

Safe Schools Issue



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**For
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 Studies Committee

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The Center for Early Adolescent Educators is committed to helping middle level educators build challenging, integrative and responsive schools that meet the unique social and educational needs of students in the middle grades. CEAE's mission is to advance the efforts of middle level educators in the areas of educational practices and professional development.

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Dear Readers:

One of the exciting aspects of working at the middle level is the willingness of educators to share their ideas, programs, strategies, concerns and successes. The Middle Level Professional Studies Committee and the Center for Early Adolescent Educators Advisory Board are committed to providing a medium for these expressions. I invite you to join the ranks of those who have been published in this issue by sending me your position papers, innovative instructional units, programs and strategies. It is my privilege to advance the state of middle level practice by publicizing the efforts of those who work in the middle.

*Yours,
Earle G. Bidwell*

In this issue.....

Very little about education has captured the attention of the public as has the rash of horrible events in places such as Littleton, Colorado and Jonesboro Arkansas. All else pales by comparison when measured against concerns for the safety and welfare of our children.

Since these events occurred, many school districts have taken a long hard look at building security, the interactions among students and the connections among the school, the home and the community. Forums have been held, in-service offerings initiated, budgets developed and programs instituted, all to provide a safer, saner atmosphere in which students can learn. Several articles in this issue of the journal address this topic with descriptions of sensible strategies or programs or thought-provoking perspectives. In addition, the Middle Level Professional Studies Committee has issued a position paper outlining its stance on safe schools. In their statement, members highlight the imperative to take a good look at students' academic and emotional safety in addition to their physical well-being.

Also in this issue is an article about the joys of Unified Sports® in Farmington. Irving Robbins Coach Andy Bean extols the pain and pleasure of one of the last bastions of truly amateur sports. Through this program, young people learn to appreciate each other and work in a selfless way toward a common goal.

Finally, we welcome Sam Lewbel to the pages of "Impact." In addition to being a teacher at Rochambeau Middle School in Southbury, Sam is a noted middle level writer and is currently the editor of "The Journal of the New England League of Middle Schools." In his treatise, he examines a growing crisis in middle level education in Connecticut: the teacher shortage, its history, causes and remedies.

“STRATEGIES TO MAXIMIZE SCHOOL SAFETY: FACTORS TO CONSIDER”

By Steven W. Edwards, Ph.D.
Principal, East Hartford High School

School safety has been at the top of the public agenda for the past several years.

With nineteen school shootings headlining national news, the concern and outcry for safer, more orderly schools has moved to the top of the agenda for those who fill the highest offices in the land. It is unlikely that the issue of school safety will be solved at the federal level. The answer will lie in grass root moments at the local level within communities and schools.

This article highlights a number of factors that are instrumental in creating safer, more caring school climates. Issues relating to negative climate are identified. Points of emphasis for creating a climate change are examined and key issues that contribute to safe learning communities are presented.

One of the questions to ask when examining school safety is: Who will contribute to addressing the issue? Without question, there are members of the school community and community at large who should play roles. The identification of key stakeholders within the community is essential.

Safe school initiatives can be accomplished through the collaborative efforts of the following stakeholders:

- Parents
- Teachers
- Administrators
- Students
- Community agencies
- School support staff
- Business leaders
- Local government



“The ability of all stakeholders to work together is critical in establishing caring school communities.”

The ability of all stakeholders to work together is critical in establishing safer, more caring school communities. Schools are only a microcosm of the community; they mirror each other's issues.

In examining school safety, the connection between school climate and safety can't be ignored. Schools need to focus on prevention to establish a safe learning environment.

By focusing on prevention and early intervention, schools can create a climate that is safe for all who enter the building. Schools must assess climate prior to implementing change. Schools with climate issues exhibit the following:

- Rules that are unclear and/or inconsistently enforced
- Indirect response to student behavior (example: lowered grades in response to misconduct)
- Poor teacher/administrator relationships
- Ignored misconduct
- Punitive attitudes on the part of the teachers

All these factors should be considered when examining school climate.

Analysis of a school's climate can be accomplished through surveys of all stakeholders. Once an assessment has been completed, steps need to be taken to address identified areas of concern.

School Change

The following are points to consider when making a climate change:

- Change in philosophy: The idea of catching children doing the right thing, as opposed to catching children doing the wrong thing. A true belief that all children can be successful, both academically and behaviorally, and a willingness to be flexible and creative in dealing with student issues are key elements to a change in philosophy.
- Identification of the problem: Through the use of a survey, trends can be identified. It is important to validate the problem(s), since beliefs do not always match facts. It must be demonstrated that the problem is grounded in fact, rather than perception.
- Data collection: Data will support problem identification. Data should be collected from a variety of sources. Data sources should include student discipline records, suspensions/expulsions, attendance data, tardiness, arrests, referrals, interviews with stakeholders, and information gathered from surveys.
- Development of an action plan: Based on the problem identification and data collection, an action plan can be developed. It is important to involve all stakeholders in the development of the plan to ensure acceptance and support by all parties.
- Implementation of the plan: A critical step in the process is implementation. Who will be responsible for implementation? What steps need to be taken? What is the time line? Make sure all stakeholders have responsibility for implementation.
- Regular review: The final step is to monitor progress and make adjustments as conditions warrant. Throughout the process decisions should be data driven. Careful use of data will ensure success of the plan. When developing a plan for creating a safe learning environment be aware of incorporating short-term and long-term goals. Early successes will build motivation for initiatives and lay the groundwork for the accomplishment of long-term strategies.

Factors to consider when creating a safer learning climate:

- Personalize the school.
- Know all students and take steps to ensure each child is connected to an adult in the school.
- Include students in the decision-making process (example: principal's council and student representative to the Board of Education).
- Promote tolerance and high expectations.
- Establish student/adult mentor programs.
- Expand student activity programs, volunteer projects, and other co-curricular projects.

Staff visibility/active supervision

- Establish a presence in the building:
 - before and after school;
 - between periods;
 - in the cafeteria.



Incorporate peer mediation and conflict resolution programs

- Provide training for students;
- Offer programs that are student-driven.

Establish clear and enforceable discipline policies

- Communicate policies with students and parents several times per year.
- Involve students and parents in the development of policies and procedures.
- Understand the difference between discipline and punishment.
- Establish a discipline policy review board.

Ongoing evaluation of existing programs

- Make adjustments as conditions warrant.

- Ensure that evaluations are data-driven (continue to collect and monitor data)

Character education

- Incorporate character education into the curriculum
- Take a school-wide approach to character education

Involve the entire community in day-to-day activities

- Establish:
 - school/business partnerships
 - a parents' room
 - connections with senior citizens
 - relationships with community agencies such as:
 - youth services
 - probation
 - police
 - YMCA
 - boys/girls clubs

Celebrate successes

- Sponsor awards programs.
- Publicize accomplishments.

Stress academics

- Hold academics pep rallies.
- Establish a clear vision of the school mission as an academic institution.

Professional development and training

- Focus on climate/safety issues.
- Provide guidance on identifying children with potential problems.
- Develop early intervention models.
- Prepare prevention strategies.

Safe schools require a collaborative effort. They do not happen by accident but are the result of careful planning and proactive behaviors on the part of all stakeholders. All schools have room for improvement. It is important to note that no community is immune to a potential tragedy, but with careful planning all schools can minimize the risk.

This article has examined possible climate concerns, recommendations for strategies that can contribute to the development of an action plan, and key factors that will enhance any plan.



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Madeline F. DeFaria

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Organizational Strategies for Creating a Safe School

Karen L. Parizeau



What makes a school a safe school can be measured by the well-being of the members of the school community. To create a school environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students, staff and parents is the goal. The extent to which this goal is accomplished is the extent to which the school is a safe place. The safety continuum, from unsafe to completely safe, can be validated through the organizational strategies and programs that are available for the members of the school community.

