



New England League
of Middle Schools

**Assessment Report
for
NISSITISSIT MIDDLE SCHOOL**

**Pepperell, MA
October 28, 29 & 30, 2019**

New England League of Middle Schools

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The NELMS Assessment Process

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*, 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.

At the time of this visit, the student enrollment at Nissitissit Middle School (NMS) was 519. There were 117 students in grade 5, 126 students in grade 6, 150 students in grade 7 and 127 students in grade 8.

The Superintendent of North Middlesex Regional School District and the Principal of Hawthorne Brook Middle School contacted NELMS to inquire about the assessment process in summer of 2019. The NELMS Executive Director visited the school and met with the administration to discuss the process. It was agreed to have the chair of the visiting team also meet with the central office and building administration to further describe the process and to answer any questions.

It was felt that self-assessments and an on-site visit would provide the opportunity for NMS to continue to examine itself relative to middle school philosophy, reflect on middle level best practices and grow on behalf of their students. The results of the self-study and on-site visit would form the foundation of a Strategic Plan.

The school completed surveys of faculty, parents, and students. This data represents the school's self-study and is extremely important information that should be used in conjunction with this report. Also, important to this report is the work done in preparation for the school visit.

Another piece of this assessment was 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.

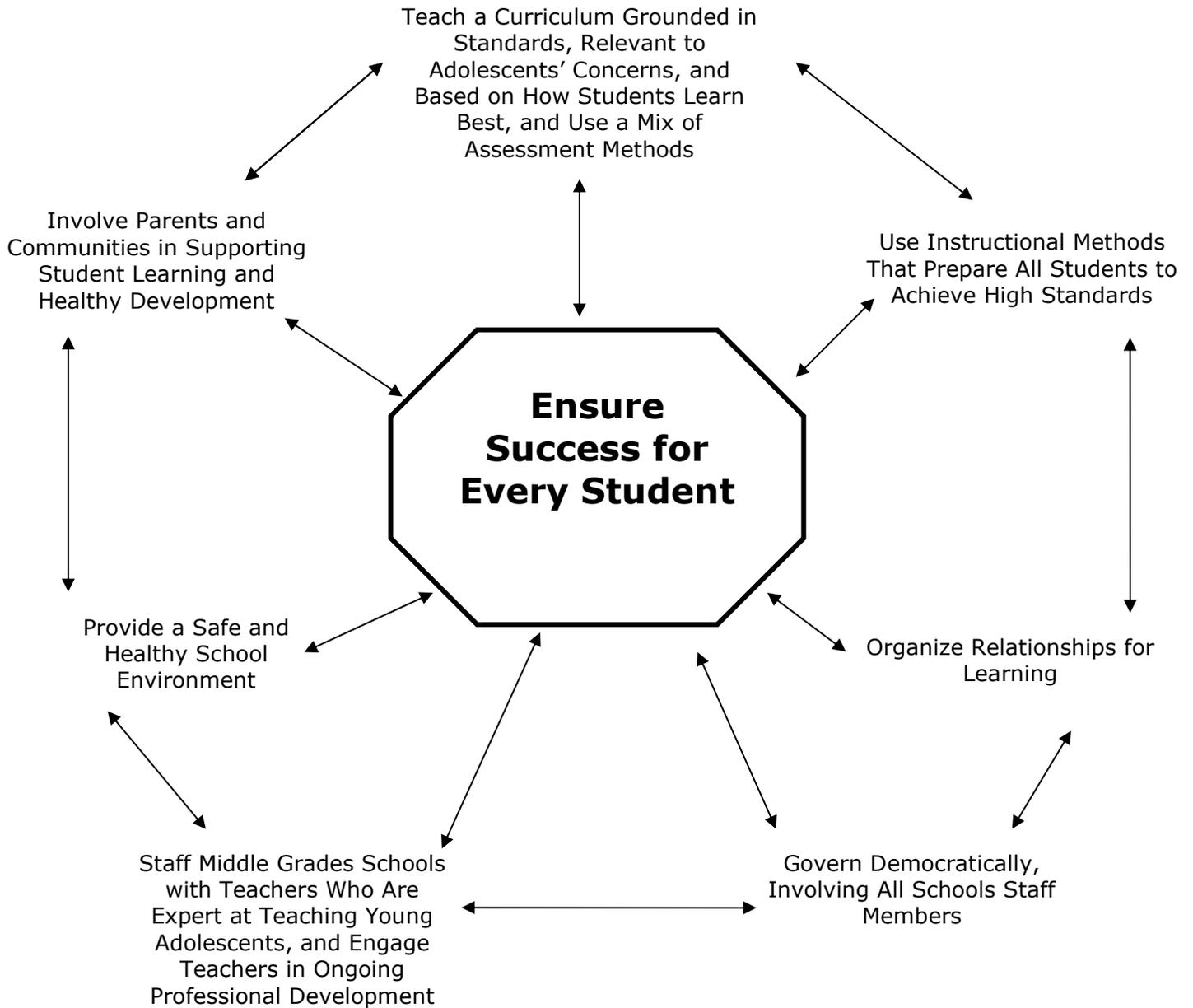
The final and most important piece of the school assessment process is how the school decides to use the information it has gathered in this work. The self-study combined with the report of the NELMS VT provides a roadmap to school improvement. "Good and getting better" is a positive theme to use in implementing some of the recommendations contained in this report. The change process is neither speedy nor painless, but 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, and the Steering Committee work will provide direction for growth so that Nissitissit Middle School will become a more effective learning community for their young adolescents.

