

The American Middle School Movement: Taking The Long View

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Introduction: Worldviews

The United States, from its founding, has always been the scene of debate and disagreement about whatever might be the central, and even the tangential, concerns of a particular era. In the early years of the 21st century, we seem to have lost little of our disputative nature. Media pundits remind us that this is true in many areas (e.g., religion, socioeconomic status, race, politics, social issues, foreign policy). In no area do Americans seem more divided, now and in earlier generations, than in the set of fundamental principles of how we view the world and our lives together in society. This apparent cultural chasm separating American citizens has important implications for social policies and practices, including policies and practices related to education. The middle school movement, we shall see, is directly related to these differing cultural perspectives.

As with so many aspects of our culture, we have inherited our divisions from elsewhere. For thousands of years of Western history, two dramatically different worldviews (largely concerned with human nature and the circumstances that arise as a result of that supposedly inherent “nature,”) have captured the minds and hearts of men and women. These two contrasting ways of seeing the world are related to today’s gaping divisions in the worlds of politics, religion, government, education, and most particularly for our purposes, middle level education. The two worldviews originate largely in two widely disparate, yet crucially important, sets of beliefs about the “nature of human nature.”

The Greeks, and all those through the ages who have held largely to one view of human nature or the other, have nonetheless acknowledged that human nature has components of *both* strength and weakness, the best and the worst, even, perhaps, elements of good and evil. The Greeks and those who followed their philosophical lead believed, as did the framers of our Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, that human history has always and everywhere been a struggle between two contrasting elements of human nature.

Readers may be familiar with the old Native American elder’s tale that delightfully illustrates this struggle. In the story, a grandfather is imparting a life lesson to his grandson. He tells his grandson, “I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is vengeful, fearful, angry, greedy, and deceitful. The other wolf is loving, compassionate, generous, truthful and trusting.” The grandson asks “Grandfather, which wolf will win the fight?” The grandfather answers, “The one I feed.” (Salzburg, 2011)

In the contrasts drawn below, however, it is important to acknowledge that these contrasts are in worldviews, and perhaps not in the actual, complex, nature of human beings. And, it should be acknowledged, many Americans today would likely be uncomfortable to see themselves characterized by the extreme elements of either perspective. Most may, though, be comfortable with the thesis that both as individuals and as societies, humans are at our *best* when we struggle to overcome our selfishness,

greed, fear, and anger and nourish a spirit of optimism, love, cooperation, and community in our own lives and (in our case) with young adolescents.

The Prevailing Perspective

Of the two worldviews, one has been generally accepted by many more people throughout the course of Western history, and this prevailing perspective represents the views of many millions of Americans today. For lack of a better term, that perspective will be identified here as the “conservative” worldview. I believe it is fair to assert that most adherents of the conservative worldview described here base their perspectives on many particular things on the basic, relatively unassailable assertion of economics that many aspects of human life are potentially difficult and dangerous, and that these conditions have persisted throughout human history (Bardham, 2004). History, thus, in this view, is a constant struggle—one group, one tribe, one religion, one nation against another in almost perpetual conflict, struggling to secure the resources required for sustaining life free from want for its members. Competition, therefore, is viewed as a central experience in human interactions (Lakoff, 1996).

Many, if not most, conservatives are likely to accept the assertion that moral weakness is a central human trait reflected in our actions, certainly far more often than strength. It follows, then, that pessimism about human potential is at the core of this perspective. It is unlikely, from this point of view, for human beings to rise far or frequently beyond self-interest, or to make the correct moral choices in difficult or dangerous circumstances. When people fail to do the right thing or simply fail, like many students do, people with this more pessimistic worldview tend to believe that it is usually because those who have failed have a character fault; they are selfish, lazy, immoral, or even evil, they have not failed because they are unskilled or lacking the necessary resources to do the job well. Dropouts, prisoners, “welfare queens,” drug addicts, alcoholics and others are seen as personal failures, not victims of circumstance. In this view, personal failure stems from the moral failings of thriftless, greedy, heedless, lawless, libertine, lazy, or evil individuals who should not be coddled with needless, destructive, wasteful social spending. According to this paradigm, giving people what they have not earned simply leads to more dependence and immorality (Lakoff, 2004).