Developing strategies that provide for a safe school requires scrutiny into what a safe school looks like. Beyond a physically safe facility, where students and staff can navigate the building without physical injury, a safe school needs to create opportunities for positive relationships to grow throughout the school day. It is the degree to which students feel connected to the school community and validated for their contributions that measures a safe school. Looping,, block scheduling, peer mediation, and the Early Intervention Project have assisted Tolland Middle School in its efforts to become a safe school. Each of these organizational strategies has provided opportunities for students, teachers, and parents to develop a positive rapport with one another and to individualize attention and instruction in a large middle school.

Looping

Few strategies have helped students, teachers and parents get to know one another better than looping or two-year teaming. Students at Tolland Middle School are placed on the same teaching teams for two years, their seventh and eighth grade years. Learning about students, really knowing them, takes time. It is often not until a quarter of the year is over that teachers can assess a student's strengths and weakness, learning styles and interests. Sometimes the student does not let the teachers see who they really are until considerable time has passed. Further, the hidden message of yearly change is the idea of ending relationships, not fostering them. Developing a positive rapport with students and families takes time and nurturing. The hidden message that teachers are willing to care for students for twice the time is then fostered. Not all relationships are initially positive; they take work to be successful. Students and staff become committed to their relationships, get to know one another well and care for each other. One eighth grader stated, "They learned all my tricks!" Another said, "They just care for me so much!" Students and teachers also learn to resolve their conflicts positively. They understand their mutual expectations for learning and productivity. Parents also become integral members of the loop and feel the commitment to building positive relationships. *Because of looping, our 900-student middle school just got a little smaller.*

Block Scheduling

Organizing time is one of the most important aspects of how middle schools function. Creating opportunities for positive relationship building and enhancing learning through scheduling has been demonstrated through the block master schedule developed three years ago at Tolland Middle School. The flexible, alternate day block schedule provides for 85-minute classes for core and unified arts classes. Daily planning periods and team planning as well as an 85-minute team plan on alternate days has proven invaluable to providing for increased safety within the school.

Hallways are not always safe places for students. Physical safety can sometimes be compromised when many bodies are trying to secure materials from lockers and get to their destinations quickly. At TMS, all discipline referrals of a violent nature took place outside the classroom; most took place in a hallway. In addition to physical safety, the emotional safety of students can also be at risk in the corridors. Bullying behavior and harassment are cultivated in hallways because they are outside the management of the classroom and beyond the view of the faculty and staff. It is here that the quiet, shy student may find passing time difficult emotionally.

With the block schedule, the hallway frenzy every forty-four minutes is eliminated as only one team of students moves through the building at a time. Imagine the quiet! With students in classes with their teachers for 85-minute classes, the hallways are desolate for longer periods of time. Discipline referrals have also declined dramatically and suspensions for inappropriate behavior have decreased by 48% over a three-year period. So far this year, not a single referral has been made due to a hallway incident.

Time to teach and learn about each student as an individual is also promoted with the block schedule. Teachers and students work in a time-relaxed atmosphere and strive to master new material. Students learn “how” they learn and teachers have opportunities to meet with individual students to provide support and get to know each student as a unique learner. *Our large middle school is getting smaller.*

Early Intervention Project

Support for differentiation of instruction, for individualizing learning, is fostered through E.I.P., or Early Intervention Project. The model of the Student Assistance Team is magnified through E.I.P. and uses the instructional team to develop instructional strategies to meet individual student’s academic, social and emotional needs. In conjunction with the block schedule, E.I.P. team meetings are held during the school day. During these meetings, support staff work with the instructional teams and parents to develop strategies for student success. Teachers collect data and analyze student work and behaviors to aid in creating the optimal learning environment for every student. The product of these E.I.P. meetings is a plan that is reviewed bi-monthly. This E.I.P. team plan is not unlike a 504 or I.E.P. plan that individualizes goals for students. Staff training in differentiation takes place on the team level where strategies are implemented and assessed. *Our large middle school is now even smaller.*

Peer Mediation Program

Another strategy for creating a safe school is to empower students with techniques for resolving conflicts peacefully. The Peer Mediation Program trains a cross-section of students in conflict resolution and mediation. Peer teams assist students as they work through difficult interpersonal situations. Annual training and a school-wide focus and advertisement of the program help all students solve their own problems with little adult intervention. The process for developing a peer mediation program can be as unique as each school, but all provide students with skills for taking control of their safe school. At T.M.S., students now help in creating a *small school within a large school.*

It is the concert of these organizational strategies -- looping, block scheduling, E.I.P., and peer mediation -- that assist in the creation of a safe school environment. A school environment where students help with the peace process, where the school atmosphere is relaxed and the focus is on the development of authentic, positive relationships, is a truly safe school.

Karen Parizeau is principal of Tolland Middle School

“The Arts”

will be the focus area for the Spring 2001 Issue of
“Impact”

The staff welcomes articles from practitioners of middle level education regarding exemplary programs, innovative strategies or position papers on the focus area, or any other middle level topic.

Contact:

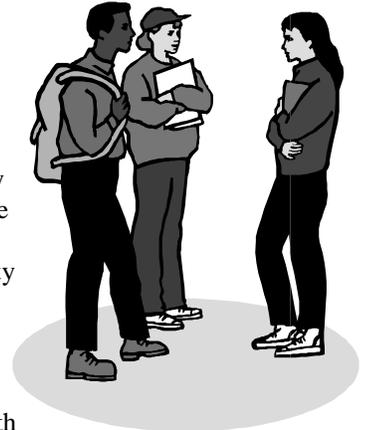
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Middle School – What is it?

Different in these times means you need to plan for success

by Ann Richardson

We have many names for students between the ages of twelve to fourteen – preteens, early adolescents, young adults, older kids, and even children. The names vary with the changes that are taking place in these developing and confusing years. The fact is no two years are the same because nature is taking its course in rapid and dramatic ways. Simply stated, kids of these years are DIFFERENT. They are too young for high school programs and too old for their familiar elementary routines – definitely not *cool* any more. The difference is a change more rapid than in any other time in their lives. It is caused by the swift transformation in their physiological, sociological, and psychological development. Kids at this age have a need to grow up fast and our present day society promotes that rapid growth.



Caught between familiar child-like responses of the past and a need to react like a twenty year old, communication with others is often difficult. Peer communications become complex because of the sophistication of some (but not all) kids and the rapid physical growth of others. Interaction with adults is also often strained. The world of an early adolescent centers on their connection with friends, even to the point of excluding necessary commitments. The most important people in their lives are their buddies, who often change from week to week! With all of these changes, concentration on important issues often becomes difficult and schooling takes a back seat. Because of this *primary* focus on socializing and the rapid growth of this age group, the Carnegie Corporation invested thirty million dollars to study the best way to create a learning environment aimed at fostering a rigor of academic skills and a safe environment for all. Thus, researchers in the area of growth and development developed the teaming model in the Carnegie structure for early adolescents. What was identified to be the root of several problems in schools serving this age group was the lack of connection with adults. Students moved at a swift pace from class to class and teachers taught subject matter not kids. The Carnegie study strongly recommended small clusters of students assigned to certain locations in schools where the teachers would know the students and the students would know the teachers. When these changes were implemented in schools, students focused on their studies, were assisted with peer problems, and teachers taught students as well as subject matter. Schools that serve this age group must be designed differently and with care.

