



“It’s all about learning!”

**Assessment Report
of
Bethel Middle School
Bethel, CT**

**Visitation Dates:
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The NELMS Assessment Process

The New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS) designed its school assessment program to help schools become even better at what they do for young adolescent learners. It is based on research summarized in *Turning Points 2000*, a validation of the original report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, *Turning Points* that was first published in 1989. This report outlines best practices for young adolescent learning and was written by Anthony W. Jackson and Gayle A. Davis with the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. It was published by Teachers College Press, New York, New York.

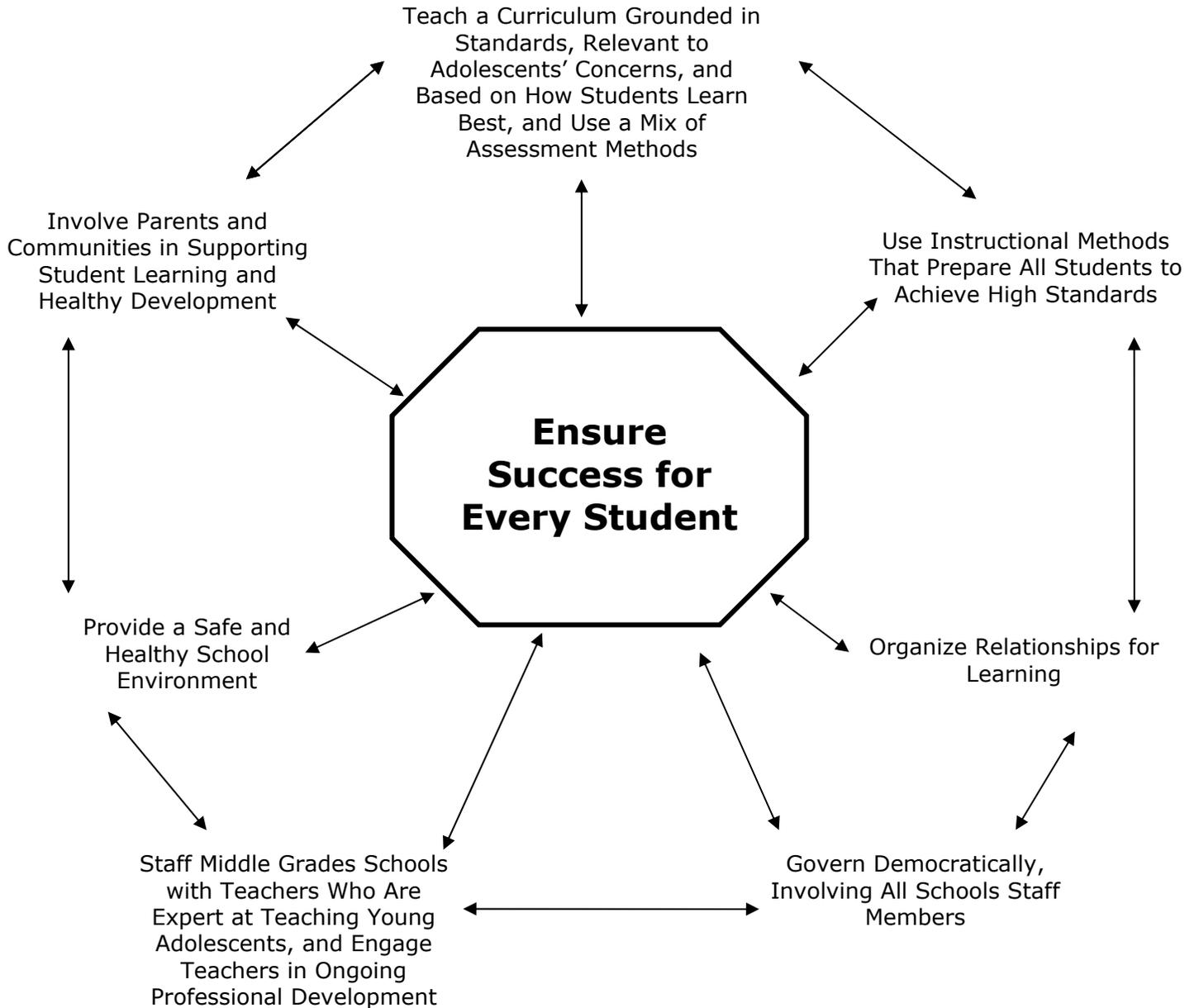
The school contacted NELMS in October 2007 to discuss the whole school assessment process for Bethel Middle School (BMS). The school and the district were mutually agreeable to the whole school assessment process. Work toward the assessment began in November 2007. NELMS provided the school with surveys to be completed by faculty, support staff, parents, and students. This data is the school's self-study and is extremely important information that should be used in conjunction with this report.

Another piece of this assessment is a three day on-site visit by a team of middle level educators, referred to as the Visiting Team (VT), who represent different states in New England and various professional backgrounds and roles. During the visit, they analyze themes raised in the self-study and make their own observations before creating a report for the school to use in conjunction with its self-study. These observations reflect three days in the life of a school which may or may not accurately represent the learning that takes place on the other days of the school year. However, generally themes that arise in the self-study tend to be visible during a school visit, and this is true of BMS.

