

an affiliate of the National Middle School Association



# Oregon Middle Level Association

November 2007

## Message from the OMLA President

*By Jill O'Neill, Principal, Meadow Park Middle School, Beaverton*

I hope that your school year is shaping up to be a success for you and your students! Middle schools across the state had good news this fall, with improved student performance on state assessments. OMLA, in partnership with the Oregon Department of Education and the Confederation of School Administrators, is working now to recognize outstanding middle schools through the Oregon Schools to Watch Program. Applications have now been evaluated and site visits will occur after winter break. I hope you will plan to join us at our annual Professional Development Institute in Bend March 7-8. We will recognize the Oregon Schools to Watch Schools and you will have an opportunity to both learn more about the program

and how these schools achieve a middle school that is academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable. Can't wait until March? Learn more at [www.omla.net](http://www.omla.net)

This will be the final print newsletter published by OMLA. In an effort to serve our members – and the environment – better we will begin publishing our quarterly newsletter electronically. All members will receive the new e-newsletter via their email. The newsletter will continue to be posted on line as well. In addition to the e-newsletter, the OMLA Board is developing additional member benefits that will be designed to enhance your practice as a middle level educator. Details will be forthcoming in future publications.

**Please join us for the :**

## **OMLA Professional Development Institute**

*(formerly the Annual Spring Conference)*

### **At The Riverhouse in Bend**

**March 7-8, 2008**

### **Watch us Thrive: Navigating the White Water Years**

- **Nationally known speakers**
- **Presentations of middle level best practices**
- **Reconnecting with friends**



### **Registration:**

**\$125 for OMLA members**

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# Differentiate the Instruction: Build a Library in Your Room

By Randy Trani, 2006-07 Oregon Principal of the Year, Recipient of the John Pence Award

I am lucky enough to be the principal at Corbett Middle School where each day I have the pleasure to watch four astounding teachers work magic with 115 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. We have purposefully created multi-age looping classrooms where students stay with their teacher all day for virtually all subjects for two years. I think that too often graded classrooms lead teachers down the path of delivering instruction to the class rather than differentiating the instruction for the individual student. Multi-age classrooms necessitate differentiating your instruction to meet the needs of each of the learners and my teachers are absolute wizards at differentiating. Broad thematic based units with multiple entry points for varied learners are the rule. The elimination of grades in favor of narrative reporting and a constant emphasis on continuous progress for each student also support our efforts to differentiate the instruction for all students so all students can learn. Many of the programs we have at Corbett took years to fine tune, however there is one aspect of Corbett Middle School that is instantly transferable and will make reading instruction more easily differentiated and therefore better.

We do not have readers at Corbett. Instead we have books. Thousands of

books at every reading level imaginable. Each teacher has their own library with thousands of titles on their shelves. The shelves are made from old wood, balanced on recycled cinder blocks, and the books themselves are a hodge-podge of used library books, garage sale books, and purchased items from Scholastic and other vendors. Since we have big units of study like the Renaissance, Middle Ages, and Westward Expansion, you will find hundreds of titles, both fiction and non-fiction, on these topics. During each of our big thematic units students read books that are at their reading level and on topic; and like magic reading has been differentiated. Furthermore, we actually let the kids read in school. Each day we have silent sustained reading, teachers also read out loud to the students everyday, and when we want to celebrate a special day we let kids bring pillows to sit on the floor and read all day.

Here is what it would take to differentiate the reading instruction in your class or school:

1. Find an administrator and tell them to give you money to buy books. (IF they won't give you

money to buy books tell them to call me and I can help them find the extra dollars in their budget to support reading instruction.....one way is to stop buying \$75 readers....you can get a bunch of garage sale books for \$75 bucks!)

2. Go out to library sales (they are really cheap), garage sales, and even look in catalogs to find books that support your curriculum and come in a variety of reading levels and then buy them. (Repeat this step over and over and over for years.)

3. Don't just buy those curriculum centered books, buy all kinds of books and encourage kids to borrow them for fun reading.

4. Build shelves and put the books on the shelves.

5. Give books to kids to read that somehow deal with a unit you might be starting and are at their reading level.

6. Stop talking to them, make them stop talking, and sit down and read silently with them for as much time each day as you can possibly manage. A half hour is a good start, an hour is better. Soon the kids will treat that time like a reward, you will have differentiated instruction, and continuous progress will be made by all.