This We Believe Summary



The Turning Points 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

During the visit to NMS, the visiting team (VT) used the information from faculty, student, and parent surveys in concert with their own data collected through observations and interviews to make the recommendations included in this report.

The school visit began on Monday October 28, 2019 and was completed on Wednesday October 30, 2019. During the three days at the school, the VT was welcomed into the middle level classrooms and had the opportunity to speak with faculty and staff members involved with grades 5,6,7 and 8 during individual interviews. The team also met with a group of parents, students, and district representatives.

Members of the VT began their visit with the principal and assistant principal to review the visit schedule.

The first day included a tour of NMS by student representatives. These students were forthcoming in their responses to general questions from the VT such as their favorite activities, activities available to students after school, best projects they'd completed and a discussion of the overall academic program of the school. Members of the VT also observed classrooms and conducted interviews.

The second day included interviews and classroom observations and a review of curriculum documents provided by the district. The day concluded with parent interviews.

On the third day, interviews and classroom visits were completed and the VT provided an initial overview of findings from the visit to the administration.

The VT enjoyed the time they spent at NMS and respect the dedication to and caring atmosphere for their young adolescent learners by the faculty and staff. The following research-based resources are cited throughout this document and provide the support for the strengths and recommendations given:

- Jackson, Anthony W., Davis, Gayle A. *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*, Teacher College Press: 2000.
- *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*, National Middle School Association: 2010.

Curriculum and Assessment

"We recommend teaching 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, in exceeding high academic standards should drive all other aspects of school improvement." (*Turning Points* 2000, p.31-32)

"Assessments 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)

NMS consists of grades five through eight; with teams of two teachers for fifth grade, teams of three for sixth grade, and teams of four for both seventh and eighth grade. Teams meet multiple times per week for planning purposes. In addition, content area teachers are provided opportunities to meet and discuss curriculum and assessments once per month.

All fifth and sixth graders take English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, Reading and Academic Assistance. They also have Physical Education two times each week while rotating through Art, Music, Health, Technology, Library and based on trimester either Genius Hour, Informational Technology, or Makerspace once per week. Twice per week they have an Academic Assistance block. Seventh and eighth graders add Spanish to their daily schedule; they have Physical Education twice per week, and rotate through Art, Music, and Health. Seventh grade also has Academic Assistance two times per week, while eighth grade does not have Academic Assistance. For the first time, NMS participated in a weeklong STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) experience. The feedback provided was extremely positive from students, staff, and parents.

The VT had the opportunity to observe and review the current curriculum being used at NMS, which is aligned with the Massachusetts State Standards. Through interviews with school administrators, faculty, and staff, parents, students, as well as classroom observations, the VT gathered information about the curriculum in each content area. The curricula are a mix of online and teacher-created resources, which are digitally available to all administrators and content-area teachers.

As indicated by survey results of faculty, students and parents, there was a high level of agreement that NMS provides a rigorous curriculum based on state standards. The results also reflected that integration of curriculum between content areas and grade levels is lacking. Additionally, there is a want for more variety in teaching methods and for the opportunity for students to work with a mixture of different classmates.

Common assessments based on state standards are utilized and data is reviewed to guide instruction in all content areas. Within the assessments a variety of methods are used and reflect specific learning targets. Students can be reassessed if and when necessary, in turn, the original score is averaged with the reassessment score. NMS runs on trimesters with progress reports sent out mid-trimester and report cards sent three times per year. Grades are reported on a traditional numerical scale.

Strengths

1. Curriculum and common assessments are digitally available for Math, ELA, Science and Social Studies on a shared drive.
2. Curriculum is based on MA state standards.
3. Provide consistent opportunities for content area teachers to coordinate and collaborate.
4. Inclusions of statewide STEM activities have a positive effect on students.
5. Social-emotional learning curriculum is obvious and a valuable resource for teachers and students.

Recommendations

1. Continue to construct curriculum guides in Science and Social Studies.
2. Develop, review, and revise curriculum maps for each content area.
3. Investigate opportunities outside of building-based Professional Development to enhance collaboration and creation of instructional strategies and resources.
4. Include additional opportunities to collect data on student progress
5. Expand cross-curricular planning and projects.

Varied Instruction

"A middle instructional program needs to be designed to meet the needs of a highly diverse and unique student body. To be effective, instruction should mesh with three other aspects of teaching and learning: the standards and resulting curriculum outlining what students should learn; the assessments students will use to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and the needs, interests, and learning styles of the students themselves. Classes should include students of diverse needs, achievement levels, interests, and learning styles and instruction should be differentiated to take advantage of diversity, not ignore it." (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 23)

The VT visited all classrooms and programs over the course of the three-day assessment period. NMS operates on a grade level schedule. All grade levels have their own schedules which include 7 classes with 55 minutes of instructional time. Each grade level has exposure to at least one Special each day and academic support and skills are offered to some students in the upper grade levels instead of Spanish. All students have an option to participate in the E-Block, once per week, which allowed for student choice for not only Band and Chorus, but a variety of other educational offerings. This time allows for student voice and choice and students shared in interviews that they enjoyed the opportunities offered during that time.