The final, and most important piece of the school assessment process, is how the school decides to use the information it has gathered in this work. The self-study combined with the report of the NELMS VT provides a roadmap to school improvement. "Good and getting better" is a positive theme to use in implementing some of the recommendations contained in this report. The change process is neither speedy nor painless, but our focus should always remain on improving learning opportunities for young adolescents.

NELMS and this VT hope that the information contained in this report, in addition to the data in the self-study, will provide direction for growth so that Bethel Middle School will become an even more effective learning community for the young adolescents of Bethel, Connecticut.

The *Turning Points 2000* Design



Jackson A.W & Davis, G.A. (2000) *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*; Carnegie Corporation of New York, Teachers College Press, p. 25

Introduction

Upon arrival at their motel, members of the New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS) Visiting Team (VT) found a welcome packet of information to supplement the self study results which they had received about their visit to Bethel Middle School.

The VT was welcomed at school the next morning and enjoyed a continental breakfast with members of the Steering Committee and the Administrative Team. Following breakfast the VT met with the Steering Committee which shared their goals for undertaking a whole school assessment.

The administrative team also had an initial meeting with the VT. This meeting was held in the conference room/work area where a packet of informational material about BMS policies and programs was provided for each member of the VT. The principal provided information about the school and district.

Bethel, Connecticut has a population of 18,000. At the time of this assessment BMS has 750 students in grades 6, 7 & 8, which includes a small number of ELL students. Students are grouped into five person teaching teams and follow an 8 period daily schedule. Eleven percent of the students receive special needs service. The majority of students are bussed.

The Principal and his two assistant principals are in their second year as an administrative team. They shared their goals for BMS and confirmed that the purpose of participating in a whole school assessment was to identify areas of strength and provide suggestions to grow as a middle school in support of excellent learning opportunities for their young adolescents.

Members of the student council led a walking tour of BMS for the VT. The students were obviously proud of their school and the many activities in which they could participate. They also indicated that they enjoyed being at school and felt their teachers cared about them and their success.

Some members of the VT then attended an 8th Grade cluster meeting. The group was engaged in a "Hands Up" activity and the principal and an assistant were also present. During the period, teachers reviewed the progress of every student in the team. As a teacher had an issue, concern, or positive comment they would raise their hand to share it with the rest of the group. The group would then identify an action item which was recorded on a spreadsheet. This is a new process and teachers are excited about the opportunity it provides to closely monitor student success.

After observing students at lunch, members of the VT visited classrooms, and also had the opportunity to meet with a student focus group from each grade. At the end of the school day, the VT met with a group of parents.

The day concluded with a dinner meeting at a local restaurant attended by the Steering Committee, administrative team, district superintendent and chairman of the Board of Education.

The majority of the second day was spent doing individual interviews of faculty and staff. Members of the VT also had the opportunity to attend grade level, department, and cluster meetings. At the end of school the VT had the opportunity to observe a variety of after-school clubs and sports activities.

During the third day, the VT concluded the faculty and staff interview process. They also had an opportunity to visit both the Bridges Program and an adaptive Physical Education class.

Students from the BMS TV Club demonstrated the filming of a news broadcast and shared information about the various activities they have undertaken.

The VT met with faculty and staff at the conclusion of the assessment and shared their thanks for a wonderful and welcoming visit. BMS is a caring community of dedicated professionals, caring parents, and wonderful students.

Curriculum and Assessment

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

"Content or academic standards, which spell out what students should know and be able to do, form the basis for the curriculum we recommend. Academic standards provide the link between excellence and equity by setting consistently high, public expectations for *every* student. As a reflection of the school's broader goal of enabling young adolescents to reach their full intellectual potential, the effort to support every student, including special education and English language learners, in exceeding or exceeding high academic standards should drive all other aspects of school improvement." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.32)

"Assessment should be designed to provide ongoing, useful feedback, to both students and teachers, on what students have learned. This feedback should be used to improve teaching and learning progressively, not just to audit student performance. Effective assessment should connect directly to curriculum and instruction. Simply put, assessments should be perfectly meshed with what we want students to learn. . . .For all students to be successful, to meet or exceed the "building codes" (performance standards), they must have a thorough understanding of the standards that form the concepts and questions that form the frame." (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 54)

The VT had the opportunity to observe the varied curricula being used at BMS. Interviews with school and district administrators, teachers, support staff, parents and students, as well as classroom observations, evidenced the high academic expectations at BMS.

An essential component of Middle School philosophy is Unified Arts. The Unified Arts program at BMS provides students with a variety of learning opportunities that crosses disciplines and includes community involvement, such as the Digital Student and television production opportunities. These programs are solidly grounded in Middle School teaching philosophy. The VT observed students actively engaged in different types of technology and media literacy programs. The Unified Arts program demonstrated that it is essential to the curricular experiences of the students at BMS.

It was observed by the VT that some BMS educators indicated that it is difficult to complete their mandated curriculum goals, as a result of the school's extensive extra-curricula activities which draw students away from direct classroom instruction.

The VT observed that in addition to Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMT), BMS implements a variety of resources to measure student achievement and the effectiveness of the curriculum being taught. When effectively utilized, this data provides teachers with information pertaining to individual student learning and the effectiveness of the curriculum.

