

Asheville Middle School: A 6–8 Community of Conscience and Intellect

This We Believe Characteristics

- Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so
- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- A shared vision that guides decisions
- High expectations for all members of the learning community
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- School-initiated family and community partnerships
- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity
- Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning

By Terry Roberts & Laura Billings

“Neither our teachers nor our students are one-dimensional people. We believe in the development of full, well-rounded human beings, who have a strong sense of social responsibility and academic discipline.”

Marsha Lipe, seventh grade assistant principal

“We want our young people to be able to work in teams, to be able to communicate through both the spoken and written word, and to remain completely open to lifelong learning, constant re-education.”

Gordon Grant, sixth grade assistant principal

“We believe in paying attention to our long-term goals, not just our short-term goals. We believe that the long-term success of our students in life is just as important as their short-term success on end-of-grade tests.”

Pam Cocke, principal at Asheville Middle School

When we sat together at lunch on a spring day in 2005, the week after these same three administrators had helped close Asheville Middle School for the 2004–2005 academic year, their passion trumped their very real fatigue, and their strong sense of mission overrode their modesty about the success they had recently experienced. Two would nod



PHOTO BY TIMOTHY L. VACULA

Paideia schools build consciences and intellects through seminars and coached projects.

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emphatically in agreement as the third spoke, and often they picked up immediately when the previous speaker paused—intent on making sure that we outside observers understood just what their school was about. *Social responsibility, justice, citizenship, teamwork*: these words echoed constantly throughout the conversation. And while they made it clear that they accepted the accountability mandates imposed by the state and worked hard to meet the standards set for them, they also believed that their job was much larger and more important than test preparation. They were adamant about preparing kids not just for the tests but for life after the tests.

While they accepted the accountability mandates imposed by the state and worked hard to meet the standards, they also believed that their job was much larger and more important than test preparation.

Asheville Middle School is a sprawling, maze-like structure located on South French Broad Street in Asheville, North Carolina, a small city in the mountains of Southern Appalachia. At the end of the 2004–2005 school year, it served 640 students in three grades: almost half (48%) of whom were white; and half (52%) were minorities—African American (40%), Hispanic, or other racial minorities (12%). Fifty-six percent of these students received free or reduced-price meals, with the actual poverty level (as in many secondary schools) probably much higher. As the only middle school in the Asheville City School System, AMS serves all the young adolescents of this popular southern town. Its student body includes the children of upper-middle and upper class families from North Asheville as well as children from low-income families of all races from across the city. Its greatest public challenge is overcoming the achievement gap between its white and African American students.

In some ways, the history of Asheville Middle School reflects the last decade of American public schooling in general. It was formed in 1991 by a merger of two much-beloved, small schools—Hall Fletcher Junior High and Hillstreet Middle. Its early history was turbulent, the result, in part, of intense

disagreement over whether all Asheville students should, indeed, go to school together. Unlike Asheville High School, classes at Asheville Middle were not “tracked,” and the result was truly heterogeneously mixed, democratic classrooms—leading to an ongoing debate about the value of a truly “public” education. In the fall of 2000, when Pam Cocke was promoted from assistant principal to principal, she knew that her job was to create a safe and orderly environment *and* to raise academic expectations for all students. In the five years since that time, she has slowly formed a strong team that has helped her create a coherent, rigorous vision for the school.

Because Asheville Middle School is the victim of what teachers there sometimes call “the urban myth”—the unfounded rumors that portray the school as having dangerous hallways and weak classrooms—Cocke knew that she and her colleagues needed to ensure a culture that was both respectful and rigorous. When she was first introduced to the Paideia Program, she saw it as a vehicle for infusing academic challenge into her middle school classrooms, primarily through the critical thinking skills learned in the Paideia seminar. Beginning in 2002, when the National Paideia Center first trained the AMS faculty in seminar facilitation, a greater intellectual engagement on the part of a much wider variety of students emerged. What surprised Cocke and her faculty was the degree to which both the Paideia seminar and coached project had a positive influence on the way students treated each other and their teachers. A Paideia coached project is a unit of study that leads to a student production or performance that demonstrates mastery of a subject to an interested audience outside the classroom (Roberts & Trainor, 2004). As with the seminar, teachers planning coached projects are encouraged to first examine the relevant curricular standards (in this case, the North Carolina Standard Course of Study) and identify the knowledge, skills, and concepts for which their students are responsible. They then build units of study that use didactic instruction (knowledge), intellectual coaching (skills), and seminar discussion (concepts) to deliver the curriculum in the most effective way possible. The dream of an AMS school community that valued both social responsibility and academic success began to come true.

