

A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER HIRING PRACTICES IN AWARD WINNING MIDDLE  
SCHOOLS IN PENNSYLVANIA

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Administrative & Policy Studies in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

University of Pittsburgh

2004

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
ADMINISTRATIVE & POLICY STUDIES

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# A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER HIRING PRACTICES IN AWARD WINNING MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN PENNSYLVANIA

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University of Pittsburgh, 2004

Given the lack of specific middle level teacher preparation in Pennsylvania, along with the implications of No Child Left Behind legislation, this case study investigated how principals of award winning middle schools resolve these issues in terms of the hiring and development of middle-level educators in order to sustain excellence in their schools. The knowledge of the essential elements of an effective middle school, the pedagogical expertise needed to effectively instruct transescents and the personal attributes of candidates were examined as possible factors in the hiring process.

Data was collected by taping personal interviews and by examining district artifacts regarding interviewing procedures, as well as the application packets for either the National Blue Ribbon Award or the PMSA Don Eichhorn Award for Outstanding Middle Schools. Interview questions posed to the principals sought to discern their perceptions of the key personal qualities and pedagogical knowledge that they were searching for in outstanding middle school teacher candidates. Questions were also posed to address the district's practices for induction, mentoring, and professional development of new and existing staff members in order to build a capacity for best middle level practices. Finally, the principal's own path to the principalship of an award winning middle school was explored.

By studying the processes used in award-winning middle schools for teacher selection, mentoring and induction programs, and on-going professional development programs, the researcher sought to reveal the patterns and themes consistent among these schools, in order to draw conclusions and make recommendations about how other principals could build the staff capacity to become an outstanding middle school.

Four themes emerged from the research. Middle school principals utilized a unique interview process in order to hire the best middle level teacher candidates. An emphasis was placed on the personal qualities of the candidates, rather than their pedagogical knowledge or

experience. Award-winning middle schools nurtured an environment of collegial learning. Finally, under the leadership of the principal, the award-winning middle schools built a culture of continuous improvement. Results from this study supported the notion that hiring the right people was at the core of sustaining an excellent middle level program.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is often true that people come into our lives at just the right time and for just the right reasons. I have been fortunate to encounter many such friends along my journey to complete my dissertation. Each of them contributed to shaping the final product, but more importantly each of them added to molding the person that I have become during my pursuit of this goal. Many encouraged, some cajoled, most demonstrated patience, but all played a role as mentor-teachers. For that I am particularly thankful.

My greatest love and thanks go to my parents. As career educators and loving parents they taught me early on a joy of learning, which somewhere along the line became my love of teaching. Other tremendous mentors along the way have included Dr. Denise Chappell and Dr. Betty Sue Schaughency. These two dedicated educators inspired me to become more than I had dreamed for myself and provided the encouragement for me to complete this work. But in the end it all came down to a dear friend, Dr. Lou Nagy, a walk in the yard with Imre, and a hole in the ground left long ago by the rotting stump of an apple tree that I played under as a child. These were the secret ingredients necessary for me to complete this project!

I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to the members of my committee who have offered invaluable help and suggestions along the way. They each helped me to stay on course and look at my topic with fresh focus. I especially wish to thank my advisor, Joseph Werlinich, who helped me navigate the waters along the way.

Finally, I would like to thank the individuals who participated in this study. Without their generosity of time and information, I could not have compiled the wealth of research, which enabled me to complete this study. Each of them affirmed my personal belief that middle schools, utilizing best practices to help middle level students grow and learn, are alive and well in Pennsylvania!

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## **I. CHAPTER 1**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

Public schools are under tremendous pressure at the local, state, and national levels to improve the quality of education for our youth. Expectations about what students should know and be able to do are rising. There is a push from the federal level to tie funding for schools more closely to academic performance. As the social and family structures of our nation change, pressure is increasing on schools to fill this void and prepare our youth to assume adult roles in an increasingly diverse, technologically advancing, and rapidly evolving society. A critical juncture for the success or failure of students occurs at the middle level from grades 5 to 8.

A student's experience at middle school serves as a predictor of his/her degree of future success (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 10). Students who are nurtured, engaged, and challenged at this level, tend to meet with success in high school and beyond. Students who are disconnected, ostracized, or under-challenged at this level often continue into high school along a declining path. "Early adolescence is a time when youth face significant 'turning points.' Many young people emerge from early adolescence on a path leading to a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, however, early adolescence represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future" (Dickinson & McEwin, 1995, p. 24). The challenge to middle schools is to design high achieving, developmentally responsive middle school programs in order to promote life-long learning for all young adolescents. At the heart of a child's school experience lies the power of a teacher to make the difference.

Staffing a school with the best possible professional practitioners becomes a goal for every administrator. This goal has ramifications for the hiring process. It also has implications for the professional development of the existing staff. These issues became relevant for the researcher as she was working as an assistant principal in a school district in Western Pennsylvania. As this district was transitioning from a junior high program to a middle school program, staffing issues emerged as particularly important. This led to the need to address two essential questions: What were the key qualities we as a district were looking for as we hired new middle school staff? What were the key learnings regarding teaching in an effective middle school that we needed to teach to our existing staff?

As the researcher and the transition team learned more about the essential characteristics of effective middle schools, we were able to hone in on the answers to both of these questions. What we wanted our teachers to know and be able to do in the middle school environment became apparent. These characteristics about middle level learners were incorporated into our interview questions for hiring new staff members. How we would teach this information to our veteran staff members became the essence of our professional development plan in order to sustain excellence.

At the same time it became evident that few of the candidates we were interviewing for new positions had received any pre-service training that was specifically designed for working in a middle school. Nor had they been prepared to design instructional lessons to address the unique characteristics of young adolescent learners. This gap created a tension in the staffing process and had major implications for our staff development program. The Pennsylvania Department of Education did not have a middle level certification or endorsement program to address middle-level teacher preparation, so the responsibility for teacher professional development, targeting teaching in a middle school, rested squarely on the shoulders of the school district.

This tension and the challenge it presented peaked the researcher's interest in the topic of teacher preparation for a career in middle-level education. How is a school to develop and sustain the elements that have been proven to exist in high performing middle schools? The researcher is currently the principal of a small, western Pennsylvanian middle school, serving approximately 350 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. The staff in the core content areas (math, science, language arts, and social studies) includes fourteen teachers. Four of them have elementary

certification. Three have dual certification in elementary and one other area of certification. The other seven have secondary certification in specified disciplines.

In reviewing the literature on this topic, the researcher discerned that the middle school concept, as defined by key characteristics has gained validity as a structure that, when fully implemented, works effectively with young adolescent learners. However, specific training to learn about middle-level schools and then teach in a carefully designed middle school program is lacking. Walzer (1994) reports, “that only 22 universities have programs which fulfill the guidelines recommended by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) for middle-level education; and only approximately one-third of colleges throughout the United States have any courses geared to middle school teaching” (Dodge & Farnan, 1995, p. 17). Pennsylvania adopted a Middle Level Certificate during the fall of 2001. During that year there were no institutions of higher education in Pennsylvania offering the courses needed to complete this certificate. In year two, 2002 – 2003, one college offered a program for this certificate (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2003). Overall, Pennsylvania school districts are left with the responsibility for training new hires and veteran teachers, if their schools are to attain and/or sustain the essential elements of an effective middle school.

## **B. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study is to determine the essential personal qualities and pedagogical qualifications needed by teacher candidates in order to sustain excellence in middle schools. This need applies to both the hiring of new staff as well as to the professional development training of existing staff.

## **C. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Given the issues of no consistent middle-level teacher preparation and the implications of No Child Left Behind, how do principals of award-winning middle schools resolve these issues in

terms of the hiring and development of middle-level educators in order to sustain excellence in their schools?

#### **D. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What aspects of pre-service middle school teachers' training, experience, or personal qualities are responsible for their being hired to teach in an award-winning Pennsylvania middle school?
2. What attributes within a principal's background, training, or experience impacted his/her career path to a middle school principalship?
3. What induction and mentoring programs do the award-winning school districts currently have in place, for addressing post-hiring professional development for middle school teachers?
4. How does the award-winning school district establish and sustain effective middle-level practices, via professional development for both new hires and veteran staff members, given that these staff members have not received comprehensive, formal middle-level training from Pennsylvania colleges as part of their certification process?

#### **E. DEFINITION OF TERMS**

Transescents – A term referring to children between ages 10 – 14, leaving childhood and entering their teens. Dr. Donald Eichhorn originally coined 'Transescents' and 'Transescence' in 1966.

Transescence is the period in human development which begins in late childhood prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence. Since puberty does not occur for all precisely at the same chronological age in human development, the transescent designation is based on the many physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes in body chemistry that appear prior to the puberty cycle to the time in which the

body gains a practical degree of stabilization over these complex pubescent changes.  
(Eichhorn, 1966, p. 3)

Middle School – A school unit which follows the elementary unit and precedes the high school unit; includes students from grades six, seven and eight of a graded school organization.  
(Eichhorn, 1966, p. 107)

Ten Essential Elements of an Effective Middle School –

1. Educators knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents.
2. A balanced curriculum based on the needs of young adolescents.
3. A range of organizational arrangements.
4. Varied instructional strategies.
5. A full exploratory program.
6. Comprehensive advising and counseling.
7. Continuous progress for students.
8. Evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of young adolescents.
9. Cooperative planning.
10. Positive school climate.

(Transition to a Middle School, PMSA, p. 2)

PMSA Don Eichhorn Award – An award issued annually by the Pennsylvania Middle School Association in recognition of a middle school, which demonstrates outstanding implementation of the 10 essential elements of an effective middle school. <http://www.pmsaweb.org.html>

National Blue Ribbon School Program – Since 1982 this national program has celebrated many of America's most successful schools. Its goal is to promote and support the improvement of education in America. The program promotes and supports the improvement of education in America by:

- \* Identifying and recognizing schools that are models of excellence and equity, schools that demonstrate a strong commitment to educational excellence for all students,

and that achieve high academic standards or have shown significant academic improvement over five years.

- \* Making research-based, self-assessment criteria available to schools looking for a way to reflect on how they are doing.

- \* Encouraging schools, both within and among themselves, to share information about best practices, which is based on a shared understanding of the standards, which demonstrate educational success.

*<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/BlueRibbonSchools/about.html>*

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – Signed into law on January 8, 2002 by President Bush, this legislation contains the most sweeping changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act since it was enacted in 1965. It changes the federal government’s role in kindergarten-through-grade 12 education by asking America’s schools to describe their success in terms of what each student accomplishes. It contains four basic education reform principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that are proven to work.

*<http://www.pde.state.pa.us/nclb.html>*

The No Child Left Behind – Blue Ribbon Schools Program – Introduced in 2002, this program was revised to align with the nation’s new education reforms for high standards and accountability by recognizing schools that are either academically superior in their states or that demonstrate dramatic gains in student achievement. The program requires schools to meet either of two assessment criteria: It recognizes schools that have at least 40 percent of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds that dramatically improve student performance in accordance with state assessment systems; and it rewards schools that score in the top 10 percent on state assessments.

*<http://www.ed.gov/PressReleases/07-2002/07282002.html>*

National Middle School Association (NMSA) – This national organization was established in 1973. National Middle School Association dedicates itself to improving the educational

experiences of young adolescents by providing vision, knowledge, and resources to all who serve them in order to develop healthy, productive, and ethical citizens. *<http://www.nmsa.org.html>*

Pennsylvania Middle School Association (PMSA) – This state affiliate of the National Middle School Association, established in 1975 works to support the growth of excellent middle schools in our state. Their mission is to articulate and to promote the philosophy of Middle Level education at the state and local level, to influence the development, implementation and evaluation of Middle Level curriculum and resources. PMSA strives to develop a network of Middle Level educators who advocate transescents as learners and individuals. *<http://www.pmsaweb.org.html>*

Pre-service teacher – An individual studying and training to become a certified teacher.



## II. CHAPTER 2

### A. REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

#### **1. Emergence of the Middle School Concept**

The Middle School Movement came into being in the 1960s with the advocacy of a school with the configuration of grades 5 – 8 or 6 – 8. “In order to be developmentally responsive, middle-level schools must be grounded in the diverse characteristics and needs of these young people. It is this concept that lies at the heart of middle-level education. While grade configuration may be a consideration, the nature of the program provided for young adolescents, wherever they are housed, is the crucial factor” (This We Believe, 1995, p. 5). Prior to this, students between the ages of ten and fifteen had attended junior highs, designed to provide a version of the high school experience.

The time was ripe for innovation in education after the Russian launching of Sputnik. Congress passed the National Defense Education Act to promote an intensive focus on curriculum and instruction, particularly in mathematics and science. “The middle school concept was initiated in this climate of fresh ideas, creative changes, and renewed interest in child-based learning” (Eichhorn, 1966, p. vii). Dr. Donald Eichhorn, one of the movement’s founding fathers, believed that the middle school movement began for four reasons:

1. A recognition and reaffirmation of the belief that youngsters aged 10-14 are in a unique stage of development in which they share similar physical, mental, social, and emotional characteristics.
2. New medical evidence that suggests that youngsters attain puberty at an earlier age than before.
3. Forces such as the new technology, racial integration, and the knowledge explosion that were affecting society.

4. The junior high school organization was perceived as and in many instances had become an institution patterned after the senior high school. (Eichhorn, 1966, p. viii)

At its inception in the early 1900's, the junior high model was begun to better serve the needs of the changing American culture of that time. Societal forces, particularly the development of the assembly line in factories, had an enormous impact on the structure of education (Knowles and Brown, 2000, p. 40). The first junior highs were not designed to account for the needs of the students; they were designed to respond to the demographics of a changing American culture.

“In 1919 the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools provided a definition of the junior high: ‘A junior high school is a school in which the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades are segregated in a building (or portion of a building) by themselves; possess an organization and administration of their own that is distinct from the grades above and below, and are taught by a separate corps of teachers’” (Knowles and Brown, 2000, p. 45). Despite the growth of this configuration (to approximately 6,500 schools by the 1950's) the junior high did not provide a unique experience for young adolescents (Knowles and Brown, 2000, p. 45). The teachers were not trained to account for the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of the students. There was no distinct curriculum.

The shortcomings of the junior high model led to the idea of a unique transitional program between elementary and high school, which could meet the physical, mental, and social needs of these adolescents. In his landmark work in Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania, Eichhorn studied these qualities of young adolescents and asserted that our culture was changing in ways that merited the creation of a new educational model, the middle school.

Eichhorn coined the term, “transescence” to refer to this unique developmental stage. His research focused on three areas of development in the transescent. The first area in which Eichhorn asserted that the child's development was uniquely evolving was in physical growth, characterized by a period of rapid growth, unequalled since infancy.

The second area was in intellectual growth. Eichhorn drew heavily upon the work of Piaget and determined that there were identifiable, sequential stages of intellectual development that transescents passed through, although not necessarily at the same rate or chronological age. “Mentally, the transescent moves from an understanding of the real and concrete to an ability to relate to the theoretical and hypothetical” (Eichhorn, 1966, p. 40). He concluded that it was

essential to the educational program for the teacher to understand this intellectual pathway in order to heighten academic achievement.

The third area of focus, unique to transescent development, Eichhorn identified as cultural forces, or a child's evolving social status. Socially, this period is marked by a shift from dependence upon family to a strong interconnectedness with peers and independence from family. Social interactions shift to include more peer involvement. This also includes an interest in the opposite sex and dating. Rates of maturation can affect this sequence and create conflicts and confusion for the transescent. Societal changes also have implications for transescence. These forces include rapidly changing technologies, geographic mobility of our society, and the value of the adolescent to the economic market. "The impact of diverse elements – some demanding conformity others requiring individuality – is a deep and necessary concern the transescent educator has to meet" (Eichhorn, 1966, p. 56). Traditional educational approaches may not meet the requirements of this dynamic era and educators must be ready to utilize changing instructional techniques.

Out of these elements Eichhorn presented his model for the middle school. "The middle school educational model will be constructed in such a manner that an isomorphic relationship will form a conceptual link between the elements of the socio-psychological model and the middle school educational model" (p. 58).

But Eichhorn recognized that educational gains could not be achieved solely through organizational models. "Ultimately the gain to be accomplished is in human relationships. That is why the means whereby the professional staff conducts the educational process is of such importance. Recruitment of personnel is a key factor in developing a successful middle school staff" (p. 91). Eichhorn indicated that prospective middle school teachers needed thorough professional preparation. He recommended that it include both extensive understanding of the physical and mental growth processes of transescents and competence in a subject area.

He also recommended a list of key personal traits that he believed would be beneficial for middle school educators, as well as characteristics for consideration when selecting middle school teachers. They included:

**Personal Security:** The insecurity of transescents requires daily examples of adults who exhibit confidence and faith in themselves.

**Understanding:** As the emancipation process develops, teachers may be of help to youth by being good listeners and by showing an interest in students.

**Resourceful:** It has been suggested at length that experiences are crucial at this age group. A teacher must not only be aware of this need, but also should cognitively react in a divergent manner in providing the diversity of needed experiences.

**Adaptability:** Being able to continually alter one's daily schedule is a necessary quality for middle school teachers. An inflexible person who depends on routine for personal security probably will find the proposed educational model frustrating.

**Enthusiasm:** Transescents profit from an enthusiastic adult. Teachers who are cynics will tend to stifle rather than motivate curiosity necessary for learning experiences.

**Cooperative:** In the educational model, stress was placed on interrelatedness of curricular content and flexible scheduling. The points will require considerable faculty interaction.

**Sense of Humor:** Teachers who fail to see the humorous aspects in daily human involvements may find difficulty in relating to transescents. (Eichhorn, 1966, p. 92)

Others followed Eichhorn in calling for a middle school uniquely designed to match the social, physical, and intellectual qualities of the transescent. A national association, called the National Middle School Association (NMSA), was formed in 1973 to advance the beliefs of its founders. In 1982 NMSA published This We Believe. Created by a committee including Alfred A. Arth, William Alexander, Charles Cherry, Donald Eichhorn, Conrad Toepfer, Gordon Vars and editor, John Lounsbury, it was a position paper to clarify the essential elements of a middle school and set the direction for the Middle School Movement. The critical component was that the middle school must go beyond meeting the needs of young adolescents, but that they must also be responsive to developmental issues (Knowles and Brown, 2000, p. 48).

The position paper by the NMSA committee expanded the early work of Eichhorn and detailed the unique characteristics of adolescents into four categories: physical, social,

emotional, and intellectual characteristics. They went on to describe the “10 Essential Elements of a True Middle School”. These included:

- Educators Knowledgeable About and Committed to Young Adolescents
- A Balanced Curriculum Based on the Needs of Young Adolescents
- A Range of Organizational Arrangements
- Varied Instructional Strategies
- A Full Exploratory Program
- Comprehensive Advising and Counseling
- Continuous Progress for Students
- Evaluation Procedures Compatible with the Nature of Young Adolescents
- Cooperative Planning
- Positive School Climate (This We Believe, 1982, p. 15 – 22).

The committee concluded by stating that these elements were interrelated and that all of the elements would have to be developed in order for the middle school to be truly effective in educating young adolescents.

The establishment of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in 1986 was the next key event in the evolution of the Middle School Movement. The Carnegie Corporation of New York gave this group the charge of “developing strategies to meet the needs of adolescents in a rapidly changing environment” (Knowles and Brown, 2000, p. 48). Renewed focus emerged due to concerns about the high risks of drug and alcohol abuse, early pregnancy, school failure, and violence among adolescents.

This group identified four key findings as to why middle schools and junior high schools were not meeting the needs of young adolescents.

1. Middle and junior high schools contained large enrollments.
2. The students had developed few meaningful relationships with the adults in the schools (teachers, administrators, counselors); that is, the adults did not become well acquainted with the students.
3. The chosen curricula were irrelevant to students.
4. The majority of instructional strategies used were better suited for specialized classes of the high school or college (Knowles and Brown, 2000, p. 48).

In 1989 the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development published its report, entitled Turning Points: Preparing Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. While the report made specific recommendations for the ideal structure for a middle school, it began with the ideals the middle-level child should embody. They narrowed these to five characteristics:

1. An intellectually reflective person;
2. A person enroute to a lifetime of meaningful work;
3. A good citizen;
4. A caring and ethical individual; and
5. A healthy person (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 15).

In order to reach this ideal structure, the Task Force made eight recommendations, which have become the core of today's middle school concept.

Integrating the most current research knowledge with considered and wise practice, the Task Force found that the transformation of education for young adolescents involves eight essential principles:

- Large middle grade schools are divided into smaller communities for learning.
- Middle grade schools transmit a core of common knowledge to all students.
- Middle grade schools are organized to ensure success for all students.
- Teachers and principals have the major responsibility and power to transform middle grade schools.
- Teachers for the middle grades are specifically prepared to teach young adolescents.
- Schools promote good health; the education and health of young adolescents are inextricably linked.
- Families are allied with school staff through mutual respect, trust, and communication.
- Schools and communities are partners in educating young adolescents. (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 36)

Of particular interest was the notice taken by this study that, "Dramatic changes are needed in both what individuals learn to become middle grade teachers and how they learn it" (p. 59).

Not long after this (in 1992) researchers from NMSA met to revisit their original position paper. By 1995 an NMSA committee republished their position paper in a fresh format. This We Believe, 1995 helped to echo the findings of the Carnegie Council. It reaffirmed the vision of middle-level education. (Both John Lounsbury and Gordon Vars from the original committee were able to participate in this effort.) This We Believe, 1995 captured the key characteristics of young adolescent learners and conveyed the implications for educators. The authors noted rapid and profound personal changes between the ages of ten and fifteen, which presented challenges for the youngsters, as well as for teachers and parents. Part of the challenge was the variety of ways these changes played out from child to child, making generalizations risky. “Dissimilar rates of growth are common in all areas of development – intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral” (This We Believe, 1995, p. 6).

They went on to note that the five various areas of development were not independent of each other, increasing the complexity of the young adolescent learner’s make-up. “It also is important to recognize that these areas of development are inexorably intertwined. With young adolescents, the achievement of academic success, for example, is highly dependent upon their other developmental needs being met” (p. 6). Success in school could not be tied to intellectual capacity alone.

This study found that when it comes to learning, the young adolescents clearly benefited from a unique approach to teaching and learning, which took into account the development of thinking and problem solving skills. “Young adolescents reveal growing capacity for conceptualization, for considering more than a single idea at a time, and for planning steps to carry out their own learning. Such evidence heralds growth toward more mature and abstract ways of thinking. Students benefit from learning systematic approaches to creative thinking and problem solving. However, because cognitive growth occurs gradually, most middle-level students require ongoing concrete, experiential learning in order to develop intellectually” (This We Believe, 1995, p. 6). This quality, the movement from concrete to abstract thinking, occurring in fits and starts, and at different rates for each child, held significant implications for adolescent teaching. The question eventually raised was how could teachers, working independently in the junior high setting, plan for teaching these types of learners, and help them to reach their maximum potential?

In addition to the development of thinking skills, the young adolescent learner presented unique challenges to the teacher in terms of their physical growth and development. “Hormonal shifts trigger physical transformations such as: redistribution of body fat; weight and height increases; abrupt growth of bones and muscles; and changes in voice, hair, and complexion” (p. 7). The authors of This We Believe, 1995 took these characteristics into account and believed that they had implications for classroom teaching and design. For example, the very fact that the tailbone of young adolescents has not completely calcified holds ramifications for their ability to sit still for long periods of time, as expected in the junior high teaching model.

A final area of developmental need identified in This We Believe, 1995, was the young adolescent’s need for belonging. Adolescents, searching for their personal identity, were likely to form allegiances with their peer group and often end up in conflict with adults. “One consuming aspect of young adolescent development is the search for personal identity. Young adolescents form their sense of self in large part from the interactions they have with significant peers and adults. Sensitive, knowledgeable adults recognize the importance of support and advocacy for those adolescents who are striving to establish themselves in positive, productive ways” (p. 7). Even the changing society and culture of the United States have an impact on their development. “The effects of societal forces upon moral development are of particular concern during early adolescence...Young people are confronted with conflicting messages about sexuality and appropriate behavior, and too often their schools shy away from such issues” (p. 8). Recognizing the importance of adult influence, in balance with the role of peer groups, could give insight and direction to both teachers and parents of young adolescents.

The authors went so far as to say that schools had a responsibility to design programs to aid young adolescents through this time of conflict and development. “A full understanding of the unique nature and needs of young adolescents makes clear many aspects of what ought to be characteristic of an educational program for 10 - 15 year olds. Guidelines for selecting educational goals, curriculum content, and instructional processes grow out of an awareness of this distinctive developmental age group” (This We Believe, 1995, p. 10). All of these efforts provided a thoroughly researched and clearly grounded foundation for the Middle School Movement. The challenge to schools would lie in the implementation of all of the recommendations.



Both NMSA and the Carnegie Council conducted and published follow up studies. In 2003 NMSA released This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents. This publication, along with its companion piece, Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe, was the product of a review of the 1995 position paper by over 250 middle-level educators and researchers. The, “burgeoning research base about adolescent growth and development and successful practices in curriculum, organization, and indeed every aspect of middle-level schools” warranted such a major undertaking (This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents, 2003, p. xi). While the core tenants of the work did not change, the research that reinforced the need for effective middle schools continued to grow. Taken in its whole, this body of knowledge continues to substantiate the early work of Dr. Eichhorn concerning the cognitive, social, emotional and physical characteristics of young adolescents.

Entitled Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and authored by Anthony W. Jackson and Gayle A. Davis, this follow up publication by the Carnegie Corporation of New York took a critical look at the failures of middle schools to meet the needs of young adolescents and thereby live up to the dreams of the middle school founding fathers. The authors sought to answer the question as to why this movement has not been more successful. Their research identified the changing nature of our society and the increased risk factors for adolescents among the reasons for many middle schools’ shortcomings. However, according to their findings the failure of most middle schools to take all the recommendations of Turning Points: Preparing Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to heart and to implement them fully created the primary stumbling block, preventing middle schools from realizing their full potential.

Nevertheless, the existing research suggests that when reforms are implemented with integrity, in a manner that leads to authentic change in curriculum, instruction, and assessment and in the organization and climate of the school, dramatic and lasting improvements in student performance can be obtained. When reforms are implemented in a limited or scattershot manner, however, as when changes in grade configuration and teacher and student grouping are not accompanied by substantial changes in teaching practices, improvement in student outcomes is more limited. (Jackson and David, 2000, p. 6)

## **2. Key Components of Effective Middle Schools**

In Eichhorn's research he envisioned a middle school program, which would integrate the analytical sphere (math, language, science, and social studies) with the physical/cultural sphere (fine arts, practical arts, cultural studies, and physical education). The cornerstone of this design was the match between the two spheres. Transescents could be successful in a model that addressed all of their needs – intellectual, physical, social, and emotional.

When NMSA first published This We Believe in 1982 the document supported this view and delineated the major characteristics and program components in a developmentally responsive middle-level school.