Because of this central, defining attribute of human weakness, personal responsibility and, by extension, organizational accountability, are viewed as crucial, absolutely central keys to effective functioning in many aspects of human life. Individual responsibility is seen as a critical aspect of moral behavior and of supreme importance in areas like education; it should, according to this view, be the central focus of life in social circumstances such as schools (Wallis, 2005).

Conservatives, it seems fair to say, have rarely been pleased about the process or content of public schooling in America. In today’s education, they are enthusiastic supporters of so-called accountability—prescribed state or national standards, high stakes standardized tests, and harsh reform efforts that follow from the results of testing.

The war of attrition on public education conducted by members of the conservative paradigm began shortly after World War II with the publication of Arthur Bestor’s (1953) vitriolic book, *Educational Wastelands*, and has continued unabated to the present day. Not all that long ago, Cheri Yecke, once Florida’s Chancellor of K-12 Schools, for example, unveiled one of the harshest anti-middle school polemics, *Mayhem in the Middle*, at the National Press Club in Washington, DC (Yecke & Finn, 2005).

This harshly critical view of public education gained real momentum with the rise to power of a group of conservative critics responsible for the *Nation at Risk* report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) published more than two decades ago. In this report, public school educators were condemned for a “rising tide of mediocrity,” for doing such a poor job that they were the equivalent of traitors. The report argued that if a foreign government had forced our public schools on our citizens, the schools were so bad that we would have considered it an act of war. In the intervening years, the premises and predictions of the *Nation at Risk* report have frequently been critiqued and challenged. Readers may want to review the long-hidden Sandia Report (Carson, Huelskamp, and Woodall, 1992), and Berliner and Biddle’s *Manufactured Crisis* (1995) careful and persuasive refutation of the charges leveled against American public schools’ success by the authors of the *Nation at Risk* report.

Even with less than compelling evidence, the drumbeat of destructive disinformation about the supposed failure of public education, and middle schools in particular, has not diminished. In fact, in the last twenty years, it has increased dramatically, in spite of the considerable evidence to the contrary, and including the fact that all of the annual Gallup Polls of the last decade illustrate clearly that the public rejects the idea that schools, at least the schools their children attend, are failing. Schools invariably earn the *highest* marks from the members of the community who know them best—parents whose children attend public schools.

The *Nation at Risk* report led to a series of wildly unrealistic expectations, such as “every child ready for school” and US students surpassing all others in the world in mathematics and science. All of this was to happen in just a few years, with (of course) little in the way of new government-supplied resources. From here, with such outrageous goals and meager resources, it was a short step to the accountability frenzy that seems yet to have peaked. So-called failing schools were threatened with takeover by the state, or possibly given to some entrepreneurial company like the Edison group.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). A decade ago, adherents to the dominant, conservative paradigm delivered No Child Left Behind (2002), federal education legislation about which a great deal has been written, reported, discussed, and analyzed in the past few years. I believe that it is possible to argue that NCLB is the almost perfect embodiment of the set of beliefs about education that flow from the template of the dominant, conservative worldview. Teachers and students in so-called troubled schools, hundreds of which are unable to make annual progress goals mandated by NCLB, were to be closely monitored. Curriculum, it was forcefully argued, ought to be aligned with externally derived standards.

The implementation of requirements associated with NCLB had a powerful impact on public education. Accountability measures have, for example, insured that many millions of dollars have been shifted from instruction to assessment. Ability grouping has seen an upsurge. Passive learning of scripted curriculum seems recommended as standard classroom fare. Curriculum alignment and pacing are common test-preparation activities.

Opponents of NCLB lament what they see as the effective privatization of education, in the sense that decision-making about critical essentials has shifted from the hands of local educators to distant policy makers and testing companies (e.g., Kozol, 2005). Lowell Rose, of Phi Delta Kappa, argues that NCLB set out goals that are so totally unrealistic that at least a few educators believe the law is deliberately designed to set up the public schools for failure. (Rose, 2003) Could that be? Realistically, it is likely that, except for those with extreme views, few educators or policy-makers find current education law and policy (including Race to the Top) all good or all bad. Many recognize, for instance, that some measures have resulted in substantial

gains for groups of students who might have formerly fallen behind without much notice or concern.