A Saturday Academy invites selected students to attend half-day Saturday instructional sessions to reinforce specialized skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, as well as a PE component.

Interim progress reports of all 6th, 7th and 8th grade students are sent home to BMS parents quarterly. Parents receive Quarter 1 and 2 report cards prior to attending a team meeting. Quarter 3 and 4 report cards are sent home. The parent survey indicated a desire for more communication between school and home.

Parent/staff conferences are held as needed. Student led conferences are held at the end of the second quarter with all 8th grade students, their parents, and cluster teachers.

Within the district, there are 4th – 12th Grade curriculum leaders available to support teachers and develop vertical instruction within subject areas.

Specific Strengths:

1. "Hands-Up" provides a well-organized and time efficient systematic method for core educators to record and respond to the progress, as well as examine educational and social growth, for each student in the grade cluster.
2. All BMS clusters are developing *Understanding By Design* instructional guidelines. "WHERE" - (W-Where are we headed? H-Hook the students E-Explore the subject R-Rethink our work and ideas E-Evaluate results)
3. The VT observed that SMART Goals (**S**trategic and **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**esults Based and **T**ime Bound) implemented in foreign language and social studies with varied mid-term and final exams as well as pre and post assessments of unit assessments and in the 7th grade PE with pre and post assessment of upper body muscular strength.
4. There is an indication that a variety of student subject and cluster portfolios are maintained on each student at BMS.
5. School-wide, Language Arts educators administer Prompted Writing Assessments three times a year. These assessments are mandated by the Bethel School District to explore possibilities for the purpose of consistency in developing formative writing across content area and maintaining student achievement.
6. The VT observed that most Unified Arts educators support and integrate basic core curriculum objectives with lessons, projects, and activities.
7. The Library Media Specialist is willing and able to support the curriculum. The media center offers a variety of resources and learning opportunities to students and staff.
8. Music education and performance is highly valued and celebrated throughout the BMS community.
9. Learning goals and guidelines are clearly posted in each classroom.

10. Extensive technology is available to students and staff, which assists implementation of curriculum.

Recommendations:

1. The VT observed evidence of discrepancy among the LA staff with the current written LA curriculum. Provide staff development time for LA Department to review and agree upon a written LA curriculum.
2. Investigate the possibility of having quarterly or annual cluster/team leaders.

Varied Instruction

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

"The main purpose of middle grades education is to promote young adolescents' intellectual development. It is to enable every student to think creatively, to identify and solve meaningful problems, to communicate and work well with others, and to develop the base of factual knowledge and skills that is the essential foundation for these "higher order" capacities." (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 10-11)

The staff and students of BMS demonstrated an enthusiastic attitude about learning. The students clearly were happy to be in school and the rapport between staff and students was evident both in the classroom during instruction and in the hallways during passing time. Students in all grades shared via surveys and interviews that BMS teachers created an environment conducive to learning and made learning fun. The VT validated this.

BMS staff provides opportunities for many students to utilize their individual strengths and passions as the basis for learning. The Bridges Program, music classes, and Adaptive Physical Education are just a few examples of programs available to students designed to meet specific learning needs of students. Additionally, 8th grade students are given the opportunity to choose between Musical Lynx class and an Entrepreneurship class.

It appeared that the majority of the classes visited by the VT were teacher driven. There were a few activities observed that actively involved students with their learning and real world applications or problem solving. Some of the teaching strategies observed included: teacher directed instruction, cooperative learning, and small group instruction. Additionally, lesson objectives and/or essential questions were clearly posted in all classrooms.

During the three day visit the VT saw limited evidence of differentiated instruction in the classroom. This was substantiated through interviews with the staff. However, the VT did observe some examples of lessons that incorporated different learning styles and levels of ability. For example, one language arts class had various leveled texts of the same book. All students were able to participate in the classroom discussion. Differentiating Instruction which meets the needs of students with a range of abilities has been proven effective in multiple settings.

A SMART goal at BMS is to address AYP of special education students. The VT observed special education students receiving direct reading instruction in a small group setting. BMS recently moved in the direction of a co-teaching model as a method of inclusion for students with special needs. Teachers indicated that the paraprofessionals are integral part of the classroom instruction.

Coordination of homework assignments among clusters is a concern of the BMS students. An initiative has been put into place to improve the coordination of tests, quizzes, projects, and other assignments. Teachers will begin posting homework on cluster web pages.

The VT heard that the teachers have access to a variety of technology. Each cluster has access to a Smartboard and laptops for student use that are Internet capable via a wireless network. The VT did not observe significant evidence of technology use in the classroom.

The music program is a strong component of BMS. All students are required to take a music class each year. Students choose to participate in orchestra, band, choir, or chorus. There is also the option to take a music class that does include a musical performance.

BMS teachers indicated that instruction is impacted by curriculum based field trips and other extensive activities. Due to the amount of time outside the classroom teachers are having difficulty meeting curriculum demands.