The VT observed both class instruction as well as transitions between classes and programs. Transition times between classes seemed to go well and the instructional time was not impacted. Clear procedures and structure for beginning of class time (Do-Now activities) were consistent and present for students. The VT noted some variety in the form of instructional delivery with observations of specific groupings of students. Some forms of student teacher engagement and integration of multiple intelligences in activities was noted. The VT team observed that the Comprehensive Learning Program, STEPS Programs and Achieve programs were very successful in varying instructional practices and used a variety of hands on integrated activities that engage students in the learning process. Hands-on learning was apparent and routine in some general education classrooms, especially in Science. Social Studies and Language arts classrooms included use of many media sources and a variety of text that enhanced the learning for students.

In Math classes the VT observed that, although students were working in groups, they were not engaged together in learning and that many of the activities involved completing worksheets with minimal use of hands on activities, manipulatives or supplemental media resources to help them understand concepts and connect them to real world experiences. Mastery objectives and learning targets were displayed in all classrooms and students were able to describe effectively what they were learning, however they struggled to relay the purpose of why they were learning it and how it related to previous learning or real-life events. Student understanding of why they are

learning is just as important as what and how they are learning. NMS should explore ways to promote creativity and authenticity through inquiry-based learning and hands on activities in addition to skills work. Service-learning projects would encourage a sense of community inside and outside of the school environment.

Sufficient data collection was observed only at the 5th grade level and with students with special education services, however there was not enough data taken in all grades to support instruction (including intervention and enrichment) or to allow for differentiation of student needs in the classroom setting. Data was not available to identify struggling readers that were not receiving special education services. NMS Should explore ways to provide reading intervention to general education students with reading needs and professional development for teachers that are teaching those skills that have experience with other contents as their focus.

The VT did see results of the STEM week that allowed students to engage in meaningful hands on activities. It was an exciting opportunity to enhance Science and Math instruction. Students shared in interviews that the activities were incredibly engaging even though it was compacted into one week. They found it to be very educational and would like more activities throughout the year that allowed them to experience and solve real world problems. Students would benefit from more integrated activities that encouraged the collaboration integration of multiple content areas with a clear purpose for students. NMS should explore ways to promote creativity and authenticity and seek out other opportunities to include hands on activities, inquiry-based learning as well as more integration throughout the school year and within classes to help enhance the real-world experiences for students.

The VT observed some students during the academic assistance period. Lessons were reviewed with students or re-teaching was happening during that time. It was noted that the number of students in the support classrooms was large. Most students in these classes had special education plans, however, there were students that did not have IEPs.

It was not clear what data was used to determine the level of support that was needed for each student, especially the students that did not receive special education services. With one teacher in the classroom for students that needed more support, it did seem challenging for the teacher to help all the students as well as keep them focused. As more data is collected for students, flexible groupings would be more productive for student growth as well as support for larger classroom sizes that are focused on intervention for students.

The VT was informed that co-teaching was happening throughout the teams. In some cases, especially the 5th grade teams where teachers taught multiple content in conjunction with the special education program, the co-teaching model was observed. However, in grades 6-8, a true co-teaching model (regular education and special education teachers) was rarely observed. In most cases, content area teachers were developing the curriculum and then sharing what was being taught with special education teachers to allow for input and accommodations. In a true co-teaching model, both teachers are responsible for the lesson development as well as instructing students together in the classroom environment. The VT did not identify opportunities in the schedule for teachers to plan in order to effectively co-teach. It would be beneficial to give some time for teachers to collaborate and build the lessons, rubrics and assessments together in order to optimize the learning for students with all teachers as part of the entire process. It would be extremely beneficial for the district to provide some professional development in this area.

The VT observed that teachers had sufficient individual planning time as well as time for team meetings and team planning times. Teachers shared that there was a need to examine "how" and "what time" was given for teachers to work directly with Special Education teachers in the co-teaching model. The schedule made it difficult for special education teachers to be part of the planning process for units and in many cases the Special Education Teachers were seeing the completed units and making accommodations and modifications for their students.

It would be beneficial for Special Education teacher to be part of the whole process of planning and to be a resource for the general education teachers as they are required to make accommodations and modifications for special education students in their general education classes.

Effective planning time when accompanied by knowledge of student strengths, needs and relevant updated data, will promote understanding of specific teacher's roles, foster effective co-teaching relationships, promote discussion on how to improve instructional practices and rigor and allow for integration and collaboration opportunities for students.

NMS has a fully equipped Media Center that included a computer lab as well as a video studio. The collections of books were relevant, age appropriate and engaging to the age group.

It was shared that the video studio was not in use at this time due to some technical issues but there were plans to effectively use it in the future for student projects.

In connection with the library, the Maker Space provided the 5th and 6th graders with opportunities for hands on learning and was well equipped to engage students.

It would be beneficial to look at ways that the schedule would allow 7th and 8th graders to have opportunities to have access to the maker space to continue to enhance their learning experiences. Adding a section of the library dedicated to the professional development of staff would encourage staff's individual learning and promote the enhancement of educational practices and student growth.

According to the survey and the VT team's observations, NMS has many teachers that identify their rooms as a peer observation opportunity and encourage other teachers to observe and learn from their classroom instructional practices. It was stated by staff that many new teachers have benefited from this option. It was noted that not many teachers beyond their first years of teaching access this opportunity which would be beneficial to all teachers to help to improve and vary their instructional practices.

The VT heard that there was curriculum available on-line and others indicated there was not and when VT looked on-line and it was determined that the curriculum was inconsistent, and some were under construction. Curriculum guides that were complete were helpful to teachers. Curriculum should include current multimedia, collaborative activities and resources that would enhance and enrich learning for students. Completed guides should also increase rigor and engagement of real-world experiences for students. NMS should continue to develop curriculum guidelines so that they are accessible to all teachers and utilize and communicate the curriculum to share instructional information and assessments across the district.

