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School



Assessment Report
for
MANCHESTER ESSEX REGIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

Visitation Dates:
November 2-4, 2016

New England League of Middle Schools
50 High Street, Suite 10 • North Andover, MA 01845 • (978) 557-9311 • Fax (978) 557-9312 • e-mail: nelms@nelms.org • web: www.nelms.org



VISITING TEAM MEMBERS

Lyn Ward Healy, Team Leader
NELMS Consultant
Bedford, NH

Janis Flint-Ferguson
Professor, Gordon College
Wenham, MA

Natalie LaFlamme
Fairground Middle School
Nashua, NH

Andrea Logan
Lyman Moore Middle School
Portland, ME

Christopher Pollet
Tyngsborough Middle School
Tyngsborough, MA

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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* 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.

NELMS designed this process in the early 1990's and updated it based on current research. The process was developed by the Research and Assessment Team whose members included academics and practitioners primarily from New England. Their work was used when the National Middle Schools Association (NMSA, now AMLE) developed its assessment process based on its position papers summarized in: This We Believe which has been updated on several occasions since its initial release in 1995.

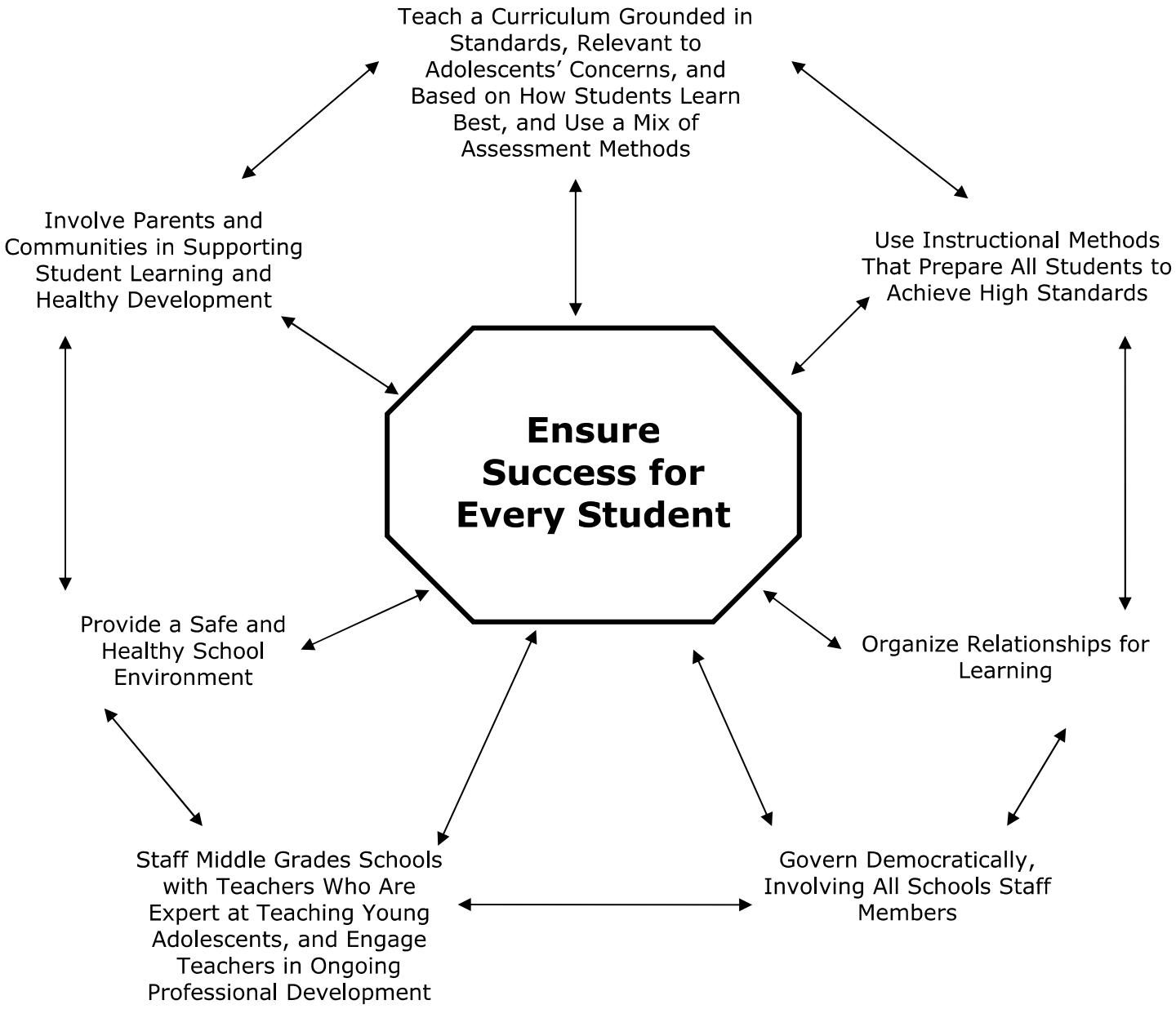
Many New England Schools have engaged in this school assessment process which involves a self-assessment coupled with a school visit by a team of middle level practitioners from the New England states. The written report combined with the school data from faculty, support staff, parents and students can provide direction for efforts to refresh, revitalize and renew efforts to ensure the success of every student.