It is important to point out, nonetheless, that some of the advocates of NCLB are essentially the same people, or hold similar worldviews, as those who point back with affirmation to Arthur Bestor's *Educational Wastelands* from the 1950s and those who contributed to the *Nation at Risk* report in the early 1980s. They are authors and promoters of contemporary works like *The War Against Excellence: The Rising Tide of Mediocrity in America's Middle Schools* (Yecke, 2003) and *Mayhem in the Middle* (Yecke & Finn, 2005). They represent the dominant perspective and they seem to be more numerous and more influential every year. Perhaps the reforms associated with the current administration's Race to the Top will be different.

The Progressive Worldview

There is a second ideology, an alternative way of viewing the world, identified here as a "progressive" stance, that has always been far less popular and less well known. It is possible to argue that modern versions of this worldview originated at least as early as the 18th century Enlightenment in Europe, following 500 years of intellectual and religious darkness. Some (e.g., Crossan, 1991, 1994) would assert that the roots of this progressive paradigm are actually to be found much earlier, in the New Testament as opposed to the Old, and that Jesus advocated ideas that reflected a very different worldview from those of the dominant paradigm. Other writers suggest that the origins of the progressive paradigm are much older, rooted in Greek philosophy. (Wallis, 2005)

Regardless of its origins, those who hold to this progressive view of the world often agree with conservatives that the resources for sustaining human life are scarce and the world can, consequently, be dangerous and difficult. This, however, is about the extent of the overlap between the two views, especially for those who are at the extremes of either perspective. Adherents to this second paradigm, for example, reject the view that the majority of human beings are predominantly selfish, weak, lazy, evil, and prone to acts of injustice. They believe, instead, that human beings are basically good, almost always motivated to become better and stronger, and often eager to help others in need. Of course, the progressive paradigm recognizes that human beings are complex, and that the interaction of human need and life circumstances often requires checks and balances, as exemplified in the US Constitution, to ensure that human behavior remains on the right track.

The subscribers to the progressive paradigm celebrate the too rare appearances of rationality and selfless altruism in human affairs (Harris, 2005). In their writing, they express optimism toward human potential and embrace cultural, ethnic, religious, and other aspects of human diversity as enriching forces in our communities. This worldview readily acknowledges the complicating presence of complexity in many facets of human life.

In this paradigm, when life is difficult and dangerous, the crucial thing is for good people to *share* with each other—cooperate, collaborate, and work together—to supply the reasonable basics required for a decent life for every one. This worldview is grounded in the belief there really is enough of everything to go around, if people can find ways and the will to share it wisely and equitably. Equity is, consequently, a core value of the alternate, progressive paradigm. Terrorists and criminals will always exist, as long as the good life is shown to the whole world but only a tiny, privileged minority actually attains it. As Lawrence Wright asserts, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning study of the origins of al-Qaeda, *The Looming Tower*, terrorism began in poverty and the prisons of Cairo (Wright, 2006).

At the center of human interaction, cooperation, rather than competition, is the hallmark of the progressive paradigm. Collective action, tolerance, and mutual support—rather than individual responsibility, mistrust, and harsh accountability—are crucial to human progress.

Lakoff (2004) puts it this way:

The basic progressive vision is of community—of America as family, a caring, responsible family. We envision an America where people care about each other, not just themselves, and act responsibly with strength and effectiveness for each other. (p. 90)

The progressive paradigm in education

Historically, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, and even Horace Mann were advocates of a progressive paradigm in education. In the 20th century, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, A.S. Neill, Paolo Friere, and Carl Rogers elaborated the tenets of this way of seeing education. In the middle school movement, writers like John Lounsbury, Jim Beane, William Alexander, and others, including myself, exemplify a perspective on education that is based on the assumption that human beings are basically good and, given a proper education and appropriate developmental experiences, given a real chance to do the right thing, can grow to become adults who are wise and good, loving and kind. Those who hold to beliefs expressed by this set of views seem to agree on a number of principles related directly to education.

They believe that human freedom and empowerment are ultimately more crucial elements in an actualized life than accountability and punishment. They assert, therefore, that school and classroom life must be fundamentally democratic and that teachers and school leaders, students, and parents, are partners in the educational enterprise.

They believe that caring for the person is at the center of any truly professional activity and that schools are for the purpose of improving the society as a whole, not primarily for solidifying the position of society's already most advantaged members. They reject a conception of schools as huge sorting mills operating so that students move on to the school at the next level in a configuration of ability groups that correlates too closely to the square footage in the homes of each student.

