

Educators Must Be Advocates

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At a time when middle level education is under scrutiny and is facing challenges from shrinking budgets and federal legislation, it is imperative that teachers and administrators educate their various publics and publicize the successes and of proven middle level best practices. While most educators probably agree with this statement, few can afford the time to devote to promoting their programs. While acknowledging that the job of teacher and administrator is increasingly demanding, the writer maintains that advocacy is of critical importance and that every educator must make it a priority. Considering the fact that the degree of success in the classroom and the school is significantly affected by outside influences, (parents, finance boards, local, state and national media and legislation just to name a few), it is incumbent on all of us to promote educators as “experts on schooling,” to inform the public about what works and what doesn’t, and to enlist the help and support of parents and community for the important work of teaching and learning.

Reflecting on the challenge of being a teacher or administrator in a middle school today, one can readily develop a pretty comprehensive list of things that affect the day-to-day business of schooling. A short list would include, but certainly not be limited to, school safety, No Child Left Behind Legislation, shrinking budgets, teacher certification, grade alignment, curriculum and instruction.

Think about school safety. The number one concern of parents is certainly the safety of their children. Criticism of middle schools, especially by parents, often revolves around safety issues. “My son is the victim of bullying” or “my daughter encounters bad language and harassment of the bus,” are just two of many common complaints that take an enormous amount of administrative time. Many administrators report that the majority of their time is spent on safety and not educational issues. In order for this to change, efforts need to be made to inform the public about school safety. Being proactive by letting parents know the type of training that teachers and administrators have such as anti-sexual harassment instruction, anti-bullying education, training in dealing with blood born pathogens, counseling, first aid and CPR, bomb threats, fire and weather emergencies and drug / alcohol education can go a long way towards establishing educators as the professionals they truly are when it comes to the safety of children.

No Child Left Behind legislation is a daunting document for educators, yet even more so for non-educators. The media tends to focus on just a couple of areas of the legislation, namely accountability of teachers and schools, and choices for parents. Little is said or written about instructional time lost due to overzealous testing, support for national programs of questionable value, or the absence of standards for the delivery of instruction in teacher accountability. Furthermore, little attention is given to helping failing schools improve; rather the emphasis is on parents’ rights to remove their children to better performing schools. The fact that this practice will lead to an even greater disparity between the privileged and the under-privileged is lost on most news media.

The growing teacher shortage is being exacerbated at the middle level by current certification regulations. There is little incentive for prospective teachers to consider the middle level when broader certifications allow them to work in the middle level with little or no understanding of early adolescent children or proven middle level best practices. Middle level administrators are spending an increasing amount of their time and energies in securing and training teachers in middle level practices. The public needs to be educated to this looming crisis and grassroots support for change needs to be generated.

School and municipal budgets are among the few places in government where average citizens feel empowered to exercise their rights. These are also the areas that arguably have the greatest impact on educators’ abilities to be effective. Class size, the number and quality of exploratory programs, in school and after school activities, materials and equipment, as well as common planning time and team activities are all subject to the public’s understanding and support for school budgets. Much of the information on which taxpayers base decisions comes from non-educators such as taxpayers groups, local newspaper reporters and op-ed articles (few written by educators). It is essential that educators be proactive in letting the public know the consequences of shortsighted budget decisions.

After many years of increase in the number of communities embracing the middle school movement, there are several that are exploring the possibility of returning to the k-8 model. While there is no one superior grade configuration, (there are 14 different ones that include middle grades in Connecticut) several of the school systems considering change are doing so for other than educational reasons. The CAS position has been that a variety of different grade configurations can work, yet some are inherently more difficult or more costly to administer than others. Educators need to take a leadership role in the communities that are considering change in grade alignment to ensure that the middle school concept is viable in the proposed grade configuration under consideration.

Perhaps the most misunderstood and clearly the most important area of advocacy should be in educating the public to middle school best practices. Unfortunately it is often a well-kept secret that the middle school concept works! The research and literature fully support the philosophy, goals, objectives and delivery systems proposed in such publications as “Turning Points 2002” and “This We Believe and Now We Must Act.” It is paramount that middle level educators take every opportunity to share these successes with parents and community members. Without this knowledge, it is all too easy for these groups to undervalue the necessity of maintaining the middle school model..

In all of these areas, middle schools will be influenced by outside entities and the public will get information. If educators do not supply the information, others will fill the vacuum. One needs only to read the editorial columns of the nation's newspapers. It seems that there is an editorial about failing schools in every newspaper, every week. What's more, in the absence of hard data, people will resort to their own memories. Virtually every citizen went to seventh grade and while experiences were mixed, it seems that all have an opinion of what schooling should look like based on what it was like when they attended.

With the current economy and political climate, promoting middle level education, establishing oneself as a recognized educational expert in the community and gaining support for team and school-wide initiatives is the job of every educator and will pay dividends both in time saved and in support for schools, teachers and programs.