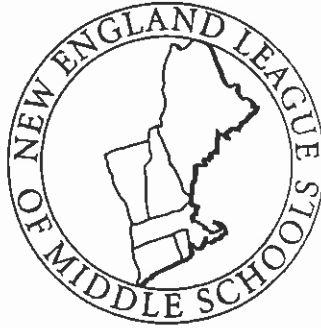


"It's *all* about learning!"

**Assessment Report
of the
Ellis School
Fremont, NH**

**Visitation Dates
May 10-12, 2004**

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"It's *all* about learning!"

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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 Commission's Council on Adolescent Development which was first published in 1989. This document outlines best practices for young adolescent learning and is written by Anthony W. Jackson and Gayle A. Davis and published by Teachers College Press, NY.

The administration of SAU 14 contacted NELMS to learn more about this process during the 2003-2004 school year. During this time, a steering committee was organized to direct the process and involved the school's constituencies - parents and community, school and SAU personnel. The faculty met with Lyn Healy on March 17, 2004 to be introduced to the assessment protocol, review the research in *Turning Points 2000* and complete the faculty survey as the first step in the self-study process. The school completed its self-study by analyzing the responses to three survey documents: parents, faculty and students. The results of this self-study comprise an important set of data for the school to use.

The second half of this assessment is a three-day on-site visit by a team of middle level educators who represent different states in New England and various backgrounds. Members of the Ellis School team included two college professors who are responsible for the middle level preparation programs at their universities, a principal of a K-8 school, and the coordinator of the assessment programs at NELMS. During the visit this team analyzes themes raised in the self-study and makes their own observations before creating a report for the school to use in conjunction with the self-study. These observations reflect three days in the life of a school, which may or may not accurately represent the learning that takes place on the other 178 days of the school year. However, generally themes that are evident in the self-study tend to be visible during a school visit, and this is true of Ellis School.

NELMS and this Visiting Team hope that the information contained in this report, in addition to the data in the self-study, will provide direction for growth to become an even more effective learning community for young adolescents of Fremont, New Hampshire.

Overview of the On-Site Visit

Members of the Visiting Team were welcomed to Ellis School (ES) on the morning of May 10th. They were warmly greeted by the building principal, JoAnn Boddy and SAU 14 personnel, Superintendent Barbara Munsey and Gary Tirone. Joanne led the tour sharing insights into not only the current school, but also future plans for expansion.

Ellis School located in Fremont, NH is a community school for grades one through eight and includes two half-day sessions of preschool. It is a member of SAU 14 with the communities of Epping and Chester. There are 203 students enrolled in grades five through eight, the grades that are the focus of this assessment. ES is a school in transition. There will be an extensive building expansion program, which was recently approved by the voters. In addition, the community reached an agreement with a neighboring town to solidify high school attendance, which has been a challenge in recent years. Looking at education in the long term, the hope is to build a new middle school, perhaps coordinating with Kingston in this endeavor. In the short term, the middle school will remain in its current location.

In addition to physical changes, the building administration will be changing at the end of the school year. The district is in the process of interviewing for a new principal and curriculum leader. Therefore the recommendations in this assessment will be used as the middle grades continue to work to improve their efforts on behalf of young adolescents.

Following the building tour, the Visiting Team had the opportunity to meet with members of the Steering Committee who not only worked on the self-study, but also coordinated our visit. The school had prepared a comprehensive guide for each team member including information regarding grade level schedules, student handbook, parent communications, sample progress reports and report cards as well as examples of individual lessons. As we met and discussed our goals and strategies for the visit, the Visiting Team was impressed by the thoughtful preparations made for us.

During our three-day visit we had the opportunity to meet with grade level teams, attend classes, and hold individual interviews with building employees. Several parents attended a special meeting on Tuesday to share their insights into the school's culture. The Visiting Team enjoyed meeting with student groups as well as talking with them informally (or, in Mr. Middleton's case, playing football during recess). We even experienced an early release day with the high level of student energy. On Wednesday afternoon we had the opportunity to meet briefly with the faculty who had been so open with us and generous in welcoming us into their classrooms. As we said good bye, we felt that we were leaving wonderful educators and newfound friends behind.

Curriculum

Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards, relevant to the concerns of adolescents, and based on how students learn best.

"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*, pg. 32-33)

During our visit, members of the Visiting Team had the opportunity to hear faculty, students, and parents comment about the curriculum. The reception of the team by each group was open and receptive and they appeared to be willing to share information and their thoughts.

Based on those comments there was significant concern expressed about the loss of the writing program, the need for the foreign language program to include more than one language or a different focus such as culture, and the hope that the Unified Arts program could be expanded to include a more comprehensive wellness program, music, art, and foreign languages.

The faculty expressed concern that the schedule and lack of common planning and preparation time impacted their ability to be more creative with curriculum integration, student grouping practices and flexible scheduling within the team.