Manchester-Essex Regional School (MERMS) contracted with NELMS for an assessment and their first action was to complete surveys based on Turning Points 2000. These were completed by faculty, support staff, students and parents. The school had positive participation in this effort and the data collected serves as a significant part of this assessment.

On November 2-4, 2016, the school hosted a Visiting Team (VT) composed of middle level professionals from around New England. During their visit, the VT had the opportunity to visit classes, meet with parents and students, interview faculty and staff, and generally immerse itself into the life of the school.

This report is the result of themes heard and observed during the three days the VT was part of MERMS and reflects the school's desire to reexamine and refresh its roots in middle level education.

The *Turning Points* 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

Curriculum and Assessment

Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the concerns of adolescents, and based on how students learn best.

Teach a Curriculum Grounded in Standards, Relevant to Adolescents' Concerns, and Based on How Students Learn Best, and Use a Mix of Assessment Methods

"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)

"Assessment should be designed to provide ongoing, useful feedback, to both students and teachers, on what students have learned. This feedback should be used to improve teaching and learning progressively, not just to audit student performance. Effective assessment should connect directly to curriculum and instruction. Simply put, assessments should be perfectly meshed with what we want students to learn. . . .For all students to be successful, to meet or exceed the "building codes", (performance standards), they must have a thorough understanding of the standards that from the concepts and questions that form the frame." (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 54)

There is a fully comprehensive curriculum for the Middle School and students have a variety of courses throughout the six day cycle. Along with the traditional core classes, all students take the core of a world language. Their exploratory (specials) have them moving through a variety of classes in art/music, physical education, health and engineering.

The Middle School has experimented with an Advisory as part of the curriculum, but currently does not have an ongoing advisory. Teachers mentioned the loss of Advisory and feel that it could help students with the growing increase in pressure felt by students and reported by teachers and parents alike.

The Team visited every classroom in the middle school at various times throughout the three day visit. The use of the Common Core State Standards is apparent and several classrooms had the day's objective prominently featured at the front of the room.

Teachers have been loading their curriculum into Aspen and report having a good deal of input into the development of grade level curriculums. But they report that the curriculum is not organized to help students see the interconnectedness of skills, concepts, and content. The next step for teachers will be to look at the vertical alignment of their content. These discussions can help to identify formulate unique elements within each grade level as well as a sense of how each grade level provides foundational work.

The Unified Arts are not connected with the teams and the curriculum. While this is not uncommon, taking time to bring the unified arts into curriculum discussions and articulating the curriculum fully supports the learning of young adolescents.

Assessment occurs on an ongoing basis but is generally relegated to tests and quizzes. Students especially reported the frequent number of quizzes and pop quizzes in their work. Teachers report using rubrics, but were mixed on how well students used rubrics to assess their own learning.

There is a variety of formative and summative assessments that can help students to demonstrate their knowledge and in understanding in different ways. Particularly formative assessment is a way for students to check in and measure their own growth in the content fields, allowing them to see learning as what they do, the choices they make and not something that teachers do to them. Working through the integrated nature of a curriculum also helps students to see the benefits of learning in a broader view.

Summative assessments can be created to allow students to use higher order thinking, encouraging them to think for themselves, analyze and evaluate their materials and their learning. This can be done through Hess's Depth of Knowledge materials, designed to focus on using evidence to assess student learning.

STRENGTHS:

1. Teachers are involved in the creation of the grade-level curriculum.
2. Teachers use the state and national standards as the basis for the design of the curriculum.
3. Students have access to a comprehensive program of learning including Social Studies, English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, World Languages, Fine Arts, Physical Education and Health.
4. Teachers have begun reexamining their 6-12 curriculum alignment.
5. Students and parents have the opportunity to look at grades in X2.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Explore a variety of assessments models including performance tasks, projects and other options (posters, presentations, etc.) that are not simply paper/pencil.
2. Utilize the Depth of Knowledge materials to ascertain evidence of learning at a deeper level.
3. Continue work on aligned curriculum 6-12; reflect together on providing a scope and sequence to the middle school curriculum that includes all coursework.
4. Provide multiple measures for students to show their learning in formative and summative ways.
5. Consider Student-led Conferences to help students articulate their learning.
6. Study and implement strategies for grading that align with Standards and the instructional practices.

