Changing families—
Changing middle schools

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As many of us do, this author wears several hats: parent of middle level and high school students, former junior high school teacher, university educator; and of equal importance, family member. I have been moved to write this article out of both professional and personal frustration with middle schools to acknowledge in a serious fashion the evolved family. Middle school philosophy and curriculum is predicated upon the belief that student-parent-teacher involvement, development, and support is essential. However, unless educators evaluate their own beliefs about what constitutes a family and dramatically change the way they link to students’ families, the middle school philosophy and curriculum will be a movement without impact.

In a recent discussion with a veteran top-notch middle level teacher, I asked her why school practices have remained basically unchanged in the area of family involvement and support in spite of the deluge of information regarding changing families. She reflected and then responded: “First, denial on the part of many teachers to accept that the family has really changed all that much and if it has, a sense that already overstressed educators can do little more than they are. Secondly, many teachers experience a comfort and security level in the schools as they used to be or in many cases, as they still are.” After reflecting on her conversation, my intent is:

1. To provide a rational why middle level curriculum and philosophy must include a wider definition of family.
2. To challenge middle level teachers to broaden their definition of both families and the roles that families can play in enhancing middle school curriculum outcomes.

A Look at the 1990s Family of Middle School Students

Middle level teachers are well aware that our youth are in trouble. In survey after survey and on one professional organization agenda after another, teachers cite the following as their top concerns: at-risk students, parental neglect, alcohol abuse, and latch key children (Cohen, 1988; Fead, 1985). Teachers identify the demise of the traditional nuclear family as the major cause of dysfunction among youth and perhaps unconsciously wish for the return of the original married couple with their own children as the preferred family structure (Eall, Newman, & Scheuren, 1984). Yet this thinking smacks against stark facts. Quite simply, as the number of two parent families of origin continues to decline, the number of single parent and restructured families continues to rise (Wolchik & Karoly, 1988).

One writer observed that while some problems in these times of change can be solved, aided, or even replaced by technology, the family may need to remain a “mom and pop” operation (Gardner, 1990). Similarly, middle school educators may also look to the “mom and pop store” as the vehicle for solving the growing problems faced by youth. However, the storefront look of “mom and pop” has dramatically and permanently changed. Divorce American style, young single women rearing children without fathers in the home, and unmarried couples with dependent children are family structures that educators must accept into their consciousness (Weed, 1982). This change in the nature and structure of the family should pressure middle level teams to reconceptualize the meaning of family and parent involvement.

Like it or not, divorce is here to stay. Statisticians report that the divorce rate will
continue to increase for four primary reasons (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 1984). First, the number of young adults between the ages of 25-39 did not peak until the end of 1991. This group experiences the highest risk of first-time divorce. Secondly, more and more women are expected to enter the employment market on a long-term, permanent basis (Glick, 1984). Third, the continuing upward trend in the equality of the sexes puts stress on first-time marriages. Finally, the continued secularization of 1990s family-life style further challenges marriage survival rates (Norton, 1980).

For many, divorce has become a major life restructuring tool to accomplish personal and societal agendas. While divorce may be here to stay, it does indeed have a cost. Educators are often the first to view the negative fallout divorce has on young children. Transforming traditional households into restructured families seemingly overnight has profound impact on children. Unfortunately, much of this impact results in decreased school involvement time on the part of parents, real and observed adjustment skills on the part of the children, disruption in family-school routines on the part of all key players, increased parent-parent conflict and parent-child conflict, decreased parenting skills for many, and increased isolation of the school and family unit (Berger, Shoul, & Warschauer, 1989). The major villain is not parents, but rather the survival of the family's economic base. In a post-divorce environment, children are most often found living in family structures which have significantly less parental income and time than prior to the marital separation or divorce.

The largest growing segment of never-married single parent families continues to be young teenage (even preteen) school-aged women. Much has been written and documented about the resulting educational, health, and vocational problems experienced by these young women and their young families (Children's Defense Fund, 1990; Hofferth & Hayes, 1987; National Commission on the Role of the School and the Community in Improving Adolescent Health, 1990). What alarms educators and parents alike is that the percentage of young girls having children is still on the rise. Some experts believe this trend continues because of the myth in modern day culture that a parent can be expendable—most notably—the father. Whatever the causes may be, educators know that many of the end results are devastating. What is less clear is how to turn the situation around so that teens acquire an education first, marry, and conceive babies later. What is clearer is the timetable. Successful intervention must come no later than the middle level years.

Finally, the last family structure slowly increasing in its occurrence is the unmarried couple with school-age children. Educators possess the least information on this kind of family structure and may experience the most
discomfort in interacting effectively with these parents. Yet, from all available
evidence, the unmarried couple family structure will remain
with us (Wolchik & Karoly, 1988).