While these concerns were shared with us, students, staff, and parents appeared to be quite proud of ES. They are looking forward to having the opportunity of working together to solve issues of mutual concern.

Specific Strengths

1. There was evidence of some explicit integration of technology in the sixth grade through extra credit work and an updated web page; in the writing classes where students used computers to compose their work; and in the seventh and eighth grade social studies class. The addition of a laptop cart with availability for the teams should provide more opportunities for the integration of technology into the curriculum in relevant and meaningful ways.
2. There is a full time counselor who works with the students both in and out of the classrooms. Her role is to address the issues, problems, and concerns of students, through counseling and teaching and not through discipline.

3. The writing program was seen as a strong addition to the ELA curriculum by the Visiting Team and was repeatedly commented upon in a positive light by teachers, students, and parents. The consensus was that this program is highly valued and will truly be missed if completely eliminated.
4. There will be a new and updated math program along with new texts in Pre-Algebra and Algebra.
5. The new health program that will focus on health and wellness issues, will be a welcomed addition to the curriculum and should become an important of the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development and well being of the students.
6. All students receive art, music, and physical education instruction on a regular basis.
7. The current curriculum being taught throughout the teams was evident through student work that was posted.
8. The students were highly enthusiastic about the development of their science projects. Exhibits such as this are important authentic ways for students to share their understanding of specific content and a method, which appeals to their developmental stage.
9. There appeared to be many instructional aides in the classroom to support the curriculum of the students who were on IEPs.

Recommendations

1. ES should investigate the adoption of an organizational arrangement as a middle school that would provide support for an integrated curriculum that would include consistent common planning and team time during the workday.
2. Substantive time should be allotted for the middle school staff to develop and implement a deep, meaningful, and relevant curriculum that can be integrated throughout the content areas. In order for this to be truly effective, it will be critical for the middle school to have conversations with the elementary and high schools about their curriculum, so that the new middle school curriculum will be aligned with and articulated to those groups. The Beane model is a highly effective method for developing this type of curriculum. Curriculum mapping that is truly reflective of the real curriculum can also be beneficial in the communication and developmental stages.
3. Student work, such as with the science projects, needs to be relevant and related to the real world in order to best stimulate and challenge students' thinking at the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy. The current research in brain-based learning states that the brain does not learn when it is not challenged or is challenged too much.
4. It is strongly encouraged that the writing program be continued. It should be part of the Unified Arts program so that every student can have access to this high quality curriculum.

5. While it is commendable that a reading program is available to students who are not at grade level, the "levelized" reading program affects other aspects of the curriculum, especially math, writing, and Spanish. It is strongly encouraged that classes be mixed heterogeneously so that all students can benefit from each other. ES should investigate an on-going professional development program in differentiation.
6. Reading and writing across the curriculum needs to be implemented on a consistent basis. Seek opportunities for professional development in this area.
7. There are limited opportunities for and offerings in the Unified Arts program. The students and parents expressed a strong desire to expand this program. The Visiting Team recommends that Spanish should be open to any student who would like to take it and if possible, foreign language study should begin in the lower elementary grades. Another option is to include the study of language and/or culture in the Unified Arts rotation.
8. Service learning is an authentic method of connecting students in relevant ways to the real world. Seek opportunities to build service learning into the curriculum. Some places that often are eager to have students work with them are community centers, retirement homes, and health related facilities.
9. Parents requested that when there are student projects displayed that they be done in the evening so that those who work can attend and support their child and the school.
10. Assessment measures should be consistent on the teams. The development and use of rubrics could support that effort. Student led conferences could become a strong component of assessment and has students accepting responsibility for their own learning.

Varied Instruction

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

A middle school instructional program needs to be designed to meet the needs of a highly diverse and unique student. To be successful in this endeavor, administration and staff must be knowledgeable about and committed to the adolescent child. Training programs on the characteristics of the adolescent age group must be ongoing to ensure that all administrators and staff members develop the skills essential for achieving maximum success with students. "The rhythms of teaching and learning are driven by what students should know and be able to do, as defined by the curriculum; what evidence will demonstrate their knowledge and skills, as outlined by assessment methods; and how they will be prepared to meet those standards through instruction." (*Turning Points, 2000, p.63*) "Classes should include students of diverse needs, achievement levels, interests, and learning styles, and instruction should be differentiated to take advantage of the diversity, not ignore it." (*Turning Points, 2000, p.23*)

"To ensure the success of every student, instructional practice must address learners with diverse levels of readiness, rates of learning, 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' (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 2), adding a new dimension to the idea of a learning community." (*Turning Points, 2000, p. 65*)

During the three days of this assessment, the Visiting Team had the opportunity to visit every classroom either as scheduled by the school or on a "drop in" basis. One area that stood out to the Visiting Team was the level of comfort that students appeared to have in their classrooms. In the majority of the classes, teacher direction was the predominant teaching style although there was some evidence of inquiry based instruction as well as peer collaboration. In general, however, there was not significant evidence that an understanding of young adolescent development dictates instruction. For example, cooperative grouping is highly effective with this age group because of their intellectual curiosity as well as their social need to interact with their peers. Students are also driven by the need to make connections in their learning and it was not evident that teachers help students discover these connections by making them obvious in their instruction.

