



Tech Corner
Computing in the cloud with Dr. Gary Ackerman. **Page 3**



Judith Baenen
On "The Art of Acknowledging Students. **Page 6**



Editor's Message
An ending or a beginning? Linda Bourne on the end of the school year. **Page 2**

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New England League of Middle Schools

MidLines

Annual Conference Invigorates Spirit

An Attendee's Personal Journal

Moria Farnsworth

As a fairly new school counselor and someone who is very new to the middle level, I spent the beginning of my first year working in a middle school trying to wrap my head around the way that these students, think, learn, interact and develop. When my principal sent out a notice to our entire staff looking for staff members who were interested in attending the annual NELMS conference I immediately jumped at the opportunity to go and was happy when she confirmed that I had a place on the team that would attend. In addition to me, the school counselor, our school sent a health teacher, math teacher, social studies teacher, technology and design education teacher, and our assistant principal.

I had never attended a NELMS conference or event before and wasn't exactly sure what to expect but others that I talked to who had been to past NELMS conferences or events assured me that it was a very worthwhile conference. I was not only excited to attend some of the



workshops and focus sessions that I had read about but also to spend some time really learning about the middle level and getting to know my colleagues better.

As a new Student Council Advisor for my school, I was excited to see a workshop, **Beyond Car Washes and Candy Sales** offered. My co-advisor was actually a part of the team from our school attending the conference so we went to this workshop together and we were

eager to hear how other schools organize their student council groups and also to get some new ideas and activities. The presenter's message was about being creative with your student council groups and really looking for new and different opportunities for your groups. He supplied a very nice PowerPoint presentation along with some helpful resources. The real value from this session for me was in talking to and hearing from others attending the

Continued on page 7

News in Brief

EETT Funding Cut

In February, the budget bill proposed by President Obama eliminated funding for the Enhancing Education Through Technology programs that were part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Officials at the depart-

ment of education have expressed support for technology in schools, and identified new programs to help teachers and students use computers.

Bring Your Own Technology?

Results from The Speak Up National Research Project's 2011 survey of educators, students, and parents suggest a growing interest in using students' own handhelds and

other devices in schools. About two thirds of parents responded they would buy a device for their children if it was used as part of instruction.

The NELMS Mission: The New England League of Middle Schools through its vision, leadership, and programs provides a network of services for learning about and implementing developmentally appropriate practices for young adolescents that will serve them in their ever changing world.

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Mid Lines welcomes your thoughts and suggestions as well as your editorial comments. Please send them to Mid Lines, c/o NELMS, 120 Water St., Suite 403, North Andover, MA 01845

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Mid Lines is e-published three times a year and circulated to 20,000 members. Contact NELMS for current advertisement rates.

Deadlines:

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March 1 for May issue

July 1 for September issue

Editor's Message



An Ending or a Beginning?

Yes, the end of the school year is approaching, but for educators could it also be a beginning?

You have just spent 9 months with a group of learners and colleagues, developing and perfecting your craft.

It is easy at this juncture to look forward to a break and let bygones be bygones. But think of all you have accomplished this year! Now is the time to assess those experiences and begin to compile them for the next round of students. What worked best? Why wasn't the _____ (fill in the blank) as great a success as hoped? How could activities be improved or expanded or embellished for a wider range of learning opportunities?

Taking time now, to reflect on this past school year is indeed, the first step for

beginning a new year. As you reflect, you may realize that you could use some expertise, and NELMS is ready to help you in a variety of ways. Make plans to attend one of the NELMS summer offerings, purchase some support materials from the book shelf, or consider an on-line course offering, tailored just for you with credit from Plymouth State University.

When you read Moria Farnsworth's article about her experience attending the NELMS Annual Conference and the resulting actions taken by her colleagues, you realize just how powerful a professional experience can be. Along with beginning the garden with seedling tomatoes and potted petunias, plant some of your own ideas for extending your professional expertise toward your growth and greater rewards.

We wish you an exciting ending to this school year and simultaneously a rewarding and stimulating beginning. Happy Spring!

