CORE PRACTICES

This section is organized around twelve Core Practices for effective middle schools. These core practices reflect 21st century literacies, skills, and knowledge that ensure Maine students will be prepared to be contributing members of the modern world. Literacy is not longer confined to reading and writing print documents, but has expanded to include digital text and tools, images and sounds, and an understanding of how numeracy is integrated in virtually every aspect of life. Collaboration, flexibility, self-direction, and social-awareness are among the key life and career skills necessary for our students to develop. Students also need to acquire the skills of innovation, creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving. Finally, the desired outcomes for Maine students expand beyond the core subjects of language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, world languages and the arts and include such themes as global awareness and economic, civic and health literacy (Partnership for 21st. Century Skills).

Learning and Teaching Practices in Maine's Middle Level Schools

1. Students have access to curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory and is organized and executed to maximize accessibility for all students.

2. Teachers use research-based instructional practices in their classrooms that are effective in increasing the learning and achievement of young adolescents.

3. Teachers in all content areas use teaching and learning practices that are anchored in 21st century literacies.

4. Students have access to one-to-one computing technology integrated throughout the curriculum allowing them to acquire the critical thinking skills related to information, media, and technology.

5. All middle level students experience learning opportunities that emphasize creativity and innovation.

School Practices to Support Learning and Teaching in Maine's Middle Level Schools

6. School leaders, using a collaborative and democratic leadership model, focus on establishing an environment that supports the learning needs of young adolescents.

7. Faculty, administration, and students collaboratively build a safe and caring climate that nurtures the individual while creating a sense of community where everyone is valued.

8. Students benefit from organizational structures within the middle grades that maximize the sense of community, support meaningful relationships, and optimize curriculum delivery.

9. Students have access to a co-curricular program that encourages all students to participate, develop skills, be a member of a team or activity, and simply have fun.

10. Teachers' professional development is an ongoing process that is embedded into the daily life of the school.

11. Parents are actively involved in the life of the school and their child's education.

12. Teachers, administrators, and staff who are responsible for the education of young adolescents are knowledgeable about their developmental needs and appreciate them for their uniqueness.

CORE PRACTICE 1

Students have access to curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory and is organized and executed to maximize accessibility for all students.

Rationale

The primary task of middle level schools is to promote, support, and ensure each student's learning. A school's curriculum must integrate needed content, skills, and attitudes with both responsive practices for young adolescents and current state and national initiatives. The middle school curriculum should reflect the Maine *Learning Results* and 21st century skills and knowledge to ensure all students are prepared for and aspire to high levels of learning, are ready to assume the responsibilities of productive citizenship, and know how to achieve personal fulfillment. Curriculum, aligned with Maine *Learning Results,* should be organized and implemented to maximize accessibility, meaning, and learning for the diverse young adolescents it serves.

Essential Elements

- Learning experiences are meaningful, coherent, and relevant, giving students opportunities to use their minds well and at the highest levels, thus preparing them for the challenges of the 21st century, including post secondary education.

- A multi-faceted curriculum helps students understand themselves and their world in the midst of discovering who they are and who they might become.

- Courses and activities provide students with many opportunities to try out different experiences, develop their special interests and aptitudes, and broaden their views of the world and themselves.

- All aspects of the curriculum are exploratory in nature.

- The curriculum helps students make meaningful connections across disciplines.

- Learning experiences are designed so that students learn to pose complex essential questions, search out potential answers, evaluate the quality of resources, and present findings in a variety of ways using technological tools through an integrated curriculum.

- Significant student voice is reflected in planning the curriculum, setting and achieving personal goals, and assessing learning.

- A multifaceted comprehensive assessment system is embedded within the curriculum, tracking students' individual progress in meeting the Maine *Learning Results* and 21st century skills and knowledge and helping teachers shape their instruction to meet individual needs.

- Exemplary organizational practices including small teams of teachers and students, extended blocks of instructional time, heterogeneous grouping, and common planning time for teachers are in place to support the curriculum.

Snapshot: The Way It Could Be

Maria was fifteen minutes early for her core class addressing the theme of "Our Community Footprints" because she needed one last practice of a presentation that she and two of her classmates were making later in the morning. They had worked for nearly a month on a feasibility study for a new senior citizen center, collecting information about the economic, environmental, and cultural impacts of such a center on their small town. As a part of this rigorous service-learning project that included work in all the major content areas, they met with a number of builders, the town manager and town council, and many citizens of various ages. Much of their work was done electronically with their laptop computers. The laptops were used throughout the day as they took notes, wrote their initial and subsequent drafts of position papers, and logged into several databases to keep track of the data they collected. Connecting to the Internet to find other towns that had built similar senior citizens centers, particularly ones on Arizona, Florida, and Ohio, was invaluable.

Rebecca and Mary were already waiting for Maria in the homeroom. As their final task, the three young women double-checked their scoring rubric for their presentation based on Maine's *Learning Results* to make sure they had addressed all of the criteria. Their presentation would begin with an overview of the Guiding Principles (also from the *Learning Results*), showing how this project gave them practice in each of the six areas. Pleased with their work, they were still a little nervous about their upcoming public presentation, but ready to go.

Phase Outs

- Curriculum that is tracked by ability and does not offer each student access to a complex and challenging learning experience.

- Curriculum that is organized solely through individual disciplines.

- Topic or unit planning that does not include the time it takes to frame the unit in a way that makes it relevant to young adolescents.

- Assessment that is done only at the end of a unit and does not allow students time to revise and improve the quality of their work. End of the unit assessments that focus just on grades rather than supporting student learning.

