

# REIMAGINING MIDDLE GRADES

## Staff and Student Spotlight July 2020 – Volume 2, Edition 2

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 have wrapped up our second year of Reimagining Middle Grades.

Many of our classrooms have incorporated project-based learning (PBL) opportunities. Through this teaching approach, students are engaged in real world and meaningful projects over an extended period. Students develop deep content knowledge as well as building upon their 21st century skills.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) supports students in a warm environment where their unique educational needs are met. Our middle school environments are enhanced by a school and classroom culture on safety, connection and problem-solving.

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 achievement to help them successfully transition from middle to high school and beyond.

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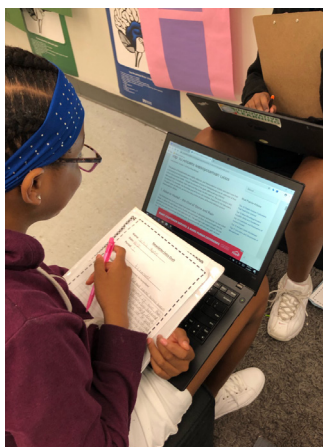
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### SPARKING THE LOVE OF LEARNING THROUGH PBL AND SEL

*By Ashleigh Foutch, Instructional  
Facilitator, Secondary Learning*

After attending a summer PBL training, Ms. Christopher was inspired to find ways to combine what she learned in her SEL training with PBL in her 7th grade Skills Civics course at Lauderdale Lakes Middle. She wanted to expand upon the previous year's Mesopotamia project. After generating some ideas with her classes, the Driving Question for her Mesopotamia Newsletter and Achievements Model Project became 'How can we as students create a newsletter that outlines the achievements and key figures of the ancient Mesopotamia Civilizations?' The final project would be the newsletter and a 3-D model of an ancient achievement. Having used PBL the year before, Ms. Christopher wanted to do something different, and further



## SPARKING THE LOVE OF LEARNING THROUGH PBL & SEL CONTINUED

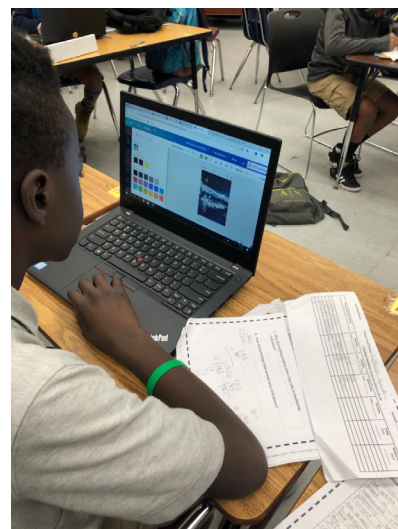


incorporate more standards. “I wanted students to understand how history and current news work hand in hand. Since social media has a large impact on our students today, I wanted to open them up to a different form of media, many tend to neglect,” she said.

Throughout the seven-week process, the students worked in groups in which they assumed different roles and responsibilities. Ms. Christopher found it imperative to incorporate what she had learned during the Conscious Discipline SEL training during this phase of the project. Roles were assigned to assist in areas of growth for each student in a way that would inspire confidence and promote unity. Within their groups they each were responsible for highlighting a key historical figure and one achievement. They were to create a 3D model of the Mesopotamia achievement of the civilization, logo and a newsletter.

Teaching them the appropriate way to conduct research was a focus, as well as the writing process. There were several rounds of drafting and editing involved. Students from other classes came in to review the work and provide feedback using rating forms. Finally, the class had a Media Press Day so the students could present their information about the key historical figure and achievements.

“Preparation is key to PBL and classroom structure. I enjoyed the process and so did my students. They have been begging since we started “virtual learning” for us to do one more PBL. They learned so much in content and about themselves. I think they love the fact that they can show their understanding of the content in more than just one way,” Ms. Christopher stated.



Given this enthusiastic response from her students, it seems as though PBL has undoubtedly sparked a love for learning at Lauderdale Lakes Middle School!