Specific Strengths

1. All teachers at BMS appeared to be extremely knowledgeable in their content areas. One hundred percent of the staff is highly qualified. Additionally, the teachers demonstrated a genuine enthusiasm for their content and used that to foster student interest.
2. Teachers demonstrated a genuine concern for the well being of their students and their success both in and outside the classroom.
3. A school-wide plan is in place to address AYP needs.
4. A variety of technology equipment is available for all students.
5. Teachers are consistently available to help students before, during, and after school.
6. Class size in basic subjects provide an environment conducive to learning.

Recommendations

1. While there were various instructional strategies utilized at BMS, the majority of classroom observations were teacher-led direct instruction. We recommend continuing to infuse different instructional strategies more frequently to align with the different learning styles of the students at BMS.
2. It is evident that professional development is available to all staff. The VT suggests that the staff continue to develop their skills in the areas of differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching, and implementing the use of technology in the classroom.

Middle Level Teachers and Staff

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

"Middle grades teachers must be well grounded in the development and needs of young adolescents if they are to be successful. Just as middle grades teachers need to know how, specifically, young adolescents are different from young children and older adolescents, they also need to understand that middle grades schools are different from elementary and high school. This difference is much more than the sign in front of the school; it lies in the philosophical foundations of middle grades education and the organizational structure that grows from and supports this philosophy." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.100)

"High-quality professional development builds a culture among educators within a middle school, and between "like-minded" schools, that supports innovation, experimentation, and collegial sharing. Collaborative planning and inquiry activities such as team- or subject-based curriculum planning, collaborative analyses of student work, peer observation and coaching, study groups, and action research all contribute to breaking down norms of privacy and isolation that prevail in many schools." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.116)

The atmosphere throughout BMS is filled with a sense of caring and overwhelming concern for the welfare of all students. The staff is a group of highly qualified professionals who demonstrate a genuine commitment to the students of the school and to each other.

A total middle school program is designed to meet the needs of a highly diverse and unique student population. To be successful in this endeavor, administration and staff must be knowledgeable about and committed to the adolescent child. Training programs on the characteristics of the adolescent age group must be on-going to insure that all administrators and staff members develop the skills essential for achieving maximum success with their students. The VT found that BMS staff members and administrators are highly committed to being a good middle school with high expectations for all.

Turning Points strongly recommends the empowerment of teachers and administrators. The Administrative team at BMS has established a structure that provides staff members with various avenues for active involvement in developing and maintaining the middle school program. During interviews the VT learned that involvement in school decision-making by all is highly valued and supported.

BMS is a professional development (PD) site for pre-service teachers enrolled at Western Connecticut State University. They also have a well-organized mentoring program with mentors for teachers new to the profession and new to BMS. The data collected by the school prior to the arrival of the VT indicates strong support by faculty (better than 90% in most categories) for the schools encouragement and facilitation of on-going professional growth. However only 25% felt they had adequate PD for teaming and for training directly related to school goals, although nearly 98% report having participated in goal setting.

The Bethel School district has a comprehensive PD plan with a wide variety of core content selections for teachers in the district. There is an articulated peer evaluation program with guidelines and a detailed evaluation format for all teachers.

As indicated in another area of the report, parents and students feel overwhelmingly positive about the qualities and talents teachers in this school have. There is some diversity of population in this school and all areas are addressed. Para-educators receive special training for assisting in Special Education and an ELL program provides tutors for LA classes. There is an elementary special education coordinator and a high school coordinator who share time with the middle school.

As mentioned in other areas of the report there are some formal recognition programs for staff by administration and by the parent organization.

Specific Strengths:

1. A mentoring program for new teachers and implementation of Connecticut's BEST program are used effectively to move teachers into advanced levels of certification.
2. This staff is among the happiest, most enthusiastic, and dedicated encountered by the VT.
3. The faculty is functioning as Professional Learning Communities. They use some protocols for looking at student work and supporting each other.
4. The core-teaching teams are provided with common planning time. SMART Goals for reading comprehension are the focus for most team meetings.
5. The staff is balanced in experience with about half senior members and the rest ranging from one to ten years of experience. The para-educator staff is superb and an integral part of the educational process.
6. Strong In-Service /professional development is available and supported. There are multiple opportunities and choices.
7. The staff is well-versed in the school's reporting processes and does an excellent job of maintaining frequent contact with parents throughout the year.

Recommendations:

1. While the current PD program has a strong focus on curriculum, instruction (Understanding By Design and SMART goal setting strategies), and using technology, there is an absence of specific middle level pedagogy topics. It is recommended that some attention to topics such as advisory, teaming, nature and needs of preadolescents, differentiated instruction, etc. be considered for future professional development.
2. Develop a simple recognitions/feedback format (Thank you notes, etc.) for individual teachers going above and beyond the expected work.
3. Attend to the professional resources in the library media center which has a limited and dated collection. Ensure that the National Middle School Association Journal or similar publications are circulated among staff.
4. Investigate scheduling to find ways to include opportunities for UA to co-plan with Core teachers.
5. Explore the possibility of a Special Education Coordinator assigned specifically to the Middle School.