The Paideia Program and Middle Grades Education

Paideia is a Greek word that expresses the idea of nurturing the whole child. The Paideia Program is a

systemic school transformation project based on the work of philosopher Mortimer Adler. Adler's original manifesto, *The Paideia Proposal* (Adler, 1982), argued that American classrooms could be made both more student-centered and more rigorous—thereby providing a quality education for all students—through the complementary balance of three types of instruction: didactic presentation of information, coaching of intellectual skills, and seminar discussion of ideas and values (Roberts & Billings, 1999). When pressured in the 1980s to provide more detail about the practical applicability of their ideas, Adler and the original Paideia Group produced the 12 Paideia Principles, an elegant condensation of the ideas that undergird much of contemporary school reform (Figure 1). These 12 principles influenced any number of school reform programs and, indeed, permeated the language of public school vision and mission statements across the country: “All children can learn,” “The best education for the best is the best education for all,” and so on.

For middle school educators, the Paideia principles have a particular resonance, which becomes obvious when you compare them to the recent “This I Believe” statement (National Middle School Association, 2004) based on *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, the position paper of the National Middle School Association (2003):

I believe that every young adolescent ...

- Has the capacity to learn, grow, and develop into a knowledgeable, reflective, caring, ethical, and contributing citizen.
- Must have access to the very best programs and practices a school can offer.
- Must be engaged in learning that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory.
- Thrives academically, socially, and emotionally in a democratic learning environment where trust and respect are paramount and where family and community are actively involved.
- Faces significant life choices and needs support in making wise and healthy decisions.
- Deserves educators who are prepared to work with this age group, who are themselves lifelong learners and committed to their own ongoing professional development and growth. (National Middle School Association, 2004)

At first glance, it would seem that almost any true middle school would provide the perfect incubator for the Paideia Program (see, for example, Arambula-Greenfield & Gohn, 2004). The two philosophies obviously share a fundamental dedication to making the “very best programs and practices” accessible to all students as well as a clear belief in the value of lifelong learning for educators and students. Furthermore, delving into the opening chapters of *The Paideia Proposal* confirms that both philosophies hold that nurturing the whole child leads to the development of any one element of his or her makeup (academically, socially, and emotionally). Adler's vehement argument that the democratic experiment can only succeed on the back of universally successful public education is echoed in the NMSA concept of a “democratic learning environment.” Although the Paideia Program would seem to be a perfect fit for almost any dedicated middle school, time has taught us that the two

Figure 1
12 Paideia Principles

We, the members of the Paideia Council, hold these truths to be the principles of the Paideia Program:

- All children can learn.
- All children deserve the same quality of schooling, not just the same quantity.
- The quality of schooling to which they are entitled is what the wisest parents would wish for their own children, the best education for the best being the best education for all.
- Schooling at its best is preparation for becoming generally educated in the course of a whole lifetime, and schools should be judged on how well they provide such preparation.
- The three callings for which schooling should prepare all Americans are, (a) to earn a decent livelihood, (b) to be a good citizen of the nation and the world, and (c) to make a good life for oneself.
- The primary cause of genuine learning is the activity of the learner's own mind, sometimes with the help of a teacher functioning as a secondary and cooperative cause.
- The three types of teaching that should occur in our schools are didactic teaching of subject matter, coaching that produces the skills of learning, and Socratic questioning in seminar discussion.
- The results of these three types of teaching should be (a) the acquisition of organized knowledge, (b) the formation of habits of skill in the use of language and mathematics, and (c) the growth of the mind's understanding of basic ideas and issues.
- Each student's achievement of these results should be evaluated in terms of that student's competencies and not solely related to the achievements of other students.
- The principal of the school should never be a mere administrator, but always a leading teacher who should be cooperatively engaged with the school's teaching staff in planning, reforming, and reorganizing the school as an educational community.
- The principal and faculty of a school should themselves be actively engaged in learning.
- The desire to continue their own learning should be the prime motivation of those who dedicate their lives to the profession of teaching.

philosophies are equally difficult to translate from the ideal to the real.

