

Middle School Programs That Work

To carry out their mission of being responsive to the needs of young adolescents, middle schools must offer a wide range of guidance services to their students. Ms. McElroy describes the multifaceted program that has been developed to ease the way for students at Crabapple Middle School.

BY CAMILLE McELROY



Illustration by Susan Todd

YOUNG adolescents face a wide range of choices. What is more, every day they bring events from their out-of-school lives to school with them. Thus middle-level schools that are developmentally responsive to their students must have on staff teachers and specialized professionals who are readily available to offer the broad range of help that many students need.¹

An essential component of an effective middle school is a comprehensive counseling program that includes individual and group counseling, classroom guidance, test interpretation, skills-building instruction, parent education, and assistance with parent and teacher conferences. The guidance program at Crabapple Middle School, where I am an assistant principal, emphasizes communications, conflict resolution, and organizational skills. During the 1990s, we implemented a number of special guidance activities at Crabapple. These included programs to facilitate transitions from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school, strategies to improve academic skills, a conflict management program to improve discipline, and an incentive program to recognize student accomplishments. In this article, I will describe the programs that have worked for us.

Transition from Elementary to Middle School

The transition from elementary to middle school can be a difficult and stressful experience for students. At Crabapple, the

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sixth-grade counselor coordinates the elementary-to-middle-school transition program. Input from other counselors and from fifth-grade teachers at feeder schools is used in the effort. This program was developed to provide rising sixth-graders with information about the procedures and programs at Crabapple. The program consists of three components: the Bridges program, visits to Crabapple by elementary students, and locker night.

The Bridges program. Sixth-graders at Crabapple are an integral part of the Bridges program, which seeks to smooth the transition from fifth grade to middle school. Crabapple sixth-graders, selected by their teachers, work with the sixth-grade counselor to provide an overview of Crabapple Middle School for rising fifth-graders. The sixth-grade Bridges participants visit classrooms at feeder elementary schools and discuss ways for fifth-graders to be successful at Crabapple.

Elementary school visits. Elementary school students also visit and tour Crabapple for a morning. Student members of the Bridges program present aspects of middle school life to the visiting fifth-graders. At the end of the presentation, sixth-grade Bridges participants take the fifth-graders on a tour of Crabapple classrooms.

Locker night. In August each year, prior to the first day of school, incoming sixth-graders are invited to a "locker night" at Crabapple Middle School. Learning to use lockers is a particularly stressful experience for elementary students who are moving to middle school, so Crabapple gives these new students an opportunity to come to school with their parents, obtain a locker number and combination from the homeroom teacher, and have time to practice opening the locker with their parents. This practice alleviates many anxious moments on the first day of middle school.

Transition from Middle to High School

The transition from middle school to high school is another stressful time in the lives of young adolescents. A smooth transition requires good communication between the staffs of both schools. A strong working relationship exists between the staffs of Crabapple Middle School and Roswell High School and has proved essential in developing a successful transition program. Each year, we have refined and

evaluated the program to make it better. Every September, the assistant principals and counselors of the two schools meet to examine feedback from staff and students with regard to the previous year's program and to plan the current year's transition activities. We have found the following activities to be beneficial in bridging the gap between middle school and high school.

- By meeting with their high school
- counselors during eighth grade,
- students begin long-term relationships.

The Bridges program. A trained corps of ninth-graders, in teams of two, visit Crabapple eighth-grade classrooms to discuss Roswell High School's academics and student life. These ninth-grade Bridges participants discuss the significant role of academics, the importance of self-discipline, the value of extracurricular activities, and the important resources available to incoming students through administrators, counselors, and resource officers. Crabapple students ask questions about programs, courses, and activities and receive answers from a student's point of view.

Teacher exchange. Crabapple Middle School teachers visit classes at Roswell High School, and Roswell teachers visit classes at Crabapple. This activity helps teachers from both schools understand expectations, routines, and developmental needs of students. Each year, administrators receive positive feedback from participating teachers at the end of the exchange.