- Disregard for student questions and interests when developing units of study.
- A schedule that does not allow flexibility for curriculum development.
- Curriculum content that skims the surface of a topic and focuses on lower level thinking

CORE PRACTICE 2

Teachers use research-based instructional practices in their classrooms that are effective in increasing the learning and achievement of young adolescents.

Rationale

It is not enough to have just a challenging curriculum. The instructional practices in middle school must provide multiple ways for students to access this curriculum so that they develop the skills, cognitive abilities, competence and confidence in themselves to successfully tackle the challenges of high school and beyond. The 21st century is about living in a global society. In order to be healthy and prosperous, Maine citizens must compete productively in the global economy by thinking innovatively, solving complex problems, being technologically sophisticated, and having a world-view that embraces diversity. Infusing these practices mentioned above into the middle grades instructional plan is imperative so that students will begin to develop these sophisticated competencies as well master content material.

Essential Elements

- Intellectual risk taking is encouraged in classrooms that are physically and emotionally safe. Students perceive that fellow students and teachers value progress in achievement.

- Hands-on experiences, discussion groups, classroom workshops, reflective assessment, and project-based learning allow for active involvement in learning.

- Teachers knowledgeable in the subject areas taught use instructional strategies and tools that increase learning (summarizing, comparing/contrasting, graphic organizers, formative assessments, and providing students time to revise and improve the quality of their work).

- Teachers use formative assessments (assessment for learning) to make decisions about next steps in the instructional process based on student readiness and mastery of elements of the curriculum.

- Complex and abstract ideas are presented through scaffolding and differentiated instructional practices that address learning styles, multiple intelligences, student interest, readiness, and other elements of learning.

- Teachers model thinking skills, study strategies, problem-solving, creative thinking, provide guided practice, and give students timely feedback.

- Explicit instruction in working collaboratively allows students to participate in productive groups and develops their skills in working independently.

- Teachers integrate digital learning tools into their instructional practice.

- Teachers ensure that all students have access to the curriculum by utilizing differentiated instructional strategies.

Snapshot: Eighth Grade Humanities Class

“Here’s my name. Are you in my group?”

“No, I’m over here by the window.” So go the conversations as the 45 eighth graders come into class and find their seats in one of the several groupings around the room. They know from class yesterday that they are split up into groups for the first day of literature circles in which they will be discussing the class novel, *Across Five Aprils* by Irene Hunt.

Mrs. Springer calls the class together and gives the directions for the work of the day. She asks them to identify questions they may have about chapter 1 - 2 and to also look for ideas that might help them think more deeply about the essential question that overarches their work for the quarter: What patterns that affect politics, economics, and culture keep repeating themselves in our history?

As the groups begin to organize themselves using skills they have been practicing during the past few weeks, Mrs. Springer joins one of the groups to discuss with them how their task is a bit different; Mrs. Lee and she think they need something a bit more challenging. Meanwhile, Mrs. Lee reviews the task with another group that tends to need additional clarification on the directions for the work. Within a few minutes both teachers are roaming the room, sitting down with groups to clarify a direction or to encourage student thinking a bit. Mrs. Springer and Mrs. Lee know their students' strengths and needs well since they have had the same students for 2 years, a practice known as looping. Conversations are intense and on task in each of the groups.

“I don’t get what this question means?”

“I think it’s asking…and look here on page 25 the characters are arguing…”

“People are split over what should happen—we’ve seen that before in *My Brother Sam Is Dead*. Families seem to get torn up during times of war.”

“Does anyone know what “confederacy” means?’ Heads shake no. “Here, I’ve got dictionary.com up, I’ll find it.”

The literature circle groups continue their work with the support of their teachers for about 30 minutes and then the class easily transitions into silent reading time so that students can continue with the next chapters. Mrs. Lee asks one of the groups if the group would like to listen to her read the next chapter. They nod yes and quietly exit the classroom to gather around her in a cozy nook as she reads aloud. Within the

classroom, the remaining students are engrossed in the novel, noting questions and ideas relating to the essential question posed earlier by Mrs. Springer.

Each of the 45 eighth graders in this heterogeneously grouped humanities class will be prepared to participate fully in the next day's literature circles, having digested the first 2 chapters together and having read and thought about the next assigned chapters. Because their teachers are using an overarching, essential question to organize the semester's work, the students will also be making connections across literary and content texts and with their own lives.

Phase Outs

- Classes where students are "talked at" for the majority of the time.
- A continual cycle of read, write, recite.
- Assumptive teaching—teachers assume students possess skills that they do not have.
- Classes that do not make use of the extensive resources provided by one-to-one computing.
- Classes where students are not actively participating.
- Instructional practices that do not allow enough time for students to delve deeply into a subject and try out and practice new ways of learning.
- Instructional practices that do not address the concrete-to-abstract thinking continuum through scaffolding and experiential learning.
- Curriculum and instruction that do not include provisions for differentiation.

CORE PRACTICE 3

Teachers in all content areas use teaching and learning practices anchored in 21st century literacies.

Rationale

Recommendations from The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, the International Society for Technology in Education, the SCANS report, the Literacy Standards for Students (promoted by the American Library Association), and the enGauge 21st Century Skills redefine "literacy" for the 21st century. The definition is much broader because it addresses challenges brought about by our global community and the advent of the revolution in technology. In order to master these 21st century literacies, middle grade students must be immersed in the traditional basic literacy skills as well the information and visual literacies and numeracy. In addition, well-prepared citizens must

also master a variety of other literacies including digital, economic, science and global awareness.

