

Defining the

BY NICHOLAS PERRY

For educators who are living with a 7–12 grade configuration and struggle with educating young adolescents in a “big person” building, I am here to tell you that it can be done and done successfully. The Neshannock Township School District, where I am a principal, is located in New Castle, PA, approximately 50 miles north of Pittsburgh. Neshannock has a student population of approximately 1,300 students in grades K–12, and the junior/senior high school is housed in a single building with 50 highly competent and veteran teachers.

Historically, our students are high achievers. We graduate nearly 100% of our senior class every year, and our graduates are accepted into some of the most competitive colleges and universities in the country. The ratio of National Merit Finalists and Semi-Finalists in our senior classes is astonishing. Our AP scores are consistently high every year.

Yet with all of our successes, some people felt there were changes that needed to be made. They were right. Somewhere along the line we forgot about our middle level students. All of the programming available in our school was senior-high related. No one seemed to have the time or the energy to devote to the middle level students. A philosophical change needed to take place in our district. The entire community needed to believe in the importance of creating unique programming for the adolescent population.

A School Within a School

Adolescence is a time of tremendous change and great social, emotional, physical, and intellectual disparity. No two children reach puberty at the same time or develop at the same rate once they get there. Their development is not sup-

ported by the structural design of a building, but by nurturing from a community of people willing and eager to work with them. Middle level education is not about what you call it or “middle school versus junior high school” or grade level configuration. Middle level education is about middle level kids and adolescent development. The goal we promoted at Neshannock was to create an age and developmentally appropriate community for the adolescent population that was separate from the general school population.

The commitment to middle level programming was more philosophical than financial. The board of education and the superintendent made a commitment to change the administrative makeup in the district, and when the assistant principal took a position in another school district, I

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Middle Ground

PREVIEW

In this 7–12 school, a middle level concept and philosophy is not dependent on a building or a place.

A developmentally appropriate curriculum and nurturing and informed staff members ensure that adolescent students receive a middle level education.

A change in philosophy and copincipals with a common vision led to this success.

became the junior high school principal. The high school principal became responsible for grades 10–12, and I took responsibility for grades 7–9. Both of us made a commitment to becoming experts in our areas.

It is important that copincipals share the philosophy of creating a school within a school. The changes we made would have been much more difficult if the high school principal and I had not embraced the copincipal role and believed in the importance of the changes we were trying to make. The high school principal has been extremely supportive of our middle level programming. It has given him more time to focus on the high school program than he had when he was responsible for the entire student body.

We couldn't expect our students and staff members to

accept this change without first teaching them about the benefits of what we were doing. To get a feel for something other than a traditional grade 7–12 junior/senior high school, staff and community members made visits to middle level schools in the area. I would be lying if I said that no one was apprehensive; people were afraid that investigation of middle level education would result in building a middle school and moving the staff. But once we visited schools and developed a more informed perspective, apprehension turned to trust. We found that we were already doing many middle level-appropriate things in our classrooms; we just were not doing them uniformly in all classrooms in an organized fashion. Such affirmation helped us create change and develop a true middle level program.

The Curriculum

We made a conscientious effort to provide an academically rigorous, developmentally appropriate curriculum. Every student learns differently and has different interests. Teachers at Neshannock are encouraged to differentiate instruction to meet the learning styles of all students. Every seventh-grade student at Neshannock participates in a learning styles inventory to help determine how he or she learns best. This information is shared with staff members and students.

Teachers are encouraged to use a variety of methods to present material in the classroom. Lectures, overheads,



Even in a junior/senior high school, the younger students at Neshannock have the support and benefits of a middle level education.

Power Point presentations, note taking, cooperative learning groups, student-created projects, student-led discussion, and Internet and intranet exploration are among the various learning activities that are used in our classrooms. This was not easy in the beginning. Although I would argue that all teachers should differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learners, the need is even greater in the junior high school. Traditionally, the delivery in a senior high school class tends to be lecture-driven. Because of the size of our district, many junior high school teachers must also teach a section of a high school class and vice versa, and many teachers were comfortable with lecture-driven classes. This mind-set has begun to shift. Our teachers have even begun to classify themselves as junior high school teachers, which shows me that we have a staff that has embraced the idea of working with adolescent kids.

