

DIFFERENCES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE:

HOW ONE MIDDLE EARLY COLLEGE SERVES AS A

“TREASURED PLACE” FOR ITS

AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS,

STAFF AND COMMUNITY

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Funding for this project was generously provided by

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

Copy as of August 2014

Converted to ADA Compliance February 2016

DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to the
devoted teachers and administrators in all schools
who exhibit the highest levels of professionalism in their craft
and caring in their hearts
for the young lives who find their way to their classrooms.*

**THE DIFFERENCES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE:
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Mott Middle College represents a fundamental rethinking and reformulating of education in the traditional sense. This program is proving that kids from very tough circumstances can find a niche in education – one that also helps them find educational success.

The model continues to break barriers in time and place by enabling students who haven't finished high school to take courses on a college campus. This kind of approach, which opens up a marvelous opportunity for young people, should be viewed as a model for other educators and educational institutions dealing with disengaged students at risk of dropping out.

William S. White
President & CEO

TRIBUTE FROM THE PRINCIPAL

To my teachers, support staff, leadership team, counselors and friends

SECOND CHANCES

Is it okay to tell you that I love you?

*That I see your extraordinary actions every day,
a beaming smile, a hug of support, a wink of understanding...
or a listening ear.*

*Don't tell me that it comes naturally.
I know how hard you work
saving precious pieces of our teenage world*

Reviving! Repairing! Rebuilding! Rejuvenating!

*At the cost of personal sacrifice –
the kind that builds up over time.*

*I also know your joys and private consternations,
because I experience them too!*

*For we, we are the Chosen People,
Healers who care and who believe
there are no “throwaway children”.*

*Daily, I witness
works of wonder and patience beyond the norm,
young lives restored and dreams reborn.*

All because you believe in second chances.

Chery Wagonlander, Ed.D. Principal/Planner, Co-Founder
Mott Middle College

FOREWORD

In *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*,¹ Jonathan Kozol challenged disparities in educational expenditures, opportunities and aspirations, false promises and the “soft bigotry of low expectations”, typically found in large, poor, minority schools.

He challenged the strategy of “one size fits all” instruction, and the damaging effects of high stakes tests.

He also showcased examples of excellence that he witnessed in his visits to urban schools in America.

He honored and counseled the educators who kept hope alive, saying

*Teachers and principals should not permit the beautiful profession they have chosen to be redefined by those who know far less than they about the hearts of children.*²

He shared his observations on the places that gave him hope:

*These are the schools I call “the treasured places.”
They remind us always of the possible.*³

¹ Kozol, Jonathan. (2005). *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York: Crown.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

CHAPTER 1

The Founding of Mott Middle College

“A Treasured Place”

Mott Middle College (MMC) in Flint, Michigan is one of the “treasured places”⁴. Jonathan Kozol referred to, the kind of school that gives hope and reminds one of the possible.

Within its walls, a faculty of 20 devoted and passionate educators has served over 6,000 students since 1991, raising new possibilities, giving birth to new dreams and creating new realities for students who doubted themselves, their future and their very survival. The staff’s statement of commitment, written by them and realized anew every day, reads as follows:

Our Commitment to our Students
To create a learning family
To encourage critical thinking
To recognize the importance of feeling
To develop and rekindle human intellect
To actively seek challenges and changes
To give support in times of joy and in times of need

The Middle College High School

The middle college concept first appeared as an American educational alternative in 1973-1974 with the founding of Middle College High School at LaGuardia College in New York. Drawing on the work of psychology professor Janet Lieberman, a team of interested educators joined her in designing an alternative high school whose mission was to see that potential dropouts succeeded in high school and continued on to higher education. The new model had several features that made it unique. Its targeted student body consisted of potential at-risk students who were not achieving success in the traditional high school setting for a variety of reasons. Sometimes referred to as “slipaway,” rather than dropout students, many such students often found themselves having to take on adult responsibilities—such as working to provide family income, caring for siblings or becoming young parents—that interfered with attending school. Others left school because of longstanding academic difficulties that went unaddressed or because they failed to see how the traditional school system was relevant to their lives.

⁴ Ibid.

Typically, such students had been written off by their local school districts or had written themselves off after records of long-term absences, failure in one or more academic subjects and social and academic disengagement.

LaGuardia Middle College High School proved that there was another way to reach such students and help them find academic and personal success by creating a new high school/college collaborative in which the high school was located on and embedded into the college campus. This innovation constituted not only a change in geographic location, but also a totally new educational environment characterized by adult norms of academic seriousness, commitment to studies, personal responsibility and more mature behavior. Removed from their traditional high school culture of top-down control and peer pressure, and assisted by high school and college student support services staff, students began a largely successful adaptation to the new behavioral and academic expectations placed on them. The commitment of both institutional partners—the public high school and the community college—demonstrated that it was possible to create a positive and nurturing environment that could foster academic success of at-risk high-school students.

In 1991, Michigan became the seventh state in the nation to offer this innovative model and the first multi-district middle college model in the country. As such, it serves as a dropout intervention high school operated by the Genesee Intermediate School District, serving 21 local public schools districts.

Mott Middle College welcomed as its first incoming 10th grade class students from all school districts in Genesee County whom counselors and teachers had referred to as “high-risk students”—students who were capable of academic success, but were at risk of dropping out of school or not achieving up to their academic potential.

The Mott Foundation provided a start-up grant to support the launching of the school. The program encourages young people to take charge of shaping and pursuing their educational goals, and helps them develop effective learning and communication skills. Since its initial support, the Mott Foundation has provided more than \$2.6 million to develop the school’s instructional model and innovative curriculum and support its dissemination to other schools.

The focus on students in Genesee County—in the public schools of the city of Flint and 20 surrounding school districts—was not an accidental choice. Long known as “The Canary in the Mine” community, Flint, the industrial heart of General Motors, was the definitive example of American deindustrialization during the latter decades of the twentieth century. As the gradual dismantling of the American auto industry proceeded, Flint and its neighbors were among the first to suffer the now all too familiar socio-economic consequences: unemployment, homelessness, distressed schools, lost youth and general social disintegration. Genesee County’s students needed “intensive care,” delivered in a coordinated regional manner. Given the urgency of the need and the seriousness of a potentially lost generation of youth, the State of Michigan authorized the creation of the country’s first multi-district middle college high school. The goal was to turn around potential dropouts from all the county’s school districts by giving them the skills they needed to succeed in life and contribute to the new knowledge-based economy.

Mission

MMC defined its clear and focused mission from the start:

***Mott Middle College prepares high school, at-risk students
for a successful work and educational future
through the full integration of
high school, community college and the world of work.***

The school offers a fresh start to students who seek a new way to shape their future. Students from the 9th, 10th and 11th grades can begin during both the fall and winter semesters. Typically, total student enrollment varies from 350 – 400 students, assuring a small, intimate environment more suited to meeting individual student needs.

MMC is proud of the unique attributes that have helped it become a “treasured place.” The following chapters describe more fully its many distinguishing characteristics—the differences that make a difference.

- MMC is located on the campus of Mott Community College.
- Students can graduate with a high school diploma and work toward a Mott Community College Associate degree in a program of their choice.
- Students are required to complete a 60-hour unpaid work internship and to create and present a portfolio to a committee prior to graduation.
- The school year is divided into five marking periods that are approximately eight weeks in length.
- Students graduate with at least 15 college credits, tuition paid by the school, based on successful completion.
- Every staff member is a teacher, and every teacher serves as an advisor for a small group of students called a Focus Group.
- All faculty members have completed staff development central to the mission of the school including: Choice Theory, Discipline with Dignity, Brain Research, Understanding Learning Styles, Mastery Learning, The Invitational School, Cooperative Learning, Understanding Literacy, Authentic Assessment, Accountable Talk/Reflection and College Readiness.⁵
- The school's grading system is based on two principles: Grades are never used as punishment, and grades reflect cumulative learning
- Students have the opportunity for a fresh start toward a successful future by the practice of wiping their 9th grade GPA clean.
- The school subscribes to the Mastery Learning concept that grades students with A, B, C, I (Incomplete) or N/C, (No Credit). Students who receive an Incomplete grade have four additional weeks to earn a passing grade. To gain a grade to replace No/Credit, students must successfully retake the class. This grading system assures that no grade lower than a 2.0 is ever awarded.
- The school accepts transfer courses for grades of C or higher. Other courses with a D grade earn credit only, and courses with a D- earn no credit.

⁵ See Chapter 4.

- The school is research-driven and uses instruments that measure personal and academic growth. These instruments are given as pre- and post-assessments (post-assessments are required to graduate) to measure student growth over the duration of their attendance in the school, and to provide data to the school's ongoing research to identify best practices.
- The school assesses all students individually to determine their learning style and left/right/whole brain tendency. This helps them better understand how they think and learn, and assists teachers in designing and delivering appropriate curriculum and instructional approaches.
- After having been accepted by the school, students must attend a high-school success seminar called GAPS: An Early College Transition program. This experience introduces them to the mission, guidelines, beliefs, practices and shared responsibilities of the MMC community.

Since its founding, MMC has proven itself an exemplar, helping thousands of at-risk high school students achieve new levels of personal responsibility and academic success. "This is truly a reform movement," says Principal Wagonlander. "We are redefining what 'college readiness' and 'work readiness' mean. To accomplish this, teaching and learning have to change."

Teaching and learning have indeed changed at "Mott", as it is commonly called. Every student in the school is dually enrolled in high school and college classes. This daily exposure to the habits and behaviors of students on a college campus is critical to building a sense of personal responsibility and academic success.

The size of MMC—approximately 80 students at each grade level—also contributes to teachers' ability to provide more customized learning experiences for each student. Ongoing professional development is a priority for all Mott staff, and new teachers have mentors to help them understand the challenges that confront their students as well as the innovative curriculum and teaching methods at their disposal. Pre- and post-assessments, both qualitative and quantitative, track the personal and academic growth of each student. These data inform MMC's ongoing research to determine best practice.

All the school's major stakeholders feel gratitude and pride in the creation and continuation of MMC. Increasingly, one message comes through: At this school, things are different, and everyone knows it and lives it: students, teachers, administrators, parents and other educational and community members involved with the school. Principal Wagonlander takes great pride in what the school has accomplished. "These students," she declares, "are a great example of what we're striving for here—a seamless, deeply embedded academic transition between high school and higher education."

As we delve more deeply into the school's story, we find that there are indeed, differences that make a difference. This study examines the critical differences that account for the school's impact by looking at four critical processes that helped the school achieve its mission. The next four chapters in Section 1 discuss those processes and include:

- *Establishing a professional school culture:* What the staff and administration expect of themselves and their stakeholders
- *Developing an appropriate school structure:* A counseling-based infrastructure purposefully designed to facilitate the achievement of their expectations
- *Designing and implementing pedagogical methods:* How students will be taught
- *Engaging and involving parents and the community:* How the “village” will serve as a partner in the shared commitment to raise successful children.

CHAPTER 2

Establishing a Professional School Culture

Imagination and new ways of “doing it” are encouraged at Mott in so many ways. We know that if teachers aren’t prepared to work differently, then they won’t work differently. We’re talking about attitude, spirit, beliefs, behavior as a learner and as a teacher, commitment to collaboration and to ongoing change. This is who we are here.

Member of the Teaching Staff

Establishing a professional culture has served as the bedrock for everything MMC has become. The staff’s *Statement of Commitment to Our Students* was of great *significance* in shaping the school’s culture. The first commitment—To create a learning family—asserts that the school will not view itself as an organization, an institution, an externally driven reactive body, or a mechanistic assembly-line processor of young people. Rather, the school will be a family. All members of that family will share a common commitment to growth and development—to learning. Like all healthy families, the school will be a place that welcomes cognition, critical thinking and intellectual development. It will also acknowledge, embrace and share feelings of joy in celebration of success, and feelings of sorrow and support in times of sadness. Finally, the school will be a living organism. It will not appear “fully formed”—cast in stone, a “given” for all times—but rather it will seek to grow by actively pursuing challenges and changes. Organisms do not remain as they are: They either develop and grow, or they wither and collapse.

How does this commitment play out in practice at MMC? One teacher movingly described how he treasures the relationship he has with his students as members of a learning family.

One of the ways I show a different kind of caring is in telling my students that I love them as a father. I know that some of these students do not have a very good relationship with their fathers, but I am hoping that I model what a good father would.

My goal is to make them feel cared for. The school environment most of the students come from is very unloving, and they are just another statistic. If I can convey an atmosphere of trust, then I can go further and teach good character.

Another teacher verbalized his beliefs and mission as a member of the staff.

My content area is mathematics, but that is only a part of what I teach. The development of a good work ethic, trust, kindness, gentleness, integrity, honesty, and so much more, depend entirely on the mutual communication of trust and respect.

My students know they can tell me anything. I may not agree with the choices they have made, but they know they have a listening ear.

The founding principal of the school affirmed, “One of our key philosophical underpinnings is inclusiveness as a core value.” Her assistant principal and co-founder, Lee Rossmassler, Ph.D., looks back to the school’s earliest days:

Here, the underlying need of the students who come here is showing them that we care. The personal relationship we establish with them is the basis for the connection they make with us and the foundation for their learning.

The staff is committed to being a constantly growing and developing “family” that encourages ongoing critical thinking, pursuit of challenges and changes, and the development and rekindling of human intellect. Through the ongoing twin processes of reflective practice and collaborative action research, they have created and shaped a culture of research and reform.

From the beginning, this approach led the staff to reflect on problems and issues as they arose, examine the dimensions and deeper meaning of the issues, reflect on possible alternative solutions, design interventions to address the problems, and evaluate all actions taken. They continuously monitored their own practices and the consequences of their actions, identifying where they were not meeting their goals and devising new approaches to create greater success with their students. These strategies of school improvement are the very opposite of what too often passes for reform in America’s public schools—mandated, top-down reform distinguished by teaching to the test and close adherence to a prescribed curriculum.

Over the past 25 years, American school reform has been largely driven by volumes of research reports, critiques, government policies and top-down directives developed far from classrooms and the day-to-day experiences of teachers, students, and administrators. However, “outsiders”—those beyond the classroom who had not experienced the living struggles and challenges of motivating and engaging disillusioned students—could never bridge the immense chasm separating their well-meaning reform policies from the lived reality experienced by “insiders”. The human business of teaching and learning—often complex, complicated and unpredictable—takes place hour-by-hour, day-by-day, and week-by-week within a difficult and complex socio-cultural context, far removed from university research labs, state and national policy chambers and corporate headquarters.

Principal Wagonlander built her own practice and shaped the ethos of the school on the philosophy of “inside-out” reform, using reflective practice and collaborative action research as the twin foundations of this approach. She and her staff share the responsibility to do whatever is necessary to help all their students complete their program, and at the end of their five years, achieve graduation diplomas from both their high school and community college.

On a daily basis, she models the school’s mission and desired culture by her own beliefs, values and actions—affirmed orally, on paper and in action. She recognizes the

difficulty of the school's mission, and recognizes the humanity of her staff and her students, with their unique personalities, attributes, strengths and needs. Describing the mission of her school, she has stated:

*We aspire to be a purpose-driven middle college high school.
Good schools always have to be recreating themselves.*

Everybody has to be a leader. For some it's a change of roles, it's recognition: different things replenish different people in different ways.

All of us working here do our work differently. We keep changing our work in order to do better work for our purpose. We are not title-driven; we are purpose-driven. We demonstrate the power of purposeful planning.

MMC has also committed itself to the interrelated concepts of freedom and responsibility as articulated in the research and writings of William Glasser, M.D. His work on *Control Theory* is a core theoretical foundation of the school. This theory, more commonly known today as Choice Theory, states that behavior is caused not by an outside stimulus, but by what a person wants most at any given time. When Choice Theory is employed in classrooms, students have a say in what they learn, and teachers negotiate both content and method with them. Glasser's work is at the center of the school's mission, and has guided its systems and structures. The school's teachers and administrators describe how their work flows not from what they are ordered to do but from what they want to do. One explained,

We're all on a journey, a never-ending journey. Our shared vision is to serve the child better. We are never satisfied, always trying to do it better.

We are trying to provide all students with the best preparation so that they can be the best they can become, no matter what the prior history or factors were. The way is not always clear. We need to have the courage to confront students when and as needed. We often ask ourselves, 'Is it even my place to say some things? Is it my business? It's the issue of grace.'

Because reflective practice, collaborative action research and Choice Theory constitute the very pattern of life and work at the school, MMC stresses meaningful, deep professional development in which staff seek to develop the new knowledge, understanding and skills that will help them improve student learning through their own increased effectiveness. They know that far from bemoaning a failure of imagination, they live in an environment that expects and encourages it. They view themselves not just as deliverers, or technicians. They reject simple cures or specific enumerated steps or other imported so-called solutions to school reform. Rather, the staff engages in a continuous process of rich professional development that stresses internal and external dialogue, (reflection and communication), hypothesizing, implementing and monitoring...and then repeats the process all over again. This approach speaks to the desire of all MMC staff that both the school—and they—unfold organically, as the two move through successive levels of development. Further, the growth they engage in remains closely linked to the ecology of their staff and students.

Though often humbled by their responsibilities and uncertain of the breadth of their mission, the school's staff nevertheless lives and breathes a philosophy that their school will be

what they create—with each other and with their students. Their freedom to question and seek new answers largely derives from the core beliefs of Wagonlander who operates from a position of valuing and trusting her teachers. According to one teacher,

She assumes that we are all doing the best possible job and that we know what steps we need to take to be the most successful with the students. She doesn't get in the way of us trying to figure out what we need to do to be successful.

Another teacher valued the culture of the school.

It makes me feel valued as part of the team and it allows me to explore different possibilities and try different things that I wouldn't be able to at other places, to try and find the best ways to teach. When new ideas or software come out, I'm able to quickly experiment and find out if that's going to help me reach students. At this school, the teachers are creating their own curriculum and that gives us the freedom and power to make things—to work things out in a way that's going to be the most effective.

In this psychological environment, teachers are growing into more confident professional educators—more reflective and innovative school researchers and reformers of their own school—and more vocal and engaged educators working with colleagues across the nation. They share their commitment to help develop the students they serve into successful, independent and productive young adults.

One of the school's science teachers shared her perspective on this commitment.

I want to tell a story of an institution that is still in progress, that is trying to find the answers. Elsewhere, the kind of teaching I had to do was like working on an assembly-line model. Here I feel much more pressure as a teacher. We're always learning and we change. We have learned through our failures. We're never satisfied, always trying to do it better. I feel we're part of a revolution in education that interlocks the two public educational institutions—K-12 and higher education.

What I do is a far cry from "covering the subject". It's holistic. Students are not just little sponges. They're whole people. I was a botanist, but I have become a teacher. When asked what I teach, I answer "students"—not botany.

Another described the responsibility she feels to carry out her commitment to herself, her students and her school:

I have made the decision to make each day a unit in itself, to make it a success for the day. Last year was a transformative year for me regarding my ideas of quality. I'm in my fifth year of teaching. I have become more of a reflective teacher. This place says it's okay to try to modify the curriculum and your pedagogy and allows the time and the professional development to do it.

She continued:

We always have to have multiple lenses here. We ask ourselves, "What's working? What's getting lost?" One of the things that make a difference is the ownership that we can have here. We create the school ourselves, with our colleagues and our students.

Other colleagues shared her views.

In this place, we are addicted to meaningful work. We are all trying to be the type of teacher we need to be here. This is the best and most challenging job I have ever had. I think we have an opportunity to do many things in this school that we couldn't elsewhere. We're always learning, and we change. I have learned through our failures. Here, we have a chance to make a difference.

Since the school's inception, staff has sought, through their beliefs and actions, to create a culture that is true to two additional commitments stated above: *To recognize the importance of feeling, and to give support in times of joy and in times of need.* One teacher explained:

What I love here is the pleasure, the joy, the genuine interest, and the playfulness that I experience. It's all life. There is exuberance; there is precision, and I love it all. I feel that I excel in exuberance. We have spirited enthusiasm, joy-filled people who have passion. The longer I'm here, I'm bolstered. I've become something and someone that I never thought I would be.

As the administration and staff of MMC clarified the specifics of their mission, they articulated both the specific academic requirements and the behavioral and societal expectations they would insist on for all students. Academically, they established outcomes for all content areas and core curriculum based on the criteria and expected student performance standards defined by the Michigan Department of Education in seven core content areas: Language Arts, Social Studies, Math, Science, Fine Arts, Physical Education and Health. In addition, they incorporated critical areas essential for future student success as responsible and productive citizens by including Technology, Career Awareness and Life Management and Employability Skills.

Defined Expectations for All Students

MMC also defined the following behavioral and school community expectations for its students:

1. Be a Self-Directed Learner

- Take responsibility for one's own learning
- Practice and extend the learning processes
- Apply knowledge
- Self evaluate

2. *Be an Effective Communicator*

- Express ideas clearly, both orally and in writing
- Demonstrate capable listening and reading skills
- Communicate with diverse audiences

3. *Be a Creative Complex Thinker*

- Access, evaluate and integrate information
- Use a variety of reasoning strategies for managing complex situations and issues
- Generate new ways of viewing

4. *Be a Cooperative Group Member*

- Possess effective interpersonal skills
- Evaluate/manage individual behavior in a positive manner
- Participate constructively in cooperative learning groups
- Evaluate/manage group behavior in a positive manner

How have students responded to these dual goals of academic success and responsible citizenship? In Chapter 6, we will hear more fully from the school's students; here, we highlight a few of their comments about their school.

It's great here. They operate on the basis of expecting you to do what you have to do instead of forcing you to do what you have to do. If they force me to do something, it's as if they are telling me, "You don't want to do this, I know you don't want to do this, so I'm going to force you to do this." Have you ever been in a power struggle with a three-year-old? It won't work. Here they expect you to do certain things, etc. and if you fail, you feel bad about it, because you know that you didn't live up to that expectation.

It happened because I was put in an environment where other people thought I could do it and they had trust in me. It's as simple as that. Before, I didn't think I could succeed in school. My family was scared I was going to drop out. But now we know I can continue and graduate, and we're happier with where I am. Every teacher here really cares. Instead of just being the student body, we're more like a family here, and that makes all the difference.

Parents also recognize how MMC has created a different environment where their students might be successful. From the first meeting with their child and the school staff, they learn the mission, purposes and values of the school, and are encouraged to assume the responsibilities expected of them as partners. Staff explains the unique opportunities available in the school and the expectations concerning the behavior, commitment and engagement of both family and student.

In the next chapter, we examine how the school's staff developed an appropriate school structure to help them achieve the mission they defined.

CHAPTER 3

Developing an Appropriate School Structure

Behavior is inspired by what a person wants most at any given time and is intended to satisfy one of the following five internal basic needs: to survive; to belong and be loved by others; to have power and importance; to have freedom and independence and to have fun.

William Glasser, 1998⁶

Clarifying and defining the mission, values, beliefs and culture of any collective effort are necessary first steps to achieve a desired goal. This process of clarification and definition is essential but inadequate. What counts are the actual measures taken that translate the mission into reality through the design and developing of an operational infrastructure that integrates all essentials to create and sustain an innovative, responsive school structure.

From its inception, MMC has had a distinctive design and operation in comparison with the traditional high school. The very location of the school on the campus of Mott Community College constitutes not only a change in the traditional environment, but also an opportunity to place potential high-school dropout students in an adult setting. In this environment, adult students approach their learning with seriousness and maturity. The norms of aspiration and adult behavior on the college campus implicitly communicate to the younger students how they are to behave. Building on the geographic partnership of the two institutions is a continuously developing collaboration that seeks to provide high school students what they need to complete their high school and college studies. Successful programs coordinate the connective components between the high school and the community college in numerous areas including admissions, curriculum alignment, developmentally appropriate dual enrollment in both high school and college classes, and collaborative student support services.

In its commitment to place its students at the center of every aspect of the school's operations, MMC develops an individualized class schedule for every student at the start of fall, winter, and spring semesters of each school year. This personalized attention includes the gathering and analysis of important student data at the end of every four-week marking period. These permit teachers, administrators and students to examine student academic achievement, personal development, assumption of responsibility, and emotional maturation. The identification of each student's academic and personal needs leads to the development of a personalized student plan that includes the appropriate instructional program, teachers' pedagogical approaches, and needed student support services and interventions. In addition, the comprehensive student career and college counseling programs in both institutions seek to create a seamless transition to higher education through individualized learning opportunities beyond the classroom, including required work internships, volunteer service learning, and work

⁶ Glasser, William. (1998, Revised edition). *Choice Theory in the Classroom*. Indianapolis, IN: Harper.

shadowing. These collaborative efforts help transform potential high-school dropouts into active learners, committed to and connected with their own continuous learning.

Since teachers are also learners at MMC, continuous learning opportunities help them develop their knowledge, understanding and skills. Together with the school's administrators, they plan and schedule staff development for both individual teachers and the entire staff. They focus on new research on teaching and learning effectiveness, innovative and engaging curricula, reflective practice and action research. Thinking deeply about the effectiveness of their teaching and designing new approaches for them to follow and evaluate, they engage in a data based process of continuous instructional modification and innovation in all areas of the school's operations. Their goal is to monitor the success of all school programs and assess how they meet students' needs.

Designing the Infrastructure to Realize the Culture

MMC places students at the center of all its efforts. Many other schools affirm that everything they do is on behalf of students, but closer inspection often reveals that their operations are designed to meet teachers' needs and interests such as their preferred course preferences and seniority; contractual mandates and requirements; long-standing district policies and procedures, and habit. The operational paradigm found in traditional districts places the board at the highest rung in the hierarchy, directing its power, policies and mandates down to the administration, to teachers, and finally to students. In contrast, MMC from in-take to graduation personalizes each student's academic, social and dual enrollment programs a minimum of three times a year. Guidance professionals design accommodations and ancillary services as needed to address students' individual cognitive, emotional and physical needs. Thus, illustrating how Mott Middle/ Early College places students at the top of the hierarchy, and seeks to ensure that their needs, interests and future success are the driving forces that shape how the school operates. Let us examine how some of these differences make a difference.

How Glasser's Choice Theory Provides a Structural Framework for Success

Glasser's Choice Theory informs the guidance-based instructional philosophy of MMC. Choice Theory contends that behavior is never caused by a response to an outside stimulus. Instead, Glasser believes, behavior is inspired by what a person wants most at any given time and is intended to satisfy one of the following five internal basic needs: to survive, to belong and be loved by others, to have power and importance, to have freedom and independence and to have fun. Choice theory affirms that people cannot control what happens to them, but can control what they choose to do about what happens.

Robert E. Wubbolding, Ed.D., teacher, author and practitioner of Glasser's Reality Therapy has asserted that people can take greater responsibility for their actions and make the proper behavior choices through what he has named the WDEP system:

- What do I want? (W)
- What am I doing to achieve what I want? (D)
- What does my self-evaluation say about my actions? (E)
- What are my plans for improvement? (P)

Central to the effective use of the WDEP system, Wubbolding asserts, is the establishment of a fair, firm, and friendly atmosphere, climate, environment, or relationship.

Application in Classrooms and Similar Settings

Glasser identifies two types of teachers. The first type consists of “Boss teachers”⁷ who depend on the rules-and-consequences method and use rewards and punishment to get students to do what teachers want. Here, students are primarily motivated by rewards (positive reinforcement) and avoiding punishment, and secondarily, if at all, by their own desire to learn. “Lead teachers”,⁸ on the other hand, focus on designing lessons and assignments to meet students' basic needs. In this way, they avoid the necessity of a reward system. A grading system is used as a temporary indicator, not a reward. Ideally, students are engaged, deeply motivated learners, and not just youngsters completing busy work and pre-determined requirements.

How Choice Theory Impacts Classroom Learning

When teachers use Choice Theory in the classroom, students have a say in what they learn, and teachers negotiate both content and method with them. Teachers use cooperative, active learning techniques that enhance the power of the students. Students' basic needs literally help shape how teachers provide instruction and what curriculum they present. Cooperative, active learning techniques help enhance the power of the learners. Lead teachers ensure that all assignments meet some degree of their students' need satisfaction.

Student Affective and Academic Support Programs from Pre-Entry to Graduation

Even before MMC opened its doors in 1991, staff designed student support programs that have played a key part in the creation of the school's unique culture and success. As the school has evolved, staff have introduced, reviewed, evaluated and modified student support programs as needed and developed new programs to provide additional support.

From the beginning, the staff realized they had to develop special initiatives to engage students and build new connections that left their past fears and failures behind. Their goal was to prevent future school dropout by bringing together new students and staff in a welcoming environment. Through a series of carefully planned experiences, they would become members of a new community and build relationships to support them through the transition period and serve as the basis for long-term academic success. This high regard for the affective needs of students has, since the beginning, served as a guiding principle for the school and has directed attention to building a culture of safety, belonging and support while offering engaging activities and programs that permeate all aspects of the school's functioning.

When MMC was still in the planning stages, staff researched the literature on dropout prevention. They learned of the importance of re-engagement of disaffiliated youth who had lost their connections with school; consequently, many of their initial efforts focused on innovative

⁷ Glasser, William. (1990). *The Quality School: Managing Students Without Coercion*. New York: Harper Perennial.

⁸ Ibid.

intervention strategies designed to reengage students in their own learning. The following is a list of the wraparound services implemented over the years.

- Mastery Learning Grading Structure
- GAPS
- Transitions I and II Courses (college preparation)
- Focus Groups
- Sequencing of College Courses
- Beginning, Intermediate and Advanced Dual Enrollment Support Seminars
- Academic Subject Seminars
- Technical Certificate/Associate Degree Seminar
- Math Intervention Program

Mastery Learning Grading Structure

A major structural innovation the school introduced from the start is a grading system designed to support the mission, values and culture of the school. The school divides the academic year into five grading periods approximately eight weeks in length. This provides students with a more timely feedback schedule that helps them measure their progress in shorter intervals and gain credit more quickly. GPA's are also grounded in the school's belief that students need an opportunity to make a fresh start toward a successful future.

Focus Groups

In order to continue the sense of connection, engagement and support initiated in the GAPS program, staff planned the next communal experience—the Focus Group. This student support opportunity aligns philosophically with Glasser's Choice Theory approach to teaching and learning, and stresses the building of connections and a sense of community. Every MMEC staff member is considered a "teacher" in the broadest sense of the word, and every "teacher" serves as an advisor for a small group of students called a Focus Group. Focus Groups consist of 15-25 students who meet with the same teacher several times a week. Students in each Focus Group vary by ethnicity, age, sex and community of residence. This creates a real-world environment where students can learn to interact with students from a variety of backgrounds and life situations. A Focus Group is structured as an open forum for the discussion of classroom issues, school-wide questions and concerns, student progress, interests, needs and behavior.

One of the school's counselors explained the importance of the personalization and community building of the Focus Group experience.

If we can get through on an affective level, then we have a chance to get through on an academic level. In Focus Groups, teachers can just be with their students. Then, when they come in with a problem involving a teacher, we can just talk and unwind the issue, and they come to see that the teacher really cared...And then we can deal with academic motivation.

MMEC devotes two hours a week to Focus Groups and seminars, and views these support mechanisms as essential. Staff believes, based on experience and knowledge about student reengagement in school, that if students do not make a personal connection with them and with the school, they are not going to engage academically.

Granting credit for participation in Focus Groups legitimizes the centrality of this program, as described by one teacher commented,

Two years ago, I found that any student not getting credit in Focus was not doing well and eventually dropped out. I find now that when I find students falling off the board, it's in some way connected to Focus. It's their way to buy into the sense of community that we have here, and their part of this organization-- that they are responsible for their education. There isn't homework in it; the credit is required for graduation but students do not get a grade.

For almost all students, this is a very special and meaningful part of the day. One student explained:

We have Focus Group, and if our Focus leaders see your grade or attendance dropping...well, they don't want anybody to fail. They will get you tutoring, or anything. It's like a mini family because I see my Focus leader more than I see my parent. My parent works a night shifter so I don't see her. This means my Focus leader can help me without having to bother my parent.

In the words of another student,

The Focus Groups are different from anything I've ever experienced because when you go through a traditional high school you go to the classes and you go home. You don't have this deep intrinsic interaction with other. It's like an extension of a family—to be able to share my life and experiences and even problems and troubles with people who genuinely care about me is overwhelming—just to know that there are so many people at this school who really are there for me.

The structural innovation of the Focus Group moves students and staff toward achieving the cultural and educational mission and goals of the school. One student described how his attitudes on race and how his differences shifted because of his involvement with the other members of his Focus Group.

I come from my grandma's racist environment and I was put into a room where I was one of the only white kids, and I was really in my box anyway. I never was really "with" Black kids before; they were in their group and I was in mine. But here, we were all family, and we shared a lot, especially in music.

I know that my Focus leader was open to my music; he got to me through the music. I had a feeling that he was open to knowing me as a person and not just as a student. Where I came from, it

was—“You’re a student, you’re not a person. We get you to graduate, and you go out as a graduate and out in the world.”

Here the teachers actually pay attention to you as a person and not just as a student. In my old high school they treated me as if I was just another little bit of money that they’re going to make. Here you have Focus Groups where there are only 15 students and you have one hour to communicate with a teacher. If you raise your hand in class, he’s going to get to you. If you need help after school, he’ll give it to you.

One student described, in a most touching and telling manner, how her Focus Group supported her after she lost her grandmother, a central figure in her life.

I lost my grandmother, came to school, and tried to just make it through with a smile on my face, but it ended up getting to me. My Focus leader noticed the difference, and he talked to me and asked me if I was all right. He called my dad and said there was a change in my behavior. He was really concerned.

Even my friends wouldn’t pick up on it, but my Focus leader really helped me through. I call my Focus Group my family; we talk about everything, they are my brothers and sisters. It is helpful being one-on-one with a teacher who really knows you, can relate, and can give you that support... I think it’s very vital.

One of the school’s counselors—an original member of the staff, reflected on the significance and power of the Focus Group model. She highlighted the importance of the sharing and enjoying good food.

The entire full-time staff leads a Focus Group. It’s a time to help students make the shift between their outside life and their school life. We found that we really needed that. Too many kids needed a transition time from their outside world.

Many of us have breakfast together. In some groups, the teachers bring food in, while in other groups, focus members take turns providing snacks. They bring in muffin mixes and love to make their own muffins in a sandwich maker.

We had a teacher who is retired now who used to make things as complex as homemade donuts in Focus Group. Many teachers just have bagels, cream cheese and juice, or we go over to the college cafeteria and have breakfast together.

A lot of them just talk with the kids; teachers have a thought for the day or a discussion topic that they’ll put up on the board. It’s a good time to debrief when something has happened, like a suicide of a former student—it helps us debrief, or we discuss political things that are happening.

Focus Groups provide a safe haven for students who experience some of life's most terrifying experiences.

I have 20 Focus students; this morning two were in crisis. One's cousin was killed over the weekend. I don't know how she's doing; I'm worried. Another just came in. She lost her grandmother last week. She was her guardian—lives with her. Her grandmother was dying for six months. Now, she's processing that and she doesn't know where she's going to stay. She was taken away from her mother because of abuse. She's 15 and wants to be here. How do we make that happen?

In summary, Focus Groups are an integral part of MMEC. They foster a familial relationship along with continuous, caring monitoring of every student's current personal or academic school issues. Through this addition of a critical support structure, the school creates community among its members.

Redesigning from a Four-Year Middle College to a Five-Year Middle Early College: Dual Enrollment of All Students

As the school redesigned itself into an early college in 2002-03, an entirely new set of transition challenges emerged. Since the school's inception, there were students who dual enrolled in college courses, but they tended to be the strongest students and they enrolled in few college classes. With the advent of the early college model, all students became dual enrollees, which meant certain groups of students—the reluctant students, the students lacking credits or skills, and the immature students—all needed to be able to function as college students. Additional interventions were created to meet their needs.

Data from more than nine graduating classes revealed that although 100 percent of the students left MMC with one or more college acceptances, the majority were not pursuing, persisting and succeeding in higher education. Based on these facts, during the 2002-2003 school year, MMC purposefully created a plan to significantly increase dual enrollment among its students. With the transition from a four-year middle college to a five-year middle early college, an entirely new set of challenges emerged that staff had to address. All core curriculum courses had to be redesigned to align with the state of Michigan Merit Curriculum. College readiness seminars had to be developed. The committees with Mott Community College named Partners in Learning had to be modified. The summer GAPS transition program had to be restructured, creating multiple five-year academic plans that correlated with key college degree pathways. Other changes involved determining dual crediting of dual enrollment courses, implementing parent education workshops and streamlining the connections between the high school and college admissions, registration and advisement departments. Henceforth, the school would be known as Mott Middle Early College (MMEC).

However, the most challenging change for staff was learning how to work differently as a teacher, counselor, support staff or administrator in this new five-year early college environment. By viewing all students as college bound, academic plans, counseling sessions, materials and technology, parent meetings, curriculum, tutoring services, assessments, etc. all needed redesigning. The next five years were spent creating a deeply embedded college culture among and between all of the MMEC stakeholders.

The GAPS Early College Admissions Program

Transition to high school is often a challenging time for young people. To help cope with this major change, many high schools have developed some type of orientation program for their incoming freshman. At MMEC, this transition encompasses radical paradigm shifts beyond simple orientation. As students transition not only from middle to high school, but also to an early college environment that expects them to graduate with a minimum of 15 college credits, they must learn how to take ownership of their education and reach beyond their current view of themselves as middle/high school students.

To begin the transition process, staff developed a program called GAPS. All incoming students are required to participate fully in this four-day summer program before starting at MMEC. Staff believes they need to tailor a transition program to the demands and expectations of an early college high school to bridge the “gap” between high school and college.

The GAPS Program introduces all new students to the mission, guidelines, practices and beliefs of their new community. Fun is a big part of the summer program, with good food and opportunities for play serving as the “glue” that bonds students with their new friends—both peers and adults. This intensive transition program introduces students to the values, culture, educational philosophy and program MMEC, and leads to a more successful transition and assimilation into the new environment.

One of the program’s developers described the rationale behind the GAPS program.

The key thing we found was that we had to establish very quickly our own school culture. The students felt very strongly about their own previous schools and we had to be able to create a new school culture. We set out on a journey together, inviting them to have a conversation with us about what kind of school they wanted, what their ideal school would be like and what its purpose would be. What were they there to do? What were their values, because their values were going to help them get where they wanted to go.

We had to start here because we all have incredibly high expectations for our kids and the students have to buy into this place. They have to believe that they belong here.

Our students are our main stakeholders, and we want them to think about all this because they have to be in the center of the school. We saw that other schools had not thought through their culture. It was not just about getting them to get to college—we wanted them to have a quality life. At our school, we have a very strong school culture. Our goal was that if you walked up to any of our students, you would get very similar answers about what the school was about and what their role was for their own success and the success of the school. That was where we had to start with them.

We wanted to transfer our beliefs to our students who didn’t even believe they could make it through high school. We told them they were going to create what goes on in our school, with us. They

didn't understand. "What do you mean, we're going to create the school together?"

We're one of the few middle colleges who do a summer transition program; in fact we may be the only one who has made this mandatory. There are lots of orientation programs, but this is a required transition program to engage and embed students as quickly and effectively as we can in our culture. We use a new language, new vocabulary. We are way ahead of the game. This is what we call preventive medicine for our shared success.

One student described how GAPS affected him when he first came to the school:

In the other schools, there were cliques—the Jocks—or the Gothic. We here are all like one family. We come together and work with each other. The way the teachers do the GAPS program—everyone works together. We're all new kids. So when you make kids work together, that lets people know that they can get along with anybody.

For many students, the GAPS experience is sufficient to give them the foundation for the purpose and expectations of the school. However, some incoming students need more support to successfully transition into high school and specifically an early college program; therefore, actual courses were designed to serve those students during their first semester at MMEC.

Transitions I Course

Some incoming students find themselves burdened with unusually high levels of academic and social needs. These students are placed into a semester or yearlong Transition I course, designed to help them make up content or credit deficiencies and supplement their academic and study skills. Major topics of the course are high school success, academic improvement and social maturity. Students learn the Dimension 5 component of the Dimensions of Learning program developed by the McCrel Organization (<http://www.mcrel.org/dimensions/whathow.asp>).

The program is a comprehensive model that uses what researchers and theorists know about learning to define the learning process help students achieve success in high school and increase their readiness for college. The most effective learners have developed powerful habits of mind that enable them to think critically, think creatively, and regulate their behavior. The Transitions 1 Course focuses on Dimension 5, that stresses the development of powerful and productive mental habits that increase students' ability to think critically and creatively, and regulate their own behavior. The specific components of Dimension 5 are:

- Critical Thinking
 - Be accurate and seek accuracy
 - Be clear and seek clarity
 - Maintain an open mind
 - Restrain impulsivity
 - Take a position when the situation warrants it
 - Respond appropriately to others' feelings and level of knowledge

- Creative Thinking
 - Persevere
 - Push the limits of your knowledge and abilities
 - Generate, trust, and maintain your own standards of evaluation
 - Generate new ways of viewing a situation that are outside the boundaries of standard conventions

- Self-regulated Thinking:
 - Monitor your own thinking
 - Plan appropriately
 - Identify and use necessary resources
 - Respond appropriately to feedback
 - Evaluate the effectiveness of your actions

Students study these “productive habits” and practice applying their new learning skills during the course. They then assess their progress toward demonstrating one or more of the school’s four Learner Outcomes: self-directed learner, effective communicator, creative/complex thinker and cooperative group member.

The Transitions I course seeks to motivate and support students to make significant improvement in school attendance, course pass rates and behavior through increased self-awareness in their new high school/college setting. Students also learn how to access college counseling services and the academic tutoring opportunities offered on campus.

MMEC’s College Readiness Curriculum

This course and the entire approach of MMEC to students’ success in college draws heavily on David T. Conley’s book *College Knowledge: What it Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready*.⁹ College readiness is a major subject of staff development at MMEC. Through their intensive study of Conley’s research, the staff learned that college readiness went beyond the traditional definition:

- What high school courses were taken
- What grades were earned
- What grade point average (GPA) was achieved
- What scores were earned on national tests like the ACT and the SAT

Conley defined college readiness as the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a college general education course. “Succeed” is defined as completing entry-level courses at a level of understanding and proficiency that makes it possible for the student to consider taking the next course in the sequence or the next level of course in the subject area.

⁹ Conley, David. T. (2010) *College and Career Ready: Helping All Students Succeed Beyond High School College and Career Ready: Helping All Students Succeed Beyond High School*. Hoboken, NJ. Wiley, John & Sons,

What he learned was that those who teach entry-level college courses identified four critical qualities or attributes that were necessary for college success:

- Key cognitive strategies
- Specific types of content knowledge
- Essential student attitudes and behavioral attributes
- Important contextual knowledge that a student must possess to be ready for college.

