



...CHANGING THE EXPERIENCE FOR OUR MIDDLE GRADES STUDENTS!

# Reimagining Middle Grades: Staff & Student Spotlight

February 2020:  
Issue #3

IN THIS ISSUE

## Initiative Overview

Broward County Public Schools is committed to changing the middle school experience for its students and implementing incremental steps that will ultimately lead to a systemic change in our District. We are now in our second year of Reimagining Middle Grades. We remain dedicated to including all students in a project-based or problem-based experience (PBL) via an interdisciplinary approach. Our teachers are learning the 'gold standard of PBL' as taught by PBL Works. This model of PBL ensures teachers, schools, and organizations can measure, calibrate, and improve their practice. Social and emotional learning (SEL) supports students in a warm environment where their unique educational needs are met. Our middle schools are

enhancing their supportive school environment using Conscious Discipline, a social and emotional learning and classroom management program that builds a school and classroom culture on safety, connection and problem-solving rather than rewards and punishments. The plan also calls for increased electives and extracurricular activities at the middle school level. The goal is for our students to be engaged and to have the social and emotional competencies, problem-solving skills, and academic achievement to help them successfully transition from middle to high school and beyond.



### PBL Teacher Spotlights

Read more about the experiences of teachers who learned about PBL during the 2019 Reimagining Middle Grades Summer Institute and about their journey with implementation.

Pages 2 and 3



### SEL Teacher Spotlights

Read more about how these two teachers who are impacting their students by infusing SEL into their classroom.

Pages 4 and 5

# Bringing Learning to Life with PBL

By Ashleigh Foutch, Instructional Facilitator

## APOLLO MIDDLE

Apollo Middle is one of the ten schools tied to the Community Foundation of Broward grant. Apollo Middle School focuses on Project-Based Learning and Social Emotional Learning as part of the Re-Imagining Middle Grades initiative. PBL is infused into core content curricula. Apollo focuses on the social emotional well-being through PASL elective classes that provides daily support to improve academic achievement and practice life skills necessary to succeed in today's world.

SHAWN AYCOCK  
Principal

When Apollo Middle School ELA teachers Renee Job and Michelle Comple saw their students' reaction while attending a field trip at the Holocaust Memorial Museum this year, they knew they had made the right decision to collaborate on a Project Based Learning (PBL) unit.

The two teachers attended the professional opportunity with PBL Works over the summer and decided to work together to create a PBL based on ELA curriculum using *The Diary of Anne Frank*. The teachers wanted to incorporate the history of the Holocaust with the literature piece. They utilized the expertise of their fellow colleague, history teacher Mr. David Reese, to generate ideas for their own PBL.

Attending the field trip to the Holocaust Memorial Museum was the first step. "It was really an eye-opener for the students actually getting to speak to a Holocaust survivor," Ms. Job stated. "The students were able to produce a lot of academically meaningful questions." This allowed the duo to inspire interest and ask more thought-provoking questions of their students, as well. Ms. Comple stated, "They came to me asking a lot of questions. Students were trying to wrap their heads around what took place at that time in history. They became hungry for more information."

Students then gathered information on Anne Frank and began to make connections between her life and the history, prior to reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*. This portion

of the PBL consisted of Driving Questions and a series of mini projects such as creating a SWAY presentation, a One-Pager, a Socratic Seminar and the reading of several related text pieces.

The culminating product will be a Public Service Announcement (PSA) answering the question: *How do we prevent the Holocaust from happening again?* Students will work in small groups on a certain area of focus and create a minute of material combining with their classmates' work to create the full PSA. Students will also work collaboratively and with their teacher's assistance, edit their work for clarity. The students of Apollo Middle will hear the PSA school wide. "We really want the younger students to be able to make connections to their own literature pieces, today's world, and themes like tolerance, bullying and acceptance," Job explained.

"The project required constant collaboration and a revisiting of our teaching practices. It was great working with someone else. I was surprised because my kids have a tendency to be apathetic with learning, but this sparked enthusiasm," Ms. Comple expressed. "Exactly," Ms. Job agreed, "it was eye-opening how much they really knew and their enthusiasm for learning. I saw my students in a whole different light."

Comple and Job say they will continue to use the same framework to create more curriculum infused PBL units in the future. The PBL structure has been a catalyst for creating independent learners and critical thinkers in their classroom. Learning has truly come alive for their students!