### PBL DEVELOPS COMMUNITY CITIZENSHIP

*By Ashleigh Foutch, Instructional Facilitator, Secondary Learning*

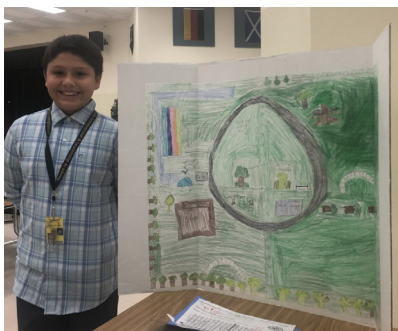
Ms. Karetha Times-Marshall at Pines Middle School has led the charge in developing PBL within her school. After attending a summer PBL training, she developed a cross-curricular team to integrate the process for her students. The idea to help the city of Pembroke Pines with building out tree canopies by 30% was born. The principal, Mr. Campbell, developed a letter asking the students for assistance. It invited them to assist the City of Pembroke Pines to improve the air quality by increasing the city’s canopy by 30% by the year 2030. The letter also asked the students to redesign various areas located around the campus and plant trees to produce the



## PBL DEVELOPS COMMUNITY CITIZENSHIP CONTINUED



*Ms. Times-Marshall with Frank Ortis, Mayor of Pembroke Pines at the PBL Exhibition Showcase*



canopy. This concept created the driving questions that compelled the students to begin their PBL journey.

Students then developed a system for research to learn more about tree canopies and their impact. Each content area classroom took on different roles for research and data collection based on their discipline. Areas explored included climate change, argumentative writing, data and finance. The students also worked with the city of Pembroke Pines, and collected data from around the school campus.

Field trips were also included to prepare and gather more data. Some of the field experiences included Flamingo Gardens, Everglades Forest Rangers, and the Broward County Climate Summit. Incorporated in their research would be the information gathered from these field trips that would then culminate in an Exhibition Showcase which included community members, a judge's panel and parents. On the day of the Exhibition Showcase, students of all learning levels were included.

Numerous students who have historically had academic concerns all year presented to the community in a professional and educational manner. To see the learners of her classroom presenting, one would have thought they were professionals with specific knowledge of landscaping, environmental sustainability, cultural relevance and canopy growth. The students' performance that day was a true testament to Ms. Times-Marshall and the impact of project-based learning on student success. One parent stated she has never received positive feedback about her child like this before and expressed true gratitude for providing him with this opportunity.

When asked about the impact of this PBL experience one student stated, "It has made me be a better person because now I take recycling serious and I don't take trees for granted." Congratulations to Ms. Times-Marshall for developing an engaging PBL that created confident, self-motivated students and citizens!

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**"It has made me be a better person because now I take recycling serious and I don't take trees for granted."**

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Tamisha Washington

## THE POWER OF CONNECTION

*By Yarlle Nicolas, Instructional Facilitator, School Counseling & Brace Advisement*

Tamisha Washington of Attucks Middle truly believes that connection is key when educating our students. Her love for education stemmed from her Aunt Pearly, also an educator who instilled the seed for learning. “I remember growing up sitting with my aunt as a child, preparing lesson plans and listening to her stories about being an educator. She inspired me to become an educator, because it always felt innate. . .” stated Ms. Washington. As the interview emerged, I learned so much about her passion and career.

Mrs. Washington expressed how SEL has become her passion, “. . . I was always curious about my students and understanding their families’ lives . . . relationships is the key. . .”. Mrs. Washington continued to express how the various professional developments received in BCPS helped tremendously in learning more about SEL and the implementation of best practices. Mrs. Washington attended Conscious Discipline and talked about how this learning opportunity helped her to look introspectively and focus on connecting with herself to then empower her students. “That was the missing piece for me, connecting with myself to connect with my students . . .”. Mrs. Washington implements yoga and incorporates an innovative style. “I focus on allowing the students to feel SEL, before I even open my mouth. Meaning how I connect with them, the way the classroom is designed before I start with explicit instruction on brain states and other SEL components.” Mrs. Washington talked about utilizing social media such as Instagram and other mediums to connect with her students remotely along with her community during this pandemic.