Developmentally responsive middle-level schools are characterized by:

1. Educators committed to young adolescents
2. A shared vision
3. High expectations for all
4. An adult advocate for every student
5. Family and community partnerships
6. A positive school climate

Therefore, developmentally responsive middle-level schools provide:

1. Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory
2. Varied teaching and learning approaches
3. Assessment and evaluation that promotes learning
4. Flexible organizational structures
5. Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
6. Comprehensive guidance and support services. (This We Believe, 1995, p. 11)

These six characteristics for middle-level schools and six program components for schools became the cornerstones upon which the middle school movement continued to grow. The next phase step for schools was to try to incorporate these principles into action and then to evaluate the successes and shortcomings, in a continuous effort to improve the educational environment for young adolescents.

In order to bring these principles to life, schools found that the teacher was the key variable in the classroom. “Teachers in middle grade schools should be selected and specially educated to teach young adolescents.” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 58) It was found that teachers who disliked their work staffed middle schools all too often. This was either because they were not prepared and confident to deal with the structure of a middle school, or because they were really waiting to be placed in an elementary or secondary school, the schools that they had prepared to work in. The Council’s specific recommendation was, “Above all else, prospective middle grade teachers need to understand adolescent development through courses and direct experience in middle grade schools” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 59).

NMSA echoed this call for specific teacher preparation. “Middle school teachers, at their most fundamental level, must be experts in the development and needs of young adolescents” (<http://www.nmsa.org/news/middlelevelteachers.html>).

For these new understandings about young adolescent growth and development to translate into action in the classroom, teachers had to be trained and prepared.

Educators need specific preparation before they enter middle-level classrooms and continuous professional development as they pursue their careers. The National Middle School Association and others have published exemplary programs for the preparation of middle-level educators. State departments of education and institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to develop appropriate programs to assist school districts in providing ongoing professional development. School districts must take advantage of these opportunities in order to secure, motivate, and sustain effective middle-level educators. (This We Believe, 1995, p. 14)

Without deliberate preparation for teachers, the shortcomings of the junior high model and the promise of the middle school model would not be addressed. The change from a junior high to a middle school would remain a change in name alone. Even today, this continues to be a challenge.

In Turning Points 2000, Jackson and Davis restated the call for professional preparation for middle grades teachers. Their research indicated that middle grades teachers should come to their first teaching experience with:

- A strong conceptual grasp of their academic disciplines and skills in developing and using assessments to guide instructional decisions
- Instructional knowledge and skills grounded in how people learn best
- An understanding of how effective interdisciplinary teams work and how they can best contribute to effective teams
- Substantial comprehension of young adolescents' developmental characteristics and needs
- Willingness and the preparation to participate actively in the school's governance system
- Knowledge and skills to support a safe and healthy school environment
- Capacity to engage parents and community members in support of student and the school (Jackson and Davis, 2000, p. 96).

Jackson and Davis viewed this preparation as the first step on a teacher's "continuum of learning and development focused always on improving student learning. Critical steps along the continuum include high-quality pre-service teacher preparation, carefully designed mentoring and induction programs, initial certification and licensure, and ongoing professional development, perhaps leading to advanced certification by the national Board for Professional Teaching Standards" (p. 94).

In 2001 NMSA published a position paper with its recommendations for teacher preparation for middle-level teaching. In this paper they echoed the calls that have gone out for specific, middle-level teacher preparation. "The realization that teachers of young adolescents need specialized professional preparation is not a recent phenomenon. For over seventy-five years, the literature has included calls for these preparation programs (Douglas, 1920; Floyd, 1932; Elliot, 1949; Van Til, Vars, & Lounsbury, 1961; George & McEwin, 1978; Alexander & McEwin, 1988; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Scales & McEwin, 1994, 1996; McEwin & Dickinson, 1995; Swaim & Stefanich, 1996; Cooney, 1998). Unfortunately, significant numbers of teacher preparation institutions, state departments of education, licensure agencies, and others have chosen to ignore the need for these teachers and have promoted the widespread idea that when qualifications for teaching young adolescents are considered, the response is often 'no specialized preparation needed'. As a result, many of today's middle-level students are taught by teachers who are not sufficiently prepared to be successful in the

challenging and rewarding responsibility of understanding and teaching young adolescents” (<http://www.nmsa.org/news/middlelevelteachers.html>).

Without this specialized training, middle-level teachers lack the technical knowledge of how to meet the changing needs of young adolescents, as well as when to apply various instructional tools with their learners.

Just as young adolescents are different from young children and older adolescents, middle schools are different from their counterparts at the elementary and high school levels. This difference is much more than that of appearance, however, and extends to the philosophical foundations of middle-level education and the organizational structure that grows from and supports this philosophy. A thorough study of middle-level philosophy and organization, therefore, must be a primary element of the student’s preparation program and not merely a superficial exploration. Middle-level teacher preparation programs should be anchored within a context that supports and extends young adolescent development. A study of middle-level philosophy and organization provides just such a mooring. (<http://www.nmsa.org/news/middlelevelteachers.html>)

In 2001 NMSA communicated their vision for the essential elements of a specialized teacher preparation program for middle-level.

Essential Elements of middle-level teacher preparation programs: (does not include elements essential to all quality teacher preparation programs)

1. Collaborative partnerships with middle school faculty and university-based middle school teacher educators should integrate both faculties in planning, implementation, direct teaching, assessment, and continuing oversight of the program.
2. Creation of site-based delivery of middle-level teacher preparation programs...where interns have numerous opportunities for authentic teaching performances with appropriate audiences.  
(<http://www.nmsa.org/news/middlelevelteachers.html>)

These elements mirrored the consensus on essential components of highly effective middle grades teacher preparation programs related in Turning Points 2000:

- Comprehensive study of early adolescence and the philosophy and organization of middle grades education
- Early and continuing field experiences in a variety of middle grades settings (usually grades 5 – 8)
- Preparation in two or more broad teaching fields (e.g., mathematics and science) (Jackson and Davis, 2000, p. 99).

These essential elements would elevate existing teacher education programs in order to provide preparation for middle-level teaching. By graduating pre-service teachers with these experiences, universities would also contribute to the continuation of effective middle schools and in many cases enhance the quality of middle schools already in operation. “Without a solid grounding in knowledge and experience of young adolescent development, the success of the individual middle school teacher and middle schools as a whole is limited” (<http://www.nmsa.org/news/middlelevelteachers.html>).

It appeared to be a fundamental need in a pre-service teacher’s preparation not only to learn about middle-level philosophy, but also to experience it first hand during student teaching. “Working in these kinds of schools affords prospective middle-level teachers valuable opportunities to experience school organizations that utilize: (a) teams, (b) advisories, (c) exploratories, (d) interest/mini courses, (e) intramurals, (f) flexible/block schedules, (g) heterogeneous grouping, and, (h) interdisciplinary and integrative curriculum” (<http://www.nmsa.org/news/middlelevelteachers.html>). These components, taken together, tie the essential components of a middle school teacher’s preparation back to the early work of Dr. Donald Eichhorn and the establishment of the middle school model.

### **3. Nationwide Pre-service Experiences for Middle Level Teachers**

NMSA has not been the only organization to call for field experiences, specifically at the middle school level for preparation of future middle-level teachers. Many have echoed the call to increase the duration and quality of field-based experiences for pre-service middle level teachers. This recommendation comes from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (1985), and Scales’ (1992) surveys of

middle-level teachers and college faculty which both reiterate the need for expanded field experiences for pre-service teachers (Harlan & VanZandt, 1995, p. 11).

States have long grappled with how to approach the addition of a teacher certificate for middle-level education, trying an assortment of approaches with varying degrees of success. One model approach was developed at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM). Although California does not have a separate middle-level certificate, (just elementary and secondary), this university developed a means for teacher candidates to gain experience and demonstrate competencies working with young adolescents, working on interdisciplinary teams, serving as student advisors, and focusing on the needs of young adolescent learners. “The broad objective was to prepare pre-service teachers to teach at the middle-level, by having the distinctive characteristics of young adolescents and of the institution of middle school permeate every facet of the program” (Dodge & Farnan, 1995, p. 17).

In Texas the Alliance for Better Schools tried another model. Middle-level interns in four-year Masters of Arts in Teaching programs established goals drawn from works such as This We Believe (1982), The Exemplary Middle School, Caught in the Middle, and Turning Points (1989). It was a collaborative effort between the universities and middle-level schools. They set several goals:

1. The overriding goal is to provide pre-service teachers in-depth experience in a school not only committed to the middle school philosophy but to be recognized as a leader in the field of middle-level education.
2. A second goal of the university-middle school partnership is to create a pool of mentor teachers dedicated to and invested in the preparation of teachers for assignment to middle grade schools.
3. Another aim is to enhance multicultural awareness by placing primarily middle to upper-class Anglo students in a largely Hispanic inner city setting.
4. A fourth goal is to increase the number of high-quality students preparing to teach at the middle-level.
5. A fifth goal is to establish a cohort group for middle-level pre-service teachers (Harlan & VanZandt, 1995, p. 11).

Missouri developed a program for middle-level teacher preparation at Maryville University. Using a constructivist perspective, the university suggested that the quality of students' reflections and subsequent actions is based upon developmental ability to integrate concrete teaching experiences, the models and strategies of others, and the principles of research in teaching. They took their guidelines from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Approved Curriculum Guidelines. "Such a program should provide a thorough study of early adolescence and middle-level philosophy, curriculum, and instruction. In addition, the program should provide content preparation in at least one broad teaching field as well as field experience at the middle-level" (Hutcheson & Moeller, 1995, p. 34).

Another model, developed at the University of Georgia, redesigned their teacher preparation program in order to marry in-depth preparation in two specific content areas with comprehensive middle school course work that addressed the learner, school environment, instructional techniques, and developmentally appropriate curriculum. They built their program on three cornerstones:

1. Foster collaboration with area teachers and schools.
2. Create a program where the courses are more coherent and integrated.
3. Enhance the quality of the field experiences in our program.

(McLaughlin & Mizelle, 1995, p. 26)

Models of programs addressing middle-level teacher preparation exist across the nation, but primarily in states with middle-level certification. Even when found, economies of scale make it difficult to assess their impact on middle-level education in general.

Scales (1992) reported that even in eight states recognized for their emphasis on middle grades education, only 17% of the 439 teachers who responded to his questionnaire were prepared in a middle grades teacher education program. In a follow-up report, Scales and McEwin (1994) surveyed teachers from grades 6-8 schools in the five states with the majority of the country's middle grades teacher preparation programs and found that only 22% of the respondents received their undergraduate preparation in a middle grades program. (p. 26)



Even more telling is that less than 20% of teachers of young adolescents report receiving special preparation for teaching these students, with many characterizing their training as poor or inadequate (Scales, 1992). In short, while studies indicate increases in the number of schools adopting middle-level practices, such as interdisciplinary teams, advisory groups, and transitional programs (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991; 1993; Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993), the expansion of teacher preparation programs remains limited and slow (Scales, 1994) (p. 11).

Logic might dictate that the best way to improve the quality of middle-level teaching is to improve the quality of middle-level teacher preparation. However, the reality for school districts, interested in creating or sustaining exemplary middle-level schools, is that they must find their own alternatives to develop their middle school staff members professionally. As mentioned, there have been a variety of barriers to the expansion of middle-level teacher preparation programs, as well as a number of criticisms of teacher preparation programs in general. “A second major challenge facing middle-level teacher education is the poor quality of teacher preparation generally” (Goodlad, 1991). Not only did nearly one-half of the teachers in both the 1992 (Scales, 1992) and the 1993 (Scales & McEwin, 1994) studies rate their preparation as inadequate or poor on topics viewed as important for middle grades teaching, but even more serious are the criticisms of teacher education by Goodlad (1991).

Goodlad conducted a nationwide study of teacher education programs. He found “that institutional mission, leadership, organization, and commitment with respect to teacher education fell short of the... conditions” (p. 151) necessary for effective teacher education. The major component parts of teacher education programs (i.e., liberal arts coursework, education coursework, and field experiences) often were not connected closely enough to one other and did not form a coherent, whole program. In too many programs teacher education was not the top priority of the faculty who taught the courses for prospective teachers, let alone of the institutions that housed the program. Moreover, “even when all the component parts were functioning well and together, the potential for excellence was diminished by state intrusions” (Goodlad, 1991, p. 153) into program curricula based on licensing requirements.

Therefore, middle-level teacher education is in need of major overhauling. Specific improvements as outlined in Turning Points 2000 or This We Believe would not only impact the success of middle schools, but more importantly advance the achievement of middle-level

students. Certainly there are a number of excellent teacher preparation programs, however, they are not typically preparing middle-level teachers for the unique aspects of that role. This, in turn, places the responsibility on local school districts. How are they stepping up to this challenge in order to foster and sustain excellence in their middle schools?

#### **4. Sustaining Excellence in Schools**

Once a school has a program in place, how does it measure that program's excellence? In turn, how does a school sustain excellence despite the changes in staffing? The original National Blue Ribbon School Program attempted to foster and recognize excellence on the national level. Introduced in 1982 by the United States Secretary of Education, this program set forth criteria for program evaluation. It encouraged schools to enter this review process both as a means for self-assessment, as well as a means to measure themselves against a national model for excellence. Middle schools could enter this process every other year.

The Blue Ribbon Schools Program promoted and supported the improvement of education in America by:

- \* Identifying and recognizing schools that are models of excellence and equity, schools that demonstrate a strong commitment to educational excellence for all students, and that achieve high academic standards or have shown significant academic improvement over five years,
- \* Making research-based, self-assessment criteria available to schools looking for a way to reflect on how they are doing,
- \* Encouraging schools, both within and among themselves, to share information about best practices, which is based on a shared understanding of the standards, which demonstrate educational success.

(<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/BlueRibbonSchools/about.html>)

In 2002 the Blue Ribbon process re-invented itself to reflect a newer national focus on the achievement of standards as reflected by standardized test scores. Recent federal legislation, known as No Child Left Behind, narrowed the focus on “excellence” to solely mean continuous improvement as measured on standardized test scores. “The No Child Left Behind – Blue

Ribbon Schools Program will honor public and private K-12 schools that are either academically superior in their states or that demonstrate dramatic gains in student achievement” (<http://www.ed.gov/PressReleases/07-2002/07282002.html>). This new focus is based strictly on student achievement results and not process. The goal of the new guidelines is to help the Secretary of Education identify educational practices that are successfully closing the achievement gap, as identified within the No Child Left Behind legislation.

In order to comply with this federal legislation, state Departments of Education are interpreting the national legislation and using it to align state plans and reports. One specific area of the law is having an impact on the hiring and professional development of middle-level teachers. The legislation indicates the teachers must be “highly qualified.” The state of Pennsylvania initially determined this to mean that middle-level teachers, with an elementary certificate, must have an additional content area added to their certificate in order to continue teaching at grades 7 and 8. By the close of the school year 2005 – 2006 elementary certified middle school teachers will have to successfully complete a Praxis (standardized) test in order to add a content area to their certificate, or must return to an elementary school to teach. This was Pennsylvania’s interpretation of NCLB and related to a national push to sustain excellence in middle schools.

As recently as this summer (2004) the state of Pennsylvania is backing away from this interpretation of “highly qualified.” The Department of Education has announced that the new measure will be based on a combination of factors to be announced and not solely on the passage of the Praxis test. Whatever the decision of the state, NCLB clearly indicates that employing highly qualified teachers is an important step toward creating excellent middle schools.

In both of these cases there is a human factor at the basis of the measure of excellence in the school program. Whether trying to legislate that teachers be “highly qualified” or ensuring that programs exist for continuous professional learning about “best practices,” the central focus in a quality school remains on the teacher. “Educational progress cannot be accomplished solely by organizational mandate regardless of its organizational compatibility with student characteristics. Ultimately the gain to be accomplished is in human relationships” (Eichhorn, 1966, p. 91). There continues to be discussion on how this excellence evolves. “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the

teacher” (Palmer, 1998, p. 10). For Palmer the real questions to be asked and answered when evaluating “good teaching” are:

- Does this person take teaching seriously, as signified by his or her involvement in conversations about it?
- What kind of process does this person go through in designing a course?
- How does this person identify and respond to the problems that arise as a course proceeds?
- Does this person learn from past mistakes in designing and implementing future courses?
- Does this person attempt to help colleagues with issues in their teaching? (Palmer, 1998, p. 143-144)

Teaching is essentially a solitary practice, yet successful teaching is intertwined with the relationships built between teacher and student. In the middle school, these relationships extend to the professional relationships between the adults via the teaming concept. One of the hallmarks of an effective middle school is the concept of teaming. This includes having teachers working together, dialoguing about their practices and their students’ achievement. As schools try to sustain excellent middle-level programs, they must look for individuals who recognize the importance of this hallmark trait and are eager to engage in this type of collegial practice, often without any prior training to do so.

Finding this type of person, as a first step to sustaining institutional excellence, does not just occur by accident. “The executives who ignited the transformations from good to great did not first figure out where to drive the bus and then get people to take it there. No, they first got the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and then figured out where to drive it” (Collins, 2001, p. 41). Collins ranks this practice of finding the right people as the first step to having a great company, because his research showed that those people would better adapt to any change in the future. He also concluded that these people would be more intrinsically motivated to produce great results. In his findings he notes that, “whether someone is the ‘right person’ has more to do with character traits and innate capabilities than with specific knowledge, background, or skills” (p. 64). Schools, like industries, are on a continuous quest to find the best people and once on board, continuously develop their talent for teaching.

Sustaining excellence in any school setting begins with hiring those individuals who demonstrate the personal qualities and pedagogical knowledge of a well-prepared teacher. Eichhorn recognized that, “recruitment of personnel is a key factor in developing a successful middle school staff. Because transescents have unique needs, this endeavor takes on particular importance” (Eichhorn, 1966, p. 91). Nurturing excellence then continues along the path, incorporating mentoring and induction activities that are focused on the uniqueness of the middle school. New staff members need to be introduced to these features so that they can understand the goals of the middle school program. The final leg of the journey includes staff development activities that are focused and meaningful, engaging all teachers, regardless of their level of experience. These are critical in all schools of excellence. Each teacher requires opportunities to hone and broaden their craft. Renewing veteran teachers with the latest developments in teaching techniques and technologies is vital to student achievement. No one part of this process can be left out; all three elements must be successfully addressed and interwoven in order to be a school of excellence.

## **5. Summary**

The early work (1966) of Dr. Donald Eichhorn identified the four key areas of adolescent development: cognitive, social, emotional, and physical. Each of these areas had implications for how transescents learned and developed. Thus Eichhorn and many others who followed recommended the development of a unique school program, marrying those unique developmental features with a unique school arrangement – the middle school.

Over the years additional research has supported the early premises of Eichhorn. However, this body of research also demonstrated that the failures of middle schools to reach their full potential often came from the partial adoption of its key tenets. Well-prepared professionals are one of the critical missing components. Despite a consensus on the key characteristics of an effective middle-level teacher preparation program, states generally have been unsuccessful in launching these.

This gap leaves school districts without a body of highly qualified professionals from which to select teaching candidates. It also puts the success of middle schools at risk, as the critical component in the classroom, the teacher, comes to the middle school experience without

an adequate foundation. Successful schools must plan to plug this gap via teacher mentoring, induction, and professional development programs. Hiring teachers who will be willing to undergo this training and subsequently internalize the tenets of effective middle-level teaching is a significant challenge for all middle-level principal-leaders.

### **III. CHAPTER 3**

#### **A. METHODOLOGY**

Once identified as “an excellent middle school program” the charge of sustaining that excellence belongs to the middle school principal. Hiring the most highly qualified teachers is one means to that end. Developing and implementing focused staff development programs is another method to sustain excellence. The design of this study describes the essential personal qualities and pedagogical knowledge needed by teacher candidates, as perceived by principals of award-winning middle schools, in order to sustain excellence in their middle schools.

##### **1. Statement of the Problem**

Given the issues of no consistent middle-level teacher preparation and the implications of No Child Left Behind, how do principals of award-winning middle schools resolve these issues in terms of the hiring and development of middle-level educators in order to sustain excellence in their schools?

##### **2. Research Questions**

1. What aspects of pre-service middle school teachers’ training, experience, or personal qualities are responsible for their being hired to teach in an award-winning Pennsylvania middle school?
2. What attributes within a principal’s background, training, or experience impacted his/her career path to a middle school principalship?

3. What induction and mentoring programs do the award-winning school districts currently have in place, for addressing post-hiring professional development for middle school teachers?
4. How does the award-winning school district establish and sustain effective middle-level practices, via professional development for both new hires and veteran staff members, given that these staff members have not received comprehensive, formal middle-level training from Pennsylvania colleges as part of their certification process?

This study was a combination of descriptive/interpretive case study. The methodology used was qualitative. This design was reached based on the purpose of the research: to describe the essential personal qualities and pedagogical knowledge needed by teacher candidates, as perceived by principals in award-winning middle schools, in order to sustain excellence in their middle schools.

The subject of this research suited a descriptive/interpretive case study method. A descriptive case study presents a detailed account of the phenomenon under study, when the researcher desires, "... information about the characteristics of a given population or area of interest" (Merriam, 1988). This method provided the flexibility to use various research methods relevant to the topic. Participants in this study had the opportunity to self-report their perceptions, as well as examine the connections between their perceptions and the impact their hiring practices had for sustaining excellence in their schools. The instruments used by principals during their hiring practices also were examined to identify common themes. Thirdly, the researcher reviewed the school-produced documents, which qualified each school to be identified as "excellent" under either the PMSA Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School Award or National Blue Ribbon School Award criteria. Qualitative research data was attained through in-depth interviews and document analysis.

The primary method of obtaining information was the key informant interview. This method permitted the gathering of information regarding an individual's experiences and knowledge, his or her opinions, beliefs, and feelings. "Key informants are individuals who possess special knowledge, status, or communicative skills and who are willing to share that knowledge and skill with the researcher" (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p. 166). By selecting



the principals who completed the award-winning applications, as well as who hire new staff members, these key informants were able to share essential information.

### **3. Research Design Outline**

1. Identification of Pennsylvania districts/building principals with middle schools identified as “award-winning” through the National Blue Ribbon School process or the PMSA Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School process.
2. Verification that the current principal was the principal when the school completed the application and received the award. The sample includes these schools.
3. Collection of the requirements utilized to evaluate middle schools under the National Blue Ribbon School process and the PMSA Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School process.
4. Collection of building level documents relating to the National Blue Ribbon School Award-winning status, or the PMSA Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School Award-winning status from each district.
5. Collection of documents utilized during teacher candidate interviews in each of the sample districts.
6. Interview of administrators from the sample schools involved in the hiring of new staff for the middle school setting.
7. Interview of administrators from the sample schools regarding professional development planning and programming for the award-winning middle school.
8. Data analysis procedures:
  - a. review all district documents relating to the characteristics of award-winning middle schools.
  - b. review all district documents relating to the interviewing tools utilized for hiring new middle school teachers.
  - c. analyze semi-structured interview responses of the interviewees.
9. Final analysis procedures:
  - a. summarize data to identify the essential qualities, both personal and pedagogical, sought by principals to sustain excellence in middle schools

- b. compare results to the essential qualities suggested in the review of literature.
- 10. Suggest the implications for districts in planning and executing professional development programs to enhance these qualities in both novice and veteran staff members.

#### **4. Procedures and Rationales**

##### **a. Selection of Sample**

###### **Procedure:**

In identifying the sample schools the archives of the Pennsylvania Middle School Association (PMSA) were reviewed to discern the annual winners of the PMSA Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School since 1997. Next the school web sites identified the current principals. The schools are:

- 1998 West Allegheny Middle School, West Allegheny School District – Ms. Janet Walsh, principal
- 1999 Mellon Middle School, Mount Lebanon School District – Dr. Kevin Lordon, principal
- 2000 Lewisburg Middle School (aka Don Eichhorn Middle School), Lewisburg Area School District – Mr. Floyd Walters, principal
- 2001 Highlands Middle School, Highlands School District –Dr. Karol Galcik, principal (no longer acting)
- 2002 Marshall Middle School, North Allegheny School District – Mr. John Schwoebel, principal
- 2003 J. E. Harrison Middle School, Baldwin-Whitehall School District – Mr. Randy Lutz, principal
- 2004 Pine-Richland Middle School, Pine-Richland School District – Dr. Kathleen Harrington, principal

Next the National Blue Ribbon School’s website was reviewed to identify 1999 - 2000 and 2001 - 2002 middle school awardees from Pennsylvania. These years were selected because they were the final years that middle schools were evaluated and awarded under the original, broader criteria for an outstanding school. (Current awardees are selected solely based on

academic achievement requirements). Again the school websites identified the principals. The schools are:

Garnet Valley Middle School – Garnet Valley School District - Dr. Richard Dunlap, Jr., principal

Log College Middle School – Centennial School District - Dr. Harry Clark, Jr., principal

Marshall Middle School, North Allegheny School District – Mr. John Swoebel, principal

Neshaminy Middle School – Neshaminy School District – Dr. Ronald Daggett, principal (no longer acting)

Palisades Middle School – Palisades School District – Karen Hessel, principal (no longer acting)

Lewisburg Middle School (aka Don Eichhorn Middle School), Lewisburg Area School District – Mr. Floyd Walters, principal

Hershey Middle School – Derry Area School District – Mr. Kevin Filgrove, principal

Ft. Couch Middle School – Upper St. Clair School District – Dr. Tim Steinhauer, principal

Based on this information, the sample included the seven schools where the current principal was also in place during the award application process. These schools were: Ft. Couch Middle School, Harrison Middle School, Hershey Middle School, Lewisburg Middle School, Marshall Middle School, Mellon Middle School, and West Allegheny Middle School. Two schools included in the sample received both awards: Marshall Middle School and Lewisburg Area Middle School.

**Rationale:**

Both the PMSA Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School Program and the National Blue Ribbon School Award Program recognize outstanding middle schools. Selecting award-winning schools from both programs provided insight into the common characteristics of an outstanding middle school. Confirming that the current principal was also the principal during the award application process assured his/her first hand knowledge of the process.

## **b. Collection of Evaluation Requirements and District Application Documents**

### **Procedure:**

The National Blue Ribbon School Award website was utilized to gather the recommendations for completing the application to become an award-winning middle school. This program alternated annually between elementary winners and middle school/high school winners. The program promoted and supported the improvement of education in America by:

- Identifying and recognizing schools that were models of excellence and equity, schools that demonstrated a strong commitment to educational excellence for all students, and that achieved high academic standards or showed significant academic improvement over five years,
- Making research-based, self-assessment criteria available to schools looking for a way to reflect on how they were doing,
- Encouraging schools, both within and among themselves, to share information about best practices, which was based on a shared understanding of the standards, which demonstrated educational success.

As cited earlier, in 2002 this program was redesigned under NCLB to evaluate schools on only two criteria: It now recognizes schools that have at least 40 percent of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds that dramatically improve student performance in accordance with state assessment systems; and it rewards schools that score in the top 10 percent on state assessments. This study utilized the original process because it judged schools on a broader range of exemplary characteristics, including, but not limited to academic achievement. Review of the award-winning schools' application packets then occurred.

