

Meeting Adolescent Needs in a Rural School Ashe County Middle School

Bobby Ashley, Principal, Kim Ball, Assistant Principal, and Sheila Richardson, Media Specialist,
Ashe County Middle School, Warrensville, North Carolina

Introduction

Imagine a gymnasium decorated with round tables draped with linen table cloths, lit candles, colorful streamers, and a glitter-lined red carpet leading up to a podium. This gym is full of excited middle school children. A limo pulls up with faculty members who get out and begin filling the gym floor and sitting at the decorated tables. The students rush to the red carpet to get autographs as the staff filters into the room. The air is bursting with excitement. As the program begins, a middle school rock band plays loudly and a student emcee welcomes everyone to the end-of-the-year ACMS Academic Awards Celebration. The special gala is filled with student performances intertwined with team awards and concludes with the administration awarding the highest overall award, “The Bulldog Award,” to students who are tenacious and focused on making good decisions and grades, not necessarily those with the highest grades.

Students cheer as their friends perform acts such as gymnastics, clogging, and dancing. Pianists, flutists, rock bands, and solo vocalists also entertain between team award announcements. The house erupts as Cary, a disabled student, sings accompaniment for Michelle’s ballet dance performance. Michelle just happens to be an academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) student who takes all honors classes. The students probably know that Cary is disabled. Her speech is slurred and her notes are not perfect, but her effort is obvious. The students probably know that Michelle is a very smart and talented child, but do not know she is in all honors classes. The creation of a master schedule of heterogeneously grouped classes fosters a climate in which students do not know or care about educational labels or placements. What they *do* care about is that both of these students achieve success in their performances. Cheer on!

This celebration of success and achievement is only one of many ways Ashe County Middle School recognizes and celebrates success. A caring school in a supportive community, Ashe County Middle School has a tradition of academic excellence, as well as service to the whole child.

Demographics

Ashe County is an isolated, rural county of 23,000 located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of northwestern North Carolina. The county serves a total school population of 3,300 students in Grades K–12. Tourism, industry, and farming are the chief economic activities. The county has seen an out-migration of citizens over the past many years as young people leave to find employment elsewhere. The population, however, has remained stable due to the influx of retirees and people with second homes.

Ashe County Middle School, opening in 1999, is the only middle school in the county and serves 497 students in Grades 7 and 8. Almost 50% of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Thirteen percent are students with disabilities, and 16% are served in the Academically Gifted Program. Ethnic diversity is limited with only 5% who speak English as a second language; 93% of the students are Caucasian.

The tradition of academic excellence at ACMS is illustrated by recognition as an Honor School of Excellence, a School of Excellence, and a School of Distinction by the North Carolina Accountability Program. In 2004, ACMS was also selected as a National School to Watch, a designation of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform.

Organization

The organizational structure of Ashe County Middle School is based on bridging the gap between elementary and high school. Each program component meets the developmental needs of the young adolescent while enforcing a high standard for learning. The strength of the academic program can be credited to many dedicated staff members who recognize that middle schools need to be different from other schools. It is one where you can find academic excellence *and* happy students. The school is organized into six academic teams, with three 7th grade teams and three 8th grade teams. Teachers of each team are provided 80 minutes of common planning time each day. This time is divided equally to provide for both team and individual planning. Student schedules are comprised of four 80 minute blocks. Three of these blocks are spent in language arts, math, and science/social studies, and one block is elective time. For this elective class or “encore,” students choose from a variety of fine arts, second language, physical education, and technology classes.

Strong relationships are established through the looping of assistant principals and guidance counselors. This simply means that when a child enters the building as a 7th grader, he or she will have the same guidance counselor and the same assistant principal for both of the years he or she is in attendance. This creates a better connection to the child, the child’s family, and the community.