They believe that all human beings have a natural potential and a constant motivation for learning what is truly important for one's own growth and development, even though it may not match comfortably the curriculum aligned with state standards. They often espouse the radical belief that curriculum is best derived from the felt needs of learners, as assessed by teachers, not determined by external standards or dictates from the state or federal government. A national curriculum—with mandated standards, assessments, and harsh accountability programs to match—may be suspect at best.

Truly meaningful learning, they believe, takes place primarily when the student perceives the subject matter as having relevance for his or her own purposes. They assert that skill development must always be connected to purposeful learning, that reading, for example, should be primarily for the joy of reading, not to pass the test. They believe that educators can organize and operate schools that make this possible for all students. Striving for that goal is what energizes their common effort.

Advocates of the progressive paradigm cling tenaciously to the idea that, in any educational activity, the dignity and self-esteem of the person (teacher, leader, parent, and student) must always be preserved, and that personally meaningful learning is much more than academic achievement.

They believe that economic hardship and isolation, the dramatic increase in persistent poverty, the destruction of American family life, and the harsh effects of violence, homelessness, forced mobility, alcohol and drug abuse are the root causes of school failure. They assert that the so-called failure of school reform is primarily the fault, not of teachers and principals, or even education professors, but of politicians, bureaucrats, and corporate CEOs who subscribe to the conservative paradigm and, consequently, are unwilling to provide the real resources required for permanent improvement.

Supporters of the progressive paradigm accept the idea that the essence of human nature is expressed in meaningful *relationships* with others, not primarily in the greedy acquisition of privilege and property. They insist that education is, therefore, a relationship business, believing that the proper alignment between teacher and student is more critical than whether the curriculum aligns with the state test or national standards.

Membership in a personal learning community is essential for both teachers and learners, in this worldview. The difficulties associated with creating effective schools (e.g., student backgrounds impacted by divorce, poverty, violence, and despair) can be overcome only in settings that are designed to a human scale. Schools must, therefore, be organized so that they seem small and personal, and adherents to this view assert that this can be accomplished even in schools that are huge and factory-like (George & Lounsbury, 2000).

Advocates of the alternative paradigm believe that education is a process based on trust, not on doubt and suspicion. They applaud studies of school reform efforts, like those conducted by social scientists at the University of Chicago (e.g., Bryk & Schneider, 2002), that show a strong connection between interpersonal trust and efforts to improve the quality of teaching for academic achievement and even for reshaping education governance. Without trusting relationships among teachers, principals, parents, and students, the evidence suggests, school reform efforts are likely doomed to failure. While others assert that the crucial ingredient in sustained school improvement is standards, or high-stakes testing, perhaps even harsh accountability programs, members of the progressive paradigm hold fast to the proposition that the key component of real reform is simple human trust, trust that rests on four supports: respect, competency, integrity, and personal regard for others.

Trust, meaningful relationships, freedom, empowerment, equity, optimism, diversity, complexity, tolerance, child-centeredness—these are the core components of the alternative, progressive paradigm in education. They are also the core components of the middle school concept, one of today's clearest manifestations of that worldview.

The current manifestation of progressive education *is* the middle school concept. Firmly situated in the centuries-old progressive paradigm, the middle school concept has been guided for decades by a bedrock commitment to meeting the developmental needs of older children and young adolescents. It begins with an unquestioned commitment to equal opportunity for every student. Advocates for the middle school concept see less value in a national- or state-dominated curriculum, preferring one that begins with the needs and interests of students. It mandates strategies (e.g., teaming, flexible scheduling, heterogeneous grouping, etc.) for school organization by which large schools come to

seem small and personal. It supports mentoring relationships, with teachers, for every student. It recognizes the importance of special training and preparation for teachers and school leaders. For further explanations of the core tenets of the middle school concept, see, for example, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2010); *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000); and *Vision Statement of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform* (National Forum, 1998).

During recent decades, the central components of the middle school concept appeared more and more frequently in schools around the nation and the globe. Academic achievement rose steadily, students became more engaged, self-concepts were strengthened, teachers loved their teamwork--everything that mattered seemed to improve. It was, undoubtedly, a great success, if not truly miraculous, given the circumstances in which the middle school movement arose. At least two whole generations of American young adolescents and their families and communities are much the better for it, as are those of us privileged to participate in the middle school movement.