The PMSA Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School Award utilizes an application process, available to schools via the PMSA website, and evaluates the applicants based upon a rubric. The award-winning schools' application packets were collected for review.

### **Rationale:**

Through a review of these documents, a pattern of the essential characteristics found in award-winning middle schools became evident.

### **c. Collection of Interview Instruments**

#### **Procedure:**

Each district was contacted to submit any instrumentation utilized for the interview and hiring process. These included interview questionnaires, scoring sheets, district hiring policies and rating forms. These tools were reviewed to identify correlations between the questions being asked in interviews and the essential qualities identified in the award packets and the principal interviews.

#### **Rationale:**

If the principals indicated that they were searching for particular personal and pedagogical indicators then these must be traceable to the interview process being utilized in the schools. If those schools wished to sustain certain features of their outstanding middle school, then these qualities must be evidenced in the interviewing process.

### **d. Administrator Interviews**

#### **Procedure:**

Interviews were conducted with the middle school principal, whose duties included the hiring of new staff, the facilitation of the mentoring and induction program for new hires, and the planning and implementation of professional development programs for novice and veteran teachers. A semi-structured interview design was used. The interviews attempted to seek information about each principal's perceptions of the essential personal qualities and pedagogical expertise needed by newly hired teachers in order to sustain the characteristics of an effective middle school. Each interview gleaned information about the induction and mentoring program for newly hired teachers. The interviews also attempted to seek information about the professional development plan's focus on the essential elements of an effective middle school with novice as well as veteran staff members in order to sustain excellence within their award-winning middle school. Finally, the interview revealed the administrator's own path to the middle school principalship.

#### **Rationale:**

The hiring decisions made by the administrators impacted the staffing of the school. Exploring the perspectives of the administrators provided direct insight into the hiring process and the emphasis on personal qualities and pedagogical expertise desirable to new teachers.

The mentoring, induction and professional development planning conducted by administrators impact the instructional practices and procedures learned and utilized by all staff members. Exploring the perceived areas of importance by the principals provided direct insight into the planning process for sustaining the essential elements of an award-winning middle school.

#### **e. Interview Questions**

A list of predetermined questions guided the direction of the interview. The questions were open-ended and designed to gather descriptive data in the words of the respondent from the respondent's perspective. The following questions were developed following a review of the literature, as well as consultation with the researcher's advisor. The semi-structured interview questions used included:

1. Discuss your process for hiring new staff members at the middle school. (Obtain a copy of any hiring instrument.)
2. What interview questions do you ask that relate specifically to the essential elements of an effective middle school?
3. Describe the types of preparation or experience for Middle School teaching that you're looking for as you interview candidates for teaching positions in your middle school.
4. Do you generally find elementary certified or secondary certified candidates more prepared to teach in a middle school program?
5. In your opinion what do you believe are the key characteristics in a teacher candidate, which predict their success as a middle school teacher?
6. Describe your mentoring program for new teachers at the middle school.

7. Does your school provide any specific professional development training related to middle-level teaching for new and veteran teachers?
8. When your school received the \_\_\_\_\_ Award, what were the key elements within your middle school program, which earned you this recognition?
9. Having been recognized as an “excellent” middle school, what programs does your school have in place to sustain this “excellence?”
10. If you could change any aspect of middle-level teacher preparation in Pennsylvania, what would your recommendation be?
11. What aspects of your own background and professional development and training brought you to a middle school career?

Additional comments that the respondent shared about hiring and sustaining excellence in their middle school were pursued through reflective listening and follow-up questioning.

## **B. ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER**

Conducting face-to-face interviews on-site of the award-winning middle schools created the type of dilemma characteristic of qualitative research. It was essential for the interviewer to maintain neutrality with regard to the respondents and their information. “The personal tailoring of the interaction between ethnographer and informant is simultaneously a strength and a weakness of this approach to human science. It is a strength because it promotes the collection of data that more richly represent the experiences of the participants; it is a weakness because it makes comparison and replication more difficult” (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p. 89-90). The authors go so far as to say that researchers have a moral and ethical obligation in making decisions around the research. “The fieldwork tradition and face-to-face contact and the moral, ethical, and advocacy issues they raise mandate that ethnographers, because of their special

relationships with and knowledge about participants, give more thought than other investigators to the roles they hold vis-à-vis participants” (p. 110).

### **C. RECORDING THE DATA**

Interview data can be recorded in three basic ways: by tape recording the interview, by taking notes during the interview, and by writing down information remembered immediately following the interview. In an effort to strengthen validity all three methods were used in this case.

With the permission of the key informants, all interviews were tape recorded due to the anticipated length and then transcribed. During each interview, the researcher scribed notes in order to remember particular areas of emphasis from the participant, as well as to note any follow up questions to be asked. At the close of each interview the researcher wrote reflective notes describing the verbal and non-verbal behaviors of the key informant, as well as the impressions of the researcher.

### **D. DATA ANALYSIS**

According to Merriam (1998), getting started in data analysis involves the recognition that it is best done in conjunction with data collection. The researcher did not wait until all data was collected to begin analysis of the data.

Initially Best and Kahn (1998) suggest that organizing the data occurs first. In this study the data was first organized according to individual key informants and then by major and minor themes representing the perceptions of the principals with regard to sustaining excellence via their hiring processes.

The second stage of data analysis, according to Best and Kahn (1998) involves description. In order to achieve this the data was sorted and organized according to themes, which emerged from the analysis of the content present in both the interviews and the documents reviewed. A written, descriptive summary was developed as a result of the data analysis.



## E. VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF RESULTS

How does the researcher know that the results are credible and valid? According to LeCompte and Preissle this is a difficult issue for qualitative research, but one that can be enhanced by “numerous indicators researchers use to build their confidence in analytic procedures and results. These include participant corroboration, theoretical and empirical consistency, rigorous review by peers familiar with similar methods, content, and populations, personal reflection and introspection allowed by the time to distance from the work, and the later contributions of other scholars to the same areas” (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p. 330). This researcher used the following strategies in this study:

1. Participant Corroboration – taking the data and tentative interpretations back to the key informants to ask them if the results are plausible.
2. Theoretical and Empirical Consistency – triangulating the results between various sources of information, including key informant interviews, hiring documents, and award-winning application documents in order to cross check for accuracy of conclusions drawn.
3. Peer Review – asking other middle school principals and educators to comment on the findings as they emerge.

How does the researcher know that the results are reliable? “Reliability refers to the extent to which studies can be replicated” (p. 332). The authors believe that this type of strict replication of results is unlikely due to the nature of qualitative research. “Compared to the stringently controlled designs of laboratory experiments or to the regulated procedures of field experiments, most qualitative designs baffle attempts at replication. The kind of data gathered and the research process itself may preclude the use of those standardized controls so essential in experimental research” (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p. 332). However, they believe that researchers can address external and internal reliability.

To address external reliability researchers must recognize and handle the issues of: researcher status position, informant choices, social situations and conditions, analytic constructs and premises, and methods of data collection and analysis. (p. 334).

1. Researcher Status Position – While this researcher is a member of the broad group of principal-educators, she is not a member of the group of principals of award-winning Pennsylvania middle schools.
2. Informant Choices – Although acquainted with some of the principals being interviewed, the researcher anticipated that these relationships would provide access to deeper knowledge, yet remain balanced by the relative lack of prior relationship with other key informants. Also, by selecting key informants who played a role in both the identification of the school as a “school of excellence” as well as still remaining in that principal position, they had a unique perspective on the concept of “sustaining excellence.”
3. Social Situations and Conditions – The social setting for conducting the interviews consistently occurred at the key informants’ middle schools. It was a face-to-face style interview with no others present.
4. Analytic Constructs and Premises – Definitions for concepts were laid out clearly in the “Definition of Terms” section of the research project prior to data collection and remained constant throughout the study.
5. Methods of Data Collection and Analysis – The researcher precisely identified the sources of data and methods for collection and analysis in order to aid any replication of this study.

Internal reliability speaks to the question of whether multiple researchers would most likely agree about the conclusions drawn from a study. While in this study multiple researchers were not used, peer examinations were pursued. The thick description generated in the written summary allowed colleagues to review the study and the conclusions drawn in order to assess the extent to which the patterns claimed are evident in the data cited (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p. 340). This increased the potential for generalizing of the results of this study.

## F. SUMMARY

In this chapter, the statement of the problem and the research questions were restated. The design of this study enabled the researcher to ascertain the essential personal qualities and pedagogical knowledge needed by teacher candidates, as perceived by principals of award-winning middle schools, in order to sustain excellence in their middle schools. The theoretical framework, methodology, research design procedures and rationales, role of the researcher and sampling selections were detailed. This study combined descriptive/interpretive case study frameworks and utilized qualitative methodology. The primary method of obtaining information was through key informant interviews. Winners of either the National Blue Ribbon School Award or the PMSA Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School Award were considered. The sample included seven award-winning middle schools in Pennsylvania, where the principal who coordinated the award-winning application was still serving as the building principal.

Data collection procedures and analytical methods were described. Key informant interviews were tape recorded and transcribed during data gathering. Other sources of data included the award packets from the districts as well as documents utilized during the interview and hiring process. Data was first organized and then described into emergent themes. A rich, descriptive summary was written as a result of the data analysis.

Issues relating to the validity, reliability and analysis of the results were presented. In order to address the issues inherent to qualitative research with regard to validity and reliability, the researcher utilized three safeguards: participant corroboration, theoretical and empirical consistency, and peer review. The thick description generated in the written summary increased the reliability of the results of the study, thereby aiding in any effort to replicate this study.

## IV. CHAPTER 4

### A. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

#### **1. Individual District Profiles**

Table 1 summarizes the essential demographic data of the seven districts gathered for this research. The table identifies each district by a letter designation and refers to the principal by the matching letter designation. It should be noted that the range of years of “in this job” experience for the principals spanned from a minimum of five years to a maximum of thirteen years within the award-winning middle schools. This characteristic gave each principal a greater depth of knowledge about the school community and the culture of the school. Five of the seven schools received the PMSA Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School Award. Four of the seven schools received the National Blue Ribbon School Award. (This overlap occurs because two of the districts received both awards.)

All of the schools, except one, had a grade level configuration of 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>. One of the schools just contained grades 7 and 8 in the school. The sample schools’ grade level populations ranged from a low of approximately 150 students per grade to a maximum size of approximately 340 students per grade (in the school with two grade levels).

The researcher gathered a considerable amount of information on the staff composition in each building. Table 1 indicates the number of full time teachers, along with their tenure status. Teachers who had not acquired tenure were considered to be novice teachers for the purposes of this study. The study defined veteran teachers as individuals having attained tenure status in their building.

The type of teaching certification was also obtained. Table 1 indicates the number of teachers in the school with elementary certification and the number of teachers in the school with secondary certification. A final category on Table 1 indicates the number of teachers not

considered to be “highly qualified” as defined by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Schools have until the end of the 2005 – 2006 school year in order to come into compliance with this requirement. Under NCLB any elementary certified teachers in grades 7 or 8 must pass the Praxis test in order to add a content area certification to their credentials (or meet the new criteria, as yet to be announced by the Pennsylvania Department of Education). This latest requirement will have a significant future impact on the hiring practices in all districts across the state of Pennsylvania.

Finally, Table 1 displays the aid ratio for each of the districts. It interested the researcher to see if any pattern would emerge regarding the socio-economic status of the districts completing the rigorous application process and winning the school awards. All of the districts, except one (D) were in the middle to upper range, however, aid ratio is not one of the criteria considered for the awards. The subtle differences between the districts were not expected to have a negative impact on the outcome of the research study.

**TABLE 1: District Characteristics**

<b>DISTRICT REFERENCE</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>
<b>YEARS IN POSITION (PRINCIPAL)</b>	10	13	5	7	13	7	7
<b>EICHHORN AWARD</b>	X	X	X		X	X	
<b>YEAR RECEIVED</b>	2001 - 2002	1998 - 1999	1999 - 2000		1997 - 1998	2002 - 2003	
<b>BLUE RIBBON AWARD</b>	X		X	X			X
<b>YEAR RECEIVED</b>	1999 - 2000		2001 - 2002	2001 - 2002			2001 - 2002
<b># OF STUDENTS</b>	750	743	440	859	798	997	684
<b>GRADE LEVELS</b>	6, 7, 8	6, 7, 8	6, 7, 8	6, 7, 8	6, 7, 8	6, 7, 8	7, 8
<b># OF FULL TIME STAFF</b>	70	63	36	69	82	74	54
<b># UNTENURED STAFF</b>	8	12	3	5	12	25	4
<b># TENURED STAFF</b>	62	51	33	64	70	49	50
<b># ELEMENTARY CERTIFIED</b>	20	10	10	13	19	13	8
<b># SECONDARY CERTIFIED (INCLUDES K-12 CERT.)</b>	50	53	26	56	63	61	46
<b>% “HIGHLY QUALIFIED” UNDER NCLB *</b>	96.8	100.0	96.7	95.6	82.8	98.6	100.0
<b>MV/PI AID RATIO 2002 **</b>	0.2710	0.3352	0.3886	0.6645	0.4080	0.4839	0.2807

\* as reported on:

([http://www.teaching.state.pa.us/teaching/lib/teaching/HQ\\_by\\_AUN\\_by\\_Building.pdf](http://www.teaching.state.pa.us/teaching/lib/teaching/HQ_by_AUN_by_Building.pdf))

\*\* as reported on: (<http://www.pde.state.pa.us/k12finances/lib/k12finances/Aid Ratios 0405 Web.xls>)

Table 2 summarizes the information submitted by each district to this research project, as well as the dates of the key informant interviews. It was worth noting that District B could not find their Eichhorn Award-winning binder in order to provide it for this study. District F was unable to provide their binder because they had loaned it to another district for study. District D was unwilling to release their Blue Ribbon Award application.

Although four of the districts provided various interview questions utilized during the hiring process, none of the districts had a fixed set of questions that they used. Each indicated that the specific questions varied based on the position being filled, the previous experiences that the candidate brought to the interview, and the make-up of the interview team. A district policy, prohibiting their release outside the district, prevented district E from giving the researcher any interview questions.

TABLE 2: Materials Provided by Each District

<b>DISTRICT REFERENCE</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>
<b>DATE OF INTERVIEW</b>	7/11/03	7/30/03	7/31/03	7/31/03	8/23/03	10/13/03	10/13/03
<b>AWARD BINDER</b>	X		X		X		X
<b>INTERVIEW QUESTIONS</b>	X	X		X		X	
<b>OTHER RESOURCES</b>	Chart of Ideal Middle School Characteristics		“Journey to Becoming a True Middle School” (Conference Presentation) & Candidate Evaluation Form	Comprehensive Personnel Handbook	Hiring Policy & Procedures for Teaching Positions	Core Values Chart	Applicant Rating Form



## **B. RESEARCH QUESTION #1**

1. What aspects of pre-service middle school teachers' training, experience, or personal qualities are responsible for their being hired to teach in an award-winning Pennsylvania middle school?

Analysis of Question 1 draws from the principals' response to interview questions #1, #2, #3, #4, and #5 as listed in Chapter 3. Appendix A documents the complete transcripts of all principal interviews. Four themes emerged after arranging the data from these questions. The first theme concerns the interview process and procedures utilized by each of the districts. The second theme reveals the principals' preferences for teacher certification and credentials. The third theme identifies the key elements of an effective middle school, which the principals expected a candidate to be knowledgeable about. They tried to discern this knowledge base during the interview process. The fourth theme provides data about the key personal traits that the principals believe will be indicators of success for new middle school educators.

### **1. Theme: Interviewing Process**

Each of the seven districts utilized a screening process via their Human Resources department or Personnel Director to select applicants for interviewing. As a result of this step, the principal received a review of candidate credentials and grade point averages, as well as a recommendation for a pool of potential interviewees. In all participating districts the principals were responsible for scheduling the interviews.

In 6 of the 7 districts (A, B, C, D, E, G) the principal included staff members on the interview team. In the district not using this approach, Principal F would have preferred to do this, but was unable to due to collective bargaining restrictions. However, he would sometimes substitute a "meet and greet" in order to involve some faculty in the decision making process. The principals collectively indicated the importance of having a team approach to the interviewing process.

In four of the districts (B, C, D, G) the principals brought the final candidates back for a second, teaching demonstration style interview. Principal D even provided the “Demonstration Lesson Rating Form” that his district had developed as part of their “Comprehensive Personnel Handbook.” Each of these principals expressed that this gave them some insight as to whether or not the candidate could utilize the teaching strategies that they spoke to in the interview. They also gained a sense of the candidate’s ability to create relationships with students.

In two of the districts (E, F) the principals were partial to hiring from their substitute teacher lists. In fact district E hired almost exclusively from this list. They had a system of staff development training for their subs and routinely included them as part of their professional observations, so they had confidence in their ability as future teaching candidates. Principal E had provided the school district’s “Hiring Policy and Procedures.” This document stated that, “first, all Long-Term Substitutes and, second, Day-to-Day Substitutes, appointed at the beginning of the previous school year, from an established Priority Eligibility List, will be given first consideration for promotion to a Full-time Teaching position.” Evaluation and scoring of Long-Term substitutes and Day-to-Day substitutes occurred twice a year, according to this policy, thereby determining the “Priority Eligibility List.”

The other principal (F) indicated that he looked carefully at substitute teachers. “I look at the people who have come to us as middle school subs, who like coming here; I look at that experience.”

Three of the districts (D, F, G) looked for candidates who had either previous career experience outside education, or had successful career experience in another middle school. Principal G indicated a preference for candidates with previous career experience or life experiences, “because they seem to add something to the environment.” Another principal (D) was adamant that candidates had a prior successful teaching experience at a middle school. “I hire almost exclusively folks that have had middle school experience... If you have had even a reasonably successful middle school experience in virtually any other school, I’m going to [hire] you.” This type of recruitment approach was evident in the way that districts hired their middle school principals, but this was the only principal that spoke specifically to this technique for hiring classroom teachers.

Principals A, C, D and G provided candidate-rating forms to corroborate the information they said was gathered during the interviewing process. Principal A’s form was the least formal,

yet it gave indicators for the “ideal” candidate in four domains: personal characteristics (including “likes adolescents”), operational dimensions (including “collaborative”), instructional delivery, and client service. Principal C’s “Professional Candidate Evaluation Form” supported the stated importance placed on “knowledge of applicable educational theory” and “attitude” as both were scored on the rubric. This scoring sheet verified that the candidates were asked to deliver a “mini lesson” as part of the interview process.

Principal D’s form, “Interview and Credential Evaluation” was part of their district’s “Comprehensive Personnel Handbook”. The members of the interviewing team utilized this as a scoring device. It contained specific references to “Instructional strategies”, “View of what a middle school is”, and “Role on a team”. The form also scored a candidate’s personal attributes including empathy, understanding, enthusiasm, continuous learning, and communication skills. Principal G’s “Applicant Rating Form” scored the candidate’s knowledge of educational theories. It also rated them on “teamwork” and “leadership”. There was even a section to score “personal” qualities, affirming this district’s emphasis on the personal qualities of the applicants.

Both Principals B and G provided their Blue Ribbon Award binders. One of the questions in this application asked, “How are teachers hired in the school?” The description of the process in each of the applications mirrored the process as described by these two principals. Not only does this corroborate the information provided through the key informant interviews, but it also reinforced the principals’ beliefs that their processes netted the best candidates for the job. Principal C’s application indicated,

As a result (of the interview process), these candidates are, in fact, ‘the best of the best.’ The common thread throughout the interview process is the questions of how the candidate will acclimate to a very special level of teaching – the world of adolescence. The very distinct needs and characteristics of this age group demand teachers with special understanding, communication skills, and commitment to teaching excellence.

Principal G’s application had an equally confident statement. “The positive result is that teachers assigned to Middle School G are knowledgeable about middle-level learner characteristics and genuinely enjoy working with this age level.”

With regard to the specific questions asked during the interviews, no clear patterns emerged from the interviews. Principals indicated that they utilized a general set of educational questions, with some questions specifically targeting middle-level students, however, none of the

principals released a standard set of questions that they asked. In each case the principals indicated that the questions varied depending on the candidate and the circumstances. District policy prohibited principal (E) from releasing the interview questions being used there. This policy resulted from a previous incident where a candidate had an unfair advantage because (s)he knew the interview questions in advance.

Four of the principals (A, B, D, F) did provide a set of sample interview questions that they often use. The researcher examined these to determine any patterns or to check for verification of the themes that had emerged from the key informant interviews. All four schools included two types of questions. They were:

1. If I were to have visited a typical class of yours what would I have seen?
2. What are the qualities of a middle-level educator (school)?

Principal B's list expanded the second question, asking not only about the qualities of the child, but also how those qualities would impact on instruction. Principal F listed a question about both the elements of a middle school and the unique attributes of the students at that age level. Again, note that the lists of interview questions provided by the principals were only guides for the questions that they might ask. Each of the principals indicated that they would customize the questions based on the experiences and qualities of the candidate.

There were also questions that were prevalent on three of the four lists. These topics included:

1. Prior experience (A, B, D)
2. Best personal quality and areas for personal improvement (A, B, D)
3. Classroom management strategies (A, D, F)
4. Accommodations for students with special needs (B, D, F)

During the key informant interviews the principals clearly emphasized their focus on prior experiences with adolescents, as well as personal qualities of the candidate. All of the candidates had indicated that, "educators knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents" was a characteristic that they were looking for during the interview process. (see Table 3) Interview questions about prior experience and personal qualities would help the principal to sift out this information.

Several questions on the lists stood out as unique. Principal D's list specifically asked a question about the candidate's role on a team. While this had come up during the key informant

interviews as an important characteristic of an effective middle school, this was the only list of questions that referred to teaming. (Five of the principals had referred to “cooperative planning” as a key characteristic on Table 3).

Another unique question, included on the list from Principal F, asked the candidate directly if they were, “familiar with Turning Points or any other readings on middle schools?” This was the only list that asked a direct question about current research on middle-level education. This type of question could have added to the information that the principals could discern about a candidate’s knowledge base on the essential elements of an effective middle school. However, during the key informant interviews Principal F did not verify that this was a question he ever used.

## **2. Theme: Certification Preferences**

The second theme, relating to Research Question #1, involved the principals’ preferences for teacher certification. The principals were quite divided on how to answer this question. Two (A, E) answered that they preferred candidates with elementary certification. However, Principal A qualified that to include elementary certification plus special education certification. Several of the descriptors that these two principals used to describe candidates with elementary certification were: “more flexible”, “bubbly”, “kid-oriented”, “sees broader connections”, and “generalist.”

Two of the principals (B, G) preferred secondary certifications. In one of these schools (B) there was a long standing commitment to using secondary certifications at grades 7 and 8, and using elementary certifications at grade 6. In the other school Principal G felt justified in this preference in light of the mandates of NCLB to hire secondary certificates for grades 7 and 8 in the future. In fact he expressed some surprise at his preference because he believed that the research indicated that, “elementary certified people tend to see the broader connections and are more of a generalist.” But in practice within his school he did not necessarily find that to be true. However, both of these principals made comments that the certification probably didn’t matter as much as the natural ability of the teacher or their desire to work at middle-level. “Well, I don’t know if there is a big difference. I’ve always had a theory in my career that good

teachers can teach. I don't know if the certificate really matters that much," commented Principal B.

Two of the principals (C, F) felt that it was critical to strike a balance between elementary and secondary certified teachers within the school. They reiterated the concept that the desire to work in a middle school, along with a good understanding of the middle-level child, was more critical than the certification.

The final principal (D) clearly stated that neither certification was effective. "I don't find either one of them [superior]. Regardless of what, elementary certified or secondary certified, the really best here are the ones that didn't fit in either one. They were too caring for a high school environment or too subject-concerned for an elementary school with all the patty-cake things going on, or they were more academically oriented and they were kind of misfits for both, but fit perfectly with 12-year olds and 13-year olds. So I would say neither one, because I'm looking for someone, just a specific personality, more than I am a certain certification."

It is significant to note the even distribution between the certification preferences of the principals. Several of the principals did offer suggestions for how the state could improve teacher preparation for working at the middle-level. Several suggestions covered the basics. "We see a lot of interviewees and they don't understand what middle-level is all about...there should be a middle-level field of study," said Principal C. Principal D added, "...as far as reshaping the teacher training, my gosh, we've got to have people understand what a middle school is about. We have to use the model and the model has been out there." The other suggestions involved having pre-service teachers spend more time in a middle school, either during student teaching or by observation. Principal E reflected, "I'm not sure that many people go into teaching thinking, I want to go into middle school when they go into college, but it really is a wonderful place for many people. I wish more people had the opportunity to check it out and see what it's like."

However, this issue will be resolved and made more consistent across school districts by the state's interpretation of "highly qualified" under NCLB. In the future all 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers will be secondary certified, or have a content area added to their elementary certificate via passage of a standardized test in the content area. This approach will not address the suggestions or concerns voiced by the principals in this study.

### **3. Theme: Knowledgeable About Essential Elements of an Effective Middle School**

The third theme related to Research Question #1 identified the principals' interests in discovering how knowledgeable the candidates were about any of the 10 Essential Elements of an Effective Middle School as identified by PMSA and utilized in the scoring rubric for the Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School Award selection. These elements include:

1. Educators knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents.
2. A balanced curriculum based on the needs of young adolescents.
3. A range of organizational arrangements.
4. Varied instructional strategies.
5. A full exploratory program.
6. Comprehensive advising and counseling.
7. Continuous progress for students.
8. Evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of young adolescents.
9. Cooperative planning.
10. Positive school climate.

(Transition to a Middle School, PMSA, p. 2)

The researcher found evidence of the principals' emphasis on the ten essential elements in the Eichhorn Award binders provided by Principals A and D. Both of these two schools had used the ten essential elements as the organizers for their binders.

Table 3 summarizes principal responses under each of these elements during the key informant interviews.

TABLE 3: Principal Responses Matching 10 Essential Elements

<b>Principal</b> _____	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>
<b>Elements</b>							
<b>Educators knowledgeable about &amp; committed to young adolescents</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Balanced curriculum</b>	X	X	X	X	X		X
<b>Range of organizational arrangements</b>	X		X			X	
<b>Varied instructional strategies</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
<b>Full exploratory program</b>						X	X
<b>Comprehensive advising &amp; counseling</b>				X		X	X
<b>Continuous progress for students</b>							
<b>Evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of young adolescents</b>							
<b>Cooperative Planning</b>		X	X		X	X	X
<b>Positive school climate</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

It should be noted that none of the principals referred to the elements regarding “continuous progress for students,” or “evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of young adolescents.” These were not elements they were concerned with during the interview process. This could be a result of their not considering the elements to be relevant to the interview and hiring process. It could also reflect that these two elements have not been internalized by principals as essential to the operation of an outstanding middle school program. Note that only two of the principals (B, F) included questions about assessment on the list of potential interview questions that they provided.