In this 7–8 middle school structure, one group of students is coming in each year, while the other group is preparing to leave. Transitions from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school become very important for both the student and the school. School personnel make every effort to support students and make the transitions as smooth as possible. School staff visit elementary schools and introduce the middle school program and its offerings to both elementary teachers and rising 7th graders. Visits to the middle school, participation in structured activities, and the opportunity to interact with other students all help students become acclimated to the middle school culture before they ever attend classes. Parent nights are designed to help ease the transition for parents. Similar activities are conducted for students and parents who are preparing to leave middle school and enter high school. Through a combination of activities involving parents, students, and teachers, the school is able to bridge effectively the transitions these middle school students face.

Faculty Commitment

Ashe County Middle School teachers are a group of exemplary educators. A high standard is set by each and maintained by all. The staff consists of 48 certified, highly qualified personnel, including six who hold National Board Certification, 21 who hold advanced degrees, 7 who hold AIG certification, and 5 who hold certification in exceptional children’s programming. Many of our staff share their expertise by presenting quality staff development on a local, state, and national level.

Academic Excellence

Accountability

Ashe County Middle School is committed to teaching the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. As little emphasis as possible is placed on the testing process; however, assessment is a reality that cannot be ignored. Students are prepared for the end-of-grade (EOG) tests with quarterly assessments and an EOG Academy. The EOG Academy starts approximately 2 weeks before EOGs and lasts until assessment time. Not only does the Academy provide a good review, it also provides much needed confidence building for the students. They feel prepared.

The use of test data to make decisions has become part of the culture of ACMS. Teachers are trained to disaggregate test data and identify strengths and weaknesses in their own performance. Staff development and planning may be redirected to address areas that need improvement. They also

disaggregate student data. This gives a clear picture of recent performance and allows teachers to differentiate instruction accordingly.

A Testing Retreat gives teams time away from their classrooms to foster collegiality and develop a shared focus for student accountability. Historical data and predicted scores are charted. At-risk students are identified along with pockets of students that may need scheduled remediation. Teachers work in teams, share results, and come away with a group of students who need targeted assistance or a little more attention in class.

Discovery Block

Ashe County Middle School has always valued the Advisor/Advisee (AA) Program. However, restructuring the AA Program to better suit the needs of students and to meet school goals was necessary. A small-group setting that facilitated building relationships needed to be maintained. Yet additional support programs were needed. Students struggling academically needed remediation, while high flyers needed to be challenged to continue their academic growth. At the same time, North Carolina mandated that 150 minutes of physical activity per week be provided each student in Grades K–8. While physical activity has always been an important component of the middle school philosophy, a way to track that became necessary. Thus, the Discovery Block was developed.

Discovery at Ashe County Middle School consists of four components: enrichment sessions, character education, advisor/advisee, and physical activity/intramurals. The first and most important is enrichment sessions. Enrichment sessions are study groups of students that share a common interest with a teacher. Some examples are Leadership, Mythology, Yearbook, Cooking, Novel Study, Health and Wellness, and Battle of the Books. Character education and advisor /advisee are taught through Discovery Block as well. Physical activity/intramurals are scheduled so that students meet the required physical activity mandate.

Instructional Strategies

The focus of Ashe County Middle School’s academic program is to prepare students for high school and real-life situations by teaching important concepts, essential skills, and problem solving. All students and staff are expected to meet high academic standards through a rigorous curriculum. A “no-excuses” approach ensures that all students are held accountable for learning. Teachers use many different instructional strategies to engage, challenge, and captivate the learning styles of students. Students are expected to take advantage of the many opportunities available to correct academic deficiencies.

Teachers use a variety of instructional approaches to accelerate and support academic learning. As teachers work to align the curriculum with the state standards, they do so in creative and innovative ways that help motivate and prepare students for successful futures. Strategies used include cooperative grouping, learning styles inventories, guest speakers, and thinking maps to differentiate instruction and make learning meaningful for all students. Language arts teachers use guided reading, Socratic seminars, literature circles, Paidia, and CRISS strategies to promote growth in reading and writing. The writing process is taught through modeling and practice. The goal is to make students readers of their own writing by teaching them to self-edit and also to be effective peer editors. Assessments are made relevant by publishing student work in local newspapers and by creating a writing community where parents are invited into classrooms to share with and celebrate student authors. All teachers are teachers of writing who provide writing practice in all curricular areas and for many different purposes. Visitors to the building often comment on the quality and quantity of writing displayed throughout the building. Due to this rigorous writing program, Ashe County Middle School continues to have some of the best writing scores in North Carolina.