Executive Director Speak

I was pleased to see the success of the 30th Annual NELMS Conference. The planning of this event is complicated, time consuming, and very stressful so having things go well was a relief and a gift. My thanks to all those that made this possible. The staff did a tremendous job, Mary Jean Fawcett, as Conference Chair, was incredible, our presenters shared quality information and ideas, and the enthusiasm and feedback of those attending made everything worthwhile. On

a positive note, we were able to maintain registration numbers from last year, which was a challenge due to the ongoing impact of the economy. As we move to the future we will continue efforts to increase this number. Of course our attendees are the best marketing that we can do. Their comments describing the value help us with future planning and is a testament to what they have taken away.

After reading all of the evaluation forms I was struck by the overwhelming positive comments. "Fantastic presentation", "I can definitely use in my school", "Awesome ses-

sion", "Excellent, A+", "Great and fun ideas", "Informative, interesting and enlightening", "I'm taking back lots of ideas" are representative of the experiences attendees had. We are also making note of the suggestions for improvement and will follow up on these. They help!

We now head into the spring events of the Scholar Leader Dinners. These are a wonderful opportunity to highlight students, recognize middle level education, and to acknowledge the support of teachers, administrators and parents. These dinners are great fun.

An outstanding Summer Institute is planned for July 20-22 in Portsmouth, NH. Although open to everyone we encourage school teams to attend. We have designed these days in order to have new learning, sharing, and time to formulate plans to be used within your local school. Common Core, Motivation and Engagement, RTI, and Teaming will be integrated into the overall theme of "Effective Middle Level Student Learning Supports that Reduce Barriers to Student Achievement and Create a Positive

Continued on page 8



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Stateside News from Affiliate Organizations



Maine

Please read about Maine's new commissioner in an interview article by Chris Toy, on pages 4 & 5 in this newsletter.

Massachusetts

This past fall COMMLE released the findings of its task force entitled, "Magic in the Middle II", with the inclusion of a letter of support from both the Commissioner of Education and the Massachusetts Secondary Schools Administrators Association. Copies were sent out to Superintendents and Middle School principals across the state. We are now trying to arrange round table discussions on the document at different locations around the state. The document can be purchased from the NELMS bookstore.

We are very busy planning for the Scholar Leader dinner to be held at the DCU center on Wed. May 25. Additional information can be found on the NELMS website.

COMMLE is looking for dedicated individuals who would be interested in becoming board members. Anyone interested can email kjkbailey@verizon.net for more information.

New Hampshire NHAMLE Midpoints

NHAMLE is getting ready for spring celebrations. The Annual Dinner will be held May 5, at the Puritan Backroom in Manchester. New Hampshire Scholar Leaders will be honored on June 2 at the Center of New Hampshire, also in Manchester.

The State Reception at the NELMS Annual Conference was well attended and fun for all. NHAMLE updates were given, prizes were raffled and schools from around the state connected and socialized.

The NHAMLE board has been busy restructuring and reorganizing. The Board hopes to streamline the necessary tasks of the board, while creating greater visibility throughout the state. With these changes, greater involvement from middle level educators is desired and encouraged. Positive changes have already been seen with increased membership and participation at the Annual Dinner. Please contact any NHAMLE Board member for more information.

Rhode Island

Senators Jack Reed & Sheldon Whitehouse receive Friend of RIMLE Award
 Senators Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse were honored with the Friend of RIMLE Award, at the Fall Membership Meeting at the New England Institute of Technology on Post Road in Warwick. This award recognizes an individual that has made significant contributions advocating for the young



Maine's Commissioner is in the Middle

By Chris Toy

Tech Corner File Sharing on the Cloud

For several years, "cloud computing" has been showing up in the media. Although it may sound nebulous to middle school educators, it is worth understanding the basics.

First, consider your desktop computer: software (like *Word*) is installed and used to create files. You access the files that are on your computer with the software that is installed. Things work well until you need to move a document (to another user) or to a different computer for your own use.

Moving the file is done by connecting to a network, perhaps a local area network or the Internet (which you do when attaching a document to an email). Things still work well as long as all of the computers have the same software installed, and as long as you remember where the good draft of an important document is saved.

With cloud computing, the situation is much different, and sharing files is much easier. Using your web browser, you log on to a web site. The site has a word processor built in and your account has typically several gigabytes of storage reserved. Once logged on, you create a file, and save it online. To access the file from another computer, simply log on and open the

I had the pleasure of speaking recently with Maine's new Commissioner of Education. Commissioner Stephen Bowen is a former middle level teacher from Camden, Maine. It's so great to have a statewide leader who clearly understands and values what middle level education is all about... The Students! An heeere's the Commissioner!