Three other categories, “a range of organizational arrangements,” “full exploratory program” and “comprehensive advising and counseling,” received less than a 50% response from the principals. This indicates that these aspects of an effective middle school are not surfacing as a key priority being identified during the interviewing and hiring process. It could also indicate



that the principals prefer to indoctrinate new hires into the form that these programs have taken in their school, rather than seeking a general understanding of them in advance.

It is significant that each of the principals cited at least five of the ten elements as being included in the knowledge base they were seeking to discover via the interview process before making a decision about who would be the best candidate for a position in their middle school. It is also significant that all seven of the school principals chose “educators knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents” and “positive school climate” as the two essential elements that they were seeking to discover about candidates during the interview process. They saw these as the two most critical factors in order to sustain excellence in their schools.

However, the principals did not just stop at trying to discover if candidates were knowledgeable about these essential elements. The next theme that emerged encompassed the personal qualities that the principals tried to discover about the candidates themselves.

#### **4. Theme: Key Personal Traits**

The final theme emerging around Research Question #1 concerned key personal traits of teacher candidates. The researcher measured the results against the seven personal characteristics identified by Dr. Eichhorn in his book, The Middle School, first published in 1966. These qualities included:

**Personal Security:** The insecurity of transescents requires daily examples of adults who exhibit confidence and faith in themselves.

**Understanding:** As the emancipation process develops, teachers may be of help to youth by being good listeners and by showing an interest in students.

**Resourceful:** It has been suggested at length that experiences are crucial at this age group. A teacher must not only be aware of this need, but also should cognitively react in a divergent manner in providing the diversity of needed experiences.

**Adaptability:** Being able to continually alter one’s daily schedule is a necessary quality for middle school teachers. An inflexible person who depends on routine for personal security probably will find the proposed educational model frustrating.

**Enthusiasm:** Transescents profit from an enthusiastic adult. Teachers who are cynics will tend to stifle rather than motivate curiosity necessary for learning experiences.

**Cooperative:** In the educational model, stress was placed on interrelatedness of curricular content and flexible scheduling. The points will require considerable faculty interaction.

**Sense of Humor:** Teachers who fail to see the humorous aspects in daily human involvements may find difficulty in relating to transescents. (Eichhorn, 1966, p. 92)

Table 4 summarizes whether or not the principal referred to each of the personal qualities during the key informant interviews.

**TABLE 4: Principal Responses Matching Personal Characteristics**

<b>Principals</b> <hr/> <b>Characteristics</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>
<b>Personal Security</b>				X	X	X	X
<b>Understanding</b>	X	X	X	X		X	
<b>Resourceful</b>			X	X	X		X
<b>Adaptability</b>			X	X	X	X	X
<b>Enthusiasm</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
<b>Cooperative</b>		X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Sense of Humor</b>				X	X		X

Each of the qualities received notice by a minimum of three principals (sense of humor) and a maximum of six principals (enthusiasm and cooperative). The principals focused as heavily on personal characteristics as they did on middle-level program knowledge. This indicates they believe if they find the “right” person for the position, then they can teach them anything they need to about the middle school concept. Principal E expressed this idea: “I think [a candidate] that first of all is willing or understands that it’s an on-going learning process. I

think that is the first thing, if they are open-minded to learning themselves.” Principal D stated, “I can teach you how to teach, but I can’t teach you how to care about kids.”

Teacher enthusiasm for their careers was also reflected in the Eichhorn Award binders provided by Principals A, C, and D. Artifacts and photos included in each of these binders documented teachers, enthusiastically collaborating with their students. In the visitation committee summary document from school C, the committee even noted this spirit. “The VC (Visiting Committee) concurred that the staff eagerness and enthusiasm permeating School C was real and not contrived for our visitation. Most schools would not find such staff enthusiasm for and support of the wide range of initiative at various stages of development.”

The principals were in agreement that personal characteristics were important predictors of success for teaching candidates. As Principal G stated, “You’re really just looking at well-rounded people - what type of things they’re involved with and really what their attitude is.” Principal E summed this up as, “I think that it’s really important they have to love what they do. I want to see the passion.”

### **C. RESEARCH QUESTION #2 – THEME: FOCUS ON KIDS**

2. What attributes within a principal’s background, training, or experience impacted his/her career path to a middle school principalship?

Analysis of Question 2 draws from the principals’ response to interview question #11 as listed in Chapter 3. While the data show that the principals each enjoyed a variety of career experiences prior to their appointment as the middle school principal, one characteristic emerged as an overwhelming pattern. In six of the seven award-winning middle schools (A, B, C, E, F, G), the principal candidate had been personally invited to assume the role of principal. Someone within the system had recognized their potential to lead an award-winning middle school and had actively recruited them to take the position. All had gained experience as an assistant principal prior to this career opportunity, but not necessarily in the district where they became the principal, nor necessarily at the middle school level. Five of the candidates were certified as

secondary teachers at the outset of their careers (A, B, D, F, G). Two of the candidates were certified as elementary teachers at the outset of their careers (C, E).

During the interview responses, each principal could be heard restating a key word or phrase. Principal A identified “fun while learning” and “enjoying kids and relationships” as key qualities providing reward in his chosen profession. Principal B explained that it was “vivid” to him how well the middle school concept worked for middle-level kids. Principal C identified his ability to be a “listener” and “communicator” with both adults and kids as pivotal to his success as a middle school principal. Principal D explained that it was his goal “to work himself out of a job” by empowering others to take the lead. It was his goal, “to make the program much more important than the person,” in order to create change that is sustainable. Principal E described working in a middle school as “good chaos.” Principal F spoke to the “core values” that he had worked with the staff to define and then operationalize for the benefit of kids. Principal G believed that its “collaborative nature” is the key to a middle school’s success. He commented, “So I’ve been here for seven years now and I’m not regretting one minute because I’ve learned a lot about teaching and a lot about education. I think that a lot of the things that we do in middle schools have value at the high school level. I have often thought, boy, if the high school teachers were only as good as the middle school teachers are at collaboration, making connections, teaming and stuff, boy, wouldn’t the high schools be spectacular!”

Each of these messages connects back to a focus on the kids – their qualities as learners and individuals. There was a significant commitment to kids evident in the beliefs that they shared during the interviews. As Principal E summed it up, “I think it takes special people to be middle school people, because they are very difficult years. You have to understand [the kids]. But I think that when you do, you can make the biggest difference in [kids’] lives – because that’s where they are either going to go on one side of the fence or on the other side. I just believe that this is where we can catch so much. It really brought me into the role of being the principal of a middle school and into leading.”

The data which emerged from the interviews showed that these principals subscribed to Jim Collins’ premise of “first who...then what” (Collins, 2001, p. 41). Collins held that, “good-to-great leaders understood three simple truths. First, if you begin with “who,” rather than “what,” you can more easily adapt to a changing world...Second, if you have the right people on the bus, the problem of how to motivate and manage people largely goes away...Third, if you

have the wrong people, it doesn't matter whether you discover the right direction; you still won't have a great company. Great vision without great people is irrelevant" (p. 42). Just as they each placed a heavy value on the relationships they built with kids, it was not surprising that they placed an equally heavy emphasis on identifying candidates' personal qualities during the interview process. They were clearly counting on these people to be able to forge the types of relationships that would make their middle school successful for all students.

#### **D. RESEARCH QUESTION #3 – THEME: COLLEGIAL LEARNING**

3. What induction and mentoring programs do the award-winning school districts currently have in place, for addressing post-hiring professional development for middle school teachers?

Analysis of Question #3 draws from the principals' responses to Interview Questions #6 and #7 as listed in Chapter 3. Each of the principals described a district wide induction program for all new teachers which included a mentoring program. The length of time that new teachers spent in this program and under the tutelage of a mentor varied from one to three years. In each district the induction programs were done on a district level, but the principals did have some input or opportunity to customize the subject matter to include training specific to the middle school concept.

Generally there were two thrusts to the district induction programs: a series of classes or programs focusing on the district history and general procedures; and a series of classes or programs focusing on educational theories, such as assertive discipline, classroom management, instructional strategies, crisis prevention, bullying, and special education. The new teachers had to demonstrate competency in each of the identified areas. The means to demonstrate this included observations (both administrative and peer), seminars, book groups, journals, web casts, and attendance at conferences.

A majority of the middle school principals did identify a special aspect of mentoring that captured the essence of the middle school program for the new teachers. That was learning how to be part of a team. "If I were a new teacher, I would want to work on a team. You just walk

in with your eyes so wide open, go through a district program for two days and they show you all this stuff, and that's good. But when it really comes down to being in the classroom with kids, it's nice having three people around you that have some experience, and know that their success depends on your success, so therefore they work together," explained Principal B about the power of teaming. This was echoed by Principal G: "The nicest thing in mentoring that happens is when you have a team of four teachers and that team has common planning time every day. I think that's where they get most of their in-service from, other team members. That's the strength of the team, as far as working collegially."

The natural connection between a district's mentoring program and teaming, one of the essential elements of an effective middle school (Transition to a Middle School, PMSA, p. 2), was apparent to a majority of the principals interviewed. Each made it clear that this was a benefit for new teachers, as well as for the veterans. It was not surprising that this aspect of an effective middle school program stood out in the principals' responses, given their emphasis on the importance of relationships to a successful middle school program. The foundation of an effective team is built on the ability of the professionals to forge meaningful professional relationships.

In the Eichhorn Award binder as provided by Principal A, the significance of the district's mentoring program was emphasized. A document called, "Mentoring New Teachers" was included. This document recognized the importance of this charge and the impact that new teachers will have on the culture of the school. Principal A explained, "By the next decade there will have been an 80 percent turnover of teachers. We are faced with the opportunity to redefine our culture. This is a challenge, a charge, a mission for the veteran teachers to leave a legacy of positive expectations with the new teachers." The document went on to describe specific responsibilities, procedures, and suggestions for effective mentoring of new professionals.

Principal C provided information on their carefully planned teacher mentoring program in their Blue Ribbon Award application. It explained that, "All teachers new to the district are assigned a mentor teacher who meets with them and the building principal periodically throughout the year to discuss concerns and orient them to the operating culture of the building." The mentoring program at Middle School C was a three-year process.

Principal G referred to the successful and important teacher mentoring program in the Blue Ribbon Award application that was provided to the researcher. In the application Principal

G stated that, “Mentors and inductees are given eight to ten days of released time during each school year for mentoring activities such as observing each other, observing other teachers, attending conferences, or working on teaching strategies.” He went on to relate, “The academic team configuration lends support to novice teachers through the transmission of a professional culture by experienced practitioners.” In Middle School G the induction activities, mentoring responsibilities and teaming structure were all tied together to ensure the success of the new professional.

#### **E. RESEARCH QUESTION #4 –**

4. How does the award-winning school district establish and sustain effective middle-level practices, via professional development for both new hires and veteran staff members, given that these staff members have not received comprehensive, formal middle-level training from Pennsylvania colleges as part of their certification process?

Analysis of Question #4 draws from the principals’ response to interview questions #6, #7, #8, and #9 as listed in Chapter 3. In responding to these questions the data from the principals was arranged into three themes. The first emerging theme dealt with the nuts and bolts of specific staff development programs offered at the middle school or on a district wide basis. The second theme honed in on the child-centered nature of the school environment and encompassed a range of indicators from the structure of the school program, to the high academic achievement by the students, to the multiple systems of student supports, to the need to develop ethical awareness in the young adolescents. The third theme addressed the culture within the buildings, including opportunities for teacher leadership, continuous reflection on existing practices, and the need to “get the good word out” about the achievement occurring in the school.

##### **1. Theme: Specific Professional Development Programs**

All of the principals were eager to explain the specific approach to staff development being used in their district. Principal A explained that, “the district has a whole curriculum for staff

development, including cooperative learning, instructional strategies to promote higher level thinking skills, building critical thinking skills, creating critical needs, peer coaching and conferencing skills, offering instructional strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners, ADAPT, and about five or six other topics that teachers can do on their own.” This district utilized a system whereby staff could sign up for the various programs and would be released during school time.

Another type of professional development activity available for teachers in District A was documented in the Eichhorn Award binder. A sample of “*Flash*”, a professional development journal published within the district was included. The description of this journal was included in the binder. It stated, “*Flash*”, provides an opportunity for independent study on a variety of professional issues. Teachers read the magazine, take a post-test, and discuss what they have learned with a colleague or administrator.” The binder for Middle School A also contained their calendar of professional development activities for the school year.

Approaches to professional development varied widely from district to district. In District B speakers were often brought in to address specific topics regarding middle-level content.

Principal C was able to access a significant amount of district funding to send teachers out to conferences and workshops, as long as they were about middle-level topics. District C also had an in-house training program called “APL” for all new teachers. He explained it as, “APL lets everybody know that they’re teaching basically the same way. I’m not talking about robot teaching. I’m talking about a common understanding of what is a good way to approach education or good teaching strategies.”

Information contained within the Eichhorn Award binder corroborated this emphasis on professional development at Middle School C. Reference to attendance at middle-level conferences, as well as presentations made at those conferences, were both contained in the binder. Additional support was provided by Principal C, in the form of the text of a power point presentation called, “Journey to Becoming a True Middle School”. This evidence of professional development outside of the district was planned in concert with the internal activities offered on in-service days within the district. Principal C was clearly proud of the professional activities of his staff.



Principal D utilized book reading to generate discussion and collective learning on various topics. Recently his staff had read Bill Maxwell's book, The Seven Essential Qualities of a Team Player and Jim Collins' book, Good to Great. He indicated, "It was the team leaders' responsibility to come up with discussion questions for each one of the used chapters. We would do it through our team leaders' meeting and we would do the same questions throughout the year. We would dialogue about the quality of team leaders." Principal E indicated that, "we are very professional developmentally oriented." In that district the contract specified the amount of time throughout the year to be spent in professional development.

District F, like District C, utilized conferences. Principal F recognized that since the identity of the staff was constantly changing, there was a need to revisit various topics on middle-level issues. "So we look at the PMSA conferences. We have some core staff members who have been here through that training, and who have done some things like student-led conferences at the middle-level, peer mediation, home base, teaming...but our identity is changing, which means we need to continue the in-servicing. We can't just rest on what we have already done."

Principal G referred to in-service done at the district level. He also mentioned a program offered each summer for middle school teachers called the "Middle-level Institute". "...That gives them a little sense of what middle school is about."

Confirming their staff development programs was a part of both of the Blue Ribbon applications provided by Principals B and G. In the application there was a specific question asking:

How does a coherent approach to professional development for teachers and other staff ensure their ability to implement effectively the school's curriculum, instructional strategies, and support system? How do organizational arrangements, such as time and teaching assignments, and school norms and culture, make professional development a priority?

Each of the binders included a thorough response to this question, which reinforced the information that these principals had provided in the key informant interviews. In their answers the principals spoke not only to the time spent on professional development within their districts, but also to the types of content covered in these trainings.

Although there were vast differences in the approach to professional development from district to district, each principal emphasized its importance within their district. Also, they were able to clearly articulate the essence of their own set of programs. It was notable that none of the districts had a separate program of specified staff development to build the middle-level mind-set amongst all staff members. None of the principals articulated a cohesive set of middle-level “skills” that all teachers learned and practiced during professional development times. The path to staff development, while viewed as important, varied from school to school and from year to year, depending on the initiatives of the district and the principal’s perceived needs within the building.

## **2. Theme: Creating a Child-Centered School**

The next theme that emerged from the research was the emphasis placed by all principals on creating a child-centered school. The evidence of this type of focus emerged in their discussions of high academic achievement and how it was connected to the structure of their school. They indicated that this structure linked to the four areas of adolescent development as articulated by Dr. Eichhorn in his early research. Other indicators included the multiple systems in place to support student achievement, as well as in their deliberate focus on developing ethical behaviors among their students. This theme also provided a strong connection to the principals’ beliefs in building relationships to ensure student success in their schools.

Principals A, B, C, and G referred specifically to the four areas of transescent development as articulated by Dr. Eichhorn: academic development, social development, physical development, and emotional development (Eichhorn, 1966, p. viii). They indicated that by addressing each of these realms they had maintained a focus on being a child-centered school. They also connected this type of multi-faceted structure to the high academic achievement of their students. Principal A stated, “Academically the scores are high. On SAT scores, most of our students are in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile or better with huge numbers in the 98 or 99 percentile.” He went on to tie this to Eichhorn’s four areas of transescent development by stating, “I can’t say key elements, but I think that overall this success of the students in the characteristics and the success of the students at the academic goals as well as the social goals, and developmental goals, even ethics, were obvious.”

Principal B related his students' success to the structure of their middle school. "We had it all for middle-level. When you talk about the effective components, I think that as you go down that list, I think we'd demonstrated all of those to a high degree of excellence. The strong ones though were the structure, but beyond that the attitude of the people and some other things that we have tried to do in terms of our culture: a community of care, communication, and cooperation."

Principal C expressed, "Curriculum is extremely important to us and we look at our test scores, and we score very, very well, for our size district; we are the number two school in the state as far as PSSA scores are concerned." The data in the Blue Ribbon Award binder corroborated the school's high standardized test scores. Scores over the last five years for both norm-referenced tests and criterion-referenced tests were displayed in the binder in response to questions H4 and H5. This category (H) dealt with "Indicators of Success" at the school.

At the same time Principal C expressed pride that his school had been recognized as being child-centered. "The things that were identified to us as exceptional...was the fact that we were very much a child-based school, not just subject matter." It was the mixing of the various elements that made his school exceptional in his view.

Principal C provided additional evidence of this belief system in his school. The transcript of a power point presentation entitled, "Journey to Become a True Middle School," was included. It described the middle school as being a, "student-centered school". It also stated that they were a, "school that is designed to help students progress intellectually, socially, physically, and emotionally."

Principal G stated, "I think we demonstrated that we addressed the four areas of development. Academically, we certainly demonstrated through our test scores and the academic performance of our kids, so academically that was taken care of. Socially, we have a lot of programs and we do a lot of things to make sure that the kids are socially developed and are able to interact with each other. Emotionally, we have a guidance program and an advisor time program that's very successful...And physically, we make sure that we have like a 95% rate of kids participating in inter-scholastic athletics. We have a no-cut program."

In addition to these comments relating to Eichhorn's four areas of development, Principal G also provided evidence of high academic achievement in his Blue Ribbon Award binder, as

Principal C had done. This binder contained the schools' responses to several questions about standardized testing results (H4, H5).

Other principals (C, D, F) referred to the child-centered nature of their school, providing supports for all students to achieve success. Principal C said, "As far as the teachers are concerned, they know that we are child-based. They know that if it's good for kids, we'd do it. We live by that motto. I expect the teachers to live by it and they expect me to live by it. I have high expectations for our teachers." This exact phrase, "If it's good for kids, we do it," was included in Principal C's Blue Ribbon binder in response to a question about "Leadership and Educational Vitality". The power point presentation document that Principal C provided, corroborated this. The "Student Advocate Network" was explained in that presentation. It detailed the support systems in place to aid all students in being successful.

Principal D emphasized, "Well, we want as few kids as possible to fall through those cracks. A lot of it is environmental, instructional delivery. Our team environment here is a model. Probably the thing that's done about here and gotten more recognition here is our pervasive support system for students." Principal F summed up those support systems by saying, "I think the school supports [programs] that we have as far as special ed, title, academic support, guidance counselors, (we have a social worker here on staff full time). I think that what we do for kids that have any level of special need is a key piece."

Principal B even connected this focus on being child-centered to the decision-making process in his school. "If you ask my staff, 'If you want something to happen, what's the criteria?' They'd say, 'If it's good for kids.' Once you convince somebody of that, generally, then we do it. If it works, that's good, and if it doesn't, that's OK. But usually it's good. Usually it works."

Being child-centered also extended to providing meaningful activities and experiences for children beyond the core curriculum. Principal A explained the approach in his school. "When they arrive here, we take advantage of that. We take time each day to talk about the thought for the day and to put in front of kids the values of society that have pretty much been accepted by every one. We use quotes from people who are recognized and we ask students for quotes. We say to them, 'What was the quote that most impressed you during the year?' Then we use that at some time during the year with the student's name endorsing it, and we find that students take pride in that and take pride in the school. I think overall from the very beginning, I didn't know

this but I just read in the last two months, that pride is the greatest motivator...I think we have created an atmosphere where kids are proud about the school, and proud about what they do, and that has gone on to motivate them.”

In capturing the theme of creating a child-centered focus it became clear from the interviews with the principals that this was a complex characteristic, but one that they perceived as essential to the success of their students and the excellence of their school. Multiple facets were woven together as they told their stories of excellence. These ranged from the academic successes, the attention given to each of the four areas noted by Dr. Eichhorn, the strong support programs to ensure that no child went unnoticed, and attention to the development of students’ character. Taken all together, these child-centered components blended right into the next emergent theme: building a culture of continuous improvement in the school.

### **3. Theme: Culture for Continuous Improvement**

The third theme, arising from the data, addressed the culture within the buildings. This included opportunities for teacher leadership, continuous reflection on existing practices, and the need to “get the good word out” about the achievement occurring in the school. This theme was the culmination of how the principals referred to the systemic connections between staff development, building a middle-level mind-set in all the professional staff, decision-making processes, and even their own approach to leadership. It was evident to them that this was a work in progress, under constant review and revision.

Each principal spoke to the type of teacher leadership that existed within their school and the impact that these teacher leaders had on the rest of the staff. It is significant that the principals all referred to teacher leadership as an important characteristic in the building. The example of this leadership in action did vary in context from principal to principal. Nonetheless, they did not view themselves as the sole source of leadership in their school.

Principal A related this in regards to the professional development program. “The district has made the administrators go first, so that when one of these topics comes up, some people think it will go away, but the first year the district has required the administrators to go to class with a teacher partner and then work with a teacher partner for the year to make sure that they had all of the material and experience, even teaching in a classroom with them.”

Principal B related this to reflection and improvements. “I think as a community we are always looking for ways to do things better. The staff I have, I am very fortunate, because they really believe that. They are always looking for how to do things in a better way. They are always coming up with new ideas. So there’s that culture, I think.”

Principal C recognized the power of teacher leaders. “The other thing I expect them to do, because they are instructional leaders, is I expect them to be leaders and work with their individual departmental people. We have one-half hour each morning before the kids come and when there’s a need or we are doing a big collaborative thing, they’ll all get together. That’s part of the whole school day.”

The report of the Visiting Committee during the Eichhorn Award process indicated that they too saw evidence of teacher leadership at Middle School C. Their report stated, “It was apparent that existing circumstances have caused the staff to develop into a strong, almost ‘family’ unit. Additionally, the leadership skills of individual staff members, if not all, have begun to blossom. As a result, the competence of this staff has developed a significant level of self-direction. There is evidence that they can problem-solve and implement strategies without the traditional identified leadership.”

The role of teacher leadership in Middle School C was further supported by the information contained in their Blue Ribbon application. This binder contained the school’s responses to several questions on leadership. One, of note, discussed the school use of teacher leadership to work on “continuous school improvement.” “The focus is on a child-centered program designed to meet the tremendous variety of needs, interests, and abilities of these students. Preparation for this Blue Ribbon submission has provided the impetus for continuing program evaluations and changes.” Ensuring continuous progress was tied not only to teacher leadership, but also to the collaboration that occurred during the team planning time at the school.

Principal D looked for leadership potential in the people that he hired. “You can extrapolate from everything I’ve already said that probably the primary reason is the development and confidence in teacher leadership. That may be the single most important component...It’s the fact that we were able to successfully develop teacher leaders. Every person that’s coming into my building fits the leadership portrait.”

Principal E saw the leadership emerge as part of a collegial process. “I think more so than that it’s the process that you use in your school of pulling everybody together and having everybody say, ‘yeah, we did this’ and ‘we could put this in there’ and that’s what’s the exciting part because they actually saw, yes, we are a true middle school. I think it’s important; it’s good for their self-esteem. It’s good for everybody’s self-esteem and kids and teachers believing that we believe in the middle school philosophy. It’s more than just words. You walk the talk.”

This collegial atmosphere was evident in the pictures included in Middle School E’s Eichhorn Award binder. Many of the snapshots showed teachers working together on interdisciplinary projects throughout the school. References were also made to the efforts of various groups of teachers beyond the core teaching teams to support students. These included tutoring programs, student activities and club, and formal programs like the Student Assistance Program.

Principal F built dialogue with his staff around the concept of leadership. “We talked last year as team leaders about core values, what does it mean to be a middle school teacher? I asked them clearly to define the issue of core values. Who are we? What do we stand for? What do we want other people to perceive us as? You have to have those conversations first, not just so we are all on the same page, but because there are a lot of people that have not been in this middle school since its beginning. So that’s where we start talking about excellence...And then from there we’re just always looking at the curriculum pieces, continuous improvement. Never taking the answer that that’s the way we have done it before, because maybe it was good before, or maybe it was award-winning before, maybe it was wonderful, but these are different kids this year, and so what are we doing differently?” Principal F provided the “Core Values” chart to the researcher. This was produced by the staff and was displayed throughout the school. It substantiated many of the themes that had emerged from his interview, including “Students First!” and “TEAMwork”. Both of these were listed as two of the core values identified by their professional community.

Principal G wrapped this idea up by saying, “There is such a strong tradition here that the veteran teachers maintain. They are the ones that bought into middle-level and created the program, and they are interested in seeing it maintained and continued. So a lot of that happens through peer pressure and collegiality...It’s a veteran staff that values what we do, and they

don't let the younger people back off. They show them, they model what the right way was. They are real proud of the program and they make sure it carries on."

In the Blue Ribbon application from Middle School G, the principal verified the role of leadership in enhancing the quality of the school. "The mission of the leadership is to promote a child-centered school where experiences build success for every child." This school had a long tradition of strong middle-level programming and they were proud to express that tradition in their award application. In response to question F2, "How does the school engage its internal and external stakeholders in leadership and decision-making?" the application described the leadership involvement of teachers, other staff members, parents, and students. It summarized this type of active leadership by stating, "As evidenced by the multitude of participatory structures, internal and external stakeholders play significant roles in making relevant decisions regarding the education of middle-level learners."

Principal A, B, C, F, and G also related their own stories of "getting the good word out" and connecting with the community. Principal A indicated, "The people who live here send their children to school to learn." Principal B used his "dream team, which is a committee of students, parents, teachers, and administrators that dream...But each year we choose a set of objectives, one climate and one academic objective, and then figure out ways as a team to infuse that into our school." Principal C saw himself as a "...vocal leader. [Principals] have to be the bandleader. They have to get out there and say to everybody, 'we are a good school and we have to maintain this excellence.'" Principal F was aware of the potential impact of the school's public image. "It may seem minor in the whole scope of things for being an excellent school, but if you don't look the part, and you don't act the part then how can we take credit?" Principal G knew that the community was carefully watching the whole package at his school. "Pressure from the community! Because as soon as those test scores go down in any way, many parts of our program will be looked at and questioned. As long as our test scores remain where they are, as long as our students are achieving to the levels they are, we are given a lot of freedom to do things." Without the liaisons between the administration, staff, and community this balance could become fragile. The majority of the principals discussed this as a major responsibility of their role.