“Key cognitive strategies” is the term Conley uses to describe patterns of intellectual behavior that lead to a more disciplined approach to thinking rather than a term such as “thinking skills.” Certain strategies relate to the ability to think and reason. They include analysis, interpretation, precision and accuracy, problem solving, and reasoning. A student who has learned such strategies possesses curiosity and a thirst for deeper understanding. He questions the views of others when those views are not logically supported, accepts constructive criticism, and changes personal views if warranted by the evidence. Such open-mindedness helps them understand the ways in which knowledge is constructed and helps students deal with the novelty and ambiguity often encountered in the study of new subjects and new materials. A college-ready student knows how to develop and apply strategies to solve problems in a thoughtful and considered way. Without the capability to think in these ways, the entering college student either struggles mightily until these habits begin to develop or misses the largest portion of what college has to offer.

“Specific types of content knowledge” refers to the content knowledge in core content areas. For success in college English, for example, high school students must be able to read strategically and with understanding, write and edit, gather information, analyze, critique and connect what they are reading to other topics in the subject or other fields of knowledge. These are the building blocks of advanced literacy. Similarly, students need to utilize techniques such as strategic reading that will help them read and understand a wide range of non-fiction and technical texts.

Most important for success in college math is more than a formulaic understanding of mathematics. Students must possess a thorough understanding of the basic concepts, principles, and techniques of algebra beyond simple exposure to these ideas.

Since college science courses emphasize scientific thinking in all their facets, students must know how to use all the steps in the scientific method—what it means to think like a scientist. Students come to appreciate that scientific knowledge is both constant and changing at any given moment, and that the evolution of scientific knowledge does not mean that previous knowledge was necessarily “wrong.”

For success in college social studies, which for college freshmen typically includes geography, political science, economics, psychology, sociology, history, and the humanities—students must be able to interpret sources, evaluate evidence and competing claims, and understand themes and the overall flow of events within larger frameworks or organizing structures.

College arts courses include dance, music, theater, and visual arts. Students ready for college-level work in the arts possess an understanding of and appreciation for the contributions made by the most innovative creators in the field and see themselves as instruments of communication and expression.

“Essential student attitudes and behaviors” is a facet of college readiness that encompasses a range of behaviors that successful college students demonstrate. These include greater student self-awareness, self-monitoring, self-control and study skills—precisely the attitudes and behaviors that are stressed throughout the entire curriculum and culture of MMEC, and that are particularly emphasized in the Transitions I course.

“Important contextual knowledge that a student must possess to be ready for college”¹⁰ summarizes a set of implicit knowledge successful students possess regarding “how college operates as a system and culture,” including “specific knowledge of the norms, values, and conventions of interactions in the college context, and the human relations skills necessary to cope within the system.”

Transitions II Course

MMEC analyzed its qualitative research data examining why some students needed additional academic and behavioral support for their dual enrollment in college, and developed the Transitions II course. This curriculum continues the emphasis on study skills, dual enrollment pedagogy, college readiness lessons in key cognitive skills, essential content strategies and appropriate college-level behavior. It also provides students with the information they need to understand how a college operates as a system and as a culture.

Sequencing of College Courses

One of the first adjustments was the careful sequencing of courses that the students enrolled in at Mott Community College. The first course students take is a one-credit college study skills course. Although it is a college course taught by a college professor, each class is a cohort of 14 MMEC students. This allows them to transition into college curriculum and expectations without the stress of being the only high school student in an adult class.

The next semester, students take two, one-credit-hour courses. The first is a leadership course, developed by two social science professors at the college. This class is much larger and contains a mix of high school and college students. The second is an introduction to technology course, which helps level the playing field for many students who do not have computers at home. This class introduces major computer programs and basis computer skills and prepares them to access the College Web Advisor and Blackboard—essential skills for succeeding in college classes in the 21st century.

Upon successful completion of these three one-credit courses, students progress to a three-credit course. If they have definite career plans, they may choose a course in a specific program of study. If they are undecided, they are counseled into a general education course that can apply to most college programs of study. Each semester thereafter, they begin taking one or more college classes per semester.

The semester schedule at the school aligns with that of the college—three semesters including fall, winter and a short spring—with the high school semesters starting and ending within a week of the college’s. This allows counselors to enroll every student individually into high school and college classes at the beginning of each semester.

¹⁰ Ibid.

After having analyzed student data for two years, staff realized that although many students were successful using this sequence of classes, others needed more support. A team of teachers and one of the counselors met to develop seminars that would address specific concerns at various junctures in the process of acclimating students to the academic and social responsibilities of college. Ultimately, they created three early college seminars, labeled Beginning, Intermediate and Advanced Dual Enrollment Support Seminars.

Beginning, Intermediate and Advanced Dual Enrollment Support Seminars

As part of MMEC's current curriculum and graduation requirements, all students take the Beginning Dual Enrollment Seminar during the semester before they start their first college course. The seminar introduces them to the college website, college classroom etiquette, and the requirements for college success including self-monitoring, time management, and study skills.

Students take the Intermediate Dual Enrollment Seminar concurrently with the college study skills course. In addition, they familiarize themselves with the campus and its resources, and investigate various careers of interest.

When students enroll in their first three-credit college course, they also register in the Advanced Dual Enrollment Seminar. Here they review and examine more fully the issues of the two previous seminars, and focus on a specific area of study and the requirements for successful completion of the coursework required. Two culminating activities are required in this advanced seminar: a project that plans and displays the overlap of high school and college coursework leading to a specific degree, and the writing of a personal reflective essay that presents their individual college plans.

Academic Subject Seminars

If students need additional support in specific college courses such as English 101, science lab courses or college math, the high school offers academic seminars in these subject areas.

Technical Certificate/Associate Degree Seminars

In conjunction with Mott Community College, the school designed extra support to help students who want to earn a technical certificate or Associate degree. To this end, they garnered a federal Tech Prep Demonstration Project (TPDP) grant to increase awareness of the technical programs at Mott Community College, and provide specific support by career college liaisons to connect students more effectively with college services and advisement. Since the grant began, the number of Tech Prep programs actively pursued by MMEC students has grown from five to 20.

Math Intervention Program

When the school conducted a quantitative analysis of students' grades after several years as an early college, it concluded that some students needed a carefully crafted math intervention program designed to eliminate the curriculum gap they experienced between high school algebra II and college algebra. Accordingly, with support from Mott Community College

and the Middle College National Consortium, staff developed and implemented a spring semester course to bridge high school math success with dual enrollment math success. College faculty collaborated with the school's math teachers to develop more successful support systems at the dual enrollment transitional stage and the pre-algebra/algebra I readiness stage. A current research project with the consortium focuses on developing rigorous project-based mathematics curricula that reflect college readiness student outcomes.

Wraparound Services

MMEC is committed to providing whatever support students need to be successful. These services go well beyond the counselor to include teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, and the community. Called Wraparound Services, the goal is to surround the student with the academic and affective supports they require to succeed. This concept is like a series of concentric circles with the student at the center of the vortex: The first layer of the circles closest to the student is the counselor, while each of the ensuing rings of the circles encompasses the other members of the school's wraparound support system.

Positioned at the front line of providing these wraparound services are the school's counselors, who carry out all the tasks of traditional high school counselors including college and career counseling, scheduling, assessments, personal counseling and parent communication. In addition, as counselors at an early college, they work with students to bridge the overlap of college coursework, essentially designing two sets of schedules, three times a year for 400 individual students. Counselors also provide intensive personal counseling and crisis management to students as needed, and coordinate their efforts with outside social and community services. Fortunately, the student/counselor ratio at the school is less than half the state's average, giving counselors time to devote to individual counseling. In this way, they provide a significant part of the essential affective component of their students' educational success.

As a school of reengagement, the foremost responsibility of counselors is to help students reconnect as learners. One of the counselors reported that her first priority was studying the files of each student, memorizing their name and some pertinent information about them, so that there was a starting point for the building of a relationship. "Then," she said, "when I walk down the hall and say 'hi' to them, they say, 'How did you know me? No one ever remembered my name before.'" All the school's staff members exhibit this personal acknowledgement of and caring for each student, because they understand that many of the students who come to the school have had negative experiences with adults in educational or authoritative roles. Such adult-student interaction is a matter of highest priority for all the staff and is one of the most significant features of the school.

Since a significant percentage of students entering MMEC lack high school credits and/or grade-level content mastery, the above-mentioned approaches and interventions provide additional opportunity.

This chapter has described the various key innovations and strategies that staff developed as part of an educational model committed to high achievement for at-risk and disengaged high school students. Several features of these unique structural design elements stand out:

- Every aspect of the school's policies and procedures derives from its core mission, values, beliefs and culture.

- Staff members at the school pay continuous attention to both the affective and academic needs of all students.
- They pay similar attention to the personal and professional development needs of all adults.
- They foster a caring, living community for all members of the school community through a rich variety of individual and group experiences.
- Connections are forged to the larger community outside the school through planned off-site learning and volunteer service projects.
- Opportunity and respect replace punishment and shame.
- The school pursues a continuous process of designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating every aspect of its operations to identify future actions that may be needed to achieve its goals, driven by unrelenting high expectations of students' personal and academic growth.
- The school grants permission and rewards to students and adults for their courage in addressing unmet needs in the school with new programs and practices.
- The school does not follow a pre-written recipe imported from the outside; rather, it engages in a process of perpetual recreation, adhering to its mission of guiding all students to successful personal and academic development.

CHAPTER 4

Designing Curriculum and Teaching

“Mott Middle Early College identifies each student’s preferred learning style, patterns of thinking and mental processing to help teachers create and deliver curriculum that can help all students achieve continuous academic success”.

Chery Wagonlander, Ed.D

From its inception, MMEC has used solid educational research to develop its own philosophy for teaching and learning, and developed its own curriculum. The school uses a guidance-based approach to instruction, drawing on the work of outstanding seasoned educators, professionals and researchers from the United States and abroad, to provide rich and continuous learning experiences for teachers and students.

Continuous Professional Development for Staff

Continuous educational research and participation in professional development programs provide the foundation for the school's improvement process. These activities help achieve the desired outcomes defined by the State of Michigan School Improvement Frameworks, the North Central Association AdvancED Standards and the Critical Friends Review Process. High quality in-service programs based on the research of some of the most highly regarded scholars in teaching and learning are provided during and after the regular academic year. The following is a listing of some of the exceptionally broad professional growth opportunities staff has pursued.

Subject	Researcher
The Invitational School	William Purkey
Dimensions of Learning	Robert Marzano
Choice Theory	William Glasser, Robert Wubbolding
Discipline With Dignity	Richard Curwin, Alan Mendler
Curriculum Design Format	Ralph Tyler and Elliott Eisner
Understanding by Design (UbD)	Grant Wiggins
Mastery Learning	Thomas Guskey
Cooperative Learning	Roger and David Johnson
Integrated Thematic Instruction	Susan Kovalik
Performance Based Assessment	Lauren Resnick
Learning Styles	David Kolb
Brain Research	Eric Jensen, Robert Sylwester, David A Sousa

Teaching with Poverty in Mind	Eric Jensen
A Framework for Understanding Poverty	Ruby K. Payne
Bridge out of Poverty	Ruby K. Payne
Multiple Intelligences	Howard Gardner, Thomas Armstrong
College Knowledge	David T. Conley
Growing up Digital: How the Next Generation is Changing Your World	Don Tapscott

Staff also identifies additional areas where they need new professional learning. They focus on the school's major outcome areas—academic success and civility and responsibility—and commit themselves to collaborative learning, reflective practice and action research. Major areas of learning include the following four North Central Association (NCA) target goal areas:

- Improving Reading Literacy Across the Curriculum
- Improving Writing Across the Curriculum
- Improving Numeracy Across the Curriculum
- Improving Civility Literacy Across the Curriculum

Other specific school-designated goals:

- Improving Problem Solving Literacy Across the Curriculum
- Improving Career Awareness Across the Curriculum
- Improving Technology Literacy Across the Curriculum
- Developing Writing and Thinking Skills
- Managing and Improving Aggressive Behavior
- Developing a School Safety Manual
- Developing a College Readiness Curriculum

In addition, staff has attended various state and national professional conferences as learners and presenters:

- Leadership Strategies Conference for E-Learning: High School to Higher Education
- Middle College National Consortium Annual Conference (MCNC)
- Middle College National Consortium Principals' Conference
- Middle College National Consortium Student Conference
- Middle College National Consortium Executive Board Meetings
- North Central Association (Advance Ed) Leadership Academy
- Michigan Council for the Social Studies Conference
- Michigan Educational Assessment Program Conference
- Michigan Career Development Conference
- Preventing Harassment in Schools Conference

- Safe and Drug Free Schools Planning Conference
- American Social History Project (ASHP) Conference
- Special Education ADD/ADHD Trainings
- Music Educators National Conference
- Michigan Educational Assessment Program Advisory Council Meetings
- Health Career Festivals, Mott Community College
- Michigan Council for Teachers of Mathematics Annual Conferences
- National Dropout Prevention Annual Conference
- Michigan Counseling Association
- School Law in Michigan Conference
- Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals
- Michigan Math Teachers Conference
- Michigan Reading Teachers Conferences

This detailed listing of professional development opportunities offered to all staff demonstrates the school's belief that investment in teachers is essential to achieve its desired goals. Excited, motivated and able adults who discover new passion and depth in their chosen field of teaching are more likely to ignite that same passion in their students. By working collaboratively, measuring their results and reflecting on their work, they move the whole school forward, creating exciting new learning opportunities and igniting a deepened love of learning among their students.

The Freedom to Develop a Rich and Stimulating Curriculum and Instructional Style

What happens when teachers have the opportunity, authority and responsibility to design what they teach and how they teach? One teacher explained:

Even with the prescribed classes such as Econ and Civics, I still can and do teach outside of the traditional textbook. I can explore much more information and varieties of topics and examples. This allows my best teaching to come from my best work.

In addition, the students are truly part of the class through contributions and examples from their own lives. I do not have to shy away from a particular student's experience or life because it is too "out there". Each student brings to the classroom a whole set of life experiences that are uniquely their own. They also bring a set of preconceived ideas about the subjects I teach. It is not my job to destroy or tear down those ideas but to work from them. I should not dismiss the validity of any student's knowledge. If the teacher is simply the knowledge holder and the student the knowledge receiver, then the student is not encouraged to share and adapt his or her knowledge.

I wanted an opportunity to have a say in what happened and how in my classroom. I relished the notion of working with young people who were bright but somehow struggling with finishing school. I loved the idea of being in a place that promoted diversity, acceptance and understanding as a part of the process.

Another teacher was a creator of a successful interdisciplinary curriculum at the school.

The strongest thing I do on a regular basis is team-teach history and English. This is one of the most important things I do around here. A student once said he hated team-taught classes. Taken aback, I asked him why and he said it was because he learned too much and he really preferred the other way that allowed for more free time.

Team teaching is more than the sum of the parts. First, you get someone who enhances your lessons. A writing or reading assignment that teaches History at the same time it teaches English skills enhances both classes. Second, it makes for more on-task time in the classroom. One teacher is taking attendance while the other is already starting class. There's no dead time at the beginning of the hour. In addition, the "entertainment" factor disappears. Other students love a troublemaker for the amusement factor, and for the time off task. If a student's behavior gets him removed immediately and suddenly, and he's having a talk in the hall with one teacher while the others continue class, well, it makes disruption less rewarding for both the class and the student involved.

It also allows for more counseling-based education. Usually, the only students in school who get personal attention are those with their hands up and the "bad" kids. The student who is trying not to cry is often not noticed. The one who is non-functioning is just ignored because there is no time to deal with him. As I give a lecture, I can see a problem, signal the other teacher, and she can take the time to care for that student in ways I cannot without stopping the class.

Team teaching and block classes allow for best practice including greater depth of knowledge and multiple perspectives in the classroom. Students see how they can discuss and debate different perspectives without leading to anger and resentment (at least, most of the time). This allows teachers to try different methods of instruction and connect different content areas—exploring how one subject blends into another. This way they can grab on to one aspect of the material and then use that to help students gain interest in areas that did not interest them as much.

For students, the content and approach to teaching and learning at MMEC are different and far more engaging. One student found it exhilarating to discover that some of his teachers enjoyed the creative arts as he did.

It was cool to find teachers who love the arts even more than I do. I wanted to introduce a new after-school music and dance program, but I wasn't sure they would let me do it. They opened the door for me to try, and I knew that if it didn't work out, they'd help me find other ways to make it work. That showed me that they trusted me with my leadership with no questions asked. They didn't ask, "How do you know this is going to work?" They said, "As long as there's a teacher in the room, go right ahead."

Others expressed similar excitement at their new learning environment.

The teachers at my other high school would say that I am more into my studies now than I was then, because there I was just looking forward to the end of the day, whereas here I'm more involved and I pay attention.

Implementation of the American Social History Project

The history teachers at MMEC wanted to engage students in the remarkable and powerful story of America and knew the traditional teacher-centered, text-based rote memorization model found in so many high school American history classes was not doing the job. They believed they could achieve their goal *if* they could teach it in an engaging and authentic manner that was connected to students' lives. Frustrated but determined to find a new way to teach this subject, a team of Social Studies and English teachers sought a curriculum whose values and principles aligned with those of the school.

They found what they thought might work in the American Social History Project (ASHP) launched in 1989 and supported over the years by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Office of Academic Affairs of the City of New York, and other foundations and organizations. In contrast to the traditional decades-old American history curriculum that focuses on presidents, wars and political battles, ASHP examines history through the eyes of common people and creates a different set of connections and meanings for high school students. The program has clearly defined goals:

- Improve the content knowledge of teachers of American History and English
- Foster inquiry- and technology-based instruction
- Increase student motivation, literacy, and academic achievement.
- Integrate mutually reinforcing elements into the curriculum:
 - interdisciplinary content
 - inquiry learning
 - high school-college partnerships
 - sustained and reflective faculty engagement
 - emphasis on teaching with technology
 - analysis of primary documents
 - development of print, visual, and multimedia materials that explore the richly diverse social and cultural history of America

- teacher training through professional development seminars in the use of technology, active teaching and learning methods and infusion of the latest research in their classrooms.

MMEC's social studies and English teachers supported the program, and the school adopted the curriculum. After an extensive training and reflective action research process, the school implemented the program and gained national recognition. To this day, the school is proud of the fact that it is the oldest ASHP original middle college team in the nation. Of all the schools that first adopted the curriculum, the MMEC team has been together the longest and has done everything it set out to do. One of their major goals was to train other teachers across the country to implement the ASHP curriculum. For more than 15 years, MMEC's teachers have been professional trainers of the ASHP program, working with almost eight hundred teachers nationwide.

In addition, a core group of ASHP teachers emerged from the trainings to form the *Teachers as Researchers* professional group. Those chosen as members of the group have spent years developing curriculum to supplement the national project. To date, they have developed lessons for a new program called *Emerging Perspectives: The Civil Rights Movement*. They are in the process of completing a text of lessons titled *Through Another's Eyes: Emerging Perspectives of Arab Culture and the Middle East*.

"We've chosen to do our work differently to achieve the results we need," one teacher said. The students agree:

The way they teach here is really different. I first thought it would be boring but it was really interesting and I learned a lot from this class whereas in my other high school they would just tell you to read the book and do the questions. Here it's more hands on and discussion. I love ASHP. It's very informative.

The Early College/Tech Prep Pathway Demonstration Program

MMEC offers "tech prep" education and workforce training to its students. Tech prep education is a planned sequence of study in a technical field that begins as early as the 9th year of school. The sequence extends through two years of postsecondary occupational education or apprenticeship following secondary instruction, and culminates in an Associate degree or certificate. This important school-to-work program helps students make the connection between education and employment.

In 2005, MMEC extended its partnership with Mott Community College through a five-year grant the college received from the U. S. Department of Education for a Tech-Prep Demonstration Program (TPDP). The purpose of the grant was to help the school build upon its existing model of offering tech prep education and workforce training to its students. Named the Early College/TPDP Pathway, the program has several distinguishing features.

- It builds an infrastructure to seamlessly transition MMEC students into technical programs at Mott Community College.
- It provides students' awareness of the technical programs offered at the college through a guided- process seminar that helps them identify a career interest area and explore the career and pathway leading to employment in that field. They proceed to develop a five-year program/plan of study.

- This plan guides individual students through their course selections for high school, dual enrollment, and the 13th year of the middle college. Each program of study reflects the student's ability to succeed academically at his own pace.
- MMEC students who select one of the approved technical certificate or degree programs join a cohort of similar students and receive additional support and counseling as they overlap high school requirements with their college credits.
- Depending upon the students' location on their career pathway, a cadre of high school personnel and community college faculty provide support to insure their continuous progress. The goal is to increase the number of students graduating from MMEC with a degree and a meaningful internship in a career area that aligns with their Educational Development Plan (EDP) goals.
- Such support services include admissions, testing, academic advising and scheduling of classes. *The Partners in Learning* support program offers support in mathematics, language arts, science, technical degree pathways and fine/graphic arts.

In 2010, an external research organization conducted a formal evaluation of the Early College/Tech Prep Pathway Demonstration Program. Chapters 6 and 7 present the evaluations by students and staff of the strengths, values and possible areas of improvement of the program.

Since its establishment, MMEC has searched for appropriate ways to teach or improve instructional programs to achieve its mission. Its success serves as a model of how a commitment to a philosophy and belief system about teaching and learning can transform the educational process for students and staff. In an atmosphere of professional freedom and respect, using high-quality research and scholarship, the school was able to transform curriculum areas into exciting new experiences that thrilled students, instilled a new love of learning, and fostered their personal, academic and career growth. During this process, staff fulfilled the demands of various state and accreditation agency requirements regarding curriculum content, but found a new way to enliven teaching and learning.

CHAPTER 5

Engaging and Involving Parents

*Is this the right environment for your child?
What adjustments do you think we need to make at the school, at home?
What help do you need?*

Mott Middle Early College Counselor

The challenge of guiding at-risk potential dropout students to successful high school and community college completion is not one that a school can meet alone. Critical to the achievement of this goal is the involvement of students and parents, as well as the school staff. The school's logo showing three overlapping hands represents the "triple partnership."



Parents as well as students often need a way to reengage and reconnect with their children's school. Many parents view their relationships with teachers, school administrations and the total school environment through their own remembered frustrating and difficult memories, as well as what they may have witnessed through their children's experiences. At Mott, staff tries to involve disengaged parents, as well those who may have had good experiences, through positive structured requirements and opportunities to help them support their children's education and future. The following section describes several examples and presents parents' reflections on their children's experiences at the school.

How Parents Learn about their New Role and Responsibilities

The level of parental involvement required at the school is a paradigm shift for many students and families. Therefore, when any inquiry is first made about enrolling a student, both parent/guardian and prospective student are required to attend an informational meeting. At this preliminary stage, they learn about the philosophy of the school, the patterns of its culture and day-to-day life, and the opportunities provided through the school's Parent-Teacher-Student Organization (PTSO).

If the student and parent/guardian decide to pursue the application process, they meet with a school counselor or administrator for a personal interview that involves the student alone, the parent/guardian alone and both together. This process affords all parties a chance to ask questions or express views they may be reluctant to express in front of the other. During the same three-way interview, the parent/ guardian and student sign the Program Commitment

document (Appendix A) that helps reinforce the family's commitment to the school. Then, they all receive additional written and verbal communication explaining the differences between MMEC and traditional high schools, and the need for continuous collaboration of all parties.

Both the student and parent/guardian sign the Student Behavior Contract (appendix B) that commits both parties to abide by all the school's rules and guidelines. This document states that both "recognize our obligation to work toward positive growth and cooperative group membership." Before a student moves from provisional to regular acceptance, he or she must complete the four-day GAPS summer transition program that emphasizes the importance of this commitment and begins the student's bonding process with his or her peers, teachers and administrators.

The student and parent/guardian) sign additional admission agreements acknowledging their understanding of the mission and design of a middle college high school as a five-year early college. The documents explain the key components of an early college including dual enrollment, the development of an Educational Development Plan career pathway, a career-related internship in the 13th year of high school and other key expectations. Students and parents learn of the benefits and risks that are inherent in an early college program, including identifying the potential permanent impact of a failing grade on a student's college record that could adversely affect future admission into college as a traditional student.

This signed documentation of the shared partnership of school, student and parent(s)/guardian(s) clarifies to all parties the obligations and shared responsibilities they all share as members of MMEC. Such an approach is an additional expression of Glasser's Choice Theory¹¹ discussed earlier, which serves as a foundational guiding principle of MMEC. Specifically, it affirms the following guidelines to all parties:

- All behavior is chosen.
- Behavior constitutes individuals' best effort to achieve their goals.
- Individuals can control how they choose to behave.
- Individuals can take greater responsibility for their actions and make proper behavior choices.

With commitments from all parties official, the student is admitted, and the work begins.

After students have adjusted to their new school, they attend various seminars focused on specific academic and nonacademic college success skills. Concurrently, the school invites parents/guardians to information seminars to learn more about the high school/college overlap and their role in supporting their child during the transition to college coursework. At the start of the school year, the staff offers an early college parent seminar for parents/guardians of students who are just beginning their experience with actual community college classes. The seminar provides an overview of college seminars, classes and the Tech Prep Demonstration Project, along with information about the changes they should expect in their students' schedules and responsibilities. In late winter, they offer a second seminar for parents/guardians whose students are further along in their coursework where they discuss the process of determining and developing a major area of study and the added rigor of carrying multiple college classes. A panel of college professors informs them about available resources at the college, such as the writing and language labs.

¹¹ Glasser, 1998. Ibid.

These parent/guardian early college seminars not only educate parents/guardians about early college but also encourage them to be more involved with their student's college experience, especially the selection of a program of study. An extensive question and answer period follows both meetings.

As students progress through the year, teachers and counselors carefully monitor their progress. If there is reason for concern about a student's progress because of too many absences, dropping grades or social/behavioral issues, staff members schedule individual parent/guardian meetings to present information and invite parent(s)/guardian(s) to jointly plan for appropriate interventions and offer support to the student as needed. They discuss many questions with parents: Is this the right environment for your child? What adjustments do you think we need to make at the school, at home? What help do you need?

In this way, staff maintains an ongoing conversation with parents/guardians to maximize their children's personal and academic growth during the school year and in preparation for re-enrollment for the following year. Parents also receive bi-weekly letters about their students' attendance, monthly communications about their academic status and a monthly school update titled *Mott Middle Messages* via e-mail and/or hardcopy. The school's annual Fine Arts Nights Program also draws large numbers of parents who celebrate their students' achievements in theater, chorus and steel drums, choir and the visual arts.

Parents' Views of the School

To investigate how parents/guardians felt about the school and what they identified as its critical differences, staff asked them to provide their personal written reflections about the school and its impact on their child. Their perceptions provided valuable feedback for the school.

One parent wrote that the grading system made a big difference for her son. It raised his self-esteem and gave him new hope that he could earn college credits, and he did. In her opinion, "The tools that Mott used to teach reached not just the outside of my child but his inner soul as well, bringing out his goodness and untapped potential." Another family expressed similar gratitude that just the idea that their student *could* graduate with pride and earn additional credits past high school meant a great deal to their child and the whole family.

A father was pleased that his son was showing more responsibility and effort in his schoolwork and did not hesitate to ask for help from his counselor, Focus leader or classroom teacher if he didn't understand an assignment or needed tutoring or support. This was significant, for his son had never felt comfortable doing so before. He also thanked the school for alerting him to what he needed to monitor in the future to help his son stay on track.

Another parent praised the whole experience as a highly successful one for her child and the whole family. "Our daughter has taken full advantage of the college experience," she stated. "We feel that in some ways she has been able to reach greater heights and goals that would not have been possible if she had stayed in a regular high school because the expectations at Mott are much greater than in traditional high schools." In addition, they reported that their daughter felt safer at the middle college than she had in her former high school.

A number of parents described their appreciation for the school's Parent Group saying, "This is a working group that gets things done," one said, "unlike what I saw in the traditional school parent group. I think Mott provides an excellent opportunity for students and parents to work closely with the school."

- Parents gave many reasons why their children needed MMEC. The following is a listing of excerpts of remarks made by many of them:
- *"My son needed teachers that think about "out of the box" teaching—not round hole/round peg."*
- *"My daughter was not encouraged and felt very isolated before she came to Mott."*
- *"The high school my kids were in did not have much to offer."*
- *"My son was tired of the nonsense at his other school--the fighting, bullying, lack of respect for others and some teachers who seemed not to care at all."*
- *"My child needed more student-teacher contact."*
- *"My daughter needed to earn better grades."*
- *"My son wasn't happy at his last school and wasn't learning as much as he could."*
- *"The structure was important for my son to be successful as a Mott student. He did not have that structure in his previous high school."*
- *"My son wasn't happy in his last school, and felt he could learn more in a relaxed setting."*
- *"My daughter felt she needed the challenge to do work in a different environment."*
- *"I felt my daughter was not learning anything from high school. She could not focus in class because students were talking too much."*
- *"My child needed Mott to concentrate on college and change her environment."*
- *"My son needed to have a challenge."*
- *"My son enjoys being here; he wants to come to learn as much as he can."*
- *"My daughter loves to learn now. She looks at it as more of a responsibility, than a chore. She is taking ownership of her education now!"*
- *"The biggest difference has been the help my son has received."*
- *"What's different here are the learning environment and the safety. My child has become more responsible and independent."*
- *"My child benefited from being around other students that had positive attitudes and being in a college setting helped her mature a lot."*
- *Here my child is challenged.*
- Parents described what they thought was the biggest difference at the school and how that difference helped their child. The following are some of their remarks:
- *"The Focus Groups, the calm environment and the overall structure of the school have been the best!"*
- *"This school prepares students to be mature, respectful and self-reliant of responsibilities of their own education."*

- *“The teaching techniques used get an A+.*
- *“The students and teachers show respect for each other.*

Several parents wrote unsolicited letters of gratitude to the school describing how they valued the changes it had brought to their children. In one letter of appreciation, a mother described what the school meant to her son.

March 18, 2010

To the Wonderful Staff at Mott Middle Early College.

Although I know my words will fall short, I at least want to attempt to thank you for all you've done for my son. At Mott Middle College he not only felt he was accepted but also appreciated for the person he was; he felt like he belonged. You have no idea how important that was for him.

Your staff is so caring and so respectful of the students. You not only have high expectations for them, but you genuinely believe that they can achieve them. Belief is half the battle. Your method of keeping kids in the same Focus Group, and the things you do during the Focus Groups, have helped my son tremendously. Focus Group and the wonderful range of class offerings afforded him a place to fit in. Social safety and security are undervalued as an element for school success but it made all the difference for him.

Thank you to the office staff and all the support people that make the school function. Thank you to the teachers that made the classes so interesting and engaging. Thank you to the administration that designed such a great school and work so tirelessly to keep it growing. Thank you to everyone who contributes to the school. I don't know what would have happened to my son had it not been for all of you.

Sincerely,

Parent "X"

A second set of parents wrote a letter to the school on their daughter's graduation to express their deep appreciation for how it had changed their daughter's life.

Dr. Wagonlander, each of the teaching staff, counselors, office staff:

Words will never be enough to express our gratitude to each of you, for going the extra mile each day that you come to work. You've given our daughter a second chance to succeed in school and in life. Her father and I are forever grateful. The transformation in her life is evident to all who know her. You gave her a positive learning experience, encouragement to take risks and a chance to grow. Thank you!

Dr. Wagonlander, thank you for allowing our into your school. You were willing to accept her into Mott even if her other school wouldn't release her until after count day. Thankfully, in the end they did. Your actions spoke volumes, so did theirs.

To each of the teaching staff and counseling staff, thank you for caring about each kid and investing your lives to make a difference in theirs. You are the best!

To the office staff, thank you for all that you do to keep our kids and parents on track. You are always so helpful. If you don't know an answer, you are always willing to go the extra mile to find it out. You keep things running smoothly and I know it's because of your hard work.

I know that I've left someone out and I'm sorry. To all of you, who work to make Mott Middle Early College the great learning place that it is...thank you!

We are grateful to each of you.

Sincerely,

Mr. and Mrs. "Y"

The Challenges Parents Face

The parents/guardians of students at MMEC want the best for their children and appreciate the valuable new opportunity their children have received to continue their education. However, not all parents are as fully engaged or involved as they might want to be or as the school would wish, and the school faces an ongoing challenge to actively connect with each of them. Not all students have two parents to support them—financially or emotionally; in fact, most have one parent or sometimes, not even one, as a grandparent or other guardian assumes responsibility for their wellbeing.

Many students are the first generation of their entire family to even consider the possibility of a college education. For their parent(s)/guardian(s), this is, on the one hand, a journey to a strange land, and on the other, an unimagined dream for their children come true. The severe economic recession that Flint and its neighbors have suffered for many years—particularly with the dismantling of General Motors and other industrial plants in the area—has placed enormous strain on many families who are struggling just to survive and to be able to put food on the table for their children and themselves. Their despair and fatigue often prevent them from being the active partners they would like to be with the school and its entire staff. This makes the school's efforts to reach out to all parents in as many warm and creative ways as it can even more imperative. Parents/guardians and the school share the goal of future academic and personal success of each student and take all measures they can in pursuit of that goal.

CHAPTER 6

Voices of the Students

*We're a group—Mott Middle Early College.
We're together—the staff, teachers, students
because everyone will help you.*

An 11th Grade Student

Student Snapshots

Tamika:*

Before I came here, I didn't really care and I didn't see myself advancing with anything. Now, I love what I'm learning--my college classes, and my internship at the Genesee County Morgue with the medical examiner. I assist in autopsies once a week. The teachers here have been a big part of it. They are more exciting and made me actually care about the work.

James:

The teachers here are firmer and smarter and care more for me than the ones at my other high school. I came in the 11th grade because I was in trouble a lot at the school and I didn't have good grades. In this school, everyone is more welcoming and the teachers are more into what you are doing and who you are. The teachers are more challenging but you get to learn more.

Luisa:

I came because I wanted to build on my kinesthetic learning style. In my other school, we did mostly textbook work, read the paragraph, answered the questions...I understood the material but it wasn't really reaching me. One of my math teachers here said, "Wow, you're not like all the other students". She pulled out a 3-dimensional model of fractions and variables, and I said, "Oh, this makes so much more sense to me now." I began after-school tutoring in all my classes and I realized that if I can work with something and actually see it becomes clearer to me.

* All names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

Robert:

I did a 180 in this place. I don't have a father but I look to one of my teachers as my father. I call him Papa, that's the only way I can put it. He is very open, understanding, I came because I wanted one-on-one; I really hated people at that time. I thought, "Just get me through the school thing and I'll be done." But it was so much more; I never could have dreamed...

In this chapter, students describe what MMEC has meant to them and what differences they experienced between Mott and their other schools. They shared information through: (1) personal interviews; (2) survey responses; (3) reflections on their experiences in the school's non-violence Peacemaker Program; (4) comments on the school's collaborative Tech-Prep Demonstration Project (TPDP) with Mott Community College, (5) writings in their Graduation Personal Portfolios.

Students' Voices in the Interviews: How is Mott Different from Other Schools?

An external researcher/editor interviewed 34 students in grades 9 through 13 in personal 30-50 minute interviews. Each was asked the same question: "How has being a student at MMEC been different for you from what it was like in other schools?" The students' reflections and responses are presented unedited, with the exception that they are grouped around seven major themes that emerged from the interviews:

The external researcher/editor interviewed 34 students in grades 9-13 in personal 30-50 minute interviews. Each was asked the same question: *How has being a student at Mott been different for you from what it was like in other schools?* The students' reflections and responses are presented unedited, with the exception that they are grouped around seven major themes that emerged from the interviews:

- The school is like a caring family
- The counselors care for and counsel each student...and every staff member is a counselor
- Every adult in the school is a student advocate
- The teachers have passion for their work and caring for their students
- The school gives students a second chance
- The school helps students develop self-confidence, self-determination, personal responsibility and maturity
- The school helps students make thoughtful plans for their future

Let's now hear from the students themselves.

The School is like a Caring Family

The people really care here. At some schools, they're just there to get paid. We have very few kids here who don't do the work. They know when they come here it will be a relaxed environment, more like a home

setting Not only are the counselors counselors, but the teachers are counselors too. You can talk to them about any problems, problems at home or in school. There are a lot of students who don't have the motivation here that they need, but a lot of teachers help motivate them.

If I have a personal problem, there's someone here for me. I did not feel that before in my other school. Here I feel that I can go to them and ask them questions without them feeling judgment toward me or putting me down in any way because they're more open here.

The teachers here really, really encourage you. They give you a second chance to do everything here. If you mess up, they'll stand you right up and give you another chance. I call my principal mom; she gives me a hug every day. She said, "You're the role model". I like her a lot.

The teachers are more like a family—not just authority. They do their job but they also talk with you and you can trust them with secrets. Here there is less testing and more teaching, that's what happens. The teachers—they care a lot more than it seemed the other teachers did at public schools. If they haven't seen you for a while, they'll pull you aside and talk to you about it.

- *I think the teachers are really good about confidentiality here, I trust them. The counselor here has made a big difference. At my other school, they are more of a counselor in arranging your schedule and keeping track of what your classes are. Here they do that but they really try to help you and they connect with you.*
- *It's a very close school. If something happens to your family and one person here at school knows, everyone knows. It's not a bad thing; they can help you through it. My mom had a car crash and she was okay. When I came back two weeks later my Focus leader asked me if everything was okay, and I didn't even know what he was talking about because it was two weeks ago. It was just a follow-up thing that you don't see very often. I didn't know people here knew. He pulled me aside and said it privately so you knew that he really cared that everything was okay.*
- *Mott is a change from a normal high school with all the drama and disturbances. There, it was very cliquy and catty and people were just getting into fights all the time. Everyone had their cliques and no one really went outside. Here everyone really likes each other. When I first came here, I was walking through the halls and people were talking to me—I wasn't used to it.*
- *I really like the way the teachers embrace each student's individuality; there is room to be different and be accepted. It is more open to be who you are...you are accepted.*
- *I don't talk with my mom much or her boyfriend. My home is not a really close family for me; it never has been. Friends at school are my family. Miss S helps me keep my mind on track, Mr. M is like emotional support and Mr. W is the one who keeps me happy all the time.*

- *We're a group, MMEC, we're together—the staff, teachers, students, because everyone will help you. If you are in a class that's kind of hard they'll tell you how to study for it, like if everyone notices that you're having a bad day outside of school, they'll try to help you.*
- *I would say it's very easy to make new friends here and they don't judge you as harshly as at the public schools. It's a small school and everyone knows each other. They have Peacemakers here...they train them on how to stop fights. If two people get into an argument here, the trained Peacemaker listens to both sides of the story and helps them work it out. At the other high school they would just fight and get kicked out. Here they take time and resolve the problems.*
- *I lost my grandmother and came to school and tried to just make it through with a smile on my face, but it ended up getting to me. I was able to speak to my Focus leader. He noticed the difference and he talked to me and asked me if I was all right. He called my dad and said there was a change in my behavior. He was really concerned. Even my friends wouldn't pick up on it, but my Focus leader really helped me through.*

I call my Focus Group my family; we talk about everything. They are my brothers and sisters. It's helpful being one-on-one with a teacher who really knows you, can relate, and can give you that support. I think it's very vital to development.

I have more opportunities here: be more social, to go on different trips related to the courses, to have great mentors—the teachers are amazing, very supportive—to take free college classes and be around students who are also taking college classes. We can help each other out and ask each other questions. I don't think I would get that in a normal college. Here it is like roots—we're all branching out doing different things but at the end of the time, we can come together.

The Counselors Care for and Counsel Each Student...and Every Staff Member is a Counselor

What's special is the size and how much everybody cares. I feel safe here; it's like a home away from home in a way.

I came in middle of 9th grade; I went to another big public high school first. It was so different. They just didn't care much. My 5th hour was in the wrong lunch frame—I had Block A and block C. So, I didn't have a right lunch for almost the entire time I was there. I tried to go to my counselor every day during 4th and 5th hours, but all the counselors' lunches last ALL the lunches so I never got to see them or talk about it, because I was always missing 10-20 minutes from 5th hour. It just didn't work out right.

In my other school, I went down to see my counselor every day for two months and they said, "Come back later; come back in the morning," but my counselor got there too late. It was just a complete lack of care. There were just so many students and so many classes. Here the counselors don't take off an entire two-hour block for lunch.

The thing is this is such a smaller school that it lets the counselors know every student and give personal attention so the students get what they need. It really helps with just planning out the classes. At my other school, I had two classes in the wrong slots for a whole semester; that would never happen here. There is no time lapse, like, "Oh, well, for the past three weeks, we've been doing this and you missed it." Everything works much more smoothly here.

Next year when I come back, I'll be able to choose my college classes. My counselor helps me pick out the right classes. They don't assign your classes; you pick your own classes. They personalize your schedule and make it so it's comfortable for you, and they are flexible and can change it for you. You couldn't do it in the other place because it was so large and so hard to rearrange. Once you got your schedule, it was pretty much set.

At normal high schools, they are pretty much unchanged for the past 75 years and pretty much only conform for one type of learner, whereas at Mott you can be left-brained—a, b, c, d—it doesn't matter. I was more of a left-brained person in the middle of a right-brained school. There is more of a one-on-one atmosphere with teachers and being here. I actually want to be here, whereas when I was at my other high school I didn't want to go to school.

My counselor has helped me find my way through what I'm doing, with my college classes, with my internship, at the Genesee County Morgue and with the County Medical Examiner. I assist in autopsies once a week. I'm 18. My math teacher was great. The fifth-year graduate sponsors are helping us get prepared for graduation, which I appreciate. Before I didn't really care and I didn't see myself advancing with anything. The teachers here have been a big part of it.

I have never thought of leaving this school, but my parents wanted to take me out and have me get my GED and go straight to work instead of getting a high school diploma. My counselor gave them a week to rethink it, and when we came back we talked with the vice principal and it was decided that I was to stay in the school and I was really happy.

I just recently had a crisis; I have to pass a computer class at MCC. I thought I passed it but I didn't. They tried to find different alternatives. My mother wants to see me graduate. We were about to take another approach of me leaving but then all the other teachers got together and found me an alternative, found my CC teacher and he is allowing me to do some extra work to make up, or they'll enroll me in one in the spring and I'll still be able to walk. It meant that I found out that I wasn't on my own. That if I just opened my mouth and talked to just one person, the whole staff knew and it was not an option for me to leave. Here, they said, NO, you've been here since 9th grade. That's not an option for you because you deserve to walk, so they all came together within a matter of hours and came up with a solution.

We save all our good report cards and our scholarships and stuff and certificates for our senior portfolio. We do work on our EDPs. The counselors help all the students. They help you pick college classes, they help you earn college credit; keep you on your toes about what you need to do about the next semester. If you failed this, you can do this to get caught up. They listen.

Teachers are a lot nicer here; they really care about you, and if you go to them with a problem, they offer you time after school, offer to take time out of their schedule to help you. They'll say, "Oh well, I have to go to dinner tonight but I can go later on, and I can help you with this problem after school if you don't understand it."