Possible Resources:

Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom
Rick Wormeli (Stenhouse)

Becoming a Better Teacher: Eight Innovations That Work
Giselle O. Martin-Kniep (ASCD)

Varied Instruction

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

Turning Points 2000 describes the purpose of instruction at the middle level: "To ensure the success of every student, instructional practice must address learners with diverse levels of readiness, rates of learning, and preferred means of learning (learning styles), experiences, interests and cultural backgrounds. To work effectively with such diversity, teachers must also become 'students of their students', adding a new dimension to the idea of a learning community" (pg. 65).

Survey data in the area of instruction at MERMS indicates clearly defined areas of strength and areas of concern as reported by the faculty. Areas of strength where teachers report a lower area of concern include: early detection of struggling learners, reporting progress to stakeholders, utilizing flexible methods in the classroom in order to provide a high standard for learning, and utilizing a variety of methods in order to provide varied and unique opportunities for demonstrating learning. Conversely, areas of concern for teachers fall primarily in the domains of scheduling and effective teaming time, progress reporting to other teachers, students and parents, encouraging interests of students, effective unified arts instruction and inclusion practices.

While visiting MERMS, the VT was able to visit each classroom, sometimes multiple times. Our observations indicated evidence of a variety of instructional practices being used across teams including but not limited to:

- inclusion of special education students in the general education setting with support based on their individual needs,
- teachers and support staff assisting students with individual needs in order to facilitate access to classroom instruction,
- and varied grouping practices within the classroom setting ranging from individual work time to small group project-based learning

These strategies indicate teachers' overall commitment to ensuring that students are met at their individual level of readiness to access the learning within the classroom. In addition, classrooms were generally learner friendly with homework boards and timelines listed for upcoming due dates including assessments, homework, individual assignments, etc. while also appearing very traditional in the overall use of seating (rows of some format being the most observed seat configuration).

Classroom observation indicated high levels of individualized support for students with specific learning needs; teaching assistants, pull-out classes, and co-teaching opportunities with school counseling were all observed as strategies being used to promote student access to classroom instruction. Despite the levels of support being provided for students of multiple levels of readiness, evidence of differentiated instruction and/or communication between support staff and general education teacher was limited.

Classroom observation in the area of classrooms as learning communities shows evidence of varied grouping strategies ranging from individual work/seat time to whole group lesson activities designed to be lecture-based and teacher-led. Instances of student seatwork, packet work, binder work and notetaking were readily

observed. Evidence of accessing instruction through the methodology of student interest and varied experiences was observed in cases where flexible seating was made available to students. Despite the use of flexible seating and organizing relationships for learning using varied grouping across teams instruction was primarily observed as teacher directed, with the teacher delivering instruction and structure far more often than students. Worksheets were more in evidence than the integration of technology or active student-led learning.

Unified Arts instructional classes appeared to be structured in a similar manner to core classes. Exploratory classes, STEM classes, PE, health and music all indicated teacher-driven instruction and little student interaction. Unified Arts teachers are largely spread out and somewhat disconnected to the rest of the school set-up.

STRENGTHS:

1. There is some evidence of a variety of instructional approaches.
2. Special education students are included in the classrooms.
3. The district identifies learning difficulties early and then provides assistance in helping the students.
4. Grouping practices within the classroom include pairs, groups, and individual work.
5. The 8th grade has an experiential field trip to Washington D.C. each spring.
6. Special education provides programming appropriate for diverse learning needs across grade levels

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Consider engaging in professional learning on different instructional strategies such as project-based learning; student inquiry; and students doing the work instead of the teacher to revitalize and refresh their repertoire of instruction. Conversations on Differentiated Instruction are also recommended.
2. MERMS should examine its culture of learning and consider changing the emphasis from "teaching" to "learning". Active engagement of students rather than teacher directed learning is recommended.
3. Current research emphasizes the importance of student voice/student choice to more actively engage students. Teachers are encouraged to implement these ideas in their classroom.
4. There is significant evidence of worksheet/packet instruction. Other strategies to present learning such as projects, performance tasks, etc. encourage students to become more active participants in their learning.
5. Consider revising the structure of special education service delivery in pull-out support settings from grade level support to 6-8 support in order to open up content offerings for students on IEPs.
6. While technology is available in the classrooms, it is recommended that teachers increase their personal technology knowledge and implement it in their instruction.
7. Experiential field trips contribute to the "whole child". Grades 6 and 7 are encouraged to examine potential field trips to prepare for the 8th grade trip to Washington, D.C.
8. It is recommended that MERMS examine its Unified Arts program, how it is implemented and how it is valued by all stakeholders. This recommendation connects to the school schedule, the way UA classes are offered (many

schools use quarters or trimesters) and the opportunities to collaborate with grade level teams.