That is why the principals summed up this theme of a culture of continuous improvement by saying that they could never rest on their laurels. It was not the responsibility of just one



person. Change and efforts at improvement were a given in the culture of their schools. This was how they approached the need to sustain their excellence. It was summed up in the following statements:

Principal A: “What we have tried to do is not rest on our laurels.”

Principal B: “We maintain some of the old ideas, yet try to keep moving in new directions.”

Principal C: “I’m hoping that the history of sustained, child-centered beliefs, and a school of excellence will maintain itself. I hope it’s self-replicating.”

Principal D: (On reading Good to Great) “Once you get the flywheel going it’s fairly easy to just do things. We have the flywheel going. Could it be going faster? I think so, but it’s created enough momentum that we have a whole house full of learners here.”

Principal E: “So with constant evaluation, constantly getting everybody involved, and everybody taking a stake in the success of our kids. I think that’s important...I think it’s just a continual process of renewing all programs and keep adding to the lists.”

This final theme, a culture of continuous improvement, may have been the most complex. In unraveling its underlying strands, recognition had to be given to the fact that each was interrelated and could not be isolated from another. This is the thick, rich nature of culture. However, in their efforts to articulate how this culture grew, sustained itself, and was passed along to new professionals, the principals in these schools of excellence demonstrated that they had spent time in consideration of their school’s culture. They had a keen awareness of what the key characteristics of that culture were and had a vision of how to maintain that culture within their school community.

## **F. SUMMARY**

Chapter 4 of this research study used data from key informant interviews to explore the four research questions. The researcher reviewed additional descriptive documents, including the Eichhorn Award binders and the Blue Ribbon Award applications, as well as supporting artifacts provided by each of the districts. This was important in order to discover evidence to corroborate or repudiate the statements made by the key informants during their interviews. The use of numerous indicators in the search for consistency enhanced the validity of the results.

Research question #1 focused on the hiring of candidates for middle-level teaching positions. Pre-service training, experiences prior to employment, and personal qualities of the candidates were explored. While the principals' interviews and the supporting documentation indicated that each of these categories was taken into consideration during the hiring process, one theme surfaced as primary. When it came to hiring, one clear area of emphasis emerged: the personal qualities of the candidates. For these principals, this element proved pivotal in the hiring process

Research question #2 explored the career path of the principals of the award-winning schools in the study. Several interesting patterns emerged, but one key characteristic was the focus by all of the principals on the unique characteristics of the transescent students in their schools. Each of the principals expressed a passion for working with these kids, as learners and as individuals. Each had a thorough grasp on the unique developmental characteristics of this age group, and the implications these had for learning. This expertise enhanced the leadership that they could provide for their schools. It also defined the vision they expressed for a future in their school where excellence would be sustained and improvements would be continuously sought.

Research question #3 delved into the professional development programs at the award-winning schools. A common theme that was consistent in all the schools was the collegial nature of their learning community. Teachers were not expected to be independent learners, but were surrounded by a professional learning network. Teaming was at the core of the professional learning community.

Research question #4 was the most complex, because it looked to the future for these award-winning schools. How did they plan to sustain the degree of excellence that they had attained? This was of particular interest to the researcher in light of the lack of a formal middle-level teacher preparation program in Pennsylvania.

The responses that emerged from the research were just as complex as the nature of the question. Perhaps the most obvious finding was that these schools all were keenly interested in sustaining excellence. The very completion of the rigorous self-study and extensive application process to win either of the awards spoke to this desire. However, the principals provided evidence that they planned to attack this goal on multiple fronts. They also indicated that they were not in this alone, but relied on the culture of continuous improvement, existing in their

schools, to set the tone for sustaining excellence. At the heart of this mission was the belief that each of these award-winning schools was truly “child-centered.” This belief provided the fuel to keep the entire school community working on continuous improvement and excellence.

Chapter 5 summarizes the findings in an effort to answer each of the research questions as well as introduces areas for future research.

## **V. CHAPTER 5**

### **A. SUMMARY**

In light of the fact that no specific teacher preparation for middle-level education exists in the state of Pennsylvania, principals at that level face a unique dilemma: they must select new teacher candidates by looking at attributes other than certification. Unlike elementary principals or secondary principals, they can not assume that the candidates coming to interview for positions in middle schools have a clear understanding of the essential elements of a middle school program, have received a series of courses on the unique developmental characteristics of adolescent development, or even have had a student teaching experience at a middle school. Instead they have had to discover another path to revealing the knowledge base and personal qualities of the candidates. Additionally, they must give consideration to how they will provide this essential knowledge to their new teachers after they are hired, along with improving the continuous learning for the existing staff.

Looking at the processes used in award-winning middle schools for teacher selection, mentoring and induction programs, and on-going professional development programs, this research study sought to reveal the patterns and themes consistent among these schools, in order to draw some conclusions and make some recommendations about how other principals could build the staff capacity to become an outstanding middle school. Four themes emerged from the research.

#### **1. Theme #1: A Unique Interviewing Process**

The first theme involved the interviewing process. In each of the districts the interviewing process being used was comparable to the process used to hire teachers for any grade level. In general it included a review of credentials, a selection of a candidate pool, a series of interviews

usually done by a team, which included staff members from the school, and a final recommendation by the principal to the school board for hiring. While the principals utilized a series of questions during the interviews, in no case were they standardized. In fact the pattern that emerged was that the questions varied from case to case and were dependent on the position open and the candidate. In each of the schools the principals did indicate that they tried to incorporate questions that related specifically to the essential elements of an effective middle school in order to assess the level of understanding that the candidate had about this type of program. Based on the answers and prior knowledge of the candidates, the depth that the principals explored this topic varied. Principals indicated that they were more interested in the personal qualities of the candidates.

Principals did not have a clear preference to the certification of the candidates. The results of this question were distributed evenly. During the interviews the principals seemed to be unable to indicate a clear preference for elementary certification or secondary certification. The clearest result was that they actually preferred the atmosphere created by a mixture of certifications. Even when they would articulate a preference, they qualified that decision by stating the pros and cons of both certificates. Some even indicated surprise that their own assumptions about the “better” certification were not born out during their observations of their own staff. What was clear from interviewing the principals was that they clearly knew that they had to delve far beyond certification when selecting new teachers. Certification did not equate with qualification.

The other issue that emerged when talking about certification was that the new legislation, NCLB, would be making this decision for the principals in the future. Generally, the principals did not see this as a positive step forward, because it would limit the pool of applicants that they could interview. They expressed concern that it would also impact the fragile balance between elementary and secondary certifications that the principals believed was beneficial to their schools’ culture.

In part this may have been why the principals had moved on to placing a heavier reliance on discovering a candidate’s understanding of the key elements of an effective middle school. There was a clearly defined body of knowledge on what these essential elements include. The responses of the principals indicated that they had a comprehensive knowledge of this body of

research. However, the principals had various preferences for which elements they viewed as most important for their school.

It may even be that the principals' emphasis on various elements may vary depending on the existing culture in their building in any given year. This would account for the minor emphasis that the principals placed on some of the elements that have a very narrow focus, such as "a range of organizational arrangements," "a full exploratory program," and "comprehensive advising and counseling." These elements may be the responsibility of a small number of staff members, or even the responsibility of the principal. Creating a balance of skills and knowledge among their staff members was an ongoing process for the principals and would lend to the culture in their schools.

There was consensus that two of the elements were critical: "educators knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents," and "positive school climate." These two elements were viewed as essential in every one of the award-winning middle schools. The principals could articulate how they would try to discover if the candidates could contribute in these two ways, and the principals were able to articulate how they would continue to try and build improvement in these two elements into their staff through professional development training. The clarity of the principals' comments about these elements indicated that they were critical to the culture of an award-winning middle school.

It must also be considered why two of the elements, "continuous progress for students" and "evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of young adolescents," did not emerge as critical to the hiring process, or to the staff development programs in any of the districts. Possible explanations for this include a lack of clarity on what these elements really mean. Another possible explanation for this omission could be that the principals see these elements as part of the larger issue of assessment and provide staff development via that broader topic.

## **2. Theme #2: Emphasis on Personal Qualities of Teacher Candidates**

As a result of the interview process the principals agreed that one quality was paramount to discern, the personal qualities of the candidates. The key personality indicators as discussed in the research of Dr. Eichhorn guided the analysis of these findings by acting as the measures. Clearly the principals were in agreement that this was the pivotal factor that they considered in

making a recommendation for hiring. The two most important traits were “enthusiasm” and “cooperation,” followed closely by “understanding” and “adaptability.” Clearly among the principals of award-winning middle schools, the personal traits were seen as key predictors of the candidates’ success in the classroom. This connects to the importance that the principals placed on the teachers developing close relationships with both their students and with their other colleagues. Constructing this type of web of relationships was seen as the glue to holding the culture of the school together.

Perhaps it was the focus on kids that was a critical part of their own experience, bringing them to the middle school principalship and accounting for their emphasis upon this when hiring new teachers for their schools. In fact one surprising characteristic to emerge from the interviews was that all but one of the principals from the award-winning schools had been recruited to this position. Ironically, the principal who had not come to his position via a recruitment strategy himself spoke about using heavy recruitment as a hiring strategy for his school’s teaching staff.

### **3. Theme #3: A Collegial Learning Environment**

Once the right candidates were hired, the attention of this study turned to the mentoring and induction programs in place in the award-winning schools. The theme that emerged from this was one of collegial learning. The mentoring and induction programs were fairly consistent from district to district and in fact were not customized in any notable way for the teachers entering the middle schools. However, one characteristic that did stand out was the importance placed on teaming, one of the essential elements of an effective middle school. The principals used their team leaders to dialogue about the goals for the school, to mentor and assist novice and veteran teachers, and to provide general leadership for the teams. Each of the teams was required to utilize a variety of supports for students, implement sound instructional strategies for curriculum delivery, and liaison with families. In other words they were to forge relationships within the school community and the community at large. This was part of the fiber of the award-winning schools.

It should be noted that the same was true for staff development programs. While the principals agreed on the importance of staff development, there was no consensus on the best

approach or topics. The principals discussed a variety of staff development programs that they had implemented in their schools, but they were random in nature and based on the latest needs assessment in the building, or initiatives occurring within the district at large. None of the schools had a regular series of “course offerings” standardized for all new staff members. The one quality that was consistent was the reliance on veteran staff members, via the team process, to pass along the knowledge base and beliefs of the school.

At the core of this system of beliefs in the award-winning schools, was the concept of being a “child-centered” school. This took on various meanings, from the structure of the school program, to the high academic achievement by the students, to the multiple systems of student supports, to the need to develop ethical awareness in the young adolescents. The principals all indicated that the staff development efforts were intended to nurture this sort of mindset amongst the staff.

#### **4. Theme #4: Culture of Continuous Improvement**

Closely connected to this idea was the theme of a culture of continuous improvement within each building. The principals described how they provided opportunities for teacher leadership, reflecting regularly on the existing practices in order to refine them, and publicizing the good things that were happening in the school in order to build a foundation of positive community support. In fact this was the most complex theme that emerged from the research. It was clear that the principals, all of whom had been in their schools for a period of years, had spent a good amount of time reflecting on how to create and sustain this within their school. Since the personalities of the students, staff, and parents were constantly in flux, this presented no small challenge, but in order to create a culture of excellence was essential. Each of the principals had adopted a strategy to attack this on multiple fronts, but no two approaches were exactly the same, just as no two of the schools were exactly the same. It may be that the ability of the principal to discern these subtle differences and “steer” the ship accordingly set each of these schools apart as schools of excellence.



## **B. IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

The findings of this research study suggest four areas for further study. First, could the key indicators of a culture of school excellence be articulated and then used to build excellence into other schools? Secondly, does the very nature of the extensive application process needed to qualify for various middle school award programs prohibit schools, lacking in human and fiscal resources, from ever applying and thereby ever being identified as excellent middle schools? Thirdly, is the existence of a visionary middle school principal-leader the missing 11<sup>th</sup> Element of an Effective Middle School program? Fourth, given the principals' emphasis on personal traits during teacher hiring, can the traits predicting a middle school teacher-candidate's greatest predilection to success be identified?

### **1. Key Indicators of a Culture of Excellence**

Ferretting out the key indicators around building a culture of excellence is worthy of further consideration, particularly as it relates to the employment of new staff members who will enhance that culture. For every retirement that occurs, a school also has an opportunity to refine the culture of the school when hiring a replacement. Each of those retirements can represent a loss of expertise, historical knowledge, and relationships forged. A district must be careful in how a new staff member can shift those delicate relationship dynamics. This is particularly relevant in a middle school where the staff members work so closely on teams, unlike any other school configuration, where most teachers operate generally in isolation of each other.

### **2. Economic Distinctions Among Schools of Excellence**

When designing this study, the focus was placed on award-winning middle schools via the Don Eichhorn Outstanding Middle School Award and the National Blue Ribbon School Award programs. Both of these programs require an exhaustive self-study, as well as completion of an extensive application as part of the submission process. Both of these, the self-study and the completion of the application, necessitate a school to devote significant amounts of time, human resources, and perhaps even fiscal resources. While the economic differences between the

schools were not viewed as significant to the outcomes of this particular study, they may have relevance for future research. For example, would districts, not in the top 50% of aid ratios, be able to muster the support, either fiscal or human, to complete the application process and win these types of awards? Since the focus of the National Blue Ribbon School Award program is shifting and in part will highlight economically disadvantaged schools who show significant improvement on their standardized testing scores, the time may be ripe for this type of comparison.

### **3. Role of a Visionary Principal-leader**

Another topic, meriting more study involves the critical role of the principal as a visionary leader. In fact this quality may be so crucial to sustaining the excellent nature of the middle school, that it should be included as the 11<sup>th</sup> Essential Element of an Effective Middle School. It was interesting that the principals in these award-winning schools had largely been recruited to their posts. Others recognized their capacity to provide visionary middle school leadership. Is there a recruitment strategy in place for all the schools in the award-winning districts? Is this a strategy in place in award-winning schools across the nation? What qualities were recognized in these principals that made the administrations of the districts seek them out? Finally, why have more principals not used the same strategy when it comes to hiring teachers for their schools?

One of the qualities that these principals appeared to demonstrate was a keen awareness of the student-centered nature of their buildings and a firm desire to maintain that culture to ensure the success of all students. Would principals in non-award-winning schools have a similar grasp on the nature of their schools' culture and a vision to mold that culture? If not, could this be taught to principals as part of their preparation to assume this type of leadership role?

### **4. Critical Personal Traits that Predict Success as Middle School Teachers**

Finally, more research is warranted concerning the emphasis placed on personal traits, rather than pedagogical knowledge during the hiring process. While the principals viewed both as important, given the lack of a specific and consistent program of middle-level pedagogical

knowledge, these principals had all turned to a heavy emphasis on personal traits. They viewed the ability of teachers to forge relationships with students as critical to a teacher's success in the classroom. They may have turned to this due to the lack of middle-level preparation. Yet there may have been other reasons for this focus. Do principals hiring teachers for elementary and secondary positions rely as heavily on personal traits? Are the personal traits, which are indicators of success, as well defined at those other levels? Are they the same or different from the personal traits for successful middle-level teachers? All of these questions are open to further research and discovery. If the traits could be identified early on, students in teacher education programs could be identified and encouraged to consider a career in middle level education. Conversely, if candidates lacked the critical personal qualities essential to success at middle level, they could be steered to a more appropriate career placement. This may help to address the issue of highly qualified teachers early on, as well as to diminish the stereotype that people "just end up" working at middle level until they can transfer to another level. Each piece of this puzzle can reveal important information in building the culture of a school, which can sustain excellence.

## APPENDIX

### Key Informant Interview Transcripts

**Interview with Principal A**  
**Eichhorn Award Winner, 2001 – 2002**  
**Blue Ribbon Award Winner, 1999 - 2000**

**July 11, 2003**

**Question one: I would like to start by asking you to discuss your process is for hiring new staff members at the middle school.**

When there is an opening, we notify human resources. They provide us with applications that meet the qualifications. There is a scoring process that they go through and we only receive the top scorers. They are on the Internet so we have to call them up, look at them on there and print them out. From there it is up to the principal to call candidates, arrange for interviews, provide interview questions, do the interviews and make a recommendation to human resources.

**Question two: Do you ask any interview questions specifically related to the essential elements of an effective middle school?**

For one set of interviews, when we interview administrators and assistant principals, we use the essential characteristics of middle schools specifically and have them tell us about various characteristics and which ones are more important and why. For teaching candidates we have not used the characteristics. We ask them more about them. We ask them what they believe about students in the middle school, how they define the difference between elementary, middle and high school students, and what they know about middle schoolers, but not from the framework of defining characteristics.

**Question three: Describe the types of preparation or experiences for middle school teaching that you are looking for as you interview candidates for teaching positions in your middle school.**

For the most part, we find that people who are trained in special education and elementary education are more aware of the needs of middle school kids. They are much more aware than secondary trained candidates. So that is one thing that's an advantage for people, although they don't always have the knowledge to teach those subjects that we need. Once we get past that, we are not looking at their training so much as in middle school education, as their training in

education or teaching. We look for such things as knowledge of Madeline Hunter's theories or Canter's. And we ask people to explain to us what they have learned and what they would use to meet the needs of kids, more than what courses they have.

**Question four: Do you generally find elementary certified or secondary certified candidates more prepared to teach in a middle school?**

You have already answered this question mentioning the elementary certification.

**Question 5: In your opinion what do you believe are the key characteristics of a teacher candidate, which predict their success as a middle school teacher?**

I think awareness of the needs of kids and a sense of being totally prepared to be organized for the kids. And to do for them until they learn how to do it - those things that middle school kids have weaknesses in: staying organized, staying on task, keeping your mind from wandering, having exciting things going on in class that will keep their attention when their self-discipline and self-control are lacking. I find that those things that teachers are more successful at providing students with a reason for being there, are much more successful at middle-level. So that's what we try to find. But that has to be balanced with the capability of teaching at the level the students are learning. For the entry-level of teacher it is necessary. Sometimes we find someone who is tremendously qualified, and tremendously exciting, but their qualification to teach science is at 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade and even though we would love to have them because of their way of meeting the needs of kids and the way they do it, we have to pass on them because their presentation is way over the kids head.

**Questions 6: Describe your mentoring program for new teachers at the middle school.**

I think it's a lot to do because we're a large district, so we have a staff development coordinator. The staff development coordinator has an induction curriculum, and so all of the new teachers who come into the building have a big brother or a big sister in the building. They go together to class. Before school starts they go to one or two classes. And then as the year progresses they go to class sometimes together and sometimes individually to learn those things that the district expects, the theories on education as well as the knowledge about the district. Basic knowledge about the district is presented early and then as the year progresses we have more theory in the lessons. Everyone has a booklet that the district prints and they have to have it signed off. So for example, procedures on how to claim personal days. A teacher has to learn how to do that and then have it signed off by the big brother or big sister. The principal has to sign off on the use of some of the theories in the classroom observations. At the end of the year the booklet is returned with all of the little pages signed off by the big brother or big sister or principal and returned to the induction coordinator. **(Do any of the items in this process specifically target middle school, or is this more of a district wide focus?)** It is a district wide focus except for the part the principal is responsible for about instruction.

**Question 7: Does your district provide any specific professional development training related to middle-level teaching for new and veteran teachers?**

That's a good question. I would probably say not necessarily targeting middle-level. It's just good educational theory. Everyone in the district was trained in ADAPT. People were selected to go to the IU for training and then they came back and trained every one in the district, all 681 teachers, were trained in using ADAPT. From my perspective that's a middle school, really good middle school. In fact, it's a good lesson for the upper secondary people to learn. But also the district has a whole curriculum for staff development, including cooperative learning, instructional strategies to promote higher level thinking skills, building critical thinking skills, creating critical needs, peer coaching and conferencing skills, offering instructional strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners, as well as ADAPT, and about five or six or seven or eight other topics that teachers can do on their own, adapting tests, maintaining the joy of learning, structuring a successful cooperative learning lesson, making lectures memorable, asking questions that stimulate learning, starting and ending lessons with impact, designing perfect practice, assessing student performance with rubrics, assigning appropriate homework, and identifying students at risk. All of those are made available to teachers every year and a list of staff development classes during school time is published and teachers are allowed to and are encouraged to sign up for those, although I would say that may be less than 100 take advantage of that each year. When the district has an initiative, like Madeline Hunter, every one in the district is scheduled over three or four years to go through the complete training. The same with ADAPT. The same with Total Quality. That is if the district chooses some model and makes a decision then staff development takes over and records that every one has participated. I have one more thing to say. The district has made the administrators go first, so that when one of these topics comes up, some people think it will go away, but the first year for the last three major movements, the district has required the administrators to go to class with a teacher partner and then work with a teacher partner for the year to make sure that they had all of the material and experience, even teaching in a classroom with them. There were six lessons and in between each lesson the administrator had to be in that classroom three times and had to observe that teachers six times.

**Question 8: When your school received, and you can speak to either the Blue Ribbon or the Eichhorn Awards here because you have received both of them, what were the key elements within your middle school program, which you think earned you that recognition?**

I can't say key elements, but I think that overall the success of the students in the characteristics and the success of the students at the academic goals as well as the social goals, and developmental goals, even ethics, were obvious. I know that the students were extremely helpful to the people who were visiting, the students were young ladies and gentlemen, and demonstrated that they had were not only learning but were using the things that we wanted students to learn. Academically the scores are high. On SAT scores, most of our students are in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile or better with huge numbers in the 98 or 99 percentile, so that the SAT scores seemed pretty easy. The people who visited commented mostly on the conduct and the process that was occurring every day in classrooms and the halls. It was a place where learning was

taking place and that we seemed to be meeting the needs of the students by doing all of those things that the characteristics talk about.

**(I am going to ask a follow-up question. That to me speaks of a culture of learning, within your school. What do you attribute that culture to? Is it here in the school, or in the community, what do you think has helped to create a culture of learning within your district or within your building?)**

I have to say that the basis of that is in the community. The people who live here send their children to school to learn. The students for the most part want to have that happen. When they arrive here, we take advantage of that. We take time each day to talk about the thought for the day and to put in front of kids the values of society that have pretty much been accepted by everyone. We use quotes from people who are recognized and we ask students for quotes. We say to them, “what was the quote that most impressed you during the year?” Then we use that at some time during the year with the student’s name endorsing it, and we find that students take pride in that and take pride in the school. I think overall from the very beginning, I didn’t know this but I just read in the last two months, that pride is the greatest motivator. I didn’t have any idea about that, but I think we have created an atmosphere where kids are proud about the school, and proud about what they’d do, and that has gone on to motivate them, because of all the stuff we’ve done.

**Question 9: Having been recognized as an excellent middle school, what programs does your school have in place to sustain this excellence?**

Not enough! What we have tried to do is not rest on our laurels. Each year we’ve tried to come up with new programs to make the kids proud. When the kids were doing very well discipline-wise, and we didn’t have a lot of detentions, we asked student council to fund a sundae bar just to say thanks for good behavior. That was a big hit with kids. We got a lot of good behavior out of that. When we haven’t been that lucky with behavior, we have done things like last year when we had a tenth anniversary birthday party for the building and we had a dunking booth where the kids were allowed to take advantage of some of us. They enjoyed it a lot. We also had a sundae bar that was attached to that with birthday cake. Just an afternoon of fun for kids, which they enjoyed. We had a service project day where we invited people in from the community. Kids say to us I want to volunteer but I don’t know where, so we had 22 organizations come in that take young people as volunteers and the kids were allowed to talk to those people at the fair type situation. They enjoyed that. And they also started doing service work, which added to their pride. We had a day last year for the first time where we tell all those things that we beat kids to death with on the first day of school and put that all on one day that week called the 10<sup>th</sup> day. On that day we did conflict resolution, we did the code of conduct, we had a motivational speaker, we had teachers work on connections with kids, and overall got the year started very well. We tried to think up some things each year that will perpetuate what has gone on. And even to playing excerpts from Harry Potter’s movie, some of Dumbledore’s quotes, “It’s not your ability, but it’s the choices you make”, and things like that that kids are familiar with. I think we used Terminator I, where that character said, where it’s too violent, “We’re not going to make it, are we?” as a motivator for kids to be more considerate of others. Those kinds of things impressed the kids. Little things like that seemed to go a long way.

**Question 10: If you could change any aspect of middle-level teacher preparation in Pennsylvania, what would your recommendation be?**

I think the hardest thing is for the teacher to be aware of kids. I think the best example is two interviews that I had. One of the teachers has been teaching for five years. The other teacher is brand new. So when I went through the interview, one of the things that I ask them to do was to translate three paragraphs into French. The three paragraphs were from their own philosophies. And then they were to read them into a tape recorder. The teacher who had been teaching for five years, when she read them into the tape recorder, gave her name and stated facts about her, first, and said what she's going to do, and then read the three paragraphs that she had translated, and then finished and signed off by saying her name very formally. The teacher who was new, just read the three paragraphs, and that's what I think I would add. New teachers need to learn the details that will make them successful, but are not their subject matter. The details at the middle-level are the things that the kids need, how do you connect with kids? If you go in the classroom with the least bit of being unprepared, the kids know it. And they take advantage of it. And you are less effective as a teacher. So whatever we can do when instructing people to see that. But even when we observe we don't see that, it just happens. When I was interviewing the two candidates, I asked the teachers what they would do if I came into their classroom? What would I see? The teacher who was experienced said that what you would see is when the students come and they pick up their folders. They would be laid out for them on the first day when they came into the room. On the first date the rules would be on the front of them and during the year their assignments would be returned in them to save me passing them out while I do my chores. When the new teacher was getting ready to teach they didn't have any of those organizational things in place. So I think a good course by Harry Wong would be in order to teach teachers these preparations.

**Question 11: What aspects of your own background and professional development and training brought you to a middle school career?**

I think I came back to middle school because I like the kids at this age level and some people say that you can have the most effect on kids at this age, probably because they're not hardened. I really don't believe that. I think ninth grade is the best place to do that. But I think that this level the student is open to learning and has fun and can have fun while you're learning. It's a place where a lot of interaction. It's a place where the principal isn't a nasty old guy but a young guy, not like you find at other levels, or the charismatic leader that you need to have, or they have on the flagship at other levels. I can enjoy the kids and the kids can enjoy me, not only for the sake of getting along, but for the sake of guiding them, taking advantage of the relationship to help them grow.