Teachers do make a significant effort to display student work in the hallways and in the classrooms. This "extra effort" is a positive acknowledgement of the value of the work students undertake. There was some evidence of an understanding of multiple intelligences and different learning styles in some of the classrooms although differentiation of instruction was not observed.

Strengths

1. Each student has a student planner and appeared comfortable using it. Teachers intentionally use it to help students keep track of their schedules and assignments.
2. The small class sizes in 5th, 7th, and 8th grades and in music classes can be conducive to student learning.
3. The use of cooperative and small group learning was seen in some classrooms.
4. New programs in pre-algebra, algebra and health are going to be initiated in the '04-'05 school year.
5. Teachers appeared knowledgeable and at ease in their content areas.
6. There was evidence of meaningful student projects in 5th grade science, 6th grade social studies, the 8th grade advanced writing class and the capstone project in computers.
7. Evidence of the use of some of the multiple intelligences was seen in 6th grade language arts and social studies and in 8th grade social studies.
8. The use of computers as a way for students to complete work was evident in some classes.
9. There was at least one paraprofessional in the classrooms most of the time. The team was especially impressed by the "kid friendly" attitude of and respect for the students by the paraprofessionals.
10. Universally, the students talked about wanting to volunteer time to work with the custodian, Scott Brown. Students clamor to work with him because he appears to like and value them.

Recommendations

1. There was a prevalence of teacher lecture with little connection to the rest of the students' curriculum. A greater variety of instructional methods is needed. Within the structure of a regular class period, use a wide variety of strategies to meet the needs of every student. ES should seek quality professional development in the areas of the characteristics of a young adolescent and implications for instruction, differentiated instruction, developing appropriate and multiple assessments, flexible grouping, varied instructional practices, and developing interdisciplinary units.
2. The school's schedule has each class on a predetermined time structure of 47 minutes. Flexible scheduling within the team would allow the teachers to determine when and how to best deliver the instructional program and to appropriately plan integrated units of study. This would also allow for the development of more depth in a concept. For students, it would provide opportunities for them to do more challenging and relevant work that would allow them to develop their strengths and areas of growth. Current brain based research states that the brain is a pattern-seeking device that looks for relationships to its prior knowledge. Flexible scheduling including longer periods devoted to a topic is research supported to help student learning.

3. When the students were asked what were things they would change about the school, many replied that there would be fewer worksheets and more participatory activities and lessons. Assessments frequently are done through worksheets, many written at the knowledge/comprehension of Bloom's taxonomy. The brain must be stimulated and challenged in order for long term learning to take place. Teaching with the Brain in Mind, by Eric Jensen is one of several valuable resources in this area.
4. Incorporating reading and writing across the curriculum is a critical component in developing content area literacies. Seek professional development to assist staff in this area.
5. The structure of the "levelized" reading program and in math has set precedence for tracking of the students in language arts, writing, and Spanish. Students need to be in mixed ability classrooms where the needs of every child can be met. Professional development in differentiation should provide a great deal of support in this area. Differentiated Instructional Strategies by Chapman and Gregory is an outstanding resource.
6. In order for teachers to plan substantive integrated units of study, they must have common planning and preparation time as part of their daily schedule. Administrative support is critical. This will allow the teachers to touch base with each other, organize lessons, discuss instructional practices and strategize in order to support student learning.
7. The availability of the paraprofessionals is to be commended. However, a more efficient and effective use of paraprofessionals in the classroom should be explored. Paraprofessionals are often expected to modify a lesson without direction or guidance from the certified classroom teacher, are often not given the student's work until entering the classroom, and/or design their own programs for student, again with little or no guidance from the regular classroom teacher. It is strongly recommended that effective models of delivering a quality Special Education Program be explored, then designed, implemented, and evaluated. Some models include team teaching and co-teaching. For more effective use of the resources, the case manager and paraprofessionals should work together to develop lessons that might include team teaching and differentiation.
8. Team size and class size should be more consistent. The current sixth grade had 30 students per class.
9. Although some of the classrooms had computers, they were used for individual students to complete work rather than to support instruction. Seek on-going professional development in how to effectively utilize technology as an instructional tool to enhance the delivery of instruction.

Middle Level Teachers

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

"Effective professional development in middle grades schools is results-driven, standards-based, and embedded in teachers' daily work (Sparks, 1977). It grows out of understanding the principles of adult learning and organizational development, and it also involves follow-up assistance in implementing new instructional strategies (Bransford et al., 1999, pp. 178-193)." From *Turning Points 2000*, p. 110.

There are two important aspects of creating expert teachers for middle grades schools. First, new professionals need to be mentored and introduced to working with early adolescents. Next, all staff requires on-going professional development that is sustained and related to their daily work.