Upon arriving in middle school, students are faced with a dramatic increase in the amount and level of sophistication of reading and writing in multiple content areas. In addition, an entirely new skills set called “information literacy” has emerged. Students need to access, evaluate, and manage all types of information both in school and in their personal lives. This information comes in combinations of words, images, sounds, and symbols. The use of combined media to communicate is growing exponentially as is the level of mathematical knowledge needed to understand the sophisticated scientific and social science concepts of the 21st century. Therefore, students not only need ongoing instruction in both developmental reading and writing across the content areas, but also in inquiry and information literacy skills, visual literacy and the application of mathematical principles in authentic contexts. Modeling, reflection, and practice of the skills inherent in both the traditional and the new literacies must be seamlessly incorporated across the curriculum.

Essential Elements

- Literacy instruction is a priority of each middle school with the goal of bringing each student, both struggling and advanced readers, up to a rigorous standard of reading and writing ability across the content areas. All students receive instruction in content-specific comprehension strategies that emphasize reading as thinking. Teachers share a common language with which to talk about literacy issues.

- All teachers are professionally trained to address 21st century literacy skills as defined by the organizations named above (See Appendix 4).

- Students read and view a variety of print, digital, and multi-media text and engage in interactive activities such as small group discussions, reading response journals, and think-alouds, and use Web 2.0 tools (e.g., wikis, blogs, podcasts) that help them construct knowledge from the various texts and to create content on the web.

- Process writing and media production instruction is incorporated across the curriculum.

- Information literacy is integrated throughout the curriculum.

- Students think and process a wide variety of mathematical information in creative, flexible, and meaningful ways. Integrated instruction provides varied opportunities to apply mathematical principles across all content areas. For example, the mathematics, art, and technology education teachers may collaborate on units that require students to apply a mathematical concept in a variety of settings.

- Algebra is offered in varied ways to ensure that each student’s learning style is addressed. Recognizing that some young adolescents are not developmentally ready for more formal aspects of algebraic thinking, it is important that school systems also provide the opportunity for students to take algebra in grades 9,10,11, or 12.

Snapshot: Increasing Understanding of Science Concepts

Mr. Ducharme's students are reading an article on genetics. The article has text, images and links. Students have cut and pasted the text into a word processing document where they are using text boxes to make comments and record questions, predictions, and connections they are making to other texts or things they have seen previously. As he circulates through the room, his students are discussing the article, and referring to their digital notes.

"We inherit 1/2 our genes from our father and 1/2 from our mom—why does it work that way?"

"It says some genes are dominant, I know that means they're stronger, but how can that happen—how does one gene become stronger than another?"

A bit later in the class, Mr. Ducharme directs everyone to some charts he's made. The charts include both text and images. Previously he had printed the article in very large font in order to make the charts. He asks a representative from each table to come and point out on the chart a specific place where a connection was made or a question generated. Mr. Ducharme realizes that some of his students need to see and hear other students talk about how they connect the text and the images in order to understand the ideas in the article. Mr. Ducharme smiles to himself as his students validate his belief that the time he has taken to provide his students with direct basic and visual literacy instruction was well spent. Instruction included teaching students the behaviors of good readers -- activating prior knowledge, asking questions, and making connections.

When a question arises, the students use their web search techniques that they have been practicing in all of their classes to find the answer. They are becoming better at searching. They rely less on Mr. Ducharme to answer their questions and more on their own strategies to find possible answers. It is not unusual to hear the students remind each other to check the reliability of their sources.

In their mathematics class the students have been studying probability concepts and Mr. Ducharme asks the students to apply those principles here in their science class, to solve a problem related to genetics. The students are in communication with a class in Scotland that is also studying genetics and working on the same type of problems. The students know they will be participating in a video chat tomorrow with their partners and they are working hard to explain their mathematical thinking clearly and precisely to one another, so that they will be articulate tomorrow. Mr. Ducharme and his fellow team teachers work hard to incorporate real-life application of the concepts students are studying in their mathematics class.

It was a struggle for Mr. Ducharme to decide to take this time in his science class for literacy instruction. He felt there was an incredible amount of content for his students to master. But, he reasoned, his students would grasp the concepts more fully and more easily meet the standards if they were able to comprehend with a deep understanding the various print and digital texts he was using. To increase their skills in comprehending the various types of science-based materials, they needed to see specific reading and viewing strategies modeled with these texts, and then practice them. So the decision was made.

Phase Outs

- School cultures where reading and writing is the sole responsibility of the reading and language arts teachers.
- Continuous teacher talk.
- A belief system that content area teachers do not have the time to address literacy issues because of all the content they need to teach.
- Classes that do not require students to read, write, view and create print and digital text on a regular basis.
- Instructional practices where students only communicate within the walls of their own classroom and only receive information rather than creating new knowledge.
- Instructional practices that do not differentiate materials and strategies to meet student needs.
- Mathematical understanding that is limited to algorithms and definitions.
- Reinforcement of mathematical principles and concepts that is seen as only the responsibility of the math teachers.
- Programs where students don't have opportunities to apply mathematical principles and concepts.
- Students being kept from studying algebra and other higher-level mathematics by tracking and grouping practices.

CORE PRACTICE 4

Students have access to one-to-one computing technology integrated throughout the curriculum, allowing them to acquire the critical thinking skills related to information, media, and technology.

Rationale

The Maine Learning Technology Initiative (MLTI) provides a unique opportunity for Maine's seventh and eighth grade students to use technology as part of an integrated system of learning. The focus in all schools should be on high quality teaching and learning, where technology tools allow students to access information and use it to support learning at high levels. Increasingly, the interconnection of technology, instruction, and content is a form of knowledge that expert teachers bring into play.

Essential Elements

- Computers are the modern tool for intellectual work. Educators maximize the use of technology to support teaching, learning, and communication within and beyond the schoolhouse walls.