**Interview with Principal B  
Eichhorn Award Winner, 1998 – 1999**

**July 30, 2003**

**Question one: Please discuss your process for hiring new staff here at the middle school.**

At District B I am blessed to have a group of administrators called supervisors. They are folks who are content area specialists. They are in charge of 6 through 12<sup>th</sup>. They are a big part of the process. How I have operated is that they become a first level screening. We have certain criteria: 3.0, and the other kinds of things that most districts have. They go through and screen people to create a candidate pool. The better supervisors sort of always have a pool of candidates that are ready. They are out there and they know whom to call in right away. So they are the screeners and they get the people together. With the help of human resources we set up the interviews. We'd do initial half hour interviews with basic questions about background, teaching and strategy questions, child developmental questions, just to get a feel for the candidate. From that we identify however many we feel comfortable and we have them come in and teach a sample lesson for the kids. From there we make a recommendation to the human resource department. That's how a candidate is chosen. So then the board has all their stuff and goes through those different kinds of legal things.

**Question two: Do you ask any questions during the interview process that specifically relate to the essential elements of an effective middle school?**

Probably not in that format, but more around the developmental understanding of students. And we get to that by asking instructionally, what does that mean? So how do you become an effective middle-level educator? We ask questions about teaming to get to an understanding of what teaming is and how they would fit into that. Those kinds of things. But we don't ask the specific list of 10 elements or things like that. Other times, a lot of our candidates are experienced at middle-level so we might get into that a little bit. Asking what their experiences are and what they have done? Do you feel comfortable? Why has it worked and those kinds of things.

**Question three: Describe the types of preparation or experience for middle school teaching that you are looking for as you interview candidates for teaching positions here.**

It's interesting in our system, I have the fortune, as I mentioned of having supervisors. They worry about the content, because that's their area of expertise. So I can more focus on developmental understanding, strategies that are effective for middle-level, designing a lesson that's effective for middle-levels students, and also, I look for qualities that will make them a good team member. So that's what I focus on. But the content, the other person takes care of, even though if I saw something that really sticks out like the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1820 or something I would probably pick up on that, and notice that we really have to worry about this person.

**Question four: Do you generally find that elementary certified or secondary certified candidates are more prepared to teach in a middle school program?**

Well, I don't know if there is a big difference. I've always had a theory in my career that good teachers can teach. I don't know if the certificate really matters that much. Probably some of my better middle-level teachers are secondary certified, but that doesn't mean my elementary group are bad. In our building seventh and eighth grade are secondary certified and six grade is elementary certified. That was a commitment they made when they started the schools. But I believe that not every elementary teacher can teach at middle-level. Not every secondary certified person can teach middle-level. Somebody who can teach at middle-level, it doesn't really matter what their certificate says. That's been my experience. Good teachers can teach middle-level kids.

**Question 5: In your opinion, what do you believe are the key characteristics in a teacher candidate, which predict their success at middle-level?**

A true desire to be with these kids. I really believe that if you don't want to be around 12 and 13-year-old kids and 14-year-old kids, it will get to you. And also the pedagogy that allows you to develop lessons that are appropriate for those kids. Obviously you have to have a background knowledge, those are givens. But what makes the difference for a good middle-level teacher is being able to relate that how of teaching to the kids they're teaching. How they design their lessons, their planning, the energy, and effort, creativity too so I think that's what the key characteristics are.

**Questions 6: Describe your mentoring program for new teachers.**

Well, we have the district and state mandated induction program. I think we have developed here an informal mentoring program. It's not formal. I couldn't give it to you on a sheet of paper. I think it's because of the community we've built for teams. If I were a new teacher, I would want to work on a team. You just walk in with your eyes so wide open, go through a district program for two days and they show you all this stuff and that's good. But when it really comes down to being in the classroom with kids, it's nice having three people around you that have some experience, and know that their success depends on your success, so therefore they work together. So here we do a two-pronged approach. If I hire two teachers teaching literature in sixth grade this year, a teacher from another grade level is going to mentor in terms of the literature but yet that team will also be mentoring. That mentoring is daily with team planning and all so that's how we do it.

**Questions 7: Does your school provide any specific professional development training related to middle-level teaching for new and veteran teachers?**

Yes, we cycle through that. It depends on how the plan is developed for staff development for the district. As the voice in the wilderness sometimes I need to be the one that promotes that. The secondary supervisors are good people, but their focus is science or math and they understand that there is this middle-level thing, but their focus is science and math. So, I think that the administration here needs to be the group that does that, so we do it in a lot of different

ways. I'm always getting arguments out because we have tried study groups at different times, had different speakers come in, I've had different content types of training that I feel would be appropriate for middle-level content enhancement for the staff, it's just a good planning. There's a mechanism from the University of Kansas that fits so well at middle-level. That is another way to approach it, just having discussions periodically about middle-level kids, what they are about, and those kinds of things. Just keeping it on their minds and reminding them that this is a different place with different kids and therefore we need to do at the way it needs to be done.

**Question 8: When your school received the Eichhorn Award what were the key elements within your school program, which you believe helped to earn you this recognition?**

I just think the structure. We had it all for middle-level. When you talk about the effective components, I think as you go down that list, I think we'd demonstrated all of those to a high degree of excellence. The strong ones though were the structure, but beyond that the attitude of the people and some other things that we have tried to do in terms of our culture: a community of care, communication, and cooperation. Programs like LEEP, the leadership development program that we have. So those kinds of things and our outreach into the community. (When you say the structure?) Teams! And then connecting the non-team areas. We've gotten into thematic units, taking phys ed or world language and making them the center of the hub. Usually it goes the other way around, where the team is the center and the other folks join in. So we have tried to redistribute that therefore making those subject areas and content areas more important in terms of the whole school. So I think that's very important too, just the connections that are made.

**Question 9: Having been recognized as an excellent middle school what programs does your school have in place in order to sustain this excellence?**

We have our dream team, which is a committee of students, parents, teachers, and administrators that dream. That's the main reason it's called that. But each year we choose a set of objectives, one climate objective and one academic objective, and figure out ways as a team to infuse that into our school. Some studies noticed that same organization, which is always a middle-level topic, so that some teachers and parents have to get together and develop some programming around that. In terms of climate we have implemented the March madness program, which is a month of activity where everybody just does things. A whole variety, whatever people are interested in. So those are just some ideas. Every year we look at its fresh and try to come up with new ideas. We maintain some of the old ideas; yet try to keep moving in new directions. The dream team is a big part of that.

I think as a community, we are always looking for ways to do things better. The staff I have, I am very fortunate, because they really believe that. They are always looking for how to do things in a better way. They are always coming up with new ideas. So there's that culture I think. It's been promoted over time where, if it's a good idea for kids and if it fits the philosophy, I'd be very disappointed if you ask my staff, "If you want something to happen, what's the criteria?" They'd say, "If it's good for kids." Once you convince somebody of that, generally, then we do it. If it works, that's good, and if it doesn't that's OK. But usually it's good. Usually it works.

**Question 10: If you could change any aspect of the middle-level teacher preparation in Pennsylvania, what would your recommendation be?**

Teacher preparation? Hmm. I wonder how much of their time? First of all it's not a category unto itself, middle-level. It's either elementary or secondary as your question indicates. And I know there's talk in the state about having a middle-level certification and I don't know how that will pan out or what it will look like, because I get nervous when the state gets involved in things. So if someone really wanted to be a middle-level teacher how much of their time is spent at that level getting ready for it, how much is focused on that? How much of their training in terms of planning, lesson planning, instructional strategy, is focused on middle-level kids? I think you would find that different schools have different levels of that. So I think making sure that there's some standardization across schools where some minimum standards to use. It turns out you and I have to follow up a lot! So what are the standards? Can we list the standards for this? Maybe setting some standards would be appropriate. I'm sure that there's a list out there. It would sort of say what they are. Are we implementing them becomes the question. So I think it's making sure that if somebody is going to teach at this level they really want to be there. So how do you do that? Have them spend more time with those kids so they can make sure that's where you want to be.

**Question 11: How has your middle school built and sustained a culture of excellence?**

I think getting back to the dream team, involving our community. We have large community involvement. Getting the message out there all the time. I am always going to things. I've come to realize as a middle-level educator that one of my jobs is to spread the word. I know what we're about, I know what we're dealing with, but every year 250 new families come into our school and they don't know. So therefore, delivering the message, looking for ways to get the message across, and having my staff deliver the same message, what we're about and where we're going, so we filter that through the system. So everybody's sort of on the same page. We know what the expectations are; we know where we're going and where we want to be. I think we sustain it through that. Just maintaining, informing, and communicating. I hope every family, and every child in my school would be able to tell you that Middle School B is a school built on carrying communication and cooperation. That's the District B spirit. I'd be disappointed if they couldn't because they hear it every day, all the time. It's what we believe. It's what we base everything on. So therefore we perpetuate it just by maintaining at, and not letting it get stale.

**Question 12: Would you describe your own path into middle-level education, leading to your principalship?**

I started as a middle-level educator back in 1972 at a middle school in XXX. It was a popular trend to name all schools with 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade the "middle school". We did some teaming, not a lot, but I really enjoyed the age group. I can remember I had been teaching two or three years and the assistant superintendent came to me and said, "B, it's time for you to move to the major leagues." I said, "What you mean?" Well he said we need a physics teacher at the high school and you're it. It didn't hit me then. But it stuck with me, obviously. His mentality was

that this was the big time. You've been in the minors for all these years and now are going to make the big leagues. I got to the high school and I enjoyed my high school time, but it was OK. We are teaching physics and all that. I moved into administration in my sixth year of education. I was an assistant at a 9-10 building. But it was a tough district and we had a structure. I was an assistant at a high school for a while, and then I moved to XXX, as the high school assistant with a promise that I would move to the middle school in a year. The middle school that I went into was really a junior high. I went to a conference with the guidance counselor and sat there with Dr. Eichhorn, Dr. Furman, and all those guys, and they're sitting there talking about middle school stuff. And the counselor and I just kept looking at each other. This makes so much sense. Why aren't we doing this? Why aren't we doing this? And so we decided to try it. We made some mistakes. We got permission, surprisingly, from the superintendent, because the assistant had been the principal at the middle school. He believed that he had a great school. And he did. We were just going to make it better. So we went through the process. It was amazing how the staff bought into it. How the family's bought into it. And it just worked so well for middle-level kids. It just made sense to me. As our reflect back on that, I was tired of being a high school assistant principal dealing with 17-year-old ninth graders who I knew weren't going to make it. So therefore I realized, all the energy I put into this child and they're not going to graduate. Sure, there are exceptions, but most of the twenty year olds don't graduate from high school - especially in the communities where I was working. So I said there's got to be a better place to start this and obviously I came to middle-level. And all the things I started reading about and began practicing, just made sense. And then I moved here and they hired me here to develop middle-level practices here. The rest is history. If you understand who the kids are and this structure, and attitude and philosophy, not just structure, it just makes so much sense. It was that vivid to me. As we are sitting here talking, that's my lament at leaving to go to the University. Leaving a group of kids and that are real special and do some really neat things that make you smile every day, and a group of teachers that are dedicated to them, watching the energy, what they put into it and their results because of that - I'm going to miss that. No doubt about it. Because it's special.

**Interview with Principal C**  
**Eichhorn Award Winner, 1999 – 2000**  
**Blue Ribbon Award Winner, 2001 – 2002**

**July 31, 2003**

**Question 1: Discuss your process for hiring new staff members at the middle school.**

That's a real easy question. We just got done interviewing for a history teacher. Part of the process is that we need current information as all schools do. We have a cut off of 3.25 average from college as far as graduation is concerned for a cumulative average and they must have at least a 3.0 in their major. In addition to that we will accept and look at credentials where they have a D or two their first year but beyond that, in their sophomore, junior and senior year we would expect us see A's and B's and nothing else. We do that simply because some kids have trouble getting started and we take that into consideration. That's our first screening issue. Our next issue is we ask them to write us a letter regarding philosophy and why they would want to teach in a middle school, specifically that is what I am asking them for when I am hiring. I use that as another criteria and I read through it. It depends on how that hits me, their interest and what they would intend to do here as far as being a professional, and why they would want to come here. We give them a standard piece of information that they are to relate to concerning our school. It's like a paragraph acknowledging the fact that we are in award-winning school, recognized both by the state with PMSA and at the national level through the Department of Education. That's another criteria. Then the third criteria is when they come in to be observed. We always have at least one grade level representative from wherever they are going to be or at least one representative from our life skills program if they're going to be in the arts. Usually because of the way we're structured we have liaisons and leaders in each curricular area and I ask them to be present also. So for example just this month when we were interviewing for a social studies teacher we had the building social studies leader as well as the district social studies coordinator there, as well as one teacher from the team (it was open to all teachers), as well as me and usually one other principal either elementary or high school. Then we actually have a rating form and I'll provide that for you. It lists all different kinds of questions that we are looking for responses to. We do a lot of inquiry to see if they're familiar with multiple intelligences, brain-based learning, issues as far as what is good teaching, we use Bloom's taxonomy to see if they understand what that is all about, not just tell us they know it but have a working understanding of it, and we ask them specific areas for them to expound upon for example what would you do with this or what would you do with that. We are also interested in their theories and understanding of how do you handle middle-level children, because they are a breed on to themselves. We also look for people who have had middle school student teaching experience. Those are our criteria. Then we ask them to teach a lesson. The lesson is ten to fifteen minutes long. We interview for an hour. They actually develop a whole lesson for us but that doesn't mean they teach the whole lesson for us. We will stop them and they know that when we start. They will teach for fifteen minutes or so and then we will come back to the interview but it just gives us a frame of reference, for example how prepared they are and believe me that's a very good weeding out process. Some people just don't do well with that. It's a one shot deal. We don't bring them back in if we're not satisfied. That's how we do it in a nutshell.

**Question 2: Do you ask any interview questions specifically related to the essential elements of a middle school?**

Absolutely! First of all we ask them to describe a middle school child. Number two, we ask them to explain to us how they understand learning and teaching takes place, how does learning take place, how does memory occur, specific to middle-level children. Third we ask them about the kinds of things we're going to see as far as instruction is concerned. We are in a block schedule; in fact we are in an intensive flexible block schedule. That means that we are in a six-day cycle, with four block classes each day. Each block is 75 minutes. And the time of day that you have each class or each block rotates according to the day in the cycle. What this does is that you only have each core class every other day, it's for 75 minutes, and it's never at the same time except for once during each cycle. We'd do that because what we know is that some kids learn better in the morning and some kids learn better in the afternoon. Some kids don't turn their brains on until after nine clock in the morning, some kids until after lunch. But what we do know from the research is that most kids are morning learners. What we are asking our candidate is how do they look at that, how are they going to respond to that? You can't stand and deliver for 75 minutes. We want to look at do they understand how to put three to five different activities together within that block, all focusing on whatever the objective is for that lesson. We also do a lot of big long-term units where everybody on team is involved, it's interdisciplinary. We're looking at how they organize that information. We're looking at how they would structure that. How do they think on their feet is another thing we're looking for. They should know something about the school before they come in. That's the reason we ask those questions. And if they don't know, they don't get hired. It's that simple. It's an interesting process, and it's one that we have developed over the years. When Dr. Eichhorn was here, he began developing this schematic of the progressive interview process, where we screen, and then they interview, and when they pass our interview, they go on to a higher level interview that involves just me and the superintendent where we ask different interview questions. By the time we hire we pretty much know what we're going to get. Competition is tight. We had 121 applications for our social studies position. With so many applications I reviewed and I picked 10 people out of that 121 to screen, and then we met as a team and decided out of that 10 which three we were going to interview. That's how we do it; it's very competitive.

**Question three: Describe the types of preparation or experience for middle school teaching that you're looking for as you interview candidates for teaching position in your middle school.**

We want people again that understand multiple intelligences, brain-based learning, how does the brain operate and how does the mind operate, because that's all essential to the teaching process. The other thing that we want to know is do they understand Bloom's taxonomy. In addition to that, do they have a real good understanding of what good teaching techniques are? We have a training program that we've put every teacher through.

**Question 4: Do you generally find that elementary certified or secondary certified candidates are more prepared to teach in a middle school program?**

Do I have to answer that since “No Child Left Behind” really screwed us up? What we have done in the past is we have looked for a balance between elementary and secondary. I have a real strong bias, because I am a sand box engineer by trade; I am elementary certified. I think people who are trained that way, elementary, understand a broader dynamic of how disciplines work together. That’s not to say that secondary people are second-class citizens, but they are more highly focused and have a narrower viewpoint as far as curricular issues are concerned. They don’t always understand or want to understand why those two things are important, why you want to do cooperative and collaborative projects. When you talk together collaboratively and plan to work together in a cooperative environment, how you do that? How does math interrelate with English? Well it does. We know it does. We look at those kinds of dynamics and we are looking at how elementary people can help secondary people. Now the opposite is true also, because when you are looking at a specific focus, especially with mathematics, now with new social studies standards, we rely on those people to help the elementary people because they have a shallower knowledge base and because the secondary people have a deeper knowledge base. So I think they tend to compliment each other. However, “No Child Left Behind” has changed all that. I just moved two elementary people out of 7th grade and down to 6th grade because of their certification. And I moved two people from sixth grade who had secondary certification up to his seventh grade so I didn’t have to lose any one but I did have to move people around and that did not make them happy. So my new social studies person had to be secondary certified. Before I would have looked at both elementary and secondary certified people to fill that position. I still think we can have that balance when we talk together as far as curricular issues are concerned. But our balanced is skewed now. The balance used to be about 50/50, but now I am looking at about 70/30 with 70 percent being secondary certified. I used to be a real advocate of that balance, but the real question and we don’t seem to be getting anywhere, is why isn’t there a middle-level certificate for us specifically? We are a unique crossover; we are a unique blend as far as education is concern. Why the state doesn’t recognize that or why the colleges aren’t doing something about it, is something I will never understand. However, I just finished teaching two courses for Susquehanna University this summer and they were both focused on current trends and issues in middle-level education and inclusion and classroom management at middle-level. It’s part of their certification and training program for people who want to come back to teaching. I had a ball. I just loved it.

**Question 5: In your opinion, what you believe are the key characteristics in a teaching candidate, which predict their success as a middle-level teacher?**

One of the things that I look for in the interview process is I want someone to tell me that they don’t know the answer to the question. I don’t know, but I’ll find out. I like that response. I don’t want anybody to try and snow me in an interview. I’m not trying to be smug but at this point in my life and at this point in the interview process there’s not too much I don’t know about middle-level education and they have a limited experience. So don’t try to snow me. Tell me you don’t know, we’ll teach you, we’ll train you, if you pass our interview process and if we want you, we’ll train you absolutely positively. I want people to be able to discuss questions intelligently, stay focused on the question and the points that they want to make, and I expect



them to be articulate and to be able to explain things verbally, because that's the mark of a good teacher. If you can take a question that's asked of you, explore it, and explain everything that the person wants, that to me is a good teacher. I will always be a teacher. I look at what I would want to do as a teacher in the classroom and see if this person has the same desire and potential that I know all the other teachers in this building have. That's very, very well known in this building. This building is very unique in this district because people want to come here to teach. That's a feather in our cap. It's known as a very progressive school. There's no fear of failure here. If it doesn't work, we'll look at it, and decide why it didn't work. But because it didn't work doesn't mean that the person is a bad teacher, it just means it didn't work. It means that A, we have to do some self-analysis or B, we have to try and make it better and the teachers know that. It's a healthy climate. Now that doesn't mean that if the teacher goofs around that they don't get in trouble.

**Question 6: Describe your mentoring program for new teachers at the middle school.**

Our new teachers go through a three-year mentoring program, that's of course tied into their gaining permanent certification and tenure. We do a number of things. First of all each new teacher has a mentor for the first year, and the mentor and I sit down at the end of the year with the teacher and we discuss everything the teacher's been through. There's a program that they go through. All new teachers meet with either me or the superintendent or sometimes both of us at least once a month during the entire school year. We talk about general issues, classroom management, even things that they should know about budgetary needs. It's always focused on what's coming up. During year two the mentor is no longer paid. The second year the teacher is on their own but I will go and observe them at least once a month. It's not a formal observation; it's an informal observation. I tell them when I'm coming in to make a formal observation. There will be three of those in the second year. Then at the beginning of the third year they will have one observation each semester. All long with that we put all of our teachers through and constantly update, APL training. APL is just the initials, but what it does is it let's everybody know that they're teaching basically the same way. I'm not talking about robot teaching. I'm talking about a common understanding of what is a good way to approach education or good teaching strategies. And they're given those teaching strategies and taught them in a workshop environment with people coming in. During the first year they do a whole week, spread out over the whole year, where they spend whole days where we hire substitutes and those new teachers or people who are being retrained on updates, are freed up and then they go through the training period. It's cyclic. It's wonderful because when it's all said and done, every teacher in this building knows that when I walk in the classroom to do an observation, they know exactly what I'm looking for. There is a format that's followed. I'm looking for bell ringers, are the objective statements on the board where kids can see them, are there between three and five sub lessons or activities going on in the lesson, what's going on with closure, how are they structuring the work as far as the kids are concerned with homework, what are their expectations, what are they doing with collaborative kinds of things with other teachers, they can show me that, but everybody's on the same page. It's a great way to run the ship. It makes it really easy to steer.

**Question 7: Does your school provide any specifics staff development training related to middle-level teaching for new and veteran teachers?**

(That sounds like what you already described, the APL training.) Yes we do the APL training as I've said. But one other thing that this district does is they send people out to workshops. That's one thing that this district does do. They will pay for that. I have a large budget for this. As principal of course I have the authority to say yea or nea and I tend to look at, what are middle-level activities and that's where I allow people to go. The other thing that we do, is we have a very unique structure as far as leadership is concerned. Our school has instructional leaders and liaisons. Those are the people that I meet with every two weeks and we sit down and say what's going on? What's happening in science, what's happening in social studies? And that's so that the whole school hears what 8<sup>th</sup> grade is doing and what 6<sup>th</sup> grade is doing, so that there is a good, constant form of communication. The other thing that I expect them to do, because they are instructional leaders, is I expect them to be leaders and work with their individual department people. We have a unique program where we have one half hour each morning before the kids come and when there's a need or we are doing a big collaborative thing, they'll all get together. That's part of the whole school day. We've moved our starting time back. Kids don't start class until 8:24. We looked at the research and that's just about the time that middle school kids are starting to turn the switches on. There are some schools that start at 7:40 and that's too early. They just aren't awake yet, at middle school. And we found that out by ourselves and by trial and error.

**Question 8: When your school received, and you can speak to either the Eichhorn or Blue Ribbon award, what do you think were the key elements within your middle school program, which earned you that recognition?**

I'll speak to the national award first. They gave us a printout of our scores, listing what things were exceptional, what things were very good, and what things were adequate. If you get less than adequate, you don't get considered. The things that were identified to us as exceptional after they spent three days here were the thing as relating to our teacher mentoring program and the fact that we were very much a child based school, not subject matter. Curriculum is extremely important to us and we look at our test scores, and we score very, very well, for our size district. We are the number two school in the state as far as PSSA scores are concerned. We just finished spending ten thousand dollars in bonus money that the state gave us because of our scores. The teacher mentoring, our scores over a sustained period of time, and the fact that we had the intensive flexible block schedule and that it was interwoven into what kids do best, the professional development time in the morning and not teaching kids until it was best for them, and the other thing was our involvement. We have a very active PTA. We have gone from a very small group of five or six people to group of 80 people very actively involved in the school. It is an on-going process. They raise money and give every teacher 300 dollars to spend. When we need something special we just go to them and they help us to get those kinds of programs together. So PTA is another thing that I think we can say that they focused on. The other thing why is the general school climate. The kids feel safe here. And one of the things that they do is they go out and interviewed the parents and they interview kids. They stopped kids in the hall. They asked them, do you feel safe here? We do an exit interview and they looked at these interviews with seniors every year. One of the questions in the interview is tell us about

one of your most memorable experiences of the District C. Invariably kids will say middle school. So that's pretty neat.

**Question 9: Having been recognized as an excellent middle school, what programs does your school have in place to sustain the excellence?**

That's a good question. I think that the first thing that a good middle school principal has to do is be a vocal leader. They have to be the bandleader. They have to get out there and say to everybody, "we are a good school and we have to maintain this excellence". I think all good middle school principals should be knowledgeable about what's going on as far as research is concerned, should be knowledgeable about what good teaching strategies are, and be able to make sure that their staff understands where the school is going as far as goals are concerned, especially now with "No Child Left Behind." We changed our focus from this is a bunch of bologna to okay, what are we going to do with this. Actually, if you think about the concept of leaving no child behind, it is an admirable concept. Anybody who's an educator should never argue with that concept. However, with the way the government is telling us what will happen to us if we don't achieve these wonderful standards that they have established for us, that's something that annoys me and is very annoying to teachers. But what we have done is we've said OK, this is where we are, we're educators, the government has said that this is where we should be. I can't find fault with the premise. I can find fault with the heavy-handedness but not the premise, so let's look at it and say what we're going to do about it? So I think that's part of the answer to your question. The other part is that I have to be sure that I'm listening to what is going on in my school. That's a two-way communication. I have to listen to the teachers and the teachers have to listen to me. I think that helps to keep the quality of teaching high. Teachers feel like when they have a question or concern somebody will listen to them, somebody will do something about it, or at least attempt it. You can't solve everybody's problems. So communication is one way we do that. The APL training and other things we do, with strong support for workshops, and they have even begun to look at how we can bring things closer with other districts. We have an open door policy and since I have been principal here, we have had 31 different schools come and visit us. We have done over 40 presentations at the state and regional level. We have a really strong transition program working with kids coming into middle school and kids going into high school and we include parents. We do a whole night with sixth grade parents, no kids. They can mail us a whole lot of questions and it's a whole lot of fun. The other thing is that we provide a good transition program to the high school. Kids coming in here are scared and kids going out to the high school are too. So those types of things, I think, provide a strong program. As far as the teachers are concerned, they know that we are child based. They know that if it's good for kids, we'd do it. We live by that motto. I expect the teachers to live by it and they expect me to live by it. I have high expectations for our teachers. The teachers also have high expectations for me and my assistant. So in summary it's good communication back and forth, good programs of support, and the understanding that the teachers know that they're in a school that really cares about kids, a child centered school.

**Question 10: If you could change any aspect of middle-level teacher preparation in Pennsylvania, what would your recommendation be?**

My recommendation, loud and clear, middle-level teaching deserves and should have focus on middle-level philosophy. That's one thing that we see a lot in our interviewees, they don't understand what middle-level is all about. So, colleges and universities need to look at how do we prepare kids, just like there's an elementary field of study, and a secondary field of study, there should be a middle-level field of study. What I would like to see is this. I think that middle-level teachers should be given a broad level perspective to all the curricular areas in their experience in freshman and sophomore years so that they have an understanding of all aspects of the curriculum. Then within that experience in the junior and senior year, they should be encouraged first of all to go out and visit schools and then getting some information and background training as far as middle-level experience is concerned. I think you could focus on language arts, which would entitle a person to teach reading and English, ties social studies maybe in with that because that a high incidence of language arts and reading because of social studies content. I think that science and math could be tied together so that they have a broader base to operate from. Just like in elementary, we're trained to cross the entire spectrum, well maybe narrow that spectrum down to two or three topics where they could get certified. Or maybe they could crossover and do three areas like science, math, and social studies, but give them some options. They also need to understand that a grade 6 child is different than at grade 8. So they also need to understand that there's a whole child psychology background there is far as age is concerned. They have to understand "Transescents". What a great word. But when I say that word in interviews kids have no idea what it is. So their background and their training has to be different than in elementary. It has to be more focused and more narrow, but it doesn't have to be as narrow as it does for secondary. I see that there's a way to do that, I'm talking globally now, and I saw that especially this summer when I taught those two classes. Teacher interviews, we have to teach kids how to interview. They need to do that across the entire educational experience, whether its elementary, middle, or secondary but colleges don't do that. They prepared them, especially secondary, with good depth of knowledge, most of them but they don't know how to interview. They don't know how to answer questions. They don't know how go ahead of the interview and find out as much information about the school district so that it appears that they are knowledgeable and interested. That has always struck me. Kids that will do that and go online and say in the interview, we have looked at your school, and have questions specific to me, see those are important things. Some do it, but it's almost an innate thing with them. It's not something they are all taught to do. Some are just smarter about interviewing.