*Michelle Comple & Renee Job were nominated for this feature in the RMG Staff and Student Spotlight by Assistant Principal Traci Aveni.*



## PBL AROUND TOWN



### Entry Event

Students took a field trip to the Holocaust Memorial on Miami Beach. This entry event launched their PBL and created excitement in the students that made them want to dig deeper in the topic.



Michelle Comple and Renee Job evidenced first-hand the power of student engagement when they worked on the Holocaust PBL with their 8<sup>th</sup> graders.



A student reads *Night* by Elie Wiesel to gain additional context during the PBL.

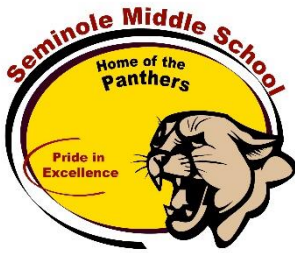
# PBL for All!

By Ashleigh Foutch, Instructional Facilitator

## SEMINOLE MIDDLE

Seminole Middle has participated in the Project-Based Learning implementation model for the Reimagining Middle Grades initiative. We utilize a project-based learning approach in core subject areas including Science, Math and Language Arts. This year, we expanded to our core subject areas for students with disabilities. Our hope is that collaborative learning will engage all learners to perform at a higher level of exposing them to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge.

KATHRYN MARLOW  
Principal



Amanda Smith's Project Based Learning (PBL) journey began over the summer when she attended the PBL Work's professional development opportunity. Having taught in New York previously, Ms. Smith was familiar with the process, but was eager to learn more about the structure. During the summer session she began to generate ideas she might present to her students in the upcoming school year.

Within the first month of school, she introduced PBL to her students and asked them to come up with some ideas that might help them assist other students in the school. As eighth grade students in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing cluster at Seminole Middle, they thought they could best help incoming sixth graders by preparing them for what to expect in their first year of middle school, and what it takes to graduate as a successful eighth grader. They came up with the idea to create a survival guide for incoming students geared toward deaf and hard of hearing children. Using a graphic organizer, they

suggested qualities that each student would need as they left middle school.

Next, students divided into groups and read excerpts from the novel *How to Survive Middle School*. Each group read a portion of the book and then students shared out as a class to create some more ideas about middle school survival. In groups, students then devised questions or concerns sixth graders might have. Using the knowledge gathered from the aforementioned activities, students decided to create a brochure trifold depicting middle school expectations and successful attributes of middle school students. Each group then presented their trifold boards to a group of sixth graders, permitting them to ask questions throughout the presentation. This allowed for students to work on their speaking and listening skills. One student, Naomi Calhoun, expressed the project really helped her confidence, while Markice Watson enjoyed being able to help the incoming sixth graders.

"I think the kids were really engaged, and that's the main reason I chose to do it," Ms. Smith stated. "The hardest challenge was making sure the standards fit within a plan for the PBL. When the kids see that they are learning that's when they become engaged."

When asked to reflect on the process Ms. Smith explained, "There were a variety of mini projects involved and that variety kept them interested and focused." If I were to do this PBL again, I would have them interview teachers to get an adult perspective."

Ms. Smith has enthusiastically already begun her next PBL project that will include slam poetry and the class creating an event night at the school to showcase their work. With the infusion of PBL in her classroom, her students have become excited to learn, grow and discover together through collaborative and creative avenues.

*Amanda Smith was nominated for this feature in the RMG Staff & Student Spotlight by Assistant Principal Jill Fiorentino.*

## PBL IN ACTION!



Qualities of the Ideal Graduate, as brainstormed by the students.



Amanda Smith saw the possibilities of PBL in her classroom.

# Count on Me!

By Lisa Farris, Language Arts Teacher

## CORAL SPRINGS MIDDLE

Coral Springs Middle is focusing on addressing the SEL needs of the adults in the building as that will greatly impact the students. Several SEL initiatives are in place for the staff, such as a shout-out wall, a Stallion Spotlight, and a WOW notebook. Students benefit from SEL strategies and supports through electives and through other select classes. Teachers are using breathing techniques, well-wishes, and instruction on the executive stages of brain functioning.