The challenge in middle level education is to ensure that the students remain connected to their academic responsibilities in a safe and orderly environment. They need encouragement to respect others who are different from them and a safe haven for excelling in academics; a place that creates an environment where it is *cool* to do well in school. They need opportunities to interact in constructive ways with one another and a place to explore new things while they are developing leadership skills. It must be a school different enough to present new possibilities and build self-esteem, while maintaining the focus to make students successful in their high school years. The school must have a staff that studies this age group specializing in understanding their rapid changes in personality, growth and needs. It must be a place that strives to have everyone reach success.

Dr. Richardson is principal of F.W. Strong Middle School, Durham, Connecticut

Access the CAS Web site

The Connecticut Association of Schools' web site is the perfect vehicle for posing questions regarding programs and practice in all areas of education. Simply go to the website at www.casciac.org and click on "Boards & Chat." There are message boards for principals, assistant principals, teachers, coaches and athletic directors. Take advantage of this opportunity to network with your colleagues.

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Bullying: A Problem for Schools

Vicki R. Smith

Fairfield Jr. High, Kaysville Utah

Two large 8th grade boys swagger down the hall of the junior high school. They are wearing large, sagging pants and oversized coats. They approach a smaller student, standing alone near his locker. "Get away from my locker. Don't let me see you around here again, you little~!" The larger of the two boys says to the young man. "If I see you around here again, I'll beat the----out of you!" As the young man cowers in fear, the boys laugh hysterically, turning their attention to some other kids walking by.

A 9th grade boy, who has a reputation for being a "tough guy," stops a vice-principal in the hall when students are returning to class from lunch. "I'm gonna punch him, I swear, he bugs me. If he doesn't leave me alone, I'm gonna let him have it and it's not gonna be my fault 'cause he's askin' for it!" He is talking about a scrawny, effeminate 7th grade boy who has made several complaints to the office about this older boy and his friends "harassing" him, the 7th grader.

"We used to be friends," an eighth grade girl sobs, "now she's spreading rumors about me. I used to hang out with all of them, but now they point at me and walk the other way when they see me. She told me if I called any of them, they'd hang up on me and tell people I got caught stealing stuff"

The above incidents highlight the complexity of the problem of bullying. While researchers disagree over whether a single act can be defined as an incident of bullying or if having the incident repeated is a necessary component, all agree bullying is about one thing: Power. Bullying is dependent on the superior/inferior relationship of the bully and the victim. Using nonverbal and quite unconscious cues and signals, bullies and victims call to each other. Bullies seek and find victims to feed their need to dominate. "Why is my son always a target?" a mother asks in despair? She and her son have moved around the country throughout his childhood and one consistent experience is that he has been teased and bullied wherever he goes. This article will examine three aspects of bullying: who are bullies and victims, why is it often allowed to continue unchallenged and what can schools do to stop it or keep it from occurring. Researchers agree that bullies are products of environmental factors. They are made, not born. Often bullies do not have a warm, caring relationship with their parents, particularly their mothers. Some suffer from a psychological disorder referred to as an attachment disorder. Their parents often discipline in an inconsistent pattern, characterized by emotional outbursts and an inability to set adequate limits. Often, parents of bullies will tolerate acts of aggression in their child, dismissing the behavior as a natural part of childhood or, simply, behavior characteristics of acceptable competition. One father, while dismissing his son's involvement in a fight at a junior high school responded screaming to the administration, "If he hadn't kicked that kid's ----I would've kicked his for not kicking the kid's ----." Children raised with this type of parenting style often develop an attitude that "might is right" which translates into bullying behavior.

Bullies are often surrounded by a group of "wanna-bes," children who are passive or very anxious, but seek attention by "protecting" the bully, often taking the blame out of loyalty and enjoying the attention the bully receives by hanging on his coattails. One such incident involved a young man who came to the school administration to make a report clearing the bully of any wrong doing and taking full responsibility for the act, when, in fact, he wasn't even there and the school administrator had witnessed the entire incident.

Victims, too, can be products of their situation and upbringing. Many victims are different in some way, suffering physical or mental disabilities. Often, victims are the product of an overly protective mother, which leaves them feeling incapable, compared with their peers. They lack the ability to function confidently in social situations and do not have a network of friends with whom they can interact and call upon when challenged by a bully. Children who have been abused or those who suffer from low self-esteem are at great risk of becoming victims. Children who find themselves in the position of being a victim often unwittingly send signals of anxiousness and insecurity to a potential bully seeking out a victim. Some children, who desperately need attention, intentionally antagonize bullies in a misguided attempt to get the attention of adults and their peers. One young man threw bikes belonging to two very tough bullies into the bushes at the school. Another, challenged a bully by saying, "Call me a bad name, I dare you!" Fortunately, school officials intervened in both instances before the bully could choose his own consequences for such behavior.

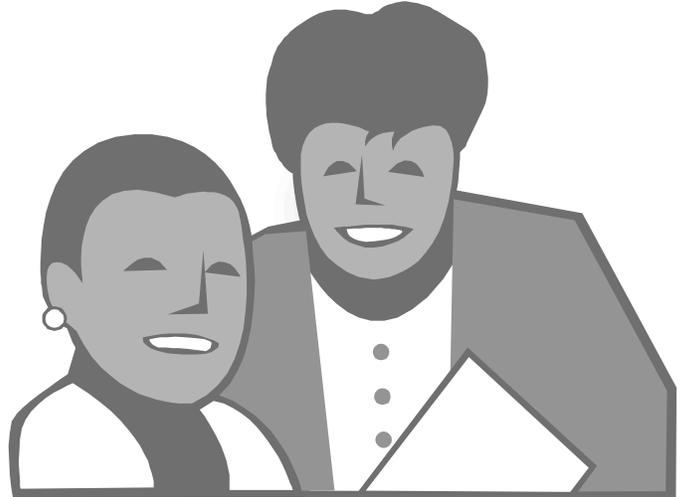


While incidents of bullying by boys seem to be more prevalent than bullying by girls, the preponderance of male bullying is more often reported because male bullies engage in more noticeable physical intimidation and aggression, often resulting in acts of violence. Girls are involved in bullying, as well, but it is generally more related in nature. Girls exclude other girls and manipulate friendships to wound and isolate victims.

Bullying is often ignored by adults because many view it as a natural part of childhood, an event that will serve them well into adulthood. Many adults think bullying is just acceptable competition and victims need to learn to stand up for themselves. Even victims are often reluctant to report incidents of bullying because they feel they should be able to handle it themselves.

Reported acts of bullying are often met with responses such as, "Don't be a wimp," "Stand up for yourself" or "You've got to learn to fight your own battles."

Research clearly indicates that acts of bullying are not a necessary part of childhood. Children who are bullies are 5 times more likely than non-bullies to be involved in future criminal activity and domestic violence. Six percent of children who are bullied, in turn, bully someone else. The residual effects of bullying can follow victims into adulthood as well. Many victims report stress in adult social situations as a carry-over from their painful experiences at the hand of a childhood bully. Deep-seated anger and guilt can afflict victims and bystanders who witnessed acts of bullying but failed to act for years after the incident. In a school setting, bullying can create a climate of fear that inhibits learning.



Schools can do a lot to solve the problem of bullying. The first step is realization that a problem exists. Three fourths of all bullying, particularly in elementary schools, takes place on or around playground areas. Often competition for playground equipment sets up an atmosphere of bullying. Providing adequate equipment, changing group interaction times and locations and having adequate adult supervision, especially in the out-of-the-way places, can prevent bullying from occurring.

Awareness and involvement leading to a school policy of zero tolerance for bullying is the greatest deterrent to its occurrence. Schools must clearly define what constitutes acceptable school behavior and violators must receive nonphysical, non-hostile consequences that are unequivocally and equitably applied. At the same time, the school must provide a warm, caring atmosphere and create a climate of "telling," clearly distinguishing between "tattling" and reporting acts of bullying. There are numerous programs that have been tested around the world to help schools develop programs to stand up against bullying.