Exploration and Enrichment

Because adolescence is a period of growth and self-exploration, Neshannock offers exploratory programming to address the various academic interests of the students beyond the core academic courses. Foreign language and computer-aided drafting are the most recently added exploratory offerings. Neshannock also offers exploratory offerings in music, art, family and consumer sciences, manufacturing, and technology. Our goal is to expose students to different experiences in hope of triggering interests that they might pursue later in life and making them well-rounded individuals.

Academic support and enrichment are available to all students at Neshannock. Teachers are encouraged to provide remediation, reinforcement, and enrichment to all students throughout the course of any single lesson. It is not unusual to see several different students working on different tasks in

the same classroom to meet their level of proficiency on a particular task or concept.

Neshannock provides additional academic support for students who need extra attention outside of the traditional classroom setting. Depending on their level of need, students may take advantage of after-school tutoring, morning tutoring, or the learning resource center. Teachers are available after school on a daily basis for students who need more individualized attention. Our academic support programs provide a way to involve our senior high school students in the development of our junior high school programming. Senior high school National Honor Society members are also assigned to junior high school students before the start of school, and our morning tutors review homework, help students organize their work, and keep parents informed about student preparedness with weekly feedback sheets. The learning resource center is staffed throughout the day with teachers, senior high school students, and college students who provide individualized attention in the learning resource center in place of a traditional study hall. Our academic support is geared toward developing the organization skills and self-discipline that so many middle level students lack. We try to include senior high school students in some of our junior high school programming so that they appreciate the adolescent population and feel empowered in their school. The school within a school concept truly is a collaboration of all parties involved.

Neshannock Junior/Senior High School

New Castle, PA

Grades: 7–12

Enrollment: 301

Community: Suburban

Demographic: 98% White; 7% qualify for free and reduced-price lunch

Administrative team: 1 principal for grades 7–9, 1 principal for grades 10–12

Faculty: 44 teachers

Staff: 5 noncertified personnel

Transitions

In an attempt to provide programming that meets the needs of the whole individual, Neshannock is focusing on the emotional development of our student body in addition to their intellectual development. Neshannock has developed a transition program to help better prepare students for the switch from the elementary setting and practices to those of the junior high school. Our transition program acclimates students and parents to the idea of entering a middle level school. Students and parents are naturally apprehensive about the changes that accompany the successful completion of the elementary experience. A developmentally responsive middle level school recognizes and addresses the needs of these students and their parents.

We recently created a peer-mediation program in which students under the supervision of the junior high school counselor work to improve communication skills and find alternative ways to settle disputes. Students can use the program to deal with adolescent issues that adults don't always see or understand. Peer mediation has been a positive addition to the current guidance course that all seventh- and eighth-grade students take. The guidance course focuses on character building topics, such as bullying, tolerance, and citizenship and features representatives from local community agencies as supplemental speakers. Assembly programs are presented throughout the school year to further reinforce the concept of citizenship and positive behavior among the adolescent school culture and community.

Transition Ideas That Work

A successful transition program gradually acclimates students and parents to the idea of entering a middle level school. Students and parents are naturally apprehensive about the transition to the middle level. A developmentally responsive middle level school recognizes and addresses this anxiety. Here are a few ideas that you may find useful in your school:

Walk-through. As the middle level principal, I make time to visit the sixth-grade students in their elementary classrooms. The sixth-grade teachers say hello as I pop into their rooms. The teachers make a point to tell the students that I will be their principal next year. This simple gesture takes only a few moments and helps to begin the process of familiarity.

Assembly program. Twice a year, we invite the sixth graders to the junior high to attend assembly programs with the seventh and eighth graders. Attending the programs allows the sixth-grade students to become acclimated to the building and to the idea of being in a building with older students.

Transition retreat. In May, the sixth-grade students go on a retreat with the seventh-grade teachers, guidance counselor, and administrators. The students complete teambuilding tasks with their future teachers.