**Question 11: How has your school sustained or built a culture of excellence?**

Well, I can tell you how that started. That goes back to XXX being here as our superintendent. When he came here he was given a directive coming from District X that he was not here to create a new super middle school. He was here to be our superintendent. But those of us who knew what we had here thought this was a pretty stupid idea. This building had been built as a middle school but it was still a junior high school in a middle school building. But we had a cadre of people who had been specially trained. We had five reading specialist in the building and when XXX came here, that combined with that group began to turn things around. When all

those things came together it was kind of a melding of philosophies, and the philosophy began to turn around to what is it we need to do to make this an outstanding school? We ended up partnering with Susquehanna University and they hired XXX to teach courses on middle-level and they ended up paying him separately from his job as superintendent of the school, but he was really teaching those courses to the staff members at the school. When all this came together I think that's when we realized that we had a unique opportunity. There was a feeling amongst the faculty, not that everyone agreed; some just fell by the wayside, because they couldn't adjust to that middle-level concept. But the faculty began to understand that the brain is different in a 7<sup>th</sup> grader than an 8<sup>th</sup> grader and you must teach them differently. And that 6<sup>th</sup> graders are still elementary. So I think overall there was the uniqueness of time, place, and circumstance, that brought all those things together and started to focus our thinking, and I'm talking about all of the faculty now, on how do we become a school of excellence? That initial start and has made it very easy for me to sustain that. And we have gone beyond that but it's not because of any one person. It's because this faculty has matured and matriculated through that whole process. I can think about it and I can see it from 1980 to 23 years later where we are now. We've gone through a significant metamorphosis. But it takes time. Process and change takes time. When you look at the criteria for what makes a good middle school, and it's right there in the PMSA guidelines, you have to work each one of those steps. You don't just automatically assume that you're going to have it or that they're going to occur. It takes a lot of work. It took us a lot of work. Seven years, five applications for that, two applications for the blue ribbon, once in 1999 and then again in 2001, but it wasn't just me, it was everybody. We took it back, we said here's what they say we need to do now, how are we going to improve? And this is a middle-aged faculty so they're still a lot of the people around who remembered XXX. As that changes I don't know what we're going to do. I hope it sustains itself. We teach teachers here to be good middle-level teachers. We work at it. There's a healthy environment, but anybody could come in here and change that. But I hope that doesn't. I'm hoping that the history of sustained, child centered beliefs, and a school of excellence will maintain itself. I hope it's self-replicating.

**Question 12: Describe your own path into middle-level education leading to your principalship.**

First of all I'm elementary certified. I've never taught elementary. It sounds a little bit bizarre but I graduated elementary but I had a reading problem up through high school. Then a person by the name of Dr. Selzer developed an interest in me during my freshman year of college. He to this day can tell you why, but I was truly a very fortunate and lucky individual. He was the teacher of elementary reading and I had him the second semester of my freshman year. He quickly realized that I had a reading problem. He taught me how to study, he taught me how to speed read, he taught me how to write, and I went back in this summer and took three of the D courses over again and got three A's. All the sudden I went from being on academic probation to having a 3.25 grade point average and it stayed up there after that. I was a late bloomer and I had a reading problem, but because of that reading problem, I have always been interested in kids with reading problems. My experience in education has always been at secondary. I have been involved with teaching kids how to read who are in high school. I also worked at Bloomsburg State University in their reading clinic teaching kids how to read and that was what always helped me to get my jobs. Not my background but my hours in the clinic. Then I came here and I've been here for 27 years. I was originally a reading specialist and reading

coordinator for the district. I went from there to eight years ago I got a call from the superintendent of school while I was on vacation in the Chesapeake Bay in August, and the school the principal and so forth had left for other jobs, and they insisted that I come up and talk with them in their office. So I came up from the Chesapeake Bay and walked into the office with a number of other people and they told me that they had looked at my credentials and so forth and they wanted me to help XXX run the building and they wanted me to be in charge of hiring a new principal and run the committee. And they said that I would have time to do it because they were going to give me release time from teaching. They said you're going to do this halftime and you're going to teach half time. We will hire a halftime teacher to relieve you. I said OK and thought that this would be fun for a little bit. By the end of the first semester we haven't found anybody and XXX had retired. Everyone agreed that we did not have the right candidate yet. Plus it was too much for me doing both jobs half time, so I said to them, "this is too much." I'm going back to teaching full time or hire me to do this full time. So that was what they did, they hired me full time for the rest of the year as the administrator and hired someone to replace me as the teacher. Now we knew we had to be really serious about looking for someone. Well long story short after all the searching we decided that I was the person for the job and I've been here as the principal ever since.

**Question 1: Please discuss your process for hiring new staff members at the middle school.**

We have a district comprehensive hiring manual that we follow. It's derived from a whole bunch of different sources. I contributed significantly to it. But the process is that. (Points to materials in office.) I end up with a box of English applications that I do and I actually enjoy doing the paper screening of the candidates and depending upon my time frame I may even, after the paper screening, do a phone interview in the initial screening interview. I normally try for a dozen for every full-time position and we are lucky to get a lot of applications at a school like this, to be able to screen out all but a dozen candidates. I really like to interview about a dozen people for every full-time position that we have here. We'd do an initial interview that I interview with either a team leader or a department coordinator or sometimes both, and we together come up with two or maybe three finalists that we then bring back to have a demonstration lesson taught to us. We do pretty well. I hire almost exclusively folks that have had middle school experience. I am very biased. If you have had any even reasonably successful middle school experience in virtually any other school, I'm going to get you. I'm not necessarily liked by many of the other principals sometimes in central Pennsylvania, because I take some of their best teachers and bring them here; because lots of folks want to be in District D It's much more than just we're a blue ribbons school. A lot of folks want to be in the community. A lot of folks want to be in the school system. I am the benefactor of that kind of reputation. But I hire almost exclusively people with experience for my full time positions. If you walk up and down the hallways of Middle School D, there is almost 75 staff and I have hired, in the last six years, 48 of them. It's growth. We have had huge growth. We have also had a number of retirements and young folks you know don't stay anywhere.

**Question 2: Do you will ask any interview questions specifically related to the essential elements of an effective middle school?**

Yes we do. One of the questions is, "what is a middle school?" What are the characteristics of an adolescent? So we ask those specifically. The initial interview script we use K-12, is modified specifically for each building level. Boy, I'll tell you what we ask, it's very important for me to understand. One of the questions that we ask is what is the point of middle school? To hear what folks say, that traditional right out of college answer to that question is, "it's a transition", which is not the one I want to here at all! I'm looking for, "it's a tremendous time of change developmentally, socially, and emotionally", that the kids need an immense amount of support, that these folks are willing to do that, invest a tremendous amount of time in these kids. Yeah, we'd pay a tremendous amount of attention to that. In our second interviews we watch for developmentally appropriate strategies being taught in the demonstration lessons. You've got to be teaching them. I act like a really good eighth grader in those demonstration lessons. My assistant is even better! We get a pretty good taste of what a person is going to be like. I think we have been very successful at getting an exceptionally qualified staff in lieu of having specific middle school training, being a specific middle schools certification, which Pennsylvania is still playing around with. I've got to tell you, there is no way you can replace someone who has had eight years of experience working in a middle school environment on a team. That person

coming into an interview at my school is going to have three steps up on anyone else that's going to be sitting out there. Especially if I find out that you've been successful and if the kids like you back at your former district. Really I couldn't ask a whole lot more questions than what is this teacher like from the other folks and reference checks and things like that.

**Question three: Describe the types of preparation or experience for middle school teaching that you are looking for as you interview candidates for a teaching position.**

I can teach you how to teach, but I can't teach you how to care about kids. Don't kid yourself that we can. We were doing some interviewing just this morning for a new position that we've created and we didn't have anybody necessarily specifically with the criteria that we wanted that applied for the position. But it came down to who has the best raw materials. Meaning, who is the person who cares the most about kids, is trainable, teachable, and is willing to do what ever it takes to meet these kids. We chose that person. That became what the primary focus is. That middle school experience is very important but there are a lot of people who come here to interview and never had any middle school experience. But if you don't care about kids, that's number one. We teach kids here at Middle School D. We don't teach a curriculum. We teach kids. And that's from 6 through eight. I have both elementary and secondary trained staff in the building. And I've got to tell you my secondary staff understands it. They know that it's the kid first and the subjects second. So whenever you come, if you are going to be talking about only math in an interview about math, even though that's my degree, you are going to get passed over. You can be the most excellent math teacher in the world, and know all kinds of math, but if you don't care about kids, that's the number one thing that we look for. Everything else flows out around that.

**Question 4: Do you generally find the elementary certified people or the secondary certified candidates to be more qualified and more prepared to teach in the middle school?**

Neither. I don't find either one of them. Regardless of that, elementary certified or secondary certified, the really best here are the ones that didn't fit in either one. They were too caring for a high school environment or too subject concerned for an elementary school with all the patty-cake things going on or they were more academic and they were kind of misfits for both, but fit perfectly with 12-year olds and 13-year olds. So I wouldn't say either one, because I'm looking for someone, just a specific personality, more than I am of a certain certification. I don't find a strength in either one. What are some of the traits of that personality? They are right there on the wall. Folks that come in here better have the characteristics there: you better have a personality that's going to be able to work as the team develops, their interpersonal skills, their efficient use of time, they're committed, they build morale, they accept praise and criticism, they maintain a positive attitude, they're able to stay on task, they welcome challenge, and they celebrate success. But then they need to move to the left (poster). Because every one of my teachers here I expect them to be leaders. The reason that Middle School D is a success is not necessarily pointed at Principal D or my assistant, it's not at all. It's the fact that we were able to successfully develop teacher leaders. Every person that's coming into my building fits the leadership portrait. These things, that they are decisive, optimistic, supportive, competitive, influential, opportunistic, those traits are incredibly important for you if you want to be in this school. Now you might say, how do you get all a whole school of leaders? I do have a whole



school of leaders. But everybody has their opportunity to lead. I have 16 teams. We have a weekly team leaders meeting for one-half hour to an hour. When you take away that 16, probably another 40 folks are leading in some project or something throughout the building like that. I talked to teachers all the time about not being over committed and not being the ones that are always in charge or on these things. We share responsibility here pretty dog gone well. That's not a nutshell, that's the whole basket. Those are the people that I want to have walking the halls of Middle School D.

**Question 5: In your opinion what do you believe are the key characteristics of a teacher candidate which predict their success as a middle school teacher.**

Compassion, we ask a question, give me three adjectives that would describe yourself. If you give me stable, or words that might be steady, I don't want you. I want somebody who is compassionate, creative, someone who is flexible, someone who is willing to look at themselves, those characteristics that I said. You know what you've got to have decided, that you're willing to take risks. If you don't want to take risks then I really don't want you here. There are plenty of places where you could be successful in education that you don't have to take risks. So God bless you, good luck and have a fine career. But if you don't want to take a couple of risks, don't come here and don't tell me that you're a risk taker if you are something else. Whenever you want to innovate, if you are worried, our new superintendent just said this recently, if you have a choice in life you can do one hundred things and do 99 of them right or 1000 things and 900 of them right, which one would you choose? For crying out loud, I'm choosing doing one thousand things with 900 right. Well, I made 100 errors and those errors could hurt, but I got 800 more things right. I have eight times more things done correctly, and that is that type of person I want. And I do get dumb calls from the parents some times saying what the heck did that teacher do, but you have to be willing I guess sometimes to accept the responsibility for what you did. You have to be sure of yourself enough that you are willing to say I'm sorry and move on.

**Question 6: Describe your mentoring program for new teachers.**

Exhaustive. Once again, when I came here, in 1997, there was nothing for new staff except we had this state induction stuff. But this is the new one. This is the principal's manual for our new induction program. But how this started again no kidding, this was one of those things that imitation is the sincerest form of flattering. When I came in here we had 13 new staff members that came in with me. So we started a new teacher group. We met once a month and we would talk about issues. We would make sure we answered any questions. It actually got to the point where we were teaching demonstration lessons for one another, and doing things like that. At the end of that year, after looking at those folks, and what they went through, I called on the one that you could truly tell had the professional development bent. She was just in here this morning. She just did her principal internship. She says that she remembers the phone call. I told her I needed her to do something and I wanted her to think about this. I said let's develop a new teacher committee and the whole purpose of that is to support the transition of new folks coming in here to make them thoroughly successful. Well she took that goal and started to run with this thing. We ended up having for a couple of years a new teachers support system here that was in addition to the state level induction program. There are all kinds of support meetings and support systems in addition to our mentors. We have done all kinds of staff development.

We train our mentors. We spend days and days training them. We used Danielson's framework. We get all of the new teachers out of class for a day three or four times. We get together to do some professional development activities and about three years ago the district said you've got the picture. So I said let's marry the induction program with what Principal D's middle school is doing and let's put them together so we can have a district wide support system. Really now our induction program is a model for that. It's one of those things that you don't see too much of. If you would talk to the teacher who is the teacher leader of our district's induction program you would hear all the things that we do. It's just absolutely remarkable. The whole goal is to not let anybody fail. We are totally committed. And I don't have to do anything with that anymore. It's great! Let it go!

**Question 8: When your school received the blue ribbon award what were the key elements within your middle school program, which you think earned you this recognition?**

A lot of it is environmental, instructional delivery. Our team environment here is a model. Probably the thing that's good about here and got more recognition here is our pervasive support system for students. We initiated it seven years ago because every school has a safety net. Whether it be your SAP program, whether it be things like special education, or IST, or other state initiatives that you might have. Every school has a safety net. Well, I asked the support people. I got the counselors and all of our support staff together and asked them what is it going to take for us to close the mesh on that safety net? So what we did was to begin to start talking about that with any safety net you still have folks falling through. Well we've wanted as few kids as possible to fall through those cracks. So we have put into one of my 16 teams called our support team, which has a behavior management specialist, the school nurse, and IST teacher, it has our school psychologist and our counselors, my assistant, and I sit on the team and we meet to discuss trends and to discuss kids. The biggest purpose of that team is to go in weekly and support the other 15 teams here at the middle school. They go in and meet with them. It's on a regular calendar. They go in and ask what kids are you struggling with? They do that every week or every six-day cycle. And probably the most powerful thing that they do is at the end of the first, second, and third quarter, we do a thing called thumbs. Thumbs is a real simple process that absolutely any school can implement. What we do is the support team will meet with the team of teachers, and we will just read down the list of the roster, and the teachers are going to give us a thumbs up or a thumbs down for any name that they have noticed significant deviations from expected adolescent behavior, academically, socially, or emotionally. And now all three times a year we have mentioned every kid. From that meeting we mentioned, say, John Smith, and we go back and talk about John Smith. We ask who has contact with him, who knows the parents, is anything going on here? We start with maybe the teacher needs to contact the parents. But then maybe the guidance counselor needs to meet with them or maybe we need to hook them in with some of our remediation programs. That whole concept of closing the net has expanded drastically. I want remediation programs here and you wouldn't think of that here, District D being a high socioeconomic area. Kid's scores are eight-tenths of a standard deviation, so what do they want. Our test scores are fabulous. What happens when your kids are above average though is that there is a whole lot of difference between the average kid in the classroom and a kid who qualifies for special education, a long academic distance. So we've put all kinds of supports in for them. We run after school programs and before school programs. I think that that was perhaps the greatest impact on the evaluator who came to evaluate us more than anything.

**Question 9: Having been recognized as an excellent middle school what kind of programs does your school have in place to sustain the excellence?**

Boy yeah! Last year what we did was we kind of took a rest. We kind of said let's get away from the hustle and bustle and let's just focus clearly on kids. But what our focus was last year was believe it or not team development. We do an awful lot of book readings here. Last year I gave the entire faculty this book, Bill Maxwells', The Seven Essential Qualities of a Team Player. Then it was the team leaders responsibility to come up with discussion questions for each one of the chapters. We would do it through our team leaders meeting and we would do the same questions throughout the year. We would dialogue about what quality is of team members. That's one small thing. We spent an extraordinary amount of effort last year talking about the differentiated classroom. What does that look like? We run web casts here. We do in-house staff development all the time. We don't wait for the district to say this is an in-service day. If we have something that we have to talk about, we create a day special schedule that frees up teachers for an hour and we have seminars during the day to talk about differentiation, or to talk about grading, or to talk about assessments, and whatever it is that would be the topic that we do. Now on reading Good to Great, it talks about the flywheel. Once you get the flywheel going it's fairly easy to just do things. We have the flywheel going. Could we be going faster? I think so, but it's created enough momentum, that we have a whole house full of learners here. They all haven't felt like they have arrived. They keep it going pretty well I think, I hope! I guess we will find valve with the next thing we win. Sustaining excellence is your work and my primary responsibility. If we design a program and it was based on us then it really better be sustainable without us. You know that's our prime job. We should be working ourselves out of the job. I hate to say it. Politics we're always going to have at the job, but we should creating a system within our school, creating teacher leaders and empowering others to make decisions at the most appropriate areas so that they don't have to always wait for me to answer questions. If I'm not doing that then change is not sustainable. It's just limited. More than anything I think that's the thing that's any middle school principal's legacy, to make themselves replaceable, to make the program much more important than the person.

**Question 10: If you could change any aspect of middle-level teacher preparation in Pennsylvania what would your recommendation be?**

I'd change the whole blasted thing. It's nice, I had the opportunity to work at Millersville University, and Penn State, their Harrisburg campus, on doing some middle-level education seminars, but that's all they get right now. Many of the universities are doing a really great job preparing high school teachers and they're doing a real good job of preparing elementary school teachers, but besides maybe a student teaching experience we're not doing a real good job of preparing middle school teachers. I don't know, I am not as opinionated on that we have to have a middle school certification but as far as reshaping the teacher training, my gosh, we've got to have people understand what a middle school is about. We have to have a model and the model has been out there. What we're doing here in District D isn't something that people haven't talked about for a long time. We're just doing some of the things that folks have talked about. And hopefully doing them quite well. So the model's there. We need then the universities and the teacher preparation schools to embrace that model and develop a preparation plan where

most of it would be talking about, ‘what is an adolescent’, ‘what are the problems going on’, ‘what happens to a seventh grader’s brain whenever they all of a sudden turn to seventh grade?’ ‘Why is it that they go to mush?’ ‘Why don’t they remember seventh grade?’ ‘What is it?’ But that’s where in K to 6 certification they aren’t talking about it and actually, in 7 to 12 certification they don’t really talk about it because they’re secondary certification. So we need to at least have the full and vigorous dialogue about what it is and then give folks some real experience. You know that in middle schools across the state, in many schools, it is in name only and that’s our worst enemy. That’s once again why I really do not hire folks right out of college. You want to work at Middle School D, go teach in a middle school somewhere for a while and then when I’ve got an opening, apply! I was talking to a young kid this morning, who had a middle school teaching experience in his practicum - it was a junior high. What he was describing was like a junior high. So he really didn’t understand or have any concept. If he were to walk in here, he would just be blown away, because he wouldn’t know what to do here. Things like calling all the parents.

**Question 11: How has your middle school sustained or built a culture of excellence?**

You can extrapolate from everything I’ve already said that probably the primary reason is the development and confidence in teacher leadership. That may be the single most important component. But I have received some negative feedback from other administrators at times that I am not managing as much as I should be, and that I don’t have as much control over things that are happening. But as soon as I would do something like that I would think, my gosh, I wouldn’t know how to operate. Well I think if I was going to control everything then I’m going to get less done. So I really believe in pushing out the decision-making and giving people that confidence that they have my support. And they realize though that if they do a numbskull thing they are going to get raked across the table. But if they have a framework, we worked for two years on creating a middle school mission statement. We spent time trying to get everyone to agree to it. I just asked them, “Does what you’re doing fit the mission statement?” If it doesn’t and you still do it then, and it doesn’t fit, we’re probably going to end up having a problem. But if you are doing things and you can show me the way it fits the middle school mission statement then I have to support you. That works very well.

**Question 12: Can we wrap up by you telling me what your own path was to the middle-level principalship?**

I don’t think I ever got out of eighth grade. I really like to play still. I’m not much for second graders. I have always been around education. I was born into education. My mother was in education. She was a second grade teacher for 35 years in a little town in northwestern Pennsylvania called Knox. In a little town my family was the number one employer at the school. We were bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers, teachers, and principal. So you learn something - that school was just like being at a family reunion picnic. When I got in trouble they knew about it before I got home. So I was always around education, but my mother said don’t get into education, so I said OK and I went and got a computer science undergraduate. I can remember getting to my junior year in a class called Data Summary and we had to write this program with hundreds and hundreds of cards and I can remember after hours and hours of work pushing the button and watching the screens scroll error after error after error. The longer I

watched its scroll error the funnier it got. I realized that I was a misfit. This was not for me. I cannot sit there in front of a computer my whole life I cannot do it. I wouldn't know what to do without technology now, but at that time I just couldn't do it, so I logged off, withdrew, and then went on to get a variety of part-time jobs. I eventually decided that I wanted to be a math teacher. After that I got my first teaching job at XXX in the middle of the Allegheny Forest. They offered me ten thousand dollars and a trailer to come in teach there and if you can believe that I was an average sized faculty member there. I learned an awful lot there. I taught math there but I pretty much just taught the kids. So after that I interview all across the state looking for a job but couldn't find one. My GPA wasn't the best. I finally got a job being a teacher at an urban high school for ten years. I got certified as a principal. That experience at XXX really helped me to understand or relate with kids that were thinking that they were as bad as the kids at XXX. I ended up taking administrative courses very quickly after my undergrad. In an urban poor environment, anybody who's doing something, they take advantage of you, so I ended up working a couple of periods in the office. In the office I was the first dean of students in central Pennsylvania. And now it's everywhere. So I did that and had some success with it, but I really just wanted to be in the classroom. So one summer I was up in Clarion County visiting my mother and I got a call from the principal. How he knew I was up there I'll never know. But he said that the assistant principal was in real bad shape and he wouldn't be back for the whole first semester. He said we want you to come to the office and do it. He said we would get a long-term sub to get you out of the classroom. But I said I am really not ready to leave the classroom so I made him a deal. I said I'll come to the office and do the assistant principal work the first two periods then go on and teach my classes the next six periods. So that's what I did - I did the assistant principal job in the morning and then I taught all of my classes. Then I would tutor some kids after school and do the rest of the assistant principal's work and I was taking grad classes too. I had two little kids then too. It was kind of funny because the only time they saw me was at the evening events up at school. I did that for a year and a half and then they came in and said, okay, Principal D it's time for you do this for the school. That was in '94. It was a junior-senior high. We created a middle school with in the junior-senior high. Then I started interviewing and I came here. I'm starting my seventh year.

**Question 1: Would you please discuss your process for hiring new staff members at the middle school?**

We've had a district policy to hire new teachers. Actually, the middle school is always included with elementary school interviews and I am also included with high school interviews. So I always have to do a double. I'm sure that's going to change now though with the classification change that teachers now have to be certified in the seventh and eighth grade, so I will probably be doing a whole lot more with the high school than the elementary. What we do is, we're a very closed District, we do a lot of things with our substitute teachers and with our permanent subs, so we'd do a lot of training, we have once a month training sessions for all our new teachers and our substitute teachers and day to day subs, so they have to attend that. We also have a whole week training in this summer. We cover our assertive discipline, our cooperative programs, our crisis plan and stuff like that. We also will, when they are in our District and if they substitute continually, then they have to have two observations from the assistant principal in each of the buildings. Now if they do well above average on those observations, they get an interview. If they don't they don't even get an interview in our District. So that is our first way. We each choose our candidates that we are going to interview. We put a lot of time and effort into that. Now if it is an area where we don't have anybody, then we go outside and we look at all of the applications. The principals will review all of that and decide, "yes, we like that" or "no, we don't think they are going to be of an interest to our District". We select maybe that top fifteen we want to interview, and then interview. But when they come and also part of this is that they have to do a writing sample and there are various points to that. And they get points for their observations in our district.

As far as with middle school we will do lists. We will do our top lists of ten or fifteen candidates depending, you know, on how good they are. And we will do those that we think are very good for elementary and those that we think will be better for middle school. Then we fill those positions from those candidates. We keep this running list all year long, so that if we have a position that opens up, and then we don't interview again until that position opens up. One more thing, as long as our permanent subs, substitutes, have gone through the interview process once, if they are observed that one year, and they are doing that and maintaining their above average observation they won't even have to go through an interview, they are just automatically on the list to get a full time job.

**Question 2: Do you ask any interview questions specifically related to the essential elements of an effective middle school?**

We ask a question on teaming because that is our main philosophy on how we've worked well together, so that is in there. One of the content area questions is on middle school concept. We ask two questions in each of the specific fields. So if it is something that we are looking for specifically in the middle school then we adjust those questions to do middle school.

**Question 3: Describe the types of preparation or experience for middle school teaching that you are looking for as you interview candidates for teaching positions in your middle school?**

I'm probably very different! I guess my priority is a positive school climate, and I think they need to have an understanding of adolescents. So I don't even look for knowledge that much so far as what their content subject is, because I think anybody can pick up a book and learn it. So I look for rapport. Who is good with kids? Who do I think will make a positive role model on my staff, and you kind of get a feel for that when you're talking with someone in an interview, you know. If they are not as knowledgeable, that can be fixed. The rapport can't.

**Question 4: Do you generally find elementary certified or secondary certified candidates more prepared to teach in a middle school program?**

Well this definitely goes against everything that's going on now! I prefer elementary. I just find that they are more flexible, plus in teaming they can teach more than one subject. And I think they have the bubblyness for the contact, you know. Secondary people seem to be very narrow minded and very subject oriented. Whereas, I think that elementary are very kids oriented. And that goes to what I look for in my interviews, so I would love elementary certified. Except for Math, I do like to see in the math department a math teacher. It's so important on content.

**Question 5: In your opinion what do you believe are the key characteristics in a teacher candidate, which predict their success as a middle school teacher?**

I think one that first of all is willing or understands that it's an on-going learning process. I think that is the first thing, if they are open-minded to learning themselves. I also think it's somebody who is very flexible, who can roll with the punches in middle school because there is never a normal day. I think that it is somebody that has to give like a very positive attitude. The negativity will be picked up on by these kids right away. I just think they have to have energy, I think they have to believe in kids. I think that's what's really important they have to love what they do. I want to see the passion.