There are many programs available, as well, to help children who find themselves in the role of victim. The greatest help to these children is to teach them skills where they can handle the situations themselves. At the very center of their victimization is the feeling of lack of control over their environment and an insecurity in social situations. Assertiveness training, social skills training and intense training on how to handle teasing, including lots of role playing, give the victim tools he or she can turn to when faced with a bully. Once they are able to stand their ground and deny the bully what he wants, domination and intimidation, the victim gains confidence for future confrontations. It is that very lack of confidence that is the source of the encounter in the first place. Such training can also help children find and make friends, an essential element of bullying prevention.

The common theme that runs through the reports of recent school shootings is that the gunmen had been teased and bullied. Many report the act of violence as specific retaliation for years of teasing and bullying that had gone unchallenged. It is reported that between 10 to 15 percent of all schoolchildren report being bullied regularly. It is imperative that we create and maintain a safe environment for children in our schools. Putting a stop to acts of bullying will do a lot to bring that about before more violence occurs. Each child has the right to feel safe and each school has an obligation to provide whatever training or support is necessary to make that a reality.

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SAFE SCHOOLS POSITION

The Middle Level Professional Studies Committee believes that safety in schools is a precondition for learning. Furthermore, safety encompasses academic and emotional as well as the physical dominion. Safe schools recognize that while there are many commonalities among children, each child is a unique individual who has the right to learn in a secure environment, free from harm and free from fear.

PHYSICAL SAFETY

School administrators must be keenly aware of their responsibilities to insure the physical safety of all the children in their charge. As the leader of the school community, the principal must guide faculty, staff, and students in establishing a school climate that honors individuality and provides for the needs of all in the school community.

Appropriate management plans need to be developed, implemented and monitored. Behavioral expectations for students and adults need to be widely disseminated and employed. All members of the school community must be free from physical harm, threats and verbal harassment.

Every school must have a written school safety plan that all parties understand and can effectively execute in a crisis situation. With input from local police and fire safety departments, this plan should feature regularly scheduled school safety audits that evaluate building security, structural considerations, patterns of utilization, and supervision assignments.

ACADEMIC SAFETY

All schools are responsible for creating learning climates that focus on promoting academic rigor in a safe environment. Today's schools must foster an extensive array of programs to support and stimulate reasons to stay in school. These programs should promote academically challenging core academic subjects combined with opportunities to explore intellectual interests through electives or exploratory courses. This academic content should be delivered in an atmosphere that supports students and encourages them to stretch themselves and engages them actively in their own learning process.

A safe environment is the outcome of learning situations that center on diffusing anger and encouraging acceptance of difference. Subject matter that teaches the acceptance of differences and anger management should be included in all curricula. When high expectations are set for all students, schools are in a better position to teach young people the reasons and strategies for developing skills to quell anger and to show respect for others.

EMOTIONAL SAFETY

A safe school provides for the emotional safety of all members of the school community. Students need to feel a sense of freedom from the fear of harassment or physical harm. They need to be free to express themselves and their concerns. Further, students need to feel safe to make mistakes. Parents and teachers also need to feel a sense of emotional safety with the school. They need to feel that they are valued and that they belong. All members of the community need to have a voice within the structure of the school.

The organization of the school must promote a sense of emotional safety through programs and structures. Character education, volunteer programs and recognition initiatives are but a few of the mechanisms that provide for the emotional safety of school stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

Safety in the middle school begins with the physical safety of the people in the building and the integrity of the school building as a protected place; but safe middle schools are far more than that. The middle school is a place of chrysalis where a child can safely metamorphose into an adolescent. Therefore, the middle school must include unique organizational features to facilitate this process. Students need to be grounded academically in a strong program of fundamental subjects with opportunities to explore other topics and identify interests. Teachers need to be organized into teams that carry the child beyond the single teacher classroom of elementary school and provide transition to the single subject teachers of a high school. Middle school teachers need time to focus on small numbers of students and see them as complex and changing individuals. Guidance counselors are needed to provide students with direction, reassure them that they are experiencing normal growth and to help them deal with unusual events. Students must be given opportunities to explore and extend their control over their own lives. Peer mediation programs teach them to manage conflict. Forms of student government should be promoted as they allow adolescents to influence their environment. Programs such as advisor/advisee should be fostered to give them a caring adult support system. For students having difficulty with transitions, the middle school should include built in mechanisms to identify those showing behaviors of concern and to provide the support and assistance that students need. A safe middle school is a place where it is safe in all ways to grow into healthy adolescents.

As Viewed from the Center...*Joe DiMaggio has been found!*

In the song “*Mrs. Robinson*,” Paul Simon laments the dearth of heroes in America. The lyrics say, “...where have you gone Joe DiMaggio? The nation turns its lonely eyes to you...” and “Joltin’ Joe has left and gone away...” Having grown up in an age when professional sports were perhaps a little more pure and kids my age looked up to great baseball and football players, I immediately related to the song and felt an affinity with the lyrics. Since the song was popularized, little has happened to change the perception of the lament. Virtually every professional sport has experienced a strike; greed has replaced loyalty to (and from) team, city, state and country. Olympic athletes from the professional ranks demand preferential treatment (luxury hotels, first class travel, expenses, etc.). Overpaid athletes are even putting clauses in their contracts that strike at the heart of the team concept, clauses such as top billing in all advertising and signage, offices for agents in the locker room and private jets. Furthermore, countless sports figures have been suspended for drug abuse and several have even faced charges of murder. This is hardly the “stuff” of heroes. “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?”

Well, if heroes are not to be found in the sports arenas, perhaps we should look elsewhere. Certainly, there are others in the public eye that are deserving of adulation, maybe in the entertainment industry. After all, young people have always admired movie actors and actresses, rock stars and TV personalities. While there are certainly many among these ranks who have attained success without being spoiled by it, there are many more who just appeal to the natural instincts of youth to test the limits of the establishment and to find their own places in the world. “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?”

Next, let's examine our nation's leaders. After all, we even have holidays to celebrate the birth of several American heroes of the past; Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. Certainly the vast majority of our leaders are men and women of courage, wisdom, foresight and sound values; yet, even they are suspect because of the unconscionable behavior of a few at the highest level. Even many of those who are not tainted by scandal or wrongdoing stoop to personal attacks, muckraking and slander to advance themselves. There are few obvious heroes among these ranks. “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?”

There are those who would say that Paul Simon was right after all. Joe DiMaggio may well have been the last true American hero, a sports legend who conducted himself with dignity and respect on the playing field as well as in public and private life for the remainder of his years.

Although the song makes a point, I submit that those who mourn the passing of the American hero have been looking in the wrong place. The true American hero is “Mr. K.” and he has been with us all along. For those who may not recognize the name, let me tell you about him. For over thirty-five years, Mr. K. taught science and language arts in a middle school. For a while, I was fortunate enough to be the principal of his school. For some time, I was unaware that he was the true American hero, yet all the clues were there. First, I invariably got several calls from parents each summer requesting that their children be placed on his team. Second, I always knew which students had him for a teacher as he was often quoted in the common areas and cafeteria: “Well, Mr. K. told us...” or “...what would Mr. K. think about...?” There were of course other clues such as students requesting that he be invited to the CAS Scholar-Leader Banquet or high school students coming over after school to visit him, however, it wasn't until three unrelated incidents a year after he retired that I stumbled onto the truth about Mr. K. In the minds of many, he is and always will be a true hero.