Ellis School has a staff of teachers and paraprofessionals who have experience and commitment to working with middle level students. They are committed to building a successful school despite the challenges and setbacks. Two main challenges regarding professional development presently face the staff. With the transition in leadership in the school, many staff members feel uncertain about the security of their position and in what teams they will be working next year. In addition, teachers and paraprofessionals seem to be disconnected in the mission and method of their work. Several steps can be taken to create expert teachers for early adolescents at ES. Staff assignments that last over longer periods of time allow for the development of strong collegial relationships. Better communication among teachers about daily classroom teaching will help all students be more successful. Finally, professional development related to the instructional practices that are hallmarks of middle level teaching is crucial for staff to continuing their growth.

Specific Strengths

1. An important piece of the discussion regarding middle level teachers is that they hold subject area specific certification. Many of the upper grade level teachers in this school are certified in their content area. Continuing preparation in content area is an important direction for professional development.
2. New teachers are assigned a mentor for their first year. This is a positive first step. The teachers who seem to benefit the most from this program are those who are assigned mentors in a similar academic discipline.
3. Strong leadership exists in special education. Grade level special education case managers receive praise for their work and support of paraprofessionals.
4. The paraprofessional staff brings considerable experience and enthusiasm to their work.

Recommendations

1. Implement sustained, job-embedded professional development related to needs of early adolescents such as instruction in and support for differentiated instruction, alternative assessment, interdisciplinary teaming, and building on advisory program. Sustained professional development that would help teachers feel more capable and confident in their work may address difficulties with morale experienced by some upper grade teachers.
2. Management of paraprofessional staff seems important to helping all students succeed. Clearer assignment, preparation, support, and evaluation of paraprofessional staff are crucial in this process.
3. Beginning steps to train staff on technology use have occurred. As integration of technology into instruction and as a means of communication among staff, students and parents grow, improving technology skills will become increasingly important.
4. Many staff members expressed concern about job security and assignment from year to year. This seems to affect staff morale. Clear procedures for retaining and assigning staff would strengthen teachers' commitment and sense of school belonging.
5. There seems to be a lack of coordination of teaching and paraprofessional roles in classrooms. Paraprofessionals are often viewed as peripheral to the classroom and are not included in instructional planning and decision making. Their ability to work on behalf of special education students and all students in the classroom is diminished when they are not included as partners in classrooms. Their unequal status is communicated to students, which may contribute to a level of lack of respect some students hold for paraprofessionals. Strong steps need to be taken to include all teaching staff as full members of the classroom with valuable roles in helping all students succeed.

Teaming

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

"To ensure strong teams, schools must pay attention to the nature and quality of interactions among teacher and student team members, ensuring that teams continually concentrate their efforts on achieving high standards for both teaching and learning. Schools should also attend to critical elements affecting team success such as team size, composition, time for planning and continuity." *Turning Points 2000*, pg. 24

The work of teams can effectively be divided into four parts:

1. Building a sense of community and identity for the adults and young adolescents on the team;
2. Designing the team protocols and organizational structures that support team community and instruction;
3. Developing and implementing effective instructional practices and curriculum for young adolescents; and
4. Communicating with the wider school community and with parents about the work of the team regarding student learning.

In creating an identity for students, teachers ensure that each student is known by at least one adult. Teams develop identity through names and logos, programs and traditions unique to that team (t-shirts, ice cream socials, student recognition events). Through a spirit of fun and a sense of shared purpose, students and teachers work together in an environment, which encourages achievement. In addition to caring for the students on a team, the team structure creates a positive working environment for teachers. Shared responsibility for a common group of students creates a professional and often personal bond for the adults. Chocolate chip cookies and popcorn can move many challenging discussions along!

At ES teams are organized by grade level, with one team per grade level. Each grade team has a varied number of students. Except in sixth grade where class sizes were observed to be greater than twenty students, the number of students in each class was less than twenty. The schedule for students in grades five through eight is organized on a seven period day, with a ten-minute homeroom at the beginning of the day, and a five-minute homeroom at the conclusion of day. There is a thirty-minute lunch/recess break after period four. Classes are approximately forty-seven minutes long. While the fifth and sixth grade teachers teach only fifth and sixth grade, there is shared staff in grades seven and eight. This makes it a challenge for these teams to meet regularly. Because each team is unique to the grade level, and since students are used to being identified by grade since they entered the school in grade one, there is no evidence of typical middle school team identity such as the "Navigators" and the "Explorers" or the "Red, Green or Purple teams."

Effective teams design structures, which facilitate their work. Using notebooks with planned agendas, recording minutes and sharing those with the administration, planning strategies for decision making, establishing and meeting goals and objectives provide a framework for teamwork. These teams also have established procedures for interactions with their students. Consistent policies around absences, missing homework and tardiness to class help both the adults and the students on a team.