SARA LAROSA  
Principal

Coral Springs Middle Reading teacher Lisa O'Brien is using SEL to ensure "that every student knows they can count on her." She started the school year teaching the brain states and quickly began to see a change in how her students reacted to situations. Teaching those SEL strategies to help one of her students, Nathaly Guerrero, avoid a very bad situation, she reported that if Ms. O'Brien hadn't taught her how to use her breathing (STAR) to calm herself and get back into her executive state this specific situation would have likely ended up being very bad. "I kept my cool and remember my brain states and calmed myself from the emotional state I was about to get in back into my executive state." "I wasn't going to allow her to have control over my emotions like you told me!", says Nathaly. Ms. O'Brien has also incorporated something she calls "In Your Feels Friday" in her class, in an effort to give students an opportunity to talk about an issue or situation, good or bad. She also has a dedicated space on her wall for "family" photos. She asked students to bring in a picture of themselves to our "family." Her ultimate goal is to help the student feel like they are a part of something and it has truly helped in their readiness to learn each day and according to her students she has done just that.



Ms. O'Brien has also been an instrumental part of creating a schoolwide SEL culture for staff as well. "We set up a pay it forward system where if somebody did something nice for you, you received a pass and would be urged to do something nice for somebody else." She also passed on the idea of "A Month of Gratitude" for the month of November where each day of November, teachers were urged to post online either via, Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, something specific for the day on what they were grateful for. Each teacher had to post at least seven times out of the 10 days and their names went into a drawing for a gift card. An added bonus that our administration does through a recommendation from Ms. O'Brien is the "Whoot Whoot" cart, where randomly administration will go to classrooms with a little "pick me up" for their teachers. This Thanksgiving, they delivered a piece of pumpkin pie and a lovely little song!

We are very proud of all the hard work and ideas that Ms. O'Brien has implemented that not only help her students but also Coral Springs Middle as a whole.

*Lisa O'Brien was nominated for this feature in the RMG Staff & Student Spotlight by her colleague, Lisa Farris.*



# Agent of Change

By Denise Calder, Language Arts & Social Studies Teacher

## SUNRISE MIDDLE

Sunrise Middle is one of the ten schools tied to the Community Foundation of Broward grant. Our school's focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) aims to teach teachers and the students' self-awareness and self-regulation techniques. As a result of building on SEL, we hope to improve achievement, increase pro-social behavior, and improve student attitudes toward school. We also will focus on Project-Based Learning (PBL) to offer high-engagement task choices that encourages responsibility through real-world application of learning standards.

TARSHE FREEMAN  
Interim Principal

When Sunrise Middle School Language Arts teacher, Robbi-Beth Dwelly was tapped to mentor struggling 6th grade students, she accepted the challenge with a whole heart. This outstanding educator delivers highly specialized support to children who receive Personalization of Academic and Social Emotional Learning (PASL). In Ms. Dwelly's classroom, students are provided guidance with how to improve their attendance, behavior, grades, academic achievement levels, and their overall experience at Sunrise Middle School. Describing her approach to building a meaningful relationship with her students, Dwelly shared, "I have an open line of communication with all their teachers. We track their missing assignments. We write letters and talk about ways to individually accomplish goals." The spotlight shines brightly on this mother of two and graduate of the Education Program at Florida Atlantic University, Robbi-Beth Dwelly is a rare and remarkable first-year teacher MVP.



Ms. Dwelly's students appreciate, love and respect her. Eleven-year-old PASL student, Chackie Fertile is also a 6th grade English Language

Learner who loved reading in elementary

school. Her transition to middle school was not smooth - she started putting her head down in classes because she was understanding less as the days went by. Ms. Dwelly believes that all behavior is communication and responded with support and encouragement to Chackie's noticeable detachment. Chackie shared with pride that her self-esteem and academic confidence have sky-rocketed and she attributes her turnaround success directly to Ms. Dwelly's efforts. When prompted to explain what she believes makes her PASL teacher so effective, Chackie affirmed, "Ms. Dwelly takes her time to explain everything to me and she listens to me. She is very good with telling us what she wants us to do; because, she gives us really good examples of what our work should look like when we turn it in." The appreciation Ms. Dwelly's students have for her is reciprocated by their teacher. Her classroom door is beautifully decorated with a quote that captures the essence of who and how she is: We have an attitude of gratitude. With heartfelt words, Dwelly expressed how she perceives herself as a PASL teacher. "I feel very blessed to have the opportunity to work with the PASL students. I realize that this group of students have been identified as students that need a little extra - help with assignments or maybe just someone to show interest in their success. Not just success academically - but their success as a person as well."