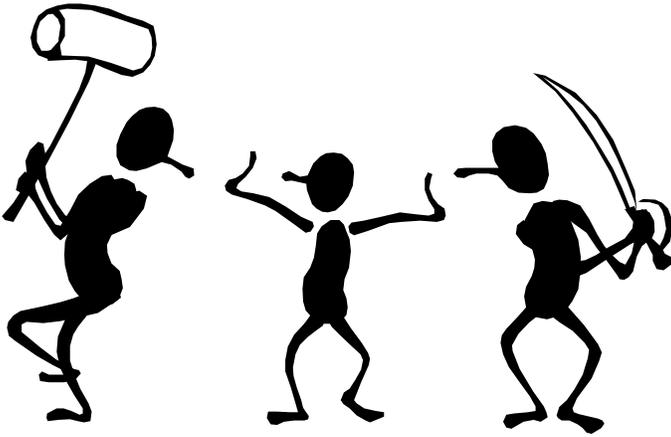
- The first of these incidents occurred when I met a young man in his late twenties who has had more than his share of misfortune. Due to unfortunate circumstances and poor decision making, this young man was disenchanted with his school experience and somewhat bitter about educators and authority figures in general. As we talked, I learned that he attended my former school and frankly had few good things to say about it. All of this changed when he mentioned Mr. K. He asked about him, spoke of how much he had learned from him and was animated and positive about science and language arts.
- The second endorsement was from a woman from California who was back east to attend a wedding. Upon learning of my connection to her former Connecticut community, she volunteered how her now thirty-five year-old difficult son “...owed his life to Mr. K. Without him, Donnie probably wouldn't be alive today.”
- Finally the third one came from Mr. K himself who said that he was amazed that a student from many years ago had called him and requested that he speak at the student's Eagle Scout induction ceremony.

These are but three of countless stories that surround the legend of Mr. K. So what do these stories tell us about heroes? I would postulate that the real heroes are, and always have been, teachers and administrators in the schools of America. While the name may be different from town to town, the Mr. K's of this country are the ones with true hero qualities. They are the ones who help establish values for youth, the ones who are remembered fondly many years later, the ones we want our children to emulate and the ones who make the world a little better place because of they have lived. Move over Joltin' Joe. Make room for Mr. K.

By: Earle G. Bidwell

Peer Mediation at Parish Hill

By Elise Graber, Jen Sullivan-Smith, Maryellen Donnelly, Jon Prue



“Get outa my way, you ***!!!! You always block my locker and I’m sick of it!”
Seamus screams in Holden’s face.
Holden’s face turns bright red and he yells,
“You ***!!!! How dare you say that!
You’re the one that’s always in my way!
I’ll get you later!!”

Seamus, angered by the name-calling, jumps at Holden and the two begin to bump one another in the hallway. A crowd gathers around the boys and the commotion draws a teacher out of her room. She yells, “Break it up!” and stands between them. Escorting the two disputants to the office, she delivers them to the vice-principal, who talks with them, one at a time. The two boys agree to consider peer mediation.

Knowing that unresolved conflicts often end in hurtful confrontations, members of the Parish Hill High School community (parents, teachers, administration) chose, six years ago, to initiate a peer mediation program for middle and high school students in grades seven to twelve school. Two community members in particular, Kate and Maryellen Donnelly, have been instrumental in the success of this program. Both of these women, who have attended workshops and been trained in this area, continue to advise at Parish Hill. Kate also teaches peer mediation at other schools in Connecticut.

Peer Mediation is a process wherein students provide a structure for other students to discuss conflicts and agree upon solutions that work for them. In implementing this program, Parish Hill sought to reduce aggressive behaviors between students and reduce the number of suspensions

Peer Mediation is a process wherein students provide a structure for other students to discuss conflicts and agree upon solutions that work
...

The goals of the Peer Mediation Program at Parish Hill are:

1. To enhance the overall school climate through improved communication and mutual understanding between individuals.
2. To teach students skills, affording them opportunities to grow and learn from conflicts.
3. To listen, understand, and respect different views.
4. To develop cooperation in solving common problems.
5. To reach agreements that address the interests of both sides.

There are several components to the program that were present at its inception and continue and which support and strengthen the program. An advisory committee is responsible for long-range planning, preparation of assemblies, selection of peer mediators, organization of training sessions, development of procedures and forms, promotion of the program, and continuous re-evaluation of progress. Administration, parents, staff, and students may attend the monthly advisory committee meetings. On a daily basis, two staff members are responsible for the supervision of peer mediators and for assigning mediations to appropriate peer mediators. They also facilitate meetings, plan yearly training retreats, and prepare a yearly report.

The staff is oriented to peer mediation through mock mediations presented by mediators at faculty meetings, through timely information provided in their mailboxes, and by always being invited to participate in training retreats. The community is informed of the program through newsletters. Recently, a table was set up at the parent open house with mediators fielding questions about the program. Other schools have expressed an interest in sharing information about their peer mediation programs with Parish Hill, an option that is presently being explored.

Each year, seventh and eighth graders attend a conflict resolution workshop presented by peer mediators. The nature of conflict, communication skills, the role of mediation in a hierarchy of conflict resolution skills, and the process of mediation are explored. Students then watch and comment on a mock mediation. At the end of this presentation, students nominate themselves or peers they feel exemplify characteristics of good mediators. Teachers interview nominees to determine their interest in becoming mediators and the students fill out an application form. Present peer mediators, advisors, and the faculty review the applications.

In selecting mediators, there is an attempt to recruit a diverse group of students to represent many segments of the school population. Criteria for selection include being impartial, honest, a good listener, and able to maintain confidentiality. Students with obvious problems of drug abuse are not considered. Any mediator who is trained and subsequently breaches the confidentiality of a mediation is suspended from the program, counseled, and may be dropped from the program if the problem continues.

When staff and students train together, it is a very positive and powerful experience for all involved.

Training for peer mediators and staff is an ongoing challenge. Student training takes place off the school campus and involves a two-night stay. It focuses on understanding the interplay of diversity, conflicts and communication skills, and practicing the mediation process. Community is built through group activity, and individual games or activities are discouraged. An exciting development through the years has been in the transition of the roles of adults and youth. The current mediators, as young as grade eight, teach adults and students new to mediation. There has been less and less that the peer mediation program advisors and coordinators contribute since the seasoned mediators now point out the subtleties of the mediation process. When staff and students train together, it is a very positive and powerful experience for all involved.

Success of the program depends on a variety of things:

- Use of the program must be voluntary
- Mediations must be kept confidential.
- No mediations are done which involve disputes concerning weapons, drugs, or physical or sexual abuse.
- Promotion of the program is ongoing as evidenced by advertisements on the morning announcements, posters hung throughout the school, and peer mediation t-shirts worn on a particular day of the week. Also, bulletin board notices focusing on key concepts are posted throughout the school.
- Motivating students to arrange additional activities.
- Teacher use of conflict resolution vocabulary that points out successful conflict resolution skills in class.
- Adventurous teachers who have used trained teachers and student mediators to help resolve faculty-student conflicts.

At present, there are 25 mediators from grades 8– 12, and many students have expressed interest in becoming future peer mediators. The program will continue to expand and improve through new members, on-going training, advertising and networking. Peer mediation involves communication, problem solving and conflict resolution, which are life-long skills that mediators take with them to their homes, communities, and beyond. This program is a vital component in providing an alternative to violence and in creating a more positive, peaceful school environment.

Peer Mediation Session

Following is a condensed version of a peer mediation sessions held to solve the conflict described at the beginning of the article. In the peer mediation room, Seamus and Holden are seated opposite each other at a circular table with two mediators between them. They glower, and it is clear this dispute is ongoing.

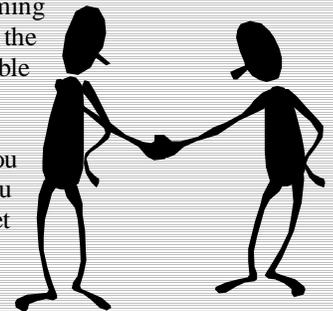
The mediators, Tova and Arthur, begin. They explain that the purpose of this mediation is to resolve Seamus' and Holden's conflict. They explain their own neutrality and the ground rules, which include reminders not to put each other down, to take turns, to agree to solve this issue, and an explanation of confidentiality.