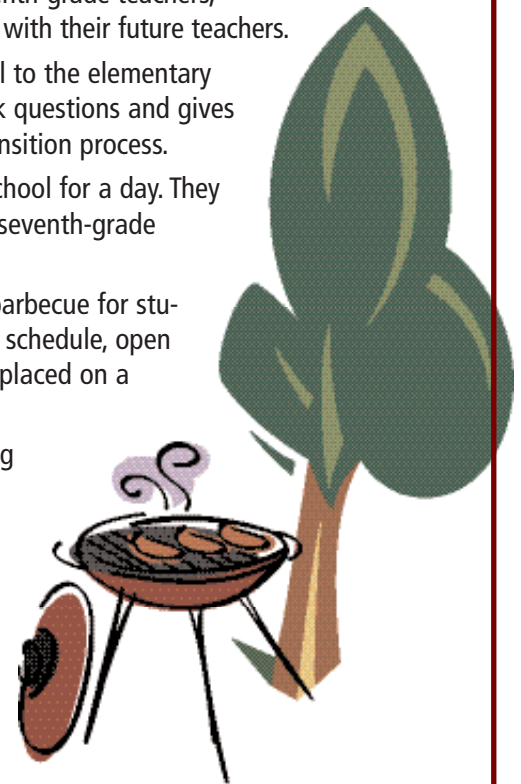
Town meeting. Members of the seventh- and eighth-grade student council travel to the elementary school for a question-and-answer session. This allows the younger students to ask questions and gives the seventh and eighth graders an opportunity to take some ownership in the transition process.

Shadow day. In April and May, the sixth-grade students attend the junior high school for a day. They ride the junior high bus directly to school and receive a schedule to follow and a seventh-grade mentor for the day.

Orientation barbecue. We combine the traditional orientation program with a barbecue for students and parents. Each student is given a list of tasks to complete (e.g., follow a schedule, open a locker, or find the library) and receives a sticker for each completed task that is placed on a bingo-type card. The completed card is used to gain admission to the barbecue.

Friendly helpers. Student helpers are strategically placed throughout the building during the first week of school. New seventh graders can approach these students to get directions, ask for help reading their schedule, and find answers to any questions they may have about school.

Questionnaire. In the spring of seventh grade, seventh graders are given a questionnaire to help us evaluate the effectiveness of our transition program. We distribute a similar questionnaire to the parents of the seventh graders as well. We use the information to determine whether we need to make changes in the program.





We have several age-appropriate cocurricular clubs and activities that further enhance the educational experience and nurture the social needs of our adolescent population; these include Math Counts, Challenge 24, chess club, student advisory committee, Junior Art Honor Society, National Junior Honor Society, newsletter, football, boys and girls basketball, boys and girls track, Junior Academy of Science, cheerleading, band, and chorus.

We also hold several social activities throughout the school year. Our seventh- and eighth-grade lock-in is a great example of a social activity held in our junior high school. The lock-in is another positive way we try to reinforce middle level as a special place in our school community. Seventh- and eighth-grade students are locked in the school for an overnighter in late April or early May. The theme of the evening centers on issues pertinent to the lives of adolescents. The evening is filled with speakers, and the activities include movies, a magician, a hypnotist, balloon art, in-line skating, manicures, video games, prizes, pizza, and snacks. High school students help with the

event. The evening concludes with breakfast in the high school cafeteria.

A Program Not a Place

In conclusion, the Neshannock Township School District is taking a proactive approach to educating its staff members, students, and community about best practices for the education of adolescents. Through developmentally appropriate teaching methods and age-appropriate programming, we nurture the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual needs of our students. Since the implementation of our middle level programming, our students have continued to achieve academically, our junior high retention numbers have disappeared, and discipline referrals to my office are few and far between.

A 7–12 grade configuration does not have to limit the ability to provide appropriate middle level programming. Middle level education is not a building or a place; it is a program created to be developmentally responsive to the needs of adolescents. **PL**

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