Meeting about course requirements. Representatives of Roswell High School, including teachers, administrators, and a counselor, meet with eighth-grade teachers to discuss course requirements and placement guidelines. Booklets that include descriptions of the high school courses along with placement guidelines and lists of criteria are given to all eighth-grade teachers.

Eighth-grade parent meeting at the high school. An administrator from Roswell High School conducts a general informational meeting with eighth-grade parents each February. This session is followed by a meeting of parents with the heads of the high school's departments. A meeting is also held for parents of students in the

gifted program to discuss ways in which the high school model of instruction differs from that of the middle school.

Meeting for eighth-graders in the gifted program. Roswell High School teachers of the gifted visit Crabapple to meet with gifted students. They explain the high school's gifted program and answer questions about it. This meeting takes place im-

mediately after the morning homeroom period at Crabapple.

Student visits to high school. Eighth-grade students visit and tour the high school. Typically, these are morning visits and involve an overview of academic and extracurricular opportunities offered at the high school. After the overview, the eighth-graders are given a tour of elective classes.

Individual conferences. High school counselors visit Crabapple for individual conferences with parents and students. This activity was added in 1998 and is an important addition to the transition program activities. A large commitment of time is required of the high school counselors to complete the conferences, but the sessions are perceived to be very worthwhile. The entire set of student and parent conferences takes seven to eight days.

Individual appointment cards are sent to each eighth-grader, with a time and location specified for meeting with the counselor who will counsel them for the four years they will spend at Roswell High School. (There are five counselors at Roswell High School, and students are divided among them alphabetically by last name.) By meeting with their counselors during the eighth grade, students begin long-term relationships and recognize a familiar face when they get to high school. During the 20-minute sessions, each counselor creates a ninth-grade schedule and develops a four-year plan of study for the student. By the end of the session, each student knows the courses he or she will be enrolling in during ninth grade and has a general plan for the four years of high school.

Magnet school presentations. In addition to activities addressing transitions between Crabapple Middle School and Ros-

well High School, our middle school counselors arrange presentations about area magnet schools. Eighth-graders in Fulton County may select from several options, including Roswell High School and magnet schools in math and science, the arts, or international studies. Each year, representatives of the various magnet schools make presentations to eighth-graders at Crabapple. Parents may attend the presentations at Crabapple during the day or visit the magnet schools during their open house sessions in the evening.

Career counseling presentations. Crabapple students are also given career counseling. A career counselor from the Fulton County Schools meets with small groups of eighth-graders to discuss the changing workplace and career trends. The counselor talks with students about the importance of choosing courses of study and electives wisely. The career counselor also presents a program at Crabapple in the evening for the parents of eighth-graders.

Other Support Programs

A number of programs have been implemented, evaluated, and determined to be successful in addressing specific needs of Crabapple's students.

Mentoring program. Crabapple Middle School applied for and received from the state department of education a "morning-mentoring grant." Beginning in October and ending in May, the program takes place each Wednesday morning from 8:20 to 9:05. Titled One-at-a-Time Middle School Mentoring, the program was initiated in 1996, and funding has been continued in each year since.

Teachers or counselors identify as candidates for the program students who are struggling academically. These at-risk students do not qualify for special education services and so can sometimes "fall between the cracks." Students who particularly need positive role models may also be referred by specialists on the educational support team or by school social workers. Particular attention is paid to students who have test scores that are between one and three years below grade level. The goals of the mentoring program include raising test scores in areas where students are deficient, providing training to every child in the program in the use of a laptop computer, encouraging the use of an "agenda" to help organize assignments,

promoting pride in academic improvement and attendance, and modeling caring and commitment.