Tova begins by asking Seamus to tell his side of the story, without interruption from Holden. Seamus tells it from his point of view, expressing his anger that Holden is always blocking his locker and calling him names. He is sick of it. Tova practices active listening by verifying and then rephrasing.

Arthur repeats this process with Holden. He suggests they brainstorm resolutions to the problem. "Kill Seamus," Holden mutters. "Flush Holden," Seamus replies.

"These first attempts are not exactly what we're looking for," Arthur says. This brainstorming continues, with prompts from the mediators, until feasible resolutions are offered.

"I could move and give you some space without calling you names, when you need to get into your locker," said Holden.



"I could be a little more patient and ask instead of pushing," Seamus grins at Holden.

The two mediators ask both boys if they agree to these resolutions. They nod affirmatively. After writing down the agreement on a paper contract, Arthur asks both boys to sign it. They agree to a follow-up meeting in a week and leave satisfied.

VIOLENCE AFTER SCHOOL

In the midst of our national anxiety about recent violent tragedies in and around our schools and our search for solutions, we must be careful to act on the basis of fact, not fear, and to solve real problems, not imagined ones.

Reliable data indicate that students are safer at school than away from school and commit fewer crimes during school hours than after school ends.

The real problem area is not the school itself, but the world our children return to after the dismissal bell rings. Most juveniles are responsibly engaged in an array of positive activities such as sports, clubs, or homework, or they "hang out" harmlessly with friends. However, for youth who have few activities available, whose friends are prone to negative behavior, or who experience other risk factors, the unsupervised hours between school and dinnertime offer ample opportunity to go astray. Statistics show that serious violent crime committed by juveniles peaks in the hours immediately after the close of school.



Knowledge is indeed power. Although we may not always be able to prevent isolated incidents of extraordinary violence, we can work together to develop programs and strategies that prevent juvenile crime and violence where and when they occur most predictably--away from school during after-school hours.

- Juvenile violence peaks in the after-school hours on school days and in the evenings on non-school days.
- Juveniles commit crimes at different times than adults do.
- After-school programs have more crime reduction potential than juvenile curfews.
- Sexual assaults by juveniles peak in the hours after-school.
- Juveniles are at the highest risk of being victims of violence at the end of the school day.

- Source: Juvenile Justice Bulletin

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4-8 SUBJECT SPECIFIC CERTIFICATION: A Mistake for Connecticut's Middle Schools

by Sam Lewbel

In 1998, with minimal input from teachers or administrators, Connecticut made a mistake, which, three years later, continues to have a disastrous impact on thousands of middle school students in our state.

At a time when Connecticut faces an unprecedented need for quality middle level teachers, we find the number of people being trained specifically to fill this need dropping precipitously. At a time when we need to improve the quality of instruction, we have inadvertently degraded it. Connecticut's 4-8 subject specific middle grades teaching certificate is a blunder that ignores the recommendations of every major middle level professional organization, the pleas of building administrators, decades of teaching experience and, worst of all, the needs of students.



Roots of the Problem

New Regulations Concerning State Educator Certificates, Permits and Authorizations were issued by the Connecticut State Board of Education in 1998. This document included a key change in middle school teacher certification which, in one stroke, undid a decade of positive reform in our state.

In the early 1990's, Connecticut became one of the first of a growing number of states to establish a teaching certificate specific to the middle level. This certificate licensed a teacher in the core subjects of English, mathematics, science and social studies for grades 4-8. The certificate recognized the unique needs of middle level learners, decades of research and the practical needs of school administrators. It acknowledged that K-8 generalists had successfully taught in grades seven and eight for decades but that specific preparation for this age group might help. It tacitly observed that Connecticut's Common Core of Learning and the reading, writing and thinking skills required on the still-evolving Connecticut Mastery Test and CAPT were best taught and reinforced in an interdisciplinary setting.

The 4-8 generalist certificate was embraced immediately by professional organizations. It embodied the recommendations of the Carnegie Commission's Turning Points report, which called for among other things, "Teaching a Core of Common Knowledge" and "Preparing Teachers for the Middle Grades." It reaffirmed the basic tenets of This We Believe, the position paper of the National Middle School Association and the mission statement of the New England League of Middle Schools.

The 4-8 generalist certificate encouraged colleges and universities for the first time to focus on training teachers specifically for the unique challenges of students aged 10-14. Programs, sometimes using middle level practitioners as adjunct faculty, grew and flourished at state universities such as Southern, Central and Western, as well as at private institutions such as Quinnipiac, Bridgeport and Sacred Heart. In short order, we found teachers entering the job market who were prepared specifically for teaching at the middle level. Most were swiftly employed in Connecticut classrooms. Noted one principal, "...It was very competitive, affording me the opportunity to select from the best for our students." For the first time, administrators could select from a pool of candidates with specific middle level training.

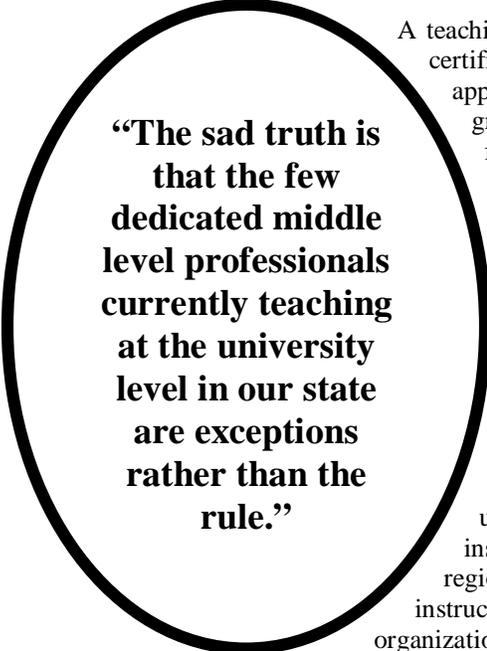
The 4-8 generalist certification came at a time when school districts across the state were moving to replace a failing, subject-centered, "junior high" model with true middle schools. It acknowledged the growing body of research demonstrating conclusively that middle schools were more effective in meeting the needs of young adolescents. The 4-8 generalist certificate put Connecticut squarely on the forefront of a growing national trend to recognize the unique needs and characteristics of early adolescents. For the first time, pre-service teachers in Connecticut were being prepared to serve on interdisciplinary teams and to use methods of instruction geared specifically to the characteristics of early adolescent learners.

In 1998, however, these reforms came to a screeching halt. Ignoring the advice of most professional organizations, middle school administrators and teachers, the state again changed its certification regulations. For the first time, generalists would not be licensed to teach in grades seven or eight. Minimum course requirements and rigid testing procedures insured that teachers looking to obtain a middle grades license in Connecticut would be restricted to one subject area. While it was possible for a teacher to gain an endorsement to teach a second subject, a number of difficult and costly roadblocks effectively ended the practice of multiple certifications.

On the surface, the change was a well-intentioned attempt to raise standards and ensure subject area knowledge on the part of new teachers. Unfortunately, rather than improve instruction, the new certification law effectively ended differentiated middle level training for pre-service teachers at the university level, exacerbated an already difficult teacher shortage, tied the hands of administrators and planted the seeds of an inevitable decline in the quality of middle level instruction across the state.

The Unanticipated Results

The first and most noticeable result was a sharp drop in the number of candidates seeking to become middle level teachers in Connecticut. In the first year of the new subject specific certification, the decline was over 30%. The reasons for this decline are as obvious as its consequences.