Came as junior, from another public school district in the county. I hated my school. I would walk five miles to skip class to get away. I was anti-social anyway, but I remember one specific class in English, we had our books, we couldn't really talk in class. It was, "Open your page, do your work..." Then the teacher was non-existent after that. She wasn't teaching. She just said here go to this page and do your work. They weren't one-on-one, didn't seem as if they really cared, they were really strict. No one reached out to me. I didn't feel I was interacting in the classroom at all. My counselor was really cool, but she didn't give me guidance; she let me vent but didn't push me outside the box to help me think in a different way.

I have one special adult teacher friend here; he is very understanding—does not judge me—really tries to help me. He says to me, "I can help you if you want my help."

I like how I can create my own schedule because in my other school when they gave me specific classes at specific times sometimes it didn't work out for me. Here I have drama and gym. They are my two relaxing classes, and I don't have to worry. I created the schedule the way I wanted it to be.

I almost had a crisis. Some students from another high school were coming onto our campus, and my friend and I were going to fight them. A couple of our students along with Officer Armstrong told us we weren't thinking. He said, "Do you know you could have lost your free education and would have to go back there?" The other was awful, and we realized that this is a great school.

I felt like I didn't quite fit in at my regular school, didn't quite fit in any group or clique. Cliques bother me. One other friend went with me and my sister who went before me, was still in attendance. I was a "nerd"—didn't really have many friends and that was about it. I started not to care about going to class; it was hard to go to school because I never felt like I fit in anywhere. Teachers didn't know how I felt. The school was pretty big and I felt like I was just a number. My counselor...going to talk to a counselor never really crossed my mind. I transferred out at end of 9th grade.

Every Adult in the School is a Student Advocate

They've helped me, I help them. They're been there for me when I've needed them. I've been kicked out of the house and the teachers have helped in every way possible. I've gone to Washington, teachers helped me figure out how to raise money, and they give me free college, so I want to give back.

I appreciate how the vice principal tries to get involved with all the students. He transitioned more from being an authoritative figure to someone who is more like a friend. We really need that. He's looking for the greater good of people. He idolizes Barack Obama and Martin Luther King and I think he is really using our forefathers and the leaders of American and global civilization to try to integrate them into this small little society and build on it.

I have more than one special teacher here...I like all the teachers. There are sweet intimacies; teacher let us retake our science tests so that we can make sure that we pass. One said, "Oh Elizabeth, you know you can do it; you know I love it, and you can do it."

There was a particular time here when some of the community college students got into it in the lounge with some of the Mott kids. It wasn't our fault because we hadn't done anything wrong. They were just rude to us and thought they could do all of this—take our table, etc. They made it seem like we were the ones who were talking out loud. So some of the college kids went to the vice principal and one of our teachers. We were in his office for at least a good three hours trying to figure out solutions, because he came and wanted to hear our side of the story. He was fighting for us. The only solution was that they had to suspend us for one day. That's the only day I've ever been suspended. I didn't get upset because he had to do what he has to do to keep the college happy. It was a Friday, so it was like nothing; we were back to school on Monday. For me it was both terrible and good—it was good because it could have been blown way out of proportion or I could have been even kicked out because of the college's feelings.

The lady in the front office--we talk about her and her daughter and son, and she reminded me of the special writing program I could apply for. She says, "You can do it—if you don't try, you'll be less of a person, you can go to the 13th year, and you can be more successful in college because you have to read and do reports and get ready." Then within a day she says, "Okay, come on, do this—do that." She helps me out with situations and stuff.

The Teachers have Passion for their Work and Caring for their Students

Here teachers care a lot more. If you go into a normal traditional high school you come in and they say, "Here's your worksheet, look in your book chapter 12 and find the answers." And that is pretty much your whole work for the semester. Here it is much more interactive. "I'm going to tell you these facts and I want you to think about them. We'll discuss

them together and see what you think.” These teachers are energized and love what they’re teaching; most have master’s degree in what they’re teaching. They’re passionate, this is their whole life. They bring it to you in a way that you think, “Oh, that is really interesting, let me write it down.”

The teachers are a lot more interactive. They’re much more passionate about their own subject than other schools. It’s not like you come into class and there’s a prewritten handout and you have a book, and you fill in the lines all day.

In this school, everyone is more welcoming and the teachers are more into what you are doing and who you are. The teachers are more challenging but you get to learn more and the art program is extremely more involved than any at other school I’ve been to. We do a lot of drawing classes, painting classes--earlier we had an anime class, quite a few drama classes and steel drums. And I’ve never been in a school that was really involved in the arts.

The direct relationship here: We’re a smaller school, and teachers are more able to focus on individuals rather than a whole classroom. It feels like students aren’t just like a number on a face; we’re individuals and they know us.

The School Gives Students a Second Chance

They didn’t have to give me a chance here because my grades were low but they did, and now they’re high. They did give me a chance. I needed new start and the other public school was not for me.

I did not always think I would go to college. Before I got here, I didn’t think school was important. I was just floating by doing whatever it takes to get by. My regular school day at any other school was to be the leader of the pack—to make the class laugh, or to skip, etc. One hour turned into the next and the next.

At my other high school, my grades were good. They’re better here. The teachers there weren’t bad but here they are more into their students and take the time out to actually help them. In my other high school, they just passed me, really.

I wouldn’t have believed when I was in Missouri that I would be where I am. There, I didn’t expect there would be a program that would allow me to take college classes. I would be just bewildered. But here, because it’s such a great program, I’m not bewildered and I’m so happy.

I have a few friends outside who do not have a home life. They are not supported in school, are rolling off the tracks and are not staying in school. They’re at the big high schools. I was like that. Being here makes a difference for me. If I weren’t here, I would probably have dropped out because I didn’t like my other school at all, and too many schools around here aren’t good. This school has changed my life.

I came here in the tenth grade from another public school district. I wasn't doing so well in there, falling behind, not going to class as much. It was too cramped, too many kids, too structured, too all pushed together and they wouldn't individually work with one person, and I needed more hands-on with the teacher. I failed the 9th grade. When I got to Mott, they just said you're a second-year high school student and I made up the year by doing grades nine and ten in one year.

I did a lot of drugs in my old school; here they gave me a new chance. I thought, "Just give me the chance and I'll do the school." By their example of being firm and of sound mind and sound individuals, I could just look up at them. Instead of being scolded, they set an example. With them it was like, "do as I do." Here, I could decide, I could have continued drugs, and I could have been kicked out. I saw it was up to me... I was open to make my own decision, instead of another person telling me what I had to do.

I did the public system for a while and that didn't really work for me at all. For 9th through eleventh grades, I was at another school in Flint; it wasn't good for me, I was trying but I would do a test, retake it, and I would fail every time and their system of just try again, try again wasn't working for me. I came here in the eleventh grade. In this school, everyone is more welcoming and the teachers are more into what you are doing and who you are. The teachers are more challenging but you get to learn more.

I have never failed a high school class here. I did in my other public school district. The classes here... the teachers are more helpful and teach different ways that are better for students to learn instead of just throwing all this stuff at you. They explain more.

The School Helps Students Develop Self-confidence, Self-determination, Personal Responsibility and Maturity

It has been great. I always knew I was a smart kid but I've always been a slacker. But when I came here, it gave me the confidence that I could go to college. It's the first time I've ever been on the honor roll—all the awards I've gotten—I'm now half-way to my Associate's degree. It's a great thing. I live on my own, with a roommate. I'm 19; I've done this since I was 16. I work at a local restaurant and I am completely supporting myself.

It's almost like you're given a chance to grow. I've been here since the 9th grade. I was like in a cocoon—being responsible for being in your college classes, it really made me come out of my shell and be more independent, open to more ideas, and here I am a butterfly. I think that's the experience you don't get at many other high schools. I think it's vital to be becoming the person I am.

Knowing that some of my teachers were students here and they weren't good students here and then they turned out to be one of my teachers shows me that by going here—and by the different things that are here,

that if you're a bad person or a bad student you can actually turn your life around. I'm going to miss it here.

I really appreciate the zero tolerance policy here for fighting, drugs, violence and all those other things. What it does is instill values and principles in all its students and those values will carry over into other areas of your life, when you go for a job, and you know from your four or five years of high school.

It's great here. There is a level of expecting you to do what you have to do instead of forcing you to do what you have to do. If they force you to do it, it's like them telling you, "You don't want to do this, I know you don't want to do this, so I'm going to force you to do this." Have you ever been in a power struggle with a three-year old? It won't work. Here they expect you to do certain things, etc. and if you fail, you feel bad about it because you know that you didn't live up to that expectation.

I'm starting a mentoring program here. About the older kids getting together with the younger kids and helping them feel like they belong here, they have a bigger brother or sister, just help them be successful here, instead of just coming to school and skipping. I want to do it because I want it to help students better themselves. So they can mentor the younger ones. When I need someone to talk to and my dad is working, sometimes a kid feels more comfortable talking to another peer.

At times, it gets tough here because you see things going on that you don't want to be part of, but we learn to deal with it. It's constantly evolving, constantly moving forward. If we learn from our mistakes, we create a better environment for those who come after us. I've been learning about Darwin in biology. I don't know where this notion came from but I have Darwin stuck in the back of my head. I don't necessarily agree with all the things because I really think genetic engineering is a big problem spot, but I think of this school as a constantly moving sphere. It's never going in any one direction but it's moving where it needs to go to keep the momentum going.

I think that one of the brilliant things Dr. Wagonlander is trying to do here is not just to give people a free education but to constantly invent new ways for people to reinvent themselves. I'm grateful for this opportunity and thank her for this all the time.

The no fighting policy is important. If you fight at Mott, you're kicked out of school for good. Before I saw at least two fights every day in my other school. Here I see a fight once a year and you usually don't see it. It's nice knowing that you can go to school and you're safe. The fighting was distracting for me knowing that anytime I could go and get jumped and this person would be kicked out only for three days and that's all it was. You can get caught with anything in the public schools and be back in three days. Not here. Here, it's very clear--you better be responsible or you'll be out.

Here they treat you like an adult. The kids are kind of in charge because the teachers are here to help you, and if you ask for something, they'll look into it, and if it's legal and safe, then you're going to have it.

It's a lot of work here. This isn't something that you can come and think you're going to fly through it... You're going to get tired here and you have to want it because in this school it's all around you that what you want to do, you can do it.

You've got friends around you who have 20 or so college credits, and they're in the eleventh or twelfth grade. I have 21 college credits, and by the end of this semester I'll have 28, and I'm still doing two more classes before I graduate. It's been good. First year was kind of rough getting along with all the other students because I had a smart mouth and attitude. I worked on it and got better. And now I'm having a real good time.

Mott is an open environment with open-minded people and I don't get judged like you would at other high schools. The structure—the campus is open, so you have the choice to skip or not to skip and it makes you mature, because it's easy to skip, but if you do you can get kicked out. It makes you feel more like an adult because you're able to make that choice. In other public high schools they take away the choice. Some kids may take advantage here but you do get kicked out if you miss a certain amount of days here, but just knowing that you're able to do but you don't want to, it makes you more mature.

At other schools, they know that you're younger and they try to treat you as such. They say, "If we give them responsibility they will slack off." Here they give us a chance to do the wrong thing knowing that we won't. There's a lot more trust here. A small percentage won't make it here. Not every student can go to a middle college. They just aren't mature enough or can't step up to the responsibility or can't do it between home life and school life but the people that it works out for understand that, like for example, we don't really have a formal dress code, but we don't wear bikinis. We respect it enough to make just general courtesy rules and stick to them. We all make them; we know when something is out of character. If someone steps out of line, other students will just say, "Hey, there's a college down the hall, and we're very aware that they won't like that."

I wasn't doing well and now I'm overachieving. I'm doing more than most kids are doing. I'm a role model. If there's a problem in the school, they bring me in to mediate the conflict. I'm doing more than I need to; I'm just trying to make this place better. I'm a mentor for a kid here, been doing high school and college since my second year here. I want to help this school and everyone in it any way I can.

Every night I sit down and talk with my mother and talk about what's happening here. This school is really all about rapid progress. I think when you're coasting along on this highway of life you can only go so fast, but MMEC has found a way to give you everything you need and more and take it two steps faster. They say the shortest distance

between any two points is a straight line, but it seems that Mott has floated over the line and found new destinations. As long as we're moving forward we're doing so much for humanity that is immeasurable.

My mother keeps telling me how much I can give to others to take full advantage of everything I have from this school. She speaks of the trickle down family, of how everything that I've learned from my teachers and professors here I hope I can give to those who come after me. I've had a say-so here about a lot of different things. I like to dance so I decided that I wanted to start a dance group after school. They allowed me to do that, and said, "What support do you need to start your dance group?" It's a hip hop group. I'm the teacher of the other students who want to come and learn hip hop after school. It works out, because I know if it doesn't work out here, they'll help me find other ways to make it work out. That showed me that they trusted me with my leadership with no questions asked. They didn't ask, "How do you know this is going to work?" They said, "As long as there's a teacher in the room, go right ahead." Is that a big deal? Yes! Because I feel like this is my home here so of course, I want to start everything here.

This place is by far my favorite school. I'm so sad I have to leave this year, and I don't want to. Here, it's a lot easier for students not to go to class, but they go. You think about it critically. You think, "Oh, that's going to come back to me later." Here you feel like you're on your own and you get the sense that it is your choice—your decision—and you know you have to make the right choice because you know the consequences if you choose wrong. You see it happen to other people.

I'm proud of what I'm doing but I don't want to focus on it too much because I don't want to get distracted. I'm really an impulsive person. I don't want to think too long—just want to find the most direct and sensible route to get to a place where I can be a constructive individual and a deep thinker. I want to be able to place myself in any situation and find the best route.

My mom puts me down. I keep myself going with my aunt and my boyfriend. It's somewhere I can go to get away from home. And Mott has helped me so much. I'm really proud. When I wrote my "Who I am" statement for my portfolio, it kind of made me realize that I'm really proud of myself, that I never expected to be here where I am now.

Before I was not a people person, I did not want to talk to anyone; I was just in my bubble. But now I don't have a bubble. I like to talk to everyone and get to do everything I can. I have taken three college classes here and earned three credits. I think it's really amazing because without this I wouldn't be able to continue my education and neither would other people here, so I'm glad that I have something else that I can do and then scholarships will be easier.

The School Helps Students Make Thoughtful Plans for their Future

I need to finish my Associate's degree at Mott Community College and then I want to end up in Tennessee teaching but I'm not sure how. I want to get there, but I have time to figure out all that. I want to teach early elementary school. I have taken three one-credits that are compulsory and got a 4.0 in English 101. My teachers at the other school wouldn't recognize me. They would be proud but they would have no idea how it happened.

I'm definitely going to stay here and at Mott Community College (MCC). That's one of the main reasons I came here. I plan to go on to become a physical therapist and transfer over to a college. My grandma's a nurse and so health is in the family. I'm also going to the Skill Center for nursing: the Skills Center is like a technical school. I'm taking nursing, biology here, passed all my science classes here, my favorite subjects. I hope to get a nursing class at MCC, like the Certified Nursing Assistant class, so I can get that and work in a hospital.

I've earned four community college credits. I want to go to Oregon State University and major in environmental science. After the ACT's I really started looking at colleges, and when we took the ACT they had the thing where we could pick out a school. I picked out Oregon State; they just sent me flyers and I liked it. I've always been interested in Environmental Science, since the eighth grade after a movie on eating meat—the cycle it goes through—the cows poop, the farmers wash it off, kills the oceans and the fish. I was always interested in how things are interconnected.

After Mott Middle, I'm probably going to find out what university I want to transfer to in order to finish up my music education program. I've been talking to some of the professors here at MCC about how to become a music major and I want to teach music. I want to teach music because I really think it will benefit someone else.

Before, my grades were 3.6, 3.6, and 3.8. The last two marking periods I got a 4.0. I have 28 college credits. I'm getting my Associate's degree in business. Then I plan on going to an out-of-state college.

I'm graduating now, and continuing at the Community College. I'm interested in Quantum Mechanics. I took Philosophy 101 when I was at Mott and I loved it. My professor was very open minded—the way he talks, we think in a very similar way, very theoretical and very open to a lot of different concepts. I have always been a thinker. I've written poetry since I was in junior high, and I was always thinking more deeply about things. Quantum Mechanics is a new branch of physics. I understand math, but Quantum Mechanics defines matter in a different way...A particle can only be in one place at one time....It makes the other particles vibrate in a way but then it's just a force of its own. It can be measured only as a force and the example it sets by moving other particles. I read a lot; I read about this in books, and I think about things.

I want to go to Central or Western Michigan University to become a teacher and then come back. I'll transfer, so I'll automatically be a junior.

I'll have my teaching degree when I'm 20 if I do this right. I've wanted to be a math teacher since third grade and I'm going to do that.

When I graduate in June, I'll have two Associate degrees: arts and Associate in science. A lot of the degrees you can dual credit. I want to do computer science as a career—networking. I've already got almost half of it done, and have 25 credits.

I have a full ride to Baker College to become a teacher. Then I will continue after four years and go to the University of Michigan-Flint and get my masters degree and teach high school.

I'm going to be studying for my Associate's degree in arts and a certificate of achievement in business management, because I want to be a freelance set designer, graphic designer and illustrator all at the same time. I learned about illustration from a guest artist who came here. I have already been doing graphic design online, and ever since I was little, I wanted to be a designer.

I have 18 college credits from MCC and I just got a \$40,000 scholarship. I have so many memories from this school that carry me through and they make it easy for me to carry on because I know there have been good times. I'm going to ship out to Fort Bragg this July because the GI bill is \$40 K and I want to go to a university that I want to go to, and there I'm going to be a Medic and I want to get a degree in nursing and science. I have completed many medical classes. I'm halfway to my nursing degree. Just for going through basic college training, I get eight college credits, and then I can do my bachelors' degree there. My plans are to have that money to finish school. I did lots of research on this. A Marine recruiter came to me at Mott and showed me my contract in writing. I researched it online, and talked to other Marine recruiting stations and other armed services and decided to join Marines. I see definitely that knowledge is power. Right before my godmother died, she gave me a big speech, and I was the only one who was not in a gang, running the streets. She said my life is on my shoulders, that I should finish school and I promised her I would. I have "My Life" tattooed on my shoulders. I have changed here; I have most definitely grown up. I know I'm more mature now, because now I know of things that used to make me mad. My grades are much better. I have finally decided what I want to study. I'm pretty focused now. I feel being here has helped me do that.

The voices of the students presented above pose critical questions for all educators to consider:

- *What can we learn from the above interviews?*
- *How did students describe the ways in which their experiences at the school were different?*
- *What can be the relevance of their observations for educators?*

Student Responses to the 2009 National Center for Restructuring Education (NCREST) Survey

In June 2009, graduating seniors responded to a survey developed by the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching (NCREST), based at Teachers College, Columbia University (<http://www.tc.edu/ncrest/>). This presents their responses to four key questions:

- *What was the best part of being a student at Mott Middle/Early College?*
- *What are some of the reasons why college classes are more difficult?*
- *What are your plans after you graduate from this school?*
- *If you could change one thing about your experience at this school, what would it be?*

A total of 38 students responded to four questions posed on the survey. Comments below were selected from all given to avoid duplication of responses.

Question: What was the best part of being a student at MMEC?

- *All of it. I wouldn't change any of it, maybe I would've taken more college courses but I regret none of it. I loved everything from Ligon to Peer Mediation to The Cedar Point and our Focus trips.*
- *Being able to be myself.*
- *Maybe I would have taken more college courses.*
- *Being able to make up high school credit.*
- *Being able to take college classes and have it paid for. I feel that I am better off than anyone from my old school.*
- *Being in the MMEC Steel Drum Band.*
- *Focus Group and how much your group can help you.*
- *Getting on the honor roll seven times.*
- *Getting to be myself. I've grown so much at this school and I feel that being here has made me a better person.*
- *Having a better understanding of who I am. Knowing I can do anything if I put my mind to it. Also, becoming a student for the national conference this year.*
- *I like the way the teachers help you out and that you can take college classes.*
- *Meeting new people and learning new things that I can pass down to the future that's arriving.*
- *Learning how to handle myself.*
- *Meeting new people.*
- *My best experience at this school was steel band and having forensic science.*
- *Taking college classes.*

- The attitude of the teachers and their compassion for their students, and the friends I've made along the way.
- The closeness of the teachers and students, the way they were there to help us when we needed it, whether it was schoolwork or problems at home. They always made sure we were on top of our class work.
- The best part of my experience was being able to take college courses.
- The commitment of the staff and faculty to see the students succeed.
- The diversity of ideas from every person.
- The experience with the caring staff members.
- The feeling of togetherness and the support system at this school really helps with the overall experiences.
- The freedom yet the responsibility of a school of choice.
- The opportunity for early college.
- The relationships with friends and teachers were very comforting in a school environment. The teachers want you to pass.
- When I went to the National Middle College Conference in New Orleans.

Question: What are some reasons college classes are more difficult than high school classes?

- They expect more because you have so much more work and a short amount of time to get it done.
- You are expected to do much more work.
- Deadlines for papers, topic, test requirements of instructors.
- In college, you're expected to achieve with or without support. In high school, you have teachers who actually pay attention to your success, which means they are more supportive and lenient.
- It's a different environment and it's new to me. I'm nervous and the pressure gets to me if I'm not focused.
- It goes by very quickly and some professors expect you to already know the material.
- It's a more mature atmosphere so everyone knows what has to be done.
- Professors don't want to hear your excuses.
- The assignments are in more need of detail than high school classes are.

Question: What are your plans after you graduate from this school?

- I plan on going back to back to MCC and get my pre-req's to transfer over to Hurley Medical Center School of Radiology.

- I plan on going to Baker College.
- I'll complete a four-year teaching program, and then afterwards I'll transfer to U of M-Flint to obtain my master's degree.
- I plan on enrolling in U of M-Flint for the fall semester.
- I plan on being a full-time college student for two years straight until I get a job.
- I plan to attend Michigan State University to accomplish my goal in getting a veterinarian scholarship.
- I'm going to work at Cedar Pointe from June 28-November 1st. Then I will come back to Michigan and complete my graphic design degree at Mott Community College.
- I have no clue at the moment. I would like to go to college eventually but I want to take some time off.
- I plan on continuing at Mott Community College. In 2010, I want to transfer to either U of M-Flint or Michigan State University.
- I plan on finishing my interpreter program at Mott then going into nursing.
- I plan on going to college and afterwards join the Navy.
- I plan on going to University of Michigan-Flint to major in pre-pharmacy.
- I plan on taking a little bit of time off. Then going back to college in order to get a degree in computer networking.
- I plan to attend a professional wrestling school to be trained to be a professional wrestler.
- I plan to attend Mott Community College in the fall and transfer to Eastern Michigan University in the winter.
- I want to join the U.S. Customs Office.
- I plan to go to a college that offers culinary arts classes.
- I'm joining the U.S. Marine Corps. I plan on relaxing and getting my affairs in order until I ship out to North Carolina. There I will join the Marines and then further continue my education.
- My plans are to attend Wayne State University.

Question: If you could change one thing about your experience, what would it be?

- I really wish I had come here in my 9th-grade year, rather than waiting until my GPA was way too low.
- I would have invested more in the future.
- I wish I could have started here my freshman year.
- I would change my attendance and attend more often. I would be a little more attentive in class.
- I would do more work and not fail classes.
- I would have not messed up my first year and strived harder to get more college in.

- I would have opened up a little more.
- I would have started on the right path in 9th grade.
- I would have taken better advantage of the college courses.
- I wouldn't change a thing.
- I would've started earlier and stayed focused longer even with those long college classes and high school classes.
- My study habits.
- Passing dropped college classes.
- Stay for a fifth year.
- Taken more college classes so that I could graduate with cords. Also I would take my 60-hour internship in the twelfth grade, not my thirteenth year.
- The way I look at criticism.
- How some teachers help more than others do.
- The misunderstandings between my counselors and me.
- The way I went about handling course work. to be a better student and use my time better.
- To do better in my college classes. To have tried harder my senior year!!!!

Responses to the school's Non-Violence Peacemaker Program

The current Student Leadership Peacemaker Program developed from a long-standing school focus on non-violence and conflict resolution. During the 2010-11 school year, the staff invited other schools who were members of the Michigan Early Middle College Association (MEMCA) to a Peacemaker Conference hosted by the school. The staff led demonstration sessions on conflict mediation and assisted their visiting colleagues to develop a project to take back to their own schools. They also developed two new programs at MMEC including an urban garden project to grow food to help the homeless, and a student-mentoring project to assist the anti-bullying club at a neighboring K-8 school.

Let us now hear how some students describe their experiences in the program. Each paragraph was written by a different member of the program.

- *Peacemakers has had a huge influence on me, especially the way I perceive and relate to people. Not only has it helped me define what I stand for but it has also taught me how to relay my message of making peace and confronting hatred with love. I hope someday to help expand Peacemakers to more people, educating people and progressing towards peace.*
- *We can't change the whole world, but we can make a difference and what better way than to start with the generation under us.*
- *The program made me realize that bullies and mean people are changing lives every day. As a Peacemaker, I feel we have an obligation to take a stand against bullies and take action wherever the opportunity presents.*

- *I, along with my fellow Peacemakers know and understand that we can't change the entire world, so we focus in on our little piece of the world. In doing this, we start a ripple of change that others add and accumulate more undulations of change to. As Peacemakers, we refuse to simply sit around and just talk about change. We initiate it.*
- *This program has brought me closer to the ones in the group. The program has taught me that if you're more confident, you can change something that's small. If you only make your peace peaceful and they make their peace peaceful, then everything will be ok.*
- *Thanks to Peacemakers, I really do see how important children are to our future. In the very near future, they will be the ones running our country and even our world. If we simply just help them to become better people instead of making them think that killing and violence is okay, then we can help in taking that small step to making our country a safer place for our own children.*
- *Being a part of Peacemakers has impacted me in many ways. Since I've become a Peacemaker, I have noticed that I've been less quick to get angry and mad. I've grown to accept that with peace anything can be accomplished but with violence nothing gets accomplished.*

Student Assessments of the Tech Prep Demonstration Project

The TPDP, described earlier (Chapter 4) provides opportunities for students to pursue one of five aligned high growth tech prep career opportunity programs: Graphic Design; Medical Practice Management; Medical Secretary; Air Conditioning, Heating, and Refrigeration Technology; and, Building and Construction Technology. In spring, 2010, external researchers interviewed students as part of a formal evaluation of their perceptions of the program.

While still in an early stage of its implementation, the MMEC Tech-Prep Demonstration Project with MCC is deepening the relationship between the two partner institutions, and helping them strengthen the support they offer to their shared students.

The selections below contain excerpts from the evaluations by students enrolled in the project conducted in the spring of 2010.

- *I do fine in college classes. It is confidence building to take classes at the college level, and we don't tell our peers and teachers at the college that we are high school students.*
- *There is more career awareness at MMEC. A goal of the Tech-Prep Demonstration Project is to improve and increase competencies in math and science, and this has helped me with more focus on these skills.*
- *The process of finding the right program of study has definitely been integrated. Career cruising, information sessions, introductory classes, advisor meetings, long-term planning and use of resources have been very helpful. Counseling helped me a lot through different things. Teachers and counselors became my support system in the program. They want to see us graduate. They want to be here.*

- *My Mott counselor knows I know what I'm interested in, which is the Building & Technology Program, and he advised me which classes I needed to take. It's helpful to review my Educational Development Plan (EDP) every year.*
- *Our Focus Group leaders have more conversations with us about our interests regarding programs of study at the college, and the Advanced Dual Enrollment seminar really helped me with long-term planning about where I want to go and how I need to behave.*
- *I'm more aware of careers. Now I'm taking a sequence of courses for the specific program of study I'm following.*
- *I didn't know how many options I had for work, and the program increased my career awareness. We're just more aware of how many resources are at the college and how much we can learn.*
- *This is a super opportunity for me. I'm earning 40 credits in Automotive, what a great opportunity! One of my friends is completing a Dental Assistant Program. Wow!*

Student Writings in their Graduation Personal Portfolio

Before their graduation, students wrote answers in their personal portfolios to three questions: “Who am I? Where am I going? How am I going to get there?” Their responses shed further light on their identity, their future goals, and their methods of achieving their goals. The following excerpts, which can serve as mini case studies, are from the portfolios of three graduating seniors.

Arthur

I'm Arthur and throughout the years of my life one of the hardest questions to answer is, “Who am I and what am I going to do with my life?” It took me a while to figure out that this is not an easy task. After not taking the first couple of years in high school seriously, I did not have any idea where I was going. I was kicked out of my school and had no idea what I was going to do. My family and friends thought I was not going to go back to school and would just drop out. I thought I was at a dead end until I found Mott Middle College. I heard about it from a friend and then went to their orientation and listened as they talked about the free college and that this school was different from others.

They actually helped me with my education and direction in life. After I started attending Mott my grades improved. I started attending class all the time and after taking some college classes I have found the career pathway I will want to work and will enjoy doing.

At the moment, I am taking college classes in the engineering pathway. I almost have completed my first real college class, Fundamentals of Electricity for Automobiles. This class has

opened my eyes to a whole new world that I cannot wait to be a part of. For my internship I worked with Mack's Car Stereo and after 60 hours there learning and watching the techs I learned some valuable information about working in this field. This made up my mind that car installation is my thing. In addition, I am thinking about taking classes in business management and hoping one day I can open my own business, but that is just a later kind of thing.

For my career goals my short-term career goal is to get my MECPP (Mobile Electronics Certified Professional) certification and then try to get a job installing radios, etc. I am going to stay in college and work for my degree in applied sciences so I can go on to getting a better job in the Electronics field and make good money doing what I love.

I also in the past year have become a father and I have a family to support now. My goals are to move out soon and get a place for my girlfriend, my daughter and me to start our new lives off with our little family.

In order to stay on my path and keep reaching for these goals, my first step is to stay in college because knowledge is the key for success. I want to expand my knowledge to the fullest in the automotive field so I am going to get my applied sciences degree so I can have many more job opportunities.

Charles

I am a young, black, intelligent and smart young man who has a good head on his shoulders and know where he is going in life. It was a long, rocky road to get where I am today, because I never wanted to listen to anyone. All I cared about was taking the easy way out, and never wanted to do any work.

But my mom told me that there is no easy way out in life, and everything that you want in life, you have to work hard for it. That's when I came to Mott Middle, and the hard work began.

I am the type of person who learns better in a small setting. I like to have one-on-one time with teachers and that's exactly what I got. Before you know it, I went from a one point something GPA to a three point, and have been maintaining good grades ever since I've been at Mott Middle College.

Theater is my life. I can sing, dance, and act, but my favorite is to dance, and to teach other people how to dance. People always tell me that they can just picture me being on stage somewhere. They also say that I work well with others, and they love to work with me because I have good communication skills and I love to try and do new things.

I intend to continue in theater studies at Mott Community College and then transfer to Wayne State University when I have my Associate's degree, because they have a much better theater department and I could really learn lots there.

Angela

In order for me to tell you who I am, I must start by telling you who I used to be. I used to be this very shy girl that rushed down the hall not speaking to anyone. I didn't talk to anyone and when someone asked me a question I kept the answers really short. I couldn't look anyone in the eye for a long time. I couldn't get in front of a group of people and say a few words without sweating and stuttering.

Now today I have represented my school in the National Middle College Conference that was held in New Orleans. I have spoken at a few school meetings and I have done a couple of presentations. I have gained a few friends since I came to Mott Middle College and I can walk down the halls slowly and with confidence. I can hold some type of conversation.

I have done a great deal of community service like the A.I.D.S. Walk, North End Soup Kitchen, Eastern Michigan Food Bank and many other things.

I have been on the honor roll many times since I came to Mott Middle.

I think I have come a long way since I first came to Mott. I can say this school has truly changed me for the better. I have grown into a more confident woman. I just feel I have accomplished so much and I found myself while I was here at Mott.

I plan to become a teacher when I get out of college. I am glad I got some help from this school because I know you have to be more outspoken to be a teacher. I may not be all the way out of my shell but I can say I have grown and I am still making progress. I have always been respectful to my teachers and a good listener. That's one thing that hasn't changed and will not change.

What can we learn from the voices and writings of the students who have shared their thoughts with us? What can we learn from MMEC about how a school can create an environment that has such extraordinary impact on young lives?

The students have informed us that for them, their school remarkable and unique. We have read how they believed MMEC differed from their past educational experiences, and how those differences affected them. How do their experiences relate back to the initial purpose of the school, even before it opened its doors? We read earlier in Chapters 1 what the administration and staff enunciated as the school's core mission, values and beliefs, affirmed before it even opened its doors. In Chapters 2 and 3, we read how this core mission remained

the foundation and the basis for the subsequent scholarship, research and reflection of the entire staff in creating a learning environment that shaped student success.

It is worth examining the statement of commitment the school's first dedicated educators wrote before the first student walked through the school's doors.

Our Commitment to our Students

*To create a learning family
To encourage critical thinking
To recognize the importance of feeling
To develop and rekindle human intellect
To actively seek challenges and changes
To give support in times of joy and in times of need*

What is perhaps most remarkable is that the school has been able to institutionalize and maintain that commitment. Through the passage of time, the addition of new staff, and the expansion of its earliest vision from a middle college for at-risk students to a middle/early college that can lead to an Associate degree, the school has been able to maintain and constantly recreate itself as a living, dynamic opportunity.

Certainly, the continuing presence of Wagonlander, the founding principal of the school, has played a most critical role. Only time will tell how the school will prosper once she is no longer there to guide it. There is reason for hope, however, for some of the original members of the staff are still there, and new teachers and staff are consciously and continuously integrated into the philosophy of the culture of the school, assuming the mantle of leadership that has been so thoughtfully constructed.

CHAPTER 7

Voices of the Staff

Since the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk* in 1993, public education has been the focus of much investigation, debate and political discourse. Secretary of Education T. H. Bell created the Commission in 1981, to examine the quality of education in the United States and to make a report to the nation and to him within 18 months of its first meeting.

The Commission was created because of the Bell's concern about "the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system."¹² Soliciting the "support of all who care about our future," Bell noted that he was establishing the Commission based on his "responsibility to provide leadership, constructive criticism, and effective assistance to schools and universities."¹³

The composition of the Commission was telling. Of its 17 members, there were three university presidents, two university professors, one community college president, three present or past national or state school board presidents, one retired corporate research lab C.E.O., one former state commissioner of education, one past president of a foundation for the teaching of economics, one private consultant in facility economics and value management services, one principal of a public high school, one principal of a parochial high school; and, most noticeably, only one teacher.

The conversation about how to reform America's public schools has often been shrill, with influential voices coming from individuals who rarely set foot in a public school classroom—if indeed they ever did—after -after their high school graduation. As the years passed and the rhetoric's temperature rose in the form of pronouncements and castigations by some of the country's national political and business leaders, it became increasingly evident that the voices of the teachers—those who work day after day with the millions of student in America's public schools—were seldom heard. Sadly, what has been missing has been the "inside-out" story that only educators within the schools live and know. The volumes of reports, critiques, government policies and top-down mandates that have characterized American school reform over the past twenty-five years have been largely developed far from classrooms and the day-to-day reality of the "insiders"—teachers and administrators who must implement policies while dealing with the struggles of motivating and engaging disillusioned students...The "outsiders", writing from their offices in state or national capitals, university research centers, or corporate headquarters operate unaware of the immense chasm separating well-meaning reform policies from the lived realities of the classroom.

Instead of high quality professional development that offers extended opportunities for teachers to reflect and talk about their practice with professional colleagues, what has typically been offered has been a "training" model of closely adhering to the prescribed curriculum and

¹² A Nation At Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform. April 1983, <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/intro.html>

¹³ Ibid.

teaching to the test. Action research and reflective practice, which research has demonstrated are essential for improvement of teacher practice and student learning, have often been abandoned, dismissed, or not even known by visiting “educational consultants.” Instead of deep level change that could result in higher levels of learning, schools have typically used superficial technical or “feeding tricks” to bolster scores including donuts and hot chocolate on high-stakes testing days.

Teachers across the country tell the same story. Many believe in the need for educational reform and change; however, over time they have become increasingly frustrated because they have experienced not *one* reform, but *two*: the one that school systems announce in press conferences and post on their websites, and the one that teachers, principals, and students actually live in the schools.

This is not a rare phenomenon; nor is it difficult to understand. We know enough now and have all the evidence needed to see that it is much easier to reform the top half of large systems—curriculum, administrative structure, downtown personnel and goal statements—than it is the bottom half—the messy, human business of teaching and learning. Because of this, much reform has concentrated on the top half, where national corporate leaders, politicians or public policy analysts have played the major role. In fact, all aspects of the total environment powerfully affect how well students learn in the classroom, including external factors such as students’ physical, dental and vision health, the state of the national economy, local unemployment and home foreclosures.

Joseph Check, Director of the Boston Writing Project, has suggested another way to approach educational reform:

Amid the hype and politics, we must remind ourselves of two truths:

(1). Teachers remain at the center of reform; and (2) reflective understanding is the heart of good teaching and the incubator of individual change. Further, understanding that mirrors the reality of urban teaching cannot be narrowly confined to test-related strategies, because difficult social, cultural, and contextual issues walk through every urban teacher’s door everyday; teachers and administrators themselves have their own socio-cultural baggage concerning their students.

In effect, students and educators are wearing invisible backpacks whose burdens they cannot remove unaided. Authentic change cannot be accomplished without emptying those backpacks and dealing with the contents, as messy as that process may be. What is required are invitations to conversation around reflection, teachers’ understandings of reform, and social issues—conversations that will help, not hinder, the progress of change.¹⁴

Check then commented on the realities of the educational change process:

Lost within the philosophy of mandated reform has been a basic fact about change: lasting transformation is rooted in reflection,

¹⁴ Check, Joe. Mandated Reform vs. Classroom Reality. *The Voice*, Vol.5, No. 4, September-October 2000. The National Writing Project. Berkeley, CA

autonomy, and community, not in robotic compliance by teachers and administrators who are told never to think for themselves.

I am reminded of a comment I once heard Steven Levy, a fourth grade teacher and author, make at a school change conference: "Ultimately, all our questions about reform have to be answered with what happens between a teacher and a student in the classroom."

When teachers are at the bottom of reform rather than at its center—receivers not initiators of change, "reformed" not "reformers"—then changing "what happens between a teacher and a student in the classroom" becomes exponentially more difficult to achieve.¹⁵

Check believes he knows a key ingredient that must be in the school reform mix if positive educational change is to take hold: Teachers must write about their classrooms. He remembers a question a teacher asked him many years ago. "How come almost everyone who writes about school reform works some place other than a school?" He believes teachers' writings can be important to school reform:

Reflective practitioner narratives about school-based change can help bridge the immense chasm separating well-meaning reform policies developed far from classrooms and the day-to-day reality of the teachers, students, and administrators who must live the policies at the school level.¹⁶

Grace Hall McEntree, Check's co-director of the Boston Writing Project, also believes fervently in the importance of teachers becoming reflective writers. She believes teachers should write for publication about their own practice from the "inside-out" for at least five reasons:

- To reflect upon practice
- To discover who we are and what we think
- To change school culture
- To model for students
- To inform and interact with the public¹⁷

Teachers as Researchers at Mott Middle Early College

MMEC strongly believes in the capacity of teachers to serve as powerful change agents for educational reform through reflective writing and collaborative action research. In January 2009, Principal Wagonlander invited every member of the staff to be part of the school's writing group. Over a 16-month period, several interested staff accepted the invitation and committed to an ongoing reflective action research process that included reflective writing about their work.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

They focused on the challenges of their own lives, and those of their students and families. They considered major forces affecting the school including its core beliefs, values, culture, organization, policies and procedures. Such complexities—all of which affect student success—are often neglected or ignored in “professional writings”. They thought about their effectiveness by asking several key questions:

- What choices did they have in responding to the challenges they identified?
- How did they collaborate with each other to find solutions to the real problems in their school?
- How did the collaborative action research process help them assess needs, document the steps of inquiry, analyze data, and make informed decisions about new approaches and practices that could improve student learning

Over many months, they thought about their work, documented significant events, reflected on their own experiences as individuals and educators, and considered the impact of their efforts on their students. They convened in regular gatherings to share their thoughts and their writings, and discuss how this process was changing how they thought, how they assumed responsibility, how they found courage and how they grew in commitment.

The staff had four major goals in mind as they approached this process:

1. To conduct and document a different kind of “insider” research that could serve the growth and development of themselves, their students and their community
2. To share this research with other educators and their communities who were searching for new ways of school improvement
3. To inform others of the critical issues and challenges involved in the establishment of a middle college high school
4. To support existing middle college high schools by disseminating their research about the critical factors involved in raising student achievement and overall school success.

Their commitment to write bore fruit, and write they did—in narrative, in poetry and in personal extended reflections. They gathered at regular intervals with Principal Wagonlander and with the primary researcher/editor of the reflective action research project. The beginnings were tentative, as the role of “teacher as writer” was unfamiliar and one that most teachers had not been trained for or even considered. As the months went by, a remarkable level of openness, honesty, trust and courage developed. A few teachers and other staff members joined the group initially, but gradually almost all staff responded to the invitation to write, as McEntee had suggested “to discover who they were and to reflect upon both their own practice and the culture of the school.”¹⁸

This chapter presents the writings of many staff members of MMEC who thought about the difficult challenges of their work. They compared what they now cared about, believed in and were committed to with their experiences as educators in other schools. They searched deep within their souls about the successes they achieved and about the times their efforts were not enough. Through their reflective writing, they reveal how they came to understand their work with greater clarity, insight, strength and wisdom. They hope the descriptions of their journey will help inform and enlighten fellow teachers, researchers and the public about the difficult but exhilarating task of reforming America’s public schools.

¹⁸¹⁸ Ibid.

Their work is presented in three sections:

1. A Change in Attitude: Education from a New Perspective
 - a. Reflections on my Journey from Practitioner to Researcher
 - b. That Special Teacher
 - c. Making the Connection
 - d. The Bocce Balls
 - e. The Small Things
 - f. From Student to Teacher
 - g. Moving from Planning to Practice--Intentionally
 - h. Reflections on Being a Teacher Here
 - i. A New Start
 - j. A Community of Learners Without Judgment
2. Modifying the Approach: Curriculum that Invites and Engages
 - a. The Campus Helps School Come Alive
 - b. The Magic of Music
 - c. Empathy from Experience
 - d. School Policies and Philosophies Make a Difference
 - e. Countering Avoidance
 - f. The Question
 - g. Enriching the Art Curriculum of the School through the Riches of the Community
 - h. Asking Questions, Looking Critically, and Pushing Forward
3. Making Connections: Meeting Students Where they Are
 - a. How Small is Too Small?
 - b. We are a Family
 - c. Alarm Clocks and Math Cubes
 - d. I Wondered on that Wintry Day
 - e. That Birthday Phone Call
 - f. A Listening Ear
 - g. Loving Unconditionally
 - h. Knitting Circles
 - i. All These Things
 - j. For Michael

SECTION 1

A Change in Attitude: Education from a New Perspective

Reflections on my Journey from Practitioner to Researcher

Before I can take on the topic of considering how I was impacted by the powerful professional growth I experienced as a member of the *Teachers as Researchers* program, I must make some general comments on the state of teaching and education in America today. This framework is necessary in order to show how viewing my role as a teacher/researcher has made a difference for me both personally and professionally.

