From the Desk of the Executive Director

12 Reasons Why You Should Attend

The New England League of Middle Schools
42nd Annual Middle Level Conference & Exhibits

The New England League of Middle Schools’ 42nd Annual Middle Level Conference is heading to Springfield. Two exciting days of the best in middle level professional development. This is a great opportunity to learn from and share with your peers who, like you, are committed to working with today’s adolescents. Here are twelve reasons why you should come to Springfield in March.

Six Strands that encompass what it means to be a middle level educator

Tools for Your Toolbox: Classroom Practices that Engage and Encourage Learning

Sessions in this strand provide an opportunity to share proven effective classroom practices designed to meet the broad range of interests, abilities, learning styles and skills of their students.

SEL & Wellness: Meeting the Needs of the School Community

Sessions in this strand share examples of ways to meet those needs for everyone - students and staff - resulting in a positive school climate and a supportive, developmentally appropriate learning environment for young adolescents and the adults that work with them.

Equity and Diversity: Creating Access for All

Sessions in this strand may focus on how teachers and administrators recognize and honor students’ diverse identities—gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, spirituality, socioeconomic class, and more—through identity work; curricula that include a full range of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors; ways to understand and disrupt unjust systems; and creating joy.

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(12 Reasons Cont)

**What You Need to Know about Young Adolescents**
Sessions in this strand focus on “everything you need to know about young adolescents,” including implementing research-based best practices and researched developmental aspects of young adolescents.

**Leadership from the Middle**
Sessions in this strand highlight all examples of leadership including administrators, teachers, and students.

**Communication: Strategies that Work**
Sessions in this strand will offer examples, advice, and strategies on how to improve communication skills for students, teachers, administrators, staff, and families in the challenging contexts in which educators work.

**Four Dynamic Keynote Speakers**

**Jack Berckemeyer**
A nationally recognized presenter, author, and humorist, Jack Berckemeyer will share how maintain joy and optimism in this crazy world. Jack will offer his insight, humor, and laughter to help you and your school create an atmosphere of joy and optimism.

**Andrew R. Dolloff, Ph. D.**
School leader, graduate instructor, and author, Andrew Dolloff will share practical ideas for ensuring your school is one in which trust forms the foundation of all relationships, encouraging students and staff to stretch their learning in a safe place that is fun and focused.

**Dave F. Brown, Ed. D.**
Dave Brown is a former middle school teacher with years of experience teaching, coach and author, who will share the many aspects of young adolescents’ overall growth—from social emotional development to moral maturity to critical thinking to academic gains.

**Scarlett Lewis**
Scarlett Lewis founded the nonprofit Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement in honor of her son, Jesse, who was murdered during the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy in December 2012. Scarlett has become an advocate for social and emotional learning (SEL) and character development to help children manage their emotions, feel connected, and have healthy, meaningful relationships.

NELMS’ is honored to have these four outstanding Keynote Presenters

**Fantastic New Venue**

**Sheraton Springfield Monarch Place Hotel & Conference Center**
We are excited to come to Springfield for the 42nd Annual Middle Level Conference. The central location makes it more manageable for educators from across New England and the Northeast. The Sheraton Springfield Monarch Place is all inclusive. The conference, the exhibitors, and the hotel are all under one roof. The hotel is beautiful and is located in downtown Springfield just off the interstate.

[welcome video](#)

**The NELMS Conference is “Affordable”**
The NELMS conference is “dollar for dollar” the most affordable conference whose focus is about the best in middle level teaching and learning. Go to [www.nelms.org](http://www.nelms.org) for early registration fees and great lodging pricing and information.

**And finally, best of All “Time with Colleagues”**
This could be the best reason to come to Springfield in March. How many times have heard that middle school and middle school students are unique? What an incredible opportunity to learn from, share with, and get together with fellow educators who all work at the same level and with the common mindset of ensuring that they meet the diverse needs of the young adolescent.

OK...this is actually 13 reasons. Just checking to see if you were paying attention. But there are 13 great reasons and the NELMS Board of Directors are excited to have you join us in Springfield in March. We have a great lineup of
In the summer of 2020, all teachers and administrators in my school were asked to do diversity-equity-inclusion work of our choice over the summer. Many of us, myself included, chose to read Dr. Gholdy Muhammad’s new book *Cultivating Genius*, and as our collective excitement over the book grew, we decided to make it a faculty read and do book studies throughout the school year. As a result, we agreed to adopt Dr. Muhammad’s HILL (History - Identity - Literacy - Liberation) model as the principal framework for our school’s curriculum and program.

The HILL model is rooted in the practices of 19th century Black literacy societies, and Dr. Muhammad begins the book with an examination of how these societies functioned and the context in which they worked. She builds a case that our current schooling practices are built on a model that has historically favoured white children, to the detriment of Black children and other children of colour, and that switching to a model rooted in Blackness would benefit all students.

The model itself incorporates four dimensions: development of identity, skills, knowledge, and Criticality, “the capacity and ability to read, write, think, and speak in ways to understand power and equity in order to understand and promote anti-oppression.” (Muhammad, quoted in Ferlazzo) In the middle section of her book, she explores each of these four dimensions of the HILL model in detail.