The Long View

Together, over a period of many decades, some progressive educators have established, by their dedication to the middle school concept, what has come to be known as the middle school movement, within a progressive mindset based on sharing, cooperation, trust and personal caring. However, I believe that both the progressive paradigm and the middle school movement are, in the short run, both in great danger. I believe Americans have entered a period when progressive educational values like local control, cooperation, trust, and personal involvement in a learning community for both students and teachers are officially and publicly demeaned, mistrusted, and ridiculed. Instead, pundits and policy-makers advocate one version or another of accountability, with the most vociferous clearly preferring moves toward privatization such as vouchers and charter schools.

Recent conservative criticism of public education focuses sharply on the perceived weaknesses of teachers and administrators. Critics of the teaching profession seem to believe that states can literally “fire their way to excellence.” They imply that there is a long line of highly-qualified, well-educated liberal arts majors waiting to take the place of today’s supposedly greedy and wildly incompetent teachers.

We are expected to believe that these great new teachers will: accept food-stamp level salaries, teach 6/7 periods a day, in classes of 40 students, spend hours every night planning great lessons, work under tremendous pressure for the elusively higher academic achievement by which they will be evaluated, tolerate little say in their professional lives, and accept a future in the classroom that promises little if any improvement or advancement. These dynamic new liberal arts graduates will, it is apparently expected, accept cuts in benefits so burdensome that teachers will be reduced to poverty in their retirement years.

Of course, we know that these mythical raw recruits, if they ever come to the schoolhouse, will quit in droves after the first, second, and third years of their teaching. They already are.

As a recent New York Times article pointed out, when we don’t get the results we want in our military adventures, we don’t blame the soldiers (Eggers & Calegari, 2011).

We don't pass legislation to tie their salaries and benefits to outcomes. We don't demand steep cuts in their pension plans. And yet, in education today, many states are doing just that: blaming the teachers and restricting their resources. Some even have the audacity to suggest that state budgets be balanced on the backs of teachers, who are getting paid about the same as turnpike toll takers and bartenders.

Under such circumstances, it does not seem unreasonable to be pessimistic, if not absolutely depressed about the future of education, and middle schools in particular. One evening not long ago, my personal tendency towards pessimism had again taken temporary hold of my spirits. I envisioned the total collapse of the middle school movement and other aspects of progressive public education, replaced by an education characterized by pauper schools for the many and private academies for the privileged few, a system of schools consistent with a society increasingly prizing markets, militarism, and money. I imagine some readers have had similar nightmarish visions.

My wife, Reisa, came to my rescue by reminding me that, if one takes the *long view*, it is surprisingly clear that the progressive view of life, of which the middle school movement is a recent iteration, has achieved tremendous successes over the many centuries of its existence, and it will continue to do so.

Those who subscribe to the progressive paradigm must keep clear in their minds the tremendous successes that advocates for this worldview have actually achieved. Historically, the beliefs of this worldview, translated into action in the Western world, have led to the end of the divine right of kings, primogeniture, feudalism, the caste system, political executions, forced castration, bearbaiting, chastity belts, trial by ordeal, human and animal sacrifice, the stoning of heretics, cannibalism, human radiation experiments, taboos against contraception, slavery and other practices once common and now recognized as monstrosities (Harris, 2005).

Taking the *long view*, it is clear that the progressive paradigm, one of radical hope in which the middle school movement is firmly ensconced, has been an astoundingly successful phenomenon (Even if it is currently in retreat), responsible for an amazing number of triumphs in American life in the last 200 years. Consider the achievements of the progressive paradigm listed below, to which the middle school movement can now be added. Each of these now-cherished victories was attained in the face of vigorous, too often violent, opposition from members of the dominant paradigm:

- ❑ Abolitionism and the end of slavery
- ❑ Women's suffrage and women's rights
- ❑ Child labor laws
- ❑ Civil rights
- ❑ School desegregation
- ❑ Gay rights
- ❑ Modern psychotherapy
- ❑ Progressive education
- ❑ The environmental movement
- ❑ Peace movements (Viet Nam and Iraq)

Now progressive, middle school education can be added to the list, with its emphasis on affirming the value of every student, collaborative leadership, teacher teamwork, flexibility, student-centered curriculum, and active instruction. The middle school concept arose from a set of elemental beliefs in essential human goodness and the possibility of progress that can be traced back thousands of years. Middle school

educators have a right to be proud of their place in history, as 21st century representatives of a life-affirming philosophy. This, in itself is worth celebrating with pride.