Middle school educators are drawing a link
between the pressures and losses associated with
the change in family structure and the risk-taking
behavior of more and more youths. Educators
have documented that at least one-half of middle
grade students first started smoking cigarettes,
smoking, drinking alcohol, and experimenting with illegal
drugs while they were still in the middle level
grades (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1988;
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction,
1991). What is alarming about the results of these
survey data is not that students casually
experiment and then stop. Rather, students
suggested that they engaged in at-risk and illegal
activities (e.g., smoking cigarettes, drinking beer
etc.) but did not encounter either harsh
consequences or reprimands for such choices.

Some teens report that choices such as smoking
at age ten or drinking beer at age twelve were
simply ignored by both school personnel and
parents. Consequently, for many youth, successful
experimentation with high risk-taking behaviors
became well-practiced habits and life-styles.

Why do educators and school administrators
appear helpless or limited in obtaining parent
support and assistance? Communicating with
different family structures and with divorced
parents is new to most school personnel. Many
are ill-prepared to deal with these same
circumstances and challenges in their own lives,
so they may be uncomfortable assisting another
family. Furthermore, most educators are
unfamiliar with special techniques for responding
to the needs of changing families and their
children. Therefore, they may be prone to give
unsolicited advice, make judgments, place blame, be overly sympathetic, or in so many cases, do
nothing at all.

If middle school curriculum and philosophy
can address anything from these changing family
demographics, it is that the family is evolving
and so must middle school curriculum
approaches, communication methods, and
family-community involvement strategies.

Six Steps for Recruiting Families
for Middle Schools

Research from education and business
supports the notion that middle level teams can
enhance curriculum outcome effectiveness by
engaging in six steps:

1. Bury the past

Plan a good old fashioned funeral at a future
team session. Bury the idea that unless student's
families are cut from the traditional mode, involving parents is more problematic than
helpful. Elegize the traditional family for what
that structure contributed to families and to the
culture. However, have one of your staff play the
part of the angry mourner who experiences
sadness and grief because the traditional family
failed to deliver those things we have come to
expect. Finally, have your staff identify
components of successful families—traditional
or not so traditional. Identify those roles that any
family can play in your curriculum which would
enhance student performance, teacher
effectiveness, and parent involvement. Lastly,
plan for tomorrow. Narrow your focus by
assessing the unique needs of your students and
their families. Armed with a vision of healthy
families, go find them.

2. Ask the students

Students in the middle level grades are quite
capable and willing to provide their input as well
as to evaluate the interest level and effectiveness
of curriculum projects and activities. Ask students
to help design ways to involve a wide diversity
of parents based upon their own personal
experiences in their families. Encourage students
to identify activities and programs that would
assist them personally or assist their families.
Tap into student clubs and course projects across
the curriculum to provide real life experiences
and interaction. Make students a part of the
solution. Cooperative learning methodology
becomes exciting when students are also involved
in some decision making with respect to
community contacts and projects.

The Distributive Education Clubs of America
(DECA) which are integrated with the business
curriculum in the secondary schools provides
one model for others to follow. DECA has been
unusually successful in connecting with the
outside business world as well as with parents in
bringing expertise into the classroom and for
bringing the classroom to the business place in
hundreds of ways that students find exciting
and meaningful to their own development as
future wage-earners.

3. Revise and use demographic information
collected by the district

Across the nation, schools collect family data
of students' enrolled in their respective schools.
In all too many instances, this opportunity to
collected critical data is missed because of incomplete, or in some cases, illegal forms which restrict the family from describing the living arrangements, working responsibilities, and legal custodial responsibilities under which a particular family operates. Common complaints from divorced parents of school aged children are that noncustodial or joint custodial parents are not notified of parent conferences, are not sent copies of grades reports or other regularly disseminated documents, and are not included on other school information networking systems.

The point is that this is the time to gather all information that will assist administrative offices and a variety of other instructional teams with the years’ curriculum goals and activities. Demographic forms can be expanded to (a) identify parents and relatives with particular expertise that may be needed in the upcoming year, (b) find parents who are willing and able to work the phones from home for a number of curriculum-related matters, (c) determine which families will require special consideration in handling grade reports and printed information because of unique family arrangements, and (d) identify new students and families to the school community and many other sources of information pertaining to specific yearlong plans. Delegate the organization, storage, dissemination, and retrieval of this data base to either a faculty or community team. When the gathering of data is accomplished, insure that the data bank is made available to all teachers and to those professional and volunteer teams who have a valid reason for access to family information.

4. Create middle level parent-community involvement curriculum teams

Now more than ever both parents and community members are interested in providing input and participating in curriculum outcomes. Teachers frequently cite the lack of time to properly plan for the integration of subject matter across the curriculum as well as to plan for the involvement of parent and community teams. Middle level teams may maximize the impact of what occurs during the school year by using brief summer planning sessions to identify and plan with parent and community teams. By sharing the year’s major goals and activities and planning ways that parents can contribute, the anxiety and burnout effect of individual teachers doing it all and doing it all alone can be greatly reduced.