Effective middle grades teams also implement instructional practices, which facilitate student achievement. Strategies such as grouping and regrouping students for instruction, using time in a flexible manner, mapping curriculum to make connections for learning, and sharing student work as a basis for decision making regarding instruction is important work for teams to accomplish during their common planning times.

ES teachers have two common planning periods per week, one occurs during the school day and one after school. Effective middle school teams use common planning time to design and implement interdisciplinary units of instruction as well as accomplish typical team responsibilities such as sharing information about students, coordinating assignments and tests, and planning team activities such as recognition programs and field trips. These teams are guided by a building master schedule, which is driven by faculty resources, particularly in the areas of unified arts such as art and physical education. Spanish instruction also occurs beginning in seventh grade.

Effective teams are also responsible for communications with the wider community. Many such teams design brochures, which are distributed to parents, which include team policies and procedures, celebrations and other important information. Teams continue to communicate with parents through newsletters, web sites and school vehicles such as agenda books. In addition to external communications, teams need to have effective means of sharing information with other teams including the unified arts and with one another. Protocols must be in place for a team member to ask for a five-minute class extension, or for teams to notify other teachers of a planned field trip.

Teams at ES communicate with parents through a variety of ways. For example, the sixth grade team uses e-mail, voice-mail, homework posting to the web site, letters sent home to parents when students miss assignments, and articles provided to the school newspaper about every two months.

Strengths

1. The faculty apparently understands the value of the teaming structure for the middle level students.
2. The current schedule at least provides for one planning period per week during the school day, and administration has directed teachers to schedule one after school session. However, because of the schedules of some of the teachers who work on the team part time or are shared staff, not all teachers can attend all team meetings.
3. Teams have individualized the methods they use to communicate with parents. All members appear to recognize the importance of parent communications and have developed methods to achieve this goal.

Recommendations

1. In an effort to distinguish the middle grades from the elementary and to provide middle level students with a unique identity, ES teams are encouraged to develop team identities including names, logos and traditions, which are uniquely theirs. Young adolescents seek opportunities to connect with each other and teams can provide this vehicle. Teams are encouraged to involve students in developing some of these traditions. Teams should also establish consistent guidelines across the middle school program and for each grade level team.
2. Teams need to consider the nuts and bolts organizational strategies of teaming. There was little evidence of team agendas, agreement about team decision-making strategies, and defining team celebrations. While most members of the faculty seem to genuinely like and respect one another, a solid sense of team identity and purpose among the adults of the team seems to be missing.
3. Team time needs to be increased and teachers need to make appropriate use of their common planning time to balance discussion of students and curriculum, and to make teams more "proactive" rather than "reactive". With additional team planning time, teams can accomplish many things that are typical of effective middle schools such as:
 - map curriculum to find opportunities to connect learning for their students;
 - design and implement interdisciplinary, integrated and thematic instruction;
 - employ strategies to flex the schedule for extended classes such as for science investigations and to change grouping patterns of students;
 - plan instruction in content area subjects that support language arts instruction;
 - expand collaboration between regular education teachers and special education teachers and paraprofessionals for modified instruction for special needs students;
 - examine student assessment data to help raise expectations and challenge students: and
 - provide time to articulate curriculum with other grade levels.
4. Although the school provides professional development to its staff, these experiences need to be targeted to the needs of the middle school teachers. Middle school professional staff should participate in identifying their needs and move away from the "top down" process of planning professional growth. Professional development planning can also take place during faculty meetings, which are currently used for transfer of information only from administration to staff. In addition, faculty meetings provide an excellent opportunity for staff to share best practices among teams.
5. There is no Unified Arts team at this time. Establishing a team for this group (including a common planning time) would provide opportunities to develop the middle school identity through making curriculum connections with grade level teams as well as planning thematic units of its own. This team would need an identified leader, its own policies and procedures, etc. Teachers of music, art, physical education, computers, Spanish and library might be members of this team.

6. Administrators are encouraged to connect regularly with teams and to develop a level of team accountability. To facilitate communication between teams and between teams and administration, team leaders should regularly meet as a group, which could include administration and potentially form the core of a Middle School Faculty Leadership Council.
7. There is currently no formal advisory program in place. While individual teachers share responsibility for individual students, and the team shares responsibility for the group of students, an advisory program could address issues not only academic but also social in nature.
8. In an "ideal world" middle grades teams are responsible for designing their own schedules. In the case of ES faculty, the reality is that the middle level program fits within the framework of the schoolwide schedule. That being said, teams are encouraged to use flexible schedules during those times that students are "off-team." Longer or varied periods of instruction are often more valuable to young adolescents who often do not handle multiple transitions well. Determining team schedules is an appropriate use of common planning time.

Govern Democratically

"Govern democratically, through direct representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know the students best."

"Americans consider participation in the democratic process a fundamental right, founded in our belief in the equality of all...We believe democracy is as vital to sustaining our way of life as the beating of the heart is to sustaining life itself. Most of us would also argue that the democratic process is an effective and equitable way of making decisions. That is, through an inclusive process of airing different perspectives, considering alternative options and reaching consensus, better decisions are made than if one person or only a few people were involved in the decision-making process" (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 145).