- Every teacher in all of the middle grades is adept at integrating one-to-one computing into their curriculum in order to differentiate, engage, develop skills, and increase achievement and has the resources to do so.

- All Maine students have the technology tools and opportunities they need to be successful in school, regardless of the community in which they live or their grade level. Continued equal access and support for one-to-one computing exists for every student.

- Administrators, the teaching staff, and the technology staff, together develop a common vision of technology integration based on the best educational research on learning and the demands of the 21st century.

- Professional development is provided at all levels for teacher candidates, public school teachers, and university faculty to help them explore and develop their own answers to the following questions: How can technology help students learn? How can it be integrated into teaching? What resources does technology make available to teachers? What new issues does technology pose for schools?

Snapshot: Technology: No Longer An Add-On

Imagine a time-lapse photographic essay about a middle school that embraces technology as a natural part of the teaching and learning process. In this essay, teachers and students over time become more adept at seamlessly infusing computers, software, cameras and tape recorders into everyday activities. Students demonstrate their mastery of a mathematics standard that requires them to apply geometric properties to represent and solve real life problems involving regular and irregular shapes; they do this by plotting navigational routes and presenting their findings in a multimedia presentation during their integrated unit on flight. Others meet history standards by creating iMovies based on their interviews of loggers who were part of the last great log drive on the Kennebec River. Learning emphasizes creating original work to share with an authentic audience of school and community members. Students demonstrate their proficiencies to a worldwide community.

Middle school teachers and students in central Maine have been involved for several years in a myriad of projects where technology provides authentic learning experiences and community service work. Among other things, students have created websites for the town's post office and police department and are in the process of helping the local historical society digitize its documents and pictures so they will be available online for everyone's use. Students are learning interviewing skills, honing their writing abilities for an audience beyond the teacher, and developing web design and presentation skills. Furthermore they are developing habits of civic participation and responsibility at a young age.

Researching, word processing, data collecting, animating, creating multimedia presentations, producing and directing movies, and designing web pages are all tools that the teachers and students use on a regular basis to make learning challenging, meaningful, and engaging.

Phase Outs

- Students who do not have access to one-to-one computing.
- Students who are not permitted to take their school laptops home.
- Students who lack easy access to up-to-date resources in all subjects.
- Teachers who lack access to or are not taking advantage of on-going professional development in integrating one-to-one computing in curriculum and instructional practices.
- Students who leave middle school and do not have one-to-one computer access in high school.

CORE PRACTICE 5

All middle level students experience learning opportunities that emphasize creativity and innovation.

Rationale

Creativity and innovation are recognized as skills that students need for increasingly complex life and work environments. Members of a global society need to be able to demonstrate originality and inventiveness in generating and communicating new ideas. They must be open to different perspectives and work effectively with others on a variety of tasks and across multiple settings. Creative thinking and problem solving deepens students' abilities to accomplish these demanding tasks.

Essential Elements

• Creative thinking is the process of generating original ideas that have value and is included in all content areas.

• The "Cross Content Connections" document in the Maine *Learning Results,* containing examples of the connections among all eight content areas, is used in curriculum planning to aid in incorporating creative opportunities for students in units.

• Middle grades educators have an understanding of Standard C (Creative Problem Solving) of the Visual and Performing Arts Maine *Learning Results*. This standard includes the steps of the creative process.

- Teachers foster a learning environment rich with opportunities for students to explore, discover, and create.

- Creativity is acknowledged as the cornerstone of teaching students in the conceptual age.

- Students have creative-problem solving skills to deal with unpredictability.

- Students have a better chance of reaching their capacity because they are taught to use creativity and innovation.

- Students use the creative process to brainstorm many ideas, explore multiple solutions and expand on ideas and revisions.

Snapshot: *Tying Together* Learning Project

It was early Monday morning and the eighth grade team was reflecting on the past week's learning project. Mrs. Strom, the mathematics teacher, Ms. Sylvia, the art teacher and Mr. Littlefield, the language arts teacher had responded to the students desire to learn more about M.C. Escher's tessellations. In mathematics class students were introduced to the concepts using a hands-on approach. In art class, students worked in groups using their laptops to research M.C. Escher's life and the details of his art work. In language arts, class students compared the writing of poetry and creating tessellations. As the week progressed, students had created several types of tessellations, studied color theory and how it applied to tessellations, and were writing diamante poetry. Students were so engrossed in the work they rarely were ready to leave one class for the next. On Friday, students chose a classroom in which to work and were focused for 2 hours on the completion of their final tessellation; it was painted on a necktie. Students had to select the tie, prepare it, make decisions on color, create and paint their final tessellation templates, and then assess and critique theirs and others. Many students' evaluations included the fact that they had lost track of what content they were doing in which classroom. Others included the importance of the opportunity to think independently yet work side by side for feedback. The work truly overlapped and students were engaged in their learning, so it was easy for the teachers to understand the value of the unit. Tie Day was scheduled for the coming week and the students were looking forward to wearing their artwork with great pride.

Phase Outs

- The arts as undervalued and misunderstood in schools.

- Connections with the arts not being made in classrooms, and arts educators who are not included in middle school conversations.

- Creative and innovation skills not being celebrated or recognized for their importance to each student's development and success.

- Creativity and innovation missing from instructional practices.

- Classrooms environments that are so structured that students are unable to express their individual creativity.

CORE PRACTICE 6

School leaders, using a collaborative and democratic leadership model, focus on establishing an environment that supports the learning needs of young adolescents.