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# Catching the Wave

**By Amelia Becker** *Recipient of the 2006-07 John Pence Award for her outstanding support of middle level education teaches Language Arts at Meadow View Middle School in Bethel, Eugene. She has worked with colleagues to develop her school's K-8 Reading plan while assisting colleagues in her school and throughout the district to implement effective*

I look, with vague memories of butterflies, at the group of young people before me, some catching my eye, others busy with friends, yet others avoiding contact with my reassuring smiles. We have a couple days of "honeymoon" so I milk it, moving myself gingerly into their awareness. I assign their seats and ask them to write down their addresses and phone numbers. I crack some jokes and tell them a few things about myself after which they have a chance to share a little of themselves with me and each other. Then it's back to business. Time for the rules, the most important one being respect: that we respect each other, the learning environment, and ourselves. We do some writing and play a few more little games, at the end of which, I have learned all their names.

By then it's time to move on in the schedule and I repeat the whole thing with another new group of students. It's exciting and delicate, our first introduction. In two or three months they'll have learned my routines and expectations. They'll know that I consider missing assignments to be homework, that I think going off on interesting tangents is not a waste of class time, and that I will answer lots of their questions with more questions. We will also have gelled into a group identity, class leaders and clowns, all of us showing our ups and downs.

I am a teacher. How did I get here? It was not school, or a

program, or a book that made me what I am. I evolved out of necessity and persistence. And love. Yes, love too—love that inspires the need to succeed, the need to rise above the obstacles. It is love that fuels the stubborn determination not to be put aside, the spirit that says, "I will figure out how to do this" and as a result I contribute to something bigger than me.

Teachers do the unseen. We learn as much as we can about the subjects we teach, we break things down into component skills, we practice creating a series of steps in order to get this student and that one from point A to point B. We collect a "bag of tricks" and set up classrooms. We beg, borrow, and steal good ideas from anywhere and anyone. We even learn character education strategies. Add the people: our students and their families, and the relationships we create with them. Then the magic begins; the result is much greater than the sum of the parts and never quite the same the next time around. This is what I enjoy most about teaching—the alchemy and mystery, the faith in the unknown that teaching engenders in me.

A new school year brings the unfamiliar faces, the teaching challenges, the new relationships, my toes testing the waters of this yet unknown entity. I dive in, anticipating the wave of dynamic energy created by our coming together. We know the general direction, but how we'll get there is an exciting ride, still to be determined by who we are when we all show up.

Teaching is an evolutionary, revolutionary process and a

lifelong practice. In reality we cannot know the outcome of our efforts, nor do we need to. The future is not for us to determine. We contribute, but we don't decide how other human beings take off with what we've helped them open in themselves. While there is a body of knowledge to pass on, we're not trying to create a cookie cutter human who will think and know exactly the way we do. This seems obvious enough, but how many times have I complained about a student, even if only in my thoughts, frustrated with how I think they don't want to learn, or with how they won't see things the way I see things.

Cookie cutter children, if they ever existed, are a thing of the past, something for the Middle Ages, or at least from our grandparents' generation. The times are changing. In fact, they have changed. It's my job as a teacher to bring the world I know together with the world they know. I'm the bridge; I help them meet who they are.

How do any of us become teachers? We have to. We've been called to it and we've figured it out, bringing our selves to the table every day. We show our spirit, our grit, our love, our limits, our dreams. You name it, we do it, if it will help us relate, convey, motivate, inspire, and be those bridges that help our students across sometimes vast expanses of their own self imposed limitations. With spirit and love we teach, present for the challenge because we're fascinated and inspired by the mystery and the alchemy of what we do. A teacher knows the magic that it is.

## Teaching from the Heart

We'd like to include a new feature in this newsletter. *Teaching From The Heart* will feature teachers who devote themselves to the growth and development of young adolescents. Everyone knows a teacher who does an outstanding job in the middle. Please give that person the recognition they deserve. Both the author and the recognized teacher will receive recognition in upcoming newsletters! Email the information to: [jill\\_o'neill@beavton.k12.or.us](mailto:jill_o'neill@beavton.k12.or.us)

- \* Teacher's Name:
- \* School:
- \* Teaching Assignment:
- \* Three words describing the teacher's personality:
- \* A sentence or two describing the teacher's relationship with:
  - a) Students:
  - b) Colleagues:
  - c) Community:
- \*Anything else you would like mentioned . . .