Most teacher training programs teach teachers as technicians. They enter into the profession, are handed a textbook approved by a school board and deliver information. This is a politically safe paradigm for teaching and learning. It also leaches the life out of the profession and contributes to the high dropout rate in the country. Lest you think that this is not with us, let me demonstrate how content, teaching and learning have been managed through *No Child Left Behind*.¹⁹ The crux of that legislation is accountability. Therefore, testing has taken front and center. Schools whose students do not pass tests, no matter the extenuating circumstances, lose funding. This is a simplistic approach to a complicated problem. Nobody seems to ask why these schools are not succeeding; they simply mandate that they must succeed. In order to keep their doors open, schools have clung to the old model of rote teaching and learning with desperation. Textbooks are ordered and consultants brought in to teach teachers how to teach to the test. Scores take the emphasis off people while publishing companies make a fortune from tax dollars. Schools and the services they offer are stripped of the very life that an excellent education can be for kids.

The model of *Teachers as Researchers* works against this paradigm. It honors teachers as working intellectuals who are on a life long journey of honoring students and the learning process. It brings teachers together instead of isolating them in classrooms and has them looking at common problems in their various educational institutions. Ideas are exchanged, differences of opinion are teased through—compromises reached. In other words, this model is a democratic one that sheds the extremes of opinion that are so prevalent in public life today. As teachers work for a common goal, they learn collegiality and stimulate one another to push beyond the limitations of singular contemplation. It is democracy in action.

I believe this translates to my work in the classroom. I empower my students as I have been empowered. That should be the most important goal of an education. Test scores show only a small slice of what is possible in a truly empowering education. Comparing my experience to those teachers who have been less fortunate than I and have not had the same opportunities to expand and grow, I know that this project has been the key to my success as a teacher and as a person. I am grateful for the opportunities I have experienced as a result of being involved in the *Teacher as Researcher* program.

I have a rich tapestry of experiences to draw from in my daily teaching life. Most recently, we attended a conference at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University as part of our ongoing curriculum writing for the American Social History Project (A.S.H.P.) As one of an eight-member team, along with the conference presenters, we grappled with the more sensitive issues surrounding how to write meaningful curriculum about Arab-Americans. The presentations wildly exceeded my expectations. One presenter, Diane

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Education, 2001. (<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>)

Moore, helped us grapple with Islam and the necessity of not backing away from the topic of religion. She convinced us that religious literacy should be part of a public school education. The next week, back in my own classes, I took her advice and created a sociology unit with religious pluralism as its topic. With the help of one of my colleagues, Ms. Moore, I was able to differentiate between teaching religious values and teaching about religion and how it has shaped us historically as a nation. Other experiences, such as visiting the textile mills in Lowell, Mass. and visiting the Native American Museum and the Tenement Museum in New York City have directly impacted my teaching in A.S.H.P. Showing photographs to students of the places we have visited and telling stories of my experiences there makes our history books less of an intellectual exercise and more of a story. Students enjoy these stories. When I describe the boarding houses and the deafening noise of the mills, history is enlivened by my passion for the experiences I have had.

Even experiences closer to home have helped enrich my teaching. Tours of Flint's historical sites bring history alive for students in tangible ways that textbooks cannot. Students beg to be released from the textbooks in order to learn something firsthand. A bus tour of Flint that I experienced several years ago is a regular part of our curriculum every fall in our local history unit. Students enjoy it so much that they pass it on to younger students as a highlight to look forward to when they take A.S.H.P. in their junior year.

I dropped out of the project for two years because I needed to continue post-graduate work. As soon as that was done, I found myself re-entering the project. I found I missed the opportunities for growth and the people who helped me grow both personally and professionally. *Teachers as Researchers* has had a profound impact on me in my life as a teacher and as a person. I hope I can continue to serve it as it has served me.

That Special Teacher

I often hear anecdotes about “that special teacher”—the one who made a difference, the one who inspired students to grow or who taught self worth as well as science of history, the one who made education a warm and personal experience. From time to time my mother, now in her late 60’s, will still talk about her special teacher—the one who convinced her that she was smart, or rather more to the point, that she was not dumb. One thing I noticed even as a child is that many people did not have that sort of story. Sadly, many people relate a less positive high school experience and sometimes even perceive their educational experience as downright negative because of the very people who were entrusted with the task of educating them.

One thing that I knew for sure as I embarked on my second career as a teacher was that it was my desire to be “that special teacher”. When I did my student teaching, I realized that the qualities that are inevitably found in “that special teacher” are not necessarily appreciated or even encouraged in a traditional high school setting. In all honesty, I was truly let down by this revelation. I suppose over the years I had romanticized the role of a teacher in a young person’s life; perhaps I had taken certain movies and television shows too seriously. In spite of my student-teaching experience, I had hoped that I would be different.

The first time that I interviewed at MMEC, I knew that it was different. The questions were like none I had encountered in interviews at other districts. The emphasis was not just on academics, but also on the overall well-being of the students. Actually, I remember being caught off guard. I was well prepared to answer questions regarding state benchmarks, classroom discipline and high-stakes testing, but I remember thinking I should have studied my notes from my education classes to answer the questions regarding affect and Maslow’s Hierarchy. In spite of that, it was the first interview in which I felt comfortable with my desire to provide a nurturing environment rather than a corporate environment in the classroom. It was clear by their questions that working at MMEC would be different from anywhere else, that teaching there would in some ways carry greater responsibilities reaching beyond academics, and that math would clearly not be the only thing I was teaching.

The big difference that sets MMEC apart from other high schools is the emphasis on the individual. This is the difference that makes a difference. Here a cookie-cutter approach will not do. It is imperative that I get to know my students on an individual level, I understand where they are coming from, and work with them from that vantage point rather than my own. There are many paths to success, and it is my job to guide my students to a path that will work for them rather than force them to a place on a path that I have predetermined. Sometimes this means trying several different methods to explain one concept. Often it means late nights surfing the web for some other teacher’s success story and hopefully an attached lesson plan. It sometimes means trying and failing repeatedly to no avail.

It also means getting to savor that sweet moment of success with a student who was convinced that she was not smart enough when you hand her the test with a passing grade and her face lights up like a Christmas tree. It means experiencing the joy of hearing a student say, “I am smart! I can do algebra!”

It means sitting across from a parent at conferences and hearing the words “thank you”. Sometimes it means you have the privilege of walking a little further down your own path to success, that path that some day may lead to the title “that special teacher” with the company of your students.

Making the Connection

We have been asked to reflect on the differences that make a difference, on what is unique about our educational practice. As we seek to reach out to a population that traditional education has not been able to engage, what is it about our work that seems to be bridging the gap?

Our student population is considered “at risk”. Most of our students are on the road to dropping out of school. They have encountered roadblocks of failure, boredom, or apathy and see school as a cumbersome burden, not a land of open doors to learning. They are “different” from the general population, yet they are not.

I am currently a counselor, but I have worked as an educator in a variety of school settings both traditional and non-traditional, in several parts of the country. I have also had the opportunity to engage in educational exchanges both domestically and internationally. When I look at our “at-risk” students, I see they are more a part of the norm than many educators would like to believe.

Most of our students deal with difficult life issues. The biggest are poverty and lack of education, which lead to a plethora of other problems. Along with economic issues, physical, relational and other social dilemmas plague our students. Life is not easy for them.

In my opinion, life is not easy for any young person today. Opportunities are abundant, almost too abundant, leaving many of our students struggling to find a path for themselves. The roads that their parents took were narrower and more clearly defined, and because of that, perhaps more secure. It is a global world now, opening doors to travel and cultural exchange, while adding pressures that make establishing a stable foundation difficult. I see real challenges for our young people as they try to settle into any kind of secure lives.

Security is important, especially as young people make the thorny transition from adolescence to adulthood. The majority of our students have not experienced a traditional family. Although that certainly is no guarantee of peace and stability, the constant change in our students’ lives is unsettling. At the beginning of a conference with a student, I often have to take several minutes to determine the current make-up of the “family” and how the student falls into its particular pecking order.

Against all these odds, why are we at Mott Middle Early College seeing success with so many of our students? And we are seeing success! Incoming GPA’s consistently move from an average of 1.6 to a 3.2 when students graduate. They continue to take an increasing college load. Nearly half of our current graduating class earn 24 college credits or more when they graduate from high school.

These stats are great, pretty amazing in fact, but the evidence of success that is most significant to me is students returning to share their lives with us. On any given day, one or more of our previous students is likely to be on site, connecting with the people who made a difference in their lives.

Some have graduated; others have had to leave because of family or behavioral issues. Some are coming to announce their wedding, show off a new baby, get congratulations for earning their degree, or show off their new military garb. More than a few come back to say thanks, to let us know they have done some growing up. Although they may not always say it in words, they all want us to know that they are moving forward in their lives and that we played a part in that process.

That leads me to my point: What do we do that makes a difference? We care and the students know it. Whether we are trying to engage their minds in learning, challenging them to look beyond themselves, or holding them accountable for their choices, we care.

Of course, that's not all we do. We provide solid academic training and many opportunities for them to grow as individuals. Our connection with the college provides a beneficial environment and further opportunities. I could list numerous ways showing how the work we do is different, even unique to the educational field, but the one thing that stands out clear and strong is the caring.

You may be asking, "Why aren't all schools having this kind of success, even with that 'at-risk' group?" I think they are, at least in a modest way. All of us know of a teacher, counselor, or administrator who had a positive impact on us or someone we know. The reality, however, is that it takes a sense of community for caring to have real impact.

Most of our schools are now of the "mega" variety, providing more opportunities, but often at the loss of stability and security for students. At a point when they need a greater sense of belonging to counteract all the chaos in their own worlds and the larger world around them, we place them in environments where they may not see anyone who knows them by name during the entire day.

Mott Middle Early College is small enough that we know all of our students, by face, if not by name. We get to know families, gaining better insights into the issues our students deal with every day.

This community does not happen just by virtue of being smaller. Much of our structure is geared toward engaging our students. All students meet several times a week in ongoing groups called Focus. Fellowship, food, and informal learning—much of it centered on life skills—give students a connection beyond the classroom. From the first orientation meetings, emphasis is placed on respect for oneself and others. Ongoing academic and social support is a part of the weekly schedule. Much class work is group work, whether discussion or assessment. In these and many more ways, community is built and students have a sense of not only belonging, but also being responsible and accountable to themselves and their school community. This breeds an atmosphere where students know the adults care.

What is it that we are doing differently? We are constantly working to provide and maintain an environment where we can build a community for young people that gives them a sense of support and strength—of challenge and opportunity. We're letting them know we care.

The Bocce Balls

The drive home is often a time for reflective thinking. Today, on the way home after one of our writers' meetings, I was thinking about the questions the editor of our little writing group asked about the "negative ramblings" I was trying to write. I told the group that my work at Mott is the most frustrating job I have ever had. She asked, "If it is so frustrating, why stay?" The answer seems simple now: Because I care about these kids and hope that somehow my being here makes a difference in their lives. Does anything I do during the course of the day have a positive effect on them? I am sure it has, but that is where the frustration comes in. I doubt that I will ever really know.

During my drive home every day, I began to wonder if any of our students carried Bocce balls around, and if so, did they even know that they were?

I carry a set of Bocce balls around in the trunk of my car. They are just an ordinary set in a carrying case that looks like a wire cage. They are dirty—filthy really—covered with dirt and grass from the yard and dust and dog hair from sitting around in the garage. I found them sitting behind the door one day, picked them up and put them in my car. I had every intention of taking them to my fiancé's house and clean them up. His family likes to play but he doesn't have a set and we have two. However, they have been riding around in my trunk for almost a year now—unclean, untouched and unseen.

I remember the last time that we played with those Bocce balls. It was the 4th of July weekend and there was a strong thunderstorm moving in. We were all out in the front yard for a spirited game—my kids, my niece and nephews and I. As always, one game turned into two, and then three, while the joking around and laughter multiplied with the approaching storm. We decided to put an end to the action when the game turned into full-contact Bocce Ball and the first raindrops began to fall. We gathered up the balls, and my nephew set the case behind the garage door where I found it about a year later.

I believe we all carry around impressions left on us by the others in our life. Whether we know it, we carry them in our minds, our hearts and our soul. They shape our personalities, affect our reactions, and influence the paths we choose throughout life. Some affect us in a positive way, while others leave a mark that we wish we could remove from our lives. For me, it is important that my efforts during the course of the day somehow affect our students positively. As a school secretary, I do not have the exposure to students that teachers do. I envy them for that. I have only moments with students and see some rarely, if at all. Obviously, I cannot make a difference in the life of every student. But, I hope that I leave a positive impression on a few. Some have become every special to me. That is the reason I endure the frustrations of my challenging work.

Those Bocce balls are special to me. They have impressions on them that I cannot bring myself to wash off. No one else even knows they are there. My oldest nephew left this world 18 months ago. His fingerprints are still on the balls. If I wash them off, will I lose another piece of him? Will I lose one of the impressions he left for me? That makes me wonder, who have I left impressions on? Does anyone even know that the impressions are there? Who's carrying around the Bocce balls? And of those who are, will they want to wash my impressions away?

The Small Things

What are the differences that make a difference?

The small things really make the biggest difference.

- Greeting students in the hallways shows them we care.
- Telling them to be safe as you wish them a good weekend shows them we care.
- Recognizing their birthdays acknowledges students and shows them we care.
- Feeding students in Focus Group, listening to their stories, sharing their successes and lending a shoulder to cry on show them we care.
- Staying after school or meeting at lunch to help a student with a difficult assignment or concept shows them we care.
- Presenting classroom material in a variety of learning styles, gently reminding students to stay on task, giving credit for late assignments and re-teaching when needed, we show them we care.
- Participating in professional development experiences to better understand how our students think and learn, we show them we care.
- Showing students that we care about them by having high standards and clear expectations shows them we care.

Most people want to feel cared for, to know that they matter to someone. With this security, they are more likely to be positive and receptive, both of which promote their learning.

From Student to Teacher

I first walked into the halls of Mott Middle College in 1992 not as a teacher but as a student. I was between my sophomore and junior years of high school when I was caught in a whirlwind of change that would have profound impact on my personal and professional life. These changes were difficult to recognize and complex for a teenage mind to truly comprehend. After years of careful reflection, I now realize that what brought me to Mott Middle College was not as important as what happened when I entered the school. However, I must briefly describe the circumstance that I faced before coming to MMC to better contrast the differences I experienced once I entered the school.

The entirety of my sophomore year in high school, I drifted in and out of various discipline measures. I would spend time in in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and after-school detention. I was a classic discipline case. I was not violent. I did not have problems with drugs or alcohol. No, I had something much worse. I distrusted and disrespected all forms of authority. School was one of the most pronounced manifestations of authority in my life and thus I reacted against all the efforts of school personal to exercise authority over my life. This resistance to authority impacted my education in various ways including falling grades, disrespectful attitude toward teachers that I now realize were trying to help, and manifestation of a general distrust of the entire education system. All of these attitudes and behaviors began to completely constrain and dominate my life. Fortunately, at the point that I was most jaded, I was told I would not be able to return to school in fall and I would have to seek other education opportunities. This is what brought me to MMC in the fall of 1992.

I sat in the middle of a ballroom full of students and faculty from backgrounds that at first glance resembled nothing I had come from. I was surrounded by people that I did not know and did not relate to. That was when the teachers and administration began to speak. "Welcome to Mott Middle College High school. This is a new place for all of you and a different kind of place to learn," one of the teachers said to us. I was immediately skeptical. School is school, I thought. How could this "new" school be that much different from the school from which I came? There were teachers and principals as in my other school. There were students as in my other school. We had classrooms, hallways, chalkboards, etc., all just like my other school. Needless to say, I remained skeptical.

When I stepped into the first class called Focus Group, Mr. McHugh asked the group of approximately 20 students the question, "Why are you here at MMC?" We all answered the question by explaining the various situations that had brought us to the school. I described my problems with school and my distrust of authority in general. After we had all had a chance to answer the question, Mr. McHugh politely said that we had all answered the wrong question. We had spent 45 minutes answering *how* we got to MMC, not *why* we were at MMC. I now realize that this single distinction was a transformative event in my educational career. We assumed he wanted us to describe the situations that we faced with former educational endeavors rather than the reasons that we individually were seeking a new and different path toward education. As discussion ensued, many of us began to describe experiences that made us question the importance of education. Mr. McHugh asked us a new question, why did we *want* an education? That was a new question for most of us. We had always been told why we *needed* an education. Of course, at the time, I did not even begin to understand the profound impact that would have on my professional career. These experiences begged the question, why do I *want* as well as *need* an education?

Educators spend countless hours in and out of the classroom concentrating on why students *need* an education. We work tirelessly connecting the world of education to the world of work and community. College preparedness, high standards, test scores, work skills, and

social readiness all give purpose to the *need* for education. Each child *needs* to be prepared for citizenship within an American and Global society. Why does the child *want* to be prepared for that citizenship? To answer this question, we cannot simply answer because we say so based on the *needs* of the child. Everyone fully appreciates the importance of educational *need* within a more and more global society. For me, it was when I switched from the thought that I *needed* education to the reality that I *wanted* education that my entire outlook of lifelong learning changed. Education provided me enormous opportunities to develop knowledge and wisdom that serve me well in my professional career as a teacher. Essentially, the question we must ask every student to constantly ponder is what are the personal and internal benefits for a person when they experience education from a *want* perspective first?

In addition to the change in my approach to education, I also gained valuable perspective as a student at MMC. Now that I have worked as a teacher for twelve years at the school, I realize that my ability to relate to the students at the school is directly tied to my experience as a student at the school. I experienced the same trying circumstances, general distrust of authority, and many of the same teachers as the current students do. I also bring an internal question with me to work every day: Is MMC a school that I would attend? I work every day to ensure I answer in the affirmative. Being an MMC graduate really drives me as a teacher and as a student. I continue to seek new educational opportunities that challenge me to consider multiple points of view and interpretations. I also try to foster within my students my own passion for knowledge acquisition that I initially developed as an MMC student. Overall, I am on a lifelong journey of learning and teaching that began in the Mott Community College ballroom in 1992 when I heard about this “new and different place to learn.” What an awesome and rewarding journey it has been.

Moving from Planning to Practice—Intentionally

Mott Middle College was built on a foundation of four student outcomes. These focused on student as

1. Self directed learner
2. Effective Communicator
3. Cooperative Group Member
4. Creative, complex thinker.

If all students could leave our program with a firm grasp of these four outcomes, then our mission could be deemed a success.

All of them?

A collective and resounding “YES” echoes through the room where the planning, discussion, and decision-making set an action plan in place.

I’ve thought about the “differences that make a difference” at Mott Middle Early College. Two concepts stand out for me. The first is the comment to foster a sense of community where all members are welcome and valued. Every staff member, student, parent is encouraged to be part of the process of building a learning community—a small school where everyone knows each other’s name and wants to be there. The second is that the school’s curriculum must include and consider affect—how the entire community of learners thinks and feel. All staff must be trained to create and facilitate ways in which students can better understand themselves, and thereby feel more confident and competent to attend to their mission as learners.

Other features of the school include powerful and unique beliefs and practices:

- Selection of staff members is critical and should be based on clear and thorough expectations that are known and understood by all candidates who apply to be part of the school.
- An overwhelming number of students believe that what makes a difference for them is the connection they make with at least one significant adult in the learning community.
- Teachers and staff at MMEC have been privileged to participate in excellent professional development programs because the school’s principal insists on ongoing professional development and training at the highest level.
- Teachers design the learning environment in accordance with principles of Parker Palmer’s *The Invitational Classroom*²⁰, acting as facilitators and coaches while they deliver course content.

²⁰ Purkey, W. W. and Stanley, P. H. (1993). *Invitational Teaching, Learning, and Living*, NEA Professional Library, Alphareta, GA

- Classrooms should look, feel, and operate as a well functioning community in which students gain confidence in their own learning and begin to teach and learn from their classmates as well as the instructor.
- An invitational classroom encourages attendance because students feel included in the process. When instruction is connected on a personal level, students often experience success more quickly. The reality is that learners need to experience a variety of materials, learning strategies, and assessment in order to discover how they learn best. Once again, more training for teachers can help them take risks themselves to best serve their students.
- A most significant difference that makes a difference at Mott Middle Early College is that the principal must have the utmost trust and confidence in the staff to foster the creation of a curriculum to meet student needs. I credit Dr. Wagonlander for having trust and confidence in her teachers to carry out this task.
- *The Interdisciplinary Classroom* places two—sometimes three—instructors together for a block of time. It was Dr. Wagonlander's brainchild to start our school in 1991 with the concept of block scheduling and team-teaching. Our school's strongest courses were born and thrive as a result of this model: small groups of teachers coming together to plan around the principle of thematic course and lesson design. Using materials that focus on multiculturalism and diversity, students are able to make personal connection with the course content. They see something relevant to themselves. The strategy of cooperative and collaborative learning groups assists students to learn and understand more about each other. This approach allows the instructor to coach necessary social skills while students work on content and retention.
- Performance assessment lends itself to creative and innovative ways in which students teach and learn from each other. Instructors are still able to assess students individually, while preparing them for standardized testing. Once the strategies or classroom style are internalized by students, doors begin to open for intense, authentic dialogue critical to the survival of our society. The students become more confident and willing to put themselves "out there". The result is the "Democratic Classroom".

This approach reenergized my career and is, to me, "the difference that makes a difference" at Mott Middle Early College.

Acknowledgment of gratitude. I had the privilege of joining others to begin the mission of Mott Middle Early College. Our goal was to be on the cutting edge of a school reform movement. I credit Dr. Wagonlander and all my esteemed colleagues over the years for having the courage, strength, and professionalism to create and maintain a school where there are "differences that make a difference".

Reflections on Being a Teacher Here

Mott Middle College engenders deep passion among its members. When I first came to this school, it was a job. I needed to pay a mortgage and support three children and I was drawn in. Now, however, I'm **absorbed!** This is a part of who I am, and I am willing to invest a big part of my life in it because I believe in it. The more I work with these students, the more I realize how bright they are and how much potential they have. Potential is just a word; it can be such a shallow, meaningless word unless we do something about it. Potential takes a lot of hard work, investment and action to be realized.

All staff members of Mott Middle College acknowledge that we are all students. We create a safe environment so that we can learn from each other. All is based on the idea of trust, which takes a long time to establish in the classroom, because based on their earlier experiences, students do not trust.

Learning at Mott Middle College is not laid out in a hierarchy. In traditional schools, teachers know and possess knowledge and students are expected to “soak it up and give it back”. At Mott, teachers approach learning as a part of life that goes on forever—in fact, it *is* life, and has nothing to do with one's age. For example, as I think about my practice and what I am learning, I realize that next year I will spend much more time focusing and reflecting on the affective challenges of my work. I did so this year, in addition to paying attention to my subject and the curriculum, and it paid off with many students.

Mott Middle College is a sanctuary, a safe place. I grew up in Chicago. When I came to the Flint area 13 years ago, I heard that things were bad, but I thought they weren't that bad. I remembered the southeast side of Chicago, where kids slept behind bars, below street level. But just this weekend, I heard the news that Genesee County (the Flint area) is turning into the south side of Chicago. Our students come to us for just a few hours of safety. Many houses here are barred up and students think about what room they should be in to avoid being shot. I now realize that is one of the reasons so many fall asleep in class.

An authentic relationship is transformative. One of my students changed my life. I had been talking with him in the halls and classroom, bouncing around various ideas. He paused, looked straight into my eyes and said, “Let's hook up because I could learn a lot from you. I want you to know I'm serious.” I ended up getting emotional and crying. My student extended his arms and hugged me, saying, “I didn't do anything, you did.” I responded, “No, you did. You didn't give up.” Our continuing relationship has been transformational for us both.”

The power of patience. Many of the students come to us floundering. Some have been in detention and experienced difficulties most of us will never be aware of. I'm just trying to be patient. I guess the jury's not out yet on how much I've really changed anybody.

A New Start

I have been in the field of education for twenty-three years. In this time, I have been a High School/Junior High Band Director, Adult Education Teacher, Coach, Middle School At-Risk Director, Adult Education Director and Guidance Counselor. During these years, I have seen many educational ideas come and go. I have worked in several different school districts and observed many similarities and differences in how they educate their students.

However, it is only during the last five years, at Mott Middle Early College, that my eyes have been opened to deep educational changes that are possible when visionaries and educators are allowed to take ownership of the process and impact students' lives. With passion and true empathy, these dedicated administrators, teachers, counselors, secretaries and support staff bring about profound and positive changes in the lives of these students. This is the story of my new start.

Before discovering Mott Middle Early College, I was contemplating leaving education. I had grown tired and disillusioned with the many travesties I had witnessed in public education, and was ready to pursue other interests. I felt that eighteen years in education were long enough, and had lost some of the passion and energy that I started with after college. I knew that life had many other opportunities for my family and me. I had heard there were other schools where educators thought differently—"out of the box", where students were given a second chance and not just kicked out to the next place as soon as they did not make the grade. However, I always thought such schools were somewhere else.

What I didn't realize when I moved to the Flint area in 2003 was that there was a school that was doing things very differently from the schools where I had previously taught and counseled, a program that would give me a fresh new perspective and opportunity, right in my backyard. This was the second chance I was looking for and needed for my own growth, a place where it might be possible to rekindle the fire I once had. This was where I needed to be, to help students realize their possibilities. This school was then called Mott Middle College.

At-risk students who were previously failing or "falling through the cracks" had a new opportunity for educational success at Mott. These students were often discarded or sent to alternative types of educational completion that were known for their mediocrity and lack of success. Perhaps these students, in their former schools, brought down the success rates for state testing or *Adequate Yearly Progress* reports. Perhaps they learned differently than others, or needed someone to listen to them because they had just lost their home. These students often were the "outsiders", not belonging to any of the cliques evident in traditional schools. In short, these were the students many people had given up on. What they needed most was—a new start.

Most students that I meet with during Mott Middle Early College admission interviews want a new start. They often feel they have no place else to go. They have been beaten down by a system that no longer seems relevant to their goals, dreams and aspirations. I believe they truly want to make positive changes in their lives. They want opportunities that were not possible in the past educational environments where they were sinking—drowning. These students, along with their parents, know that if given a chance, Mott could be their new start.

For most students who are admitted to Mott, this is just what happens. The school gives them the chance to start with a clean slate. The staff knows that students are entering with a myriad of issues, reasons, excuses and circumstances that have affected their previous lack of school success. They know that not all students learn the same way, and must be accepted

and received where they are with the strengths and needs they possess. In my opinion, they work miracles.

Graduation at Mott Middle Early College is always an incredible experience. Many students are the first in their families to earn a high school diploma. I am almost speechless when I observe them walk across the stage with a newfound purpose and direction, graduating with college credits that in any other circumstances would not have been financially or logistically possible. I see and talk to parents who thank us for helping their children. The experience is highly emotional and rewarding for all--students, parents and staff!

Being a member of the Mott Middle Early College family is very challenging. However, the rewards are also great. I give thanks for the opportunity I have been given to make a difference in the lives of so many students. Our graduates know that their next stage—their new start—may not be easy. However, they know we are here for them and will do anything we can to help them. Most of all, they know that we love them.

A Community of Learners Without Judgment

Everyone is a “newbie” at some point in one’s life. The summer I joined Mott Middle College, I was 22 years old. Some of my students were 19. Age doesn’t define who is the student and who is teacher. I’m honored to learn from my colleagues who range in age from the teens to the sixty’s. They have taught me about strength, courage, determination, success, loss and resilience.

Trust makes growth an option, for everyone. Mistakes and encouragement are certain. Bullying and violence are unacceptable. These simple concepts set the tone for our learning community. Honesty and transparency allow all to reflect and make decisions that benefit MMEC students. When safety and failure are not worries, students can be not only present, but also plan for their future.

Where else can a high school math teacher be in conversation with the ISD, community college, university and national consortium? The answer is—very few places. Basic math skills, sequencing, curriculum development, best practices, standardized testing, numeracy, manipulatives, blogs, podcasts, powerpoints, clickers, Agile Mind, Florida Virtual,

Accuplacer and Blackboard are some of the topics covered in my time at MMEC. This type of collaboration is exactly what is necessary to facilitate young people to have resources to become efficient students, employees, and life-long learners.

SECTION II:

Modifying the Approach: Curriculum that Invites and Engages

The Campus Helps School Come Alive for Students

Teaching at Mott and being on the campus of a community college has been an exciting and gratifying experience for me and has provided special opportunities for our students. Higher education has in its infrastructure learning opportunities in terms of technology and facilities that are beyond what most public school systems can offer and support, even the most wealthy.

Just the logistics alone make a huge difference: Our science classroom is on the third floor, and our students have to walk through the college library to get to the classroom. Think of how much more prepared they are when they know what a college library sounds and feels like, and is part of their daily lives. That alone is a wonderful asset. When a student walks into a traditional high school chemistry class, it looks like a high school chemistry class. At the college, they see sophisticated scientific equipment and smell the various chemicals that permeate the room. Similarly, they walk into the college gym and see the banners of all the athletic competitions college students have won. It is this space that gives students a sense that this is different—that this is better.

I think middle colleges that exist on college campuses are very different from those that do not, and I think those off-campus are at a disadvantage. The integration of the space of higher education is the key. Located on the actual higher education campus, Mott Middle Early College is not just “a building over there that the kids are bussed to.” Here, students and teachers are intertwined; they are an integrated part of the community college campus. Teachers intermingle with college professors and with the college’s facilities every day.

This has made a big difference for me as a science teacher. I talk with college faculty and learn just by informal conversation what they expect out of my students. I actually work with the college professors and ask them, “What information do you want my students to know before they come to your class?” This works for them too as I tell them what I’m working on with my students and what kind of activities and investigations they are doing. They give me feedback and suggestions. So it goes—and we all benefit.

I think this partnership—just the change of geography and the behavior of all the people on the campus—is a difference that makes a huge difference!

The Magic of Music

I'm the music teacher at Mott Middle Early College. I came to Mott with a Bachelor of Music Education degree and a Master's degree in Music Performance. My specialty is percussion. I'm the director of the Steelheads.

I had the good fortune of getting a music graduate assistantship at the University of Akron, under the direction of Larry Snider. That's where I was introduced to the steel pan. I quickly gained a lot of steel band experience there. I also was able to travel with the band to Trinidad (the birthplace of pan), where I watched and even rehearsed with steel bands. It was a life changing experience! The University of Akron was one of the first universities in the nation to have a steel band, and they continue to be a leader in the steel pan movement in the U.S.

Shortly after I graduated from Akron, I was given an opportunity to cover the teaching lead of a professor at Central Michigan University while he was on sabbatical leave. That's when I started the university's steel band, the first in Michigan. Ms. Rachael Moreno, Assistant Superintendent of the Genesee Intermediate School Board, was a member of the university's board of trustees. She learned of the debut of the University's steel band, and urged Dr. Wagonlander to establish a steel band at Mott Middle College. She did—and I was hired.

I remember those challenging first days very clearly. I joined MMEC, but only on a part-time basis. The steel pans had been ordered, but their arrival would take months or even years. While we waited, we played on cowbells, shakers, and other hand-held percussion instruments.

At first, I couldn't get anyone to move a muscle. We didn't have a band room; students sat at their desks, not wanting to do anything. Just trying to get students to play on a cowbell was challenging. Eventually, they came around a bit and we began making music. That's when we started getting complaints about the noise level from the rooms below and above us.

A month or two after the steel pans arrived, we played two songs at a picnic for all of the staff at the Genesee Intermediate School District. The music was very basic—not really much of an accomplishment compared to what I was doing at the same time elsewhere. But when the students showed they could play, the excited reaction from teachers and staff astonished me!

Any kind of success with these students was a great success, and it stayed with me. Eventually my position became full-time, including other classes like Music Fundamentals, Music Appreciation, Piano, and Focus Group.

I really think that for many of the students here, the arts are “make it or break it”. It's a reason for a student to come to school and gain a sense of self-worth and identity. This happens at other schools, but I think it's more pronounced here, and is one of the reasons for the school's success. Dr. Wagonlander has a background in fine arts, and she understands their power of connection.

Occasionally, I look back on my time here and think of all our hard work and the many successes we have achieved. Friends of mine ask how we've been able to do it. They think it's so unusual to have a high-performing steel band at an alternative high school. Our students have won numerous international competitions and have performed at major jazz festivals around the world, and usually on the main stage. They have outplayed the best high-school percussion groups in the nation, and have beaten steel bands from the United Kingdom and the

Virgin Islands. They have been broadcast on PBS throughout Canada and live-streamed on TED21 around the world.

Here are a few things that I do know helped us to succeed. When some of the students come here, they are floundering. They come from many challenging situations through no fault of their own and way beyond their control. It's the cards they were dealt. In many ways, I admire them, because I don't think I could deal with what they've been through.

Long ago, I realized that the first thing one has to do here is remember that these students are different. Keeping their attention and trust can be a very fragile thing, and a teacher can't always proceed the same way as one might in a more typical situation. One has to think of the person first, and build a relationship.

The second thing one has to do is remember that these students are not different. They thrive on high expectations, and have the potential to perform as well as any other group of students anywhere. One's expectations of them have a profound impact on their behavior and performance.

There is the old cliché, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" or, in our case, "How do you get to the Paris Conservatoire?" The answer, of course, is practice. Practice and more practice. A note was once posted anonymously in the percussion room at my undergraduate music department at Central Michigan University: "Nothing succeeds like excess". Our students work very hard, year round. If nothing else, they know the value of hard work and commitment!

I think that there is something in the power of music that connects the students to a new part of themselves they didn't know existed, and to other members of the band and the school. We share this powerful connection to the music and commitment to excel, and that brings us together no matter how different the other parts of our lives may be. It's why there are no outsiders here. We are all in this together, and maybe with a little luck and a lot of hard work, we can each throw a couple of cards into the music and come away with a pair of aces.

²¹ TED is a nonprofit devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading, bringing together people from three worlds: **Technology, Entertainment, Design**, and featuring the award-winning TEDTalks video site. www.TED.com

Empathy from Experience

A few years ago, I had to take some course work to keep my teacher/counselor certificate up to date. I had taken many classes in my field beyond my Masters and really wanted to do something that would be new and useful to me. Scanning the catalog, I found a computer class that looked interesting. It covered some programs I wanted to get more familiar with, and it would give me graduate level credit. I do much of my work on a computer now: word processing, power point presentations and pdf file transmissions. I maneuver through our school software every day, have a Facebook account and yes, order my Christmas presents online. However, I learned everything by practice, and was not sure I had the background for a graduate level computer course.

When I asked the person at our local extension office about the course, she assured me that if I could “turn on a computer”, I could handle this class. So I signed up. It didn't take long before I realized that. I was in way over my head. The first night I was able to turn on the computer, but not much more. My knowledge of the programs we were working on was so limited that I couldn't even get started. All the other students had computer degrees, and although they were nice enough, they did not take this class to help me get down the basics. I felt frustrated, helpless, and stupid.

I am thinking of that experience as I work with a student today. He is bright, he is motivated, but he is failing his college class. He has the right attitude, he attends class, but he has some huge holes in his learning and there just is not time this semester to fill them all in before the finals. I know how he feels, frustrated, helpless, and stupid.

Empathy is one of the major tenets of counseling. And yes, I spent several years immersed in counseling theory and practice that focused on being empathetic, but I think it goes deeper than that. I did not just have empathy for the student today. I had experienced what he was experiencing. I knew what it was to want to learn, to want to be successful, but to be lacking the skills and tools to be able to do that. Important contextual knowledge that a student must possess to be ready for college.

Most of the students who walk through our doors are in that position. They want to do something with their lives. They want to learn. But for many of them, life experiences have deterred them. A family death or illness, multiple moves, financial woes, custody battles that caught them in the middle, all these things and more distracted them from the learning what they needed to be successful at this stage of the game.

As educators, whose goal is to help these students who have the desire but not the foundation, where do we start? I am sure we haven't, but it seems like we have tried every intervention there is. We do lots of remediation in a variety of forms. We have tried computer based, self paced programs. We work with content recovery and credit recovery. We provide support seminars and support groups. We have writing labs and math labs. We have learning contracts and behavior contracts. We have before school, after school and lunchtime tutoring. And you know what? It makes a difference. Does one intervention work for every student? No. Does every student take advantage of the interventions? No. But they do give the students options; they provide tools for them to add to their desire to learn.

Now, do we know what and how many interventions we should have? Yes and no, because we have learned that you cannot provide too much support. What works for one may not work for another, what works in one situation may not work in another. And if we truly want our students to have opportunities to be successful, we need to open all the doors we can to allow them to learn.

School Policies and Philosophies Make a Difference

There are many important aspects of education over which the practicing educator has little or no control. These include economic conditions, societal conditions and human development. Still there is a plethora of factors, especially those dealing with school culture and structure, over which we have control to help move students along a path to success. Mott Middle Early College has throughout its history grappled with school policies and philosophies that make a positive difference in student success. These include the following

- We operate with the understanding that it is a privilege to go to school at MMEC.
- We believe that students are people—not numbers, and operate on that belief.
- We tailor each student’s schedule to the needs and interests of that student. Therefore, while one student may have a free high school hour to provide time to manage college assignments, this does not necessarily mean another student will have the same release time.
- We pride ourselves on having established a non-coercive, accepting learning environment.
- We do not accept as a passing grade anything lower than a C-.
- College work is required to graduate.

A key component of MMEC’s philosophy is individualization to meet students’ needs. The effects of this approach are positive and powerful, helping students meet new levels of school success. Nevertheless, in a few areas, MMEC has very inflexible and non-negotiable policies. For example, we take great pains to communicate orally and in writing that MMEC is much more rigid than traditional schools when it comes to certain behavioral infractions—specifically drug and alcohol violations, and fighting. Most other traditional schools punish such student violators with an out-of-school suspension for a few days. However, at MMEC the day a student uses drugs or alcohol or is involved in a fight at school (regardless of who started the fight) is the student’s last day at the school. This harsh consequence for these relatively common high school behavioral violations is not intended to be a punishment. It is a natural consequence of the simple fact that those behaviors cannot be tolerated in a college environment.

Though these non-negotiable consequences are not designed to be a punishment, they do serve as a deterrent. I can unequivocally state this because on a daily basis, I hear a student say something like this, “I was going to fight, but I didn’t want to get kicked out so I want to have a mediation.” Sometimes I receive anonymous information from one student who really wants to help his friend before the friend makes a very regrettable mistake.

It seems surprising that a population of students that usually requires huge amounts of personalized service and care responds so positively to such concrete absolutes. There may be numerous factors playing a part in this paradox. It may be that a student really knows what the right thing to do is and just needs an “excuse” to do it. A very serious and inevitable consequence may be just enough reason to enable a teenager prone to peer-pressure to be able to avoid a fight or use drugs and still feel accepted by the peers. Perhaps what has made the difference is the clear and consistent communication that certain areas of student behavior are non-negotiable. Whatever the reasons, this stringent policy has been successful in setting boundaries that are respected. Perhaps a way to summarize this example would be to say that

our school philosophy of flexibility requires us to even be flexible about being flexible, i.e. sometimes, we aren't!

Our conscious attention and commitment to those factors over which we, as educators, have some control have helped shape this school into the special place it has become.

Countering Avoidance

I understand how and why some students seek to avoid or deny reality. I myself have engaged in such behavior more than once—ignoring medical symptoms and denying anything could be seriously wrong until my doctor presents me with the results of medical tests, and I am forced to face reality and make choices.

I think that is often the case with my students. They can ignore the effects of their choices until someone sits them down and lays it all out, making it impossible for them to avoid facing their situation. Often, as their counselor, I am that “someone”. My responsibility is to lead them to examine the poor choices and bad decisions they have made and prevent them from continuing to evade and ignore the reality they face.

Their body language speaks volumes as they slump down in their chair or cast their gaze to the floor, acknowledging the consequences of their choices. Once they accept their situation and the part they played in it, I have their attention. It is uncomfortable to be faced with our failings and usually we want to get out of this spot as quickly as we can. This is where I find one of the most satisfying aspects of my work: the student has accepted his responsibility, he wants to change and now we can make a plan to enact that change.

Plans vary with every situation and every student, but they all carry some of the same elements. These elements are the establishment of hope, developing a course of action, and a method of accountability.

The first thing students need is a sense of hope. They have faced something they were patently avoiding and it is often painful to realize they have fallen behind, lost an opportunity, broken trust or just plain messed up. Now is the time to facilitate how to place all this in context, look at the big picture and get back in the game. Finding the road back to success can have many pitfalls and students need to have a vision of the final outcome, to know that there truly is a light at the end of the tunnel. Hope is an amazing force; we all face difficult times and it is often hope that sustains us through some of the hardest situations. Students also need to learn how to access hope and gain strength from it.

Once that spark of hope takes root in them, it is time to develop a course of action that is a realistic plan that is capable of being executed. If the plan has multiple steps, the student needs to know what to do first, and why. I have learned that taking the time to explain this to students and including them in the formulation of the plan helps them become more likely to make the commitment needed for new action. Students have to know they are part of the process. If they cannot come up with ideas on their own, it is important that they are helped to brainstorm some viable options. Having several possibilities gives them opportunities to choose, which results in their greater sense of empowerment.

During this process, I often use elements of William Glasser’s Choice Theory, giving the students choices and helping them take ownership of their behavior. This is a very powerful process, and as they sit up and lean forward, listening and engaging, it is evident they want to make a change. Now hope has been planted and a course of action is in place.

The final step is to establish some means of verifying the change. It may come in the form of accountability, such as attempting to rectify something that has already been done, or it may involve soliciting someone to make sure the student is following through with his or her plan and making good choices. Sometimes it just comes in the form of making sure the changes are acknowledged and celebrated. But it is important that the change is noted and supported.

Fortunately, most of our medical tests just lead us to make lifestyle changes that improve our quality of life. Some of them may involve giving up things or taking on new activities we would rather avoid. How we handle these health situations is a good way to look at our students when we are helping them learn and incorporate new patterns of behavior. Sometimes they will zoom right along, easily assimilating these new skills and their improved self-awareness. Often they will have setbacks. They may stumble, and when they do, we can remind ourselves of the time we avoided exercise or did something we knew would adversely impact our health. Our responsibility is to help them pick themselves up, look squarely in the mirror, ignite a spark of hope, lay out a plan, and get support to help carry it out.