Because project-based learning develops skills necessary for adulthood, teachers assign long-term projects throughout the year. Poetry notebooks, short story projects, and literature projects are just a few of the many learning experiences required. The North Carolina Standard Course of Study for social

studies in 7th grade includes the study of Asia, Africa, and Oceania. To build bridges across disciplines, many classroom novel studies are based on the social studies curriculum. For example, while studying Asia, 7th graders might read *Children of the River*, a novel about Cambodian refugees; or *Red Scarf Girl*, a novel about the Chinese Cultural Revolution; or *Farewell to Manzanar*, a story about the Japanese internment camps. In 8th grade, students study North Carolina and U.S. history. Novels included in this study are *The Wright Brothers*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl*. Through the use of novels in social studies, teachers are able to reinforce vocabulary and establish cultural awareness.

Interdisciplinary units create understanding and relevance across disciplines; subjects are not taught in isolation but rather through topical studies. Supported by a grant, 7th graders developed an integrated unit on Africa. Students read the novel, *Safari Journal*, constructed masks; learned and retold folktales; collected, analyzed and illustrated data on vital statistics of Africa; created country brochures; studied African wildlife; and visited the North Carolina Zoo. As a culminating event, a Parent Night was held for students to showcase their work. Eighth grade students are involved in an interdisciplinary unit called "Beyond the Deep Blue." The study covers a variety of topics related to the beach and specifically the North Carolina coast, ending in a trip to the coastal area of North Carolina. Language arts activities include reading the novel, *The Pearl*, and the short story, "The Sea Devil," writing short stories and poetry, and constructing their own sea creatures. Social studies assignments include mapping activities, study of the "graveyard of the Atlantic," and piracy. Students use technology to create their own pirate characters, complete with wanted posters. In math class, students create dilations of nautical maps, use calculators to graph models of marine life and symbols, and construct sand castles using geometrical shapes. Bathymetric profiles of the ocean floor and the hydrological cycle and shoreline are studied in science. In health and physical education, students learn to shag and are taught the importance of sun protection.

Science teachers make learning relevant for their students using inquiry-based lessons and available technology. One major activity involves chemical monitoring of a stream on school property that feeds into the New River, a nationally protected river. Students use Calculator-Based Laboratory probes and graphing calculators to analyze, display, and store data. They test the water quality for biological indicators by finding and classifying macroinvertebrates according to their pollution tolerance levels. Next, students turn their attention to groundwater as they build a model of an aquifer with a well. They then explore how the groundwater can carry pollution throughout the aquifer. A writing activity concludes the water study as students write about methods of water treatment and reclamation.

The integration of media and technology is an important component of our academic program. A strong instructional partnership exists between the media specialist, classroom teachers, and students. Through this collaboration, students are taught how to find and use information effectively. Attention is focused on the learner so that media services expand, support, and complement classroom learning. These skills establish the ability for lifelong learning. The media specialist supports the success of each of the interdisciplinary units by helping students perform research and produce final products such as Microsoft Publisher brochures and PowerPoint presentations.

Students in the multihandicapped classroom are given authentic learning opportunities through community-based instruction. These students practice skills in natural settings so that upon graduation they will be comfortable and as independent as possible while living, learning, working, and recreating in the community. For example, students are taken to McDonald's where they learn to order and pay for their food. This not only helps students to function more independently but also builds natural supports within the community. Students get to know people who can provide services for them, and the community becomes acquainted with them as well. As students learn to participate in activities, service providers learn the strengths and personalities of the students so that possible barriers, prejudices, and fears are dissolved.

Encore Classes

Encore classes enable students to expand on their academic classes and discover their particular abilities, talents, interests, and preferences. ACMS offers three types of exploratory opportunities. All students are required to enroll in the following Encore 1 classes: Computers and Physical Education. Encore 2 classes include Art, Band, Career Skills, Chorus, Life Skills, and Spanish.

