do their best.

The VT thoroughly enjoyed visiting Amherst Middle School. It is our hope that by reflecting on the results of your self study and the information in this report you will continue to provide a learning environment which meets the characteristics and supports the needs of the young adolescent learner.

About the Assessors

William Downey is a retired educator from Massachusetts. Certified in science, elementary, middle and high school principal and as superintendent, he has worked as a fifth through eighth grade teacher, elementary and middle school principal and also chaired the long range space study as well as the middle school building and renovation for his district. He is most proud of the years spent working with faculty to transition their junior high school to an exemplary middle school. Since retiring, Bill has worked as a consultant for NELMS. He has participated on and chaired several school assessments and currently coordinates the school assessment programs for NELMS. Bill is certified to provide Breaking Ranks in the Middle training through NELMS.

Margo Fraczek is a doctoral student in the Boston College, Lynch School of Education's Educational Administration program. Currently, she works for Boston College as a pre-practicum student teacher supervisor. Before entering the program she taught at the Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary in Cambridge, MA from 1998-2006 as a middle school math teacher. She is currently completing her administration practicum at the Guilmette Middle School in Lawrence, MA.

Michael Mahoney is a teacher in Nashua, NH. He has taught grades 7, 8, & 9 at Pennichuck Middle School (PMS) for his entire seventeen year career. In this time Michael has experienced the transition at his school from a junior high to a middle school. As a member of a 4 person teaching team, he has served on the district Language Arts Curriculum Task force and co-wrote many of the Student Proficiency Outcomes within the Language Arts Curriculum. Additionally, Michael has served on the Middle School Program Based Budget Committee for the city of Nashua, and is also a certified administrator in the state of NH. There is no level other than Middle School in which Michael has or would ever work.

Sarah Reinhardt is a Reading Specialist at Pennichuck Middle School (PMS). In addition to teaching 7th and 8th Literacy classes, she coordinates the Alternate Assessments for the Pennichuck Middle School Intensive Needs Program. She has served on her school's SINI Team as well as their CHAT team. In conjunction with the ESL teacher, Sarah coordinates an after school program for ESL students. For the past two years, Sarah has presented her popular Star Wars and the Hero's Journey unit to the participants at the NELMS Annual Conference. Sarah has previously taught Special Education in New Hampshire, Maine and New York City at both the middle school and secondary levels.

Jeffrey F. Solan is the Assistant Principal at Dodd Middle School (DMS) in Cheshire, CT. Jeff will begin serving his tenure as Principal of DMS on July 1, 2008. Dodd is a nationally recognized Blue Ribbon School of Excellence and was recently recognized by the Connecticut Association of Schools as one of six Exemplary Teaming Schools in Connecticut. Jeff was formerly the Assistant Principal at Ansonia Middle School and a counselor at Moran Middle School in Wallingford, CT. A former member of the NELMS Board of Directors, a member of the NELMS Technology Committee and regular presenter at the NELMS annual conference, Jeff is excited about joining his second assessment team.