

## OUR MIDDLE SCHOOL JOURNEY

### RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

#### ***Learning, Instruction, Achievement, Motivation, Homework, Grading, Discipline***

Several years ago MMS began a careful examination of our collaborative assumptions about a variety of educational topics. This examination of assumptions was not only encouraged by our own school district's strategic plan, but also a part of a much greater shift in educational excellence around the globe. It is tough to deny the value in examining our cognitive assumptions from time to time no matter what career path we have followed. MMS began to study such concepts as "Professional Learning Communities", "Response to Intervention", "Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support" and "Standards Based Grading." We studied together, we collaborated together, and we decided together. Sometimes parents, students, community members and other educators are curious or perhaps even a bit confused about the recent changes that have taken place. The following information may help build a better understanding:

#### **What did we learn as we studied?**

**We recognized "learning is not a race."** Each student is unique. We re-examined ways to meet the learning needs of students who learn faster or slower than the majority of our student population. We also challenged ourselves to pay close attention to how and why the majority of our learners were achieving or not achieving. Learning should not be optional. Learning should be required.

We have always known individual students learn differently. Knowing how to deliver instruction in the most effective manner is the difficult part. We continue to develop new and innovative ways to incorporate additional time and support for students who need it. We also continue to incorporate enrichment lessons for those who demonstrate proficiency. We continue to adjust our instructional strategies to meet the learning needs of all of our students. This will continue to be a major area of professional development for our teachers and para educators.

**We discovered that some of our traditional assumptions about learning, instruction, achievement, motivation, homework, grading and discipline were faulty and perhaps unintentionally damaging to our middle level learners.** While it would be impossible to summarize all of our learning in one article, a few of our major outcomes are indicated below:

We learned to focus our attention on four basic questions - the foundation of what we do:

1. What do we want students to know and learn?

*This is about our curriculum map aligned with state and national standards at each grade level.*

2. How do we know if students have learned it?

*This is about our balanced assessment system – AIMS, WKCE, EXPLORE, Literacy Tracking Card, Classroom Data, Standards Based Grading*

3. What do we do if students do not learn it?

*This is about our intervention plans. A pyramid description may be viewed on our MMS webpage.*

4. What do we do if students have already learned it?

*This is about enrichment plans. A pyramid description may be viewed on our MMS webpage. Our Gifted and Talented Handbook is available on our district webpage.*

### Teacher Collaboration Changed

Collaboration time among teachers began to focus more about student LEARNING and less about teaching. Teachers have made a commitment that ALL students CAN LEARN. Our mission is to partner with every student and every family to find the capacity to learn in each child and nourish each child's capacity throughout each school year. Learning contracts, Homework Lunch, and our new BRAINZ Study Skills Center are products of our most recent collaborative work at MMS.

*"This year my 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers all met with me to ask me why I was failing. I felt sort of weird at first, but then I could tell they really cared. I didn't realize teachers spent time talking about kids. Everyone seemed to know the same things about my life at school. They helped me organize my stuff and made a list of all of my missing work. I have a special time to meet with one of my teachers for extra help in math and reading. My principal met with me too. I know I have to make changes to do better, but I am actually glad to know my teachers and principals are paying attention to me." Anonymous MMS 7<sup>th</sup> Grader*

### Relationships Changed Teachers are amazing student advocates!

MMS developed a student driven Core Value Program to remain our constant mission and reminder to be positive citizens within our school culture. We celebrate our academic, extra-curricular, and social victories each term. We motivate students with positive reinforcement by promoting the concept that **"Doing what is right matters at MMS!"** Morning CARES/Resource has become our "soft landing" for each student to start their day feeling connected and supported. All teachers have been trained in the research based character education model: Developmental Design. Knowing how to support the sensitive and hormonal adolescent years of middle school is key to our success! CARES is also used for intervention and enrichment balanced with guided homework study per grade level.

MMS adopted a popular discipline model called PBIS – Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support which is designed around the latest brain research. This three tiered model involves clear documentation and a series of interventions for all student behavioral issues at the middle level. All parents/guardians and students sign our PBIS Pledge the first day(s) of the school year.

*"I love my CARES teacher! My CARES teacher starts almost every morning by having our CARES class in a circle. The circle is about the power of respect. After circle time, we do different*

*things each day. Sometimes we work on school work. Other days we walk or do a physical activity. Sometimes CARES is the best part of my day.” Anonymous MMS 8<sup>th</sup> Grader*

*“Common planning time has helped me to become a better teacher in many ways. I appreciate the time to exchange ideas with my common planning partner. We have developed better curriculum and lesson plans. Our assessments are common enabling us to compare results and strategies. We are currently learning more and more about how to use our common assessment results to improve learning in the classroom.” MMS Teacher*