Seventh grade students have an exploratory schedule and are exposed to each Encore 2 class sometime during the year. Eighth grade students, however, may select one Encore 2 class each semester. Students who choose to participate in the ACMS Band substitute band for an Encore 2 class for both semesters.

Bridging the Gap

Ashe County Middle School offers many opportunities to help students, parents, and teachers make the transition from elementary school to middle school and then middle school to high school. All 6th graders are invited for Meet in the Middle, a day of fun that includes a school tour, ice breaker games, and indoor and outdoor activities. This day allows students to interact with other 6th graders from the three feeder elementary schools, meet teachers, and get familiar with the school. Toward the end of the year, a Parent Orientation Night for incoming 7th graders and their parents is held. During this meeting, parents receive information about classes, buses, lunches, sports, and a quick tour of the school.

Before school begins, parent orientations are held for the incoming 7th and 8th graders on different nights. During these orientations, students receive a copy of their schedule, bus information, and a walk through their schedules to meet the teachers on their team. Counselors work very closely with the 6th grade teachers and counselors in registering new students. The counselors and an administrator visit each elementary school prior to Meet in the Middle. This is an opportunity to meet the 6th graders and show them a PowerPoint presentation about the middle school. In the spring, high school counselors visit with the 8th graders and distribute information regarding the High School Curriculum Fair. The fair is held at the high school and includes information about classes, clubs, sports, and transportation. High school registration is completed through the collaboration of 8th grade teachers, along with middle and high school counselors. In the spring semester, the 8th graders visit and tour the high school.

Bridging the gap within the faculty includes monthly grade level and curriculum meetings. During the grade level meetings, teachers are able to share ideas, concerns, and plan units together. The curriculum meetings offer a time for all the teachers in the same subject area across 7th and 8th grade to discuss present and future curriculum plans. A cohesive K–12 curriculum is established through a countywide curriculum committee, which meets on a monthly basis.

Programs for At-Risk and Special Needs Children

Alternative Learning Lab

The Alternative Learning Lab (ALL) is a program that helps at-risk and special needs children, as well as students who have fallen behind on assignments or need to make up a test. Teachers, teams, and administrators may refer students to ALL for a portion of a class, for a class period, or for the day. While in ALL, students receive assistance on assignments and tutoring in the basic skills from a veteran middle school teacher. The Alternative Lab is also used as a separate setting for EC students who have testing modifications and as a “time-out” room for students who are having difficulties in the regular classroom setting and would benefit from a lower teacher-student ratio. The number of students in the lab at one time is limited to six, and each student has his or her own study carrel. Students in ALL have access to textbooks, workbooks, reference materials, classroom supplies, reading materials, and the Internet. The director of the lab maintains a database of the dates and times each student is in the lab.

Project Turnaround

Sixth grade students are recommended by the elementary schools for Project Turnaround. Students with attendance issues, poor homework and study skills, or lack of parental guidance are candidates. Students who receive exceptional children's services are ineligible. To maintain a small learning environment, only 12 students per year are chosen. This small-group setting creates a positive atmosphere for the teacher to support the student academically while serving as his or her advocate. Project Turnaround is a self-contained program, except for Encore classes. Many successes have occurred for these students, including measurable gains on EOG test scores. Intangible measurements can be witnessed by observing them in 8th grade or speaking with the parents during and after time spent in this program.

Before School and After School Tutoring

Certified teachers provide before school and after school tutoring in core subjects. Tutoring is provided not only for students who are at-risk of failing but also for any student needing additional support. Every effort has been made to create a school climate where it is acceptable and even fashionable to participate in after school activities, including tutoring. In partnership with the Ashe County 4-H, ACMS offers tutoring for each student who needs the extra support. Teachers take ownership of student's tutorial needs by collaborating and scheduling individual students. Teachers on each team rotate to stay after school and assist students with their learning.