Ellis School is the only school in Fremont and is a part of SAU 14. The school is led by a principal and assistant principal as the administrative team along with the Special Education director who handles Fremont students from ages 3 to 21. The district has a five-person school board specific to Fremont and has representatives to the SAU board, which is responsible for hiring the superintendent and other district personnel.

At the time of this report the principal had submitted her resignation and the assistant principal had been notified that the administrative structure is being revamped to include a curriculum director in its place. The climate created by this expected change in leadership is challenging as the year comes to an end, therefore this section of the report reflects hopes the faculty have expressed for their new leadership team.

Governance is more than the interactions between administrators and faculty; it also includes ways that students are involved in the decision-making process both in the school and in their classes. It also includes ways that the central office and school board influence the school and the decision making process.

The school has an active student council, which is advised by Mrs. Segal the guidance counselor and Mrs. Boss, a fifth grade teacher. The group sponsors activities for the entire school such as coordinating Red Ribbon Week and teacher appreciation activities. Students are responsible for raising and lowering the flag, leading morning announcements, and filling the juice machine as well as planning and running school dances, which are held for seventh and eighth graders. While not evident at ES, there are some student councils that provide an after school social activity for their students in grades five and six so that they are included within the framework of the middle grades and experience an age-appropriate social event.

It was obvious to the Visiting Team that there is an abundance of data available to support continuing improvement. In addition, there is a sense of urgency among faculty and SAU personnel to achieve this goal. There is a feeling expressed by the faculty that the school needs first to define its mission and vision and then to implement this through specific measurable goals. ES should implement a process to develop and assess its school improvement goals based on student learning needs. As the school develops an action plan for school improvement, professional development opportunities should be provided in areas to support faculty in the successful achievement of these goals.

A challenge to many middle schools, and certainly evident at ES is the process used for communication. ES has an excellent communication model created with parents using a weekly newsletter format that contains significant and important information. However, the vehicle for internal communication is not as obvious. Many staff members commented that they would appreciate more notice on items such as schedule changes or planning for specific activities such as state testing and field trips. Most successful middle schools have established some type of an advisory committee i.e. Principal's Advisory Committee, Team Leaders, or Faculty Advisory Team which enhances communication between building administration and teams as well as communication between teams.

A piece of communication is always the balance in the decision making process. Not only are teachers looking for input into significant decisions, but they also hope for follow through on certain issues and expect to be held accountable for their own follow through. In many schools, and probably true at ES, administrative follow through has occurred but teachers are not informed of any outcomes.

As Ellis School embarks upon the change process, it will become important to continue engaging the significant constituencies, not only the faculty and staff, but also students, the parents and community. By being inclusive and providing a voice, a positive school climate ensues and ultimately, student learning is positively impacted.

Recommendations specific to new leadership:

1. The new principal should institute a Team Leader Council to facilitate communication from administrators to teachers and from team to team.
2. The new principal should focus on clear communication with faculty perhaps using email as the internal vehicle. Teachers would appreciate sufficient notification in order to adapt schedules and/or instructional activities.
3. The new principal needs to engage in specific activities to improve the school climate. If ES is a pleasant place in which to work, it will be a more positive school for the students.
4. The new principal should work with the middle level teachers to articulate the vision for the grades five through eight as well as to develop specific goals to implement this vision.
5. The ES student council is one vehicle for the new principal to utilize to effectively seek student input into decisions regarding school life. This individual is strongly encouraged to use this organization as well as other methods to encourage student voice.
6. In addition to engaging teachers and students in decisions about the school, the new principal is strongly encouraged to involve parents and community in meaningful ways. When the new principal models democratic governance in his leadership style, the teachers may begin to model this behavior in their classrooms.

A Safe and Healthy School Environment

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

"A healthy school is one that provides its students and teachers with a secure and supportive environment, free from violence and discord; that promotes intergroup understanding and respect for those who differ in race, culture, gender, and religion; and that is strongly connected to the community" (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 168).

In creating a safe and healthy school environment, school leaders must consider the physical, psychological, and academic well being of students. A safe environment addresses the physical and emotional needs of students as well as prepares them for taking responsibility for themselves. The academic curriculum, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, and school physical plant, in addition to interpersonal dynamics, contribute to the school environment.

To promote a healthy learning environment, educators are responsible for managing behaviors in a way that encourage positive personal growth and interpersonal relationships. Young adolescents are able to take increased responsibility for self and group management and need to be included in decision-making regarding behavior management and group relations. Because the peer group plays an important role in early adolescence, peers can often exercise a powerful positive influence on each other; however, adults have to provide opportunities for structured work among peers that lead to success. Promoting a healthy lifestyle among students demands meeting physical and emotional needs and guiding students in strategies for becoming healthy adults. Curricular activities such as physical education and health education play a role, as do extracurricular opportunities. Both curricular and extracurricular activities should be accessible to all students and provide opportunities for all students to succeed.

An important issue for K-8 schools is shifting school structures to accommodate the changing needs of students as they grow from children into young adolescents. Ellis School has taken initial steps toward creating a unique middle school identity for its upper grades but can go much further toward solidifying a middle level program. Elements of this program should address the safety and health needs of its students. Early adolescents require more physical space, increased choice in activities and diet, curricular and extracurricular offerings that allow all students opportunities for success, and structured social activities in and out of the classroom. Involving students in management and encouraging positive peer collaborations can play a large part in this process.

Meeting students' needs for safety and health depends on meeting the needs of staff. Often teachers know the needs of their students in their particular school. Involving them in decisions around health and safety such as the addition of specific co-curricular activities, use of building space, and structures for school management and discipline will enhance teachers' sense of school ownership and autonomy. Creating positive relations among faculty will provide students with healthy models of adult relationships and will enhance a sense of community within the school.

Presently, the school faces two important changes – new leadership and building expansion. Both these changes provide the opportunity to address student needs for a healthy lifestyle.

Strengths

1. There is evidence of healthy relationships among teachers and between students and some teachers. Many faculty members report a strong sense of community among the staff in the school. Teachers who have been in the building for several years show a strong sense of loyalty. In addition, students report positive relationships with several individual teachers.
2. The school is a secure environment with careful attention to who is present in the school and to the building entrances. The sign-in procedure is arduously followed. A system is in place for staff to report security concerns. The strong and consistent attention to these facets of safety makes additional efforts such as locked classroom doors unnecessary (and potentially hazardous).
3. The administration and faculty are taking steps to address problems with disciplinary procedures in the school, including considering implementing PBIS. It is important for this discussion around new approaches to the management of student behavior *that is appropriate for early adolescents* to continue and to involve administrators, staff, students and possibly parents.
4. Strong attention is given to the school's appearance. The staff makes a consistent attempt to enhance the school's physical appearance with student work. The custodial staff keeps the building clean and in working order.
5. Students in the school seem well mannered with few major infractions of school rules and regulations. There seemed to be strong positive relationships among students and between students and some teachers. However, support staff and paraprofessionals often reported that students show lower regard for them than for teaching staff.
6. The school attempts to meet some important physical needs of early adolescents. They have daily recess and physical education two times each week. Students are allowed time to snack in school and may bring water with them to class.
7. There has been an attempt to build after school programs to meet the interests of students who enjoy sports and some other activities. Some of these efforts have not been realized due to lack of involvement. Continuing these efforts in coordination with town activities to provide more diverse extracurricular options would be beneficial.

Recommendations

1. A major concern about school climate is the lack of distinction between the elementary programming for children and middle level programming for early adolescents in the school. This is a common difficulty faced by many K-8 schools. The needs for early adolescents include autonomy, competency, positive relationships, and intellectual challenge. Although some people in the school explained differences among school structures for upper and lower grades (including bus schedules), the need for more definite distinction and the development of a middle level identity is clear. Addressing unique curriculum and management issues for young adolescent learners is important. *Turning Points 2000* reports the relationship between an increased sense of school belonging with a decline in at-risk behavior. Shaping a distinct middle level program in the school may foster a greater sense of belonging for the upper grade level students.

2. Currently the school is undergoing leadership changes. Uncertainty and lack of direction seem to have contributed to a poor morale among staff. As new leadership enters the school, steps should be taken to include more staff and students in decision making as well as strategizing ways to foster a greater sense of common purpose and belonging among all school community members.
3. As school leaders take steps to address discipline and management in the school, the specific needs of early adolescents should be considered. Staff and students should be involved in the creation and enactment of a management plan. Presently, management seems to be driven by administrative procedure. Programs such as peer mediation and peer counseling that would involve students in the process have not been established and should be considered as a piece of a more comprehensive guidance program.
4. School renovations are being planned. These plans should take into consideration meeting needs of staff and students that are presently not addressed. For example, students expressed concerns about having more hallway space to reduce crowding and improved changing facilities for physical education. Teachers who share space (especially non-core courses such as physical education, art, and music) would benefit from more specialized classrooms and accessible storage to meet their needs.
5. A health education class to address students' physical and emotional health should be considered as part of curricular classes.
6. Attention should also be paid to providing a more comprehensive after school program for middle level students.
7. Dining services should pay close attention to nutritional needs and choice for students. Students strongly advocated for a salad bar as a minimum change.
8. Locking classroom doors appears to be an excessive security effort and may be sending a different message to young adolescents than is intended. If classroom doors must be locked at all times, the paraprofessional staff should be issued keys so that teachers do not need to interrupt the instructional program in order to allow them to enter the classroom.

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. (*Turning Points 2000, page 24*)."

Responsive middle schools recognize the importance of "family and community partnerships." Parents, families, and community members can enrich the curriculum and provide a diversity of programs and opportunities that will greatly enhance the quality of education for every student.

Parents were actively engaged in this assessment process. There were parent representatives on the Steering Committee including a school board member who is also a parent. A total of 47 parents shared their feelings by responding to the parent survey. Several school employees are also parents so they shared a dual perspective. During our visit the Visiting Team had a specific opportunity to meet with a representative group of parents who were forthright in their comments about the school and who had varying years of experience with the school. These parents generally reflected positive feelings about the school, which is obviously a center of the community.

Strengths

1. ES has strong parental involvement through its PTA and the Fremont Ellis School Volunteers, an important major strength for the school. The PTA sponsors many community events such as the Women and Young Girls Self Defense course.
2. Parents indicated that communication with the staff is usually very good, and that the school provided a safe environment for students owing to the school's small size.
3. Parent communication with the school is facilitated through several vehicles: e-mail, voice mail and teacher and school newsletters. The school encourages parent teacher conferences at any time. Grade reporting is done four times per year in academics, effort, conduct and attendance.
4. Some teachers communicate regularly with parents via e-mail.
5. The DARE program has recently been reactivated.
6. Students volunteer to help in the school such as doing work for the school custodian.
7. The *Ellis School Newsletter* is published to inform parents of activities, accomplishments, curriculum and school wide events and functions.
8. Special education students participate in vocational training/career fair and shadowing programs as well as a therapeutic recreational program in the wider community.

9. Students have a diverse set of activities outside of the school environment in the wider community such as the sixth graders who attend an environmental camp, Sargent Camp, every spring for one week. Seventh graders go to the AMC Mountain classroom in the spring for three days and students in grade 8 go to Washington in the spring for four days.

Recommendations

1. The administration should provide specific guidelines that define opportunities for parents and community members to utilize their expertise in supporting student-learning activities. An example of this could be the establishment of an after school interest-based enrichment program. Intramural sports, a book club, arts and crafts, photography, model making, First Aid, babysitting, theatre and cartooning are just some of the activities many middle schools offer.
2. Job shadowing experiences such as those provided to special needs students should be expanded to include regular education students. For example, local business representatives or community members could be invited to school to establish partnerships to support middle school programs. These organizations could also address students about their real life experiences in various jobs and professions. Similarly, local companies might sponsor opportunities for students to experience time in the actual work environment.
3. "Every middle school should include youth service-supervised activity helping others in the community or in school-in its core instructional program". (*Turning Points 2000, page 211*). The custodian has indicated that there is a 3-month backup in students who wish to help him out. Students could also seek out the local senior center to volunteer their services. Teachers may need professional development opportunities on service learning programs to facilitate implementing this program.
4. Many schools are implementing student-led conferences so that the students assume responsibility for sharing their learning with their parents. ES should investigate this strategy, which positively impacts parents, students and teachers. Publicity from such an activity builds the school's reputation in the wider community.

Summary

The middle grades at Ellis School face many of the challenges of a self-contained middle school and certainly the same ones of other K-8 schools. Overall there is an apparent lack of understanding by both parents and community and by many school personnel as well as to who the young adolescent is and what he requires developmentally. A starting point to recognize the value of the programs currently in place in the middle grades is to have a community education piece on the nature of the young adolescent learner. Understanding her physical, social, emotion and intellectual development, and why middle level grades need to respond to this unique nature in a way that is different from elementary and high school should provide needed support for the middle grades and will improve any school or community misperceptions.

Understanding and accepting the young adolescent will lead to a strengthened and articulated vision for the middle grades. It is necessary that all Ellis School educators understand the differences between a first grade student and an eighth grade student so that a building wide acceptance of one another is possible. While the introduction of PBIS in the fall may help to create this understanding, respect for one another as professionals and for the students themselves will go a long way to creating a healthy and positive school climate.

There is a significant need to address middle level instructional strategies that are appropriate for the middle level learner including strategies that encourage more active engagement at a higher level. The beginning of this conversation is around curriculum design and implementation, which must be articulated between the grade levels. This needs to be supported by systemically planned professional development.

Supporting this conversation around curriculum and instruction (as well as the final element, assessment) is the need to revitalize the teaming structure. Reviewing the nuts and bolts of teaming and then suggesting strategies for effective teams to engage in higher functioning strategies will address some of the issues regarding student learning. Teams should engage in practices such as flexible scheduling including longer class periods and regrouping students for instruction to address issues of student achievement.

Finally the issue of internal communication and its impact upon the building climate needs to be faced head-on. Building trusting relationships takes time, and open communication is one of the cornerstones. A change in leadership guarantees ES a change in the school community. Open communication should be a building block in the renewal of Ellis School.

The NELMS Visiting Team enjoyed the three days we spent in Fremont. We found serious educators genuinely hoping to engage in practices that help their students learn and grow. We hope this report will help in the important work you do on behalf of your students.