Possible Resources:

Never Work Harder Than Your Students
Robyn Jackson (ASCD)

Classroom Instruction That Works
Ceri B. Dean, Elizabeth Ross Hubbell, Howard Pitler and Bj Stone (ASCD)

Teach Like a PIRATE: Increase Student Engagement, Boost Your Creativity, and Transform Your Life as an Educator
Dave Burgess (Dave Burgess Consulting, Inc.)

Where Great Teaching Begins: Planning for Student Thinking and Learning
Anne R. Reeves (ASCD)

Learning Targets: Helping Students Aim for Understanding in Today's Lesson
Connie M. Moss and Susan M. Brookhart (ASCD)

Differentiated Instruction – Multiple resources by Carol Ann Tomlinson

Project Based Learning – Multiple resources on www.edutopia.org or from the Buck Institute (bie.org)

Middle Level Teachers and Staff

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

"An expectation that professional development activities can be effectively focused to improve outcomes for students makes professional development a serious endeavor for all involved." (*Turning Points 2000,* pg. 111)

"High-quality professional development builds a culture among educators within a middle school, and between "like-minded" schools, that supports innovation, experimentation, and collegial sharing." (*Turning Points 2000*, pg. 116)

When we were at MERMS, the VT met teachers, administrators and support staff members who genuinely like young adolescents and understand their physical, social, emotional, intellectual and moral development. Most faculty have been part of the MERMS community for several years, and have been teaching with the same colleagues during this time, frequently at the same grade level with the same content. Teachers new to the school have a nominal mentoring program, but could benefit from a more structured support system.

The faculty appears to be comfortable with their instruction and assessment efforts and tend to rely on familiar practices. Engaging in professional learning in study groups or as a faculty could help to introduce more student centered instruction. "He who does the work does the learning." In addition, technology, both faculty and student use, could be a topic for professional learning.

STRENGTHS:

1. Teachers genuinely like the students.
2. Teachers at MERMS are certified to teach middle level students. Many teachers hold content-specific certifications.
3. Teachers are committed to the success of MERMS and the students.
4. There is a defined Professional Learning Plan which assures ongoing professional development to maintain certification.
5. Teachers articulate their professional goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Consider strategies to conduct peer observations such as Instructional Rounds, or shadowing a student to understand the instructional practices.
2. Work with colleagues to define student engagement as opposed to student compliance.
3. Encourage collaboration in all directions, interdisciplinary teamwork, vertical content alignment, integration of the unified arts, special education, etc.
4. Provide opportunities for professional learning when faculty has input into the topics and initiatives implemented.
5. Seek out opportunities for research-based professional development which can include conferences, workshops and job-embedded learning.
6. Individual practitioners are encouraged to reflect on their own instruction and pursue opportunities for diversification. In many middle schools, teachers

regularly work with different team colleagues and teach at different grade levels. MERMS students could benefit from such changes among the professional staff.

7. MERMS is encouraged to evaluate the mentoring program for new teachers and examine supports in place to help them through their first years in the profession.

Possible Resources:

What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know
Dave Brown and Trudy Knowles (Heinneman)

Teach, Reflect, Learn
Pete Hall and Alisa Simeral (ASCD)

Meet Me in the Middle
Rick Wormlei, (Stenhouse)

School-Based Instructional Rounds
Lee Teitel (Harvard Education Press)

Who Moved My Cheese?
Spencer Johnson, (G.P. Putnam)

Yardsticks: Children in Classrooms 4-14
Responsive Classroom, (Northeast Foundation for Children)

Organization: Relationships for Learning

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

"For young adolescents the need for attachment expands to a need for affiliation and belonging to a valued group. Building on early parent-child relationships, students' sense of belonging at school – of being known, liked and respected by peers and adults – strengthens and expands their capacity for learning." (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 122)

"Belonging within a supportive web of relationships motivates young adolescents to make the effort and to take the intellectual risks that produce high-level learning. Young adolescents derive much of their academic motivation from their sense of the supportiveness of others within the school environment. Put simply, students try harder and achieve at a higher level if they feel that their teacher is interested and supportive and that they belong to a group of peers and adults that encourages them to succeed and provides help when it is needed. (*Turning Points 2000*, p.122)