In spite of the hideous, horrendous things that still happen frequently, if one looks at the news of the world, one can see dramatic instances of a moral momentum moving human history slowly forward, in places like Eastern Europe, South Africa and now the Middle East, for example. I, myself, have lived in the American South for almost 50 years, and I have seen it change. We now have a President who could not have taken a drink from a water fountain a few decades earlier. We can, if we look, recognize the continuing, contemporary, almost daily small but significant victories of life's best impulses. Robert Wright (2009), evolutionary psychologist and author of an important work, *The Evolution of God*, nominated for the 2010 Pulitzer Prize, asserts that a careful study of history makes it inescapably clear that there is a "moral momentum" underway in human affairs.

It may have made sense, thousands of years ago, for the survival of our species, for the savage virtues of the warrior to predominate on every continent. Moral virtues may have been a luxury when saber tooth tigers were stalking the land. But there is reason to believe that more and more of humanity recognizes that those old values are now dysfunctional, in the modern interconnected world in which we live.

There is, in fact, a rapidly increasing amount of evidence to support the assertion that the actual genetic basis of our nature is to be cooperative and democratic (Shadyac, 2011). Readers may not recall that Charles Darwin, in the *Origin of Species*, mentioned survival of the fittest twice, and love 95 times. Darwin argued at length that the human capacities to cooperate and to sympathize were the most important components of our survival as a species. Recent research at places like the Institute for Noetic Sciences confirms Darwin's insights. Or, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu proclaims, "We *are*, because we *belong*." (Shadyac, 2011)

I firmly believe that Robert Wright is correct, that a new human consciousness is unfolding, based on the attributes of a positive, life-centered worldview. A new conviction is developing, one that tells us that the future of life on this planet depends on our acting as responsible members of a worldwide commonwealth of conscious, loving, trusting, cooperative human beings. We do live in challenging times, and there is, of course, no guarantee that progressive education and the middle school movement will automatically revive and prosper in the near future. Not if you take only the *short view*.

Progressives believe that the evidence from history is unequivocal-- human beings, drawing on the best that is within them, will continue to create ever more enlightened societies and the schools that support them. Taking the *long view*, it is clear that time is on the side of the moral momentum that can be seen if one just looks closely.

Middle school educators cannot, however, expect that the values they hold dear will, at least in the short run, win out simply because those components are right and true. I believe that if those of us who have a different worldview fail to keep this alternative paradigm alive in education, education may endure another long, dark period until another group gathers the courage to pick up the banner and carry it forward again. Human progress may be axiomatic, but it is not automatic. It requires action.

So the purpose of our work together, as middle level educators, should not be primarily to learn to adjust to the demands of the dominant paradigm, to get better at strategies that we do not believe in, or provide research support for educational policies and practices that run contrary to

how we see the world. Our time is better used, I think, in clarifying, sharing, and honoring what we believe and preserving a middle school community of meaning and trust, a paradigm of positive hopefulness. No matter how small membership in the middle school movement may be at any one time, it remains the job of middle school educators to bring to the current controversies the goals, purposes, values, and meanings of a paradigm that affirm the dignity, worth, and opportunity of every child.

The focus of our research efforts, in my thinking, should be to investigate and publicize the evidence related to this worldview. In addition to the importance of factors like trust, investigators must reestablish research pathways dealing with student engagement, group cohesiveness, the importance of a sense of “smallness” inside big buildings, professional learning communities, and a dozen other factors. We must have the courage that comes from conviction to conduct and publicize such research in the face of a very loud, repetitive, and powerfully dominant paradigm, a paradigm that openly asserts that most of public education must be dismantled, that a free public education is inconsistent with the triumph of capitalism and private enterprise.

Some will scoff, using terms like “dreamers” and “utopians.” Eleanor Roosevelt once said “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” Middle school educators have always been dreamers. So, dream on. The education of millions of young adolescents depends on what you dream, and on what you deeply believe and say and do in the years ahead. Progressive, middle school education may be the best chance for an educational paradigm that affirms the worth and dignity of every person and yearns for a society that operates on trust, dignity, diversity, and democratic principles. That’s worth dreaming of, and fighting for. And some things are worth fighting for even when suffering temporary losses. So dream on, fight on. There are exciting times ahead.

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