Members of the PTA are responsible for recruiting mentors through visits to companies and churches, through newsletter articles (including PTA and subdivision newsletters), and through phone calls to business partners. Mentors have included employees of Coca Cola, a member of the school board, an employee of IBM, a retired principal, a retired Crabapple secretary, several parents, and even students from Roswell High School. For some high school students, mentoring middle-schoolers is a way to complete their own service-

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Mentors receive training that includes a rationale for mentoring, descriptions of organizational procedures, suggestions for mentoring, and information about the computer lab. At each weekly meeting, mentors award points to the students for being on time, for having an agenda with written weekly assignments, and for staying on task during the sessions. In the weeks leading up to statewide testing, mentors work with students on their test-taking skills. Mentors routinely focus on improving areas of weakness. Some mentors even make home visits and phone students at home to see if they need additional help.

Through the mentoring grant, Crabapple was able to purchase several laptop computers for students to use at home. Word-processing, math, and vocabulary programs are installed on them. In 1998-99 the number of parent mentors and volunteers from the business community grew. More training sessions in the use of the laptops were held, and students are checking out computers more frequently. One unexpected outcome of the mentoring program is that a veteran mentor from the business sector has entered teacher training.

Saturday math tutoring. Saturday Scholars Math Tutoring began in October 1998. This program was organized and implemented by an assistant principal and a teacher. Teachers supplied lists of students who

were struggling in math. Letters were mailed to parents inviting these students to participate in tutoring on Saturday mornings from 10 to 11:30. Students from Roswell High School serve as tutors. The high school students represent the National Honor Society, the Beta Club, Interact, and other service clubs. Eighth-grade students from Crabapple who are advanced in math also serve as tutors. Students are placed with a tutor and given a packet of math activities provided by their math teacher. The tutor and the student work through the packet, and the tutor explains how to solve the problems. The tutors are also trained by a Crabapple math teacher to use the software in

the math lab as an additional strategy to reinforce math concepts.

The program has continued during the 1999-2000 school year, with an average participation of 25 students and 25 tutors each Saturday. At the end of the 1998-99 school year, math grades for students participating regularly in the program increased an average of 10%.

The tutors are very enthusiastic and dedicated. They take a deep interest in their students and often follow up by checking on their students' test scores and grades.

Peer mediation program. A peer mediation program was implemented several years ago. Seventh- and eighth-graders apply to be peer mediators. The purpose of peer mediation is to train students to help their peers settle minor disputes. Training is provided at the beginning of each school year. Peer mediators are trained in listening skills, understanding conflict, the peer mediation process, using constructive criticism, and role-playing. Several teachers participate in the training and are available on a rotating basis to monitor any peer mediation sessions. Teachers are located in an adjoining room during peer mediation sessions and intervene only when necessary. The objective is for peer mediators to guide the disputants to a solution. Students may refer themselves for peer mediation, or a staff member may make the referral.

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in *Turning Points* are as valid today as they were in 1989. There is more agreement than inconsistency between those ideals and the subsequent vision statement that was produced by middle school leaders in 1997. *Turning Points* stressed academic as well as personal and social development, stating, "Every student in the middle grades should learn to think critically through mastery of an appropriate body of knowledge." The vision statement recognizes that "high-performing middle schools are academically excellent . . . developmentally responsive . . . and socially equitable."⁴ Most of those concerned with middle-grades education agree that a balanced approach is best. With strong, consistent leadership at all levels, including national study groups, state and local officials, building administrators, and teachers, we can create the middle schools our nation's children deserve and that we all desire.

1. *Statewide Evaluation of Georgia's Middle Grades Educational Programs: Phase 1 Report* (Atlanta: Georgia Department of Education, 1998).

2. Eric Gonzalez, "Barnes Defends Education Reform: Governor Hits the Road to Toughest Legislation," *Athens Banner Herald*, 1 April 2000, p. 1.

3. Paul George, "A Middle School—If You Can Keep It Part II," *National Middle School Association*, Washington, D.C., Occasional Paper, Fall 1999.

4. John Norton and Anne C. Lewis, "Middle-Grades Reform," *Kappan* Special Report, *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 2000, p. K7.