Exceptional Children's Services

At ACMS, a wide variety of inclusion classes is offered to meet the needs of our exceptional children. Students from all settings (regular, resource, and separate) have the opportunity to participate in at least one inclusive class. Subjects taught through inclusion are math, language arts, science, social studies, and physical education. Twelve of eighteen classes provided for special needs students are in inclusive settings. These classes are cotaught by a highly qualified teacher in the particular subject area, as well as an EC teacher. Every child deserves access to regular classes with nondisabled peers on a daily basis. This helps maintain a high academic standard for all students. Inclusive classes meet the social needs of exceptional students by making them feel a part of the larger group. In addition, nondisabled students gain compassion and understanding for their disabled peers as they interact with one another.

Students identified as having behavioral or emotional disabilities (BED) are served through the regular classroom setting with the services of a certified BED teacher. Every effort is made to maintain the integrity of the school day. Services are tiered through interventions beginning within the classroom setting. When necessary, the BED teacher can remove a student to assist them in the Alternative Learning Lab. The BED teacher also serves as the communicator between school and parent to keep parents abreast of day-to-day conduct and academic progress.

English Language Learners

A certified English as a second language teacher (ESL) provides English language instruction to the English language learners (ELL). The ESL program is a combination of content-based and pull-out instruction, which is determined by the individual needs of each student. The ESL teacher works with the mainstream classroom teachers and ELL students to provide instruction that develops language skills while preparing students to study grade level material in English. The ESL teacher also serves as student advocate, parent-school liaison, and cultural and academic resource for mainstream classroom teachers.

In-School Suspension

The In-School Suspension (ISS) Program is designed to answer the need for an alternative to out-of-school suspension. The director of the ISS Program collects work assignments for the students to complete. In addition to regular assignments, the director may assign extra reading and math to low-performing students and assist them in catching up on missed assignments from their classes. While in ISS, a student must sign a behavior contract and complete a behavior modification packet geared toward the misbehavior. A written reflection must be completed. While working on assignments, students can receive one-to-one assistance from the ISS director, who is a certified, experienced teacher. When the student is ready to return to class, the ISS director sends the student's team a detailed report about the student's performance and attitude in ISS. Students in ISS are isolated from the general population. They eat lunch in a separate room and are excluded from school activities during their stay. Although punitive in nature, the ISS program stresses academics, focuses on modifying behavior, and strives to create a positive learning environment.

Counseling

The Counseling Department at Ashe County Middle School offers developmental services for every student. School counselors are specially trained to help children solve many kinds of problems at school and home. The counselors are a part of the school team because children can experience problems or changes in their daily lives that can affect them emotionally, physically, and academically. Helping students find solutions to their problems or adjust to changes is very important so they are able to grow and develop in a positive manner. The counselors are available for individual counseling, small-group counseling, and classroom presentations. Counselors consult with parents and teachers on ways to help students find success in school or home. The department is also able to provide referral sources to community agencies, as well as collaborate with the school social worker, school psychologist, and other staff members to help ensure that personal and academic needs are met for all students. Students, parents, teachers, or other staff members may make referrals to the counselor.

A tobacco cessation specialist works with students who have been identified as current tobacco users or who are at-risk for future usage. This program educates students in tobacco prevention and emphasizes tobacco-free schools in the community.

On-Site Health Clinic

Ashe County Middle School is fortunate to partner with the Ashe County Health Department to provide an on-site, school-based health center. The funding was originally by state grants, but the center is now almost completely self-supporting. A registered nurse, a clerical office assistant, a licensed mental health counselor, a nutritionist, and a nurse practitioner are all employed by the Bulldog Clinic and serve exclusively Ashe County Middle School students. Counseling services, nutrition education, and health screenings are also available at the clinic. Ninety-three percent of students are enrolled, allowing them to use the services of the center during the school day at no charge to the student or parent.

WISH Team

The WISH (Ways to Intervene with Students Holistically) Team is a student assistance team designed to help students who are struggling academically or exhibiting signs of at-risk or other self-destructive behaviors. The WISH Team is composed of a teacher from each grade level, an assistant principal, a counselor, an EC teacher, and a school psychologist. Interventions the WISH Team may recommend include counseling, further academic testing, or other intervention.