“The sad truth is that the few dedicated middle level professionals currently teaching at the university level in our state are exceptions rather than the rule.”

A teaching candidate not opting for the elementary grades can seek either grades 4-8 or 7-12 certification in one subject area. Since few schools employ a single subject centered approach in grades four or five, this effectively limits a teacher certified grades 4-8 to three grade levels. With six possible grade levels, a 7-12 certificate doubles the likelihood of finding a position and offers greater flexibility when changing positions. While teachers trained in a single subject for grades 7-12 will obviously receive some instruction specific to 10-14 year-old learners, since the bulk of the license deals with the high school grades, that obviously becomes a focus of preparation in methods courses. Where the 4-8 certification recognized the need for specialized training for those who work with this age group, programs for 7-12 teachers simply cannot provide the same degree of preparation.

Further, the likelihood of a 7-12 pre-service teacher receiving sufficient middle level pedagogy would be better if more Connecticut university level instructors had a greater interest in the middle level themselves. Unfortunately, compared to neighboring states, Connecticut is notable in its lack of middle level expertise at the university level. Not a single university or college in Connecticut is listed as an institutional member of the New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS), our regional affiliate of the National Middle School Association. Less than a dozen college instructors in the state can be found on the membership roles of either NELMS or our state organization, The Connecticut Center for Early Adolescent Educators. While professional

membership is no measure of the quality of instruction or the curriculum of our state's teacher education programs, it does hint at what we can expect. In contrast to neighboring states, only a handful of Connecticut university people have ever presented at national, New England or Connecticut middle level conferences. This illustrates the lack of emphasis placed on middle level education in our state. The sad truth is that the few dedicated middle level professionals currently teaching at the university level in our state are exceptions rather than the rule.

One-Third Fewer Teachers Seek Middle Level Endorsements

Few students enter teacher education programs expressly because they "want to work with seventh graders." Unless inspired and encouraged by their instructors, few discover the joys of teaching this age level prior to actual initiation - and thus do not seek the kind of training which will make them successful with this most challenging of age groups.

Statistics provided by the State Department of Education bear out what one would predict under the circumstances. Since the new subject specific certification has gone into effect, there has been a decline of over 30% in the number of individuals seeking certification in the middle grades.

In 1995-96, 257 teachers were granted the generalist 4-8 certificate; in 1996-97 the number was 288; and, in 1997-98 it was 267. (An additional 72 received discipline based 4-8 certificates in 1997-98 as the new law came into effect mid-year.) (See Table One)

In 1998-99, the first full year of the new subject centered certification and the only year thus far reported by the state, only 161 certificates had been obtained to teach English, Science, Math or Social Studies in grades 4-8. We thus see a decline of over one-third in the number of teachers preparing to teach in the middle grades at time when the state was beginning to experience a teacher shortage in many areas.

TABLE ONE

**COMPARISON OF TEACHERS CERTIFIED AS MIDDLE LEVEL GENERALISTS, MIDDLE LEVEL SPECIALISTS AND 7-12 SPECIALISTS BY CONTENT AREAS
1995-1999**

From October 1, 1995 to September 30, 1996

257 teachers received generalist certificates for grades 4-8

792 teachers received subject specific certificates for grades 7-12

225 English

232 History/Social Studies

144 Mathematics

191 Science

*Science includes certification in either Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Earth Science or General Science

From October 1, 1996 to September 30 1997

288 teachers received generalist certificates for grades 4-8

807 teachers received subject specific certificates for grades 7-12

203 English

225 History/Social Studies

139 Math

240 Science

From October 1, 1997 to September 30, 1998

267 teachers received generalist certificates for grades 4-8

72 teachers received subject specific certificates for grades 4-8

14 English

15 History/Social Studies

12 Math

31 Science

912 teachers received subject specific certificates for grades 7-12

246 English

243 History/Social Studies

118 Math

305 Science

*The discipline-based 4-8 certificate went into effect on August 6, 1998, causing a two month over-lap during the 1997-98 reporting year. It must also be assumed that a number of 4-8 certificate recipients also received 7-12 certification.

From October 1, 1998 to September 30, 1999

161 teachers received subject specific certificates for grades 4-8

45 English

52 History/Social Studies

41 Math

23 Science

935 teachers received subject specific certificates grades 7-12

262 English

262 History/Social Studies

146 Math

265 Science

*Note below the increase in 7-12 certificates when comparing 1998-9 to earlier years. For each subject (except during the transition year of 1997-8) the increase in the number of 7-12 certificates was approximately equal to the drop in those seeking 4-8 endorsement.

	1998-99	1995-6	1996-7
English	262	225	203
History/S.S.	262	232	225
Math	146	144	139
Science	265	191	240

** Reporting year for certification in Connecticut is from October 1st to September 30th. Information from Hilary E. Freedman, Ph.D., Chief of the Bureau of Certification and Professional Development of the State

Similar Drop in Enrollment in Middle Level Programs

A similar and even more pronounced decline can be seen across the state in the number of students enrolled in programs designed specifically to train middle level teachers. Statistics from Quinnipiac University illustrate this trend. In the early 1990's, Quinnipiac began an "integrated methods" course (Ed 570-571) which was team taught by adjuncts, all practicing middle level teachers. Pre-service teachers received specific instruction on the development of interdisciplinary units, cooperative learning, assessment and teaming along with content specific methods in each subject area. Graduates of the program were among the most sought after of candidates, most receiving multiple offers for positions prior to graduation. The program enrolled an average of two dozen individuals annually between 1994-1997. In 1998, with the new certification, enrollment fell to 9 pre-service teachers and then to just two individuals in 1999. (See Table Two) Other middle level preparation programs around the state have experienced a similar drop in enrollment as potential teachers opt instead for 7-12 certification.

TABLE TWO

ENROLLMENT IN MIDDLE GRADES PROGRAM (Ed 570-571) AT QUINNIPIAC UNIVERSITY

Enrollment by cohort in Fall of the year:

1994 = 21

1995 = 27

1996 = 26

1997 = 24 (plus 10 who began a new cohort in spring 1998)

1998 = 9 (new certification takes effect)

1999 = 2

* Information from Cynthia Dubea, Director M.A.T. Program, Quinnipiac University (November 10, 2000).

Certification: Tying the Hands of Administrators

A hallmark of a good middle school is teaming. The Carnegie Commission and others point to strong interdisciplinary teaming as essential for meeting the intellectual and emotional needs of early adolescent students (Carnegie, 1990). It is almost universally accepted that the best middle schools are those where teachers skillfully weave together or "integrate" skills, themes and content from several subjects to make learning meaningful for students. Interdisciplinary instruction and curriculum integration are widely accepted practices which enhance understanding for students at this age. Most Connecticut middle schools employ four and even five person teams. However, three and even two person teams are common as well, configurations requiring teachers trained and certified in more than one area. Many experts and a wealth of research evidence support the use of smaller or "partner" teams as the most effective of all (Stevenson, 1998). Some schools around the state are experimenting with "looped" teams in which teachers spend two years with a group of students. Such innovations have proven successful in improving test scores and insuring student success (Lincoln, 1999). Middle level teams have produced thousands of highly innovative and successful interdisciplinary collaborations. Hundreds of examples can be found within the projects recognized annually by the Connecticut Celebration of Excellence Program or in articles published by NELMS and the Center for Early Adolescent Educators.

The common thread through all of these innovations is flexibility in staffing. It is a rare building where the number of students in each grade level consistently matches the number of certified teachers in each particular subject area. For logistical reasons, many principals are forced to periodically place at least part of their staff in more than one subject area, team or grade level.