Kathi "Jacks" Jackson of Hilda Lahti Elementary in the Knappa School District is our first teacher to be recognized as Teaching From the Heart. Kathi teaches Physical Education to 1<sup>st</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> graders and Leadership. Nominated by Paula Mills, Principal, Kathi is "vivacious, energetic, unbelievable!" Paula described Kathi's relationship with the stakeholders in her school: *Students: Jacks is the building ambassador. She knows all 355 students by name and by heart.*

*Colleagues: People in the building depend on her to organize and spearhead activities. She is the coach of our PBS team. She goes out of her way to do special things for her colleagues!*

*Community: There are only a few people in our small community who do not know Jacks!! In fact, she is recognizable around the globe--as her twin sister will tell you. Even though she has a twin, she is one of a kind!!!*

Under her leadership, our HLE Student Council was one of only ten student councils of any size in the US to receive the Gold Council of Excellence Award for Middle Schools. Leadership is her life!!!

Kudos to Kathi Jackson for her great work with young adolescents and to Paula Mills for nominating her for Teaching from the Heart recognition. Both Kathi and Paula will receive a Teaching from the Heart memento.

## Membership

**Membership Year:** OMLA's membership runs from July 1st to June 30th. All current memberships expire then, on June 30th. Our forms are also on line at [www.omla.net](http://www.omla.net).

**Types of Membership:** Everyone interested in middle level education is invited to join.

- For individuals, the cost is \$35 for the year.
- For full-time students, only \$20 per year, a real bargain!
- Teams of five can join for \$125 per year.
- For your whole school to be members, the fee is \$250, which includes ten newsletters per edition. NMSA/OMLA J

**Joint Membership** OMLA has joint membership available for individuals with the National Middle School Association, the organization with which we are affiliated. We strongly encourage support of NMSA.

NMSA is the national voice for middle level education and an important force. Benefits include:

- reduced Conference Fees. You will want to participate in the OMLA/OASSA/OESPA Professional Development Institute next March! And you must be a member, so you might as well join us now.

**"Together celebrating the uniqueness of the middle level"**

## **Call for Nominations**

**Is there a middle level educator or advocate in your community that should be recognized for their commitment to young adolescents?**

**The John Pence Award** is given to people who the OMLA feel deserve recognition for their contributions to the improvement of middle level education. These people can be classified, licensed, administrative employees as well as volunteers, school board members, or community leaders. Teams of educators can also be recognized with this award. What is required is that they show...

- a commitment to increasing awareness of the needs of middle level learners and strategies most appropriate to meet them
- initiative in advancing middle level education
- evidence in providing leadership to make middle school a positive experience for students and staff

**The David Putnam Award** is given to one middle school educator per year. It is essentially our Middle School Educator of the Year Award. The person winning this award...

- is committed to and promotes middle level philosophy and education
- maintains continuous intellectual and skill growth
- is a contributing member of a learning community
- has made significant contributions to the improvement of middle level education
- is committed to students and their learning
- is responsible for managing and monitoring student learning

**Visit our website [www.omla.net](http://www.omla.net) to nominate them by December 15, 2007.**

## **OMLA Professional Development Institute Call for Presenters**

Do you implement successful pedagogy, curriculum, and/or climate enhancing programs that have improved student achievement? Do you have great teaching tools to share? If so, we hope you will present at our annual staff development institute, March 7-8, 2008 in Bend. Participants tell us in their evaluations each year that what they value most at our staff development institutes is the presentation of ideas they can take home and use immediately. Additional information and the Presentation Proposal form are available online at [www.omla.net](http://www.omla.net)

## **Ballot for Election of Officers to the Board of Directors Oregon Middle Level Association**

Please vote for one person to fill each of the following positions:

**Secretary:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Marsha Eckleman, Principal, Newport Middle School, Newport

**Region 1 Director CENTRAL:** Crook, Deschutes, Gilliam, Harney, Hood River, Jefferson, Sherman, Wasco, Wheeler Counties

\_\_\_\_\_ Katie Baltzor, Principal, Hines Middle School, Hines

**Region 6 Director WESTERN:** Benton, Lincoln, Linn, Marion and Polk Counties:

\_\_\_\_\_ Steve Nelson, Principal, Leslie Middle School, Salem

Please send this ballot by January 31, 2008 to:  
OMLA/COSA, 707 13th Street SE, Salem, OR 97301-4035

# Orbitals Offer Students the Chance to Shine, Share, and Support

By Rick Heckendorn, Ed.D. Manhattanville College has been an Assistant Professor of Education for the past three years. He received his doctorate from Hofstra University. His secondary teaching experience includes work as a Social Studies teacher, Social Studies Department Head, and Assistant Principal in the public school arena for over 30 years. His scholarly interests include secondary school methods of teaching, social studies methods, and the importance of the continued functioning of the middle school where teachers focus on content and students. He believes in active learning where students come first. Rick has recently published, "A Teacher's Attitude Always Matters!" in *Transition*, Winter 2006, He has presented: "Individualize within a Classroom Community," at a meeting of the New Jersey Middle School Association on March 27, 2006.