Of course, as middle school teachers, we well understand the importance of identity development - it’s the central focus of our students, dominating their thinking, offering us an opportunity to help them not only figure out who they are but also learn about identities different from their own and develop both empathy and an open mind. Dr. Muhammad’s book is written for teachers of all age groups, but this section will resonate particularly strongly with many of us.

Development of skills and knowledge is, of course, the traditional work of schools, but when we integrate these with identity and Criticality development, we can take all four dimensions deeper. As such, Dr. Muhammad’s chapters on skills and knowledge will feel quite familiar to most teachers and yet may provoke a reexamination of our practice.

(Book of the Month)

*Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*

Scholastic, 2020. reviewed by Bill Ivey

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For members of 19th century Black literacy societies, liberation was the central goal of all they did; similarly, for teachers who are genuinely working for equity, teaching Criticality is fundamentally important to this model. An essential part of this process is finding joy.

The third and final section of the book details how to put the model into practice and includes both a general discussion and many specific examples.

In reading this book, I found both confirmation of the importance of much of what I was already doing and inspiration to add to it and take it deeper. Wherever you are personally in your own equity journey, this book will positively shape and even possibly transform your teaching and your school.

Bill Ivey (he/any) is Middle School Dean and teaches Humanities 7, Rock Band, and Academic Skills at Stoneleigh-Burnham School, a gender inclusive girls school for grades 7-12 in Western Massachusetts. He serves on the NELMS Board of the Directors as an advisor for equity, inclusion, and social justice, and on the AMLE Equity in Middle Grades Education Committee.

Why Advisory matters so much
Nancy Doda

The Why

We teach a precious and somewhat precarious age group. Our middle grades students are in the throes of one of life’s most pivotal and seminal periods in human development. They are growing faster than at almost any other time in life and are grappling with some of life’s most significant milestones which will come to shape how they see themselves, others, and the world. These are the “turning point” years of life.

Growing up has always been hard work, but for today’s young adolescents, it is well...simply harder. We do not need volumes of research to convince us of this. The past two years of trials and challenges in managing the not-so-post pandemic school world offer plenty of evidence. Students need us more than ever to help them navigate the challenges of growing up well.

As middle grades educators we have long celebrated the importance of positive relationships and social and emotional learning in middle school. We know and research substantiates that when our young people feel well known, valued, and included at school, they are more likely to be fully invested in learning, make better choices, and feel happier at school. (CDC, 2011). Moreover, for young adolescents, being connected to others is essential for healthy identity development. A productive search for self is inextricably linked with positive adult and peer relationships. And, since our age group is vulnerable to bullying, ridicule, and exclusion, they depend on us to ensure school is a socially and emotionally safe place so they can take the risks needed to grow in such important ways.

The Advisory concept has long been celebrated as an essential program feature designed to safeguard our young adolescents. While there are many models of Advisory, the twin aims emphasize quality peer relationships and personalized adult support. The hope is that every child has one caring adult advocate, feels connected to a caring peer group, and is afforded the opportunity to develop social skills in a safe haven.

Over the past decade, educators have learned even more about the value and leverage of Advisory programs. Perhaps most significant is the fact an Advisory program can transform a school’s culture creating a sense of connectedness, a key ingredient in school success. Connectedness takes shape when schools deliberately attend to quality relationships and make time to help students do the same. (See this resource from AMLE for more: Creating a Culture of Connectedness through Middle School Advisory Programs.)

Finally, there is no doubt we all aspire for a softer and kinder world. Living through the pandemic has made abundantly clear the need to help kids learn to care about themselves, others, and their world. Advisory is one special opportunity to help us show young people how to be caring members of a community: to listen well to others, to understand others with empathy, to learn to be kind, and to learn about the value of a civil community.

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Advisory Going Forward

So, let’s say you are on board with all the possible benefits, but last year’s Advisory left a bad taste in your mouth. You felt like you were managing chaos most days and the occasional good days were not enough to bring you back into enthusiasm. You’re not alone.

The last school year will long be remembered as one of the toughest we have ever faced. And it wasn’t only Advisory that lost ground. Advisory, however, is a unique beast. It’s too relational to be unstructured; too intimate to be unplanned. And, with a huge decline in student social skills and a rise in problematic student behavior, it’s no wonder many of us were wondering if Advisory was really worth it.

Considering How

With the fog of last year’s challenges starting to fade, how can we give Advisory a new fresh stroke, and better prepare for a year of Advisory success.

Here’s what some fellow middle grades teachers and students have learned that might help us recommit to our Advisory and keep it relevant and manageable:

Revisit your most positive Advisory memories. Sit with this. When did you witness growth? Can you recall the faces of students who flourished over time? What were some moments of joy? Did your students discover emerging new friendships? When did things work well?