Rationale

Effective middle level principals have a deep understanding of the development of young adolescents and the programs and practices that are best suited to their learning environment. However, as knowledgeable as these principals need to be, they cannot do everything alone. Working closely with both formal and informal leaders through a democratic governance structure, often referred to as a Leadership Team, principals build investment, understanding, and action where teachers are ultimately responsible for the school they make. Highly collaborative and democratic leadership structures result in more students of all abilities attaining higher achievement (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Other ways to support collaboration and democratic processes in a school include professional learning communities and healthy, dynamic teams.

Essential Elements

- The Leadership Team uses the expertise of teachers, team leaders, and the principal to provide leadership for the entire school. The Leadership Team sets direction, analyzes data, promotes risk taking, and functions as both the long and short-term leadership for the school.

- Middle level principals and leaders keep current with middle level research, best practice, and systemic change theory.

- Interdisciplinary teams are the hallmark of effective middle level schools. Time, energy, and resources are allocated for the development and maintenance of healthy team dynamics. Team leaders receive training in facilitation skills.

- Professional learning communities that explore effective instructional practices are in place. Through them teachers examine student work, share strategies, and convene peer reviews of units of study, thus creating a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility for decision making in school improvement efforts.

- System level leadership, including the superintendent, central office staff, and the school board, is knowledgeable about young adolescents and middle level education, particularly within the K-12 spectrum. These school system leaders advocate for excellent middle level schools for every young adolescent.

Snapshot: A High Performing Middle School Leadership Team

The weekly meeting of the Lakeview Middle School Leadership Team is starting. As the 12 members of the Leadership Team enter the room, they engage in conversations and help themselves to snacks. Each of the 12 members represents school staff including academic teams, unified arts, guidance, and administration. 2 of the team leaders are facilitating the meeting and they arrange handouts and post the meeting agenda on the white board. The agenda is separated into three sections: lead, manage, and fires (issues needing immediate attention). The meeting begins with a focused discussion on the progress of their school goal for the year: all students will have equal access to a challenging curriculum. During the weekly delayed starts, several small groups across the school have been meeting to discuss how to improve their practice to meet this goal. One team leader shares how his group has begun to use a moodle (online learning site) to address the needs of some of the more advanced students in their classes. Another describes how members of her team are doing text-based discussions on a new resource that addresses literacy in the content areas. This part of the Leadership Team discussion concludes with the recommendation for sharing with the whole staff at the next staff meeting how these two teams are differentiating instruction as a way of addressing the school goal. Time will be allotted for staff reflection on these experiences and to discuss ways these ideas might be adapted across the school. While there are always important details to talk about, this part of the meeting is the heart and soul of what the leadership team does—focusing on improving teaching and learning.

The tone of the room quickly changes as the team leaders address the management issues on the agenda. As the meeting progresses, all members participate and reach consensus on many, but not all issues. When discussion about school socials runs over the allotted 10 minutes without reaching consensus, the principal asks the team leaders to return to their teams to discuss that item again and to prepare to work through the issue at the next meeting. The Leadership Team also decides that the principal should ask the students who requested the changes to attend the next Leadership Team meeting to present their case. The team develops a list of clarifying questions for the students to consider. The meeting adjourns with a quick review of what has been accomplished, a check for action items for the next week and those responsible for completing tasks, and a beginning list of the agenda items for the next meeting. Before they leave, they review the issues discussed in light of the vision and mission for their school, asking themselves, “Have all decisions made today been consistent with what this school believes?”

Phase Outs

- The principal and/or administrative team who are the sole decision makers and school policy developers.

- Teachers who work in isolation to develop units and plan instructional frameworks.

- Teams that are created and then not given time and resources to develop an effective working relationship.

- A school organization that lacks knowledge of the developmental needs of the young adolescent.

- A piecemeal approach used to implement the different elements of an effective learning environment for the young adolescent.

- Time not being provided to make use of democratic processes for decision-making.

CORE PRACTICE 7

Faculty, administration, and students collaboratively build a safe and caring climate that nurtures the individual while creating a sense of community where everyone is valued.

Rationale

Fear and high-level stress have negative effects on the brain's cognitive abilities and learning and achievement are diminished when these two emotions are present in a school. It is therefore imperative that middle grades schools be places that are physically and emotionally safe for every member of the school community. A warm and caring school climate that emphasizes the importance of relationships sends the message that each individual is valued. Such schools are characterized by clearly communicated, high standards for student behavior. These standards are created with the input of administration, staff, parents, and students and are based on based on commonly held community values. Students are always treated humanely and discipline policies are a part of the learning process.

Essential Elements

• Each member of the school community is valued and treated with respect, and positive relationships are recognized as a key factor in student learning.

• All students and families are welcomed into the school community in an equitable fashion and given full access to school offerings and resources.

• Middle level educators engage the community and students to establish agreed-upon values that will serve as the foundation for the school.

• Each middle level student has at least one adult who knows him/her well and advocates for him/her.

• Students are directly involved in developing policies regarding discipline and standards of behavior in each school.

• Curriculum and programs address the myriad of physical and emotional wellness issues facing the young adolescent.

• Multi-faceted transition plans (elementary to middle level and middle level to high school) are collaboratively planned and implemented.

Snapshot: Valuing School Climate

One central Maine middle school's award-winning advisory program was designed to create a safe and caring school climate. Staff input was and continues to be an integral ingredient of its success. The staff had a picture of what an advisory program should look like, and a team was sent to the Middle Level Education Institute to develop the vision into a plan. At the Institute, the school team created "Fostering Student Ownership, Communication, and Unifying Students" (FOCUS). In the FOCUS advisory program, each staff member would take responsibly for caring for 12 or so students for their four years at their middle school. Over a 2 year period, staff worked together with students to establish what would happen during FOCUS time. These mini-communities became the places where many school projects and issues were shared and discussed.