"The hallmark of an effective team is its ability to focus sustained attention on coordinating the curriculum and improving teaching strategies. What an effective team does not do is spend an inordinate amount of time on the behavior problems of a few students or on other issues that distract the team from the main business of the team: improving student learning. Teaming will not improve student achievement unless teams consistently focus on teaching and learning." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.141)

When we were at MERMS, the VT saw a facility that is conducive to teaming. Classrooms surround a common team area that can be used for team meetings and gatherings. Team classrooms are located in close proximity of each other and student lockers are within the team area. The staff is organized into teams with shared students and common planning times. Overwhelmingly, the students reported that their teachers cared about them and their academic success.

A recurring theme the VT heard was the challenge teachers had with finding the time to meet with teammates. There are demands on the teachers and the schedule that prevent team teachers from meeting more than once a week. Opportunities for setting team instructional goals, planning team activities, creating a team academic calendar, designing interdisciplinary units, comparing student work, and discussing all students are lost when the team teachers are not able to meet often and regularly or when the agenda is predetermined by others. Research has shown that smaller teams "substantially reduce the number of students a teacher is expected to know. Moreover, with fewer teachers and students, communication is enhanced." (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 129) There are many teaming options available to MERMS beyond the large one team per grade model that is currently in use.

A concern expressed by several stakeholders is the continued separation of Manchester students and Essex students. The VT was told that the students tend to stick with their elementary school circles and don't mix on their own very much. The VT saw and heard little evidence of team identity and team value. The student work displayed in the 8th grade common team area showed a desire to get to know students beyond academics and celebrated student personality. Activities and

displays like this build relationships and team affiliation and are an integral part of good middle school teaming practices. Having team names, creating traditions, celebrating learning with team peers, are all ways to shed the elementary alliances and encourage new connections.

The VT heard many wonderful things about the team building done in 5th grade at Merrowvista. Since the perception exists that Manchester and Essex students don't integrate in their middle school years, offering the Merrowvista experience in the fall of 6th grade would help students make lasting relationships with their teammates. Rooming situations that blend Essex students with Manchester students would send the message that they are all MERMS students and no longer separate elementary entities.
Lastly, the VT sensed a disconnect between the special education and the general education teachers. It's clear to the VT that each group wants the best for their students. It is important for there to be some discussions between the groups so that a plan can be made to provide the best for all students by all teachers.

STRENGTHS:

1. Students feel that their teachers care about them.
2. The facility is built to support the teaming structure.
3. Teachers are organized into grade level teams.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Investigate and consider other teaming configurations (2-person; 3-person; multi-age; looping) in order to provide close-knit team communities.
2. Cultivate team identity and affiliation by creating team names; logos; chants; songs; etc.
3. Incorporate opportunities for team celebrations & traditions into each trimester.
4. Hold regular team meetings (often called town or community meetings) where students facilitate the meetings.
5. Coordinate when assessments, projects, etc. are given. Maintain and post the academic calendar in the team area.
6. Communicate to parents about team events and celebrations. Provide opportunities for parents to join in the team's sharing of student work. (For example, invite the parents in for coffee at the beginning of the school day and have the students share their work.) Celebrate student learning.
7. Consider implementing student-led conferences.
8. Continue the work/community building started at Merrowvista. Consider moving the Merrowvista experience to the fall of Grade 6 as a way to bring the two elementary groups together as one unit. Make it a point to remind students that they are no longer Manchester or Essex students, but they are now all Hornets.
9. Examine the relationship between the special education and the general education teachers. Cultivate the belief that all students belong to all teachers.
10. Examine the school schedule to create more opportunities for Common Planning Time. While one CPT may be devoted to discussion of students (including special education), other topics such as integration of curriculum, examining student work, taking care of nuts and bolts, etc. should have equal time.

11. Develop team norms, common discipline procedures/interventions, late work policies, etc. to insure effective adult interactions as team members.
12. Consider implementing a team-wide advisory program.

Possible Resources:

Implementing and Improving Teaming: a Handbook for Middle Level Leaders
Jerry Rottier (National Middle School Association)

Revitalizing Teaming to Improve Student Learning
Sandra L. Schurr and John H. Lounsbury (National Middle School Association)

Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds
Chris Stevenson (Allyn and Bacon)

The Advisory Book: Building a Community of Learners, grades 5-9
Crawford, Linda (Origins Developmental Designs)

Govern Democratically

Govern democratically through direct of representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know 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." (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 146)

Frequently educators tend to focus on building leadership when considering this indicator of student success, and yet democratic governance is everyone's responsibility. This area not only focuses on adults in a school, but on leadership opportunities provided to students as well.