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**“The class also helped me learn and understand my worth as a student....”**

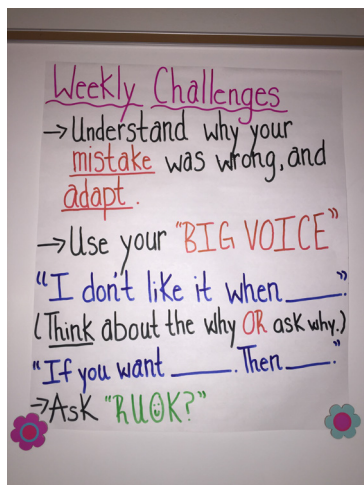
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Ms. Washington delivers highly specialized support to students in her personalization classes, also referred to as PASL. In Mrs. Washington's classroom students are provided with guidance and strategies on how to improve their attendance, behavior, and grades at Attucks Middle School. A colleague has noticed that because of Mrs. Washington, educators have seen a notable change in many of the hard to reach students. They have become more self-aware, confident, and involved in their school community.



## THE POWER OF CONNECTION CONTINUED



The true impact of the work being by the teacher done resides in the testimony of the students. When asked, Mrs. Washington could think of many of her students who have experienced a turn-around this school year. There are two young ladies who really embraced the class and made it a part of their lives outside of the classroom. Their commitment to SEL was evident because they would reference knowledge and skills learned in class and how they applied these skills in their home; then she would reflect with them. These two students also acted as unofficial ambassadors because they would always refer to SEL concepts when having discussions with their peers. When



asked to share about his opinion of the PASL class, Jacob shared that he was very thankful for the class, the teacher, and the school's Community Liaison.

“I think the PASL class is a much-needed class.... I personally felt this class was a pit stop for my hard-working day of school and just to take a breath and reflect. The class also helped me learn and understand my worth as a student.... I feel I just needed the class. I grew, not just academically, but mentally as well.”

## EVERY BEHAVIOR IS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

*Shining bright for her students and colleagues daily, our featured teacher has humbly requested that only her story remain in the spotlight. Her name and school will remain anonymous.*

*Interviewed by Deborah Cardoso, SEL Project Manager for Reimagining Middle Grades*

Emerging from a 4-day Conscious Discipline course with a group of like-minded colleagues, our featured teacher clarified something she already knew: Every behavior is a form of communication. With a background in psychology, this is a familiar concept to her. “Children have reasons for doing what they do, but they don’t always have the verbal language to communicate it with us,” she explains. She entered the training with established relationship-building skills, and Conscious Discipline provided practical tools to apply this and many other concepts with increased precision. An immediate shift in teaching practices happened for all the teachers and within a few months she, as well as many of her colleagues, began to see marked improvements in her students.

Motivated by a desire to be able to talk with her students about what is happening when their executive functioning capabilities are not accessible, she taught the brain states to all her classes at the beginning of the year. “I wanted to be able to talk to them about what was happening



## EVERY BEHAVIOR IS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION CONTINUED

in their brains when they got upset, so I made a power point about the brain states and conducted a lesson on triggers.” Students kept their triggers private and practiced using the breath and other mindfulness techniques to return to a state of executive functioning. With time and frequent breathing practices, students were able to calm themselves down more quickly. Breathing techniques are taught whole group by focusing on what the breath feels like. “By the end of the second quarter, students started to use the classroom Safe Space (name changed for anonymity) and the tools within it to help them regulate strong emotions.”

Her classroom’s Safe Space has visuals to guide students to calm down, headsets to listen to a sound machine, calming glitter jars, and mindfulness cards for reflection and taking pause. Her students use the Safe Space meaningfully. Observing their teacher encourage students to go to the Safe Space and use the tools to gain composure reinforced the purpose of the Conscious Discipline structure. An autistic student in first period frequents the Safe Space as place to self-regulate. “Students seeing me react to her calmly and holding her accountable taught them how to react calmly as well. Not reacting automatically is what makes a difference.”