The challenge of creating a true Paideia middle school was precisely the one facing principal Pam Cocke and her faculty. Paideia theory and practice met Asheville Middle School's needs squarely in their common commitment to the education of the whole child. More specifically, the Paideia principles captured the breadth of what Cocke and her team believed about schooling:

- Schooling at its best is preparation for becoming generally educated in the course of a whole life-time, and that schools should be judged on how well they provide such preparation.
- The three callings for which schooling should prepare all Americans are, (a) to earn a decent livelihood, (b) to be a good citizen of the nation and the world, and (c) to make a good life for oneself.

Rather than emphasize the relationship between the curriculum and the tests, they were able to use seminars and coached projects to illustrate the relationship between the curriculum and the students.

In other words, the middle school's job was to prepare adolescents for all the challenges of adulthood. The only way that Cocke and her colleagues could imagine doing that successfully was placing the development of the whole child ahead of performance on the increasing number of standardized tests required by the state. As they worked together to develop a school-wide fluency with the Paideia seminar from 2002 to 2004 and add the real-world challenges of the Paideia coached project in 2004–2005, they articulated two important ways in which they consistently valued students more than scores. The first was making the state curriculum relevant and even applicable for their wide range of students through regular use of Paideia seminars and coached projects. Rather than emphasize the relationship between the curriculum and the tests, they were able to use seminars and coached projects to illustrate the relationship between the curriculum and the students. The second way in which they put students first in their mission was a dedicated focus

on the development of social awareness and skills in all their students. They see social maturation as preceding—or at least paralleling—intellectual maturation, and so they place “social responsibility” at the core of their mission.

Authenticity and Social Responsibility: Seminars and Coached Projects

In its recent publications on the Paideia seminar, the National Paideia Center has defined this form of dialogue as “a collaborative, intellectual discussion facilitated by open-ended questions about a text” (Roberts, 2002, p. 46). A “text” in this instance may be a written document, but it may also be a work of art, a map, a photograph, or a math problem. Any artifact that is rich in ideas and ambiguous can serve, so long as it helps the teacher deliver the conceptual elements of the curriculum in a compelling way. Successful seminars are carefully planned, somewhat formal classroom dialogues that are driven by a teacher's or facilitator's open-ended questions.

Beginning in 2002–2003, Asheville Middle School chose to implement the Paideia seminar in two ways: first, in a series of school-wide seminars based on their core values; and second, within the subject areas taught by each of the school's teams. The first were intended to develop social awareness and understanding, and the second were intended to deliver the ideas and values embedded in the North Carolina Standard Course of Study.

In both types of seminars, school-wide and curriculum-based, teachers used a prescribed pattern of questions, moving from opening and core questions that focused on the text to closing questions that asked students to apply the ideas and values under discussion to their own lives. For example, in a seminar based on a short excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the closing question asked student participants to discuss the potential power of literacy in their own lives and in the lives of people they knew. Having just read and discussed a powerful description of how Malcolm learned to read in prison and, therefore, felt more “free” than ever before in his life, students were able to discuss with great candor their own dreams and fears concerning the power of the written word. In this and numerous other examples, teachers used the seminar to first ask students to analyze an author's or artist's ideas and then personalize those ideas in a way that made the curriculum both relevant and memorable.

In a broader, more integrated way, the Paideia coached project also taught students the power of academics to inform their lives away from school. The National Paideia Center staff developed the coached project in the mid-1990s to make increasingly detailed state curricula more relevant and more engaging for students as well as answer NMSA's (2003) call for "learning that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory." Ideally, the coached project provides both teachers and students the opportunity to produce rigorous, relevant work and to measure the quality of that work against authentic standards, judged in part by an outside audience. Like many of their colleagues around the country who are used to a more traditional approach to unit design, the Asheville Middle School teachers discovered the coached project exhilarating yet demanding.