The "C" in Focus stands for communication. Communication needs to happen on many fronts. Teacher to student, teacher to parent, student to parent and administration to staff are but a few of the communication threads. One program that makes this "C" such a success at this school is the student-led conferences. They too, were born out of FOCUS. The FOCUS community time is the perfect place for students to organize portfolios and ready themselves for a presentation of their portfolios to their parents. The comfort level within these advisory groups allows students the opportunity to practice the sharing of their work with fellow classmates in order to be ready for the student-led conferences. Student-Led Conference Night has had an attendance rate of 95% or better.

The driving force behind the positive atmosphere that exists at this middle school is the adoption of the FISH Philosophy from the Pike Fish Market in Seattle (http://www.charthouse.com/content.aspx?nodeid=1066). This philosophy follows four simple principles: have fun, choose your attitude, make their day and be there. Each component in its own right speaks volumes. Lump them together and a fantastic work place for students and staff is created.

Phase Outs

- A principal who is the sole maker and arbitrator of the rules and policies of the school.

- Students who pass through a middle level school without anyone knowing their interests or goals in life.

- Curriculum content that is so inflexible that the needs of the individual child cannot be addressed.

- School staff who seem not to notice harassment and bullying of students.

- Inadequate or non-existent transition plans (elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school) that are the norm.

- Working relationships between middle level schools and high schools lack that respect and a spirit of collaboration.

CORE PRACTICE 8

Students benefit from organizational structures within the middle grades that maximize the sense of community, support meaningful relationships, and optimize curriculum delivery.

Rationale

In successful middle level schools, there is a strong sense of community established through smaller teams of 2 or 3 teachers and no more than 40-75 students. When these teams stay together for the 2 to 3 years that students are in the middle grades, strong relationships are formed and a sense of belonging is fostered. Some schools that have included multiage grouping in their schools also report that student empowerment and leadership increase as the experienced students on the team welcome and orient new students. Combine a small team structure and an effective advocacy program with a democratic curriculum based on the questions and concerns of students, and a climate is created that says to students, ”You matter here.”

Essential Elements

• 2 or 3 teachers highly qualified in at least two disciplines, staff small interdisciplinary teams of 40-75 students.

• Teams stay together for 2 or 3 years to maximize the ability to build strong relationships and successfully address individual learning needs over a longer span of time.

• Students and teachers set and monitor student-learning goals together in order to help students achieve at high levels.

• A climate of advocacy exists where each student has an adult throughout his/her middle level experience who knows the student well and who is responsible for seeing that the student’s needs for academic success and personal growth are addressed.

Snapshot: Small Team Meeting

Team leader Sue is compiling items to share with the other 2 teachers on her team, who meet every other day. The list seems especially lengthy today, and yet the 70 minutes they spend every other day allows for these extensive discussions. The content varies; however the 3 always meet to update each other on curriculum progress, student needs, or upcoming team/school events. Today, Sue begins the meeting by sharing notes from last night’s Leadership Team meeting. Of special importance is the outcome of a proposal to look at possible scheduling changes for the next school year. The communication from smaller teams to whole school Leadership Team (and back) helps to keep information flowing.

Following the discussion of the Leadership Team notes, Bill asks how their theme of "Change" is progressing. He is concerned that the student presentations in his core class might extend beyond their original time frame. Sue suggests they examine the calendar and revise the schedule slightly. Jane offers another solution of combining core classes for 1 day so that all students could hear the other students' presentations. The flexibility of having a small team of 60 students grants them many options. Each teacher spends a few minutes updating the others on how the unit is progressing in his or her class.

The bulk of team time today is spent preparing for the student-led parent conferences. They examine copies of goal cards students and teachers completed at the last conferences and review samples of the students' electronic portfolios. They decide students should revisit their goals prior to the conferences and decide whether each goal had been met (with evidence to support the decision), or would be met by the end of the year, or would be carried over into the following school year. (This team of 60 students and 3 core teachers will stay intact for 3 years.) Their students were becoming proficient at setting and meeting learning goals.

During the final minutes of team planning time, Sue, Bill, and Jane jointly complete a student referral to the Student Assessment Team and review the student-written parent newsletter the team sends home and to the exploratory teachers each week.

Phase Outs

- Large interdisciplinary teams that focus on individual disciplines and are teams in name only.
- Students who are not known well by the staff.
- Schools that are organized solely by departments.
- Expectations and goals for students lack continuity across the different grade levels.
- Team meetings that focus primarily on crisis management and/or daily details not related to curriculum and instruction.
- The lack of communication and common goals between the interdisciplinary teams and the exploratory/allied arts teams.

CORE PRACTICE 9

Students have access to a co-curricular program that encourages all students to participate, develop skills, be a member of a team or activity, and simply have fun.

Rationale

Exploration has long been an essential concept of middle level education. Co-curricular offerings in such areas as drama, clubs, and athletics have been an ideal way to offer students experiences and opportunities. Middle level schools should offer a wide variety of these activities. The goal of these activities should be to engage students in worthwhile and enjoyable experiences with an emphasis on leadership, citizenship, and sportsmanship. These activities should help students gain the knowledge and skills associated with the activity for their enjoyment and benefit. However, more than in any other co-curricular area, a sense of balance is often lost when middle level athletics mimic high school athletics. The publication, *Sports Done Right,* from the Middle Level Athletics Task Force (MLATF) under the auspices of The Maine Center for Sport and Coaching at the University of Maine, provides excellent recommendations for a school system to use as guidelines as they review their athletic programs.

Essential Elements

- The co-curricular learning environment is developmentally appropriate for young adolescents and addresses the great variety of student interests. The middle school students' physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual characteristics are a priority in planning and implementation. Additionally, programs develop creativity and problem-solving, good citizenship, leadership, and character.