When we were at MERMS, the VT witnessed the collaboration of the Steering Committee and the principal as they brought the NELMS Assessment to fruition. Teachers on the committee were eager to share their hopes and expectations for the future of MERMS. The principal encouraged the staff's input and provided opportunities for frank discussion. The VT also saw the principal's desire to get uninhibited input from parents in the community. Support by the Central Office administration for bringing MERMS from good to great was evident in the conversations with the VT.

There is a definite sense that parents, staff, principal and central office stakeholders are ready to implement changes to make MERMS a better place. Defining what "better" looks like will be the next challenge. The principal, staff and parents will need to work collaboratively to determine what a "better" MERMS looks like and how to get there.

Evidence of student leadership and governance was limited. The VT asked students about student leadership opportunities. The answers were unclear. Some students knew there was a Student Council, but thought it was only for 6th grade. Others thought it was for 6-8 grades, but weren't sure who the representatives were or what they did. The VT did not see any opportunities for students to make decisions about their day, their team, their classes or their school. The middle school years are a great time for students to be given opportunities to lead, to fail and to learn from mistakes. Students at this age have strong opinions and middle school staff can show they value those opinions when they empower students to lead.

STRENGTHS:

1. The Central Office Administration and the Building Principal are supportive and desirous of making MERMS a better school.
2. The staff expresses the belief that the principal listens and works to act in their best interest.
3. The parents are generally happy with the change in building leadership and are optimistic about the future of MERMS for their students.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Evaluate MERMS' school mission, vision and guiding principles. Ensure that these reflect the core beliefs of the school community.
2. Build a Student Council that includes representation from many types of students (many schools welcome any student as a participant). Empower the Student Council to plan, coordinate and implement school activities and events such as school dances, community service projects, etc. Work to involve as many students as possible.
3. Provide opportunities for students to be leaders in the classroom, the team and the school. Encourage students to lead their team (community) meetings.
4. Consider implementing a Faculty Advisory Board or a decision making body such as a Building Leadership Team (BLT) that allows for faculty participation in the decision-making process for MERMS.

Healthy School Environment

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

"Healthy lifestyles and academic success are tightly interwoven--improvement in one leads to improvement in the other, both directly and indirectly. Positive inter-group relations are essential to a safe and healthy school. Middle grade schools, in partnership with the community, should support physical and mental health and fitness by providing a safe, caring and healthy environment, health education and access to health services. (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 24)

"A successful school for young adolescents is an inviting, supportive place, a joyful community that promotes in – depth learning and enhances students' physical and emotional well – being. In a healthy school environment, human relations are paramount." (*This We Believe*, 2010. pg. 12)

"A responsive middle school will provide abundant programs and opportunities for students to understand and experience the connection between a healthy lifestyle and academic success." (*This We Believe*, 2010. Pg. 31)

Research indicates that healthy lifestyles and academic success are tightly interwoven; the improvement in one leads to improvement in the other. Positive inter-group relations are essential to a safe and healthy school. Middle grade schools, in partnership with the community, should support physical and mental health and fitness by providing a safe, caring and healthy environment, health education and access to health services.

MERMS is a clean and welcoming school with a supportive environment for students. It is a well-designed building that has been built with a nautical theme. Teachers consistently reported that they are a staff that cares about their children and students report that their teachers care about them and want the best for them.

MERMS is a "green" school with design features that are environmentally friendly and aware. There is a commitment to recycling and composting for their "Green Team" project that includes a garden in the front of the building. The commitment to recycling needs to be embraced by the school once again and can be implemented by students.

A significant factor is a new principal who is committed to implementing a program that meets the needs of the students. Teachers reported they are optimistic with her in the leadership position. This is an opportune time to redirect the efforts of all school members toward consistently supporting a well-defined mission, goals, rules and procedures in the school.

There are two lunch periods that allow students time to eat, talk with friends and enjoy a short recess. When we were at MERMS, the VT saw students who enjoy their meals and time with friends. There is a patio outside the cafeteria but the VT did not see this area in use by middle school students. Some students went onto the turf field to play various games or be with friends.

There is an abundance of research that supports the physical needs of 10–14 year olds. When we were at MERMS, the VT observed students who have a short recess during their lunch block, but many did not take advantage of the time. Students do have Physical Education classes throughout the year, but the classes are large with one teacher. Unless a student participates on a sport team, he or she does not have the recommended daily activity. Increased opportunities for physical activities for all students during the school day are recommended.