According to the surveys, parents and students are in strong opinion that students have a lot of options when it came to Specials as well as band and chorus classes. The E- Block provided opportunities for students to choose what they wanted to do.

Through the VT student interviews it was shared that they appreciated the opportunity to work on Murals, Genius Hour, and participate in a variety of activities and clubs offered by the teacher, but shared that they would like more voice in what could be offered during that time. Students like the opportunities to participate once a week and many would like the opportunity to meet more often especially when involved in the music programs.

Strengths:

1. Mastery objectives and learning targets are displayed in classrooms.
2. Clear procedures and structure for beginning of class time (Do-Now activities) were consistent and present for students.
3. New teachers have benefited from the peer observation opportunities.
4. A variety of data is available for teachers for the incoming fifth graders, as well as for Special Education students.
5. Students were engaged and on task during walk-throughs.
6. The Media Center is an inviting and engaging place for students. The computer lab and video studio allowed for extended learning through technology. Books in the library are relevant to students.
7. E- Block provided an opportunity for student choice and explorations such as Genius Hour and Clubs that were offered at that time. Student also had exposure to a variety of specials each year that included hands on learning and Unified Arts experiences.
8. Science and Language Arts classes included varied instructional practices and hands on learning for students using a variety of media.
9. STEM week enhanced student's hands-on learning experiences and was a positive opportunity for students. The maker space provided 5th and 6th graders with more hands-on learning experiences.
10. Technology was used effectively by students to enhance their learning.
11. Curriculum guides that are complete are helpful to teachers.
12. Special Education programs were effective, and a variety of instructional practices were used to engage learners.
13. Parents and students were pleased with the variety of specials that were offered.

Recommendations:

1. Carefully evaluate ways to foster learning environments that allow for hands on activities, inquiry-based learning, more STEM activities throughout the year as well as service-learning opportunities to enhance student learning.
2. Explore ways to promote creativity and authenticity through engaging instructional activities that allow for movement and collaborative discussions that allow for sharing and justification of views and help student to understand "why" they are learning.
3. Investigate ways to get more data about students and more training for staff in order to determine how to use the data effectively to identify strengths and needs for improving instruction, intervention and grouping.
4. Identify effective co-teaching models and provide professional development and time for teachers to improve their co-teaching skills.
5. Providing time for reflection as lessons are progressing, in order to look at student work samples and skills, in conjunction with student data, in order to support differentiation needs as well as identifying modifications and accommodations that regular education teachers need to make for their students.
6. Continue to develop curriculum guidelines so that they are accessible to all teachers. Utilize and communicate the curriculum to share instructional information and assessments across the district.
7. Investigate current reading supports that are provided for students that are not receiving special education services.
8. Provide professional development to teachers that are expected to teach reading skills so that they may improve their knowledge in that area and provide much needed instruction to struggling students.

Middle Level Teachers and Staff

"Middle grades teachers must be well grounded in the developmental and needs of young adolescents if they are going 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. The difference is more than a 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)

"Middle Level Educators are advocates for young adolescents. They enjoy being in their presence and understand the dynamics of an everchanging youth culture. They recognize the value of interdisciplinary work of integrated learning and are able to make sound pedagogical decisions based on the needs, interests, and special abilities of their students. They are sensitive to the individual differences and respond positively to the natural diversity present in middle level classrooms." (*This We Believe*, p.13)

Nissitissit Middle School is a grade 5 – 8 school serving the community of Pepperell and is part of the North Middlesex Regional School District. There are two middle schools in the district. NMS has an enrollment of about 525 students. There are approximately 130 students per grade and the school is organized by grade level teams. In 5th grade there are three two-person teams and in grade 6, there are two three person teams. In grades 7 and 8, there are three teams. A 7th grade team, and 8th grade team, and a split team whose teachers teach both 7th and 8th grade. Each of the teams with 7th and 8th grade students are made up of four content teachers. Students in the 7th and 8th grades take Spanish as full academic class. Additionally, each team has an assigned Special Education Teacher.

As described in both "*This We Believe*" and "*Turning Points 2000*", middle level educators enjoy being in their students' presence and are well grounded in the development needs of young adolescents. This certainly true of NMS. Through observation, interviews, and surveys it is apparent that the staff of Nissitissit are committed and truly care about the students who enter their building each day. Each morning, as students enter the building, they are greeted by administrators, teachers, and staff. The same was observed as students entered classrooms. Teachers were there to warmly welcome them. It is a climate and culture that supports the unique needs of this age group.

At Nisstissit Middle School, the faculty is a veteran staff and is comprised of two administrators, 34 regular education teachers that includes the librarian and computer teacher.

As NMS is the "Program" school, in addition to the seven Special Education teachers who are assigned to the academic teams, there are ten Special Education Program teachers, ten Special Education Paraprofessionals, three Speech and Language teachers, a Reading Specialist, a Math Coach, school Psychologist, and a Social Worker. The school also has one guidance counselor, a full-time nurse, an office secretary, and a lead custodian. The North Middlesex Regional School District has one fulltime Resource Officer who splits time between the high school, the middle schools, and the elementary schools.

