PROLOGUE

More than the Sum of Its Parts: Changing a Middle Level School

In 1985 Knox Junior High School became Knox Middle School when grade 9 returned to the high school and grade 6 students entered the newly named middle school. The primary reason for converting from a junior high school to a middle school was to alleviate overcrowding in the elementary school. Like many converted middle schools in the '70s and '80s, Knox adopted several signature programs including 4-teacher teams and an adviser/advisee program, and added exploratory courses like Spanish, general music, and art. They could “check off” most items on a list of middle school characteristics.

In the next 20 years, Knox Middle School underwent a number of changes: 2 new computer labs were added, several classrooms were carved out of former storage spaces, and volleyball joined the sports roster. If someone from Knox’s eighth grade class of 1983 had returned in 1998, they would have seen these changes; they would, however, have seen very few changes in how Knox conducts its business for its students and teachers every single day.

In the early years of Knox Middle School, every program and activity was regarded as separate from each other: advisor/advisee relationships were seen as the way to “handle” young adolescents’ concerns; the exploratory program was a way to “facilitate” young adolescents’ need to explore a number of activities without too early specialization; and the formation of teams of teachers and students was another way to “BE” a middle school. After all, aren’t middle level schools organized into teams?

In 2006, however, a new superintendent arrived who was not happy with the middle school that he referred to as “that junior high school” and a new principal was hired to implement middle level research-based teaching and learning strategies that Knox had never considered before. The new principal listened to students, teachers, and parents. Perhaps the best thing she did that year was to bring them all together to listen to each other.

For the next 2 years, faculty, students, parents, and community members studied the possibilities for their school—before they changed anything. They read and discussed important middle school literature such as *This We Believe*, *Turning Points 2000*, *Reinventing the Middle School, Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in American School*s, and article after article on successful practices. Teams of teachers, students, and parents visited 15 different “successful” middle schools throughout the State, and shared what they learned with the rest of the Middle Level Advisory Committee. Before discussing specific changes in their school—schedule, teams, professional development—or before deciding to keep current programs—advisory, exploratory—the Advisory Committee debated what they wanted for their students and from their school.

Ultimately, the school endorsed the principles and practices that had come to define best middle school practices and are set forth in the National Middle School Association’s *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003), the Carnegie Corporation’s *Turning Points 2000*: *Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (2000), *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (2006), and the work summarized in the National

Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (2000). The difference this time, however, was that the recommendations were applied as a SYSTEM, “an interacting and interdependent group of practices that form a unified whole” (Dickinson, 2001). This change is what Dickinson calls moving from “the incremental stage implementation model” to an understanding of the original middle school concept as a “total ecology of schooling”(Dickinson, 2001). It means recognizing that everything depends on and is influenced by everything else.

This time, Knox Middle School reformed itself by recognizing that changing one aspect of the school changes everything else. The move from 5 person teams to 2 or 3 person teams, for example, was profound. Meaningful and coherent connections across subject lines were more frequent and students and teachers preferred the smaller teams; the old advisory program was no longer necessary when students had opportunities within the curriculum to pose questions about themselves and their world. With fewer teachers and students, teams became learning communities with closer relationships that never quite occurred on larger teams. Their teachers were able to address individual learning needs and provide necessary interventions and support for each student because they knew their students better.

A panacea? Hardly. Yet throwing away the middle school “checklist” to focus on proven middle level practices and strategies for all students was a key to Knox’s success.

CALL TO ACTION

In September 2001, Commissioner of Education J. Duke Albanese established and charged Maine's Commission on Middle Level Education to report on the current state of middle level education and to make recommendations to the Maine Department of Education about needed improvements in educating Maine’s 10 to 15-year-olds. The Commission met and discussed critical issues facing young adolescents, studied the literature including current research and reports regarding high achieving middle schools, and consulted with experts and policy makers.

At the heart of middle level education are these unique people - young adolescents - who experience more dramatic changes from ages 10 to 15 than at any other time of their lives. No longer children and not fully into adolescence, they experience physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and moral changes. For many, the middle years represent the "last best chance" to learn the skills and concepts, and to develop habits of mind to prepare for high school and adulthood. Successful middle grades schools provide a broad education that meets the needs of every young person in its charge, taking seriously both the intellectual and personal development of every student. Above all else, young adolescents need adult advocates—parents and family, teachers, community members, and others—who recognize their positive possibilities, challenge them to their highest abilities, and support them unconditionally.

Research on high achieving middle schools over the past 20 years demonstrates that all students will achieve high standards in schools where there is a clear, shared vision based on what we know about teaching and learning, as well as leadership to support continuous improvement (Felner, et al., 1997). The Commission believes that now, more than ever, middle level educators and policy makers need to focus on reaching this

vision. This Report and *Promising Futures* (2000) present a well-articulated vision of a seamless 6-12 progression of education in Maine.

Bright Futures! makes recommendations for achieving quality middle level practices. The Maine Commission on Middle Level Education supports high expectations for each student using Maine's *Learning Results* as a basis for curriculum, instruction, and assessment. We also believe that students will achieve those standards when they work with teachers who are experts in the content knowledge that all young adolescents need to have and in planning and delivering learning opportunities based on standards that are challenging and relevant to every student.

Through this report, the Commission hopes that middle level educators, parents, and policy makers will gain a clear understanding of what is needed for high quality, equitable, and effective middle level programs. We also hope that all of Maine's middle level students will be in schools that are academically rigorous and responsive to their unique developmental stage of life. Finally, it is our hope that these schools will implement the components of successful middle level schools to ensure that each child learns and achieves at high levels and develops his/her understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in the 21st century.