- Decisions regarding intramural and interscholastic activities are governed by a sincere concern for the safety, health, developmental needs, and educational well-being of middle level students; the main goal is to provide an enjoyable experience for all participants, while teaching skills and teamwork. *Sports Done Right* is used as basis for the school's athletic program.

- Parents are educated regarding the purpose and philosophy of middle level activities.

Snapshot: Co-Curricular Activities for Everyone

It's a snowy February day as we enter a local middle school while the school buses are loading for the trip home. As we walk through the halls, however, we don't find an after school ghost town. There are activities and students at work throughout the building. Basketballs are thudding off the backboard in the gym where the teams are practicing for their next game, and down the hall some students are practicing their rock climbing skills on the school's climbing wall. Peeking into another room, we find a group of students thoroughly engrossed in their cooking club activity for the day; next door other students are huddled intently over their jewelry making projects. The future engineers and inventors of the world are problem-solving as they program their Lego-Robots to perform complicated tasks. Looking down the hall, we see students exiting the after-school café as they head toward the rooms set up for homework help and mathematics tutorial. Healthy snacks reboot the brain so students are ready to concentrate on academics for

a while longer this afternoon. Winding down the corridor we hear grunting and look in and see students keeping in shape by weightlifting and doing an aerobics workout. As we finish our tour, we meet a group of seventh graders brainstorming ways they can support the local Food Bank—service-learning projects are a tradition at this school. This middle school is determined to provide a vibrant and responsive co-curricular program in order to keep their students engaged in healthy activities and to provide a multitude of experiences that broaden their students' perceptions of themselves and their world.

Phase Outs

- Interscholastic sports that are for the elite few and are the only after-school activities.
- Limited offering of activities.
- Coaches who do not have a solid background in the physical and emotional development of young adolescents.
- Over-scheduling young adolescents in activities so that they do not have adequate time to devote to their academic studies or sufficient down time for rest and relaxation.
- Highly competitive athletic programs that are not consistent with middle level philosophy.

CORE PRACTICE 10

Teachers' professional development is an ongoing process that is embedded into the daily life of the school.

Rationale

Teacher quality is the most important component in ensuring the excellence of a student's educational experience. Investments in professional development made to enhance this quality are at the epicenter of improving student learning. "The goal of professional development is to improve student learning, and the means to that end is continuous development of a teacher's knowledge and skills" (Jackson & Davis, 2000). The transformation of middle grades schools into high performing middle level schools is contingent upon continuous, high quality, and pre- and in-service professional education. The seamless flow of professional development and its ultimate effect on student learning must be part of the daily experience of every staff member. The school must be organized in ways that promote the kind of collaborative, professional problem-solving that is the hallmark of effective professional growth.

Essential Elements

- Professional development experiences and activities are planned with input from participants, are coordinated and comprehensive, and are tied to the mission and vision of the school.

- Personal professional development plans increase a teacher's knowledge base in pedagogy, content, and adolescent development.

- The professional development plan is ongoing and provides for multiple assessments of the plan to determine if the stated goals are being achieved.

- The professional development experience models best practice in learning research and makes excellent use of available professional planning and learning time.

- All professional development activities result in improved student achievement.

- Every school has the sustained assistance of at least one individual whose role is to facilitate staff members' professional development.

- Individuals and teams are able to see successful achievement of professional development goals.

Snapshot: Team Meeting Focused on Reading Literacy

Bob, Mary, Daria and Jeff gather with their school's literacy coach during one of their team's common planning times. Reading across the content areas has been a primary professional development initiative this year for the system. A 7-12 Literacy Leadership Team, aided by a consultant, leads the literacy work in the individual schools and regular all-staff workshops. At the middle school, the departments share ideas and strategies in monthly department meetings and part of each faculty meeting is also devoted to the topic of reading. Finally, once every 3 or 4 weeks, teams meet with the literacy coach. Today the discussion focuses on helping students learn to interact with text. Mary shares that she's been teaching the students notation techniques in language arts and that she's seeing her students more engaged in their reading. Daria, the science teacher, expresses frustration that she's not seeing the level of engagement and comprehension that she desires, even though she's having the students read articles that are rich in interesting details. Jeff asks her if she's using any kind of graphic organizer and jumps up and rushes off to his room to grab an example. It's a history story map that helps kids identify the key people, critical actions, and results of important historical events. The teachers are drawn to this particular graphic organizer and remark how it could be adapted to their curriculum areas. Bob reflects, "Something like this would be useful with lengthy word problems, helping the students identify the key information they need." The meeting ends with each team member leaving with a new tool from Jeff to adapt and try out in their classrooms in their quest to help each of their students develop the behaviors and skills of good readers.

Phase Outs

- Professional development programs that are isolated one-day events and lack any follow-up.

- School vision and professional development plans that are not connected.
- Professional development plans that are not connected to increasing student well-being and achievement.
- Existing opportunities for professional development (e.g., team meetings, in-house experts) that are not part of an overall professional development plan.
- Common high school and middle level curriculum and instruction issues that are not addressed through a coordinated professional development plan.
- Necessary financial and human resources for professional development that are not provided.

CORE PRACTICE 11

Parents are actively involved in the life of the school and their child's education.

Rationale

Middle school parents are caught in the middle! New middle school parents are often accustomed to an inviting and nurturing elementary school, close contact with one teacher, and children who like to see their parents at school. That scenario often changes with children in middle school who work very hard to keep their two worlds -- home and school -- as separate as possible. As young adolescents assert more independence, they want school to be theirs alone. Middle level schools also tend to be larger, more complex, and in some cases, seemingly more impersonal. Finally, some parents may not feel welcome, and may sense that the school does not want them involved; or they may feel uncomfortable with a school that operates differently from the one they attended. All of these factors inhibit parents from getting actively involved in their young adolescent's middle level school. However, the collaborative team structure of an effective middle level school lends itself to teams and parents establishing an open, consistent, and meaningful way to communicate about what they share in common -- the young adolescent.