The Question

One of the most thought-provoking statements I've heard as an educator came early in my career when a director of an Upward Bound program praised a colleague by stating, "He is a great teacher because he is a teacher of students." Hearing this, my initial thought was, "Well of course, he is a teacher of students...who else would he be teaching?" It has been almost twenty years since I heard that great challenge for my approach to education. In a way, being a "teacher of students" has become both a guiding light to and a filter through which I've learned to define my role as a classroom teacher. Being a "teacher of students" has become my strategy for helping today's youth break the cycle of poverty and academic failure that surrounds them. Theodore Roosevelt once said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."²²

My role as a teacher has evolved during my twenty-three years in the classroom. Without realizing it, a transition occurred that has moved me from being a conveyor of curriculum to a "teacher of students." I have become a thoroughgoing "affect-oriented" teacher in the process. Taking time to get to know my students has become one of the most important factors that shape what goes on in my classroom. Interestingly, during this evolution, student performance and attendance have notably improved. Without reservation, I now understand why "teaching is an art form," and not a skilled trade.

The respect of a student's personhood is vitally important to gaining their listening ear. The formula to classroom success is actually quite simple: curriculum taught + the student's listening ear = knowledge imparted. The variable in the formula—the great difficulty—is obtaining their listening ear. As great as the digital age is, it has unfortunately done a disservice to education by dehumanizing the process. Our humanity should be enriched by education, not digitalized and lost through education. On a daily basis, students are hooked up to audio and visual stimulation, often at the expense of positive social interaction with each other and their teachers. Being a "teacher of students," rather than of curriculum, is a big step toward retaining our humanity.

Recently, I discovered a way—developed an art form—to enhance being a "teacher of students." This discovery has allowed some of my most difficult moments to be personable rather than passable. This discovery has allowed some of my most challenging behavioral issues to be more palatable rather than poisonous. It has even allowed some of my most emotionally wrenching experiences to be more empathetic rather than pathetic. In a very real way, becoming a "teacher of students" has allowed the release of my "real self" into the world of the "real needs" of my students.

Before sharing this art form, let me describe how the philosophy of our school has allowed for and encouraged this evolution. Most teachers approaching twenty-five years in the saddle have become numb by the blurring of faces, the ever-increasing demands upon educators and the unending needs of our youth. Classroom sizes are on the increase. The school district's ability to provide various means of classroom support is on the decline. Teaching has long since left the realm of our once-youthful idealism to change the world. Unfortunately, many a veteran teacher has journeyed into the realm of middle-age career defeatism. It is at this juncture in one's career that teaching becomes more about curriculum than students. The veteran hands are thrown up in surrender to the age-old mantras of "I'll just draw a paycheck" and "I can't wait until I retire."

Our principal, Dr. Chery Wagonlander, has always been committed to training and inspiring her each member of the staff to be a personable "teacher of students." Mott Middle

²² Cited on <http://www.examiner.com/power-talk-and-nonprofit-in-seattle>. Sept. 28, 2009.

Early College is about to celebrate twenty years of what I fondly refer to as “educating the youth of America.” The school’s philosophical foundation is secure. A good house has been constructed. As the timeline of my life has lengthened, I’ve either incorporated classroom strategies as they were presented, modified those strategies or stumbled into an effective approach on my own. If not for the ongoing encouragement of this visionary administrator, my enjoyment of teaching would probably have been lost a long time ago.

As a college wrestler and coach, I believe my DNA has been ingrained to win in every situation. Now the reality of education is that we don’t always win in the classroom. However, being a “teacher of students” in the classroom can provide the impetus for both teacher and student to pursue the educational process as winners. Thus, it has become my heartfelt ambition to pursue each day as a “teacher of students.” With this in mind, I’d like to share three art forms that have made a significant difference concerning interactions with students.

Art Form #1: The Question

This art form involves a common scenario about confrontation and how to handle a student who is on the verge of crossing the line of respect. In today’s authority-rejecting culture, this is a line straddled by far too many. Clues to such a scenario are agitated body language, fiery eye contact and the steadily raising of one’s voice. In my “pre-teacher of students” days, I would have won the confrontation by blowing the student out of the proverbial water with a belittling retort or a power play. Well, and this is so obvious, this often resulted in a wake of student anger, hardly conducive to a receptive attitude toward learning.

In situations like this, most teachers tend to think something like, “I don’t want to lose control of this conversation.” Note, however, that if we are thinking about who is in control of the conversation it is already out of control. Any time we have to consciously think about whether we are in control or not, we’re not. The teacher’s thoughts might be more effective if they went something like this, “I am going to change the course of this conversation for the better.”

It is at this point in the conversation that a course-changing question might well be asked of the student, “Are you sure that you want to talk to me like this?” It was by accident that I asked this question of a verbally aggressive, almost abusive, male student several years ago. Asking this question did not enflame the situation; rather, it doused it out, like throwing water on a fire. The student immediately responded, “Oh, I am sorry.” Immediately, his tenor changed and resolution followed with both of us being pleased with the outcome and sharing new mutual respect. This question has been used multiple times since that fateful day with what has become an anticipated change of course. Teaching can be a beautiful art form when we practice being a “teacher of students.”

Art Form #2: The Lean

I discovered this art form one day when I had to ask a student to go out into the hallway for a private conversation with me about her behavior. Up until this time, I had always taken the power position by having the student stand against the wall while I physically towered or lorded over the individual. In thinking back to my own school days, I recall that when teachers assumed this posture their accompanying body language often included hands on hips or hands waving or a finger pointing. Whenever this hallway posture occurs, students more or less accept it as an inevitable fact, but it is something that should be avoided. Accepting something and being comfortable with it are two totally different attitudes. I believe there is not one person among us who would appreciate being pinned up against a wall.

It so happened that on this particular day fatigue had set in for a reason that I cannot recall. What I do remember is thinking, “I am tired and I’m going to lean against the wall. My student is young and she can stand up.” Amazingly, what I thought would be easier for me and more difficult for her actually became easier for the both of us. Although the conversation was delicate at best and difficult to approach, it morphed into a gentler form of a concerned teacher conversing with a receptive student.

Somehow, without my realizing it, the student had been placed in the position of power. For her it wasn’t a position of lording over me. After all, I was still the teacher. Her position of power allowed her the ease of being in a position of security, with the liberty to listen to my concerns without having to keep her guard up. Both of us returned to the classroom with a newfound understanding. This leaning technique has been successfully exercised multiple times since that fateful day. A colleague uses a variant form of the lean whereby both she and the student lean looking at each other. The results have always been the same—a more relaxed conversation, mutual respect and forward movement in a positive direction for the student. Teaching can be a beautiful art form when we practice being a “teacher of students.”

Art Form #3: The Bench

This third art form is the most recent acquisition and probably the one that is appreciated the most these days. It began when the college decided to place benches in the halls throughout the building. One was placed directly across the hall in front of my classroom’s door. During pass time between classes, the bench across the hall became a convenient island to unwind and refocus for the next class. On this bench the batteries were recharged by saying hello to college personnel, engaging former students and getting acquainted with the new students. What began as an escape mechanism—like getting a breath of fresh air between classes—has developed into a phenomenal opportunity to be a “teacher of students.”

Joe had been an ideal student in class. Each day he arrived on time, came prepared to work and was typically in a good mood. His assignments were always done on time meeting the highest standards. At least that was the way it was for several months until one day he dragged in late and just sat there, doing nothing. I thought to myself that one day out of several months wasn’t worth being overly concerned about. Nonetheless, it was worth noting. The next day Joe was later than the day before, agitated and constantly trying to look at his cell phone in class. Again, no work was accomplished. On this day, I said something about keeping his cell phone off and out of sight or else I’d have to take the phone according to school policy.

The third day was even worse. Joe was not only late, but openly surly toward everything that was said to him. This was true whether it was a “good morning” or a corrective statement. By now, there was a genuine concern, for his display was beginning to infect the entire class like a virus. “I’d like you to go out in the hall,” were the words coming out of my mouth. These were followed by what has become a standard statement, “and don’t go anywhere.” After the class was refocused, I journeyed out into the hall to have a little one-on-one time with this young man who had been such a wonderful student. As I exited the door into the hallway, I saw Joe sitting on the bench with his body language sending out all kinds of defensive signals.

“Hmmh...” I thought. “Perhaps I’ll sit down as well.” So there we were, halfway facing each other, knowing that the next few minutes were not going to be easy. Being the adult, I recognized the burden of the conversation was going to be mine. And so I started with...

“Joe, I just don’t understand what is going on.”

He barely looked up while shaking his head a little.

“Until a few days ago, you’d always been a good student. I hope you know that I like you as a person. We’ve never had any problems between the two of us, have we?”

He responded, “No.”

“Well, then what is going on?”

Dejected, he just sat in silence. I sat with him as if we were both being held captives by a long awkward verbal pause. Finally, Joe broke the silence by sharing with me the horrendous truth that allowed his pain to come out. “My brother was shot and killed in front of my parents’ house this weekend.” More silence followed.

Now I spoke, “I am so sorry. How are your parents handling this?”

“Oh, not very well,” revealed even more of Joe’s pain.”

After this, we just sat on that bench in silence like two pilgrims trying to figure out how this tragedy fit into the grand scheme called life. Joe’s heart was filled with pain. Mine was hurting because of his suffering. I broke the moment by going over to the classroom door to check on how things were going with everyone else. It was a relief to see everyone studying in relative quiet. “Well, Paul,” I thought, “It’s time to man up and help this young man deal with this.”

“Joe, I don’t really know what to say about your family’s situation right now. I am so sorry that you are going through this. I do know what can be done here at school and with me, however. You have my permission to sit here on this bench. I’ll bring your textbook and your workbook out to you. If you feel like doing some class work, you can. If you don’t feel like it, you don’t have to...not today. If you feel like you have to call home...call, you have my permission. The only thing I ask is that you do not go anywhere without talking to me first, OKAY?”

“OKAY,” was Joe’s response. I then returned to the room for the remainder of the hour. The next day Joe returned to class and though he wasn’t over the sorrow of his brother’s death, he was on his way to returning to his true form in class.

Since that day, the bench has served as a meeting of minds, and perhaps souls, in other critical situations with students who were dealing with their own troubled situations. The conversations are sometimes pre-planned on my part—like with a behavioral issue—and sometimes they’re not. This strategy has always produced good results. There are other times the bench avails lighthearted conversation, jokes, small talk and perhaps even a bit of homespun philosophy. Teaching can be a beautiful art form when we practice being a “teacher of students.”

In all of this, the ancient story of a man sitting by a well in a foreign land comes to mind. He chooses to speak to an outcast woman who is from a disenfranchised race. All of the false lines of society—race, gender, culture, religion, status—that segregate people are crossed as prejudices are set aside. Her bitter past and pain are released by his acceptance of her as a human being. As his “real self” is revealed to her...her “real needs” are met. She leaves him and returns home, no longer feeling like an outcast. In fact, by becoming her “real self,” she was able to return home and help others with their “real needs.”

This is what being a “teacher of students” is about. The teacher must be able cross the false lines of society—race, gender, culture, religion, status—that segregate people. These

false lines must be crossed in order for effective learning to take place. The “real” teacher must be able to enter into the “real world” of one’s students if “real” learning is going to take place. This way of thinking sounds rather idealistic doesn’t it? Well, perhaps I’m younger in spirit than what I’ve thought of late. Perhaps, teaching can change the world. Perhaps, I’ve got a few more good years after all.

Enriching the Art Curriculum of the School through the Riches of the Community

I began teaching at Mott Middle College about five years ago. I knew the school was unique before I started, as my mother was a secretary here when the school opened. As a high school student, I also attended the local Genesee Area Skill Center where I became friends with a student from Mott Middle College. However, it has only been in the last few years that I have begun to understand the differences that make a difference at our school.

A major difference that has impacted what I teach and how I teach at Mott Middle Early College is the location of the school. As an art teacher, I have the challenge of trying to implement art practice, history, theory, criticism and terminology to a very diverse group of students. The school is located on the campus of Mott Community College, which is in the heart of Flint Michigan's cultural center. My classroom is an eight-minute walk from the Flint Institute of Arts and a six-minute walk from the Mott Community College art building. This close proximity to masterworks of art and a college art program turns a basic high school art program into a true college prep program with elements of real world experience, professional speakers, and unlimited recourses close at hand.

One example of how our school has collaborated with the Flint Institute of Arts is a class we offer at MMEC called Art Appreciation. It is an art history class beginning with cave paintings and ending with contemporary art. At a traditional high school, such a class would consist of slides, notes, dittos, writings, and lectures, and might end with one trip to the local museum.

In contrast, at MMEC our art history class takes place in an I-Mac computer lab equipped with a Smart Cart. The computers serve as a research library for students, giving them access to an almost infinite number of images, museums, art criticism, exhibitions and art magazines. Students are challenged to discover information on their own, instead of being handed a sheet of paper with blank lines for one-word answers. While my students might be researching an artist such as Pablo Picasso on the computers, I might be hooked up to the Smart Cart with my laptop, with a five-minute You Tube video presenting cubism, an explanation of two of Picasso's works from the Museum of Modern Art's website, and letters and pictures from his home in Spain.

At any time during a unit, the class can walk to the Flint Institute of Arts to examine original artistic creations in person. If the Museum does not happen to have a Picasso available for viewing at that time, it has something from that particular time period or style. Within minutes, the entire class can be in the Modern Art section studying works of Pablo Picasso and his contemporaries. We can compare his work to theirs, and point out aspects that we have learned about intention, color choice, cubism, techniques, historical context, time period, lifestyle and geography. The staff at the Flint Institute of Arts knows us well and always welcomes us with no appointment necessary.

At the end of the class, a staff member guides students on a tour of the facilities where they learn first-hand about the numerous key organizational and operational facets of a public museum:

- the technical issues relating to the control of humidity and lighting
- storage of the permanent collection
- the woodshop which delivers and ships out artwork
- the role and responsibilities of key staff including the curator, graphic designer and Museum Director
- the financial operations of the Museum
- how artworks are purchased and traded

When the class and tour are done, all students receive a free three-month membership that admits them to openings, special lectures and workshops.

Our program—like the school—is a work in progress, as we constantly seek to rework, adapt and improve. Each year we try to expand our relationship with the local colleges and their professors of art and design. Our school has an amazing working relationship with the Flint Institute of Art and its staff as well as several other local arts organizations including Buckham Gallery, The Greater Flint Arts Council and Link Community Arts. This is just one aspect of the differences that make a difference at our school.

Asking Questions, Looking Critically, and Pushing Forward

I have had the privilege of being involved in a number of projects and activities that have made this school different. One is a class called *Explore America*, a team-taught block course targeted at 9th grade students. Our curriculum includes units on civil rights and immigration, and assignments that tie into historical ideas as well. A team-taught class is more than the sum of the two halves. I can teach History, my colleague can teach English, and our classes are just fine with us working together as a powerful team. With the two of us together, there is no downtime and very little disruption, for one of us can take a student aside who is disruptive and work with him. No child having a bad day can be forgotten or ignored, because one of us can help him while the other students stay on task.

In addition, ideas can be reinforced between the two class periods. When we want to teach something such as note taking skills, one of us can be teaching while the other is modeling, which strengthens and facilitates student learning. Team teaching, no matter what the subject matter, is a fantastic way to work with students.

We teach students many basic skills they often lack when they enter, and stress affective dimensions of teaching and learning, becoming good people with compassion for others. For students who spend two hours every day with us, the course serves as home—a safe haven on a college campus for some who are still thirteen-years-old when they enter. I want them to go to college and to succeed. More than this, I want them to have lives where they are good to those around them and expect the same in return.

I have also had the opportunity to lead Peacemakers, a mentoring program that reaches out into the community, and am sharing its design with the member schools of the Michigan Early Middle College Association (MEMCA).

Many other opportunities have enabled me to join with my colleagues to support our students in so many ways. As a team, we commit ourselves to making sure some of us arrive at school every day at 7:30, so that no student who is dropped off early has to be on a college campus alone. We collaborate on Diversity Fairs that include the whole school, and that include breakout sessions that promote tolerance and celebrated differences. As a team, we share chaperone duties at school events, and carry out the necessary but mundane tasks involved in order to make the events wonderful. Through the curriculum development opportunities MMEC teachers enjoy, I have been able to design and teach a class on the Holocaust that during most years has included a trip to Washington. We deliberately keep the costs down to \$250 per student, never letting lack of funds prevent a student from participating.

My commitment is to continue, with my colleagues, to serve our students and school to the best of my ability. For me, this means I will not stop asking questions, looking critically, and pushing myself forward.

Section III:

Making Connections: Meeting Students Where They Are

How Small is too Small

Several years ago, I was checking my mailbox one last time before I left for summer vacation and found a book someone had placed in my box. Sometime later, I was heading to the beach and grabbed the book for lack of something better to read. I discovered that the book was a series of vignettes by successful professional people who had started out life in deplorable situations that included abuse, neglect, and abject poverty. The stories were graphic and depicted horrific childhoods, but I was mesmerized by the thrust of the book and the core of each story. Each of these professionals credited much of their success in life to one person who had profoundly affected them during the period that they lived in these terrible situations. That is pretty amazing in itself, but what absolutely blew me away was that these influential, outside people did not have long-term exposure to these young people. In fact, some of them only had a one-time meeting. However, during that meeting a seed was planted that helped that young person pursue dreams, work hard, and ultimately change the course of his/her life. Who would think that a one-time or limited encounter could impact someone's life in such a long-term way?

Amazing. I always thought that the small moments don't really count, that you have to spend significant time with people—and in my case—students to really have any impact. But this book caused me to look very carefully at how I interact with students—not just in a counseling setting—but when I see them in the hall or the parking lot, or at the mall, when I have to address their behavior or when I respond to their antics. Now I look at each moment as if that is the teachable moment, the second when something clicks and they see how courtesy or consistency, or doing what is right, can make a difference. A moment when they feel affirmed or acknowledged, when a crack opens in their perceptions of life or their vision for the future.

I don't think anything thrills me more than seeing that light bulb come on in a young person, when they realize they have more control over their future than anyone else, and that it can be a good future. I did not have a traumatic childhood, but when I think back, I was impacted in that way by my high school counselor. She was easy to talk to and she made a point to give attention to every student, not just her favorites. Even though my strengths were math and English, here I am many years later (after a rather circuitous route), working as a high school counselor and implementing many of the things I saw her do. I never saw her after I graduated, but she had more influence on my life than I—or I am sure she—ever realized.

I sometimes get discouraged working with this at-risk population, Many of my students are dealing with situations that are unfair and I often feel limited in what I can do to help. Most days are filled with conferences, meetings, phone calls and mountains of paperwork that help keep the guidance department running smoothly. Given all that, I try never to forget why I do what I do. I no longer take for granted the smile and greeting in the hall, even when there is no response back. I take more time to truly listen, to hear the voice behind the words. I give a hug, even though we are told to avoid touching our students for fear of it being misconstrued. Does anyone fear that never touching our students will be misconstrued?

I make it a practice to know not only the names of the students on my caseload, but to also know enough about them to make connections. Every morning I pray that I will be aware of how I live my life in front of them, how I treat them, and why I do what I do.

I never did find out who left that book in my box. I asked everyone at the school, but no one knew anything about it. My high school counselor doesn't even know I became a counselor. I, however, know without doubt that who I am and how I do my work were influenced by her, and by that little book. Small things really do make a difference.

Alarm Clocks and Math Cubes

When immersed in the daily demands of any school year, the fact that I am doing anything “different” disappears. I tend to think that each staff member in Mott Middle College is doing the same as every other teacher in surrounding schools. Then I am asked to reflect on differences—differences that actually make a difference to the teenage lives we see each day. When one school tends to blend into the next, I forget that a life I may have been privileged to touch has actually taken a fork in the road.

Then one day, when again I am immersed in a particular task, a former student returns. He or she stops purposely to talk with me—not to just say hello, but to give a hug and update me on their life. It could be a former Focus member. In one case, it was one who never actually graduated from our high school, but is going to finish his Associates Degree within the month. This student is the one who tells me that he still uses the alarm clock I gave him back in high school because he was constantly late for school. It seemed like the thing to do when that student had no consistent adult in his life at that time. If he had not been a member of my Focus Group, I would never have known that he didn’t have an alarm clock. This made me wonder: Does every high school use the concept of Focus Groups? Maybe this is a difference that makes a difference.

Another time as I am meeting with my department a former graduate—a Focus Group member, stops to talk and catch up. She asks, “Do you still use the area model and hot and cold cubes”? I assure her I do, even though the traditional text we now use makes no reference to those models. She proudly tells how she was asked to present one of the models to her entire college class. As I think back, I realize that both of these models came from our former curriculum—an innovative curriculum that our principal felt would make a difference to a more math-phobic population. Would every school principal be at liberty to see a new approach and allow a teacher to jump in with both feet? Maybe this is a difference that makes a difference. I know it made a difference in my teaching if not for the students.

When students are in the midst of a personal crisis, every staff member tries to balance what is expected academically as well as what is needed emotionally in the student’s life. I remember the year my own son found himself in the middle of his senior year, returning to school after Christmas vacation with a life turned upside-down. His father had decided over New Year’s that he no longer wanted to live in our home and left. I spoke with one of my son’s teachers about what he was going through so she would have an understanding of why his behavior might not be as she expected. She told me, “I don’t need to know that.” How could a teacher work with a student—with the whole person—and not want to understand his personal crisis? Maybe this is a difference at Mott that makes a difference.

So many small things are done differently here. I believe that each plays a small part in creating a big difference in one particular student’s life. I feel all of the concepts I’ve mentioned matter, but I think every staff member could reflect on many others that their experiences and interactions with students have shaped as well.

We are a Family

Let me start by saying that while we are a school, we are family. I felt this when I first began working here. I felt so incredibly welcomed. I had worked at a few other schools prior to Mott Middle Early College and knew right from the beginning that this was a different place. How different? I would learn very quickly.

At Mott Middle Early College,

- we actually take the time to get to know our students. I don't know why that was not one of my priorities at the other schools. I just know that at the other schools I taught, I coached, I was a class sponsor, but I was not emotionally involved. I was doing what I was told to do and focused on the content to deliver, not so much on who was receiving the content. I was doing a job, and that was it. Certainly, I cared about the students, but I just kept an emotional guard up, not getting too close to any of them. Here, I feel a lot more human. I am genuinely concerned for the welfare of our students and I hope they know that. I would do anything within reason to help them out.
- many of our staff feed our students at least once a week or more. I know I am putting out about \$15.00 per week, but it's worth it. The students know they can come to class Thursday morning and there will be something to eat, and there will be good company in the room. At Mott Middle College, I feel safe. I have never felt in danger while here. I know the students feel very safe also. So many students have shared stories about violence from their home schools. I am so glad they are here and feel the safety that we provide.
- we go above and beyond to try to get our students to succeed. Sometimes it is such a long process. However, when the process is complete WOW! It is not just one person that helps the student to succeed: it is the culminating effort of a whole team.
- we are a team. We pick each other up when we're down and have many good laughs together. I have learned so much from my colleagues here. With so many different teaching styles and so many different personalities, we offer our students a very diverse environment.
- we are making a difference. We all bring unique qualities and talents to the school in the visual arts, drama, music, sports, etc. We have different ways that we can connect with the students and make them feel welcome, which is how I began this writing. Our students feel welcome even after a mistake and then the cycle of being a family falls right back into place. We may not live together outside of school, but we have very caring relationships in school.
- we are family and that is a huge difference from so many other schools.

I Wondered on that Wintry Day

A teacher said she saw her standing at the bus stop

On a snowy, bitter cold morning in January.

She was standing there, waiting for the bus holding a car seat that carried her new baby.

It was snowing and bitter cold and there she waited for the bus that would take her to her baby's day care and then to school.

I remember that day and the snow. It was the kind that was heavy and stuck to you. It was the kind that fell in big, beautiful flakes and made you think it was pretty.

I wonder if she thought it was pretty as she waited for the bus.

What did she think as she waited for the bus? I wonder...

I did not see her standing there waiting for the bus, but I cannot stop seeing her

Standing there waiting for the bus

That child who is in my English class, who is a student, who is a mother, who was standing there on a winter day waiting for the bus.

In my mind, I see her precariously balancing a too heavy load of book bag and baby as she steps onto the bus surveying the seats for a place to accommodate her.

That Birthday Phone Call

It has been so long (nearly two decades) since I've worked in a "regular" school that I'm sometimes not sure how different we are at Mott Middle Early College. Today I'm really tired and somewhat cynical. It's almost the end of the school year. It's 3:10 p.m. before the Memorial Day weekend, and I'm feeling beaten down.

One difference I still feel we have is our individual relationships to our students. Today a student wrote her phone number down so I could call her on Sunday to sing Happy Birthday to her. This is a student with whom I've had a rocky experience. Some days she refuses to work, or even *be* in a classroom. Some days her eyes shoot daggers at me. Other days she is the perfect example of cooperation and scholarship. She wants to be an astronaut, yet acknowledges that one hurdle she will have to overcome is working in close quarters with PEOPLE. Yes, people. She has been heard to say that she can't stand people. So it came as a surprise to me when I jokingly said, "Do you want me to call you or come to your house to sing Happy Birthday to you?" "Yes," she answered, "*after 11:00 a.m.!*"

I plan to put several post-it notes around my house this weekend, because I dare not forget that I told this child I would call her. I don't know whether she will remember that I said I would, but I have a feeling that she will.

I know that all the other teachers at this school could tell similar, more poignant or meaningful stories about connections that they have with our students, but this child, who I know has had a very troubled past, this child who doesn't often trust or even like people, *will* get a phone call from one teacher. "Happy Birthday, K. You're 15 years old today."

Kids hang out in teachers' offices, and don't immediately clear the halls at the end of the day, even on Fridays, so we know that this place, these people are some of the most important people in their lives.

Are other schools like ours? I don't know. If not, that is a difference that makes a difference.

A Listening Ear

The primary difference at Mott Middle Early College that makes us so different is the communication between students and teachers.

One of the ways this manifests itself is in how I tell my students that I love them as a father. I know that some of these students do not have very good relationships with their fathers, but I am hoping that I model what a good father would do. My goal is to make them feel cared for.

The school environment most of the students come from is very unloving, and they are just another statistic. If I can convey an atmosphere of trust, then I can go further and teach good character. My content area is mathematics, but that is only a part of what I teach. The development of a good work ethic, trust, kindness, gentleness, integrity, honesty, and so much more, depends entirely on the mutual communication of trust and respect. My students know they can tell me anything, and I may not agree with the choices they have made, but I give them a listening ear.

The listening ear is probably something they have never had before. So many of our students come from dysfunctional homes where communication between child and parent does not take place. I believe the students are grateful to have someone finally listening to them. We become the home they never had, with many coming back to visit. These returning students include both graduates and non-graduates.

Loving Unconditionally

He was my student, and to this day, I think maybe I failed him. Maybe I didn't give him enough support. I don't know. As I said—it's hard. Our jobs are so complex, so exhausting. That is if you do it right. If you do it right, you are beat at the end of the day. If you do it right, sometimes they don't like you very much. If you do it right, they just want to be around you and they want to do well. If you do it right, you never teach anything the same way twice. If you do it right, you weep and can barely breathe for joy and pride when your Focus kid you've had for five years walks across that stage at graduation.

Kids need so much from us. They don't get it from television and the computer and all that. They need other people in the flesh and the blood. The adults they see most of in their day are often their teachers. They are precious, real human beings that need to be nurtured and cherished. It's an incredible responsibility. It is humbling. This whole thing we do—it's not just teaching. It's so huge. If you can do anything else, if you like anything else, you should go and do it—because this is too hard and requires much integrity and great sacrifice. And I don't use the word sacrifice lightly. You literally give your body and soul every day. In fact, sometimes I think I die a little each day in this job. But isn't that the way—everything must die for something else to live. If you do it right.

This job is about loving—unconditionally. Maybe I shouldn't speak of this. Maybe. It could be considered dangerous or stupid or both. But I will anyway. I was raised a Catholic and while I would not refer to myself as a religious person I do view myself as a spiritual person. And I always have in the back of my mind this idea that whatever else might be going on—we are called to love. It makes sense to me.

There are two pieces that have always stuck with me and that I keep near me to remind me what I should be doing at all times if I can muster the energy and the spirit. One is the Peace Prayer of St. Francis and the other is Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 13, verses 4-8. If we're talking about who we are then I have to go there. I do believe that people can come to this place of understanding without religious training or guidance, but my parents took me to church and I was taught by the hippies of Vatican II who were all about peace and love. And it has made all the difference. It is not an easy life. But I think it's the right life. Especially for the kids. They don't know this about me and that's okay—because it's not about me. And I am not interested in preaching or proselytizing. But let me share with you: "Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous; and is not arrogant, love does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, love does not take into account a wrong suffered, love does not rejoice in unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth; love bears all things, believes all things, endures all things, Love never fails (I Corinthians 13; 4-8). This is what I have to do and be to be a teacher. As I said—it's hard. But these are the differences that make a difference.

I believe education can be a place of centering; of focusing ourselves on our mind and body of the moment; of re-connecting that mind and body with the tangible world that exists inside and outside of our own skin—one that we need not experience vicariously through cyberspace but one that is as accessible as our own backyard or our next-door neighbor. Education is a place of centering—on senses, on self, on each other, on environment, on what we have known and learned as a people and on what we still need to know.

A rangy group of naughty young men from the south who make up a bluegrass band called Old Crow Medicine Show sing some lyrics, a verse and chorus, that go like this.

*Well my friend, let's put this thing together, and walk the path
these worn out feet have trod, 'cause if you want it, we can go
home forever, give up your jaded ways, spell, your name to God.
We're all in this thing together, walkin' the line between faith and
fear, this life don't last forever, and when you cry I taste the salt in
your tears.*

Education is more than information. Education without context, without meaning, without justice, means nothing. It is sterile. Education teaches meaning. Education gives value to the variable. And if those elements are taught, we can be in this thing together. We can 'walk the line between faith and fear' together. We can know the difference between home and transient seductions and be home forever, always satiated. When we are full, when we are whole, we are free and finally have something to give.

Barbara Kingsolver (2002) writes, "...I suspect that deepest of all human wishes, down there on the floor of the soul underneath the scattered rugs of lust, thirst and hunger, is the tongue-and-groove desire to be understood. And life is a slow trek along the path toward realizing how that wish will go unfulfilled."²³ I think she is right. We each live out our own lives in our own skin and in our own hearts, ultimately alone in our own experience. But, I think the other side of that coin is that when we try for understanding, when we reach and creep toward each other and the gifts this universe we inhabit holds, we experience something of a sense of oneness and something to share. This is what I believe education is about. It may be a muddled sort of journey, but it is all about seeking truth, about finding our home. It is a burning lamp that sheds light on what we know, what we need to learn still and teaches us how to light our own journey home and holds it out to others.

My vision for our learning community is that we make deliberate choices in our work and education that will allow us to create for ourselves a quality life; one that is desired and fulfilling, one that is of significance to the world, one that is characterized by integrity, responsiveness to community, persistence, resilience and joy. One that brings each other home.

²³ Kingsolver, Barbara. 2002. *Small Wonders*. Harper Perennial, New York, NY

Knitting Circles

It is May and the school year is winding down. Yesterday, for the second time, Ann came to me and asked me to teach her how to knit. The first time Ann tried to learn to knit was in the fall. She was pregnant and wanted to know if I would teach her so she could make a baby blanket. Ann really struggled with knitting. She had problems coordinating the two needles. After two weeks, she felt discouraged over her lack of progress and wanted to give up. One day she asked me if I thought she might find crocheting easier. I grabbed a hook and showed her the basic stitches. She took home some yarn and a hook and came back within a couple of days clearly pleased with the result. She had made mistakes on the sample, but by the week's end we both decided she could probably handle a blanket. I found a simple pattern on the internet and picked up the yarn that weekend. Ann's progress was slow, but steady. Her son is due at the end of this month and she tells me she is almost finished with his blanket.

When Ann told me she wanted to learn how to knit for the second time, I paused briefly, remembering her trouble coordinating needles, and then went to my scrap box of yarn and sat down with her for what I expected would be a long session. I helped her cast on for a scarf and showed her the basic knit stitch. She took the needles and recreated the stitch very slowly. Then faster. And faster yet again. She was knitting! We were both pleased and she took her needles and yarn home with her. Knitting and crocheting are not very much alike, but clearly managing one needle and yarn had prepared her for handling two needles and yarn. She had worked through what is often referred to as the "field of frustration" in order to learn a critical and dexterous task. It was fun to watch her face as she accomplished a task that had eluded her before.

Reflecting on Ann's newfound ability, I began to think about her progress over the course of the year. I have Ann in my American Social History Project class that meets for two hours a day over our student's junior year. I thought about how many times between classes I helped her with her baby's blanket and how she in turn helped me manage students by yelling at them to be quiet. Not one to mask her emotions, she would even occasionally declare she was bored and tell me to pick up the pace! On other days, she would ask if she could help me pass out papers. I don't think I am the only teacher she has done this for, but I know that through the baby blanket project we gained a connection that created a sense of ease between us—a space of humor and tolerance.

I teach knitting to high school students one or two hours a week during a time devoted to academic seminars. During this time, students can get extra help with classes or participate in new activities. As an avid knitter, I proposed knitting about four years ago and have taught at least a couple of hundred students to knit, mostly girls, with a few boys along the way. Many schools use knitting to teach students how to connect with different learning processes. Knitting teaches spatial recognition, dexterity, and math skills through design work and the use of pattern, color and texture. Keeping up with the need for yarn and needles hasn't been easy, but between the school, the donations of the local yarn shops and community donations, we manage to get enough yarn for students to learn and complete small projects. I give them their first pair of needles and enough yarn to complete a scarf, and if they enjoy it, they buy their own needles and return the old ones to me.

Here's the thing that I know to be true. Over the past few years, No Child Left Behind has put a stranglehold on innovation in curriculum. It has been back to the basics and traditional methods with a vengeance. For some reason, knitting has, so far, survived at our school. I do not expect it to last for much longer, but I know what it does for kids. For those who have the patience to learn, it teaches more patience. In a multitasking world, it forces kids to slow down and focus. Kids learn about process and they skill build as they graduate to

tougher projects on their own. For many, knitting creates a generational connection. Many a student has come to class and told me of a mother, aunt, or grandmother who saw their daughter or son knitting and not only helped them with their own know-how, but often took them to the craft store to buy them their first pair of needles and some beautiful yarn. When I sit in a classroom conversing and helping knitters, experienced knitters help the inexperienced ones and people laugh at their mistakes as I float from person to person, checking progress. The kids talk about their lives and relax in a way that is impossible in their academic classes. They tell stories about their families and their aspirations for the future. They ask me for advice and other kids chime in offering theirs. In this hour a week, this is one way my school helps to build a community. In a school designed to help kids at risk for dropping out, connections are often the only reason they will come to school. Connections with the teachers and other adults in our setting are essential for student success. Knitting is one way to help build connections—one stitch at a time.

It's an American story: The hero or heroine is seen from a distance coming up through the wasteland to the impersonal and corrupt town. They don't want to get involved, but they are forced to as they encounter the innocent and weak falling victim to the corrupt and uncaring officials in the town. Sounds like your typical western, but it's really the plot of almost any teacher movie drama to make the big screen. From Jamie Escalante in *Stand and Deliver* to LouAnne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*, this scenario is pretty typical, though often moving, fare. One wonders how many people went into teaching with these folks as their inspiration—and found out that is NOT exactly how it works. Nobody gets anywhere alone except for in the movies and teachers will tell you, if they are being honest, that Hillary Clinton got it right—"It takes a village to raise a child." In the case of Mott Middle Early College, visionary administrators, talented teachers, caring counselors, and earnest students all work together to try to make our school work.

Teachers can often go to heroic lengths to reach students. Mott tries all kinds of techniques—most learned through district advocated professional development and state mandated education. Good teachers turn the requirements to their advantage, dovetailing their classroom demands and their educational requirements. Most of my own extension work has done both. My Master's degree in American Culture allowed me to explore and deepen my primary teaching assignment in the American Social History Project. I was encouraged in my efforts by two terrific college professors (among several!) who both became readers for my Master's thesis: *Schools for a Democratic America*. My principal encouraged my participation in the professional development that came with my work for The American Social History Project. Our school's team became national leaders in the development of that curriculum and currently teaches the methods and curriculum to other schools interested in this unique approach to the teaching and learning of American history and literature. Along the way, the encouragement of the team teachers I have worked with as well as our curriculum coordinator have been absolutely invaluable as have the contributions from other team teachers around the nation.

All of the above factors are just a smattering of the ingredients that go into a good school. The core of the school is, of course, the students. I cannot wax poetic on the tough lives these kids come to us with—suffice it to say that I wish the politicians who manipulate the schools so deftly would walk in the shoes of a few of our kids for a month. It might wake them up to the daily struggles that capture and engage our school's counselors, who try to bridge our kid's home lives with their school lives. The landscape is all very carefully constructed in order to help kids be successful. Our students make me live in the moment and they remind me every day that nobody does it alone—least of all schools.

Good teaching and learning are not created in a vacuum. If schools are really to succeed, they shouldn't have to do it in spite of society—but rather as an integral part of it. Maybe Hollywood should try telling a different story—one where everybody in the community contributes to the success of its children. We don't have to do it alone.

All These Things

Is it Focus Group where we feed the kids as often as our own budget allows—even making personal sacrifices to make sure there is enough money to cover the fruit, the breakfast of bagels and cream cheese and cereal and pancakes and eggs and sausage and yes, even tacos at 9:00 a.m.? Kids will eat anything, and it goes without saying that what they are eating is hot Cheeto's and Mountain Dew for breakfast. No wonder they are tired, lethargic, they are getting no nutrition. Where is the calcium, the vitamins in their breakfast choices? And yet they flock even from other Focus Groups to the ones that feed. They are polite, grateful, and hungry. It is a small thing I can do, and with it they know I care about their health, their well-being and their life. When you know someone cares that much—you turn toward, not away.

Is it Mastery Learning where we are constantly monitoring students for work completed? In the halls I hear, "I'm still waiting on that paper from you. I will work with you. I will give you an "I". See me for help on completing your outstanding work." I hear, "I will be here after school, come to my room and I will stay after to help you understand the assignment." I hear, "I know you've had it rough lately. I'm here to listen—to help you through feeling so overwhelmed. Let's break it down so it is more manageable for you." I hear all these things from every corner of the school. Is that what makes the difference?

Is it Purkey's Invitational School Model that makes the difference--the model that says all teachers are responsible for inviting students into their classroom? At MMEC, being an invitational school comes as second nature; we do it from the time we walk through the doors, greeting students with, "Good morning, how are you today", and noticing if everything doesn't seem quite right. Questioning gently—"Everything okay?" And if it is not, asking "Is there anything I can do?" Sometimes there is nothing one can do but empathize and just listening is helpful. We are invitational at the grocery store—shopping where our kids shop—and at the mall and even as they are walking down the sidewalk in my neighborhood. I live where I teach.

Is it brain research? Is it understanding that all students learn differently and that this plays a big part in kids' perception of their ability to learn, so that having in-depth information about learning styles, brain function, adolescent development and social environment is critical to teaching strategies that reach kids?

Is it understanding that environment, poverty and wealth all play roles in students' identity of themselves? Is it the ability to see perspectives and know that a non-judgmental response is critical to building a relationship with a child who doesn't see himself as smart, successful, or capable of moving out of his current situation? Is it the fact that teachers make time to get to know their students on a personal level and to discuss things that are important to them?

Is it leadership that wisely guides the adults in the same way that the adults guide the students—by listening, caring and helping when possible, by supporting and creating an environment that includes, in fact enlists and insists, on collaborative decision making? Is it the leadership that allows staff to have a say in curriculum taught, sections needed, assessment of student needs, professional development, use of time, organizational changes?

Is it the size of the school? Is it the diverse, interesting, well-developed curriculum? Is it the power of being a college student on a college campus? Is it the infrastructure that purposefully puts the student first in everything—in course scheduling, Help seminars, five graded marking periods that provide for course recovery, and no grade less than a C, or a No Credit, that does not impact GPA, or before- and after-school tutoring? Is it leaders constantly

switching hats to understand the school as a whole and not just from the realm of a single classroom?

The answer to all these questions is YES. It is all these things and more that we don't even realize we are doing. This was evidenced by an associate at the Michigan Department of Education who took me aside and said, "I heard from a colleague that you saved the life of her nephew." "Oh my," I said, "Who is that?" He asked, "Don't you know?" I responded that in fact I did not. When he told me the name, I shook my head. I didn't think I had done anything out of the ordinary to salvage this young life, but in the eyes of his family, what I had done had altered the course of his life and ultimately his future. And I didn't even know what I did.

For Michael

Black
Boy
what is it
that I could know
who you are
you
who are
dark
and complex
with your
swagger
and your
flat bill hat
and your
bling belt buckle
and your
perfect rhymes
and your crumpled gaze
these things
that belie
your fears
your courage
your gentleness
you
who do hand stands
and back flips
for attention
for love

Why do you wear those chains?
draping yourself in
blue
and
black
flags
and
diamond studded skulls

Why do you wear those chains?
Who told you to?
are you not yet free?
are you not trying to break the bonds of gravity
every time
with your hand stands
and your back flips

Who told you to wear those chains?
 I saw you yesterday
 I mean I really saw you
 yesterday
 you came to my assistance
 you said hello
 you smiled
 you helped a friend
 you knew

Who told you to wear those chains?

but
 what is it
 that I could truly know of you
 of what it means to be you
 me and my
 white girl
 suburban bread

yet who am I to speak of
 colors
 and flags
 and chains
 and gangs
 and bruthuh

Brother!

Courage!
 Faith!
 Work!
 Love!
 Peace!

Brother!
 Brother!

yet who am I to have the audacity to say these things
 who am I
 but White Teacher B. Semple

I suppose

a simple cracker girl
 with love in her heart
 and truth in her eyes
 could say those things

to you maybe?

who ever told you to wear those chains was wrong
they are liars
they are thieves

they don't deserve the preciousness of your soul
the wealth of your mind
the gift of your future
don't you understand?
they don't deserve those things

I am telling you

Cracker says

Cracker says
you don't have to wear those chains
drop the flag
and the chain
in the ditch where it belongs

you are precious
and should be treated thus
you are free

you are free
Black
Man

CHAPTER 8

Voices of the Community College

The parents, students and staff of MMEC have described the differences that have made the school a special place. This chapter will present the comments of members of the administration, faculty and staff of Mott Community College, the higher education partner of MMEC. Richard Shaink, Ph.D. and Scott Jenkins, President and Vice-President for Student and Administrative Services of the college respectively, and four college faculty members shared their views during several interviews about critical factors that were essential for the partnership's success. These were the major points they stressed.

Voices of the Administrators:

New Options and the Power of the Site

A theme that continually recurred in conversations with Mott Community College administration, faculty and staff, was the importance of locating a middle college high school on the campus of a community college. Only this approach creates the different sociological and psychological environment that extends beyond the mere offering of college credit, to include profound modification of self-concept, strengthening of confidence and aspirations for new future possibilities.