To help individual teachers implement the coached project during the 2004–2005 school year, grade-level teams at Asheville Middle School planned and executed full-scale coached projects together. All seventh grade students participated in an integrated project titled "Empty Bowls" based on a design they borrowed from the Pueblo School for the Arts and Sciences, a Paideia school in Pueblo, Colorado. This project was intended first to deliver the seventh grade curriculum as it related to hunger, both local and worldwide; and second, to give students the ability to use their scholarship and art to contribute directly to the local fight against hunger. Students approached this very human theme through detailed study of the countries that they were assigned by their world history curriculum, thereby making that curriculum more personally

Figure 2
State Standards Addressed by the Empty Bowls and Bio-Bistro Coached Projects

<p>The Seventh Grade Hunger project, culminating in the Empty Bowls Celebration, addresses the following standards from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study:</p>	<p>English Language Arts (reading and the portrayal of an individual's biography/autobiography; written review of chosen text; opening and closing Paideia texts — <i>The Enchiridion</i> by Epictetus and <i>The Rose That Grew from Concrete</i> by Tupac Amaru Shakur)</p>
<p>Computer Technology = 1.13/Demonstrate knowledge and use of WP/DTP terms/concepts to create and publish assignments/projects. 1.14/Demonstrate appropriate use of copyrighted materials in word processing documents used for content projects/assignments.</p>	<p>1.02 Analyze expressive materials that are read, heard, and/or viewed. 1.03 Interact in group activities and/or seminars in which the student shares personal reactions to questions raised; gives reasons and cites examples from text in support of expressed opinions; clarifies, illustrates, or expands on a response when asked to do so; and ask classmates for similar expansion.</p>
<p>Science = 4.08/Explain how understanding human body systems can help make informed decisions regarding health.</p>	<p>1.04 Reflect on learning experiences by appraising changes in self throughout the learning process; evaluating personal circumstances and background that shape interaction with text.</p>
<p>Healthful Living = Goal 5/Learner will apply behavior management skills to nutrition-related health concerns.</p>	<p>2.01 Analyze and evaluate informational materials that are read, heard and/or viewed by summarizing information; making connections to related topics/information; generating questions; and/or extending ideas.</p>
<p>English Language Arts = Goal 1/Learner will use language to express individual perspectives in response to personal, social, cultural, and historical issues. Goal 3/Learner will refine the understanding and use of argument. Goal 5/Learner will respond to various literary genres using interpretive and evaluative processes. Goal 6/Learner will apply conventions of application of grammar and language usage.</p>	<p>3.03 Evaluate and create arguments that persuade by understanding the importance of the engagement of audience by establishing a context, creating a persona, and otherwise developing interest.</p>
<p>Mathematics = Goal 4/Data Analysis and Probability — learner will understand and use graphs and data analysis.</p>	<p>4.03 Use the stance of a critic to construct a critical response/review of a work/topic.</p>
<p>Social Studies = Goal 3/Learner will analyze the impact of interactions between humans and their physical environments in Africa, Asia, and Australia. Goal 5/Learner will evaluate the varied ways people of Africa, Asia, and Australia make decisions about the allocation and use of economic resources. Goal 6/Learner will recognize the relationship between economic activity and the quality of life in Africa, Asia, and Australia.</p>	<p>5.01 Increase fluency, comprehension, and insight through a meaningful and comprehensive literacy program by using effective reading strategies to match the type of text; reading self-selected literature and other materials of interest; taking an active role in whole class seminars and extending understanding by creating products for different purposes, different audiences, and within various contexts.</p>
<p>The Eighth Grade Overcoming Obstacles project, culminating in the Bio-Bistro, addresses the following standards from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study:</p>	<p>5.02 Study the characteristics of literary genres (nonfiction, biographies). 6.02 Continue to identify and edit errors and written English producing final drafts/presentations that demonstrate mastery and accuracy; independently practicing formal oral presentations.</p>
<p>Mathematics (homelessness — mathematical and statistical analysis)</p>	<p>Social Studies (Integration of didactic instruction, Bio Bistro presentations and fund raiser for Manna Food Bank/Homeless Shelters)</p>
<p>4.01 Collect, organize, analyze, and display data (including scatter plots) to solve problems</p>	<p>9.01 Describe contemporary political, economic, and social issues at the state and local levels and evaluate their impact on the community.</p>
<p>4.02 Approximate a line of best fit for a given scatter plot; explain the meaning of the line as it relates to the problem and make predictions.</p>	<p>9.02 Identify past and present state and local leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds and assess their influence in affecting change.</p>
<p>4.03 Identify misuses of statistical and numerical data</p>	<p>9.03 Describe opportunities for and benefits of civic participation.</p>