No stranger to school struggles herself, Ms. Dwelly relates to many of her PASL students with a very personal connection: "I was considered an at-risk student. My mother was a single parent of two who struggled with addiction and mental health issues. Beginning in the 5th grade, I was placed in foster care. I am sure that no one specifically said they were going to let me fail, but I remember sleeping through classes and just making it through day by day." She reflected candidly on the turbulence of her youth: "I attended six different elementary schools, Apollo Middle, and Pines Middle. I was sent up North and when I returned to Broward, I went to Blanche Ely High; but I was struggling so much, I eventually dropped out." Despite the challenges, Dwelly persisted. She earned her high school diploma from American Academy in Miami and after the birth of her first daughter, she

made a life-changing decision to be the best version of herself to ensure her baby would have a secure future. For close to five years, she waitressed and sold vacation time-shares to put herself through college. When questioned about her choice to become a teacher, she didn't think twice: "It was really difficult for me to enter college as an adult and I felt so awkward trying to use the new technology. What saved me was one professor. She called me to her office and spent the extra time to tell me about all the free resources I could use and teach myself about software like PowerPoint. That changed the way I felt about myself and my opportunities. I decided right then that I wanted a career that allowed me to have that impact on others."

Ms. Dwelly believes that middle school students need the most support, "I am positive that having a PASL course greatly improves students' lives both now and in their future. Social emotional learning teaches them about reacting to situations. Negative or positive, there is always a choice to make. Now is when students begin to mold into the person they will become. Students can never have too many people invested in them." She is guided by her favorite Barack Obama quote: "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek." Her modesty and wisdom have unquestionably impacted children like Chackie Fertile, who has some advice for all teachers, "They should be like Ms. Dwelly and give us the rubrics, so we know exactly what to do." Her words of encouragement for Ms. Dwelly, "Please don't be discouraged by difficult children. You're a good teacher and there are students who will always need you. I want you to stay." Sunrise Middle School Interim Principal, Tarshé Freeman holds Ms. Dwelly in the very highest regard and wishes her well: "Dear Ms. Dwelly, you are such a valuable part of our Falcon Family and we thank you for choosing Sunrise as your home to do this much needed work. You are the change we want to see in our world."



*Robbi-Beth Dwelly was nominated for this feature in the RMG Staff & Student Spotlight by her colleagues: Analisa Austin & Errol Simpson.*

# It Takes a Village - A Look at Community Partnership



Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) is proud to continue its partnership with the Community Foundation of Broward. Part of our Reimagining Middle Grades work is driven by the largest grant ever awarded by the Community Foundation of Broward, \$3 million – \$1 million over each of the next three years. The District has also matched the grant from the Community Foundation. This makes the total contribution to the Reimagining Middle Grades initiative to be \$6 million.

The ten schools associated with the grant are: Apollo, Attucks, Bair, Crystal Lake, Lauderdale Lakes, New Renaissance, New River, Nova, Silver Lakes, and Sunrise. At each of the schools, the grant has funded an additional person to help to improve attendance, reduce risk-taking behaviors and increase academic achievement on a subset of students. Additionally, each of the ten schools has created personalization classes to ensure all students obtain academic success and have the necessary social-emotional learning supports.



Apollo Middle School



Attucks Middle School

The Community Foundation of Broward visits schools throughout the year to see the initiative in action and have conversations with school personnel.

## Recognition Corner

Support for 'School is Cool' has been provided by the following Funds at the Community Foundation:

- Mary and Alex Mackenzie Community Impact Fund
- Mary N. Porter Community Impact Fund
- The Allen Family Fund for Children
- Broward's Tribute to Children Fund
- The Sherman "Red" Crise and Evelyn R Crise Memorial Fund
- The Huizenga Fund for Children
- James and Lynn LaBate Family Fund
- Lawrence A. Sanders Fund to Promote Literacy
- Jim Moran Children's Fund
- Sheriff Nick Navarro Fund
- Robert O. Powell Family Fund
- Margaret and Cato Roach Tribute Fund
- Patricia Lee Rutherford Fund for Children
- Sun Sentinel Literacy Fund
- Charles and Ruth Taylor Fund
- Anna Bloeser Fund
- Donald C. Grobmyer Fund
- David and Francie Horvitz Family Fund
- Edwin A. and Jane N. Huston Fund
- Herschell and Margo Lewis Fund
- Jan Moran Unrestricted Fund
- Norman R. and Ruth Rales Fund
- Kathleen Kinney Slappey Fund
- LaVere G. and Mabel R. White Fund
- The Rumbaugh Fund
- Jack Belt Memorial Fund
- Vista Healthplan Children's Health Fund
- Fred and Mary Ruffner Fund
- William G. Roy, Sr. Fund
- Frank D. and Anita M. Butler Endowment Fund
- Community Impact Fund
- Margaret Garrison via Discretionary Community Fund.