### Instruction and Learning Improved

Teachers have implemented more and more instructional strategies into the classroom related to the emotional and multiple intelligences of the middle level learner. Teachers have examined current curriculum maps to meet current state and national standards. Teachers have shifted more attention to *why* individual students learn or *why learning did not occur*. In the past if a student received instruction and did not learn, we may have left the student behind – moving on to new instruction. Now we choose to turn our attention to focus upon what our professional obligation is as educators of children to ensure learning for ALL. **The hope and promise of a good education is what makes dreams come true for children and families.**

*“My son was identified for special reading help. I didn’t like the idea of my son being pulled out of class for reading help, until I began to see the difference the program was making. My son has since been “graduated” from this reading pull-out intervention. He is proud and so am I.” Anonymous MMS Parent*

### Grading Changed      *Setting Standards Higher*

Our grading and assessment research began several years ago. We spent several years studying grading and assessment. Our staff had the opportunity to work with national experts such as Tom Gusky, Cassandra Erkens, and Ken O’Connor. We are committed to a plan of continuous improvement as it pertains to our grading practices at the middle level.

### Key Assumptions

- During this process we realized the importance of evaluating behavior separate from learning. We do not deduct points or discount learning because of an unwanted behavior.
- We removed unnecessary barriers. For example, we do not average learning over time. Rather, we honor the most recent achievement and learning at the summation of a unit of study. By doing so, we avoid penalizing a student for not understanding a particular learning standard at the first attempt. We all know we learn from our mistakes.
- **We have examined the purpose and meaning of homework.** Although we believe in the concept of home practice work, we recognize that students often do not complete homework or other course work because they do not understand it. We prefer to

assign guided practice that can be done in class with supplemental practice work to be taken home. All student work is valued and evaluated as part of a teachers' summative grade.

- **We maintain due dates for all course work and assessment.** Students who fail to complete work on time are evaluated accordingly on our standards based report card in the area of "work habits." For example, a student who consistently fails to complete work on time will be assessed unsatisfactory in the area of "Responsibility", "Participation" and "Persistence." Grades reflecting a student's work habits are very important to colleges and universities as well as the work world in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Some may argue grades reflecting a student's work habits might be more important than an academic grade in a particular subject area. **We discourage and accept late work because we expect learning.** Learning is not optional.
- **We have adopted a 5 point standards based grading scale.** The scale is based upon 4,3,2,1, and Incomplete. It is often referred to as a 4 point scale; however, we utilize *Incomplete* to code a lack of achievement rather than a digit. This scale provides quality information for parents and students about the achievement in each learning standard cluster per grading term.

While no grade report is completely accurate, our current report card is a great improvement as compared to our traditional report card that simply provided an averaged grade for the term per course. Our goal is to revise the current report card options to include a plus and minus per summative grade by the fall of 2012. *Additional information about grading policies are available upon request and on our website.*

*"I wasn't sure I liked standards- based grading when the middle school first used this report. Kids didn't really understand why the report card changed. We were so used to As or Bs. Now, that I understand the system better, I understand so much more about what standards I need to work on in each class. I like knowing that I have more than one chance to learn something I didn't get at first without getting a bad grade." Anonymous MHS 9<sup>th</sup> grader*

#### Who collaborated and who decided to rethink educational assumptions at MMS?

Menomonie School District is not only a very progressive district as it pertains to educational excellence, it is also a very collaborative district. Teacher collaboration occurs between grade levels, between departments and between various goals task teams. The MMS Site Council is the decision making group at our school. This middle level council includes the principal, the assistant principal, teachers, guidance counselors, clerical assistants, para professionals, and parents. Currently, we seek a parent volunteer to participate in our meetings. Historically, we have included one or two parents per year. Our Site Council studies together, collaborates together, and decides together. Lifelong learning has and will continue to be the heart and soul of our professional and moral commitment to our students, family, and community at MMS.

*"This year our middle school staff read a MCRel document titled "Changing the Odds for Student Success: What Matters Most" recommended by our principal. I am glad to have collaborative study time that directly impacts what I do in the classroom. After reading this document and discussing it with my collaborative team, I have begun to focus more of my attention to the*

*demographic and cultural factors among my students. I know I am making better connections with my students.” Anonymous MMS Teacher*

Right or Wrong? *Change can be misunderstood.*

Change of any kind is managed differently from one person to the next. Adults, like children, learn at different rates and in various ways. Sometimes educators, students, parents, and others ask me why change is necessary. Sometimes change makes us feel as though the “old way” was wrong. I guess we need to remember that the “old way” *wasn't wrong at the time*. Yet, it would be careless and irresponsible to deny our children of the best education possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Professional Learning Communities <http://www.solutiontree.com>

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports <http://www.pbis.com>

Response To Intervention <http://www.Rti4success.org>

Developmental Design <http://www.originsOnline.org>

21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills <http://www.sdmatechwikispaces.com>

A Repair Kit For Grading Author – Ken O Connor

Whatever It Takes Author – Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Gayle Karhanek

My Door Is Always Open To You,  
Principal Stacey Everson