relevant. As teachers met to plan the AMS version of Empty Bowls, they began to see how to integrate math and science lessons into the project so that eventually all subject areas were involved (see Figure 2 for state standards addressed). On April 21, 2005, more than 750 people, representing 180 families, attended the Grand Finale Night of Asheville Middle School's Empty Bowls project. They bought 210 of the 220 bowls produced by seventh grade students, resulting in a donation of \$2,470 to the local MANNA Food Bank—the equivalent of 7,600 meals for the hungry of Asheville, North Carolina, all while studying hunger as a local, national, and global phenomenon. As countless students and teachers remarked, this was academic work with real meaning and real worth.

Similarly, all eighth grade students participated in the "Bio-Bistro" project on the theme of "Overcoming Obstacles," in which they planned, designed, and performed elaborate biographical

presentations on their social and cultural heroes for other students, teachers, and the community. In this instance, the focus was on the relevant curricula as well as the application of the hero's life to that of the student presenter. Both of these projects stressed rigorous quality control based on authentic standards (see Figure 2), but more to the point, they both stressed the application of the curriculum to the students' lives. Cocke and her leadership team began to see them as effective ways to teach social awareness and social skills concurrently with academic skills.

When Adler first defined and prescribed consistent use of the seminar as a teaching strategy in the 1980s, he saw it solely as a means of infusing higher-order thinking skills into the classroom. More recently, the staff of the National Paideia Center has stressed that seminar practice has two interrelated goals: social and intellectual. Furthermore, because students essentially learn from each other during

Figure 3
Plan for School-Wide Seminar on AMS Honor Code

SEMINAR PLAN: Excerpt from The Social Contract (Rousseau) and Asheville Middle School Honor Code	
Ideas and Values: community, individual rights & responsibilities, honor	
<p>PRE-SEMINAR Content — (Present relevant background information. Prepare participants to discuss selected text.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to take home a copy of the two texts several days before the seminar and read the texts to an adult guardian. Request that the students ask their guardians to opioniate on the AMS Honor Code. Instruct students to take notes on comments that their guardians make that they agree with. Finally, ask that the students and their guardians together write a definition of the word integrity. • In Homeroom, AA, or Language Arts Class on the day before the seminar, have all students write a full paragraph in response to the Honor Code. Student writing should address which of the four agreements in the code will be hardest to live by. • On the day of the seminar, explain that the Frenchman Jean Jacques Rousseau was an 18th Century philosopher and writer who wrote an influential treatise on the nature of society titled <i>The Social Contract</i>, concerning the role and responsibilities of the individual within society. • On the day of the seminar, have participants reread the texts, underlining important words and phrases. <p>Process — (Review seminar objectives and guidelines. Prepare participants to participate in seminar discussion, self assess, and set goal[s].):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the participants to choose a group goal based on their past experience with seminar. Have the group goal written where everyone can see it. Also, assign one participant to keep a careful set of notes during the seminar in which s/he charts the relative success of the group in meeting this goal. • Ask each participant to choose one seminar participation goal (from a list prepared by the teacher) to focus on during this discussion. Have them write their individual goals on the back of the name tent in front of them where it can easily be seen during the dialogue. 	<p>SEMINAR Opening — (Identify main ideas from the text.): Which one phrase or statement in our Honor Code do you think is most important in making our school a good place to learn? (round-robin responses) <i>Why?</i> (spontaneous discussion)</p> <p>Core — (Focus/analyze textual details.): Based on this text, what do you think the term "honor" means? What is its value?</p> <p>Rousseau wrote that "while uniting [your]self with all, you may still obey [your]self alone." Do you think this is possible? <i>Why</i> or <i>why not</i>?</p> <p>What do you think that other people in our school community owe you as an individual?</p> <p>What do you owe them?</p> <p>Who is the Honor Code for?</p> <p>Closing — (Personalize and apply the textual ideas.): How would you improve the Honor Code if you could? <i>Why?</i></p> <p>POST-SEMINAR Process — (Assess individual and group participation in seminar discussion. Refer to recent past as well as future seminar discussion.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss how successful the participants were in meeting first their group goal and then their individual goals. Then, as a counterpoint to the seminar text, discuss in some detail the relationship between the group and individual goals. How does one enhance and/or inhibit the other? <p>Content — (Extend application of textual and discussion ideas; continuation of pre-seminar.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in groups of three or four to write a user-friendly description of the School Honor Code for new students and their parents. Explain the relationship between the Honor Code and school/class rules. Include illustrations.