If a school only has 100 seventh graders - four class sections - then each teacher must pick up a fifth preparation, often out of their initial area of certification. Similarly if there are 150 students in grade eight, administrators need to fill six sections for each academic subject. Someone must "pick up" each of these extra courses - usually outside of their primary content area. In many schools, the number of students dictates that teachers on an academic team will "share" one subject area. Working collaboratively, each sixth grade member of a team might "cover" a classroom of language arts or social studies. A two-person team may involve one teacher for language arts/social studies and a second for math/science while they share responsibilities for reading. Such configurations are the norm in Connecticut. They are dictated by class size, the talents of individual teachers, the creativity of administrators, and the needs of students. The endless possibilities foster creativity, innovation, and the integration of content and skills; all of which make learning relevant for students.

For a teacher trained as a 4-8 generalist, one with some background in a range of subject areas, one trained to work on a team, to collaborate and to make interdisciplinary connections, such classes are highly successful. They allow administrators the flexibility to connect staff who work together best and meet the ever-changing needs of their buildings. But, for teachers trained and certified to teach just one content area, such arrangements are problematic at best. Principals find themselves unable to maintain teams because

they cannot hire teachers with the correct mix of certifications. Administrators around the state have raised a chorus of complaints as the new discipline-specific certification dries up the pool of teachers who have the flexibility that middle schools need. Says Lauren Robinson, Principal of Rochambeau Middle School in Southbury; "We have a number of K-8 and 4-8 certified people in our building, so we have flexibility now. But as they retire and are replaced by newly certified teachers, we lose that flexibility and will be forced to revert back to a more traditional schedule, one that looks more like the old Junior high school. This flies in the face of research that proves the 'middle school' concept improves student performance and of what has worked so well in our building."

A grades 7-12 certification also ignores the grade levels found in most middle schools and creates divisiveness that goes beyond the problems of grouping and teaming. Karen Parizeau, principal of Tolland Middle School, in Tolland, Connecticut, notes that she has "great concerns for the future." As she explains, "Developing a whole school team climate is difficult when grades 5 and 6 are perceived as elementary but 7 and 8 as middle school. While subject specific 7-12 certificates provide the feeling that these teachers are qualified to teach their content area, interdisciplinary development is difficult because these teachers are reluctant to teach outside of their content area. What we really need is the flexibility to hire teachers that possess the qualifications needed. Cross endorsements and multiple endorsements within the 4-8 certification area would be helpful." Unfortunately, the present subject-centered certification system severely limits these options.

At the crux of the entire issue is a longstanding debate. Do we need greater subject area expertise on the part of teachers or do we need teachers with greater expertise in working with middle level students? While it is difficult to argue against the desire for teachers who have greater training in the subject which they will teach, the evidence of the past three years is conclusive. Rather than rectify any perceived problem of subject area expertise, the subject centered 4-8 certificate has instead widened an already deepening teacher shortage, hindered teaming and innovation in middle schools, and done a disservice to the students of our state.

Says James Agostine, former principal of Memorial Middle School in Middlebury, Connecticut, "The new certification law exacerbates the current teacher shortage. Middle school instruction requires flexibility of teaching. When teachers are locked into teaching a single discipline, team configurations are disrupted."

It is obvious that the present certification laws in Connecticut must be changed and changed quickly or they will continue to have a disastrous impact on instruction in Connecticut middle schools.

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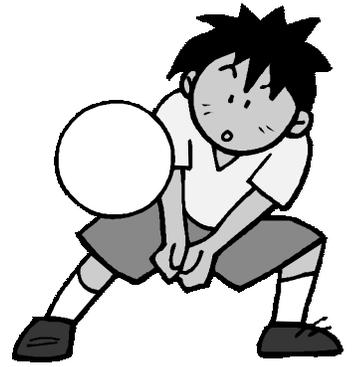
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Unified Sports

Irving Robbins Middle School, Farmington, CT

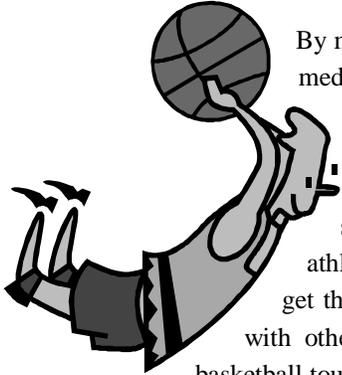
By Andy Bean

Two hours of indoor soccer and volleyball competition have exhausted these red-faced, sweat-soaked middle schoolers on an October afternoon. After some congratulatory high-fives, and quick guzzles at the water fountain, these recreational athletes collect their school stuff and head for the buses. Chatter from these 10 to 15 students fills the halls. "That was awesome," said one sixth-grader; "When will we be doing this again," chimed in another. Normal responses from a group of middle school students, except these were two groups of students who were meeting for the first time.



Expecting to notice differences, these students, instead, bonded through common interests their first day as members of the Unified Sports team at Irving Robbins Middle School in Farmington, Conn. The team is a combination of mainstream students and mentally and physically challenged students who participate in intramural activities in preparation for competition against other schools. The team's goals were to establish new friends, share common interests, provide an outlet to improve physical fitness, and possibly win a medal or a ribbon. These goals were all accomplished by just having some fun.

The team met two Thursdays per month for most of the year. In the early fall *organized* games of indoor soccer, volleyball and floor hockey were played to improve team skills. "Passing" was the key word in all our competitions, and rules requiring teammates to play in their own "zones" were added in each of the sports. This prevented students from "ball hogging." Special needs students were relied upon for the scoring in each game, while the mainstream students got their workouts getting the ball to their special needs teammates. This format of competition provided challenges and fun for all involved. In fact, it seemed kind of purposeless to be calling the groups "mainstream" and "special needs;" "Passers" and "scorers" seemed more appropriate. Improvements by all were evident by mid-year as we prepared for the upcoming basketball tournament at Berlin High School. The team was now truly "unified."



By mid season one of our "scorers," who is our shortest player and is physically challenged due to medical treatment at a young age, was taking three or four steps to go after the puck in floor hockey. That's three or four more steps than she was taking in October. Another "scorer," who is mentally challenged, found her thrill in floor hockey as well. After slapping in her first-ever hockey goal, she responded quite emphatically, "I'm going to get another goal." -- and she did! The "passers" grew too. One "passer", who wasn't known for her shooting ability or athletic ability, used her cooperation skills to pull the team together. She reminded the players to get the ball to the "scorers" and helped the players with their positions when they needed it. Along with others, her coaching made the idea of teamwork through passing automatic by the time the basketball tournament rolled around.

The team was so confident in its ability after a tie against McGee in a scrimmage, it decided to move up from level 4 to level 3 in the Unified Basketball tournament competition. One "passer" reminded the team on the return bus trip, "Remember this is about the (scorers) not us." The move up proved to be a challenge at the March tournament, but it was no less rewarding. The team was taken off guard by the speed of Quirk Middle School of Hartford and lost its first game; but it did not falter from its game plan. Although the "passers" could score 75 percent of the points in this competition, they did not want to break from their game plan of finding open shots for the "scorers." The team broke its scoring slump in game two with four points. Irving Robbins finally got comfortable in the tournament atmosphere in a rematch against McGee, and came up just a basket shy of beating Simsbury in its final game. One of the coaches asked a "passer" on his team if they had been successful and the player replied, "We didn't win any games, but we wanted the "scorers" to make baskets today, and every one of them did."

After the tournament and a break from competition, the team reformed for some springtime activities. Outdoor kickball and basketball were the two most popular sports and a pizza/Popsicle party concluded Irving Robbins' successful Unified Team season.

Our "scorers" grew in confidence and physical ability and our "passers" learned the power of sharing and teamwork. Celebrating each other's strengths and working towards a common goal created a truly "unified" team at Irving Robbins Middle School in Farmington.