Thanks for taking time from your busy schedule and sharing some of your thoughts with the Bright Futures readers Commissioner! So let's get started. Here's our first question.

CT-What did you see and hear on your listening tour that you think all Maine middle schools should pay attention to?

SB-What I've seen so far is that Middle Schools are really taking the lead on the kind of student-centered learning we want to see at all levels. At Massabesic Middle School, for instance, they have implemented a true outcome-based learning model that allows students to move ahead based on mastery of standards rather than seat time. Because of the student-centered focus that middle schools tend to have philosophically, I see them really taking the lead in moving us in this new direction.

CT-I'm sure middle level folks are pleased that you see how important it is to keep students in the center of everything we do in our schools. So on to our next question.

CT-Maine is the world leader in the implementation of 1:1 learning with technology. What do you see happening with MLTI in the next four years?

SB-The world of digital learning is moving so fast that it is hard to say where we'll be in four years. It is pretty clear, though, that digital learning has become much more central to content delivery and instruction than it has been, and we will need to do a lot of thinking and planning to make sure we're adapting to this new reality in a thoughtful way.

CT-Very true. We will need to change to keep up and stay ahead of the ball that, in many ways, Maine's middle grades started rolling a decade ago!

CT-How do you see the department supporting middle level leaders as they implement the tenets and core recommendations of Bright Futures?

SB-Part of the work we propose to do around a comprehensive state strategic plan for education will be to answer that very question - *What is the proper role for the state in supporting the work of Maine's educators?* The state has to deal with the same resource issues that local districts have to deal with, which means we'll have to work to strike a balance between what we'd like to be able to do and what we have the resources to do. Finding that balance will take a lot of thinking and discussion and planning, and that is what we plan to do over the next few months.

CT-We wish you and the department well on that! It will be a challenge. I'm sure I speak for the Bright Futures Partnership and many other middle level folks in saying we are willing to help in any way we can. Just let us know!

CT-How can the department encourage and support effective Middle level teaching in Maine's schools?

SB-On the listening tour, I've talked with

educators about strengthening the Department's role as a clearinghouse for best practices in curriculum development, instruction, assessment, etc. We need to build out the Department's capacity to allow educators to share back and forth across districts those things that are working for them. Fostering better communication is a way that we can help teachers learn from each other, and I think that is a great role for the Department to play.

CT-For sure. Communication and building networks is so important. Thanks for focusing on ways the field and the department can share what's working around the state.

CT-You have a daughter in middle school. As a parent of a middle school student what do you think is important about the education your daughter receives at this time in her life?

SB-The key piece for me is the exploratory nature of middle level education - the way that the middle level provides students with exposure to a rich curriculum that has academic rigor, but also fosters curiosity and maintains a focus on the complete child. This is a time for students to move from simply learning how to learn to really building a passion for learning. It is a very exciting time for them!

CT-Yes, the whole child, and a passion for learning in every Maine middle level student, no matter where they go to school!

CT-What message would you like to send to all of Maine's middle level educators?

SB-Keep up the good work! I look forward to working with you as we undertake an effort to really transform our schools.

CT-We'll continue to do our best, improve where we can, and change when we must!

CT-I understand that you are familiar with the Middle Level Institute being held from August 1-4 at Thomas College. Would you be willing to share your thoughts about MLEI for those considering attending this summer?

SB-In my time at the Middle School in Camden, I attended two MLEI sessions and found them to be a great opportunity to do what educators seldom have time to do, which is to reflect on our instructional practice and to really do the kind of thinking and planning we all need to do to be effective. It was always a great experience and one I hope to get back to one day!

CT-Yes, MLEI is all about middle level teachers taking time in the summer to be more effective with students in the fall and beyond. I'm sure you'll have the opportunity to visit MLEI in the near future! Thank you for sharing your thoughts and for all you are doing and planning to do with Maine's educators on behalf of Maine's students Commissioner. We wish you well, keep in touch, and let us know how we can help!

Editor's Note: The Commission on Middle Level Education, under the leadership of Mary Callan and Ed Brazee, created the report Bright Futures! on the current state of middle level education to make recommendations to the Maine Department of Education about improvements for educating Maine's 10 to 15 year olds. The entire document is available at www.maine.gov/education.

Chris Toy is an adjunct professor at Antioch New England College and the University of So. Maine, as well as an esteemed consultant for NMSA and NELMS.

Tech Corner continued

file. To share a file, click the "share" button that is part of every cloud computing platform.

If someone else has an account on the same system, then you can give that user permission to view or even edit the file. Also, the system maintains a revision history, so every copy of the file ever saved can be accessed. Also all updates and even some security tasks are managed by the provider of the cloud.

Many schools have moved to systems such as *Google Apps* or *Zoho* to allow cloud-based file sharing. My school has, and we have stopped many previously troublesome technology problems. *Dr. Gary Ackerman has taught middle school science and math and computers for more than 20 years in Vermont schools.*

Read Gary's blog: <http://nelmstech.blogspot.com/>

Teacher Tips!



All students can learn - sometimes all they need is someone to listen.

Believe it or not, you are already doing lots of formative assessments. Focus them, document them and most importantly, use them to drive your planning! It is not one more thing; it is the thing to maximize student improvement.

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Please visit nelms.org for more information and/or to register



The Art of Acknowledging Students

Judith Baenen

Why are middle schoolers so embarrassed about being good? Even those students who love their moms and dads, care for their siblings, get good grades, and like school, hate being pointed out as someone who cares, studies, or cooperates. What is so bad about being good?

Of course, experienced middle

grades teachers know it isn't being good that embarrasses them, it's being singled out. Even the boldest middle grades student is inherently averse to attention, especially from adults. The student who gets snorts and snickers from peers for some silly antic or egregious remark carries on with aplomb, but that same student would be reeling with humiliation if a teacher noted his or her high score on an assignment or

a kind act in the hall.

Of course, that doesn't mean good work and good behavior should go unnoticed. Here are a few ways of acknowledging students without embarrassing them.

Praise in private. Just as you would reprimand in private a student who exhibits poor behavior, find a private moment to offer congratulations to a student who has done well. This can be done

in a very casual way: "By the way, great job handling that argument today." Or, the situation may warrant a more focused conversation: "You know, I wanted to tell you how nice it was of you to help Danny pick up his books." These conversations can be held between classes or during a quiet moment in the library or in a study hall when other students aren't paying much attention.

Continued on page 8

Stateside *continued*

adolescent and their educators through their work at the state and national levels.

In other news, RIMLE, along with the Rhode Island Association of School Principals and the Rhode Island ASCD have been meeting with our Commissioner of Education, Deborah Gist on a monthly basis. We seek to collaborate with RIDE on the strategic agenda and in our case, support middle level practice.

RIMLE has been asked to sit on the Rhode Island Council for the New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC), which is overseen by the Great School Partnership. The mission of the Consortium is to develop and support bold educational innovations that will empower the next generation of citizens, workers, and leaders to be prosperous, knowledgeable, and responsible participants in our global community. RIMLE is participating on the Action Team for the League of Innovative Schools.

The RIMLE Annual Winter Conference was held at the end of January and Brenda Needham spoke at the conference along with Joan Jarrett, President of NMSA. The conference this year focused on the RIDE agenda as it relates to teachers and administrators. Teams from the department presented sessions on the use of data, the educator evaluation system that is being developed in Rhode Island, and the changes to the graduation system. The sessions on Personalization were conducted by RIMLE CADRE members.

Executive Director Bill Fasano spoke

at public hearings that were called by the Regents on the changes to the graduation regulation system. The adjusted requirements were adopted in March.

VAMLE

America's Promise Mini-grants Awarded

VAMLE is proud to announce two more mini-grants, with funds provided by America's Promise Alliance and State Farm. The grants were awarded to projects that support the strengths of young adolescents in 'staying the course' in their schooling toward successful graduation. Main Street Middle School in Montpelier received \$1275 for a project entitled "Increase the Understanding," which will bring positive communication between middle school students and the downtown Montpelier business community. Brattleboro Area Middle School received \$2980 for a project entitled "BAMS Community Investment." This project will connect students with the world of work, explore career options, and relate personal skills, aptitudes, and abilities to future decisions by participating in community service projects. Both projects focus on students being involved in planning, implementation, and evaluation. There are funds still available for another round of mini-grants that will be awarded on May 10, 2011.

2nd Annual Parents, Educators, and Principals Conference

VAMLE Executive Director, Sue Gee, and Desirae Vasquez of FCD Educational Services, presented a workshop at this

conference at Vermont Technical College in Randolph on March 30th that focused on "Risk Factors and Protective Factors for Vermont's Early Adolescents," an exploration of the essential question: What can parent, school and community partnerships do to counteract the risks early adolescents are facing today? The intent was to complement the keynote speaker, Joyce Epstein's, model of parent engagement through an interactive case study discussion about the risk environment today's adolescents face and identifying the protective factors that provide support for assisting them in making healthy decisions.

Pre K-16 Council

VAMLE Executive Director, Sue Gee, and Penny Bishop, Professor of Middle Level Education at the University of Vermont and a VAMLE Board Member, are participants on the "Student Outcomes" committee of the Pre K-16 Council, identifying the key factors to enhance the success of students at the important transition points along the pre K-16 trajectory, and particularly for VAMLE, between elementary and middle, and middle and high school. The Council, created in legislation, is led by Tim Donovan, Chancellor of the Vermont State Colleges.

New Website

VAMLE has a new Website at www.vamle.org. Though still under development, it is active and serving our members!

Annual Conference *continued*

workshop about what they are doing and what works for them. We had a very rich discussion and it not only helped me to get some new ideas but it reassured me that what my co-advisor and I have been doing and planning with our group are similar to things that other people, who have been doing this much longer than we, have recommended. One of the great ideas that we discussed during this workshop, which we brought back as a suggestion to our students, is the idea of a staff appreciation breakfast in which the student council group organizes and holds a breakfast one morning to show appreciation for all the hard work that the school staff puts in.

I really enjoyed Jack Berckemeyer's sense of humor. He was engaging and entertaining while giving information about **Understanding Young Adolescents** that I found to be very useful. The main focus of this session was on characteristics of the middle school student and ways that we can teach to meet the needs of adolescents. As I mentioned before, I am fairly new to working with this age group so it was very helpful for me to discuss the nature of students this age as well as real life strategies for working with them in the school setting. A lot of the information and discussion related to the classroom, and although I am not a classroom teacher, I do teach classroom guidance lessons and I still found the information to be very useful.

I attended a session, **Personalization of Learning** because the description mentioned advisories. Advisories are something that I didn't know much about but as a school counselor the concept of them really appealed to me and I was hoping to learn more about them. This workshop, although not well attended, turned out to be the most valuable to me of the entire conference. The presenter, Patricia Clem, was able to adjust her format since we had a very small group and we had a very meaningful discussion about what advisories are and members of the workshop who already had advisory programs at their schools were able to talk about what worked or didn't work for them. In addition to this I received tons of valuable information from the presenter in the form of articles, lesson plans, activities and research all relating to advisories. This workshop really solidified my interest in advisories and encouraged me to work to explore the idea of creating an advisory program at my



The Value of Membership

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school. There was one particular activity that someone shared during this workshop that I definitely plan on using at my school. It was recommended that we create posters with the names of all the students in the school on them and hand out stickers to the staff during a staff meeting and ask them to put a sticker next to students that they have a strong connection with. Hopefully this will help us to identify how we are doing as far as connecting with our students and allow us to begin the discussion with our staff about the possibility of implementing an advisory program.

A Keynote Address by Judith Baenen titled **Making the Best Better**, was very entertaining and there was a great deal of humor used. Although I am a fairly new educator I see every day why people get overwhelmed and burnt out working in the field of education so it was nice to hear someone discussing this. It was a nice way to start the morning on Saturday and the message that we need to take care of ourselves could not have been more important.

Although it certainly isn't an area of expertise for me, as the school counselor, I often am expected to work on scheduling issues and serve as a member of the scheduling committee at my school. When I saw that Dr. Paul S. Freeman was offering a workshop, **The Schedule "Says it ALL"**, I really wanted to attend so that when I participate in these discussions regarding scheduling I can feel a little more comfortable and even have some information to share as to what other schools are doing. I found Doctor Freeman to be a very engaging speaker and really enjoyed his workshop. There was a nice balance between discussing the philosophical side of scheduling and what should drive a schedule with the more specific information about the logistics of actually creating the schedule. There was a good amount of time for discussion and for participants to ask questions, which were also much appreciated.

Overall, I could not have been happier with my decision to attend the NELMS Conference. I feel that I gained a lot from the different presenters and workshops that I attended. It really invigorated my spirit and my drive and I think it did the same for the colleagues who attended the conference with me. Each night we were able to have dinner together, discuss what we had attended that day, and really think

Continued on page 8

Annual Conference continued

about how we can apply these ideas to our school. We were so excited and enthusiastic our team ended up staying up extremely late our last night in Rhode Island brainstorming and working on some ideas to bring back to our school. We decided that we wanted to do some work on building our staff unity at our school and together that night we drafted a letter to the staff which we sent out when we returned to school. We also discussed the idea of having a staff retreat in the summer where we would be able to work on some new initiatives that we will be implementing, but also have fun and enjoy each other's company. Finally, the idea of advisories seemed to strike a chord for all of us and we decided that we want to bring this idea back to our school. We decided to begin a committee which I will head and start to gather information and put feelers out to determine how open our staff would be to implementing an advisory program and what that would look like.

The ideas that were sparked at the NELMS conference lasted longer than that weekend in April. We now have a committee at our school called the ABC Committee (Adults Building Community) that has planned several events throughout the last year to promote staff unity and to give us time to just have fun together. Some of the events included a staff bowling night, snowshoeing and potluck and a staff dinner out at a local restaurant. The staff retreat that we dreamed of did actually happen last summer and a good portion of our staff gathered together at a local park in August to discuss PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support), advisories, meet our new staff members, go kayaking, play horseshoes and have a barbecue. The advisory committee was formed when we returned to school and worked through the end of the school year to gather information and bring the idea of an advisory program to our school community who were supportive. We worked over the summer and put together T₃ (Time To Talk) our advisory program which has been running all year. I feel that the NELMS Conference had a positive influence on me and my middle school and if I am given the chance to attend again, I definitely won't hesitate!

Moria Farnsworth is the School Counselor at Riverside Middle School in Springfield VT



Executive Director continued from page 2 school Climate". Enjoy learning, receive continuing education or college credits and join us for a great few days.

Spring is also the time to renew memberships. We are continuing to review and revise what we do in order to insure continued value for membership. My belief is that membership is more important than ever. We need a solid voice for middle level education. We need effective instructional information specific to meet the needs of this unique population of student. We also need each other as colleagues and advocates to continue our work. And we need the networking, professional development, and resources to move middle level education forward. Next year we look forward to working in schools and doing our part to support improvement. Also be on the lookout for additional information about the November Literacy Summit, the January Differentiated Instruction Workshop and of course the 31st Annual Conference.

Acknowledging Students

continued

Use classroom displays. Students need models of good work. Your classroom walls and bulletin boards are the best place to show off student work that has met or exceeded expectations. These models can be displayed without any additional praise or attention to the persons who performed the work.

Mail your praise. Keep a stack of postcards in your desk (If you travel, use postcards from your journeys.). When a student does something really noteworthy—especially if it's being kind to others or exercising control—jot one or two sentences of praise on the postcard and mail it. Be sure you address it to the student; if parents also see it, wonderful, but it's the student who needs the recognition.

Create an age-appropriate caught being good wall. Call it something more suitable to middle grades students, such as CHIC (Character Here Is Cool) or KEWL or LknGd—or ask the students to think of a name. Teachers can discreetly post names of students who have done something especially kind for another student, teacher, or other person in the building. Just list the name, not the deed. Any student whose name is on the wall receives a small treat at the end of the month.

Sincere praise can be a valuable tool in building student confidence and reinforcing positive behaviors. However, effusive or empty praise and recognition of one or two students that, in effect, puts other students down can have a negative impact on student morale and classroom climate. Use praise sparingly but well.

Judith Baenen, a former classroom teacher, speaks and writes about middle grades students and the issues that affect them. She is author of National Middle School Association's HELP, More HELP, and HELP for Teachers and editor of The Family Connection.

I hope you have each had a year of successes and that your connection to NELMS has been helpful. I appreciate what you bring to us and we will continue to do our best to meet your needs. In recognition of the recent Teacher Appreciation Week a special thank you for the outstanding work of our talented and caring teachers.