It is of note that other than the Math and Reading specialists as well as the Adaptive Physical Education teacher, NMS does not share staff with any other school in the district. All teachers at NMS, meet the standards that define "Highly Qualified" and are fully committed to meeting the needs of the young adolescents.

Turnover at the school is low and for the 2019-2020 school year, there are only two new teachers at Nissitissit. To support new hires, the district has a comprehensive mentoring and induction program. Each new teacher has an assigned mentor with whom they meet on regular basis. New teachers also attend a monthly meeting with the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and teacher representative to discuss issues, concerns, and opportunities related to first year teachers as well as programs that go beyond the classroom such as setting up a 403b retirement account.

The school's principal and assistant principal are both in their ninth year in their respective roles. Staff interviews indicated that they feel strongly supported by the administration. Both administrators are highly organized and are committed to the ensuring that the students and staff feel safe, supported and encourage all to do their best. There is an intentional commitment to a "growth mindset" that is led by buildings administrators.

A significant and important component of the Whole School Assessment are the surveys. The surveys coupled with the observation and interview paint an important picture regarding Nissitissit Middle School. A review of the teachers' survey overwhelming indicates that the NMS staff believe that they are well prepared to teach and meet the needs of their students and that they engage in ongoing professional development opportunities. 93% of the teachers agree that the school provides professional development that support the physical, emotional, intellectual, and social characteristics of the emerging adolescent. Nearly 97% of teachers either agree or strongly agree that the district has an evaluation system which encourages faculty to assume responsibility for their own personal and professional growth.

The faculty survey strongly indicates that the district provides outstanding support for teachers who are new to the system as 96% of those surveyed either agree or strongly agree that the school has specific programs for induction and mentoring of new faculty. Additionally, this was also clearly evident during interviews with new staff as well as with their mentors.

Parents and students also overwhelmingly support the work of the staff at NMS as 88% of parent respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the school employs teachers who are adequately prepared and like to teach this age group. More than 96% of the students agree or strongly agree that their school and their teachers expect them to do their very best.

NMS houses each of the district's Special Education programs including the Therapeutic, Achieve, +Steps, ACHIEVE, and Language Based programs. Each of these programs has at least one teacher and several paraprofessionals. An exception to this is the Therapeutic program which has only one paraprofessional. Through observation and interview, it is apparent that the Special Education Staff is dedicated and committed to their students. There major concern is finding time to complete IEP's.

The school has a fulltime librarian and the library includes computer labs, meeting spaces, and a room containing professional development resources for staff. However, the resources for staff development and support are limited.

NMS has one Guidance Counselor and one Social Worker. The administration has clearly delineated the responsibilities (School Counselor vs. Social Worker: Who to call when) of both for staff. Despite housing the district's middle school Special Education Programs, through observation it appears that the caseload and the "day to day" of the work of the guidance counselor is at a tipping point and options to support her work should be explored.

The North Middlesex Regional School District has an Adaptive Physical Education teacher who works closely with the school's Physical Education department to support the needs of students who require an adaptive program. The school is to be commended for its Unified Physical Education class. This class has enlisted five 8th grade students who have volunteered to assist with class lessons and play alongside the ACHIEVE students in an inclusive setting. This is a model of an exemplary program and should be celebrated.

Strengths:

1. The faculty and staff of Nissitissit Middle School are extremely positive, exceptionally dedicated, highly motivated, and committed to ensuring that each and every student has the opportunity to be successful academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally.
2. A team structure in each grade that appropriately meets the needs of the middle level learner. Evidence of this is two person teams in grade 5, three person teams in grade 6, and four person teams in grades 7 and 8.
3. A positive culture and climate permeate throughout the building.
4. The NMRSD Induction and Mentor program provide supports and opportunities to teachers who are new to the district.
5. The staff is genuinely supportive of the building leadership and the building leadership is genuinely supportive of the NMS staff.
6. The North Middlesex Regional School District has an Adaptive Physical Education Teacher who works closely with the school's Physical Education department and has developed a program that includes regular education students working with students with significant special needs.
7. Two full days and nine early release days allows for quality professional development opportunities.
8. Other than the Math Specialist, Reading Specialists and Adaptive Physical Education Teacher NMS does not share staff with any other school.

Recommendations:

1. The school's professional library is limited and needs updating.
2. There is a need to review the Therapeutic staff's caseload and schedule to determine a possible need for additional support.
3. Also, review the Guidance Counselor's caseload and schedule to determine a possible need for additional support.
4. Special Education teachers indicated that they need additional time to write I.E.P's.

Organization: Relationships for Learning

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

"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. 122).

"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 purpose, 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 that 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 adults" (*Turning Points 2000*, p. 129).

"Research shows that effective teams lead to improved student achievement, increased parental contacts, an enhanced school climate, and positive student attitudes" (*This We Believe*, p. 29).

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.

During our visit to NMS, the VT noted that the building was designed with the middle school model in mind. Teams reflect many of the structures of a middle school in their practice. Students are organized onto teams, teams have names and identities, there is a team planning time three (3) days a week and team meetings are structured with an agenda and minutes that are available to the team, support staff and administration.