High school students now have many ways to earn college credit. High school redesign efforts, known collectively as Secondary-Post Secondary Learning Options (SPLOs), include at least eight models that provide many of the important elements that have been missing from high school for most students: challenge, engagement, access to the adult world, and support. Of these models, only one offers the approach of locating the school itself away from a traditional high school, and moving it to the campus of a community college. The following is a summary of eight ways high school students can earn college credit.

- **Advanced Placement (AP)**

AP courses are the most popular option. There are 35 nationally designed AP courses that allow high school teachers to provide college level options on-site. Students who score well enough on the end-of-course exam can earn college credit. Many high schools that do not have AP trained teachers offer access to AP courses through online internet instruction.

- **International Baccalaureate (IB)**

A small but growing number of schools across the globe have adopted this program, designed to offer students a high school degree that is rigorous enough to meet any nation's highest standards. Some American colleges grant credit for students completing some junior and senior level IB courses.

- **Direct Credit**

Colleges send professors or deputize high school teachers to provide direct credit college-level courses on location at the high school, usually as part of the regular school day.

- **Dual Enrollment**

Students spend part of their day at high school and part of their day attending college classes on campus or via distance learning. Public high schools pay the bulk of the college tab, but various rules govern how and when they do so. Students can also sign up for a course independently at night, on weekends, or during breaks.

- **Early Enrollment**

Some students move directly to college before turning eighteen, sometimes even before having graduated from high school. This option is used by students who are ready for more challenging work, by homeschoolers who see no need to wait, and by high school students who do not fit in well in a traditional school setting, but demonstrate self-motivation to learn in other ways.

- **Summer College**

Many colleges run a variety of sports, arts and academic programs during the summer. Some of those programs now offer credit.

- **Technical Credit**

High school career technical centers offer some courses for credit that may transfer to some colleges for vocational degrees like Computer Aided Design and Drafting and Accounting.

- **Middle Early College**

Four- or five-year high school academic programs located on a college campus with an embedded organizational structure purposefully designed to assist students to earn an Associate degree or 60 or more transferable credits.

The first seven options have a discrete goal: To provide opportunities for high school students to earn college credit while still in high school. The first three options—AP, IB and direct credit—all take place within the regular high school with instruction in both high school and college-level classes provided by high school teachers in the building. Dual and early enrollment options involve high school students spending part or all of their school day (and possibly evenings) pursuing college coursework on a college campus. Such students are often highly able and motivated and pursue college courses independently with the single targeted

goal of earning college credit. Summer college and technical credit options provide additional opportunities for high school students to earn college credit while still in high school.

Only the middle early college is a totally new design involving collaboration between two educational institutions that formerly operated as independent institutions, now collaborating in a comprehensive partnership designed to provide a seamless transition for high school students.

All members of Mott Community College interviewed for this study emphasized that for this new model of education to be successful, it must operate totally on the college campus. This change of location encourages the teenage students of a middle early college to assume the adult behaviors of their new fellow students because—although they are still teenagers and in some ways act like teenagers—once they are in an environment of adults, they adapt to the new culture and norms of the college campus. The community college’s administration and faculty believe that if a student is on the campus, he is in college—not in high school. As Jenkins stated,

The student is in college because of this program. The power of this site is that the students are in a building that we call the University Center, one of our prime facilities. It is a building that houses our Mott Community College programs along with five universities—Ferris, Eastern Michigan, the University of Michigan-Flint, Cleary College and Michigan State University--and MMEC... In this way, MMEC and its students can see themselves as part of that whole community-based partnership and initiative, not in some corner far away from the center of the campus.

When Mott Community College entered into partnership with MMEC, it had deeply rooted values and goals in mind. From the beginning, more was involved than merely increasing student enrollment and gaining additional tuition revenue for the college. “Direct credit is *not* the same as what we’re doing,” said Jenkins. “Rather, our purpose is to change lives and affect the community. If we do not take part in reaching out to students who are failing high school or dropping out before graduation, where will our community be in ten years? We’ll have a lost generation of leadership.”

Jenkins is proud of the history and concept of community education as a core value of Mott Community College. Since 1988, and during numerous college presidencies, the institution has remained loyal to its fundamental mission to serve the entire community as a center of educational opportunity. “What we did was community minded—to uplift a community,” he said.

Mott Community College was also in a strong position to carry out its mission because it was one of 23 educational institution members of a county-wide collaboration—the Greater Flint Education Consortium²⁴, one of the oldest of its kind in the nation—whose leaders share a spirit of mutual collegiality, collaboration and respect. This remarkable relationship was created and is continued by all its members including the president of Mott Community College, the superintendents of the 21 local school districts and of the Genesee Intermediate School District. They meet monthly to address the educational and community development needs of the entire county.

²⁴ An organization composed of the leaders of the public educational institutions in Genesee County, from pre-kindergarten through to community college.

During the last decades of the 20th century, the Consortium was acutely aware of the severe economic disruptions the county was suffering due to the collapse of the auto industry. They looked at the common problem of education and reframed it as a seamless process in which each member and institution had a role and a part to play. According to President Shaink, “What renders us unique is how we work together. I think that really helps, and has served as the bedrock of our success. We are stronger together than we are apart.”

Why a Middle College on the Campus of Mott Community College?

Many of Mott Community College’s own faculty and staff asked why their college would want a high school on its campus, losing full use of their facilities, giving away classroom space during the day, and having hundreds of teenagers on their campus. Even some members of the board of trustees and administration believed there was no good reason that a community college would want a high school on its campus.

The only response to these concerns that made sense was that the new educational alternative that would serve the community would be more than just a traditional high school placed on a college campus: It would be a middle college—Mott Middle College.²⁵ According to Jenkins,

*We also had to establish a reason for subsequent administrations to continue the partnership, since presidents come and go, and principals come and go. We had to make the **college** part of it clear and important to the college. We had to create a hybrid college, so that when new presidents came they could look at the middle college as part of the college system, not as part of the high school system.*

Once the identity and role of the middle college became clear, administrators and instructors at both institutions began an intense process of collaboration to design their new hybrid. For MCC, this involved modifying their college curriculum to serve their expanded student body, and planning with the middle college teachers to ensure they would be more part of the college than a high school.

Since the establishment of the partnership 20 years ago, no subsequent president of MCC has challenged the presence of the middle college on its campus or asked what it was and why was it there. When new administrators see the middle college and observe its operations on the college campus, they recognize that it behaves and feels like a college, not a high school. The two institutions and their staff are integrated and collaborative.

Faculty at MCC credit the administration and staff of their partner institution. As one college faculty member candidly remarked,

Even some of us who had “heartburn” initially, because, for example, we felt, ‘This is my hall, this is my classroom—have become supporters, because the administrative arm of Mott Middle College has reached out to us. They have asked, “Can you help us understand how to do this? We want to understand and we are reaching out to you.”

²⁵ This remained the name of the school until 2003 when it became Mott Middle Early College (MMEC). References before that date cite its original name, Mott Middle College (MMC).

One of the community college's administrators confirmed this. "I can't recall in the last few years any complaints from college faculty. I don't think I've actually had one that I can register in my head in three years. The new faculty really embrace getting involved with the middle college and love the concept and what we're doing."

Guidelines Established by Mott Community College

Clear guidelines and shared understandings were essential for the success of the new middle college on the college campus.

- From the start, both institutions agreed that no student with a violent history could be part of the middle college and enroll in classes on the community college campus.
- MMC administrators would meet the expectations of the community college, and operate and manage the middle college *as a middle college and not as a high school*.
- Mott Community College would adopt a "hands off" posture on the day-to-day operations of the middle college, and the middle college administrators would exercise direct supervisory responsibilities for the behavior and conduct of their middle college students. MMC would attend to the college developmental readiness of all their students, so that when they entered college and began to take college courses they were ready to take on the rigors of a college-level course.
- MMC students would be mainstreamed into regular college classes according to the college's class schedule with the single exception of the Counseling/Study Skills/Core Enhancement Class, which would be a middle college student cohort class. The college would not identify any MMC students by any tagging system. All students would be college students unless and until they choose to self disclose. (Many faculty are surprised to learn, at the end of the year, that some of their students were in fact middle college high school students. Some may suspect that about a particular student, but never discover this until the end of the course, and some never find out.)
- Total middle college enrollment would be capped at 400 in order to maintain an educational environment that offered personal connections, engagement and support for all students in the program by both institutional partners.

The core mission and focus of the program would remain true to its commitment to serve students who have not been successful in their high schools. Such students were often alienated or disconnected from their previous high schools, and disengaged from their schools and its demands—first mentally and ultimately, physically. Both Mott Community College and Mott Middle College are committed to staying true to the original purpose of the middle college program to serve students who are not accepted into or do not feel part of their high school. This mission is in keeping with a core value of Mott Community College to serve its entire community.

According to Shaink,

When the middle college serves at-risk students and provides opportunities for them to change their lives, we are also changing the lives of their parents. Most parents of middle college students have never been on a college campus, and now their children are the first generation in their families to do so. As the tale unfolds, the students often begin to teach their parents, and arouse in them the thought and possibility that they too could go back to school and become successful college students.

Think about it. Before the middle college, it must have been devastating for parents to see a son or daughter going in a certain direction with no hope of changing that. Then, through this program, their student gets into a middle college like this. The parents see the faculty looking at their sons and daughters who now set goals for their future success and make plans about what they can be, and the students morph into these successful beings because of it—because the expectation is that the student is going to act like an adult, and yes, is going to go to college. By embracing their sons and daughters, guiding them toward becoming successful college students, we also inspire some parents to follow their children’s example.

How Mott Community College and Mott Middle Early College Support Each Other

Mott Community College shares the sincere commitment with MMEC to provide Genesee County at-risk high school students with a new chance for academic and future success. When speaking with middle college students, community college administrators remind students and staff that they live in a country that offers vast educational opportunities. They stress that now *they* are part of an important historical movement. All other educational systems were developed elsewhere and integrated into the United States, but the community college was designed and implemented specifically by Americans for Americans. Now, the middle college is another unique educational model of public education, “born and bred” in the United States. Thus, all members of the middle college are themselves in the midst of a historical development that they are helping to shape. They remind students that in other countries, students who are in the 10th grade are *not* also in college. The middle college is a unique and innovative model, an opportunity not open to everybody. Thus, middle college students are in fact a select group and it is their responsibility to take full advantage of this opportunity because very few students anywhere are given this chance.

Shaink reflected on the special educational opportunity the two institutions were providing to their citizens of all ages. “It’s thoughtful and deliberate,” he stated.

If a student comes from a middle class family where the parents have attended college, the common question is, ‘What college are you going to?’ However, with parents who have not gone to college, who probably have been thought of as less than college material, their children do not have that example and the parents

do not have that expectation. When they come to the middle college, they see that what is now possible was something they had never imagined before. They see themselves in a community of individuals who expect that they will go on to college—in fact, they are in college.

Both institutions have benefited from their partnership and positive changes have occurred. Through ongoing communication, both sets of administrators have collaborated to develop new programs that have supported faculty and students of both institutions.

- A new middle college summer orientation was created for students starting the program to help them develop the maturity needed to meet new expectations of college-level behavior and performance. According to community college administrators and faculty, the orientation has made a difference. Student Services at both institutions have worked together to streamline processes and alleviate or minimize gaps that students experience in various critical areas including Admissions, Financial Aid, Registration, Program Advisement, Sequencing of Courses and Post-Community College Transitioning to a four-year higher education institution.
- A second manifestation of this collaboration involves teachers and faculty who work together to align current curricula between the two institutions and to create new curricula that better prepares high school students for a current program or study, or supports the development of new programs of study. To prepare skilled graduates for the growing Michigan film industry, Mott Community College created a new program of study in 2009 titled Media Arts and Entertainment Technology. In response to this new opportunity, MMEC created a new high school course named Video Production, open to all interested students, that exposes them to the equipment and skills needed for entry to the new college program.
- A third example of the collaboration involves college faculty who have redesigned and/or created courses such as Leadership Development, College Study Skills and Introduction to Technology that address more appropriately the gap between high school success and college readiness.

Such actions by both institutions have created new understandings of the needs of younger middle college students on their campus, as well as those of the traditional community college students. According to community college administrators, this has been one of the ‘golden nuggets’ of the partnership. Numerous college faculty have shared publicly that they have modified their instructional strategies and selection of academic content as a result of what they have learned from the middle college. As one stated, “I’ve moved away from being a lecturer most of the time. I now create more interactive ways of engaging my students, challenging them with long-term inquiry-based authentic problem solving, and new ways of assessing how much they have learned.”

College responses to student conduct have also changed. Many times, blame for certain problems had been placed on middle college students, when in fact it had been college students who had been responsible for the difficulties. The collaboration of both institutions on a daily basis strengthens both and fosters the success of all students.

How Both Mott Middle College Partners Share Pride in Their Students' Successes

President Shaink recalled the 2005 Mott Community College graduation ceremony that featured two student speakers. One of the two was a middle college high school graduate, approximately 18 years old, who had been in the Honors Program and earned two Associate degrees with a college GPA of 4.0. The student was selected because of his active involvement in many different student groups and activities, and his outstanding success. In addition, Shaink remarked that such an event had occurred several times during his presidency. He proudly acknowledges that MMEC graduates now average 22-24 college credits, and many earn even more. Longitudinal data indicated that a student who has completed 24 hours of college credit has an 80-85 percent chance of graduating with a Bachelor's degree. He reflected on this success.

We set as a goal when we first started a program that every student would go to college. We did not have that in policy, and we did not know how that would happen, but it has. When dual enrollment first came possible, it was not loved by all. MCC did not go on the bandwagon for dual enrollment.

The local school districts lost funding and then had to pay the community college, but the college never promoted dual enrollment. Mott Community College actually stayed neutral and let it evolve. I think about this now that dual enrollment is pervasive throughout the entire Michigan system of public education, Our success has been to know our role, be supportive, and walk in the shoes of the high school system by being empathetic, understanding, and sensitive to the issues they face.

The key ingredient of a middle early college is, as was stated earlier—the power of the site of both institutions on the community college campus. This distinction mandates that both institutions commit to integration, blending, partnership and collaboration.

Financial and Operational Management of Mott Middle Early College

When community colleges explore the idea of a partnership with a middle college, many financial and operational issues have to be addressed including: Who pays for what? How are space and rent handled? Who manages student behavior? In the case of MMEC, both partners have negotiated solutions that work for them and provide financial stability.

- MMEC has its own security officer directly related and connected to the community college and the middle college, not the City of Flint Police Department.
- Both partners have established a formula by which the middle college receives a certain amount of services and products at no cost, with additional costs charged to them for direct payment.\
- While the middle college pays tuition costs for all its students, the total does not cover all costs for the educational services provided. Mott Community College provides a Board of Trustees Scholarship to one student to earn an Associate degree. While middle college students are dual enrolled in both institutions, they do not have all the rights and

responsibilities of full-time college students. They are not permitted to play on college teams, but are encouraged to participate in athletics in their home school districts. In such instances, and in other cases of high school based extra-curricular activities, middle college students are obliged to hold themselves true to their high school regulatory bodies.

- Both institutional partners have committed themselves to a unified way of thinking in carrying out their administrative roles and practices. They specifically avoid a kind of “we/they” thinking, seeking to operate as one team to avoid confusion, misunderstanding or manipulation by staff, students and parents who may seek to play one against the other.

The administrative interviews described above reveal that both Shaink and Jenkins are deeply committed to the continued success of MMEC. They view the new educational program as an exceptional opportunity for the Genesee County community, and have consistently demonstrated their unflagging support for the thousands of students and families they have served in the college’s 20 years of operation. What is obvious is that such deep commitment is essential if a middle college is to succeed on the campus of a community college campus. An almost infinite number of obstacles and problems can arise. Leaders less bonded to each other and to the unique new educational model of a middle college would likely have surrendered to the complexity of the challenges and the heavy burdens they already face operating a traditional community college. The survival and flourishing of MMEC is a testimony to the sense of responsibility and perseverance the leaders of Mott Community College have shown since the idea first surfaced, more than 20 years ago, of meeting the educational needs of at-risk youth in Genesee County in a new and exciting manner.

Voices of the Faculty

Four faculty members of Mott Community College were selected to be interviewed, based on their intensive involvement with the middle college. Their comments are revealing, and reinforce the beliefs and commitments of the community college’s leaders.

a. Mathematics instructor

One community college math instructor described his experiences with the students and staff of MMEC since he became involved with them nine years earlier.

When we first got involved with the middle college, several of their math teachers came over and watched what we were doing in our basic math classes the community college. We discussed what middle college students would need, and what would transition best to us; then we helped them write a curriculum. I came to cherish the close working relationship that developed between us.

In the early years of working with middle college students, I did not even realize who they were. Apparently, I had a number of middle college students in my classes, but never realized it. One day I was with their counselor and she said, “By the way, you’re a favorite of our students.” I was startled. “I actually had your students?” I asked. She responded that indeed, I had already had “quite a few” middle college students—perhaps 10

to 20—and I had only been there at that time for two or three years.

I had no idea, and as I see it, that is the whole premise of the school—that those students will come over to the college level and we won't be able to tell the difference between the two levels of students.

This faculty member had taught high school mathematics for 30 years. When he heard the term “alternative high school”, he always thought it involved students who could not behave in a regular classroom. He had heard of Mott Middle College and assumed that it would be one of those “alternative” schools. “So, I already had that bias in mind,” he added. “That’s the whole thing about having those kids come over. Usually they don’t say they’re from MMEC. I probably have some in my classes right now and I have no clue.”

He added that if he were to compare the MMEC students with the students he had in traditional high schools, his current students would be “exemplary”—model students. He believes that the middle college does a very good job in counseling and supporting their students, and as a result, “never even thought about who was who, and could **not** tell the difference.”

The math instructor praised the middle early college math teachers for their excellent orientation of students preparing to take college classes. “They make sure that they understand that college is not the same world as high school, and if as students they do something wrong, it’s not just going to be a teacher or an administrator they’re going to have to deal with, but the campus police!”

He was pleased that he never had any prior information about the students in his math classes. His point of view was, “I didn’t want to know anyone’s previous experience. To me, every student coming to my class is starting fresh, and I don’t care what they did before. I have had middle college students in Beginning, Intermediate and Advanced College Algebra classes, along with some in Calculus I. I treat them all as students. My whole concern about all the middle colleges in the country is that here at Mott Middle College they are integrated into the college. I hear stories of other places where a teacher goes to the high school. That is not a middle college, and that is not what we do.”

This instructor spoke extensively about the merit of the middle college teaching and learning environment.

We want the college experience,” he said. “We want them to come on to campus as individual students and be exposed to the atmosphere of a college. We do not want our college instructors to go out to their high schools. It’s not the same when the students remain in their high school, or if a group of middle college students—say, 10 or 11, go to the same class, because they are still bound together and do not have a college experience.

He continues to communicate with MMEC math teachers, touching base about how things are going within their classes and the college classes, and how the transition

is progressing. They work closely, coordinating their efforts and planning spring seminars together to prepare new students for the college experience in the fall.

b. Psychology and Service Learning & Leadership Development Instructor

This faculty member has taught at Mott Community College for 35 years, and been involved with MMEC since its inception. She was interested right from the beginning in developing teaching strategies for the new students and formulating plans about how the idea of a middle college could be successful. Funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation enabled her to write a new curriculum that would include leadership development. She had already participated in diversity workshops with administrators and teachers of the middle college, and respected their beliefs about what students needed to learn and how they might learn.

This instructor shares the beliefs, values and goals of MMEC at the deepest levels. She was grateful that she was able to create an environment within the walls of a college where students are acknowledged as adults. “When they are treated as valuable human beings with a contribution to make—they are high school students, adolescents in the turmoil of all that goes with that—they are able to see themselves in an adult setting being treated that way.” She knew that middle college students could simultaneously take college level classes.

On several occasions, those students had been in class with her regular college students and on many occasions, they had surpassed the college students’ expectations. She could see the surprise in the eyes of the older students when a 16-year-old introduced himself as a middle college student. The others had made assumptions about maturity and ability—and here was a 16-year-old who earned the highest scores that semester. She continued,

I have had many very intelligent, gifted students who have been assets in the classroom. That enriches their own perception of themselves, and enables them to get a hold and move forward. Whether they are pregnant or in poverty, they have the benefit of being in the presence of students with whom they feel equal, and that is wonderful.

Perhaps because of her understanding of human psychology, this faculty members identifies and accepts some of the behaviors that are “just so characteristic” of high school students—the first time love, the hallway hugging, the factions and cliques—all the adolescent stuff that is so normal. In her opinion, most of the college students are able to work with it, and are not critical of those behaviors. “Even if a college student wants to say something to a middle college student,” she said, “they’ll just walk on by, and not say anything to them. I think it enables them to grow in a comfortable environment.”

She also praised her fellow college instructors who, for the most part, have been “receptive and inclusive”. Certainly, some were not pleased, but in her opinion, their voices have not made a difference. As an ardent community college instructor, she stated, “I think the very idea that we are a community college means we must be innovative, open to change, and willing to do what is necessary to grow our community, to facilitate the development of our students’ talents and skills and move them forward to new jobs and new opportunities, no matter what it takes.” She contrasted this attitude with that typically found at universities, which tend not to be as flexible.

Community colleges have to be flexible enough to serve the needs of the community, and courageous enough to take risks and operate differently to allow new talent to flourish. “We represent the place where people come who have been out of school for so many years, and the idea that we would have a high school within that community college, sometimes it fosters courage in the high schoolers who might not have considered going on to college.”

Thinking about her community college, she remarked, “I think we are a different animal to some degree. The personnel here make it different. It’s the mindset, the values and the commitment of those who work here. For the most part, we really do have an excellent faculty. Administrators come and go but the mission of the college remains and runs through our veins. I have often said that when I’m at Mott Community College, I feel I’m at home, and I think many faculty feel that way as well.” This learning environment that stresses a sense of community supports MMEC’s emphasis on meeting a student’s need for love and belonging.

In addition, this instructor believes the commitment of her institution to create Mott Middle College was—and remains—a good investment because it is an act of human resource development. “Our country needs to create jobs, and be innovative and creative. We can’t be innovative and creative without education.” She felt the nation had too many dropouts and had not sufficiently invested in quality education in recent years as was needed. To her, therefore, the middle college represented an excellent way to try to extend instructional effectiveness to all students to help them build a successful future.

c. Psychology and Study Skills Lab Instructor

This faculty member became involved in counseling and advising students ten years ago, and has had numerous middle college students during that time, although she did not necessarily know this when they were in class. She has enjoyed watching the progression and interaction of students of all ages—from middle college teenagers to older students in their 40s returning to college, respecting each other and learning quite a bit from each other.

When she first started teaching study and learning skills to middle college students, she was astounded at how motivated they were. One student was a young pregnant woman who did not miss one class: She delivered the day after class and the next day she was in class. “She showed impressive motivation and dedication.” Then a few years later some of those students appeared in her psychology class. She was further impressed with how many credits they had acquired, and by the fact that some of them had acquired their Mott Community College Associate degree one week earlier than they received their high school diploma.

This instructor believed that both institutions had been very good at encouraging, structuring, and supporting the at-risk middle college students, and had created a positive learning environment for them. “In the end,” she believed, “it will pay off for the whole community.”

She herself had personally experienced Mott Middle College as the close friend of a woman whose son was a student there and was deeply inspired. The young man had been floundering, but after a year, the school made a big difference in his life. The instructor’s experience showed her how the staff at the middle college truly cared and treated each student as an individual. She came to support and embrace the school

even more. From various perspectives, she saw how being on a college campus and taking college classes affected former high school dropouts and at-risk students.

They begin to see that they can do this. They have peers receiving their Associate degree while they are there. They observe the mentoring. Many are first-generation college students who had no idea they could be on a campus and succeed in higher-level studies. They learn there is even financial aid to assist them. They can do all these things, and they see it. A door opens up to them that probably never would have without the opportunity of the middle college.

To community colleges elsewhere who might be considering partnership in a middle college, she would say, “Embrace it. It’s educating; it’s a very positive, inspiring and meaningful experience. Those youth are going to take care of us when we’re older; we need to take care of them also, and we’re showing that we can.”

d. Career Education and Tech Prep Program Director

This college staff member brought extensive teaching and community service experience to her role in career education and the Tech Prep Demonstration Project at Mott Community College. This background helped her develop new connections between the high school career and tech programs typically found in Michigan high schools with the related advanced programs at Mott Community College.

Originally, middle college students pursued college-level classes in liberal arts fields such as English, government and psychology. The administrators of both institutions along with their faculty wanted to increase their students’ awareness about opportunities for technical programs at the college to interest them in various fields. After two years of collaboration by faculty of both institutions, Mott Community College was selected as one of 13 community colleges across the country to receive a federal Tech Prep Demonstration Grant for \$800,000 over a five-year period.

This collaboration not only raised students’ awareness about technical career opportunities, but also helped them plan programs of study that met high school graduation requirements and then transitioned to college programs that led to either a Bachelor’s degree or certification in a technical field.

Success in this important area has been facilitated by the support of the entire Genesee County community including the educators in all 21 K-12 districts, the county’s higher education institutions, the business community, the Flint Chamber of Commerce, child care institutions, automotive associations, and trade unions offering apprenticeships—a broad cross-section of people involved in the work world.

The business community has been involved in many ways including its participation in advisory committees that help shape the programs and provide resource support, internships and curriculum suggestions. They are aware that MMEC is making students aware of occupational areas and career pathways early by starting the technical and career preparation stream in high school. Consequently, right from the start local businesses have shown their support—hosting students in job shadowing, providing speakers, creating opportunities in the work-based learning process, and ensuring that what is taught are the skill sets that businesses need and will prepare students for employment as they complete their formal educational studies.

How Two Partner Institutions Worked Together for Their Middle College

Administration and faculty at both institutions worked closely together to transition from a middle college to an early college. MMEC math teachers ensured that the math program provided students with the skills and competencies they needed. The common goal was that students would not only earn college credits but that those credits also would be purposeful, would yield a minimum of 15 credits, and possibly a maximum of 60 credits leading to an Associate degree, or transfer credits to another institution of higher learning. Both institutions planned and held numerous gatherings with college faculty and business people to discuss career options with students. These efforts have resulted in increased interest in a greater variety of career and technical fields earlier in their high school program, which has guided them to enroll in the most appropriate classes in the most appropriate course sequence for their career or technical field of choice.

The director of the Career Education and Tech Prep Program was particularly proud of the MMEC because while many other early colleges had focused on a particular career area, in this case both partners decided to support students where *they* were according to *their* goals, rather than trying to fit them into pre-defined areas. Focusing on the needs of at-risk students, it was important to start with the students—what they were interested in, where they had talent, and what they aspired to become. She concluded,

As I have spoken with faculty across campus, I have been told in many cases that the highest achieving student in a particular course has been a high school student from Mott or another dual enrolled student from across the county. I think it's important for the faculty to keep an open mind about whom they're serving, and that they do serve students from the ages of 16 through their '70's. All these students need an opportunity to learn. All faculty have to orient to the behavior needed in the course.

I also believe in the power of the site. We have seen that when students from high school or an early college are in a classroom and expected to act like adults, they do rise to that occasion. Management of behavior is part of what teachers do, and I believe that as educators we have that responsibility.

I also commend the college's administration for their continuous hands-on involvement with the middle college. This sends the important message across the campus that in no uncertain terms, the middle college is part of who we are.

A summary analysis of the comments by members of the administration, faculty and staff of MMEC reveals that their successful partnership in MMEC has not been serendipitous or accidental. Rather, from the highest levels of the institution, the college has remained loyal to its historic mission as a public educational institution serving its entire community as broadly and effectively as possible.

Thus, when new needs emerged at the end of the 20th century that showed how many of the county's high school students had already dropped out or were in danger of not graduating from school, courageous and bold leaders joined with other educational partners in

the county to create an exciting new educational opportunity that could provide at-risk youth with new hope and a future.

Such courage and commitment are indispensable for the success of any middle college on the campus of a community college. This project involves far more than moving furniture, or giving high school teachers and students a new address. It requires intensive and continuous shared outreach, collaboration and commitment to the success of a new institution that can have a profound impact on the future of the entire community.

CHAPTER 9

Voices of the Genesee Intermediate School District and Early Educational Colleagues

*I think of the experience of kneading bread.
You keep folding it on itself, stretching it, and pulling it.
That to me is this breathing organism that is Mott.
Every piece is connected to the other and each of those pieces
is feeding and pulling from the other.*

Jerry D. Johnson, Executive Director
Communications and Development
Genesee Intermediate School District

We have heard from the parents, students and staff of MMEC, and the administration and faculty of Mott Community College. In this chapter, we will learn about the critical role the played by the third partner—the Genesee Intermediate School District (GISD) – and other educational partners in the county, in helping to establish and support the school. We will hear the chronological comments of 11 key educators who helped create and shape Mott Middle College, from its inception to the present.

David E. Spathelf, Ph.D., Superintendent, G.I.S.D. (Retired)

The educators, students and community members of Genesee County were blessed to have David Spathelf as Superintendent of the Genesee Intermediate School District, during the difficult years in the mid-1980's. Spathelf and a key member of his staff—Rachael Moreno, Associate Superintendent—saw an urgent need in school districts throughout the county to help high school students who had lost interest in school and were dropping out before graduating.

This was the last thing those students or the community needed. In those stressful years in the late 1980s, General Motors closed many of its automotive factories, including the massive “Buick City” complex, which, during its peak production years of the mid-1980s, employed 28,000 workers. For young people with no high school diploma, their very survival was at risk. Something had to be done, and the search for a new approach to educating such students began. That was when Spathelf and Moreno discovered LaGuardia Middle College—the first high school in the country that was operating as a middle college on the campus of host community college.

Spathelf was excited with the opportunities this new model offered.

When you start up a school like this, it is different from any traditional school startups. If you are operating within a school district and you build a new high school or a second high school, you just really do not have the flexibility to reinvent the way education takes place. There are too many things established in the district—a fixed curriculum, textbook adoptions, etc. What I

saw in the idea of the middle college a unique opportunity to reinvent how we educate young people.

That reinvention from my perspective first dealt with the role and relationships of the people. What is the role of the principal, the teachers, and the parents? We looked at all the roles and the context simultaneously--the environment the students would be in; the type of student population we were dealing with; who our stakeholders would be and how we had to blend their roles to create a new kind of school.

Spathelf believed the leader of such a school would have to be someone who “thought differently”, who could dream new kinds of dreams and then help translate them into reality. In Wagonlander, he found just such a leader. He recalled,

Chery came from a private school where she was assistant headmaster. They were very inventive and could try new approaches to teaching and learning. This gave us many possibilities because Chery did not have a lot of preconceived notions about how to deal with a special population, and she could just come in and start from scratch.

Wagonlander’s challenges were huge and varied. In addition to the new roles and relationships of all stakeholders in the school, she was able to look different kinds of instructional strategies and evaluate those in line with the student population we were to serve. Our concept of assessing students before instruction, and then—and only then—developing instructional strategies that corresponded to their needs and learning styles led to the creation of a school that looked and was, in fact, drastically different from any other school I had seen.

As he described it,

What we ended up doing was eliminating traditional boundaries. In a traditional school there are so many boundaries—you cannot go outside the physical perimeter; you can only advance so far if you are in an Algebra I class, because the policy says a student is not to be learning Algebra II or talking about trigonometry or geometry...in an Algebra I class.

What we tried to do with the location of the new school on a college campus was to say we were going to open the boundaries where appropriate to help those students become very successful based on their interests, aptitude and needs, and on what they needed for their future. Right from the beginning the school was a real invention, not like other alternative education programs that were very traditional. No, the plans for Mott Middle College did not look like anything we had.

According to Spathelf, Wagonlander designed a new program based on her own research, visitations, and intuition, aided by many educators from Genesee County school districts. When he presented her plan to the G.I.S.D. Board for approval, he believed that it had

the potential to revolutionize how a school could meet students' special educational needs. Genesee County, like most others in the nation, had a student population with good potential who did not fit into a regular school. The new middle college introduced the "matching" concept. Matching means that a principal and staff are selected based on whether their interests and dispositions can meet the needs of students, rather than having students placed in a school whose principal and staff are not matched or even particularly concerned about their students' special needs. This kind of innovation was very difficult to introduce within the boundaries of a school district, and represented one of the few models in the state—if not the country—that looked at a completely different way of educating students. Their challenge was to match all administrators and staff of the middle college with its students and their families to get "the best outcome for the input that we make," Spathelf said.

To achieve this, after considerable challenges and resistance, the G.I.S.D. and its teacher union agreed to permit Wagonlander, as the "director/principal" of the new school, to handpick all staff members. She selected those who met four criteria:

- They had the necessary instructional content knowledge and required certification.
- They were open to students' different learning styles.
- They had the disposition to work effectively in a team environment.
- They were willing to engage in a continuous process of solving problems and sharing power.

"All of these things became a reality," Spathelf recalled. "Some of those happen in some schools, but I've never seen all of them happen in one school."

One quality that stands out in Spathelf's mind as a key ingredient for the success and growth of the school, beyond the obvious essential instructional one, is what he refers to as the virtue of tolerance and patience.

It is a virtue that very few of us have in society, but that was built right into that school by the principal. If a student came with bright yellow or purple hair or whatever, we saw past that. We were able to deal with the human being rather than the outward characteristics or the past manifestations in education or trouble at home. We accepted people for who they were—we helped. We wanted to guide them toward educational and personal outcomes. We were very successful in doing that, but in order to accomplish that there had to be a lot of tolerance and patience on the part of everybody including the host institution, the college itself.

This was something very different. The faculty and staff at the college were not used to this kind of student. In the early 90's, the college probably had an average student age in the 30's, and here came these kids that didn't look like any of the students that were on their campus or behave like them.

One of the things that the core team of the four of us had to achieve—the president of Mott Community College, the superintendent of the G.I.S.D., the representative of Flint Community Schools, that served as the middle college's fiscal

agent, and the principal of Mott Middle College—was to become a real team, to talk amongst ourselves—bath and forth—and find ways to build a learning climate where our students would be accepted, where they would fit in, and where the outcomes could be successful for everyone involved.

It took a while to do that. We had a lot of success among the four of us, and then we began to make inroads with the faculty and staff at the college because they saw the students being successful as part of this expanded approach to education from kindergarten through to the community college.

Spathelf credits Wagonlander for exemplifying this virtue of tolerance and patience. As he observed her working with others, he saw how she was able to articulate things that were complex in simple terms—in understandable terms—with her own staff and the partners in this project as well, as with others when they met at the national level.

Looking back on it all, he gives thanks for what was a wonderful experience for him. He was able to participate in a successful effort to find a way—“given the fortitude, the effort, and the concern,” to meet the needs of any student population. He concluded,

It probably was one of the most rewarding experiences that I’ve had in a long career in education, to see what I believe in, to see the principles that I knew would work if we had free reign to do it, to just let it bubble up, and to see those kids and the interaction between students who are 16 or 17 and teachers who were twice their age—all this was different from anything I had ever seen.

The other thing that made it so interesting was that it had a lot of impact on all the other 21 districts. Many of them were lighthouse districts, and they had good programming, but for this group of students, they did not seem to fit in with those lighthouse programs.

When Chery brought those people together and we talked about how to build this new program, we not only had the advantage of her, but we also had the advantage of some of the best curriculum people in the state of Michigan working with her. Therefore, instead of having one curriculum in a local district, we had 21 people who came together, sometimes for the first time, to talk about what they believed they would do if they were free. To see that kind of interaction was not only a real tribute to various efforts but also to the local people who gave a lot of time and curriculum to this. It also enriched the whole way we approached learning and teaching in the county.

Rachael Moreno, M.A., Retired Associate Superintendent for Education and Learning, G.I.S.D.

In Rachael Moreno, Spathelf found an outstanding partner—committed, determined, resourceful, and informed about the kind of education at-risk high school students need. She knew that in schools throughout the county, students were leaving without their high school diploma. This meant that for each of them—and their communities—their future was at risk,

especially given the dire challenges facing a deindustrializing Flint and its neighboring communities.

As the chief instructional officer of Genesee County with Spatholf during the mid and late 1980's—and as the master educator she was and remains—Moreno researched alternative models throughout the nation that targeted the special needs of student dropouts. When she discovered LaGuardia Middle College—the first such educational model in the country—she felt that she had found a way to serve the at-risk students in all 21 local county school districts. She developed a proposal based on her research and presented it to the 21 superintendents at their annual retreat not once—or twice—but three years in a row.

All the superintendents admitted that each of their districts had a high number of students who were not engaged in their education and were eventually dropping out. However, they were highly skeptical, for in their opinion, none of the existing traditional alternative programs they were familiar with that were designed to help students earn their GED (General Education Diploma) or provide a different way of reaching such students, had particular value or power.

Finally, during her third attempt to present the middle college educational model at the county superintendents' annual retreat, one district superintendents expressed his support to Moreno, and offered to take the initiative in presenting the proposal to his peers. He urged them to support the concept, and suggested that they refer the proposal to the Genesee County Curriculum Committee for their review. This was important, as there was now an audience of educators who knew teaching, learning and educational research and who were impressed with the possibilities of the middle college model. Several of them played a major role, and provided the needed support for the project to move to the next level of review.

At that critical juncture, Moreno presented the proposal to The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation²⁶. This illustrious foundation, founded in 1926, has devoted itself to serving communities according to the beliefs of its founder:

It seems to me that every person, always, is in a kind of informal partnership with his community. His own success is dependent to a large degree on that community, and the community, after all, is the sum total of the individuals who make it up. The institutions of a community, in turn, are the means by which those individuals express their faith, their ideals and their concern for fellow men.

Charles Stewart Mott, 1875-1973

The mission of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation is to support efforts that promote a just, equitable and sustainable society. Through its *Pathways Out of Poverty* program²⁷, it seeks to ensure that education serves as a pathway out of poverty by advancing systemic changes that improve educational policies and practices, particularly for children and families living in low-income communities.

The Foundation responded favorably to the proposal Moreno presented that summarized the needs of the county's youth and the research that had already been investigated by numbers of its educational leaders. It provided funds for a group of

²⁶ The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation is a private, grantmaking foundation based in Flint, Michigan. The Foundation funds in four program areas: Civil Society, Environment, Flint Area, and Pathways Out of Poverty.

²⁷ See Foundation website, www.mott.org

approximately 25 Genesee County school superintendents and curriculum directors to fly to New York to visit LaGuardia Middle College. During their visit, they talked with a number of students, and began to understand the potential of the middle college approach for students back in Flint. As Moreno said, “We saw many of the same personal reasons kids did not want to go to school—they didn’t have clothes, or homes, or any self-confidence or sense of future possibilities. That was what we encountered with our own students.”

The funding provided for this on-site visit proved to be the turning point. With the strong support of then Flint superintendent Dr. Joseph Pollack and other colleagues in the county, Moreno presented a proposal to the Mott Foundation to fund the project on a pilot basis. She recalled, with gratitude,

The Foundation believed in us, and granted us the funds to begin, and most important, hire a principal director to work on the program a full year before it officially opened. Of course, we chose Chery Wagonlander, and then we set to work.

She continued,

I knew that spiritually and philosophically, Chery had what we needed. She understood the concept immediately and provided the leadership that was required. She put the major pieces of the program together, such as starting the day with reflection and discussion and problem solving, along with the whole notion of extended class periods and team teaching. Chery has been everything I could have predicted and even more.

While the project had been launched and the planning begun, there were a number of obstacles that had to be overcome. Moreno insisted on special union cooperation because, as she stated, “we had to be free to hire the people we wanted and needed for all teaching positions in the program.” She and her colleagues were not interested in hiring people who wanted to do exactly the same thing they were doing in other programs, because they would then get exactly the same results they were getting in other programs. They decided the middle college would not be a “transfer-in” program and would not just draw from the large numbers of county educators who frequently applied for transfers to new programs. However, they did agree that any teacher in the county was free to apply. She described the struggle:

This was a highly fought concept, and generated much resistance and many grievances. Eventually we won and began the interview process. Most individuals came from local school districts and went through the application process and then the very intensive interview process. We were grateful to find some really good teachers who were committed to every aspect of the program that we presented including the intensive care concept, team teaching, and personalized connections with every student.

As she reflects on the success of the program in its 20th year, she gives primary credit to the belief system that Wagonlander and her staff clung to during not only the development and implementation of the school, but also through its continuation. This clarity of focus and continuous commitment created a culture that is now stronger than ever. They believe—and know—that:

- Every child is worth saving.

- There is no such thing as a child who wants to fail.
- Irrespective of family situation or economics, there can be success in every single child's life.

Moreno credits some of her own administrative colleagues throughout the county along with Wagonlander and her staff, for their wisdom in looking beyond the status, on a regular basis, and challenging those who expected and wanted the same old thing. She recalled,

We often heard people in schools and in top local and county leadership say, "You can't do that,"—or "That's not how we do it". Some district superintendents even refused to send their students to the program, fighting it "tooth and nail"—even though their counselors privately said those students should really go to Mott Middle College where they had a good chance for success. Only later did we gain their support, when their earlier sarcasm and criticism were replaced with new understanding and respect.

We had to support each other, and be brave and courageous enough to counter the prevailing thoughts, the enshrined, ineffective orthodoxy, and the warnings from many who loved to predict our failure. We found the strength to fight against the status quo, and learned that the more strongly we fought, the greater our chances of success.

Moreno is particularly proud of her role in supporting the establishment of the MMEC steel drum band. She recalled with great pleasure the unexpected circumstances that brought it into existence: While she having lunch at a national principals' conference in California, a steel band was performing, captivating those who heard the music. This moved her to get the director's card, a copy of the program and a tape of their music. When Moreno returned to Flint, she asked the G.I.S.D. Board for funding to start a music program at the middle college. The response was not supportive: "Well, you have to start them when they're younger, we don't have money to buy all these instruments." She refused to give up.

Shortly thereafter, while attending a meeting at Central Michigan University, she heard the spring concert featuring the university's steel band.

It was just all so serendipitous—there were two students graduating and I hired one of them to start our program. I really feel there was something spiritual behind the creation of the steel band, and it has turned out to be one of the strongest programs at Mott Middle College. In a very short time, our young musicians started winning contests and travelling internationally. I always believed that the joy that I derived from music would enhance the lives of our students and increase their self-confidence and connection to their school. That has proved to be the case."

As is evident, Moreno was perhaps *the* prime mover of the creation of MMEC. Certainly, she had the wisdom and insight to hire the school's first director/principal, and the privilege of seeing Wagonlander's leadership lead the school to distinction not only in Genesee County or in Michigan, but also throughout the country as a leader in developing successful new educational programs for at-risk youth.

D. William Shaw, Ph.D., Retired Associate Superintendent for Instruction, G.I.S.D.

The students, staff and community of the Genesee I.S.D. were blessed once again when Shaw succeeded Moreno as the Associate Superintendent for Instruction. Few educators anywhere can match the commitment of Bill Shaw (as he is affectionately called) to the needs of young people, whoever and wherever they are. His devoted and wise leadership and support strengthened the success and growth of MMEC over many years.