When we were at MERMS, the VT found classroom areas had up-to-date access to technology though the wireless network can be intermittent. Science classrooms were designed for the needs of varied instructional practices. There are numerous classroom spaces for a variety of learning opportunities (individual lessons, small group lessons, and entire grade meetings). The library is a well designed area with light, seating, and a thoughtful collection for students of all abilities. There is one librarian and no assistant to support her. Scheduled sixth grade classes and the ability of seniors to visit during any free time throughout the day do limit flexibility in the library. The VT observed the chorus rehearsals in the well-designed music area of the school. Additionally, students can also participate in a variety of other extra-curricular activities although more opportunities designed by students would help create a more positive culture.

There is a of guidance department that supports students throughout the school day. The VT heard during several interviews that there is a serious concern about the level of stress that students feel every day due to the pressures of their workload and expectations. MERMS survey data identified this issue consistently as the biggest issue facing students at MERMS. There are numerous methods to support students more effectively during the school day with an analysis of homework practices, health and wellness practices being taught and consistently applied (i.e. Mindfulness and Yoga). Students consistently reported they had little input in their school life or their environment. The VT observed a Health Program which addresses several of the areas important to the social and emotional development. There is a commitment from the teacher to assist students in dealing with the rigors of adolescence. The concepts of empathy, service and overall awareness should be expanded throughout the school's programming. An Advisory Program would allow students a chance to have conversations with an adult advocate and allow staff to have a better pulse on how students are doing emotionally through their three years of middle school.

The adult culture of a middle school should be one of consistent support for all students. The organization of the school and the schedule separate grade level and Unified Arts teachers from each other. Opportunities to bring all teachers together should be explored. Additionally, teachers at MERMS report there is a divide between the regular education and special education. This divide has created an "us versus them" mentality when it comes to the education of "all" students at MERMS. Increased attention to the adult culture and instruction for all students should be a focus in the upcoming year.

STRENGTHS:

1. There is a collaborative effort with the Parks and Recreation Department and the YMCA to provide multiple after school activities for students.
2. MERMS provides clubs such as Student Council, Green Team, Mountain Biking, STEM, Journalism, Anime, and a homework club, although these could be better publicized.

3. Students feel safe in their school.
4. There are articulated school safety procedures.
5. Students and staff value the "Green School" designation and the Green Team is supported by the students.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Develop an Advisory Program to support students various needs.
2. In the absence of an Advisory Program, consider the use of Early Release days (i.e. Wacky Wednesdays) to do special activities to build relationships between faculty and students; across teams and grade levels while including the unified arts.
3. Develop ways to address the "whole child" within all aspects of the school day.
4. Find ways to empower student decision making and promote student leadership at MERMS.
5. Carefully examine the opportunities for after school activities to see if they are available for all students and address the myriad interests of young adolescents. Consider offering activity nights in combination with dances so that students feel less social pressure.
6. Recommit schoolwide to the recycling and composting program in the cafeteria.
7. Focus attention on improving the culture among adults including the teaching staff, paraprofessionals, and administration (ex. "sunshine committee" to celebrate staff events and accomplishments).

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. Schools and communities should forge connections to provide needed services to students, offer career exploration opportunities, expand learning beyond regular school hours and outside school walls and advocate for school improvements critical to ensuring success for every student." *(Turning Points 2000*, p. 24)

Research clearly indicates that the involvement of parents, family and community members contribute to higher levels of student achievement. Schools cannot educate children alone. The community contributes to the financial support of a school, but also contributes its values and support of the work the school is doing. Parents, families and community members can enrich the curriculum and learning opportunities that enhance the quality of education for every student.

During the visit to MERMS, the VT had the opportunity to interview faculty, staff, students, and parents. It is clear that all constituents care about the school. There is an active parent population who are involved in the PTO, School Council and volunteer program. Faculty and staff have a strong commitment to the students of MERMS. Students reported they feel as if their teachers care about them and their well-being. Many parents want to be active partners in their child's education.

The VT observed an effort on the part of the MERMS faculty and staff to provide parents with on-going communication. Evidence of communication with parents and community includes a detailed Student Handbook, school newsletters from the Principal, phone calls/e-mails home by teachers, progress and trimester report cards and implementation of a Aspen X2 Parent Portal. Nonetheless, Parent surveys identified the lack of consistent communication and the ability to meet with teachers during a scheduled conference. The VT wonders if there is adequate outreach to parents to partner in students' education.

In addition, the school is the centerpiece of two communities and therefore provides parents and community members from both towns to join together around school events. While there were signs for a few volunteer opportunities, there are opportunities in both towns for community service learning. Even work around the school and in its gardens could include signage so that members of the school and community are aware of the work down by the students to support sustainability.