A change in the middle school schedule was directed by the superintendent last spring with the intent of creating a similar schedule for both middle schools in the district. The first phase, based upon an email, put the following in place:

- *Two person teams in grade 5 and two or three person teams in grade 6*
- *A and E blocks eliminated or a plan for efficient use of the time approved by the assistant superintendent*

- *HBMS will be allowed to continue on a 6-day rotation provided there is no loss to instructional time for any student*
- *Reading every day in grades 5 and 6*
- *Preps must be equitable for all teachers in grades 5-8 (Each teacher has one prep per day and each team a minimum of the common planning periods in the six-day cycle).*

NMS has a five-day schedule. Students see specialists once a week for the full year which is approximately 30 sessions. Students that are scheduled on Monday, due to the number of Monday holidays, are seen for approximately 20 sessions over the course of the year. Band and chorus meet every day. There are accommodations made for students who participate in both band and chorus. Students miss one content class a week on a rotating basis for lessons. While the NMS schedule reflect many of the superintendent's expectations there appears to be some work left to be done i.e. daily team planning time.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a district-wide goal. There is an SEL team at the building level. Based upon interviews with teachers at the various grade levels, each team is working on implementing SEL goals for students. This is a new initiative and in its formative stage of development. However, it should be noted, there is no student advisory program currently in place.

Based upon the surveys completed by staff, parents and students and the VT interviews, there are several strengths evident when visiting NMS. In the area of Relationships for Learning the VT has identified several strengths and would like to make the recommendations listed below.

Strengths:

1. Students are organized onto two-person teams in Grade 5, three-person teams in Grade 6 and four-person teams in Grades 7 and 8. There is a split team in Grade 7/8.
2. Teams have names and identities.
3. NMS has a five-day schedule.
4. There is team planning time 3 days a week.
5. Team meetings are structured with an agenda and minutes that are available to the team and administration.
6. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a district goal and a professional goal for staff.
7. There is a strong staff focus on supporting all students.
8. NMS has a before and after school program and provides a late bus providing students an opportunity to participate.
9. Students with special needs (on IEPs) are included in the regular education classrooms.
10. All students are eligible to participate in Student Council.
11. The building was designed as a middle school supporting the middle school concept
12. Band and chorus meet during the day.

Recommendations:

1. Expand the number of team planning times to one per day.
2. Continue to investigate ways to address the impact of Monday holidays on student access to classes and staff availability at team meeting times.
3. Determine the district's non-negotiables and priorities and develop a schedule that reflects them.
4. Include the appropriate stakeholders in the development of the schedule.
5. Develop a more in-depth understanding of middle level teaming beyond the organization to include communication and coordination of events, testing, homework and integrated units.
6. Continue to expand the SEL program and consider implementation of a student advisory program.

Govern Democratically

It has been proven that highly successful middle schools have collaborative leadership.

“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” (*Turning Points 2000* p.146).

Nissitissit Middle School (NMS) has a principal who is in her tenth year in that position and who was the assistant principal of NMS for nine years before assuming the principalship. There is also an assistant principal who has been in that position at NMS for nine years. The principal has been active in fostering the development of a middle school concept within the structure of a 5 to 8 school. The administrative team work well together in support of the faculty and staff. Survey results and interviews indicate that they are visible throughout the building and accessible.

There has been a principal’s advisory council in the past, but it was not yet active at the time of the visit this year. Faculty meetings are held twice each month. As part of a district and school plan, a portion of these meetings includes discussion of social emotional issues. Protocols and strategies related to implementing social emotional concepts are evident throughout the school.

In interviews with faculty and staff, the VT confirmed a willingness to provide programs of quality instruction to meet the learning needs of their young adolescent learners.

A parent teacher organization is in place at NMS. They support a wide range of activities and social events. As NMRSD fosters a more regional identity, the NMS PTO is meeting with the Hawthorne Brook Middle School PTO to identify opportunities to collaborate.

The opportunity for students to have a voice in the governance of their school is important. There is a student council at NMS. The group has a faculty advisor who work with students to provide an opportunity for student leadership to promote school and community spirit.

The principal and assistant principal visit the student council meetings on a regular basis.

Parents have a variety of electronic communication using either email, web site or the Principal's Blog available to them. While the school indicates there is considerable information available members of the VT heard a desire for increased communication from parents.

The VT consistently heard that faculty and staff feel they are supported by the administrative team.

NMWRD has many new administrators. The NMS principal has already started conversation with the high school and elementary principals to discuss how the Transition process could be improved.

The two middle school principals have also met to discuss similar opportunities at each building

Strengths:

1. The administrative team is considered accessible and is visible throughout the school.
2. An active student council is in place.
3. The Principal's " Blog" provides useful information to parents and the community.
4. There is strong support for the administrative team from NMRSD.
5. The collaborative leadership of the administrative team is evident.

Recommendations:

1. There is a need for a Strategic Planning Team with broad-based representation comprised of faculty, staff, parents, students, and community representatives to analyze the results of the self-study and this report. This team should develop action plans to prioritize and implement recommendations as well as establish benchmarks to measure progress and identify areas of responsibility. This action planning team will promote student learning and an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership. The team should be an on-going group that meets regularly to continue to discuss and help implement best middle school practices and investigate professional development opportunities for staff.
2. Reestablish the Principal's Advisory Council.
3. Replace last year's Student Handbook with the new version for both middle schools on the school's web site.
4. While there is considerable information in the Principal "Blog", consider more school specific topics.

Healthy School Environment

"A successful school for young adolescents is an inviting, supportive place, a joyful community that promotes in depth learning and enhances students' physical and emotional well-being. In a healthy school environment, human relations are paramount." (*This We Believe*, p.12)

"Healthy lifestyles and academic success are tightly interwoven—improvement in one leads to improvement in the other, both directly and indirectly. Positive intergroup 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 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)

When reviewing components of a healthy school environment, one has to look at the physical aspects of the building, the school climate, the programs that support the social, emotional, and academic needs of its students, as well as the relationships within. Nissitissit Middle School embodies the characteristics that define a "Healthy School Environment".