Educators can design their own community programs along the lines used by the health care field with respect to the identification and meaningful use of volunteers. Hospitals nationwide have developed large and sophisticated volunteer programs to function within and outside the walls of the hospital in a host of educational functions and services. Not only have hospitals reaped the benefit of a multi-talented cost free staff, they have experienced increased community visibility and have fostered a warmer, nurturing hospital climate.

5. Engage in long range planning for subject integration and parent-community involvement

Teachers are exposed to literally hundreds of different curriculum ideas or district initiatives each and every year. This may be the crux of the problem—too many new ideas and initiatives barely begun with not enough time and assistance to develop curriculum objectives at the integration stage (that is, to be used by the student) or to the point where there is curriculum generalization across the subject domains. Long term planning and evaluation is an ongoing process deserving of a steering committee process used by our colleagues in the private business sector. A steering committee can be appointed to each middle school with representation from the business community, social agencies in the community, key parents, educators, and other interested and vital community persons. The charge of the steering committee is to provide input on the effectiveness of past curriculum projects and activities for both the integration of information across related subject matter as well as for the appropriate use
of parent and other volunteers. This steering committee should maintain a particular concern for issues of school climate and issues of student and family safety, security, and nurturing within an educational context.

6. Enhance communication via strategic use of technology

Life in the 1990s is further complicated by working parents and restructured family living arrangements. The key to improved communication between school staff and students and their families is simple and direct lines of communication which minimize disruption of classes and reduces telephone tag with various parties. Electronic communication networks can meet this need. One strategy which facilitates the transmission of information with minimal disruption is computerized taped recorded messages that provide a caller information on the school calendar, directs the caller to a particular team recording of updated curriculum activities, or directs a caller to a list of parent volunteers or takes a name and message. Systems can be modeled after those used by banks and other businesses and can be designed to facilitate communication needs identified by various teacher-parent teams.

A second communication essential is phone lines in individual classrooms, or at least in every unit, hooked up to answering machines. It is difficult to imagine any busy business, agency, church, or the majority of homes operating efficiently today without a direct phone line. Answering machines provide the teacher with the means to communicate directly and quickly to parents and other community members without interrupting the school day. Access to a teacher's answering machine provides the parent a quick route to leave a message with specific details on how and when to return the call.

Still another system which facilitates curriculum communication is the use of electronic mail. These computer networks can be readily installed in key centers throughout the school and are then hooked up to electronic systems located in other areas of the community, for example, bankers with whom the social studies and math faculty are working in a given year in order to increase the financial competence of students, or perhaps various marketers in the retail area who are working together with the business and English departments without any parties having to leave the work place, be it school or business!

The use of video equipment can bring the outside world into the classroom and vice-versa and provide instant motivation to learners. By identifying persons (including students) who possess video camera skills, a host of creative ideas can be developed which curriculum objectives and subject areas together. An example currently underway in Eau Claire, Wisconsin involves both the video camera and the electronic mail system in bringing an elementary public school classroom into a university classroom of students studying elementary assessment techniques and bringing the expertise of the faculty and university students into the elementary school classroom.

This project involved redesigning both the university and the elementary classroom. In this case, the parent-community involvement came from the university and the initiative for change came from the public school teachers who wanted improved ways to assess student performance in curriculum areas but did not have additional budget monies to hire consultants, nor did they want their classroom to be disrupted in an extreme fashion. The assessment needs of the teachers with student data are transmitted via electronic mail to the university at the public school teachers' convenience. Descriptions of assessment probes and other ideas are transmitted back to the teachers by the university.
students. Video tape segments add interest and motivation to all parties because brief interviews, scans of students, and instructor feedback are easily obtained since there is no time table when certain activities must occur.

Given this scenario, students in the creative arts area may be able to be on line with a local advertising agency where they can draft art work for clients. Students studying science and math can be on line with police departments and environmental agencies to share examples of common real world problems and to solicit ideas from young students and teachers. Extensions of these types are limited only by creativity and commitment.

Finding Timé

The primary objection teachers have to promoting meaningful and significant family and community involvement is time—not enough of it. If educators and parents alike view time as a record of what an individual values, than perhaps we would not use time as an excuse. Rather than viewing time as the enemy, think of time as an asset. It is not about creating additional hours in the day; it is about creating more productive time. Strategies that have been effective in both business and school reform include the following:

- commit to first time quality
- increase automation in classrooms and school offices
- compress student/teacher learning time
- increase student contact time with parents and the community
- transform teachers from lecturers to choreographers, producers, and consultants
- delegate particular curriculum objectives to parent centers
- appoint a staff member as a public relations liaison between the school, families, and the community
- use “off-season” time for planning family involvement.

Families have changed. The communities that youth live in have also dramatically changed. The one ingredient in successful schooling that has not changed is the need for educators to have the verbal, emotional, and financial support of families and the community. Families and communities look toward schools to help provide partial solutions to some of the challenges facing our changing society. The challenge to middle level educators is quite simple. Expand your team—make room for all families and your community. Now more than ever, we need one another.

References


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