Relationships for Learning

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

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

"Middle school educators have long recognized an essential truth about children's learning: relationships matter. For young adolescents, relationships with adults form the critical pathways for their learning; education 'happens' through relationships." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.121)

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

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

To create an identity for students, teachers ensure that each student is known by at least one adult. Teams develop identity through names and logos, programs and traditions unique to that team. Through a spirit of fun and a sense of shared purpose, students and staff work together in an environment which encourages achievement. In addition to caring for the students on a team, the team structure creates a positive working environment for teachers. Shared responsibility for a common group of students creates a professional and often personal bond for the adults.

BMS has a building that is conducive to team organization and is well used by teams. BMS has an 8 period day schedule with A and B days. Students are organized into clusters; two for 8th grade, two for 7th grade, two for 6th grade, and a combined grade 6 & 8 cluster in place for the current year to accommodate a population bubble. This 6-8 split has been problematic by its nature, causing inconsistencies in student enrollment in classes. This is an issue recognized by all as not being an optimal situation for students or teachers and in order to gain greater flexibility for teams in the schedule, alternative ideas are being considered for another year.

This school has a strong commitment to providing teams daily time for careful planning and implementing of their own and school wide educational goals. There is an atmosphere of respect and commitment to children and to teachers as they pursue excellence. The VT observed some team meetings and witnessed variations in process for conducting meetings, keeping records, and following an agenda. While no one person is assigned the job of team leader, the VT observed that usually one teacher assumed that role. Some teams were actively engaged in discussing student work and aligning instructional strategies, while others were dealing with logistical details for trips or other activities. There was little monitoring of homework assignments to guarantee even distribution for students.

The "Hands UP" program is an excellent practice, developed to ensure that all students are monitored for academic, behavior, and social-emotional success. There is a protocol in place for managing these monthly meetings. There was no evidence of advisory meetings but many teachers exhibited a very strong commitment to their students.

According to the data submitted, a result of these programs and practices is that 88% of all students feel welcome in the school and 89% of all students feel that they are taught by teachers "who are adequately prepared and like to teach this age group". Ninety-three percent of all parents responding to the data feel the school is a welcoming place.

In other areas of the data, teachers report about their teaming practices. While most (98%) feel that they work on a highly effective team and that there is 98% faculty commitment for teaming, only 75% report that there is adequate professional development for learning about team practices and only 71% feel that there is team identity. The feeling that communication between teams always or usually happens received an 83% rating. Seventy-eight percent feel that the school leadership supports teaming, but the evidence gathered by the VT indicates via the schedule and attendance at team meetings that the leadership is actively involved in the teaming philosophy.

One area of team excellence is in communication with students and families. Teachers take care to provide information through conferences, reports, email, and websites. The student, parent, and faculty surveys all cited communication between teachers and homes to be a real strength. There were also high percentages of students, parents and teachers praising the transition of 5th graders into the BMS community. This data lends evidence that the educators and families in the Bethel community recognize the importance of their partnership for the success of their students.

Specific Strengths:

1. Team time is valued and uninterrupted. The schedule provides for team meetings: as a Team (cluster) twice a week, content departments (PLC's) by grade level twice and the 5th day is rotated between the two.
2. There is a variety of academic and non-academic activities provided by teams, including field trips, lunches, and projects.

3. There is vertical teaming in content areas (Science, Math, ELA). Teams meet every 2-3 months 4th – 12th grades.
4. Creation of a welcoming school for parents, students and staff. Along with parent-teacher conferences, frequent e-mail, phone, and personal contacts, BMS will be instituting a mid-year student-led conference.
5. There are strong transition plans for students entering BMS and also for moving up to the high school.

Recommendations:

1. Investigate a schedule which would allow for greater flexibility for all teams.
2. Arrange for professional development for improving teaming practices to encourage:
 - a. development of meeting protocols,
 - b. team leadership,
 - c. management of student learning, including homework,
 - d. establishing team identity,
 - e. while maintaining communication with other teams and a commitment to the school as a whole.
3. Continue to investigate, for future development and implementation, an advisor-advisee program.

Govern Democratically

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

"A middle grades school should be organized and should function through a democratic governance system with structures and processes that are systematically inclusive, collaborative, and focused on the improvement of student learning. The system should give all "stakeholders" in the school – teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, students, and community members - a primary voice in planning and implementing school improvement efforts. When educators, parents, and students make important decisions regarding school matters, they share responsibility for implementing those decisions and for the outcome of those decisions." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.146)

BMS has a principal that has been in the district for two years, and two assistant principals that have been in the position for two years. Based on interviews, observations and surveys, it is evident that there is an overall feeling of respect for the administrators by teachers, staff, board of education members, and the parent/school community. Teachers, staff, parents, and students report that administrators are approachable, accessible, and welcome conversation. The team observed a situation in which a student sent a letter to the principal asking for his support for a fund raiser that he was glad to approve.

The administrative team has been successful in enunciating a vision for the school and they work collaboratively, complementing each other's skills and experience. A major goal of the administrative team is to continue to empower and support teachers and students to assume leadership roles. The team has established itself as the leaders of learning. An example that the VT observed was during an 8th "Hands UP" session that was led by the principal with input by the assistant principal.

The academic planner and the Parent/Student Handbook of Selected Policies, Procedures and Regulations include information that clearly defines the Bethel Public School District policies and district calendar along with much other useful information. The VT did see evidence of school-wide governance of rules and guidelines for students in the academic planner and in the Parent/Student Handbook. The school, as a whole, has a climate of students who comply with the rules of the building. Most classrooms have rules posted.