It was apparent to the Visiting Team that NMS is a healthy school. The first indication of this is upon entering the building. Students and visitors are greeted by staff and that safety and security are of the highest priority. The school is equipped with cameras, once school begins doors are locked, visitors need to enter through one designated secured door and are directed to sign in upon entering. Additionally, through observation it is evident that the building and adjacent grounds and fields are well maintained. The hallway floors, walls, classrooms and bathrooms are all clean. There are virtually no signs of graffiti or vandalism. Water fountains have been retrofitted to include bottle filling stations. The school and district custodial staff are well trained and are proud of their school. Also, the school's athletic fields are maintained by the Pepperell Department of Public Works, who work closely with the school to support school sponsored events that take place outdoors. A positive sign of the level of respect and trust that students have for each other emanates throughout is that none of the students' lockers have locks.

Despite the fact the school is nearly twenty years old, it still looks new. Staff and students take pride in their building. Posters, banners and student work are showcased throughout the building. Students interviewed at all grade levels indicated that they felt safe and their surveys supported their comments. Nearly all classrooms at NMS had a pineapple symbol outside the door. The pineapple is a sign of welcome and that it is "okay" to enter. However, the VT felt welcomed in all classrooms throughout the school.

Staff surveys also support the belief that their school provides a safe and healthy environment committed to improving academic performance as well as developing caring and ethical students. 94% of staff strongly agree or agree that the school exhibits a positive and caring learning climate. 96% believe that the school has a school-wide code of conduct that age appropriate and nearly 95% of the staff strongly agree or agree that there is an expectation that students respect individual differences in the school. The Physical Education Department's "Achieve" adaptive physical education class is a prime example of students and staff creating an environment that inclusive and supportive of all students.

However, a review of the surveys indicates that more than 25% of the staff disagree that the schools holds regularly scheduled meetings between administrators, guidance counselors, and teacher teams to discuss safety, health, and related issues. Additionally, nearly 42% of the staff disagree that the school has a schedule that allows for healthy physical activities each day.

Through observation, all members of the VT team commented of the positive interaction between student and staff, including hallways, classrooms, cafeteria, etc. Relationships among staff, particularly within teams and departments was positive and supportive. Team meetings can be characterized as "student centered" and "collaborative" as, during these meetings, staff focused on providing supports to benefit the unique needs of their students.

Student services, including the main office, nurse's office, and guidance services are located in the same wing of the building. The main office includes the principal's and assistant principal's office and is directly adjacent to the main entrance to the school. It is noteworthy to mention that there is only one School Resource Officer for all the schools in the North Middlesex Regional School District.

There is a building and district goal that time at each staff meeting is devoted to aspects of social emotional learning. This time is facilitated by the NMS Guidance department.

An essential characteristic of successful middle school program is ensuring that every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate. As stated in *This We Believe*, "the concept of advocacy is fundamental to the school's culture, embedded in its every aspect" (p. 35). A key component of middle school practice is a healthy and vibrant Advisory program designed for the specific culture of the school. Although SEL is a key element of student success as identified by it being a district goal, NMS does not have a formal advisory program.

The daily schedule includes four 30-minute lunch periods. Each grade level has their own lunch. The food service staff is supportive and school lunch program is well organized. The cafeteria is monitored by the building administrators and supported by teaching staff. Students are responsible for cleaning up their table areas. The 30 minutes allow for ample time to eat. Although the playing fields and courts are not easily accessible, it would be beneficial to allow students outdoor time during their lunch period.

NMS provides a wide array of afterschool activities for students that includes athletics, clubs, and the Children Learning After School Program (CLASP). CLASP is a program that offers students the opportunity to learn something new in supervised setting. Activities in CLASP meet one time per week and run in six-week cycles. Other after school programs include Student Council, drama, yearbook, band and chorus. Late busses run three times per week allowing all students access to after school offerings.

Strengths:

1. The building, the grounds, and the adjacent fields are well maintained
2. The staff, students, parents, and visitors feel safe and welcomed
3. Students, visitors, and colleagues know they are welcome to come into a staff members classroom that display a "Pineapple" icon at the entrance to the room
4. Students have ample time for lunch
5. Social Emotional Learning time at every faculty meeting
6. Safety and security protocols are in place
7. Significant evidence of cooperation and support between staff as well as with administration
8. Students are provided an extensive array of extracurricular activities
9. Late bus allows students to participate in activities
10. Physical Education includes rowing club and adaptive PE programs
11. There is a building wide focus and belief in a "Growth Mindset"
12. Team meetings are well organized and focused on student "support"
13. Although not objectively measurable, there is a positive climate and culture that emanates within the school.

Recommendations:

1. Create opportunities to hold regularly scheduled meetings between administrators, guidance counselors, and teacher teams to discuss safety, health, and related issues.
2. Consider incorporating an Advisory program into the school schedule
3. With ample time for lunch consideration should be given to providing outdoor time.
4. Although there is a true sense of safety and that the school security is a priority, there is only one School Resource Officer for the North Middlesex Regional School District. Consideration should be given to adding support in this area.
5. Create opportunities that allow for healthy physical activities each day.