Shaw described what he believes are “the differences that made a difference” in the school. The critical factor, in his opinion, was the commitment and dedication of Wagonlander on behalf of significant changes to the traditional educational models that were provided to at-risk county students.

Not only was the arc of change in the county—her vision also preceded that arc, and included the support of her staff, the nurturing insight she demonstrated, the professional development she provided them, and the generosity that included sending staff across the country to share their message of what was possible. What she accomplished was just unparalleled. Through the bridges she built with Mott Community College, she helped change the perceptions held of the “street-smart kid” dramatically, not only by the college staff but also by superintendents and boards throughout the county. What she helped bring about was an evolution on the part of a student from “street smart” to “school smart.”

Her continuity of being there offered the support needed to improve upon the original ideas and concepts and best practices she and her team discovered and developed, that many high schools have not yet attempted, twenty years after the fact.

The stable leadership of the administration and staff at MMEC stands as strong evidence of their commitment to the organization and to all of the people involved in the school’s new culture. That continuity of collective effort bring about the initial reforms and the development of their effectiveness to help students who were initially performing not even at basic level up to proficiency as defined by federal standards, and beyond, to advanced educational levels, as demonstrated by the number who have taken the opportunity to excel not only in their classrooms but in the college classroom as well.

By collective effort, Shaw included all MMEC staff who were responsible for the academic, social and career progress of every enrolled student. “I saw it in the hallways and in the classrooms,” he recalled, “and before and after school. It was a culture that every staff member had for every student.”

As Shaw thought about the progress made by MMEC based on what he saw, heard and read, he concluded that the school served as a place of recovery by students who formerly believed there was no place for them. Mott created an environment that allowed them to be accepted and excel.

When I saw the kids in the hallway there was a pure sense of belonging. That is difficult to find in high schools anywhere. In high schools, we typically have subgroups based on athletics, chorus, band, cheerleaders, robotics and other areas of special interest, and the participants all belong to the particular group that

unites them. At Mott, I saw a sense of belonging to the total environment, to the climate of the school. This led students to render support for each other and for the institution in which they found themselves.

The critical factor, in his opinion, was the commitment and dedication of Wagonlander on behalf of significant change to the traditional educational models that were provided to at-risk county students.

Shaw recalls that the “naysayers” early on weren’t too pleased about the school but through strong effort and partnership of a few innovators throughout the county, and the continuing commitment of the board and administration of the Genesee Intermediate School District, the county was able to provide a public school program that had the support and financial strength to make it go. “It has just been remarkable!” he concluded.

Johanna Brown, Formerly Director of Math/Science and Technology, G.I.S.D.
Currently Dean of Science and Math, Mott Community College

Johanna Brown remembers when “this new and exciting program” was getting underway in 1990-91. She considers Moreno a “total and complete visionary, who saw beyond others, and knew what a middle college could mean for Genesee County. In her opinion, Moreno also had the commitment, courage and skills to make things happen. Looking back at the beginning, she remarked,

I am sure that it was Rachael who was the driving force for this. The three key people were Rachael with her vision; Chery with her incredible ability to make things real; and Bill Shaw with his extraordinary heart and encouragement and deep understanding of people. He believed in a school-within-a -school, as an alternative for students who needed a different environment. He was always positive, and always inspired those students. Chery always believed the glass was half-full, and found a way to drive all that negativity down.

Brown’s first involvement came while she was teaching at the University of Michigan-Flint, and serving as the director of math and science in the Swartz Creek School District in Genesee County. The middle college needed a college representative, and she volunteered to be the college math support person and representative through the G.I.S.D. As she learned more about the middle college, she considered it a great experience. “The work with the students was wonderful,” she recalled. “I’ve seen this from the inside. We tried to make math relevant. Chery was always willing to take some risks. Not everything worked—even things we dreamed about didn’t work—but we kept trying.”

Brown then moved to Mott Community College, and continued her efforts on behalf of the school’s science and math departments. She praised William Angus, then Vice President for Academic Affairs at the college, for ensuring that when Mott Community College renovated some of its facilities, they dedicated some of their classrooms to MMEC, assuring them dedicated lab facilities in biology, physics, chemistry and the physical sciences, with lots of current equipment, and professional technical support to assist the middle college’s teachers with materials, supplies, set-up, and a buy-back order-sharing process. There was perhaps no high school science program in the state that was as well supported and provided for as that of MMEC.

Brown recognized the generosity of Mott Community College, because they could have used those classrooms completely for their own students, but chose to share the facilities and, in some cases, commit them fully to MMEC. As the partnership between the two institutions deepened, so did the collaboration between the teachers and college faculty members as well. A positive exchange developed, as both sets of educators learned important lessons: “You don’t have to be all things; you can ask for help; you can ask for collaboration. For example, many college faculty needed guidance in knowing how to teach high school students. With time, it all became a great collaborative opportunity as students, teachers and faculty grew.”

She reflected on how things would be different if the middle college did not exist.

I would suggest there would be many more students whom we would not know about. There would be empty seats, there would be unfulfilled moments. We would have students who would be like the teenager in Cipher in the Snow.

Originally, a short story and then a short film made in 1973, the story tells about an ostracized teenager, Cliff Evans, who following his parents' divorce has no friends and becomes a completely withdrawn "cipher". Then on a school bus, he asks to be let off, and collapses and dies in the snow near the roadside. His school's literature teacher is asked to notify his parents and write the obituary. Though listed as Cliff's favorite teacher, he recalls that he hardly knew him. After getting a delegation to go to the funeral—it's impossible to find ten people who knew him well enough to go—the teacher resolves never to let this happen to another child in his charge.

Brown considered what might have happened to potential dropout students in Genesee County if MMEC did not exist. She commented,

In my opinion, each of those students could have also ended up as ciphers. If there were no Mott Middle College, there would be many more people less competent, less independent and less productive. We would have all been diminished by what they were not able to add to society.

Jacob (Jake) Brisendine, Retired Principal, Flint Public Schools; Early Committee Member and North Central Association Co-Chair for Mott Middle Early College

Jake Brisendine became involved with Mott Middle College as a former middle school principal and associate with the Michigan Association for Secondary School Principals (M.A.S.S.P.). He served with Wagonlander on some early school committees and co-chaired a North Central Association visitation to the school.²⁸ He knew well that students had widely differing needs and admired what MMEC offered students who were not successful in traditional schools. One parent stood out clearly for him. She described how much her son had needed MMEC, because he just did not fit in where he was. “We have”, Brisendine believes, “too many kids who don’t fit into those square boxes.” Shaw continued:

²⁸ The North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA) extends its authority to more than 10,000 public and private schools in 19 states. Established in 1895, it is one of a half-dozen regional accrediting bodies approved by the U.S. Department of Education to ensure that schools from pre-kindergarten to post-secondary uphold educational standards.

As a former middle school principal, I could clearly see what was different about Mott. It is more innovative. I have been very impressed with the things they come up to connect students to the school, like the steel band, fine arts programs and special service projects. Above all, I have been moved by the enthusiasm of the people at the school—not only the teachers but also the other staff members such as secretaries and office people. One of the best was a teacher who was a student there. I went on a trip to a conference with him one time and watched him make a presentation. I was very impressed with his speaking skills and his thoughtful understanding of important educational issues. All of this adds to the rich educational experience students receive there.

When he was associated with M.A.S.S.P., Brisendine often spoke with the members and wrote columns about their need to adapt and be innovative, to “think out of the box” on behalf of their students, and to be flexible in striving to meet their needs. For him, MMEC exemplifies that, and Wagonlander embodies all these qualities and maintains harmony with all the stakeholders and constituent members in an admirable manner. “Just amazing,” he concluded, with gratitude and respect.

Dr. Thomas Svitkovich, Retired superintendent, G.I.S.D.

During his years as Superintendent of the Genesee Intermediate School District, Svitkovich played an important role in supporting and strengthening MMEC. As he looks back on its evolution, he expresses gratitude on how the school has served its many students and the entire community, and recognizes the importance of the skills and commitment of the key members of the partnership that created it.

The faculty, administration and staff of MMEC and Mott Community College, along with the leadership and staff of the G.I.S.D. and the local county school districts, were able to create a new kind of learning opportunity because they were able to bridge the gaps among their various institutions. It has often troubled me why not all community colleges in the state embraced this model almost immediately—but they have not.

I certainly understand why it was difficult at first for some of the college faculty, but the top leadership—the president and his administration—were just what was needed to make it work.

There was mutual respect between the two institutions. The notion of a bond between faculty and staff was established and created a living partnership. The curriculum at both educational levels became integrated, and students could move through the process because everything came to work as one seamless unit.

A key factor for the school’s success was the changed dynamics that resulted from two key requirements for admission to MMEC:

- A student had to have a desire to attend the school, and the family had to support that desire. Mott was not a school where students would be “sent” as a kind of punishment of exclusion from the traditional high school.

- The school had to decide whether the student had the potential to be a successful student in the new educational environment.

Svitkovich also recognized the powerful role the Focus Group concept played in shaping the culture at MMEC. Instead of just having “a counselor” to deal with students’ problems, the Focus Group became a group counseling session guided by a teacher, which created a sense of camaraderie, team membership and family. This served as the foundation on which students could feel safe in the school, and begin to grow and succeed.

Individual counselors, staff or administrators still handled serious problems with individual students, but the Focus Group became a place where small groups of students could interact with staff and talk about many things—how decisions were made at the school; what opportunities and responsibilities they had; how and why the discipline code was developed; what role they could play in shaping it—along with other important school-wide issues. This gave students a sense of belonging and deep connection to the school, helping them fulfill two of the five basic human needs defined by Glasser: the need to belong and be loved by others, and the need to have power and importance.²⁹

Another key difference that helped shape the culture of MMEC was the cooperation between the teachers’ union and the G.I.S.D. that was responsible for the operation of the school. Both parties committed to a win-win negotiation strategy, which allowed them to develop a contract supportive of the middle college’s mission.

Svitkovich regards with special admiration the sophisticated arts program that MMEC developed, starting with the steel drum band, a visual arts program instructed by professional visiting artists, and the integration and infusion of the arts into the school’s general curriculum.

When the state of Michigan authorized the creation of charter schools, the G.I.S.D. considered converting MMEC into this new model. After careful consideration, they chose not to do so, even though there would have been financial advantages, because, as he stated, “the charter concept would have taken the partnership factor out of the equation.” In addition, the original process that required both student and family commitment, and the acceptance of the student by the school, would have had to be abandoned. As already discussed, this would have altered a key dynamic of the school by which admission was a voluntary process by all parties concerned.

Svitkovich was successful in addressing critical financial concerns by using federal career/tech education funding to strengthen career counseling and guidance, and structuring career experiences such as internships for every student in the school. This added an essential component to the academic and career education that MMEC was able to offer its students.

Another funding innovation developed by Svitkovich allowed the school to carry over any allocated monies that were not spent to the following year. Typically, such resources are returned to the district (in this case the G.I.S.D.), and the school starts the new year with its allotted dollars.

Dr. Wagonlander was able to build her own fund equity over time. This meant that if she wished to make a major purchase for the school—a piece of equipment or technology—she could save her money over several years to make that purchase. In addition, if

²⁹ William Glasser Institute. www.wglasser.com

there was a tight year, then that money could be used the following year.

Finally, Svitkovich cautioned about the constant financial dilemmas as well as the opportunities that are presented in operating a school such MMEC.

It is more than a program, and creative ways must be found to permit the school to operate and sustain itself. If the financial problems are solved, then the benefit to the students and the community as a whole is immeasurable.

Jerry D. Johnson, Executive Director, Communications and Development, G.I.S.D.

Although Jerry Johnson has worked with the G.I.S.D. for only eight years, he has known about MMEC since moving to Flint in 1998. As the director of a child advocacy group, he was aware of some of various programs within the community that were addressing some unique challenges that children and students were facing. Joining the G.I.S.D., he continued to work with such youth from a community awareness and data standpoint, looking at issues that shape success such as family socio-economics, early childhood education, child abuse and neglect, teen pregnancy and high school graduation rates. His goal is to try to mobilize the community to pay attention to those pieces of data to build support for social change to assist youth.

Johnson is very familiar with what MMEC is, and what it seeks to accomplish.

The concept is to offer an alternative way, or a better fit, on an individual basis, than what might be available in a traditional high school setting. I believe, based on my many experiences, that the school's administration and staff have created a culture where each student has a path tailored for him based on where he or she is, what his or her talents and abilities are, and how he or she can connect with the school.

I think this kind of "mass customization"—one student at a time, treating that student as the most important student of the entire student body, across the board—is the magic of what is going on at MMEC. Certainly, after twenty years of building a school, what they have accomplished and the reputation they have deservedly earned represent an extraordinary gift to those students who just do not find success in other ways.

Mott is specific in how it plans and cares for every student. In this regard, it can serve as a global model for what educational systems need to look like and be able to do to achieve positive gains on the front end of high school and prevent negative outcomes when these youth become adults.

For Johnson, the spirit of the wraparound approach is a "huge difference that makes a difference". He recognizes that MMEC is a school community with specific goals they must accomplish, but, he believes, they are not naïve enough to ignore all of the other factors that can interfere with or enhance school success. He explained

At Mott, the administration and staff know that they have to collectively, as a team, address the comprehensive child and that

there's more to it than just dealing with instruction and assessment, in terms of academic achievement. It is the relationship—the trust, character, interaction, adult-child, child-child connection—that makes the difference. There is a tremendous amount of modeling.

I recognize that I was given the opportunity to take advantage of many positive experiences as a child. I was able to draw on the men at church on whom I could model my behavior, those teachers at school, the folks that my grandparents knew and my uncle knew and my mother knew—it was that broader environment that I drew upon for examples so that I could develop.

That is what Mott provides. It gives students all those pieces that they can choose as models, and if they do, they're getting the best that is available for them to learn and perhaps to modify, as compared to what they may see growing up.

Johnson described the phenomenon of interacting relationships that affects all stakeholders as “kneading bread”.

I believe that having Mott on the campus of Mott Community College adds to the educational experience for high school students, and enriches what happens at the college level in terms of how their administrators and faculty look at those students.

I believe that parent influence does something in the way the school addresses the needs of students, and I think the way in which the school meets and addresses the needs of the students affects the parents as well. Mott is a trusting place for parents, and students as well, and they influence each other.

I think of the experience of kneading bread—you keep folding it on itself, stretching it, and pulling it. That to me is this breathing organism that is the school. Every piece is connected to the other and each of those pieces is feeding and pulling from the other.

Think of the heart: It's beating, pumping away, but without one piece, it's weaker and might not beat as fast. The concept is that the more of those pieces that are working together, the stronger the muscle is, the more capacity it has, and the more it is moving or producing in terms of flow.

That's what Mott means to me—this living breathing thing that is growing and learning and continuing to adjust and adapt. It is a different experience that, I think, draws people to it, at least people who know what it can do or want to believe in what it can do and are willing to take that risk.

For Johnson, Wagonlander is “that heart muscle organism”. At the start, she was like a pacemaker who “poked or shocked or sparked in the right spots to get the rhythm going. She got it beating in sync and kept nurturing and moving that vision and agenda forward.” Clearly, he believes, it all did not just happen. Administrators and staff who have been with the school from the

start or who have joined the school “get it”—they understand how it is supposed to work and they help feed that energy.

He concluded,

*I am a lobbyist and public relations person, so I **know** even with my three-year-old daughter, I cannot be a full-time caregiver and teacher like those folks at Mott. I know my limitations and I know how far beyond my capacities they go, being able to do what they do every single day. I think that is an extraordinary element of how Mott works and why it works. It is a human experience—not just chalkboards, laptops, and whatever else is in those rooms—but a human experience.*

Michael Moorman, M.A., Deputy Superintendent, Human Resources and Operations, G.I.S.D.

After five years in his current position at the G.I.S.D., Michael Moorman still feels “shivers down his spine” whenever he attends one of MMEC’s graduations. He thinks about each of the students crossing the stage, all of whom entered the school with issues about their former schools, and most of whom exit with multiple college credits, and some with their Associate degree, moving forward along their career path with purpose and gratitude for the opportunity they have received. “All of these things are very evident at the graduation ceremony,” he said, “and I’m very proud to be associated with it.”

For this remarkable success, Moorman credits above all the quality of the teachers and administration and their willingness to go the extra mile for the student. The care they show for the student—the inclusion and involvement of the parent in the program, regardless of the home environment—whatever it is—they do their best to ensure support from the school and the home, whatever it looks like.

He remarks on the real paradigm shift that has bridged the separation between secondary and post-secondary education. The comments he receives from administrators and faculty at Mott Community College are positive because MMEC demands certain behavior from their students whether they are in high school or college classes.

MMEC administrators and teachers insist that their students follow the school’s Code of Conduct whether they’re in a high school required class or a community college class. Students know that they are accountable for their behavior, and know that MMEC administrators and teachers are quick to deal with them as needed. The G.I.S.D. only gets involved when there are serious disciplinary issues requiring expulsion, which do occur from time to time.

In Moorman’s opinion, if MMEC did not exist, the effect would be enormous. He stated, “I think we would have four hundred students not learning. They would either be enrolled in a traditional high school where they would be unproductive or they would be out on the streets.” He believes the very reason this unique model of education exists is an indication of the collaboration between all branches of learning in Genesee County: the Genesee Intermediate School District, Mott Community College, Mott Community College, and the local school districts. “This is the working environment among educators in the county,” he asserts, “and this is what has made Mott Middle College possible.”

In summary, Moorman believes that the difference that makes a difference at MMEC is the commitment on the part of the entire staff and their refusal to give up on any student.

Lisa A. Hagel, Superintendent, G.I.S.D.

The Genesee Intermediate School District welcomed Lisa Hagel as its new superintendent for the 2010-2011 school year. Hagel brought to her new position extensive K-12 experience as a teacher, elementary school principal, high school principal, director of curriculum and instruction and district superintendent. Newly appointed, she expressed how her past educational experiences had shaped her for her current role: "Being a building principal really educates you on the needs of students, the needs of the teachers, and the needs of the parents... I've been there. I've walked in those shoes."

With that broad background, and with fifteen years knowledge and experience with MMEC, she has been able to assess the uniqueness of the school's culture.

The attentiveness of the staff to special needs—the students that had never been read to—whatever the need was, they were met. Mott openly accepts students where they are in their life and seeks out the talent or gifts that each student has. They find a way to tap into that interest or that talent and tie it to the curriculum so that that student feels immediately welcome, needed, and ultimately successful.

We identified students who would thrive not just with a second chance, but a different chance at a successful high school career. That is what they found at Mott.

The school's culture builds a strong attachment with students, and gives them and their parents the instant hope and belief that the students are capable of being successful in college and more importantly, in life. For many families in the county, having a child in Mott is the first time anyone in their family has had an opportunity to be exposed to a college.

Because the transition between high school and college is done in such a seamless manner, students can take a risk, knowing there's a 'net' underneath them consisting of a ton of support and encouragement for them to be successful.

As county superintendent, Hagel's perspective and appreciation of MMEC have deepened. She believes the school has made the entire community a better place. She also has a greater recognition of the leadership provided by Wagonlander and her entire staff to the entire state, offering guidance, encouragement, and the benefit of their experiences.

From her observations, Hagel sees how MMEC is able to apply what students learn in the high school to what they will need at the college. This is obvious in programs such as Visual and Graphic Arts, where students learn the required basic skills in their high school classes and then extend their learning at Mott Community College in preparation for a career. Never does she hear MMEC students asking, "Why do I have to learn this?", because the counseling and advisement they receive make clear how everything works together on their behalf.

Hagel praises the instructional delivery model at Mott Middle College because there is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach. For this, she credits Wagonlander's leadership. The expectations and

modeling she provides demonstrating that different people learn in different ways, and all the school's teachers live and breathe their commitment to find a way to help every student understand.

Looking to the future, Hagel has new and higher aspirations, and considers herself a "true believer" that nothing is ever good enough.

We can always improve and I think the program will just need to keep morphing with what the community and the economy really value as employment opportunities at that time. We cannot just stay in a fixed curriculum and track of college programs. We have to change like the universities, so that our students are very well prepared when they are finished.

In assessing the success of MMEC, Hagel stated:

I do not think you could put a measure on that. It has been a fabulous contribution to the community because it is absolutely priceless for what it does for those students. When I see those students graduate with those credits, I say in the back of my mind, "This wasn't supposed to happen, but it did happen"—and as an educator, I have to give the school a grade of A+. It's a critical piece of the educational opportunities in Genesee County at this point, and I think we are all most fortunate.

Ms. Mary Behm, Assistant Superintendent, Office of Education and Learning, G.I.S.D.

Mary Behm is relatively new at the G.I.S.D. Formerly an elementary school having assumed her duties there three years ago as a former elementary principal, she is well aware of the MMEC has made to the county's students.

Twenty years ago, maybe for the first time, students who were not doing well in the traditional setting had a spot where it was "okay." to be who they were. They certainly did not feel a sense of belonging back in their own school. Maybe they had dropped out, gotten pregnant, stopped going to school, or had failing grades, but they were obviously at risk. Maybe for the first time there was actually a place that was going to feel like a place they could belong to.

As far as the county is concerned, these students were not forgotten. They were given a new opportunity, held to task, expected to dual enroll if they could, and not only think of themselves as successful high school students, but also as college students.

Behm believes that over time, MMEC faculty and staff have improved their craft in learning how to address the needs of students that come through their doors. This means more students feel a greater sense of belonging, learn the skills that they need to be able to be successful in the community, to be productive and worthwhile, and to be able to provide for themselves and their future families because, as Behm stated, the school filled the gap where there really was nothing before."

Two features of MMEC have been particularly noteworthy for Behm. The first is high expectations for all students:

No matter how many tattoos or pierced rings a student is wearing, or what he did last night, or if she's pregnant or not, the school has high expectations for all their students. Normally, such students set low expectations for themselves, often shaped or reinforced by their former schools. At MMEC, the expectations are over and above what traditional high school students would have to meet, as they are expected to dual enroll.

What's different is that the students know what the expectations are, and that faculty and staff are going to help them along the way, hold their hands and make sure they're taking courses they are ready for and doing fine. The expectations for these students were not lowered—they actually were raised high above the normal high school student's world.

The second is the relationships that exist between the students and their school.

The research tells us that in any kind of at-risk school or high poverty school, the "relationship piece" makes the difference. MMEC offers great instruction, obviously, by great teachers. What is different is that the teachers not only deliver the content but also relate with the students in an exceptionally caring manner. They take an interest in their outside world and are able to talk with them in a way that the students know that they care about them and respect them, and that they are interested in them, so it gives them a sense of belonging.

What results is a feeling for students that says, "This is the place where I belong, and if I'm emotionally tied to this school, then I'm less likely to get so frustrated that I quit, or not speak up for help when I need it." For many of these students, these are entirely new school experiences.

*In fact, some of those students who appear to be somewhat hard to love, the staff has loved them. For those that other people have forgotten or given up on, they have embraced them, followed them, and nurtured them. It's easy to love and teach the good kids—kids who are doing well. It takes a special team of people who not only encourage these students but also embrace their challenges, their differences, and their hard-to-love pieces **and** hold them to high expectations, not only academically but behaviorally. The students want to please because they know there is an investment by the administration and their teachers.*

In Behm's opinion, what makes MMEC so unique is that the populations they want to reach out to—nobody wants. Districts as a whole would probably not put up much of a fight up to keep them, and are grateful to have someone else take over. She has done extensive research and work on the subject of diversity, but as she views it, "Nobody has the mission for the unloved students, the failing at-risk, poor students."

Behm also believes MMEC's location on a college campus makes a huge difference in how the school operates and what it can do. The school is not just a high school that has been "stuck" into some building on a community college's campus. Rather, by design the school proclaims itself as something different, part of another culture that happens to have students there who are taking high school classes. The "power of the place" produces a different mindset that has the potential to change everything.

Behm quoted a comment recently made by Jenkins at Mott Community College, "It's not about how you start...it's about how you stay!" She commented,

Many people can start something—but what really counts is how they stay, how the project gains sustainability, how it continues and evolves into something more, how it gets better and changes with the needs of the people it serves. MMEC is not what it was twenty years ago, and as can be seen, its founders are staying, demonstrating the school's promise and hope for the future.

Indeed, for Behm, it is precisely the hope that MMEC gives to its students and community—hope for a future, for an education, for themselves and their families—that has been its most important gift.

I have seen a student getting both degrees at the same time—high school diploma and Associate degree. That to me speaks volumes about how they see themselves—students, teachers, parents and faculty—they are all capable of achieving.

This chapter looked back on the history of MMEC since even before its doors opened to the end of its first two decades. Eleven of the most influential educators at the Genesee Intermediate School District and in Genesee County recalled the dreams that launched the school, the challenges it faced, the triumphs it celebrates and the unknown future it prepares for. All in their own ways recalled the various contributions that helped Mott Middle College "start...and stay"! Had they not been present as the "mothers and fathers" and continuing guides and advisors of this hopeful new opportunity for thousands of students in Genesee County, and had all the county educational institutions not had the history and the wisdom of collaborating on behalf of all citizens in their community, the lives of those thousands of citizens would not have been enriched as they have been. MMEC has been a blessing to the students they directly served, the families who supported them and the families they created. During this remarkable journey, educators were also enriched—not only those who have been part of the school—but also those administrators and teachers—both in Michigan and throughout the country—who have been able to learn the lessons that MMEC has so capably learned and disseminated.

CHAPTER 10

Lessons Learned

Before they opened its doors in 1991, the founders of MMEC drew on their knowledge and experience of why students had dropped out of or been pushed out by their traditional high schools. Their mission was to create a different kind of educational environment that would establish new learning and teaching conditions that might lead such students to new success. Now completing its second decade, Mott's success speaks for itself.

What is significant is that although the model of the middle college high school was already in existence, what Mott achieved in coordinating with 21 local school districts, a county intermediate school district, a community college and the state board of education was unique. From the 1960s to the mid-1970s, the prevailing form of standardized public education was challenged as part of a widespread social movement that deeply questioned traditional assumptions and shook the social system to its core. This was a period of crisis for public education, complete with student demonstrations and teacher strikes. In just a few years, hundreds of "free schools"—non-public schools based on countercultural if not revolutionary ideas—were established, following what came to be called a "humanistic" and "holistic" approach to education.

The counterculture did not prevail and by the early 1980's, traditional values were strongly reasserted in politics and in education. The 1983 report by President Reagan's Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, followed by President Bush's *No Child Left Behind* were powerful statements of the traditional goals of American public schooling--social efficiency and economic growth. Alternative education models that had been created within public school systems with the goals of child-centered or humanistic education found little support for their vision and came to be seen as the ultimate "dumping grounds" of failing high school students.

The model of a middle college placed on a college campus offered new hope through a different kind of structure, a radical shift in beliefs, values, goals, and a changed location that by definition, included "the power of the site".

A realist might have bet against the odds of any middle college high school surviving, let alone thriving, and certainly not one facing the challenges of the proposed countywide Genesee model. However, there it stands—MMEC, beginning its third decade on the campus of Mott Community College, proud of the success stories of approximately 8,000 graduates who have changed their own lives along with the lives of their families and communities.

Furthermore, MMEC is now the coordinator of the new Michigan Early/Middle College Association that brings together administrators and educators in 19 other established or new middle colleges throughout the state, seeking to impact the lives of tens of thousands of other young people. In that role, and with the continuing support of the Mott Foundation, Mott's leaders seek to share with others what they have learned.

In 2011, the leadership team at the school gathered to reflect on the school's accomplishments to date, and the lessons they had learned in the school's first 20 years. The team consisted of six participants: the principal, assistant principal, two counselors and two teachers. Four members of the group had been together since the school's establishment,

while one counselor and one teacher joined the staff more recently. Their discussion had a double focus:

- What lessons had they learned and how could they strengthen the school's effectiveness for the future?
- What lessons could they share with the 19 other Michigan Middle Early colleges launched after Mott Middle Early College?

To answer these two questions, staff decided to document and disseminate findings in a “lessons learned” report that summarized their newfound knowledge for their own future needs as well as others in the middle early college movement, to help them avoid some of the pitfalls encountered in establishing Mott. They asked themselves three questions: What went right? What went wrong? What could have been better? This chapter describes the 13 most important lessons the school and its educators have learned.

Lesson One

Paradigms Shift and Everything Changes

*If you keep on doing the same things, taking the same actions and
thinking the same thoughts, guess what you're going to get!
The same results that you've been getting!*

Creating the middle early college educational environment is a complex and challenging task. The past culture known and shared by all must be left behind and replaced with a new way of thinking, believing and acting.

Beliefs, Assumptions, Goals and Responsibilities in Traditional Public Schools

Traditional public high schools subscribe to beliefs, assumptions and goals that have shaped practice for decades. Such beliefs have usually included the following:

- Intelligence in students is fixed and schools are limited in what they can do to modify the capacities that students bring to class.
- Consequently, tracking is the proper way of educating students, “sorting and slotting” them into groups for all subjects within a school by innate academic ability. In a tracking system, the entire school population is assigned to classes according to whether the students' overall achievement is above average, normal, or below average.
- Students attend all classes with students whose overall academic achievement is the same as their own. Students in academically advanced tracks study higher mathematics, more foreign languages, and literature. Students in less academic tracks acquire vocational skills such as welding or cosmetology, or business skills, such as typing or bookkeeping.
- Students are not usually offered the opportunity to take classes deemed more appropriate for another track, even if the student has a demonstrated interest and ability in the subject.

- Student dropouts and failure are inevitable because not all students are intellectually capable or motivated to do the required work, and not all parents care enough about their children or value education.
- It is the responsibility of the adults in a school to exercise power and authority over their students since they obviously have more years of knowledge and experience and know what is best for each student and understand what each student needs.
- Time is a fixed concept that should be divided into various equal segments for all students, known as marking periods or semesters. Students should achieve proficiency in all subjects they study within these allocated times, or they will be labeled failures.
- Policies and procedures in a school are “givens”, handed down by the board of education to be implemented fully in all schools, for all students, in the same way.
- Administrators lead, evaluate teachers, discipline students and give orders to all.
- Teachers follow orders from above, and teach a set curriculum handed to them, usually through official textbooks, with common assignments for all students and correct answers at the back of each chapter. Their main responsibility is to cover subject matter and carry out their mandated responsibilities as defined in their contracts.
- Students obey administrators and teachers, accept the given curriculum and strive to complete all assignments and achieve proficiency within the allotted period. They are essentially passive—receiving information from their knowledgeable teachers at the front of the room—and regurgitating such information on exams that usually involve filling in the blanks with correct answers. If students behave and demonstrate “success” as defined by the school, at the end of four years they graduate and move on with their lives.
- Counselors schedule students, usually once a year. They present some career information, periodically meet with parents and help students understand themselves and other factors in their lives in order to graduate high school in four years.
- Staff such as secretaries and clerks carry out their office responsibilities attending primarily to the needs of administrators and teachers, answering phone calls from parents, and completing necessary paperwork for the school’s operation.
- Parents send their children to the schools they are assigned to, where teachers teach them, counselors advise them and administrators discipline them

Assumptions, Beliefs, Roles and Responsibilities in Middle Early Colleges

Middle early colleges are based on different beliefs, assumptions and goals that profoundly alter each of the aforementioned modes of thinking and behavior.

- Administrators have a clear ideology about the students they are serving, placing them first in every plan, every decision and every action they take in their school. The goal of student success drives every aspect of the school. Teachers and staff serve students—they are the instruments by which students reclaim their connections to their own learning and shape their own futures. Parents “loan” the school their children—often “bruised” by their prior learning experiences in other educational settings. They don’t quite understand what a middle early college is, but do know that their children need something different if they are to survive and ultimately prosper.

Administrators are leaders of and servants to all the school’s constituents. They understand that the education their students received before they came to Mott did not serve their needs, and that many now need what the school calls “academic life support—“ intensive personal and educational care”. It is their task to take the lead in shaping a different teaching and learning environment that will produce different outcomes for all the students in the school. Through their own behavior, they demonstrate the patience, sometimes almost infinite patience that is required as all members of the school learn and internalize the new beliefs, values and goals that constitute the culture of their new school.

School is no longer a timeworn recipe of teaching and learning. In order to create and maintain authentic change, the new mode of operations is driven by reflective action research. All adults in the school must commit themselves to a permanent state of thinking, questioning, drawing on the latest research of best practice, and demonstrating and evaluating actions and outcomes.

- Teachers face the new challenges of professional freedom and responsibility. No longer mere receivers of orders or messages from the principal, they are the instructional decision makers in the school, sharing leadership with their “official” leader. They have the opportunity to become true professionals, purposefully applying and creating new knowledge about effective practice. As pioneers, they cannot count on others to give them the right answers; indeed, others may not even know the right questions. They cannot forget their responsibility to meet external state curriculum and testing requirements by presenting new, engaging lessons that motivate students and prepare them for success.

They must create a support system for themselves, their fellow teachers and staff, and their administrators as they experience “the pain of giving birth to” a new model of education that gives hope to their often “wounded” students. No longer are they teachers of subjects or curriculum content; rather, they are educators of young people—their students—and the challenge is to reach and inspire them to connect, to care, to trust, to reengage and to strive for new levels of achievement and success.

This means that teachers in addition to being subject-matter specialists are first and foremost human resource developers. They must serve as advisors, counselors, guides, friends or family to students who are bereft of all such supportive relationships. They must recognize that forging human connections and meaningful relationships with their students is the foundation of their new learning and growth.

- Students are the very purpose of the entire school enterprise. Therefore, their interests, needs and future success always come first. However, since learning is not a passive

act that a teacher can do *for* or *to* a student, students are held accountable for their own choices. They know the consequences of the few “non-negotiable” behaviors from the start: no fighting, drugs, alcohol or weapons. Such actions lead to automatic expulsion. If students wish to skip class, they may, but they will endure the consequences of that behavior. Staff will help them to consider the implications of their choices and the alternatives they had to act otherwise, but in the end, students are responsible for their actions.

Students in a middle early college also have new freedoms and opportunities to shape what and how they learn. They discover their own learning styles and monitor the conditions under which they learn best. Their old patterns of excuses, avoidance and denial no longer carry them through, for in the end, they are responsible for taking advantage of the new educational opportunity they have been given.

- Counselors respond to students’ personal and educational needs, within the limits of their own time constraints and energy. This means that each student is scheduled not once a year, but three times a year, for both high school and college classes, or more frequently if needed. They understand the delicate paths they must negotiate among all stakeholders in the school: students, the middle early college administration and staff, the community college administration and faculty, parents, external legal and political forces such as differing institutional structures, cultures, expectations and calendars, and differing county, state and federal financial and learning requirements. There will never be enough time, and seldom any easy answers, but the work must be done and the students must be served.

Staff such as secretaries and clerks share the school’s primary commitment to its students. Thus, while performing their assigned office duties, they are mindful of what difficulties students may experience and what burdens they may bear. Their work may involve completing district accounting forms and listening to troubled students. These are not incompatible responsibilities; both are essential accomplishing the school’s mission.

Parents are welcome and respected partners in their children’s education. Many parents have the same needs as their children. For them, the concept of a middle early college high school is often confusing, bearing little semblance to the schools they attended. In addition, many had their own difficulties in school; not all graduated high school, or dreamed that their children would continue to college. Like their children, they also need new information, understanding and support, even more so as they struggle with their own problems including unemployment, single parenthood, illness and lack of emotional support. Accordingly, many come with their own fears, defenses, and hopes for their children’s future success.

The school’s responsibility with parents is to build on the goal they share, and create a living partnership of support. A way to achieve that goal is to develop parent education programs that parallel what students learn and experience as they move through their programs. For example, just as students need seminars on the early college dual enrolment process, so do parents, in order to understand what did not exist when they were in school. The school invites parents by mail and by personal phone calls to school celebrations, special events, and information evenings. Such occasions provide opportunities to build connections and strengthen school-parent relationships. Yet, a lesson to be learned is that such efforts will not always lead to success. Many at-risk youth raise themselves, as they are often parentless, or lack parents who care or are able to support them.

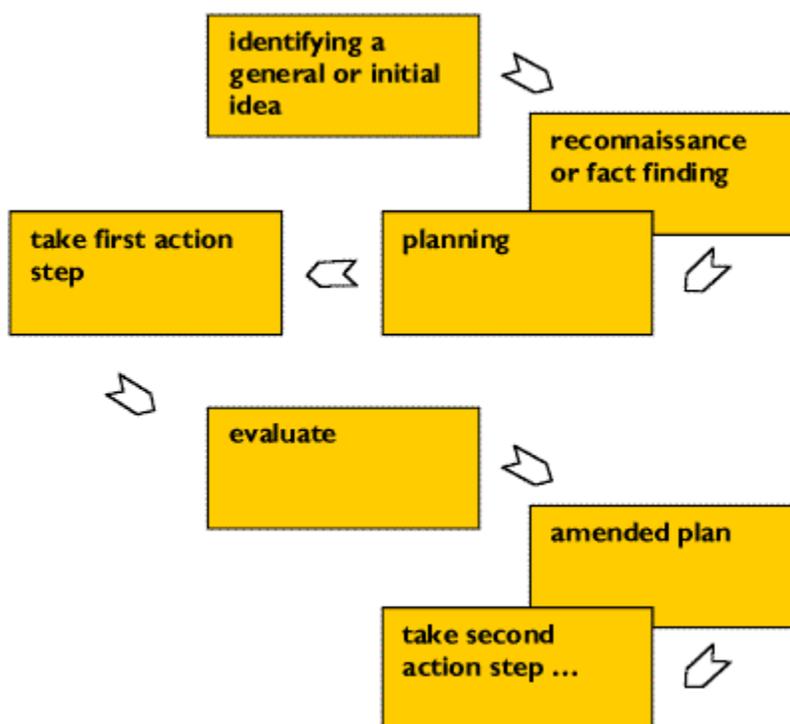
Lesson Two

Create and Sustain a Culture of Collaborative Reflective Action Research

Since its establishment in 1991, MMEC has created a culture of collaborative reflective action research that has remained the core guiding value and practice of the school. Reflective action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to develop and deepen their own practice. It is not merely a 'method' or a 'procedure' for research. Rather, it is an ongoing commitment by educators to extend their ability to identify problems or ineffective assumptions, beliefs and practices in teaching or learning, and to do so by observing, collecting information, planning, taking action and evaluating, to improve the school.

The essence of reflective action research is four steps:

1. **Look**—building a picture and gathering information, defining and describing a problem and its context, and observing what all participants have been doing.
2. **Think**—interpreting and explaining, reflecting on what they have been doing, and examining areas of success as well as deficiencies, issues or problems.
3. **Act**—formulating and implementing solutions to any issues or problems.
4. **Evaluate**—judging the worth, effectiveness, and outcomes of those activities.



During its 20 years of operation, reflective action research has become institutionalized in the organizational culture of MMEC as its primary continuous improvement process. Staff is

empowered to question, collaborate, and discover. The result has been the creation of a “lessons learned” culture that drives instructional practice.

Lesson Three

Get a Handle on All the Data

The national demand for student achievement accountability has moved educators into the critical area of assessment of all key data affecting and documenting student success. Data-driven decision-making has moved teaching and learning beyond intuition and “gut feelings” to new levels of precision and analysis. While this has led to a sharpened focus on not only what is taught by teachers but also what is learned by students, educators have had to attend to a deluge of statistical information derived from various sources—local, state and national.

When the emphasis on data was first brought to the schoolhouse doors, its burden was placed mostly on the shoulders of the principal—the newly titled “instructional leader”, and the counselors. However, given the volume of data now generated about every student every year, effective new ways of handling the data must be found, and ownership of its contents and its use must be shared by all teachers and staff in the school.

One key lesson learned by stakeholders of MMEC was that they had to develop an organizational structure that could receive and make use of all the data efficiently and effectively. Statistical analyses provided by new technology and software must interface with each other and be shared with all members of the school. While the school had long had a technology committee that addressed uses of technology in the classroom for teaching and learning, the role and responsibility of the committee had to be expanded to focus on the collection, analysis and application of all kinds of student achievement data in collaboration with a school-wide instructional leadership committee and ultimately, all teachers.

Lesson Four

Policies and Practices Must Change for Students to Achieve Success

Traditional policies and practices regarding matters such as grading, time, failure, attendance, authority, power and voice no longer work in an educational environment based on new assumptions, beliefs, goals, roles and responsibilities. Attendance is one area in which traditional policies and practices must be re-examined.

Traditional high schools have attendance policies established by the board of education and implemented by administrators and teachers, that strictly define various kinds of “absences” and prescribe specific penalties for set numbers of infractions. The following is a summary of an official attendance policy from an “exemplary” traditional high school.

Attendance regulations are listed in twelve categories:

- *Daily Excused Absences*
- *Excusing Absences*
- *Prearranged Excused Absences*
- *Unacceptable Reasons for Absences and Tardiness*

- *Student's Responsibility*
- *Absence for In-School Activities*
- *Make-up Work*
- *Attendance Alerts*
- *Unexcused Absences: Removal from Class and/or School*
- *Excessive Excused Absences*
- *Unexcused Tardiness*
- *Suspension Absences*

The approach to attendance is fixed and unyielding.

The school communicates a tone of suspicion, distrust, disbelief, strict formulaic prescriptions and punishments applied to all students equally. There is quantification of absences with penalties—with all “i’s” dotted and “t’s” crossed. All responsibility is placed on the shoulders of students and parents, with no apparent consideration of whether in-school factors including the culture of the school, the disconnection of students, the irrelevance of the curriculum, and the tediousness of its presentation, or any out-of-school factors such as family economic stress, illness, impending divorce, might have any role to play in students’ absence from school. If students reach three unexcused absences in a class, they may remain in that class for the balance of the semester, but receive credit for the course. More numerous absences may lead to school suspension for the remainder of the semester. Parents are contacted and students referred to their counselor only after 10 or more excused absences in a semester.

Such a policy in an educational environment with highly motivated students and caring, engaged parents is one thing; were it to be implemented in schools serving at-risk, disconnected, unmotivated youth and troubled parents, that would be quite another thing. Chapter Two described Glasser’s Choice Theory as one of the foundational beliefs that shape the culture of MMEC. Central to Choice Theory is the principle of student accountability and the logical consequences of an individual’s behavior. Thus, if a student misses classes at Mott, the inevitable result of such chosen behavior is loss of instruction, disruption of learning, and missed opportunities for interactions with teachers and peers. The ultimate consequences of that behavior may be school failure, dropout, and abandoned opportunity for the tuition-free college education that MMEC provides.

From the first meeting held with students and parents seeking admission to MMEC through the interview and admission process, the staff explains its approach to attendance. Staff stresses student responsibility for individual choices. However, as a new educational environment for at-risk high school students every member of the staff and parents are engaged to take “ownership” of all students through their personal formal and informal interactions and through support interventions described earlier such as the Focus Groups. MMEC does not operate on a simple automatic or binary model: yes/no, in/out, 5 minutes=1 absence, 10 absences = failure. Further, the school’s staff do not wait until students have “excessive excused absences (10 per semester)” to refer them to the counseling staff, as described above, or to contact parents. Such policies and practices would be constraining in this new setting, especially given the school’s commitment at its founding principle **not** to keep on doing the same things, taking the same actions and thinking the same thoughts, because they do **not** want to get the same results that they’ve been getting.