A Weekly Calendar of Events is a means of communicating to students and parents the events and programs as well as upcoming events at the school. This calendar is posted in classrooms and in the main lobby and posted on the school website. A monthly newsletter is also published and mailed home to parents.

The first sign of governance for the VT was the Steering Committee that was established to plan the NELMS site visit. The committee members did an excellent job of coordinating the interviews, events, and materials for review for our visit. Teachers, staff, parents, and students from 6th through 8th grades were surveyed, and the VT was provided with the data, along with survey comments from each group. Steering members, staff, teachers, and administrators look forward to seeing the recommendations from this assessment process so that progress and success for BMS students can continue to improve.

A major component for governance and faculty voice is through the team meetings which take place two or three days per week. The teams are made up of content area teachers, special education teachers, and an assistant principal or the principal. While we were present, we observed the "Hands UP" during a team meeting, as well as various planning discussions for team activities.

Faculty meetings held once per month are also a means for administrative and faculty communication. The administration also attends team meetings regularly, and they are involved in the instructional discussions with each of the teams they represent.

There is a Principal's Advisory Committee that meets monthly with a broad representation of faculty that discusses a wide variety of issues.

There is a Student Council that meets regularly and has representatives from 6th through 8th on one large council, as well as three teacher advisors, one for each grade level. The Student Council was restarted this year, and students have been encouraged to present their ideas for change to the administration, who seem to value their input. Students were allowed to chew gum during state testing and the "flip-flop" initiative are a couple of examples. The Council was also responsible for running Spirit Week and dances as well as fund raising for the Darfur refugees.

There are a number of opportunities for parents and the community to participate in school activities and/or functions. Open House and Curriculum Night, instructional nights in specific subject areas, and conferences for all parents are held during the first and second marking periods. Meetings are scheduled as needed during the third marking period. Teachers and administration report that there are a large number of active parent volunteers.

Specific Strengths:

1. There is an overall feeling of respect and cooperation for BMS administrators. This was indicated to the VT during staff interviews, where such words as "collaborative", "receptive" and "democratic" were used to describe their leadership style. The trio of administrators forms a cohesive team that complements each other and is visible throughout the school. They are committed to being instructional leaders who take an active role on each of the teams for which they are responsible. The VT saw evidence of student accessibility to administration showing their commitment to each student's learning.
2. The impression from the staff indicates that they have a voice in the decision-making process at BMS through the Principal's Advisory Committee.

3. The Steering Committee was an effective model of school governance and did a thorough job of gathering data, making suggestions and recommendations, and planning for our VT.
4. The Student Council has an active membership and plays a role in planning activities and events that involve faculty, staff, parents, and community members/groups.
5. Parents are an integral part of BMS and provide needed financial and voluntary services to the school.

Recommendations:

1. There is a need for broad-based representation comprised of faculty, staff, parents, and community representatives to analyze the results of the self-study and this resulting report. Continue to develop action plans, to prioritize and implement recommendations, as well as establishing benchmarks to measure progress and identify areas of responsibility. This school improvement team will promote student learning and an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership. The team should be an on-going group which meets regularly to continue to discuss and help implement best middle school practices and investigate professional development opportunities for staff. One of the first things the team could do is establish a school mission statement would guide the future course of middle school improvement, and establish a common set of guiding principles.
2. In order for change to be supported by parents and community members, the school's strengths and achievements should be communicated to parents and community members. Although the principal communicates weekly about calendar events, parents who met with the VT indicated that there is room for more frequent communication between administration and parents.
3. Although the Student Council shows great promise in its second year back at BMS, the role of student voice in the school should be encouraged and expanded. Leadership and governance opportunities should be extended to classrooms where feasible as well, to give students a sense of ownership in their learning environment. Students could also be given the opportunity to help decide about interest-based offerings that could be held during the school day or after-school.

Healthy School Environment

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

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

"Healthy lifestyles and academic success are tightly interwoven--improvement in one leads to improvement in the other, both directly and indirectly. Positive inter-group relations are essential to a safe and healthy school. Middle grade schools, in partnership with the community, should support physical and mental health and fitness by providing a safe, caring and healthy environment, health education and access to health services. (*Turning Points 2000* p. 24)

A responsive middle school will provide programs and opportunities for students to understand and experience the connection between a healthy lifestyle and academic success. Many schools have a comprehensive health education program and a physical education program that provides daily exercise for every student. Most middle schools design curricula that provide opportunities for students to develop strong communication skills, work cooperatively with others, apply problem-solving and decision-making skills, and promote civic responsibility and demonstrate wellness.

Every aspect of BMS, from its staff to its students to its parents, conveyed a true sense of pride, belonging, and security to the VT. The VT was fortunate to spend three days learning about their school. The Steering Committee greeted the VT with a warm welcome breakfast each day. Student Council members served as friendly, cordial, and articulate ambassadors as they gave a guided tour through the clean and brightly decorated corridors, teeming with displays of students' work. The VT observed this sample of students as a truly wonderful community, and this eventually proved to be absolutely true.

Students indicated that BMS provides a safe learning environment and that they enjoyed coming to school. They also indicated that they have high expectations for themselves, and are well aware that their BMS staff and parents expected them to perform to their best ability in all aspects of their learning.

Following the tour the VT visited several classrooms and had the opportunity to observe and join students at lunch. Lunch appears to offer a wide variety of food. Each grade level is provided with its own 30 minute lunch period. Lunch offers a hot lunch, as well as cold sandwiches, and/or fresh green salads. In general, the food offered to students and staff appears healthy with dietary wellness consciousness. However, no recess is offered to any BMS students at any grade level.

BMS provides a positive learning community. Concerted efforts are obviously made to keep the interior and exterior environment of the building positive as well. It is evident that a recycling effort has been undertaken to recycle printer ink, cell phones, and other recyclables, but there is little evidence of receptacles in the classrooms or corridors for recycling paper.

BMS has made an admirable effort to celebrate multicultural diversity into its learning community. International flags, various projects, fund-raisers, and co-curricular activities all help to promote understanding and acceptance of various cultures, backgrounds, nations, and creeds. Specifically among these are: study of countries through teaching about the Olympics, Earth Day projects, international guest speakers and a fund-raiser for Darfur.

Students and some parents expressed that the assigned seats and seat belts on buses worked as a positive system. Both also indicated a long daily route to and from school. When scrutinized, it appears that student's experiences vary from a 20-40 minute transport.

Specific Strengths:

1. Physical plant is located in a safe and quiet area of Bethel, CT. BMS provides a positive, clean, and safe learning environment. Wide hallways provide for safe passage of students/staff and allow for individual lockers arranged by cluster.
2. The majority of students and staff appear healthy, cheerful, polite, and energetic.
3. Designated activities appear to be conducted in appropriate locations.
4. Large nurse's area allows for space between students. Extensive emergency procedures are practiced. "Red Team" staff members serve as an emergency support group. Comprehensive medical and emergency procedures are understood by staff and students.
5. A wide variety of pamphlets and helpful guides are available in office, counseling, and parent resource area.
6. Extensive and diverse extra-curricular activities and programs available to students. Staff is allowed access to the BMS weight room for personal physical fitness before and after school.
7. BMS students attend year-long, 40 minute Physical Education (PE) classes (including locker room time) every other day. Students are allowed activity choices per quarter.
8. Creative Adaptive PE program which involves PE staff, "Paras," cluster students and Occupational Therapy (OT) students.

9. School rules and behavior expectations are clearly posted throughout school corridors and classrooms. Teachers are assigned hall monitoring duties and administrators were observed in various locations throughout the building, as well as outside during dismissal.
10. Positive transitions, 5-6th and 8th-HS, are both strong. All 8th grade students visit HS. In addition, at the end of 8th grade, HS SpEd staff visits SpEd students at BMS to ease transition.

Recommendations:

1. Consider exploring and implementing an advisor/advisee program to develop interpersonal bonds between students and staff, and support academic learning and social growth.
2. Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the current comprehensive health curriculum to determine if it is indeed meeting the health and safety issues of the students.
3. Consider exploring the possibility of adding a recess component to their student's lunch period. The VT observed evidence that indicated students would benefit from a lunch/recess to their BMS day.
4. To provide privacy, replace PE bathroom doors and repair staff bathroom door.

Involving Parents and Community

Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development.

"Schools and families must collaborate to establish continuity and communication between home and school; to monitor and support students' schoolwork and academic progress; to create opportunities outside the school for safe, engaging exploration; and to improve the school itself through parent and community involvement on site. Schools and communities should forge connections to provide needed services to students, offer career exploration opportunities, expand learning beyond regular school hours and outside school walls and advocate for school improvements critical to ensuring success for every student." (*Turning Points 2000*, p.24)

During the visit to BMS, the VT had the opportunity to interview faculty, staff, students, and parents. It was very clear to the VT that there is a strong sense of community in their school. This is reinforced by the school motto: "Can't Hide That Tiger Pride." The team observed an effort on the part of the BMS faculty and staff to provide parents with on-going communication. Evidence of communication with parents and community includes a detailed Parent/Student handbook, school newsletters, monthly parent calendars, and positive recognition postcards. Also, the local newspaper, *The News-Times*, features the school on a consistent basis.

The self-study survey results indicated a high level of parent satisfaction with opportunities for communication with the school. Survey results and interviews also indicate that parents feel welcome at the school and that BMS provides them opportunities to be engaged in meaningful ways.

There is an active, involved, financially supportive PTO at BMS. The PTO supports BMS through sponsoring programs such as the 'Parent Pledge Program' where parents pledge that they will neither serve nor permit the use of alcohol or other drugs in their homes. In addition the PTO sponsors an annual Book Sale in the school library. The VT observed a number of parents working cooperatively toward this fundraising goal. The VT also observed several parents preparing to chaperone a music field trip to New York City. Furthermore, the PTO is responsible for coordinating a faculty room makeover and organizing a beginning of the school year welcome back breakfast for the staff of BMS.

Community businesses are supportive of the efforts of BMS. Business Enterprise, a course developed for 8th grade students, teaches students the basics of entrepreneurship. As part of their business plans the students put together an operation budget and marketing and advertising campaign. At the end of the course, a panel of local area small businesses evaluates the students' work.