Establish routines and celebrations that will keep you sane all year. How do you hope students will enter and leave the Advisory time, gather in a face-to-face circle, behave during the share time or activities, take turns, act as co-leaders, set up and clean up messes? These routines are so important that if you had a rough year, look back and consider what routines you had in place from the start. Then, consider how you might take steps to address this during the first month of the school year. Rituals and celebrations are also vital to keeping Advisory going. Could you plan one or two fun celebrations to hold the year together? Monthly special food sharing? Monthly cross Advisory play? Goofy days

Spend more time up front on building relationships and belonging. A few ‘getting to know you’ activities is not enough. Commit to a month of steady relationship building work. Take lots of pictures of the journey and share. And keep in mind students are always growing and changing so ‘getting to know you’ activities can and should happen all year long.

Engage students early as helpers and leaders of Advisory. Start with three simple roles needed to keep Advisory productive. Examples: News and Announcements, Check-ins, or Greetings, and Set up/Clean-Up. Add on over time. Student voice matters in all our classes, but Advisory can fall apart without it

Balance and structure what you do in Advisory. Focus on blending structured discussions, with free-flowing productive play. Use both as opportunities to teach social skills, as simple as manners, to good listening skills, and appropriate discussion skills.

Have a simple plan for every week. Don’t over-plan but have a focus for the week’s Advisory with some talk time, activity time, play and reflection. If you find you are without a plan, ask a colleague to borrow an idea or check the Advisory calendar. Try using components that give Advisory more structure. Here’s one example: Morning Meeting Components - Cambridge Public Schools

Talk often about Advisory as a faculty. What we talk about is what matters to us. No less than once each 9 weeks, faculty should have a chance to share ideas, debrief what’s working or not, and learn one new thing. Even 10 minutes can yield ideas and inspiration. In between, try starting each faculty meeting with a different check-in. Without this needed talk time, and added modeling, we will risk losing momentum.

Focus on face to face. When in doubt, leave technology out. We live in a world where technology is ubiquitous. While there is no full escape, Advisory ought to hold sacred time for face-to-face relationships. Eye to eye, knee to knee will have a greater impact on student behavior in Advisory and throughout the day than any technology platform could achieve.

Last words

Every one of us joined the teaching profession to try to make a positive difference in the lives of our students. This has always been challenging work. Today, however, it’s not only harder for students to grow up, but also for all of us to reach and teach every child. In these challenging times, we need every tool available if we are to make that difference. We need many ways into the hearts and minds of young adolescents. Advisory is one powerful way in.
Tech Tip

What is coding? Coding is the process of writing out steps for a computer to follow to achieve a goal or perform a task. You probably know, every time you interact with a computer, you are executing prewritten commands to your computer’s processor which it translates to your desired goal.

I used to have a poster in my classroom “The problem with computers is they do exactly what you tell them to do.” They can’t (yet) read between the lines, they can only understand the commands they are given. That is code.

This little activity is a great way to introduce or explore the process of computer coding. Let your students code you.

Lay the ground rules; you only move if the command is understood, If the code is executed you follow exactly what is commanded, lastly you only know how to move (you don’t know how to identify objects in your surroundings). Have each student in a given order speak the commands one at a time.

Examples of how you move; taking one step forward, lifting your right hand 90 degrees, move hand left 4 inches (roughly), open hand, turn left 90 degrees, etc. Make sure they don’t give open commands, for instance if they tell you to turn left, you have to keep turning left until the next student gives the command to stop. If they tell you to walk forward, take care not to hurt yourself as you walk into something before the next student’s command to stop!

Start off easy- pick up a pencil and sharpen it or pick up a book and place it on a designated target area. Then get more challenging, draw your name (or another word) on the dry erase or chalk board, pick up a cup, or fill with water and take a drink (prepare to get you or the floor wet- kids love it!).

This is a great advisory activity or just for fun. You can decide the length of the activity based upon the difficulty of the task. Extension, to test their code, have a student be the notetaker, and if the code is well written, then anyone (another student or teacher) should be able to be given the same code with identical results.

Feel free to reach out to me at bbridges@rsu10.org with questions or comments.
Middle schools across the country are now forming teams and competing in esports. Esports teach students the “soft stuff” like leadership, communication, teamwork, and how to win and lose with class. The value of teaching social and emotional learning (SEL) through esports is proven, but it isn’t new. Mindfulness and SEL training is being done at the collegiate and professional level, so it is only natural that it is trickling down to the high school and middle school level. Schools have found that esports builds a sense of belonging for the students who join the team. It’s been proven that esports brings new students into school activities and also improves their attendance at school. Plus, students know that they can turn their love of video games into careers, especially STEM careers, not to mention all the college scholarships available to esports players.

Brand new New England middle school esports leagues have been formed so your school can now join. Uptime esports offers:

- Safe & secure online platform
- Local competition
- STEM skills sessions
- Lessons from professional esports coaches
- Fun free activities for players

The winter season starts December 5th so go claim your school today and get involved in esports! Find the league for your state at: [www.uptimeesports.gg/leagues](http://www.uptimeesports.gg/leagues)

Enterprises, please contact Will Wilson at wwilson@veinternational.org

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