Thus, MMEC abandons steadfast policies and parameters etched in stone—as comfortable and easy as that might be—and commits itself to intense individualization of all aspects of a student’s functioning in their school, treating each student as a “case of one”, and

modifying how its staff interacts with that student as needed. As one member of the school's leadership team stated, "It doesn't matter what the theory is. The school must be able to articulate the philosophical and psychological basis on which it is basing its own mode of operation. There must be an agreed upon philosophical basis and psychological understanding of human behavior that guides the school's mode of operation." Interactions with all students will be personalized and individualized as needed to "pull out all the stops" on the way to high school completion and college success.

In addition, since a middle early college is a partnership between two institutions—one part of the K-12 system and one part of higher education—it must coordinate its approach to student attendance with that in operation at the college level where, obviously, parent excuses and permission are irrelevant. Students are held personally accountable for their attendance, and their presence or absence indicates the choices they have made.

Beyond a very few absolutes, MMEC does not follow a given formula or recipe. The four behaviors that are "non-negotiable" at the school are fighting, possession of alcohol, drugs or weapons. As earlier chapters stated, students are well aware of those absolutes, and welcome the safety and security they bring.

Other key policies and practices are different at MMEC, including its approach to grading, definition of time allocation, authority, power and voice. Taken together, these shape the culture of the school and affect every aspect of teaching and learning in the school.

As is apparent, one of the lessons learned is that changing a traditional high school or dual high school/college program to a successful early/middle college for at-risk youth is far more than just "rearranging the furniture" or assuming new labels and titles. Change must be substantive, grounded on philosophical foundations and deep understanding of adolescent psychology and sociology, as well as student and adult needs. It is a complex, endless process of change based on real differences.

Lesson Five

The School Must Create a Culture Where it's "Cool" to do Well

One of the ways in which "the power of the site" of a community college campus is so powerful is that it places students in an environment in which motivated adults are paying for their education and are seeking to build their futures. For many high school students, especially those in poverty or in schools and communities with little history, regard or respect for education, doing well in school is considered "nerdy"—a costly exercise that endangers membership in a peer group. Instead of growing up in a culture of success, many at-risk students consider it "cool" to fail—to challenge the traditional rules, authorities and norms.

For a middle college, particularly one serving students who have not yet achieved academic success, it is essential that problems of affect—feelings, emotions, self-concept, sense of belonging and sense of confidence—must be addressed before a student engages the problems of cognition. Therefore, a prime requirement for success is the creation of a culture that removes the risk for students who fear being labeled "nerdy", and demonstrates that high student academic achievement is encouraged, acknowledged, respected, honored, valued and awarded. Typically, high schools reserve such public honor and respect for its star athletes—the football players, the basketball champions—and the trophies adorning their entrances proclaim their values "loud and clear". Therefore, middle college administrators, teachers and staff must consciously plan for ways to create a new culture that will envelop all students in an

environment of confidence, high aspirations and continuing support. Just as seedlings need the right elements of nature—light, water, temperature and freedom from weeds—to thrive so do at-risk high school youth need the right elements of their social and educational environment to learn and grow.

Lesson Six

The Middle College Must Plan to Transition and Support...and Transition and Support

Traditional movement of students to new grades or levels of education, such as from elementary to middle school, middle school to high school and high school to college, typically involve an orientation to the new setting. Such orientations usually are single-session events—general assemblies or gatherings lasting 60 – 90 minutes, bringing together all students moving forward, with the sending and receiving school officials and faculty. While this approach may suffice within the traditional K-12 setting, or with the traditional high school graduate entering college, it is inadequate for the changes that will face middle college students attending their high school classes or participating in college classes with adult students and professors on a college campus.

Staff at MMEC learned that they needed to replace the concept of a single-experience orientation with an ongoing series of transitioning experiences that met students' needs as they entered fully into the daily life and demands of a college student. This means that middle college staff, in cooperation with college faculty and support personnel in many fields—student services, financial, aid, registration—must share a continuous process of monitoring student transitions and successes to design new interventions as needed to ensure success of the middle college student. Furthermore, experience has shown that in this intensive and ongoing transition process, the middle college counselors must take the lead in planning and implementing continuous support interventions as needed.

Another critical area in which continuous planning for successful transition and support of middle college students is essential, is helping them successfully adapt to the shock of life as a student in a college classroom. For the 10th or 11th grader, especially one who has a history of past academic difficulties in a traditional high school, entering and participating in a college class can be overwhelming. It is not sufficient to have a student meet with the middle college counselor, select his or her courses, register for the classes and be present in the classroom. All of that is necessary but insufficient. One way of looking at such a student is to consider that what is needed is “intensive initial college support” with ongoing monitoring, meeting, follow-up and assistance as needed. As one counselor stated, “We can’t just dump these students into the classes and walk away. They want to be successful, and they can be successful, but they cannot do it alone. A colleague continued,

We try to meet the needs of our students and prepare them for the college classes they are going to take. It is a continuous struggle seeking to engage them and keep their interest, and preparing them for the structure and expectations of a college class. Then when they don't pass a class, I have to question how I am serving their needs, what do I have to do to prepare them with the material and the style needed for their next level. How can I keep them motivated? Where should I steer them to get more help—to the professor, to the tutoring lab? I know I have to

move them to be ready for more independent learning at the college level.

As we say of our country, “The price of liberty is eternal vigilance,”—so is it true that the price of success of a middle college student is eternal vigilance, and transition and support.

Lesson Seven

Everyone “Owns” Every Student in Their Shared Educational Home

“Whose students are they?” All partners of middle early colleges have literally asked this question as they face the challenges of educating at-risk high school youth. Only one answer is possible, “They are all **our** students, and we are all responsible for them.” The burden for clearly articulating this response and protecting the very future of the program lies at the feet of the administrators of both partner institutions, and particularly the principal and assistant principal of the middle early college.

Discipline problems will occur, just as they do at every educational institution through graduate school. In the case of the middle early college, a plan of action must be developed and committed to before the first student arrives on campus. Every college complaint about student misbehavior or violation of decorum must be handled by the middle college immediately, and communicated back to the community college.

The middle college must never forget that it is, in a sense, a guest on the college campus. This reality imposes comprehensive, rapid and effective supervision responsibilities and accountability by the middle college to support the partnership’s success. Communication must be rapid after any incident, either through e-mail or personal phone contact to the proper college officials, so that they are duly informed. Only in this way can they have confidence in the middle college administration and staff as partners.

At the same time, middle college staff has an additional responsibility to familiarize college faculty with the needs and behaviors of high school students, especially at-risk youth of poverty. All adults must be able to understand and carry out their advocacy responsibilities in support of the students they share. In this regard, the counseling services at both institutions must closely work together and serve as key liaisons to their respective staffs.

As Wagonlander concluded,

Both institutions—middle college and community college—are learning to adapt and change, and in doing so, are creating a model of effective educational reform. We are demonstrating that the college can move away from the remediation business if they work with us to do the college prep. Mott Middle Early College is a truly collaborative approach in which three units of education—an intermediate school district, a middle college and a community college—demonstrate the creation of a bold new model through full partnership.

Lesson Eight

Plan for the “Minefield” of Student Behavior and Safety to Protect the Partnership

Student life on a college campus is not the same as that in a traditional high school. With the extended physical environment of a community college and its many opportunities for easy entry and exit, high school students must be guided as to the new behaviors and responsibilities demanded of them. Clear expectations of attendance and safety must be stressed for students in their new environment. Nothing can destroy the future of a middle college as quickly as a situation of a missing minor child on a college campus, or a high-school student disrupting teaching and learning on the campus through immature and uncontrolled behavior, or a young female high school student becoming involved with an adult male college student.

Middle college administrators and teachers must be familiar with the daily life of the high school and have working knowledge of legal guidelines, state policies, federal student privacy protection laws and external social and protective service resources, as well as deep knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of all K-12 counseling and support personnel. Such knowledge and experience are required to clarify and demand adherence to critical safety and behavior issues up front with students and parents, as one of the mandatory requirements for admission to and continuation in the program.

Lesson Nine

High Schools and Community Colleges are Two Different Worlds with One Common Goal

The community college is largely a phenomenon of twentieth-century American higher education, perhaps the most pragmatic and adaptive of all the components of our national education system. As a key element of American postsecondary education, the community college has created a unique role in its dedication to the needs and expectations of American society, peoples, and cultures. It is a distinctively American invention, standing between secondary and higher education, between adult and higher education, and between industrial training and formal technical education, providing educational programs and services to people who otherwise would not have enrolled in a college or university and who seek a geographically convenient and low-cost postsecondary education.

In 1974, the American community college broadened its scope when LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York joined with the New York City Board of Education to create a unique high school alternative program—a middle college. LaGuardia Middle College was the first collaboration of its kind between a high school district and a community college that sought to meet the academic and psychosocial needs of at-risk urban youth with college potential. By the beginning of the 21st century, the middle college--or middle early college, as it is often called—expanded from its single partnership to a national model of institutional collaboration that exists in virtually across all 50 states. While this partnership of two educational institutions committed to a common goal—the success of at-risk youth—has achieved remarkable success, the process of collaboration has been a challenging and complex one.

First, both institutions derive from different histories. The first American schools in the 13 original colonies opened in the 17th century. The larger towns in New England opened grammar schools, the forerunners of modern high schools. Boston Latin School was founded in 1635 and is both the first public school and oldest existing school in the United States. Soon schools were opened in all colonies and were for males with a few facilities for girls. The U.S.

Constitution omits any consideration of education or schooling—in fact, the words *education* and *schooling* do not appear in the document. The only education topic of serious concern was whether to form a national university, which the delegates opposed. The absence of any specific mention of education, coupled with the Constitution's Tenth Amendment, rendered education a state function. While the federal government plays a vital role in some aspects of K-12 public education including financial support for identified special needs, national tests of student achievement and national standards for school performance, American public education has primarily been shaped by the 50 state legislatures who have determined the specific policies and guidelines for the operations of public schools in their states.

The community college evolved from various sources of educational innovation starting at the end of the 19th century. Later forces supporting expansion of community colleges in the 20th century included the advent of universal secondary education, the vocational education movement, open access to higher education, and the rise of adult and continuing education and community services. By the beginning of the 21st century, when global economic competition revealed the importance of a knowledge-based work force in the sciences, technology, manufacturing and business, community colleges assumed even greater importance as potential powerful engines of human resource development. New concerns about American education were raised, including the short- and long-term costs of high school dropouts. In this context, community colleges took on added significance as a new opportunity—in partnership with high schools—for the education of high school youth who were not yet be ready for college or work.

The shared understanding of the importance of a shared public work force motivated both institutions—public high schools and community colleges—to collaborate on a common goal of vital importance to them both. The goal has been worthy and to a high degree, successful, but navigating the “boundary waters” of the two institutions, and overcoming their governance and operational differences have been something to learn. As MMCC and Mott Community College have learned, numerous areas of misunderstanding or potential conflict have arisen.

Facilities. Since middle colleges are located on the campuses of community colleges, they are by definition guests of that college. Many advantages derive from that setting, including the opportunity for high-school-aged students to learn in an educational environment populated mostly by motivated adults, and to access well-equipped science labs staffed with skilled technical support beyond anything available at the typical high school. At the same time, as guests of the host community college, middle college administrators and teachers must always be mindful of the generosity of their hosts and interact with appreciation and patience as they live side by side, day after day, hour after hour. The obligation is on them to monitor and guide their middle college students in their behavior and conduct in their new higher education setting.

As might be expected in any such host/guest relationship, the initial period required adjustment by both partners. For both middle college and community college staff, flexibility and cooperation are vital for the success of the project. Whereas college faculty formerly enjoyed their own campus facilities, serving their adult students who had signed up and paid for their services, now “others” were sharing their hallways, their labs and even their classrooms. Not only were some middle college teachers using campus facilities, but now younger “others”—some as young as 14 years old—also used the facilities. New middle colleges planning for their location on a college campus must consider some of the dynamics of sharing facilities with other educators who wish to help at-risk youth, but also feel some ownership of their own space.

Challenges arose about how, where and when college faculty and middle college teachers would be able to schedule their classes. Space—and in particular, regular classrooms and science labs—were essential to both institutions. The responsibility was on the “guests” to prove that they and their students were responsible and respectful of the needs of the college and its students. Over time, through demonstration of their seriousness and their prompt and visible supervision of their students before any problems, the administrators and staff of MMEC gained the confidence of their educational colleagues. As their relationship as educational partners grew, both institutions overcame normal “turf” issues and thoughtfully considered the needs of all students on the campus. Over time, guests came to be perceived as neighbors, and ultimately, as students like the rest of the student body at Mott Community College.

Calendars. State Departments of Education determine the scheduling of key events for elementary, middle and high schools, publishing set dates for events such as statewide student assessment programs. By definition, all students must take the same exams on the same dates at the same times. Inevitably, such mandated scheduling of activities affecting one of the partners in a middle college—the high school students and staff—affects the other. For example, some state testing dates have been scheduled when a community college is not in session for spring break. On such occasions, administrators or chief liaison officers of both institutions must resolve potential conflicts with deans and other key officials—an often indelicate process. Since not all community colleges in a state follow the same yearly calendar, this results in unit-by-unit negotiation and collaboration to resolve scheduling difficulties. Conversely, a community college may choose a certain period to administer midterm exams, and access to facilities in a calm and orderly environment is essential. Once again, special negotiations may be required to serve the needs of both institutions.

1. Shared programs and campus life. While sharing space on a campus can be a logistical challenge for both partners, other aspects of dual enrolment also require negotiation and flexibility. Both institutions must consider the unique aspects of their cultures, including the different working conditions of middle college teachers and college faculty. The educators may all belong to unions, but they are two different unions operating under different collective bargaining agreements and working conditions. While middle early college teachers are accountable for student performance on external statewide mandated exams, community college faculty are not held accountable for any outside assessments of student achievement administered to all college students throughout the state. The college faculty enjoys greater flexibility and independence in developing and modifying their curriculum, topics of discussion and selection of instructional materials. For example, several college faculty may teach the same course, but each lecturer may independently select different textbooks and instructional resources. In addition, since such materials may be extremely expensive (an average of \$100 per textbook), middle colleges must budget accordingly to cover the costs of students enrolling in several college-level courses as they move through the middle early college sequence.
2. Challenges of high school students operating under college policies. Both middle college partners must move through the entire experience of educating high school youth on a college campus with openness and understanding of the need to modify “standard operating procedures”. For example, the college model of student orientation may not be feasible for the middle college students due to schedule conflicts, traditional length of time of the college orientation and maximum number of students permitted to meet with each counselor according to the terms of the school’s collective bargaining agreement. Challenges such as these are resolvable, but they demand goodwill, an openness to review all policies and practices that have traditionally governed methods

of operation and continuing support from members of both institutions—especially from the two sets of administrative officers.

An additional issue may arise from the fact that some high school students get in over their heads at college and are unable to deal with their difficulties successfully. Many high-school-aged students handle problems by avoiding them or ignoring them, “sweeping them under the rug,” so to speak. While high-school educators have a moral and often legal responsibility to contact parents if students are failing, higher education does not operate in that way, holding individual students personally accountable, especially when their students are legally adults. Both institutions must find a way to share academic information with parents, within legal parameters that protect student confidentiality. MMEC resolved this problem by having both students and parents grant written permission to staff at both levels to share information with each other and ultimately with parents, to support students and help them achieve success.

Lesson Ten

Multiple Models: There is No Such Thing as One Middle Early College Model

With the expansion of middle early colleges in Michigan during the last 20 years from just one to 20 across the state, various models of middle early college figurations have evolved. Some, like MMEC, started with a dropout prevention focus on at-risk high potential youth. The demographics of the Flint community shaped the origins of that school, but are not necessarily the same at the other 19 sites. Other middle early colleges are located in rural settings, in remote parts of the Upper Peninsula, or in impoverished urban centers characterized by homelessness, high rates of teen pregnancies, absence of parents or parents who never completed their own high school education. Some middle early college programs have been launched and funded by the Michigan Department of Education and the Michigan legislature specifically to steer students into high-growth employment fields such as health services or technology, while others simply want to help all students complete high school and become college and work ready.

The partner institutions involved in each middle early college must address the unique features of the model they are developing and seek the most effective ways to address their problems. An example of variations that demand unique responses are those Middle Early colleges that are health-related and have not two but three partner institutions—a middle college, a community college and a hospital or community health center. Once again, success is possible with a strong sense of shared mission and an openness to collaborate and negotiate differences.

Lesson Eleven

Plan Right and Go Slow: Transitions are Difficult and Take Time

These may be the most important words of wisdom that developers of a middle early college receive. All change is difficult and takes time; however, when change involves two major, historically different educational institutions with long established traditions and modes of operation, then extreme caution and sensitivity must be the rule.

Before MMEC opened, its founder and principal spent a year in advance planning, communicating with all stakeholders, seeking advice regarding new policies, researching best

instructional practices to meet the needs of the school's target population, and seeking to anticipate and address possible problems and conflicts.

After teachers were hired, they attended a three to four week comprehensive summer orientation and training program to learn the new philosophy and mission of the school. They had to learn adult roles and responsibilities relating to teaching, learning, handling of student discipline and many other aspects of the new school would be different from what they had learned and experienced elsewhere. At the same time, there was awareness that this orientation process would have to be repeated with all new staff joining the school, and would be revised with new training, as needed, based on internal reflective action research conducted within the school, and external research completed by outstanding educators in the field and in other educational institutions.

The staff at MMEC remembers early experiences with specific issues that demanded attention and resolution. Their first approach, under the pressure of time, was "Just *do it*". This was soon replaced by a more deliberate approach that they described as, "No, it takes more thinking and work; just doing something is not enough. We have to do it well and we have to be mindful and analytical about the different expectations in our school."

The journey was a difficult one, and not all joined in the change process, although they had professed their initial willingness. All had been shaped by their experiences and were subject to falling into past modes of thinking and behaving. They had learned and worked in an old paradigm of "working in silos", where a common refrain was, "It's not my job, it's the counselor's job, or someone else's responsibility." They were also used to being the *receivers* of orders and direction from above, not the *creators* of new ways of designing and implementing teaching and learning. The process was one of empowerment and responsibility, requiring all staff to accept the fact that no single external "savior" would show them the way and deliver the key to student success. It involved confidence in their ability and strength to persevere and reach new heights of professional practice that they had never envisioned for themselves.

The school had to struggle to find the correct pace of change in order to reach the desired goal. They learned the risks of trying to do things too fast, especially in working with educational partners from a very different history and culture, as well as the dangers of falling into the trap of easy familiarity and old habits of thinking and behavior. They learned that just as students needed a GAPS program and other continuous support mechanisms to be successful in their new environment, so did the staff. Patience was paramount, along with reinforcement of the worth of the project and confidence in the staff who were committed to their students' academic progress and future success. Everybody had to get on board, but it was important that the train not move too fast, and that the individual needs and learning styles of all staff members—not just all students—be addressed with respect and support.

Lesson Twelve

The Middle College Must Give Public Recognition and Praise to its College Partner

The core role and responsibility of a community college is to provide opportunities for post-secondary education to all applicants who can meet admission requirements. Traditionally, community colleges have served students from a broad spectrum, representing diversity in almost all aspects including age, ethnic and racial background, socio-economic status, and students seeking terminal degrees or transfer credit for continuation in a four-year institution of higher education.

For a community college to expand its traditional mission to include serving high school students on its campus is an act that some would label as foolhardy and irresponsible, but that others would consider bold, courageous and boundary breaking. Consider the grave challenges they face in the current economic crisis facing most states, and certainly Michigan: a declining industrial base, increasing unemployment, a growing demand for a skilled and highly trained knowledge workforce, fewer state and federal resources, greater demand for sophisticated teaching and learning equipment and new classroom facilities, and greater public scrutiny and accountability. How remarkable it is that some community colleges have in fact opened their doors, as has Mott Community College, in service to the needs of all the citizens of their community and county.

Such courage and commitment should be recognized and praised by the “guest” middle college that established residence on a college campus. Their generosity, effort and continuing commitment should be communicated to all possible middle college audiences. When possible, whether at a state or national conference, a professional gathering, or a meeting of the local chamber of commerce or public service agency, or at political events ranging from meetings with local legislators and lobbyists to the governor and state board of education, the “guest” middle college must express its deepest appreciation to its host. In collaborating with a middle college, a community college assumes the additional burden of meeting the needs not only of their traditional clientele, faculty, staff and board of trustees, but also of the hundreds of young teenagers who are visible throughout the campus. Every effort must be made to credit and acknowledge their generosity, commitment, and boldness in setting the pace and changing the traditional K-12/community college educational paradigm to a seamless K-14 system.

A middle college must also develop an ongoing flow of information, both with its partner institution and with the public print and visual media, to share the successes of the students both institutions have served. Their achievements would not have been possible without the willingness of their host community college to break traditional patterns. For this, eternal gratitude and honor must be extended to the administration and faculty of the community college partner.

Lesson Thirteen

Commit to Developing a Win-Win Partnership with the Teachers and their Unio.

If, in the end, as most educational research confirms, the teacher is the most critical factor in the academic success of a student, a teacher of at-risk students in an innovative, continually developing school is without question the highest priority. Most teachers work very hard and are committed to their important roles and responsibilities. Teachers of high-need students in an educational environment that is constantly redefining and recreating itself are stretched almost beyond their limits. Just as the school must attend to the emotional needs and interests of its students, offering them the support required for their continuous learning and success, so must it commit to meeting those same needs for its teachers.

In a school such as MMEC, the teachers’ union collaborated to ensure that joining the school was a matter choosing teachers who best met the needs of individual students and of the school as a whole. From the beginning, the approach of the Genesee Intermediate School District and MMEC was to give teachers a strong voice in the hiring of faculty members, even though the ultimate decision belonged to the board. The goal was win-win, and the commitment was to provide an environment in which every teacher could learn, grow and contribute. It was understood by all that a major high school reform initiative such as a middle

college would be stronger and more likely to succeed and endure if its members chose to be part of the program. As one teacher remarked, "It's not the same kind of work here. What it is, is work...on top of work...on top of work!"

The administration of MMEC paid careful attention to get to know the union, its leaders, guidelines and contract, and to seek to develop an authentic partnership on behalf of a common goal. It also knew that continuous quality professional development for all teachers would not only demonstrate the respect the school had for all teachers, but also its commitment to help them acquire the training to understand more clearly what the school was trying to do and how its approaches were different from what they had experienced in traditional high schools.

Since its beginning, MMEC has invested heavily in the professional development of its teachers and staff. Their principal supports their research into effective teaching models, sends them to conferences that demonstrated best practice, calling on them to share their new knowledge with their colleagues, allocating time for them to meet weekly with their peers and to collaboratively create the new knowledge that would transform their school. The staff praises Wagonlander for her enduring commitment to their professional development and the trust she demonstrates in their ability to become master educators.

MMEC followed no script when it opened its doors in 1991. It had found an inspiring model at LaGuardia Middle College in New York, but no specific blueprint as to what to do, when to do it, and how to do it existed to meet the unique needs of its students, partner institutions and community. On reflection, the staff looks back on its early and continuing challenges, and seeks to share the lessons it learned with middle early colleges in Michigan and across the United States that are serving tens of thousands of students.

The final chapter, *Reflecting on Two Decades of Discovery—Preparing for a Third Decade of Exploration*, summarizes what MMEC has achieved, and how it commits itself to sharing its experiences, challenges and successes with all Michigan high schools to help all students achieve career- and college-readiness upon graduation.

CHAPTER 11

Reflecting on Two Decades of Experience—Preparing for a Third Decade of Exploration

Anticipating State Reform of Michigan Public Education

Halfway through the second decade of MMEC's history, the former governor of Michigan, Jennifer Granholm, boldly announced a new effort to dramatically break from the state's educational policies of the past. In 2004, she announced the formation of the Governor's Commission on Higher Education & Economic Growth to be chaired by Lt. Governor John D. Cherry, to recommend new policies to guide Michigan to a new future. Specifically, the commission was charged with identifying strategies to double the number of Michigan residents with degrees and other postsecondary credentials of value within 10 years.

The commission made several recommendations:

- Michigan should forge a new compact with its citizens to make higher education universal and should end, once and for all, the idea that postsecondary education is an option rather than a necessity, with responsibility shared by the student, community and state.
- Set high expectations for high school students through rigorous standards and curriculum that reflect the competency necessary for postsecondary success and readiness for the world of work.
- Implement new strategies for high school success through the establishment of a network of newly fashioned secondary schools and learning environments formed around research-based models that engaged and motivate students.
- Equip educators and administrators to support the high-expectations high school path, expand access to baccalaureate institutions and degrees and opportunities for early college attainment, and win the race to the creation of a flourishing economy.
- Expand access to baccalaureate institutions and degrees including two-year institutions that offer applied baccalaureate degrees.
- Expand opportunities for "early college" achievement through dual enrollment and other means of obtaining college credit while in high school.

Taken as a whole, these recommendations—subsequently supported by the State Board of Education—had the goal of creating a new Michigan K-12 education system that prepares all students for success in college and work, and moves unprecedented numbers of residents to new levels of educational attainment.

Seven years after the commission's recommendations, Governor Rick Snyder presented his educational reform plan that also included bold new proposals to meet the educational needs of Michigan's students. As he stated to the Michigan Legislature on April 27, 2011,

Michigan needs to drive toward a system of higher expectations for its system of schools and educators. We need a performance-based education system that will meet the 21st century education needs of all students. Innovation and educational entrepreneurship must be cultivated through improved models of

*instruction across the state. There must be greater choice for students and parents, and greater responsibility and accountability at the individual school level for student growth.*³⁰

Among his specific proposals, several stand out for their direct connection with the approach Mott MMEC has used since its inception:

- ❖ Development of a system that efficiently directs limited taxpayer dollars toward smart, research-based efforts proven to help all students perform at dramatically higher academic levels; and that holds every teacher and school administrator at the state, intermediate and local level accountable for student gains in the classroom, while also empowering them to get there with the autonomy, student data, instructional tools and meaningful support they require.
- ❖ Presentation of a new public school learning model titled *Any Time, Any Place, Any Way, Any Pace*.³¹ Michigan would permit state funding to follow the student—to help facilitate dual enrollment, blended learning, on-line education and early college attendance. This new education system would offer unfettered flexibility and adaptability for student learning models and styles, and break down the status quo on how, when, and where students learn.
- Recommendation that all Michigan students should be able to receive a community college degree or credential no later than their 13th year of school. Every public school district should offer college credit opportunities by using early college, dual enrollment, online college credit courses, direct credit, and other valid and rigorous course options. Career and college readiness for all students, coupled with the opportunity to receive college credit before graduation, would provide both an incentive for students and an affordable post-secondary pathway for all families. Students should be able to earn college credit as early as their ninth year, and those students who choose to, should be able to earn college credits that will be accepted by Michigan community colleges and four-year baccalaureate institutions.

Governor Snyder concluded his message on education reform with these remarks:

We cannot expect reform if we ignore the most important part of education – our kids. A better future for Michigan youth begins with a shared understanding of what is right with our students, rather than what is wrong.

A 2010 Gallup poll of American 5th through 12th graders revealed that kids cite three things they need to succeed in education and in life. They tell us: I need to be known. I want to be excited about the future. And, I could use your help.

Our schools and communities need to show kids that they matter, that we see them as individual human beings, and that we commit ourselves to knowing and developing what is right about each and every student. Parents, educators, and community leaders need to help students become excited about their future and about the vitality of their cities and towns.

³⁰ www.michigan.gov/.../snyder/SpecialMessageonEducationReform_351586_7.pdf

Kids need to hear that their parents and communities will actively help them learn, grow, and move toward an independent and successful future.

I'm asking all of Michigan to make our youth a priority. Listen to what students say they need from their schools and communities. Track their hope, engagements, and well-being. And, take action to improve those areas.

How fresh, yet familiar, were Governor Snyder's remarks. Even before its doors opened in 1991, MMEC committed itself to these same goals with this same spirit. However, what was not known 20 years ago—but is clearer now—was how the school would achieve these goals. Few models existed that involved designing and implementing a radically different educational design that coordinated reform efforts with 21 local school districts, a county intermediate school district, and a community college.

Mott faced the challenges of three key questions:

- Could these goals be achieved?
- Would those goals be achieved?
- How would these goals be achieved?

The only certainty shared by the founders of the school was, as Peter Block wrote ten years later, “The Answer to How is Yes: Acting on What Matters.”³² Block warned that any major innovation or reform effort could be stifled by “how?” questions, which focused on all the blocks and barriers that made progress difficult, but he affirmed that once clarity had been achieved about “what matters,” then step-by-step, the “how” could be answered.

Mott was clear on what mattered, and the members of its educational team had faith in their knowledge passion, and courage to rethink basic assumptions about how they could grow the learning capacity of at-risk high school students. Whatever and wherever the “Yes” was, they were confident they and their students could find it.

As the founders of MMEC reflect on their two decades of experience, and review the challenges of educational reform in Michigan presented by two governors, what they see now is that the answers can be found and the work can be done for all students—but it can only be done in stages. Developing college-ready students by immersing them on a college campus certainly had the advantages and power of the site; however, the administration and staff of MMEC have come to believe that the six recommendations made by the Cherry Commission could even be applied even in traditional high school environments. This could be achieved by examining and redefining goals and expectations for all members of a school, providing ongoing quality professional development to support the new high expectations of college- and career-ready graduates, acting on the belief that post-secondary education was a necessity for all students, designing and implementing new strategies for student success, and expanding opportunities for the successful attainment of college credit by students still in high school.

MMEC staff researches its student achievement data and sees the evidence of what they have accomplished. Each year, more and more of their students have increased the number of college credits they have earned by graduation, ratcheting up the credit hours from

three, to 15, to 24. These data show that more and more MMEC students are earning 24 college credits or more.

Few might have predicted this remarkable trend line of college success for Mott's students. Traditional standardized testing, taken by many to be the main or only component of determining college readiness, could not have yielded the actual successful college results, for as one can observe, MMEC students have typically demonstrated almost a flat line on state and national normed tests, such as the ACT and the MME (Michigan Merit Examination). Were these the only admission criteria used for college admission, the majority of the school's students would not have been allowed to dual enroll or earn entrance into any institution of higher education. The change of focus that the staff learned to emphasize over the years moved from dependence on standardized testing as the main or only component of determining college readiness, to strategies to develop college readiness skills even with students who do not test well.

In digging deep to understand what is needed to achieve college readiness, MMEC administrators have concluded that the successful outcomes of its students demonstrate that there is a process and a set of curriculum standards and content that can be taught, supported and learned. This process includes first—key cognitive processes, key knowledge content in four core areas, key skills and behaviors, and college contextual knowledge and skills—and second, wraparound support services to remove barriers and strengthen student confidence and capacity.

As Wagonlander summarized,

The big "Aha" for us was when we learned there was a big lesson learned: Students that one would never have thought would be successful higher education learners are indeed, with the right opportunities and the right support, very successful higher education learners. Their problem was our problem. We chose to reframe the problem, and took it off the students' shoulders.

We're just going to continue to do the work because we are learning how to do the work of college success and readiness better. We learned that for so many students we were just doing minimal college readiness in direct instruction and experience. We were not wrapping services around the students, nor were we reaching the parents. We learned that we have to work with the parents in parent education; it is our obligation to share with them what they can do to help their children be more successful early college students. We are applying this new knowledge and want to get better at modeling it for others.

A total of seven years were needed for Mott Middle College to redesign itself as Mott Middle Early College. During the school's first decade, when it was a four-year middle college, it was typical to have 10 percent of the student body—20 students—dual dual enrolled, earning a total of 100 college credits each year, averaging about 5 credits per student. For example, in the 2002-03 school year, when the transition to an early college occurred, Mott had 15 students dual enrolled in high school and college courses. By the 2009-10 school year, 98 percent of the entire student body in grades 9-13 was earning a total of 1500 college credits annually; 31 percent of Mott's students earned 24 or more credits; and 100 percent of all graduating students were dual enrolled, averaging 20 completed college credits upon graduation. The school's

commitment in this stage of its development is to ensure that all students graduate with at least 15 college credits.

The staff at MMEC now *knows* how to make high school students *college ready* by making them *college experienced* while they are still in high school. They have created a college culture and immersed students in that environment. While its location on a college campus is a critical factor, MMEC has also learned that while there is “power in the site”, all sites could design different strategies to create a college-going culture by taking one or more of the following actions:

- Bring their students to the college campus for a college experience
- Create opportunities for on-campus student shadowing days
- Develop one dual enrolment course on a college campus site
- Design ways to bring the college to the school

Staff at MMEC has made a commitment to focus its efforts during its third decade on exploring how to assist other educators create a college-going culture with their high school students. They are emboldened by the success they have achieved during their first two decades and are now poised for their new work: Helping other high schools—traditional high schools and middle colleges—scale up to a level of college readiness that is not yet being done, and preparing all high school students to college-ready. Their goal is to model how other schools can overlap some college with the high school and afford opportunities for all students to experience a college readiness curriculum that is embedded in their high school courses and supported by expanded student support services. In this way, MMEC seeks to serve as a case study of what has been learned in its first two decades, when it entered unknown, uncharted and untested waters. A successful model of one can be an inspiration to many.

Thus, Mott Middle Early College seeks to assume its obligation to expand equity and access to higher education to all high school students, not just those experiencing the early college model. Their mission in their third decade is to shape new perceptions by high school educators that even those students long believed to be unsuitable for or incapable of higher learning can be guided and supported by policies and practices that open doors to higher education for all their learners. Mott Middle Early College has proved that educators do *not* have to give up on a student—that all students can be viewed as potential college students including students of a meaningfully certificated community college program that leads to direct meaningful employment. The gap can be bridged, and the dream can be realized.

EPILOGUE

A Letter Written by members of the Class of 2002 on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of Mott Middle Early College

As part of the class of 2002, we celebrated Mott Middle College's 10th year as students—as juniors. Now, on the eve of our 10th anniversary, we celebrate Mott's 20th year as nearly decade-old alumni. It's scary how quickly time flies. While each of us would love to be standing before you today, relaying our own testimonies of the significance of this place and the people that make this place possible, Mott was successful in its endeavor to mold us into productive citizens and we are working—with intentions of joining you shortly.

True to the spirit of the establishment, we found ourselves gathered in the living room of a friend just last night, deliberating those things we believed it most important to say. How do you celebrate Mott in all of its physical and conceptual glory? For some of us it was easy to appreciate Mott and all of its possibilities as students. For others, it has been as alumni that the experience has gained its true significance. Ultimately, we decided it best to reflect upon the lessons we learned as students and the influence the Mott experience exerts upon us as alumni.

As students we learned things such as—never to be late to certain teachers' class, always have a pencil ready, a steel drum is an instrument and volleyball is a valid school sport. We came to understand that textbooks do not guarantee an education, and we explored the world around us from perspectives too often given no credence. Lockers are overrated. Everyone is an artist. And Gorman was a long way away. We witnessed the convictions and passions of our educators and learned to foster and defend passion and convictions of our own. We benefitted from the commitment of the staff to art, music, health, politics, volunteerism, and hobbies. The word diversity came to dominate our vocabulary and we learned to accept differences among us, as well as appreciate the similarities. There was a certain benefit to being indistinguishable from the college students.

As alumni we have realized that what Mott really represents transcends those lessons we learned so many years ago as students. Today, we are part of a greater community and we are more conscious members of the communities we compose. We espouse values we internalized through the efforts and passions of the faculty and staff of Mott Middle College. These values include tolerance, acceptance, involvement, and pride—pride in our past, pride in our present, pride in our future, and pride in ourselves.

So to the faculty and staff we'd like to say thank you. Thank you for your passion, your commitment and your confidence. Thank you for demonstrating the effectiveness of a community and how to build one. And to students and alumni alike, thank you for being a part of that community of which we are so proud to be a part.

*John Bishop
Tiffany Fitch-Bishop
Tiffany Daraiseh
Faith Finholm*

APPENDIX

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Biographies of Contributors

Katherine Carr — teaches English Language Arts and Theatre at Mott Middle College High School. She began working for Mott Middle College in 1998 as a Theatre Guest Artist and joined the team as a fully certified teacher in 2004. Katherine holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre, a Bachelor of Arts in English, a Post-Graduate Certificate in Acting and Musical Theatre from Mountview Conservatoire for the Performing Arts and a Masters in Educational Leadership – Administration.

James Coviak — earned his Bachelor of Music Education degree from Central Michigan University and his Master of Music degree in Percussion Performance at the University of Akron. He currently teaches at Mott Middle College, Mott Community College, and the University of Michigan-Flint. In 1993 he founded the Mott Middle College Steel Band. They opened for “The Canadian Brass” in 1998, and “Free Flight” in 2000 at the Bands of America National Concert Band Festival, and won the 2000 Percussive Arts Society international competition. They have also performed at the Montreux Jazz Festival (Switzerland), and the Nice Jazz Festival (France).

James Donovan — is a Guidance Counselor and Summer School Director at Mott Middle College. He also coaches the Varsity Swim Team at Kearsley High School. He joined the Mott Middle Early College Team in the fall of 2006. Donovan holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Instrumental Music and was a High School Band Director for 15 years. He also has a Master’s Degree in Guidance and Counseling from Eastern Michigan University. In addition to being a High School Guidance Counselor, for the last nine years he has been a Licensed Professional Counselor.

Helen Dettore — is an enrollment and student services coordinator at Mott Middle Early College. Prior to joining the school in 2005, she spent 20 years as a small business owner and community volunteer.

Amy Hackett — teaches Health and Physical Education at Mott Middle College. She has a Masters degree in Teaching Reading and a Masters degree in Special Education with a Cognitive Impairment endorsement.

Paul Holdren — teaches Biology and Physical Education at Mott Middle College, having joined the MMC family in 1992. He holds a B.A. in Biology and Physical Education, a Masters of Divinity in Theology and a Masters in Educational Leadership. Recently, Holdren retired from the nationally ranked Mott Community College Wrestling program, having coached one national champion and 15 all-Americans. Additionally, he has authored two books that have given him the opportunity to travel to South Africa where he taught in local churches, Bible Colleges and was interviewed on national radio and TV.

Victoria Milne — is a teacher of Language Arts and Theatre at Mott Middle College. She helped to start the school in 1991. Milne has a Bachelors Degree in Language Arts and Speech and a Masters in American Culture. Prior to working at Mott Middle College, she worked at the Valley School as a Drama teacher.

Kerry Moore — has been a guidance counselor at Mott Middle Early College for 17 years. She played a key role in the school’s redesign into an early college, and currently serves on the Michigan Middle Early College Leadership Council. She has done numerous workshops and presentations on middle early colleges and wraparound services. She also works with the

Middle College National Consortium to help middle early colleges develop guidance programs through national webinars and workshops.

Celeste Mora — is a Mathematics instructor at Mott Middle College. She joined the Mott Middle College team in 2007. Celeste holds a Bachelors degree in Mathematics with a minor in Chemistry and a Masters in Business Administration. She received her Secondary Education Certification from Ferris State University where she is pursuing her MED in Curriculum and Instruction. Prior to working at Mott Middle College, Celeste spent 20 years in the Automotive Industry before pursuing a career in Education.

Matthew Osmon — has been the full-time art teacher at Mott Middle College since 2007, and is also part-time faculty at the Flint Institute of Art. He received his B.A. from Columbia College in Chicago, and is currently working on his Masters Degree at the University of Michigan-Flint. His studio practice is focused on drawing, painting and filmmaking.

Laura Rainey — has been a science instructor at Mott Middle College since 2005. She holds a Bachelors Degree with teaching endorsements in Chemistry, Physics, General Science and Mathematics. Rainey taught for 20 years prior to joining Mott Middle College.

Leila Rivard — is the Curriculum Coordinator and a Language Arts instructor at Mott Middle College. She joined the Mott Middle College team in 1992. Rivard holds a Bachelors degree in English, a Masters in Educational Leadership, a Masters in Secondary School Teaching and an Ed. Specialist degree in Leadership and Counseling. Prior to working at Mott Middle College, she spent 17 years in business and industry before pursuing a career in Education.

Lee A. Rossmuessler — is currently the Assistant Principal at Mott Middle College, and has served in that role or as a science teacher since the school opened in the fall of 1991. Before that, he served on the planning committee for Mott Middle College and taught in various independent schools, colleges and universities, in Michigan, Indiana, California and abroad.

Bonnie Russell — is an English Language Arts teacher at Mott Middle College. She joined the Mott Middle College team when it opened in 1991. Russell holds a Bachelor's degree in English and a Master's degree in Reading. Prior to working at Mott Middle College, she worked at the Genesee Intermediate School district for 15 years in youth and adult job training programs.

Heather Sandrick — is a Math/Science teacher at Mott Middle College. She joined the Mott Middle College team in 2001. Sandrick holds a Bachelors degree in Mathematics and a Masters degree in Counseling, and has served for several years as the coordinator of the school's Tech Prep Demonstration Project.

Gail Snider — is a mathematics teacher at Mott Middle Early College. She joined the school in 1994. Snider has a Bachelors of Science degree in mathematics education and a Masters in the Art of Teaching. Before joining the school, she taught in several different settings which included traditional as well as non-traditional students of all ages.

Terryl Sperlich — is a Social Studies teacher at Mott Middle College and has taught there since its inception. She graduated with a double major BA in History and the Social Sciences from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, did additional studies at Western Michigan University and earned a teachable minor certificate in English from Grand Valley State University. Sperlich previously was an Alternative Education teacher in Grand Rapids, MI and a teacher of computer languages and ESL for migrant workers. She has supervised many extra-curricular functions, and directs the current Peacemakers Program at the school.

Donald Van Horn — is a Mathematics instructor at Mott Middle College. He joined the Mott Middle College team in 2004. Van Horn holds a Bachelors of Arts degree in Mathematics, and a Bachelors of Arts in Historical Studies. Prior to teaching at Mott Middle College, he spent 11 years teaching Mathematics in Angleton, Texas.

Chery Wagonlander — is the Principal of Mott Middle Early College. She has been the principal for 20 years having served as the founding principal/planner. Wagonlander has been a teacher, counselor, assistant headmaster and college instructor. In addition to the principalship, she serves as the director of Michigan's Early Middle College Association and the Center for Technical Assistance to Michigan's middle and early colleges located on the campus of Mott Community College. She holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership from Eastern Michigan University.

Eric Wood — is a history and world studies teacher at Mott Middle College. He joined the Mott Middle College Team in 1999 as a full time instructor. In addition, Wood attended Mott Middle College High School from 1992-1994 as a student. Eric holds a Bachelors degree in Education and a Masters of Arts in history from Central Michigan University. He obtained his Masters as a senior fellow with the James curriculum writer and is currently involved in a project with Harvard Divinity School and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies.