

North Oldham Middle School: We SAVE Kids – One at a Time

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“SAVE”ing kids

There are thousands of schools in our great country, and each one can claim excellence in some facet. History indicates, and rightfully so, that academics be at the forefront of most efforts—the fundamental purpose of public education, if you will. It is our belief, however, that academics in isolation is myopic at best. At North Oldham Middle School, we have made it our never-ending goal not only to address but to excel in all facets. We believe that what sets us apart is the attention, both in philosophy and application, to measures aimed at meeting the developmental needs of the whole child. So in a profession full of acronyms, we offer one more: “SAVE” is our written reminder to address the social, academic, vocational, and emotional needs of those we serve. It is our passion.

Who Are We?

North Oldham Middle School is situated near Louisville in Goshen, Kentucky, and has served students in this area—as well as from other small communities along U.S. Highway 42 and the Ohio River in rural Oldham County—since 1996. We service approximately 760 students in grades 6 through 8 who arrive on our doorstep from three feeder elementary schools. In addition, we are linked through professional collaboration with North Oldham High School, which sits on the same campus. Our school has an exceptional service population equal in percentage to our gifted and talented population at approximately 15%. In addition, the percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced-price lunch is approximately 3%. The staff consists of 1 principal, 2 associate principals, 3 counselors, 36 regular education teachers, 6 special education teachers, 1 media specialist, 1 literacy coach, 1 gifted and talented coordinator, and a speech pathologist.

Our Mission

Long before the three R’s of rigor, relevance, and relationships became buzzwords, North Oldham Middle School had its own version of the three R’s, which served not only as a mission statement but as our guiding principles for every decision made: Respect, Responsibility, Relationships.

Call it the golden rule if you will, but it is our belief that anything significant has its roots in respect for humanity. When looking at the multitude of constituents—students, staff, parents, and community—that encompass the schoolhouse, respect is a must. Opinion, alternative thinking, and ultimately collaboration will carry us toward our goals.

If achievement is the focus, then all of the aforementioned constituents have a responsibility. Parents and the community play a similar role in providing support for the school, both financially and through verbalized votes of confidence. Student opinion of what goes on during the day is often influenced by what is heard at home. Therefore, it is imperative that parents have opportunities to see, hear, and understand exactly what happens behind the front door. They are our greatest advocates, and it is our responsibility to open our doors and exact their opinions. As a staff, our supreme responsibility is to those we serve—our students. Anything less than our absolute best is unacceptable. They deserve it.

Finally, and most important, we believe that nothing can be accomplished until a level of trust and belief in each other is achieved. Like the vertices of a triangle, parents, students, and staff all work together for common goals. The sturdiness of this triangle is the foundation for our instructional plan, our extracurricular offerings, and our affective needs programming.

The magnificence of the three R’s as opposed to a traditional, wordy mission statement is the simple fact that students can both recite and explain its meaning—not in the depth you read here, and possibly not with the same interpretation, but the underlying theme is always present. That theme is to

make good choices, do the right thing, and know that meeting high expectations is the standard for everyone.

Our Vision

It is no secret that to most, the primary definition of *vision* relates to sight, or what is physically seen. Thankfully, the staff at North Oldham Middle School (NOMS) does not subscribe to that line of thinking, preferring instead to think of *vision* in terms of what is possible. Given that perspective, the question becomes, “What exactly *is* possible?”

Broadly, the answer lies in levels of student achievement, but more specifically, the harsh reality is that nobody knows the answer. It is a quest. And for us, it is a never-ending quest. What is possible is endless; so therefore, identifying and addressing the multitude of variables becomes the focus. And it is with this focal point as our motivation that a guiding priority list has been developed. Call it a slogan, call it a motto, but whatever you call it, make no mistake that it is our vision and one that we embrace unequivocally.

This vision, deliberately and intentionally prioritized, is drenched in the concept of “growth.” First and foremost, we must nurture growth in those we serve. To accomplish this task, the staff at North immerses itself in the developmental characteristics of adolescents. We have researched their physiological needs (daily PE/health, water intake), their social needs (small learning communities, established boundaries), and their emotional needs (teacher-based guidance, grade level counselors) and have put in a place a structure that addresses all concurrently. Teachers at NOMS are passionate about our kids, and ultimately it is our belief that an emotionally safe and stable child has the foundation to be an academic wunderkind.

Paralleling this effort in nurturing growth in students is fostering growth within our colleagues. And just as we attempt to create a safe environment for students, that same sentiment must be available for staff. Becoming more effective as a teacher is often the result of risk taking in a world satisfied with the status quo. Innovation is encouraged, and collaboration is celebrated. In our family, teachers observe each other, share instruction strategies, and seek out ways to improve. It is part of the culture, and imperative if we are to meet the needs of our students.

Finally, we must cultivate growth in our measures of accountability. In Kentucky, the magic number (proficiency) on state assessment is 100. Our school achieved this milestone in 2001 and subsequently flat-lined over the next six years. Through our teal and black colored lenses, we saw that being satisfied with an index score of 100 was akin to accepting mediocrity. Not continuing the fight for higher achievement was not an option. No, an index of 100 was not acceptable. Nor was 105. We decided, through the collaboration of students and staff, that or next rung on the achievement ladder was 110. It has been written, articulated, and promoted throughout the building until it has become part of our culture.

Where Have We Been? Who Are We Now?

North Oldham Middle School, a 2002 National Blue Ribbon School and a 2007 Kentucky School to Watch, has been an exemplary middle school since its opening in 1996. Over time it has grown into a model for rigor in academics, dedication to standards-based instruction, and keen student-centered focus in all areas. North’s strengths are many, but its greatest hallmarks are student achievement, student accountability, and staff professionalism. Every decision made hinges on the question: How will this impact student learning?

Answers to this ultimate question grow out of a thorough knowledge of best practices in education. Research-based professional development delivered throughout the year provides guidance for the refinement of current curriculum and the creation of innovative, effective programs. Continuous attention is paid to developmental appropriateness, the expectation of a high academic standard, and to the structure of our school’s accountability system.

Probably the greatest evidence of student achievement is our school's continued position among the top-scoring schools in the state's accountability and testing system, the Kentucky Core Content Test. However, that annual indicator is just the tip of the academic iceberg. North Oldham Middle's academic excellence is evidenced on a daily basis when one steps into any classroom to witness the rigor of instruction; the high level of student engagement; prominent displays of written, artistic, and dramatic performance; and the almost constant teacher-student and/or student-student interaction. Discipline issues are few, and since all staff are trained in the "Cooperative Discipline" technique (authored by Linda Albert of American Guidance Service), rapid and effective interventions are easily put into place as the need arises.

Students are held accountable in every area. Precise standards within every curriculum strand allow all students to know what is expected and how they will be assessed in order to determine that mastery of an objective has taken place. In addition to the yearly state assessment, students are evaluated as they are given opportunities for choice in long-term projects, performance-based assessments, self-determined inquiry situations, and multiple hands-on experiences. Our school is grounded in the unshakeable ideal that all children can learn at high levels.

North Oldham's professional staff—teachers and administrators—is extremely highly qualified. Long before the *No Child Left Behind Act* was passed, our teachers were among the most highly credentialed in the state, with a disproportionately large percentage being National Board Certified educators. This exemplifies the creed of lifelong learning, which is an ideal considered vital to our high-performing community.

Continuous self-assessment occurs through collaborations of content area, grade level, and special education teams and ad hoc committees, often composed of members of the community who join faculty in broad-based efforts to enhance student learning. This reflective nature produces a fluid and flexible atmosphere that considers, and serves, the entire range of student developmental/learning needs. At the middle school level, especially, all school staff members need to be aware of the adolescent's requirements. This "heart for the young teen" is a mandatory characteristic of North Oldham's personnel, and one that is evidenced over and over again, whether one peeks into the classroom or the lunch room, the band room or the office.

Accountability Measures

When viewing state assessment (KCCT) results in a holistic manner, it can be argued that North Oldham Middle has been Kentucky's most consistent middle school in the new millennium. In fact, NOMS has been a mainstay in the top five-achieving schools, including two years of being the state's highest scorer. The beauty of North, however, lies not in its ranking, but rather in its mentality toward achievement. Much like a world-class runner, the school measures success as the outcome of competition with itself, constantly and tirelessly challenging accepted norms in an effort to encourage all students to perform at a level beyond proficiency.

To understand NOMS and its initiatives, one must first understand its history of results. What should immediately stand out to both educators and laypeople alike is the statewide goal of proficiency that was reached in 2001, 13 years ahead of the 2014 deadline for all schools. As was detailed earlier, the goal of 100 is no longer part of the NOMS vernacular, but has become a given. The expectation, both written and verbalized by all staff members, is that a minimum score of 110 is desired within the 2006–08 biennium.

As equally impressive as the KPR is the AYP report over the past two testing cycles when our school met 9 of 9 and 10 of 10 goals, respectively. Perhaps the most notable aspect of these reports is the reading score where approximately 92% of NOMS students tested "reached proficiency." Not as remarkable as the reading score, but notable and highly respectable nonetheless, is the math score, where 82% of students tested "reached proficiency."

Maintaining and increasing scores of this caliber is no easy task, and collaboration is essential to fostering an environment of high expectations for students. One key factor in promoting the inclusion of

the new core content for assessment (4.1) is vertically aligning curriculum throughout the middle school, as well as collaborating with the high school to ensure cohesion in grades 6 through 12. Through content meetings, North faculty members are regularly revisiting the curriculum and “tweaking” it to increase student achievement. Teachers meet regularly to revise curriculum maps, share common assessments, and analyze various levels of student product. Test scores addressing individual exit standards are analyzed to determine which areas in the core content need more in-depth instruction. In addition to department meetings, the Learning, Delivery, and Results (LDR) Committee of the SBDM Council monitors curriculum improvement and makes recommendations in a concerted effort to meet the needs of all students.

NOMS not only addresses curriculum in terms of content area but also analyzes KCCT results on an individual student basis, pinpointing the specific area of growth for those students not meeting the proficient standard. Interdisciplinary teaming at North allows teachers to address these individual needs, both academically and developmentally. This collaboration is an opportunity for grade level teachers to develop standards-based units of study, discuss opportunities for differentiation, and compare data on individuals. Grade level collaboration between content teachers allows for reflective practice to determine which instruction and assessment techniques are most effective. Not only does this enable consistency between teachers but also consistency for students (and parents) on different subteams.

Interdisciplinary teams at North also include one ECE teacher within each grade level. Though resource classes are offered for students when needed, the philosophy is inclusion whenever possible. Special education students consistently have scored above the state average for regular education students on the KCCT test, and we attribute that to the fact that all of our students are exposed to high-level, quality instruction, with collaboration from special education teachers in the regular classroom setting. Expectations are lofty for our special education students, and therefore we still consider the achievement gap between ECE and regular education students to be significant. We are constantly striving to find ways to close this gap in the regular classroom, such as differentiation and innovative instructional strategies, including those that incorporate technology.

Another significant achievement gap seen in our KCCT results is between our female and male students. Over the past six years, our female students have scored approximately 11 points higher on average than our males. The problem is not with our males underachieving but a positive in that our females score extremely well on the CATS test, often averaging over 110 in specific content areas. We are trying to close this achievement gap by finding inventive ways to reach our male students. A few of the methods teachers are utilizing to address the gender gap include teacher-based guidance, gender-specific book studies, and student reward systems.

With an ever present eye on methods both to address gaps and to improve achievement as a whole, the staff at NOMS is currently implementing three distinct initiatives that, when combined, have the ability to revolutionize classroom instruction and further meet the needs of the whole child.

The first initiative is a concentrated dual focus on curriculum alignment and collaboration in accordance with Kentucky’s recently released core content for assessment and program of studies. Being scribes to Rick Dufour’s notion of professional learning communities, attentiveness to our curriculum—all the while asking “What do students need to know?”—aides in creating an environment where instructional strategies are aimed at going deeper, as opposed to broader. We often use the analogy of reaching an inch wide and a mile deep as opposed to an inch deep and a mile wide. To maintain this focus, teachers have access to the “K drive” on their classroom workstation. In short, this resource allows staff to access the curriculum framework, common formative and summative assessments, various resources, and most importantly, the ability to collaborate not only with NOMS peers but also other teachers in the district.

The second initiative aimed at bolstering achievement is the advent of the literacy coach position. Because NOMS has pronounced gaps in both reading and writing, this position has the capability of addressing both. Primarily used in a collaborative model, our coach has the freedom to work with students and staff alike in the areas of literacy that include, but are not limited to, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and critical thinking. This is especially beneficial when facing the inevitability of hiring new

staff who may or may not be versed in Kentucky standards or have any years of experience with best practice.

Last, but perhaps the most exciting of the initiatives aimed at growth in accountability, is the transformation of instructional strategies to a more technological paradigm. It is no secret that today's students are as "tech savvy" as ever, and schools, including NOMS, have not met the responsibility of keeping up with advances in the field. The installation and subsequent utilization of the Dell Intelligent Classroom, has changed that mind-set. Creativity and innovation have become the norm, and the time spent planning and gathering materials for lessons has been reduced. In addition, formative assessments can more aptly be implemented in guiding instruction, as immediate feedback can be disseminated.

Ultimately, it should be known that data play a pivotal role in charting the course for NOMS. Viewing multiple forms of data with a critical eye allows the school as a whole to analyze and self-reflect on past practices and serves as the impetus for positive change. Thankfully, it is an accepted part of the culture to push the limits of both instructional and assessment strategies. These efforts culminate in an increasingly effective school and, most important, a richer experience for students.

Commitment – SAVE Kids

The worst plan is no plan at all! Absence of intention is akin to searching for treasure without a map. Although this concept is not overly insightful or significant, its simplicity guides us in the organization of our proactive and reactive responses to the needs of the whole child. Middle school students, by nature, are ever-changing animals, and if we are to be successful in reaching all facets of their makeup, a comprehensive plan is a must.

Social Commitments

At NOMS, when we say that we believe in educating the whole child, the action behind those words occurs when teachers become involved with our students outside of the regular academic setting. This supports the academic successes experienced in the classroom. Because our students bring a variety of interests and talents to school, our voluntary club and application/election-based offerings are numerous (Drama, Chess, Recycling, Beta, KY Youth Assembly, KY United Nations Assembly, Student Leaders, Ultimate Frisbee, Bowling, IM Basketball, Odyssey of the Mind, Academic Team, Archery, Skateboarding, Art, and Pep Club). In fact, any group of students who wish to launch a new program only need a minimum number of participants and a faculty sponsor; funding is courtesy of the school. We also have an extensive athletic program consisting of sports in all seasons for both males and females, including field hockey, which is the only program of its kind among our district's four middle schools and was started by an interest group four years ago.

For more information on how we meet the social needs of our students, please see Appendix A. Here you will find an explanation of our TARGET program, which is the NOMS version of advisor-advisee, tailored to the specific needs of each grade level.

Academic Commitments

This component can best be categorized by our attention to professional learning communities. Again, following Dufour's model has created an intentional focus on the following four questions:

- What do we want students to know? (articulated curriculum)
- How will we know if they get it? (common assessments, data analysis)
- What is our response if they don't get it? (systematic remediation interventions)
- What about those who already know it? (systematic enrichment interventions)

Each and every day, when teachers come together in a collaborative effort, these four questions are asked. It is imperative, however, that a culture of trust is present before the critically difficult topics are discussed. It is never easy for a professional to admit in front of peers that the students in his or her classroom did not perform well in comparison with students in a colleague's classroom. We all must be open to learning from each other.

Please see Appendix A for vocational commitments and emotional commitments.

Despite our best efforts, we would be naïve to believe that every child finds a niche or develops the ability to self-address his or her shortcomings through participation or the seeking out of an adult for assistance. At times, someone will find a crack and slip through it before our eyes. It is at this moment when NOMS is at its finest. The culture of “kids first” is never more evident than when watching our counselors, teachers, and parents take a prescribed, systematic approach to intervention. This ordered methodology is in the form of a continuum where, as the situation becomes increasingly severe, more specialized service is made available and employed. Details of this intervention continuum, complete with all SAVE areas, can be found in Appendix B.

Where Are We Going?

The immediate future of NOMS is bright indeed. Constantly critiquing ourselves is a hallmark of the professionalism of the staff and is a necessity if we are to maintain an understanding of the 21st century adolescent. The next phase in the evolution of our school is twofold:

First, we must locate and utilize alternate methodology to reach our diverse learners. As indicated in the demographics of our school, our traditional special education population is equal, actually slightly smaller than, our gifted and talented population. For years, our GT students have not been properly addressed in the classroom despite our best efforts. We have run the gamut from complete heterogeneous groupings to cluster groupings and have still experienced limited success. For the fall of 2008, we will be launching a new strategy that is similar in structure to a middle school AP program. A single class from each content area per grade level will be designated as a “Challenge Class” and will be conducted with a curriculum that explores standards more deeply than that required on our state frameworks.

Another population demanding our attention is the English language learner. Students in this category have increased in number substantially over the last three years. Thankfully, we have been proactive in our approach, sending teachers to ELL academies with the plan of disseminating the training to our other staff members through ongoing professional development—a win-win situation for both students and teacher leadership.

Second, we are about to embark on the journey of transforming how we grade and report from a traditional paradigm to standards based. Through collaboration and open dialogue concerning assessment, our staff is coming to the conclusion that there exist many inconsistencies within a traditional grading system. Our grades must reflect what a student actually understands if we are to stay true to our academic commitments. Compliance grades are becoming an entity of the past; zeroes are no longer acceptable scores for missing assignments; and grading as punishment is becoming completely unacceptable. We understand that this will be an extensive journey, but together we are willing to challenge these accepted norms for our kids.

We Will

When educators are asked why they chose this profession, the most widely given response is “to make a difference.” After a time, this seems to have become tad cliché. Not so at NOMS. We challenge each other to live that very sentiment. We challenge each other to make a difference by whatever means necessary. Yes, we are proud of who we are, and maybe somewhat biased, but the effort that we see made by adults on a daily basis indicates that behind our front door is a school community interested in the well being of the whole child—every child. We will SAVE them, one at a time. That is North Oldham Middle School.

Appendix A

TARGET

It's a climate not a curriculum.

If our mission is to truly SAVE kids, the cornerstone of that motivation is our TARGET time. Called by some schools “advisor-advisee” or “mentoring,” TARGET is a 30-minute period that meets four times per week. There is no set curriculum, nor is this class driven by a traditional grading system. This is, simply put, a time for the adults at NOMS to meet the social, vocational, emotional, and (sometimes) academic needs of our students.

The evolution of TARGET began in 2004. Originally dubbed TAG, the program was based on the 40 Developmental Assets as identified by the SEARCH Institute, an independent nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities. Twenty of those assets are internal, meaning that they must really come from within the young person himself. The other twenty are external and depend on adults and peers in the young person’s life. Categories like self-esteem, sense of purpose, honesty, and peer influence characterize SEARCH’s asset list and, to this day, permeate our teachings.

And while the SEARCH Institute’s 40 developmental assets are still a significant component of the foundation, we found quickly that a stringently prescribed linear process was not as nearly as effective as a fluid, need-based approach. With that in mind, our teacher Leadership Team went to work on changing the face of the program. What emerged, which now includes counselor-driven classroom guidance, was much more effective than the past methodology. Teachers and students now have a voice in the direction of the assets to be addressed.