The creation of a classroom community that is characterized by trust, safety, respect, and collaboration is important (Christiansen, 1994.) As middle school educators we value students and teachers' cooperative and individual work. Connecticut middle school educators recognize the importance of teams for teachers and students to encourage collaboration as the recent emphasis in *Impact* shows (v.9, #1; v.9, #2.) Teaming to simulate collaborative efforts has been a major component of the Fundamentals of Middle School course that I teach at Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York. During the past two semesters I have introduced orbital studies to encourage students' individual work in a more dynamic manner.

**Orbitals.** Orbital studies, or orbitals, are an opportunity for middle school students to find out more about something that interests them (Stevenson, 2002.). Each student researches a topic of interest, writes a brief report about it, and makes a five-minute presentation to the rest of the class. For purposes of assessment there is an oral and written part to each student's orbital.

To discover whether future middle school teachers value orbitals, my students present their own orbitals in this methods course. They complete the orbital assignment at home, but during two activities in class they discuss their orbitals with their collaborative teams. They report back that they receive worthwhile feedback and encouragement from their classmates.

My requirements are few but specific. They choose topics of interest to them except for education or their major subjects. They cannot expand upon what they study for other coursework. Their one-page error-free typed sheet is to connect their topics with English,

social studies, math, and science. They are to make interdisciplinary connections and communicate correctly. They are to speak enthusiastically and informatively about their topics. Enthusiasm sparks curiosity among others. Students in the audience fill in the orbital presentation sheets.

Several positive outcomes result from the orbital presentations. Each student has the chance to shine as an expert for five minutes. Students share information as a peer teacher. Students support each other during the discussions. Questions, compliments, and excitement abound. Orbitals help students know each other better and contribute to a safe, trustful, respectful classroom community. Students learn interesting and worthwhile information from each other.

I ask my students to consider six factors to function as effective instructional classroom leaders: planning, content, strategies, caring, flexibility, and assessment. Orbitals fit well into this lesson design and presentation. After relating each factor to orbital studies, I will cite a few of my assessments of students' work and students' individual reactions.

**Planning.** ...I integrate orbital presentations throughout the lessons for several weeks. Either two or three students present their orbitals at the beginning, middle, or end of class. When occurring at the beginning of class, the orbital acts as a Do Now to focus everyone immediately on class. On the orbital presentation sheets, students note down each student's name, topic, something learned, one positive comment, and a one-sentence summary. I model the importance of planning as these sheets help the student audience attend to the presentations' salient points as students present. Key to a planning is to ask: Do we know

if students are learning? What can teachers do to make it more likely that the students listen and learn? Writing is key. Hence I created the orbital presentations sheets.

**Content.** ...Orbitals allow students to bring additional content to class as they report on their interests. Content becomes a shared contribution. Students ask questions about topics that interest them or we refer to the orbital presentation sheet. Students acknowledge what they learn from each individual's expertise.

**Strategies.** ...Each student takes on the role of the teacher. Choice is an empowering teaching strategy because students research topics that interest them. Reflection is an important strategy as students think about what they present or hear from other presenters to ascertain if they are learning and effectively communicating their ideas ...Student interactions increase during discussions providing evidence of students' thinking. Opportunities to correct errors and to praise insight increase. Since orbitals occur at different times during class, more variety of activities exists. In their reflective journals students react to the orbitals.

After the first semester doing orbitals several students suggested that it would have been helpful if I had modeled what an orbital looked like. Last semester I presented my orbital first to their delight. Since I am learning French, and since I play the piano and sing, I sang a song in French and invited everyone to sing along. ...Students benefited from seeing my example.

**Caring.** ...Giving students time for orbitals shows caring. During orbitals each student is an expert. Since each student feels safe and secure in our classroom community nobody criticizes anyone for

## Each Other: How Orbitals Enliven an Effective Classroom Community

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any ignorance about the material. No interruptions occur during orbital presentations unless the presenters choose to take questions as they speak; ...

Several students indicated that they would not have felt comfortable presenting their orbitals at the beginning of class while others would have. Shy students need time to feel comfortable in a new classroom community. This is the reason I choose to begin after we had already established a comfortable classroom community. The orbitals enhance the level of caring; they do not create the care and concern.

**Flexibility...** The teacher's ability to allow students to relate their personal lives to highly intellectual investigations heightens the personal value of the discussion and increases the depth of understanding (Nafisi, 2004.) Orbitals allow the focus to rest on the students' voices. ...

**Assessment.** Assessment focuses on whether all students are learning, not simply the presenter. Each presentation receives a maximum of 12 points on a rubric that contained a maximum of 3 points for each of four categories: knowledge of content, enthusiasm, interdisciplinary connections, and written English. To discover whether other students learn from each presentation, there is discussion and the orbital presentation sheet. We find out whether the orbital presentation makes an impact on the students' understanding (Black & Wiliam, 1998.)

...My assessment of students who need to improve include: the need to express more enthusiasm, the importance of looking at the audience more and reading less from your notes, and the need to use proper English.

My positive comments to students focus on the interesting content, the impact on their lifestyles, the connections they construct, or the hidden talent they reveal. To the track and field student I said: "Although it (the time commitment) conflicted with the academic demands of college... you are still devoted to maintaining a healthy lifestyle that includes exercise and healthy eating habits." Some were stimulating for offering historical connections. To the lacrosse student I wrote, "

You explained how the French learned of the sport from the Huron Native American Indians." I made a note on the Black Plague paper that, "... you told the class briefly that you were a member of a group of individuals dedicated to learning about the lives of the common people of medieval Europe." Hidden talents reveal themselves. One student artist shows and explains the technique of her engravings, a type of art in existence since Rembrandt of the Netherlands. A ballet student explains the history of ballet, beginning in Italy but brought to France by the Medici family before she demonstrates the five positions of ballet for the class.

In their reflective journals students value getting to know more about classmates and learning interesting material. Other student comments include: valuable experience talking in front of the class; the research involving the four subjects; choice in picking the topics; a good discussion afterwards, varying class activities with the orbitals as beneficial, a good activity for students' self-esteem, and having to write something down helped remember the presentations.

...(Topics) include(d) the telegraph, an Egyptian ancient temple, hurling, football, snorkeling, flair bartending, a Dominican dance called the Bachata, white sharks, Louis Vuitton handbags, yoga, bee keeping, skiing, pottery making, the Beatles, building a new water tunnel for New York City, tourism in Puerto Rico, quilting, soccer, scuba diving, tap dancing, electric guitars, chocolate chip cookies, computers, my art, ghosts, doing art, coffee, ultimate Frisbee, movies theaters, yoga, stretching, track, volunteering, rock climbing (2), ballet, flower arrangements, gymnastics, poker, snowmobiling, sushi, brewing beer, guacamole dip, baseball, and music. Each is outstanding in different ways. The skiing, quilting, bee keeping and pottery presentations include wonderful artifacts. Two students dance for the class. Pictures, brief audios, drawings on posters, and demonstrations make others remarkable. Food and drink are made

and shared.

...As a class, we discuss how this activity applies to the fundamentals of middle school. Since the middle school philosophy recognizes the importance of students' academic, emotional and social development, my students overwhelmingly feel that the orbitals help them learn more about each other and feeling closer to each other. This helps to increase the positive classroom community feeling. This should apply to middle school students as well. Many students intend to discover this for themselves soon. Sadness permeates the room as we offer our farewells.

And what about the six factors? The teacher has to plan carefully for orbitals to work successfully. The teacher has to read carefully the written one-page summaries and listen attentively to the presentations because this becomes the content. As a teaching strategy, I find it best to spread out the orbitals so that each one has its own five minutes to be special. Caring and respect is built into the process of listening and receiving each student's orbital. Flexibility applies to students' choices and the questions following each orbital. The assessment follows the rubric that each student receives in advance. In addition I write a reaction to each orbital that the students appreciate.

Orbitals help the Fundamentals of Middle School classes to accomplish three things that apply to middle school instruction. Each student becomes an expert in an area that they communicate to the class to enrich everyone's knowledge. Each student's self-esteem increases as an active and worthwhile participant in the class. Each student researches, writes about, and communicates interesting information to the rest of the class. Students' reactions to the orbital activities are overwhelmingly positive. I plan to incorporate this strategy again in my lessons for next year.

**Oregon Middle Level  
Association**  
Confederation of Oregon  
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**See You at the Riverhouse on March 7-8, 2008!**



***OMLA Professional Development Institute***