seminar discussion, the facility with which they speak, listen, and think in collaboration with one another is directly related to how much and how well they learn (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2003). In pre- and post-seminar process activities (Figures 3 & 4), teachers coach specific participation skills for individuals as well as whole groups. In addition, because students learn to actually listen to each other thoughtfully during seminars, many of them come to understand and respect their classmates in a way they never thought possible.

In an end-of-year staff survey given in June 2005, teacher after teacher cited the growth in social responsibility and social skills that they saw during school-wide and in-class seminars. Teachers wrote:

- “They [the students] learned to respect each other by being positive with their words, waiting for others to speak.”
- “They were able to put themselves in others’ shoes and develop empathy for others.”

Figure 4
Asheville Middle School Honor Code

The first school-wide seminar of the 2005–06 Asheville Middle School year is intended to introduce a dialogue about community in general and more specifically the goal of each AMS classroom becoming a civil community. The text for this seminar is a brief quote from Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* in combination with the AMS Honor Code. We are asking students to consider the Honor Code in the context of what Rousseau wrote: “The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.”

The AMS Honor Code reads:

To emphasize the importance of personal and academic honesty and to nurture the growth of integrity within the students of Asheville Middle School, the following Code of Honor has been established:

I will show respect for all peers and adults, according to them the dignity to which all are entitled.

In the same manner, I will respect the property of the school and of others, as I wish them to respect mine.

To guard my honesty and that of others, I shall not give or receive information concerning tests or test questions, or copy assignments, essays, research or other materials. I understand that such acts constitute cheating and plagiarism, both of which are dishonest. Consequently, I shall avoid such acts.

I further understand that honesty and integrity extend beyond academics to include all activities of the school. I recognize my responsibility to report with truth to proper adults any breach of conduct committed or witnessed by me during any school activity on or off the school premises.

I understand that serious consequences will result from infractions against this Code of Honor.

I also understand that to abide by the Code of Honor is to do that which is right and, by example, to encourage others to act honorably as well.

Signature _____

- “Appreciation of diversity. ... Appreciate others’ opinions without argument.”
- “Equality for all [students] sharing and joining.”

The vast majority of respondents on these surveys used similar remarks to echo the theme of increasing student understanding and respect for others. As one eighth grade language arts and social studies teacher wrote: “The [students] learned to communicate better. [Thinking] about ethical issues and making wise choices enhanced [their] understanding of people who are different.”

The school-wide implementation of the Paideia coached project was intended to build on this growing notion of social responsibility by giving students the opportunity to actually apply what they were learning in the larger society. In the same June 2005 staff survey, one eighth grade teacher wrote that being part of the Bio-Bistro project taught students “the significance of doing an individual part as part of a group effort,” reflecting the administrators’ commitment to producing “young people who can work in teams” (Gordon Grant) and who are practiced at collaborative “decision making and problem solving” (Pam Cocke). Surprisingly, when students became actively engaged in the real-world work of coached projects and began to see how the lessons of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study might actually have something to do with their daily lives, their enthusiasm rubbed off on their teachers. On the culminating night of the Empty Bowls project, after the chorus had sung, the orchestra had performed, student publications on hunger had been distributed to hundreds of people, and dozens of student-made bowls had been sold to support the MANNA Food Bank, the seventh-grade faculty along with volunteers from other grades could be heard singing Motown tunes together as they cleaned the cafeteria kitchen.

When Pam Cocke stresses that Asheville Middle School has developed a clear, coherent vision—that it is an institution with heart wherein every student feels she or he has a place—she uses the word “community” over and over. She and her assistant principals clearly articulate that schooling is community building, and that within their community, students learn a durable brand of social responsibility that will transfer to the larger community as students become adults.

If all this is true, if Asheville Middle School has grown so considerably in both rigor and respect in the last five years, why would some of Asheville’s

elite parents still regard the middle school with distrust or disdain?

Why Should I Send My Child to That School?