Programs That Work

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Saturday school program. In 1997 the administration at Crabapple searched for alternatives to traditional in-school and out-of-school suspension. An assistant principal developed and initiated the Saturday school program to alter student behavior, reduce the number of repeat offenders, and keep students in classrooms.

Some offenses that have resulted in a student's being assigned to Saturday school are disrespectful behavior, inappropriate language, refusing to follow directions, technology tampering or misuse, vandalism of school or personal property, being tardy, skipping class, or skipping school. (Some more serious offenses still result in suspensions instead of Saturday school.) Students who skip school are assigned to two days of Saturday school for a total of seven hours: two Saturday school assignments equal the amount of classroom time

missed on a regular day.

Saturday school begins with a school service project, such as picking up litter, landscaping, cleaning lockers, washing windows, cleaning classrooms, or cleaning the cafeteria. This is followed by a session of academic work because many students who exhibit inappropriate behavior also struggle academically. Students work on academic assignments provided by their teachers, but they also work on reading comprehension and math skills. Saturday school concludes with a character education component. Videos are presented that deal with such topics as respect, anger control, manners, and conflict resolution. The videos used are matched to the offenses. A discussion and question-and-answer session follow the video presentations. The last portion of the character development component involves a student-written action plan. In it, the student describes how he or she plans to make better choices in the future.

Saturday school has been a success. Very few students repeat Saturday school.

Recognition and rewards. Because the Crabapple school community recognizes the importance of honoring students for outstanding accomplishments, a cooperative relationship is maintained with the Roswell Rotary Club. Each month, eighth-grade teachers nominate students for Rotary Club Student of the Month. One student per month is selected from nominations based on six characteristics: being cooperative, having good attendance, being committed to academic achievement, being trustworthy, being respectful, and being involved in the community. The student, nominating teachers, principal, and eighth-grade assistant principal at-

tend the Rotary Club meeting where the award is presented. At the meeting, the nominating teacher describes the student's accomplishments and introduces the student. The Rotary Club honors the student with a savings bond. Rotary Club students of the month are featured on the school Web page and on a school bulletin board.

The faculty and staff of Crabapple Middle School are committed to providing programs to meet the educational and emotional needs of all our students. The programs I have described here are designed to smooth transitions from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school, to improve academic skills, to deal with a range of affective concerns of young adolescents, and to recognize significant accomplishments. Some of these programs are more academically focused; others concentrate more on the affective domain. And that is as it should be, for it is imperative that middle schools implement programs that both challenge their students academically and meet their diverse and changing emotional needs.

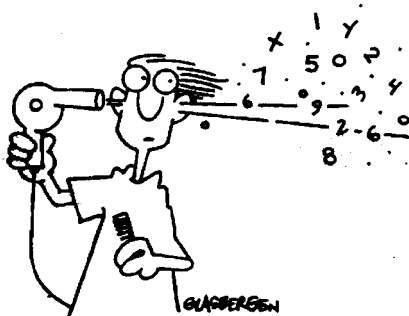
1. *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle-Level Schools* (Columbus, Ohio: National Middle School Association, 1995), p. 31.

Multi-Age Teaming

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year of the cycle dealt with subject matter typically taught to seventh-graders and the third year with that taught to sixth-graders. This approach was very successful and was embraced enthusiastically by teachers, students, and parents.

Multi-age teaming offers a much richer, broader experience to students, teachers, and parents than a more traditional approach. The challenges presented are far outweighed by the improvements in learning that occur within the MAT framework. The professional growth experienced by educators who dare to think "outside the box" brings new enthusiasm and fresh perspectives. The opportunities provided for in-depth exploration and hands-on, active learning simply cannot be duplicated in more traditional approaches. Finally, and most important, multi-age grouping, with a child-centered philosophy, is absolutely the most appropriate and exciting arrangement for successfully educating middle school students.



WARNING: Never use your blow dryer on the morning of an important math test!