Essential Elements

- Each middle level school and its individual teams has a specific, comprehensive, and ongoing plan to involve the family and community in the life of the school.

- Schools use a variety of resources to communicate with families and the community. While traditional phone calls, and newsletters or notices sent or mailed home are all effective with some families, others need access to phone-in lines, websites, e-mail, and more. Schools must make every effort to make timely information available to parents and the community on their time schedule, not merely when convenient for the school.

- Every middle level school has someone who is responsible for coordinating the work of the school and community. Involving the lives of the school and the community it serves will yield great dividends for both.

- A collaborative partnership exists among the school, the student and his/her family.

- The secondary education experience is a seamless 6-12 process for the student and his/her family.

Snapshot: Parents as Full Partners

One Maine middle school Parent Team's stated mission is "…to be a partner with the school in meeting the educational needs of our students." This long-standing partnership has resulted not only in some great moments, but also in a pattern of support and advocacy for the middle school's mission and vision by its families.

Each year since its inception, the Parent Team provided input and feedback to the principal and the school committee regarding what works well and what needs to be improved at the middle school. As a result of this kind of participation, the middle school was able to increase library services at the school from less than half time to full time within two years of its inception. On the strength of parental feedback, the size of the foreign language program was doubled in 1 budget year. In the same year parents supported a part time computer coordinator. After convincing the administration of that need, they supported an increase to full-time the following year.

The middle school Parent Team actively supported the school's goal of addressing harassment and bullying by writing a large multi-year study grant. The result of their effort provided time and resources to develop an effective program of awareness, prevention, and response to bullying in the school.

The most striking example of a strong partnership between a middle school and its parents has nothing to do with budget or programs. Not long ago, a middle school critic wrote a scathing article specifically denigrating the community's middle school, its teachers, the administration, and its students. In the following weeks, the middle school Parent Team orchestrated a series of rebuttal letters, providing specific examples disproving the critic's negative allegations and broad generalizations. The outcome was that the critic who wrote the negative letter asked to attend a meeting of the Parent Team leaders and apologized for attacking the school. An active and engaged parent team certainly made a difference for these Maine middle schools, and can for yours as well!

Phase Outs

- One-dimensional communication systems with parents that do not take into account the diverse natures of the modern family and time demands on these families.

- Reactive rather than proactive approaches to communicating with parents about their children and difficult school-wide issues.

- Power vested in one group of parents based on their socio-economic status in the community.

- The lack of a cohesive K-12 education experience for parents.

CORE PRACTICE 12

Teachers, administrators, and staff who are responsible for the education of young adolescents are knowledgeable about their developmental needs and appreciate them for their uniqueness.

Rationale

Young adolescents are passing through an intense transitional period that affects their bodies, their intellectual development, and their sense of self. Educators working with these students must understand these changes and their impact on learning and achievement. Mertens, Flowers & Mulhall report that the instructional practices of teachers with middle level certification tend to be research based. When these practices are combined with teaming, the students in these schools demonstrated over time the biggest gains in achievement levels (Mertens, Flowers & Mulhall). In *Turning Points 2000*, Davis and Jackson argue forcefully that neither an endorsement attached to pre-existing certification or overlapping certification drive significant changes in serving young adolescents. With few notable exceptions, high-quality middle grade teacher preparation programs simply do not exist in states without mandatory licensure for teaching in middle grades that is separate and distinct from licenses for elementary education and secondary education.

Essential Elements

- Each member of the staff has studied in undergraduate, or graduate school, or through professional development opportunities the unique developmental characteristics of the young adolescent.

- Each member of the staff has studied in undergraduate or graduate school, or through professional development opportunities the principles of exemplary middle level education.

- Curriculum, instructional practices, assessment strategies, co-curriculum programs, policies and procedures are designed and implemented with the developmental needs of the young adolescent in mind.

- Faculty, administrators and staff members value the uniqueness of the young adolescent and enjoy working with this age group.

Snapshot: Graduation

Twenty teachers are on stage for their hooding ceremony. They have earned their Masters degree in middle level education and are feeling relief that the grueling days of teaching full-time and studying for their graduate classes are over, and at the same time

are jubilant about their accomplishment. Having studied the nature and needs of the young adolescent, they are crafting more relevant and rigorous units of study and presenting them using strategies that engage students and scaffold learning effectively. They confidently address adolescent literacy issues through their instruction, ensuring that their students will have the reading and writing skills they need for higher education or well-paying jobs. No longer intimidated by one-to one-computing, the use of computers and the web are integral parts of their curriculum and instruction. These middle level teachers have come to appreciate the interconnectedness of the elements of middle level philosophy, and work in their schools to implement the components of effective educational practices for young adolescents. They came to be teaching middle level students for a variety of reasons, but each has chosen to stay because of being unable to imagine being anywhere else.

Phase Outs

- A licensing system exists that does not recognize that teachers of young adolescents need expertise in the unique characteristics of these students as well as content expertise.

- University programs that do not address middle level curriculum and instruction in pre-service programs.

- Placement of pre-service teachers in middle level schools that do not use research-based exemplary practices in the education of the young adolescent.

- Teachers transferred to the middle level without any requirement that they become knowledgeable about the age level and its unique needs—intellectual, social, physical and psychological.

- Teachers unprepared to integrate 21st century skills including literacy, numeracy, creativity, and technology into their curriculum and instruction.