This question emerged during a planning retreat at the end of the 2004–2005 school year, wherein three of the school's four administrators and seven other staff were engaged in planning the next year's school-wide seminars. One staff member described how many people she knew still questioned whether the middle school was right for their children precisely because students truly were heterogeneously grouped and could end up "in classes with any kid from anywhere in the city."

It is also important to note that this statistical closing of the gap occurred while the top students continued to grow academically.

"So, what do you say," we asked, "to a physician or attorney from North Asheville who asks you at a social gathering 'why should I send my child to that school?'"

The answer came back surprisingly quickly and in the form of a dialogue. "This is about race and about poverty," one teacher said, "and the stereotypes that too many middle-class adults have about 'other people's children.'" "Of course it is," chimed in another, "and I have the answer. Asheville Middle School is the safest way for the child of a middle-class family to first encounter and come to understand the nature of the real world, to be educated in the nature of the world and of society." "How can any child come to understand others," Sixth Grade Assistant Principal Gordon Grant asked, "if he or she lives in the equivalent of a gated community and goes to school in the equivalent of a gated school?" The middle school staff reached the consensus that a young adolescent should be sent to Asheville Middle School to be educated in life as well as in math, reading, and writing.

In January of 2005, Eric Robinson of Baylor University completed a third-party evaluation of the Paideia Program in which he examined student achievement in seven schools from five states: three

elementary schools, one junior high school, one middle school, one alternative high school, and one K–12 magnet Paideia school. Of these seven, Robinson found a "very positive impact" on student achievement in four Paideia schools, "mixed impact" in two schools, and "inconclusive impact" in the alternative high school because of the intentionally transient student body. Overall, Robinson praised the Paideia project for the degree to which it was being implemented in a large variety of schools serving low SES student communities—schools that were dedicated to making academic rigor available to "all students." Even more to the point of this article, Robinson found a "very positive impact" on student test scores at Asheville Middle School.

In summary, Asheville (NC) Middle School showed a noticeable improvement in the percentage of students who passed the End of Grade (EOG) tests in both reading and mathematics from the year prior to implementation of Paideia (2001) and its first year (2002). With regard to reading, the improvement was consistent across all students and all three grades, with one of the more significant findings being that there was a large percentage increase of Black students passing the EOG reading test across all three grades at Asheville Middle. Concerning mathematics, there was a clear and positive impact from Paideia from the year prior to implementation to the end of the first year of the program. This trend was significant with 6th grade students and appeared to level off in 7th and 8th grade as the percentage of students that passed the EOG was slightly lower for each grade. Exceptions to this trend were for 7th grade females and 8th grade black students who saw an increase in percentage of students passing the EOG from 2002 to 2003. Finally, there was a clear and consistent decrease in the achievement percentage gap between Black and White students across both reading and math and all three grades with the exception of 7th grade math. (Robinson, 2004, p. 8)

Most important in Robinson's eyes—and in the eyes of many educators who are concerned with the achievement gap—the Paideia Program has helped the faculty and staff of Asheville Middle School "decrease ... the achievement percentage gap between black and white students across both reading and math and all three grades with the exception of 7th grade math."

It is also important to note that this statistical closing of the gap occurred while the top students continued to grow academically. For example, following one cohort of students through their

entire middle school experience during this period, we see the number of students scoring a IV (the highest possible score) on the state reading test increase from 41.4% in sixth grade (2002) to 51.6% in seventh grade (2003) to 54.3% in eighth grade (2004). In other words, Pam Cocke's original goal of increasing achievement for *all* students is being realized. Perhaps then, it is possible to put students first and still make the kind of standardized progress measured by state tests.

In our democratic society, the role of the public school is larger than in any other culture. For not only must it prepare the next generation to be financially self-sufficient, it must also prepare them to be activist citizens of the nation and the world—even as the world we live in becomes more complex and more demanding. Furthermore, educators have the moral duty to do everything they can to prepare students to lead personally fulfilling lives—lives defined by learning. To settle for something less, to allow our focus to shift from the long-term goals of public education to the often short-sighted measures of standardized testing is to give up on the American dream. At Asheville Middle School, Pam Cocke and her staff are proving—slowly, year by year—that it is possible to maintain and even raise test scores while keeping alive the dream of social responsibility and democratic citizenship.

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