After School Programs

After school programs have been an important component of Ashe County Middle School since its inception. Statistics support the fact that unsupervised adolescents are at risk for unhealthy behaviors, especially during the time between school dismissal and parents' arrival home after work. Ashe County is unable to provide community-supported activities such as a YMCA for unsupervised youth. Knowing this, school and community personnel collaborate to establish school-based after school activities that appeal to young adolescents.

Athletics

Ashe County Middle School has made a commitment to provide sports experiences that are inclusive and reflective of student interests. To help accomplish this goal, interscholastic and lifetime sports are included in the sports program.

In order to include as many children as possible, two competitive sports teams are provided in football, basketball, baseball, softball, soccer, and volleyball. Coaches select players for two-team sports in ways that balance the talent and abilities of young adolescents involved. The football and basketball teams play teams from other schools as well as opposing teams at ACMS. Sports follow a no-cut policy with the exception of basketball. With a few exceptions, cheerleading is a no-cut sport.

The interscholastic sports program emphasizes learning fundamentals and having opportunities to practice and improve skills. A major focus of the sports program is to become a contributing member of a team rather than focus on recognition of the performance of individuals. There are no personal trophies or other awards given, and sports ceremonies and banquets are not held. After school tutoring and time to complete homework are provided for participants when late practices are held.

Lifetime Sports

Lifetime sports are offered to develop skills and interests in activities that students can enjoy throughout their lives. These opportunities are provided as part of the after school program. Sports included are golf, swimming, skiing, tennis, and other high-interest sports. These activities are provided free of charge, with the exception of skiing. The only qualification for participation in this program is interest. Bus transportation is provided to central points in the school district so that more students can participate.

Second Chance

Second Chance, better known as After School Detention, allows students who are struggling academically and/or not completing their homework to stay after school for small-group assistance. This program is used as a support to students and teachers.

4-H SOS

Ashe County Middle School partners with North Carolina Cooperative Extension and Ashe County 4-H to provide a multifaceted program called 4-H Bulldog Alert—SOS (Support Our Students). SOS gives students a safe, supervised place to participate in activities designed to improve their grades, provide them with cultural activities, show them how to make good choices, and teach them the importance of community service. The program goals include reducing juvenile crime, improving the academic performance of participants, improving coordination of existing resources, improving attitudes and behavior of participants, and enhancing community collaboration. The students who participate in SOS enjoy it, and many working parents know their children are safe after school—a time when children are most likely to commit or be victims of crime, use illegal substances, or become sexually active.

SOS also provides a safety component for our students. If a student stays after school for any reason, including clubs and athletics, they must check in with the after school program. This procedure provides accountability for any student who does not leave campus when the regular school day ends. Students are charged a minimal fee.

Conclusion

Students and teachers at Ashe County Middle School are busy, productive, and happy. The school culture is one of high expectations for *all* students: Some students need the support of a Discovery Block or 4-H Bulldog Alert—S.O.S in order to achieve their goals; others thrive on the challenges provided through interdisciplinary teaching, exploratory science, and honors classes. All can find something at ACMS to support their unique needs.

Student success is revered and celebrated on a regular, conscious basis. Success is not defined as being the best at everything but rather as doing your personal best. There is room for everyone at Ashe County Middle School, and that is reflected in the bustling, energetic atmosphere one feels immediately upon entering the building.

Teachers, too, are nurtured in this setting. Collaboration and teamwork are the norm. Support from, and interaction with, colleagues is rare in education, but that is accomplished in the organizational pattern of ACMS. Teacher creativity is encouraged and respected. New teachers are provided with role models, support, and encouragement as they learn the school expectations and develop their teaching skills.

Whether it is the School Awards Celebration with visiting “celebrities,” a choral concert, an athletic contest, or a regular school day, ACMS is the place to be for adolescents in Ashe County. The collaboration of everyone has created a true “School to Watch.”