**Question 6: Describe your mentoring program for new teachers at the middle school.**

We have an induction program and everybody gets a mentor, even if you are a substitute or a permanent substitute for a position. Everybody gets teamed up with a mentor. Sometimes I'd do this differently. Sometimes, like in math, I'll do it in the content area. Other times I'd try to pick somebody on that team, and it does not matter if it's the same subject. That way they can kind of get used to the team knowledge. We meet three times during the school year with me, and their mentor, and them, and we go over how are we doing, where are we, they have to and are required to do observations of other teachers in the building. Our mentors are required to observe them. There is a lot of peer tutoring. Logs are kept to keep track of every time that they met. Everything they've done in the new teacher workshop in the summer is documented. They are required to attend those once a month meetings after school and we pick a particular area like assertive discipline or crisis prevention, just different things that they can learn from, so we

require them too, once a month for that. So they keep track of that and it's all in their mentor logs.

**Question 7: That probably rolls into this next question but just to be sure that we have covered it, does your school provided any specific professional development training related to middle-level teaching for new and veteran teachers?**

We are very professional developmentally oriented. We have to have, and according to contract, two extended in-services per month. It is usually on a Thursday. The elementary has at the first and the third, I guess. The secondary has it on the second and the fourth, which is very good because we can pull all of the middle and the high school together sometimes and they can pull the elementaries together. They have to stay for I believe it's an hour and a half on those two days. We'd do different subject areas – sometimes we meet with different departments across the curriculum, and that is with the high school. Sometimes we will meet with teams. Sometimes we will meet with our own departments, right there in our middle school. We'll do a lot with mapping the curriculum; we have done a lot with sensitivity training, anti-bullying, crisis prevention, things that come up. We do like character education, and advisor; we work with advisor programs so yes, there's plenty of in-service time for our teachers. (That's for both new and veteran teachers right?) Yes.

**Question 8: When your school received the Don Eichhorn award, what were the key elements within your middle school program, which you think earned you this recognition?**

Well, I think first of all, if you look at those philosophies, and each one of those 10 essential elements, we went down all 10 essential elements and we had them all. We do all of those things and it's just a matter of sitting down and organizing your thoughts. But I think more so than that it's the process that you use in your school of pulling everybody together and having everybody say, "yeah we'd did this" and "We could put this in there" and that's what's the exciting part because they actually saw, yes we are a true middle school. I think it's important. It's good for their self esteem. It's good for everybody's self-esteem and kids and teachers in believing that we'd believe in the middle school philosophy. It's more than just words. You walk the talk.

**Question 9: Having been recognized as an excellent middle school what programs does your school have in place to sustain this excellence?**

Well, we continually look at, and I think this is what's important, because I think sometimes people fall back to doing it one way, and middle schools are known for cream of the crop programs because they do require a lot if you're a true middle school. So I think it's important to constantly go back to those ten elements and say, "are we still doing that?" and expanding that list which is kind of nice too, so we still do that. We'd do that during our goal setting and we do a goal setting for our building, we do a goal setting for our teams, I often have a team leaders workshop every summer that they have to come to so that we can make sure we are following those ten elements. And I think the big thing is getting those teachers on board. And believing in it too because, then they'll tell you, "we can do this and getting them out there to do those neat things. I think it's just a continual process of renewing all programs and keep adding to the lists.



**Question 10: If you could change any aspect of middle-level teacher preparation in Pennsylvania what would your recommendation be?**

I would like to see colleges offer more on the adolescent behaviors and characteristics of adolescents, because they are a different breed. Elementaries need to be spoon-fed, and high school you're getting a little bit more mature, but that middle school teachers are just so tough for them. I think they need to have some better, instead of theory, discipline classes, I think they have to have some better classes for that because I think if a teacher doesn't know where that's fine line is, and they have difficulty in discipline, then kids aren't learning. But I think that we need to zero in more on what adolescent needs are. And I think you need to look at all that research about kids hurting other kids, and the bullying and the teasing. We need to address that too, and teachers need to be ready to address that when they come in, so awareness levels have to be different. So I think that we need to get away from theory and get into practical things for our middle school kids to be successful and our teachers to be successful teaching them.

**Question 11: How has your middle school sustained or built a culture of excellence throughout the school?**

I think that key is collaboration. I think first of all we have a lot of young staff. I think I have very few veterans now. I've been there 13 years (this is my 13<sup>th</sup> year), so I've brought three/fourths of that staff within those thirteen years. So I think I have a handful that are ready to retire any day now, but I think my attitude has a lot to do with it. I believe in it. And every day I praise all of those that are doing something within the middle school philosophy. So I think that's important. I also think it's important to get your parents on board and you hear so many negatives and bad things. I think publicity. I think getting this kind of award, it wasn't for a pat on the back, I think it raised the self-esteem in the building and believing in the process. So when you do these kind of things I don't look at them as a reward and oh, boy, this is a feather in your cap. I look at it as what did this do for my school and what did it do for our parents and community to get that pride in what we're doing, and we need more of that out there and we need more of that positive, teachers are doing a good thing, kids are good kids, and if we keep it more positive than all the negative, I think we can turn this around.

(review of question for interviewee)

So with constant evaluation, constantly getting everybody involved, and everybody taking a stake in the success of our kids. I think that's important.

**Question 12: Describe your own path into middle-level education leading to your current principalship.**

This is interesting because I have been in education thirty years now. I started in the elementary, never taught school in a middle school. In fact I was teaching first grade at the time, when I decided to go into being a principal, and I really didn't know much about middle schools to be real honest, because I taught everything from kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade. I never heard anything about that. But one year, they had asked me to develop the developmental kindergarten. So I did. I did the developmental kindergarten. I was really excited about it, but it was a lot of work to do. I loved my principal. My principal was very much into PR. As long as you were doing it, it was OK. But there was no help and follow-up. So that made me determined that I

wanted to go into being a principal, because I wanted to make a difference and help other teachers do things and put neat programs in place, but also be that leadership person who would help them. So, that's what made me go into being a principal. I actually turn down my first job because it was a middle school. I didn't think I was qualified. So I was looking for an elementary principal's position. I happened to go to XXX because they were looking for one. I was one of the top three candidates. The girl next to me was explaining to me how she used to teach at XXX, and she was just coming back after getting a year or two experience at being a principal elsewhere. So of course she was going to get the job and she knew these people. So I knew that and I almost walked out, wondering why am I going to put myself through this. But I was determined to go in there and at least give them something to think about. She'll get it but I wanted them to remember me. So I did. And of course she got this job. So I started back school teaching in September and I got a call in October from XXX school district. The middle school principal called me and said that we have an assistant middle school principal opening. Now I had never even applied for any middle schools. I had just applied for elementary principals. And I had just gotten my degree this summer and this was October. So he said, the Board said I needed to talk to you first before we opened it up to any one else because we were very impressed with you at the interviews. I said to him, oh, no, I'm not interested in middle schools. I don't know the first thing about middle schools! And I'm looking for an elementary school position. So he said OK. Ironically, I had been turned down in three or four elementary jobs because I lacked experience as a principal. So I thought, this is really stupid. This could have been a stepping-stone for me, but I had turned it down. So at lunchtime I called him back. I said, that was really stupid of me. I don't know anything about you yet. I said, could I come and meet you and see the middle school? I started thinking my own two kids are middle school age so I had plenty of experience with middle school. I just needed to see it. I was afraid of the word "middle school". So we set up an appointment for me to go the following day. I walked in and thought, this is a pretty neat school. But I was still nervous because, I thought, I'm still inexperienced. I am inexperienced as a principal and about middle schools. But I walked into the cafeteria and that made all the difference in the world because those kids just came at me. They were just so sweet and talked to me and made me feel so welcome. I was just looking at them thinking, they were just kids. There were like the kids that come to my own house and that my own kids were around. So I went back and said yes, I would like to do this, so in November I began that job. I had to give my notice and it was hard leaving my first grade classroom, but I loved it. I was there for two and one half years in the assistant principal's job there. That's when I learned about middle schooling. Now, XXX wasn't a true, true middle school, but they did the teaming. They were about three-fourths there. That's where I started to learn about what middle schools were all about and about adolescents and their different needs. But then there was an elementary position opening at District E. It was closer to home. So I applied for that and I was the elementary principal at District E for one year. And then the principal at the middle school left to go to another position and they ask me since my experience was at the middle school if I would be interested. And I have to tell you that I had to think about it because the one true word that I think about when I think about middle school is chaos. It's good chaos a lot of the times but it is true chaos. And at elementary the hours were good, I was not out late at night, I only had to be out maybe one night a week so it was a hard decision. The kids were good. They gave you hugs and kisses. But middle school was a challenge. But I loved it. I loved the kids and I loved the level. So I thought about it, and I thought about it and I thought, yeah I'm going to go back and so now I have been there thirteen years. And I think it takes special people to be middle

school people, because they are very difficult years. You have to understand them. But I think that when you do, you can make the biggest difference in their lives - because that's where they are either going to go on one side of the fence or on the other side. I just believe that this is where we can catch so much. It really brought me into being the principal of a middle school. And the leading. I do a lot of presenting because I believe in the middle school philosophy. It works!

**Question 1: Please discuss your process for hiring new staff members at the middle school.**

Of course you determined the need and advertise. Once we have the advertisements out, central office collects all of the applications, whatever the case may be. Then you'd just get all the stacks, whatever their certification, and it could be many or it could be few. Our first step here is to go through and do a sort by looking through them on that initial short list, looking at the cover page, where they list preferences, where would they like to teach. We're always looking for someone who would like to teach middle school, because with our contract, after they are hired within a couple years, they have the option to bid either up or down, wherever they want to go. I'm not looking for a revolving door, so I want people who have the very first or second choice as middle school. If they put it as a third choice, I'm more inclined to put that one aside, at least on the first cut. From there we identify a core group for interviews. We interview here at the building level and I'll be doing a second interview here at the building level that just involves principals and vice principals. We are unable to involve teachers, even though we try to, because that's just a collective bargaining issue for us. So it's a good practice, and we've done it in the past, but we have got ourselves in trouble. We have tried the first or second, sometimes the first they just meet and greet to just see a person and see a face. And maybe the second one here as well, depending on the issue, or looking at the subject. Then a third interview, a second or third interview depending on where it is within the scheme, will go to the assistant superintendent and then the board just hires on recommendation, even though the board has to make the final cut.

**Question 2: Do you ask any interview questions specifically related to the essential elements of an effective middle school?**

Absolutely! Couched in a lot of our questions are middle school topics, discipline plans, supports for kids, adaptations, all of those. We don't come out and say the 10 essential elements, but within all that, we talk about middle school programming. They need to know excursion, they need to know homebase, teaming, they need to know all those types of areas as well. Within the questions we ask it's either directly or indirectly, yes.

**Question 3: Describe the types of experience or preparation for middle school teaching that you're looking for as you interview candidates for teaching positions in your middle school.**

Well, first of all of course, we look at their placement first, what did they do in teaching, because depending on the age of the applicant coming out, they may not have had a whole lot of experience, so we look at that student teaching experience, where they were, who they were placed with, and what kind of experiences have they seen. We're also looking at substitute teachers. We hire, not exclusively, but a considerable amount of teachers off of our sub list. I look at the people who have come to us as middle school subs, who like coming here. I look at that experience, at those experiences. But you're really just looking at well-rounded people - what type of things they're involved with and really what their attitude is.

**Question 4: Do you generally find elementary certified or secondary certified candidates more prepared to teach in a middle school program?**

Boy it, I'm torn on that one. If you would've asked me eight years ago when I got here, I would have said elementary for sure, because there's such a difference. When you walk down our sixth grade hallway and it's core elementary people, of course. They are teaching language arts and other subjects and they are all elementary certified. And just the atmosphere is different. There's just things all over the place on the walls. And of course the eighth grade hall is different. But, in our culture of the middle school, it's kind of a toss up because I think the people that we look for in interviews, whether they're secondary certified or elementary certified, they want to be in the middle school. So, they're truly not elementary, even know that's what it says on their certificate, and they're truly not secondary, either that are coming here, because that's not what we're looking for. I'm torn on that one. I guess content-wise, with No Child Left Behind, we're looking at content, we're looking at certification in each grade. But to me it doesn't matter, it's a toss up. It's just do they like middle school?

**Question 5: In your opinion, what do you believe are the key characteristics in a teacher candidate, which predict their success as a middle school teacher?**

Flexibility is one. I don't know if it's number one, but it's one. You've got to be flexible. You've got to be understanding, and be cooperative. If you're going to work on a team, you've got to be able to cooperate with other people. You've got to be flexible in the fact that I don't know if there's a single day when three o'clock rolls around, that it finishes the way you thought it was going to start or end, whatever the case may be. So, flexibility is huge.

**Questions 6: Describe your mentoring program for new teachers at the middle school.**

The district has an induction program. It's really left up to the devices of the building to make sure it's implemented, in as far as making sure that all new teachers are assigned a mentor to work with for at least the first year. Then we can recommend a second year or even on further than that as well. For us at the building level, we do a bi-weekly meeting, pretty much every other Monday, over the course of the year. There is a needs assessment that is completed with the teacher and the mentor, and then based on that, one of our assistant principals takes that information and tries to design programs on the bi-weekly basis, and brings speakers in to address it, whether it's special ed, or its budgeting materials, or its ordering materials. A lot of it's timely for the year, depending on the time of the year that it is. The other thing is just doing things within the building in order to get people acquainted. Maybe it's as simple as having one of the secretaries come down to work with one of the teachers on some of the record keeping and so forth. Things that we need out of the office, things that we take for granted with the regular staff. It's very informal, but once you get that needs assessment taken care of, then you go forth from there.

**Questions 7: Does your school provide any specific staff development training related to middle-level teaching for either new or veteran teachers?**

Yes. We incorporate the PMSA conferences. That's something we have always done. I'd say we did a lot in the beginning whenever Dr. X (previous principal) created the focus of this school back in 1994. And we've seen the need for that again, because our staff has changed so greatly, more so in the last two years. So we look at the PMSA, we have some core staff members who have been here through that training, and who have done some things like student-led conferences at the middle-level, peer mediation, homebase, teaming, so we'd do a lot in-house as well with our core group. But our identity is changing, which means we need to continue the in-servicing. We can't just rest on what we have already done.

**Question 8: When your school received the Eichhorn Award, what were the key elements within your middle school program, which you believe earned you this recognition?**

I think the school supports that we have as far as special ed, title, academic support, guidance counselors, we have a social workers here on staff full time. I think that what we do for kids that have any level of special need is a key piece. And other than that, just the wide variety of experiences that all kids are entitled to, whether it's the extracurricular activities, whether it's after school tutoring, whether it's sports, or just within the core curriculum. All the different facets of the curriculum, whether it be an extension, or the regular assignment, just the variety of experiences overall for all kids.

**Question 9: Having been recognized as an excellent middle school, what programs does your school have in place to sustain this excellence?**

We have done some things to try to revise and remodel along that line. We have academic tutoring; we have a high level of support with the Title. Actually we have just revised the title support program. We split the reading Title 1, and the math for academics support. We're actually looking at some individualized instructional programs to sustain or actually to move to the next level as far as student achievement. We'll get the results back from the state and it just gave you a school score in the past and there's not a lot you can do other than say that okay as a school you scored at say 1390 on the PSSA, but now we're getting information back that's a very individualized. We're talking about, well we just adopted a program, Compass Learning, which is a computer-based learning. Really it's an IPI, individualized instruction. We're looking at our study halls and what we can do with kids that are sitting in study hall. We're looking at bringing instruction down to the individual level, dealing with them on some progress monitoring and progress reporting, and helping those students to become not just proficient on the PSSA, but to allow them to be able to read, and to write at a proficient level, regardless of whether it's on the PSSA or not.

**Question 10: If you could change any aspect of middle-level teacher preparation in Pennsylvania, what would your recommendation be?**

I think teachers coming in, they don't focus enough on middle school thus far. When you talk to a perspective candidate right out of school, depending on their program, their course description,

their classes that they're taking, to be able to understand about teaming and interdisciplinary units. A person that's elementary with reading strategies and math strategies, whatever the case may be, or high school that's more advanced. I think that as far as the structure and form of middle school is really crucial to their preparation program. They're getting the content area so far as their regular curriculum goes, but I don't think there's a whole lot on the actual form and function of the middle school as far as teaming, as far as interdisciplinary, as far as homebase and so forth. That's very much a missing piece. Special education as well. That doesn't mean the few kids that are in the special ed classes. But I think as far as the overall piece of special education, they may know that they leave their classroom for certain things, but as far as the overall fit and how every child is accountable for their progress, I don't think that teacher preparation is doing a very good job with special ed.

**Question the 11: How has your middle school sustained or built a culture of excellence in your school?**

I think it starts with what we do here. The publications that go out have to be right. We've asked that teachers don't put things out to parents or to other teachers, kids handwritten things, or things that our word processed without a high level of professionalism. Anything that we put forth has our name on its and is about us has to look professional, has to be spelled correctly. That takes a lot of time and a lot of effort and that's just the first step. It may seem minor in the whole scope of things for being an excellent school but if you don't look the part, and you don't act the part then how can we take credit. You talk about teacher dress, and teacher attitude, how they talk about their profession in the hallways. We talked last year as team leaders about core values, what does it mean to be a middle school teacher? I asked them clearly to define the issue of core values. Who are we? What do we stand for? What do we want other people to perceive us as? You have the have those conversations first, not just so we are all on the same page, but because there are a lot of people that have not been in this middle school since its beginning. So that's where we start talking about excellence. What do we want kids to learn? What do we want us to be perceived as? And then from there just always looking at the curriculum pieces, continuous improvement. Never taking the answer that that's the way we have done it before, because maybe it was good before, or maybe it was award-winning before, maybe it was wonderful, but these are different kids this year and so what are we doing differently?

**Question 1: Discuss your process for hiring new staff members at the middle school.**

Our process for hiring new staff members is one that's pretty similar throughout all of our buildings. What we do first is we have our curriculum leaders do some initial screening of applicants. There's already a screening that's gone on before that by our personnel director who reviews the applications. She goes with a 3.0 and she makes sure they are certified to teach in the area we are looking for. So then our curriculum leader or myself, frequently there's a department head, they would go through and do some initial screening, poll applications that look interesting to them, that maybe have some experience or maybe have some unusual experience, sometimes a second career type person. So we go from there. Then we'd interview of all of those people and that's usually about fifteen or so. We try to limit it down to 15 and I interview along with the curriculum leader and the assistant principal and if there is a team member or I like the team to come up and interview. I always have one of the team members from which team the position is open come up and interview. So that's another step of screening. Then we do a teaching demonstration. We give the teachers an objective, and then they teach that to a group of students. We also invite as many students or teachers around the building that want to come and watch that and make it as nerve racking as possible. From there we kind of select a final two candidates and send them over to the superintendent and he ultimately has the final decision.

**Question 2: Do you ask any interview questions specifically related to the essential elements but an effective middle school?**

Yes. Are you going to ask a follow-up to that, what are they? (Yes you can talk about them now – please elaborate). We talk a lot about what we find is the strength of our program, the teaming process. So we are always real interested to see what type of teaming background they have, whether it's being on an athletic team if they are fresh out of college, or if they work in another school, what type of collaborative process have they been through. So that's one specifically we always talk about. We always ask them to describe, if you landed here from another planet and you had to describe a middle school child, what would say? That certainly gives us an indication as to whether they're knowledgeable about the age characteristics of middle school kids. So we are always looking to see if they have experience in those areas. What else? Teaming, I'm trying to think what else would be an essential element? What are the other elements? (Integrated curriculum, developmental guidance, advisory, things like that). Right, advisor time, we tell them about our program and make it clear that the typical day would include an advisory time with kids. And we ask them, how would you feel about that, or have you had any experience with that? So I think we do cover all of the essential elements of what a good middle school is. And probably some idiosyncratic to District G - what types of parents have they dealt with, would they be comfortable talking with lawyers all the time, that's the first words out of a parent's mouth, I'm a lawyer of such and such. How would they deal with that?



**Question three: Describe the types of experience for middle school teaching that you are looking for as you interview candidates for teaching positions in your school.**

Well, now it would be middle school certified or secondary schools certified. That's the only people that we look at now. I think that requirement doesn't kick in for a couple of years, but there's no sense in hiring them ahead of time, hiring an elementary certified person that you know you're going to have to lose. We look for people that, we often look for people who come with different experiences, or different life experiences, because they seem to add something to the environment. Several of our teachers are second career people that have been in accounting, come back through the MAT program, and done very well through that. It seems that we hire a lot of people who have gone through that MAT program, whether it's at Duquesne or Pitt or what ever. They seem to possess so much more confidence after having been in a classroom for a year, than a lot of the student teachers or people fresh out of college. So those are the kind of requirements that we are looking for. Obviously such things as a 4.0 grade point average, good grades, involved in a lot of activities, and I always look to find the most interesting thing on their resume. People often have the most interesting resumes, but they don't say like, "I was on the scuba diving team" or something like that. And those often catch my eye and I often ask questions such as, "from scuba diving how could you relate that to the classroom?" And that either makes or breaks them. They either say, "Oh, well it's obvious, here's what I would do." Or, if they say, "I have no idea," and then that kind of gives me some indication as to their ability to make connections amongst curriculum and amongst disciplines. So, that's kind of where we go.

**Question 4: Do you generally find elementary certified or secondary certified candidates more prepared to teach in a middle school environment?**

Well, I would say in this building we are about 50:50. Fifty percent secondary, and fifty percent elementary, although I don't have many teachers that have taught at the high school, as with many middle schools, because of their age and reconfiguration happening recently, they have had to put some high school teachers down in the middle school that probably don't want to be there and that's obvious. We are very fortunate in that the secondary certified people who are teaching here probably started their career here and will finish up here, too. So it's hard for me to say this, but the research seems to say that elementary certified people tend to see the broader connections and are more of a generalist, but I don't find that to be as true, or I can't say that that is true here.

**Question 5: What do you believe are the key characteristics in a teacher candidate, which predict their success as a middle school teacher?**

Key characteristics that predict success? I think they have to have a good sense of humor, because often working with middle school kids can be very stressful, but it can be very funny. If you don't have a sense of humor, it's unfortunate. I find people who seemed to demonstrate more personality in the interview, are more extraverted, I tend to like those people better, but they tend to have the personality it takes to work with middle school kids. Not to say a quiet person, an introspective person, can't be successful at middle school. We have those. You have to be pretty on top of your game to be here emotionally and just be ready to go with these guys.

**Question 6: Describe your mentoring program for new teachers at the middle school.**

We have a district, mentoring program. Every new teacher is assigned a mentor, hopefully from that building, and hopefully from that subject area. They stay in the mentoring process for two years. That's in addition to their induction program. So, we do that mentoring. The nicest thing in mentoring that happens is when you have a team of four teachers and that team has common planning time every day and I think that's where they get most of their in-service from, other team members. That's the strength of the team, as far as working collegially.

**Question 7: Does your school provide any specific professional development training related to middle-level teaching for new and veteran teachers?**

Only I do that. The district does some in-service for new teachers in the induction program, but I tried to give new teachers as much information about what middle school is supposed to be as I can. There is such a strong tradition here that the veteran teachers maintain. They are the ones that bought into middle-level and created the program, and they are interested in seeing it maintained and continued. So, a lot of that happens through peer pressure and collegiality. (Just because I know little bit about your district, do all of your new teachers attend your middle-level institute that you've been running for a couple of years now?) Yes, that's a good point. The Middle-level Institute runs each summer, and that gives them a little sense of what middle school is about.

**Question 8: When your school received the Blue Ribbon Award what were the key elements within your school program, which earned you this recognition?**

I think that we represented what a true middle school is to be like. I think we demonstrated that we addressed the four areas of development. Academically, we certainly demonstrated through our test scores and the academic performance of our kids, so academically that was taken care of. Socially, we have a lot of programs and we do a lot of things to make sure that the kids are socially developed and are able to interact with each other. Emotionally, we have a guidance program and an advisor time program, that's very successful. Lots of thought went into it and it's maintained and it's just great. And physically, we make sure that we have like a 95 percent rate of kids participating in inter-scholastic athletics. We have a no cut program. So all of those contributed to helping us win the blue ribbon award.

**Question 9: Having been recognized as an excellent middle school, what programs as your school have in place to sustain the excellence?**

Pressure from the community! Because as soon as those test scores go down in any way, many parts of our program will be looked at and questioned. As long as our test scores remain where they are, as long as our students are achieving to the levels they are, we are given a lot of freedom to do things. I don't think you could sell our advisor time, where kids spend fifty minutes, twice a week, to parents if our kids were failing academically. They'd just say look, instead of doing that for fifty minutes, read a book, show them reading strategies. But as long as we were able to maintain those scores and the achievement of the kids, we can continue those other

programs that we know are just as valuable for children as the academic part. So, its community pressure.

**Question 10: If you could change any aspect of middle-level teacher preparation in Pennsylvania, what would your recommendation be?**

That they spend some time in middle schools before they get here. Because often they do student teaching in high school or at the elementary school, and I'm not sure that many people go into teaching thinking, I want to go into middle school, when they go into college, but it really is a wonderful place for many people. I wish more people had the opportunity to check it out and see what it's like. I'm sure with middle-level certification now will require them to spend time observing. That's what I think needs to occur. Because they are different, they are so different from elementary kids and so different from high school kids.

**Question 11: How has your middle school sustained or built a culture of excellence?**

It's a veteran staff that values what we do, and they don't let the younger people back off. They show them, they model, what the right way is. They are real proud of the program and they make sure it carries on.

**Question 12: Would you describe your own path into middle-level education including your current principalship.**

My own path into middle-level education, well, let's see, how did I get here? I ask that question every day! What that hell am I doing here? Actually it was, I had been a music teacher so I did mostly marching band. I was a high school marching band teacher, but I always had that middle school band, or that junior high school band or orchestra, as one of the classes that I taught. I was always in a district that was small enough that the band director was the band director for the middle school and the high school. So, I kind of had some exposure to middle school kids at that time, never thinking I would end up as long as I have here. Then I went into administration and spent four years as an assistant principal at a high school and then the superintendent one day said, "How would you like to go be the principal at the middle school?" I said, "What are my options?" "You can go and be a principal on your own, or stay and be an assistant." So, I opted to come to the middle school with some hesitation. I have not regretted it one day ever since. They are really neat kids. They can be the biggest jerks in the world, or they can be the greatest kids in the world, it just depends. So I've been here for seven years now and I'm not regretting one minute because I've learned a lot about teaching and a lot about education. I think that a lot of the things that we do in middle school would have value at the high school level. I have often thought boy, if the high school teachers were only as good as the middle school teachers are at collaboration, making connections, teaming and stuff, boy, wouldn't the high schools be spectacular! That's my path here.

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