The BMS students are involved in several community service projects. These include "Helping Others Flea Market", Relay for Life, Darfur, Hoops for Heart, and the Green Team.

Specific Strengths:

1. BMS is a community that is supportive of education. Parents are actively involved in both academic and extracurricular components of their child's education.
2. The active and involved PTO provides significant support for BMS.
3. Communication about student performance is accomplished through a system of progress reports, report cards, and parent teacher conferences.

Recommendations:

1. BMS should continue to work cooperatively with the community to provide opportunities for community service and service learning projects.
2. While there are several forms of communication in place the VT heard evidence for a need to continue to expand avenues of communication for parents and community. BMS should investigate creating individual staff or cluster web pages.

Summary

It was evident to the VT upon arrival that Bethel Middle School is a welcoming setting dedicated to the support of middle level students. Warmly welcomed by faculty, students, and staff, the VT confirmed their first impression during their three day visit.

BMS exudes an atmosphere of teamwork. Faculty, staff, and the administrative team assess needs, set goals, and then work cooperatively to achieve those goals and reflect on progress. There is a clear understanding by students that teachers care about them and their academic success.

While everyone is involved in the collaborative process, the principal and his administrative team have clearly made it a priority to make BMS "the best middle school it can be" through a variety of initiatives and support of the faculty. There is a sense of belonging at BMS. Staff work hard and also share opportunities to socialize with each other throughout the school year.

Bethel is recognized as one of the "Top 100 Communities for Music Education." Students are actively engaged in a strong music curriculum supported by the administration, district, and the community.

The VT was most impressed with the "Hands UP" strategy used by teams to monitor student progress. The initiative is new this year and teams were actually completing the first cycle of the process. Teachers and the administrative team are actively involved, and the VT heard many positive comments on the benefits that the strategy has provided in attaining the goal of success for every student.

There are several professional development initiatives underway. The importance of co-teaching and differentiated instruction is valued and will be supported with ongoing professional development.

The administrative team has successfully incorporated various communication opportunities to keep parents, faculty, staff, and the community well informed. Parents are actively involved in the school and the community demonstrates its support in many ways.

A key element for middle schools is an advisory program. Currently, there is no program at BMS. However, plans have been in development during the past school year to determine the best way to incorporate such a program for the next school year. The VT was told by both the Steering Committee and the administrative team that the purpose of doing a whole school assessment was to determine how they could become the very best middle school they could be.

The VT clearly identified a strong commitment to excellence from the BMS school community during their visit. They really "Can't hide that Tiger Pride!", nor should they!

Using the results of their self study and the contents of this report Bethel Middle School will continue to grow and be a caring, supportive learning environment for their young adolescent learners.

About the Assessors

William Downey is a retired educator from Massachusetts. Certified in science, elementary, middle and high school principal and as superintendent, he has worked as a fifth through eighth grade teacher, elementary and middle school principal and also chaired the long range space study as well as the middle school building and renovation for his district. He is most proud of the years spent working with faculty to transition their junior high school to an exemplary middle school. Since retiring, Bill has worked as a consultant for NELMS. He has participated on and chaired several school assessments and currently coordinates the school assessment programs for NELMS. Bill is certified to provide Breaking Ranks in the Middle training through NELMS.

Linda C. Bourne worked for the VT Dept of Education as a School Improvement Coordinator after teaching and administrating for 32 years, helping schools develop Action Plans and implementing programs for student success, as well as providing professional training to staffs on data analyses and writing instruction. She retired in 2004 and has been spending her time as Executive Director of VAMLE, Editor of Midlines (a NELMS publication), and as an educational consultant. In her spare time she and her husband of 45 years play with grandchildren and entertain their black lab, Seamus

Deborah L. Jungk has served as a Special Education teacher at Dodd Middle School in Cheshire, Connecticut for the past 14 years. Dodd Middle School is a nationally recognized Blue Ribbon School of Excellence. She holds a Bachelors Degree in Special Education Pre K-12 and a Masters Degree in Social and Emotional Disturbances. She has also served as a presenter at the NELMS Annual Conference in Providence, Rhode Island.

Dr. Philip Lanfranchi is the Principal of Bolton Center School in Bolton, CT. Phil had been a teacher for more than 15 years of math and science in New York and Connecticut, and he is certified in math and in grades 7-12 in all of the sciences except physics. He is also certified as an administrator and as a superintendent. Phil's K-8 school has a grade 6-8 middle school program which experienced a site assessment from NELMS in 2003. Phil has been an administrator for 11 years in Connecticut.

Diane Phyllides-Tregea is a veteran educator who is currently a 7th grade Social Studies teacher at Oyster River Middle School, a NELMS Spotlight School, in Durham, New Hampshire. After teaching at the high school level and at the Lanckenau School, a private elementary school outside of Philadelphia, she worked as an educational counselor in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, where she started an Adult Education and ESL program for the Pennsylvania Department of Employment. Diane is a mother of two, active in New Hampshire Carbon Challenge, the National Consortium for the Teaching of Asia and travels nationally and internationally as often as possible.