Parents and Community

"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)

"Research studies clearly link the involvement of family and other adults in the community with higher levels of student achievement, improved student behavior, and greater overall support for schools." (*This We Believe*, 2010, p. 40)

"Schools do not presume to educate children alone. In today's society, genuine community involvement is a fundamental component of successful schools for young adolescents." (*This We Believe*, 2010, p. 41)

During our visit to NMS the VT interviewed parents, faculty, staff, students, and administrators. It is clear that everyone involved cared about the students and the school. There is a small, but very active, dedicated group of parents leading the PTO. The organization has reorganized this year as a 501(3)c organization and parents have focused on the district's goal to create opportunities for connections between the two middle schools in the district.

In addition, they have focused their fundraising efforts on supporting capital projects, field trips, teacher requests for classroom supplies, 8th grade "final blast", Washington, DC trip, teacher appreciation brunch and scholars' brunch. It was noted that in the past the Washington, DC trip was a joint trip between the two middle schools in the district, however that is no longer the case. They have held joint meetings with HBMS PTO to explore the possibilities for and plan joint events, i.e. dances and family nights. They also indicated involvement with several businesses in the community that support their efforts with the students.

The PTO appears to have its own website. A review of the school website does not indicate a link. Discussions with parents indicated that it would be helpful to the parent community to have information available in one location.

Based upon the surveys completed by staff, parents and students and the VT interviews, there are several strengths evident when visiting HBMS. In the area of Involving Parents and Community, the VT has identified several strengths and would like to make the recommendations listed below.

Strengths:

1. Parents generally have a positive view of the school.
2. The school has an active PTO.
3. The community and PTO have collaborated on events for students.
4. The PTO has funded and designed a variety of STEM/cultural programs for students.
5. The school provides a late bus for students allowing them the opportunity to participate in after school activities.
6. The website is new and updated.
7. There is a collaborative effort with HBMS PTO to plan joint events.

Recommendations:

1. Develop a communication plan for sharing information with parents and the community.
2. Continue to expand the use of technology to enhance communication.
3. Support the efforts of the PTO to coordinate events between the two middle schools in the district.
4. Continue to increase the social media presence.
5. Explore options for Open House and parent conferences that showcase student work in an effort to attract more parents to the school.
6. Investigate ways to share school information with the community.

Summary

The foundation for this report is based on the research of *Turning Points* and *This We Believe* which identify the nature and needs of the young adolescent learner and provide examples of best practices which are essential to a strong middle level program.

It was evident to the VT upon arrival that Nissitissit Middle School is a welcoming environment dedicated to the support of middle level students.

A self-study and an on-site assessment provide a reflective opportunity to examine varied aspects of a program through critical examination of what we do and make a determination of what works well and what could be changed. It is a vital factor in school improvement. This report includes several recommendations for your consideration during the strategic plan process.

The North Middlesex Regional School District is committed to provide excellent middle level program experiences for their young adolescent learners. There is no doubt that the collaborative efforts of Nissitissit and Hawthorne Brook Middle Schools to accomplish this goal will be successful.

The members of the VT enjoyed the three days spent at NMS and appreciated the hospitality of the school community. We hope the recommendations in this report will assist in creating an outstanding middle level program for the young adolescents of Nissitissit Middle School. Thank you for welcoming us into your community.

About The Assessors

William H. Downey is a NELMS Whole School and Focus Assessment Coordinator and 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 numerous school assessments and coordinated this school assessment program for NELMS. He also works as an adjunct professor in the Licensure Office of Worcester State University.

Jeff Rodman was named Executive Director of the New England League of Middle Schools in August 2018, after 41 years as a middle school educator. Prior to becoming NELMS' Executive Director, Jeff was the principal of the Middle School of the Kennebunks in Kennebunk, Maine. It was a position that he held for 10 years. He also served as a middle school principal in both Falmouth and Wells, Maine. Prior to delving into administration, Jeff taught math and coached a variety of sports at Old Rochester Regional Junior High School in Mattapoisett, MA.

Mary Jean Fawcett is a retired educator from Massachusetts. She has a Bachelor's degree in Education, a Master's degree in Reading and Language Acquisition, and a Master's degree in Educational Leadership. During her 36-year career in education, she has held the positions of teacher - grades 5, 6 and 8, reading, ELA and mathematics, Middle School Associate Principal, Middle School Principal, and Supervising Principal of a K-8 school. Her passion has always been middle level. She is very proud of having been a principal of two schools who had the opportunity to participate in the middle level research conducted by the Carnegie Foundation contributing to the resulting publication of both *Turning Points* and *Turning Points 2000*. She has also served on the NELMS Board and as the NELMS Board Chair. Since retiring, MJ has worked for NELMS as a consultant, Director of Professional Services, Acting Executive Director and is currently the Assistant Executive Director.

Jen Goff teaches seventh grade math at Littleton Middle School. Jen began her career at Springfield College where she was awarded a mathematics fellowship and received her M.Ed. She has over 20 years of experience teaching a variety of mathematical disciplines ranging from middle school through the college level. She is also certified in Physical Education and Health. Jen is passionate about integrating social and emotional learning in her classroom.

Kathryn Lariviere is a Special Education teacher, Team Leader, and new teacher mentor at Auburn Middle School, Auburn, Maine. She has been teaching for nineteen years; the first five years as a Life Skills teacher, and the past fourteen years as a resource teacher. Currently, she co-teaches in a regular education Language Arts classroom as well as teaches Language Arts and Math in the Special Education setting, a role that she has had for ten years.