Students were particularly proud of work on behalf of Haiti, an experience that could be developed and expanded to include family, parent and community interaction as well.

Parents report little understanding of how the school connects students to the community. Again, the school is in a great position to use its position in two communities to include the community in instruction and curriculum.

The community could be invited to share from its wealth of careers and professions to help students form a broader sense of career choices. Networking within the community and students seeing themselves as valued members of their community reinforces citizenship and community pride.

STRENGTHS:

1. Parents have access to Aspen X2 Parent Portal to track grades.
2. Parents care about the school, community and students.
3. There is a school council and a PTO.
4. The students have arranged fundraising projects for Haiti as a result of Hurricane Matthew.
5. Teachers use e-mail to communicate with parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Encourage student leadership to develop collaborations with the community to provide service learning opportunities and community outreach activities.
2. Teachers are encouraged to communicate class academic expectations to parents and students in a consistent manner. Building leadership should work with teachers to decide common practice across classrooms and teams.
3. There are several creative ways to include parents in their student's education such as student led conferences, morning coffees with teams and students demonstrating their learning, academic fairs to showcase student learning, etc. Other practices include regular phone calls in addition to email messages. MERMS is encouraged to implement some of these practices.
4. Parents are encouraged to allow their students to become independent learners.
5. Faculty and parents are encouraged to provide opportunities for students to make mistakes and to learn/grow from them.

Possible Resources:

The Kid's Guide to Service Projects: Over 500 Service Ideas for Young People Who Want to Make a Difference
Barbara A. Lewis (Free Spirit Publishing)

Summary

When the communities of Manchester and Essex built a new school for students in grades 6-12, they supported a physical school design to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents by supporting the team concept. Teaming is an essential support for effective learning as it should provide students with a sense of identity, a supportive environment and a spirit of belonging. Teachers on team have the opportunity to coordinate and integrate instruction, balance academics, and work together on behalf of a common group of students.

Many faculty members recognize the need to revisit the middle school's identity and make certain it is independent of the high school, fostering best practices for young adolescents. Looking at the data provided by parents, students, support staff, and faculty, and combining it with the observations of the VT recorded in this report provides MERMS with the opportunity to plot a direction for providing students with the best possible options to learn and grow. One element that shows what a school values is its master schedule, and looking at this could be an area to consider as it relates to teaming, integration of learning and issues of equity.

Members of the VT sincerely thank the school community for welcoming us into your school lives for three days. We enjoyed this opportunity for our own professional learning and each of us leaves with ideas to share with our colleagues. We hope that our observations help you to continue growing and developing as you fulfill your desire to move from good to great!

About the Assessors

Janis Flint-Ferguson has worked in the middle level for over thirty years—as an ELA teacher, middle level consultant and currently as chair of a teacher preparation program for middle and high school teachers at Gordon College. She has served on the NELMS Board and has presented at the NELMS Annual Conference, the New England Social Studies Conference and the National Council of Teachers of English. Her work for NELMS has taken her throughout the New England area doing school assessments and professional development for teachers.

Lyn Ward Healy is passionate about middle level education and has spent more than 35 years in the field. She is the former Associate Executive Director of NELMS and currently is an independent education consultant. She began working at the middle level with "at risk" students, has been a building administrator as well as a district leader. Lyn received the James Garvin Award from NELMS in 2013.

Natalie LaFlamme has been a middle school mathematics educator for 30 years. She has served on the boards of the NH Association of Middle Level Educators and the NH Teachers of Mathematics for many years. In addition to developing middle level mathematics curriculum in two districts, she has been on various committees that promote the advancement of student learning and student well-being. Natalie has been involved in NELMS in a variety of capacities over the years including presenting, consulting and participating in site visits.

Andrea Logan has been a middle school educator in a variety of roles for 13 years. A strong advocate for whole-child teaching, she has a dual certification in regular and special education and has spent time in middle school roles spanning from regular education teacher 6-8 to teaching strategist 6-8 and everything in between. Andrea has presented to middle level educators through MAMLE and NELMS for 4 years on her favorite topics including the relationship between feedback and goal setting as well as increasing time in front of students without extending the school schedule. Andrea is currently authoring a book on feedback in the classroom "Tell it Like it is: Reaching Performance-Based Learners in a Mastery Classroom."

Chris Pollet is the principal at Tyngsborough Middle School and is in his 28th year of middle school education. Chris has been an administrator for the past 20 years after spending six years as a middle school social studies teacher. He has presented at NELMS as well as serving as an instructor at the University of New Hampshire teaching "The Middle School Institute" course. For the past two years, he has served as the president of the New Hampshire Association Middle Level Educators.