In a nutshell, grade level teams are given the autonomy to organize TARGET in a manner that most accurately defines the students they serve and support. The following is a general guideline of the types of activities promoted:

- 6th grade – organizational skills, study skills, reading comprehension, and philanthropy
- 7th grade – social boundaries, bullying/cruelty, and building/maintaining healthy relationships
- 8th grade – avoidance of risky behaviors, transition to high school, and community service

By no means is this a comprehensive list, as teachers always have the opportunity and authority to tailor the programming to meet a specific objective. In addition, this time may be utilized as an opportunity to provide intense academic interventions for individual students.

These assets have an incredible power for our children. Their presence leads to a healthy, productive, and positive life. They simply do not make as many harmful decisions as youth who lack these assets. By promoting assets, we can spend more time building opportunities and less time fixing problems. It is the responsibility of all of us to build healthy young people. Anything else is less than acceptable.

Appendix B What to Do When a Student...

This worksheet should be used as a tool to implement and track strategies and interventions, as well as to assist with brainstorming when a student is struggling.

Has Difficulty With Work/Task Skills	Struggles Academically
<p>Phase 1—Teacher Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-teach agenda use • Daily monitoring/signing of agenda use • Locker checklist to help organization • Student email parent daily regarding homework • Phone contact daily/weekly with parent • Study skills instruction • Student conference • Peer partner • Intervention room <p>Phase 2—Team Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corrective/supportive via Coop. Disc. - Fear of Failure/Attention/Revenge/Power(F/A/R/P) – 3 C’s (Connected/Contributing/Capable) and 5 A’s (refer to Cooperative Discipline book) • Contract • Mentoring • Parent/Student/Teacher (team) conference • Team privilege restrictions • Review/Adjust differentiated instruction <p>Phase 3—Administrator Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling Referral • Discipline Referral • Saturday School <p>Phase 4—Administrator/ECS managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GAP referral 	<p>Phase 1—Teacher Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review/Adjust differentiated instruction • Provide opportunities for re-teaching the skills during the day • Adjust daily schedule to maximize strengths • Parent contact to gather information and express concerns • Re-teaching before/after school • Intervention room assistance • Student conference • Peer partners <p>Phase 2—Team Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corrective/supportive via Coop. Disc. - Fear of Failure/Attention/Revenge/Power (F/A/R/P) – 3 C’s (Connected/Contributing/Capable) and 5 A’s (refer to Cooperative Discipline book) • PLC team discussion of TIER II responses • Check with lead teacher, ELL, and ECS for ideas • Adjust instruction/assignments for learning styles • Student conference • Mentoring • Parent/student/teacher(team) conference <p>Phase 3—Administrator Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative contact – Principals and/or counselors <p>Phase 4—Administrator/ECS managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GAP referral
Struggles Emotionally/Behaviorally	Has Poor School/Class Attendance
<p>Phase 1—Teacher Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-teach expectations • Change seat • Increase frequency of positive feedback • Modify how feedback is applied • Corrective/supportive via Coop. Disc. - Fear of (F/A/R/P) • Review Classroom Management plan and implementation • Phone contact with parent to gather and share information • Student conference • Intervention room • Review/Adjust differentiated instruction • Consult AP and/or grade level counselor <p>Phase 2—Team Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contract • Parent/Student/Teacher (team) conference • Mentoring • Team privilege restrictions • Corrective/supportive via Coop. Disc. - Fear of (F/A/R/P) • Create opportunities to enhance student strengths 3 C’s and 5 A’s. • Change/Increase structure during class • Consult AP and/or grade level counselor <p>Phase 3—Administrator Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review/Adjust differentiated discipline • Counseling Referral • Discipline Referral • Saturday School <p>Phase 4—Administrator/ECS Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GAP referral 	<p>Phase 1—Teacher Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate concern to the grade level counselor • Class tardies—use grade level policy and Cooperative Discipline • Call parents of those students who are habitually tardy to classes (between classes) <p>Phase 2—Team Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate concern to other staff—team, counselor, attendance clerk, administrative team <p>Phase 3—Administrator Managed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling referral • Work with attendance clerk/counselor to refer to OCBE supports. <p>Phase 4—Administrative/OCBE/ECS Managed</p>