Other students benefit from classroom jobs. She started out this year introducing sixteen jobs in each of her classes, allowing students to submit applications for the top five. “Managing a job board for the whole class was way too much.” Next year, she will continue to offer jobs for the kids who want them. On the walls outside of her classroom, she thematically displayed large laminated quotes and positive affirmations. Everybody loved them, the students respected them, and there has been zero vandalism to this bulletin display. They were impacting for students and teachers alike; however, it made the biggest difference for the teachers.

Conscious Discipline helps her, and her colleagues remember to stop, breathe, and not react. This past year, she doesn’t get ‘ruffled’ as much as she used to. She explains that it is helpful to act like a detective to try and get to the cause of the behavior. By breathing deep and focusing on figuring out what students are trying to communicate, she has stopped blaming students and instead has found ways to help them manage emotions and solve problems.

Our featured teacher is hopeful that Conscious Discipline will be rolled out to her whole school. She believes that all teachers need an introduction from a trainer who understands middle schoolers. “My first introduction to Conscious Discipline was through a video course. I was lucky that my experience allowed me to filter out the heavy elementary content. Most middle school teachers would be put off if that was their only introduction to (Conscious Discipline).”

In the meantime, her and her team are hoping to make small changes in their school next year that will continue to create a positive climate such as replacing the school bell with music to transition classes and to implement class jobs more realistically. They are thankful for the support they received from their Assistant Principal, because they do not think they could have inspired others in their building without it.

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**“Conscious Discipline helps her, and her colleagues remember to stop, breathe, and not react”**

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Jill Martinez, a Community Liaison at Attucks Middle

## AN ANGEL AMONG US

*Interviewed by Tanya Thompson*

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. Part of these District-match dollars are used to staff a Community Liaison and to fund personalization classes at ten schools: Apollo, Attucks, Bair, Crystal Lake, Lauderdale Lakes, New Renaissance, New River, Nova, Silver Lakes, and Sunrise.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused us to close schools as of March 13, 2020. Since then, we have distributed 90,000 laptops to ensure that “learning never closes”. Learning went from face to face to an online platform by March 30th. Student engagement, in lieu of physical attendance, has been monitored every day. These “Community Angels” have been indispensable during this time to keep our most fragile students engaged.

The 10 Liaisons have made extra efforts to provide outreach to select families that epitomizes going above and beyond. George Brown of Crystal Lake met with parents in the evenings to distribute laptops because some parents were unable to get off from work to come to school during the day to get a laptop. Jonathan Thomas of Silver Lakes hosts Instagram Live sessions to keep students engaged. Phone calls and emails became the main form of outreach to check on the well-being of families and needs or resources. This interview takes a closer look at Jill Martinez, a Community Liaison at Attucks Middle. Because the work embodied by Jill and the other nine Liaisons, this selfless group of individuals has also been coined as “Community Angels”.

### **Describe your role and what a typical day looks like in a brick and mortar schoolhouse.**

Under normal circumstances, a day in my life as a Community Liaison begins with warm welcomes, hugs, fist bumps and so much love through physical connections. It’s one of the most important parts of the job as some do not receive that connection at home. The remainder of the day revolves around checking in on my kids in a variety of class settings and fielding calls from concerned parents. I also implement action plans developed through collaboration with parents, teachers and guidance counselors.

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## AN ANGEL AMONG US CONTINUED

### Since schools have been closed, where have you been directing your time and energy?

I have spent a lot of time guiding students and parents through the technical knowledge necessary for success. This has been a huge lift and have helped in many ways: helping with logging on to CANVAS, helping students to schedule their time appropriately, making impromptu drive-by visits to check on their well-being, serving as a direct line of communication through live video chats, assisting them in completing and submitting assignments, connecting them with their teachers and cheering on their success.



*Photograph taken on January 30, 2020. Pictured from left to right: George Brown (Crystal Lake), Raymonde Desire (Sunrise), Caroline Lofton (New Renaissance), Latosha Bright (Lauderdale Lakes), Tanya Thompson (center), John Martinez (New River), Daniesha Patterson (Bair), Jonathan Thomas (Silver Lakes) Alexandria Hall (Nova), Jill Martinez (Attucks), Marie Coriolan-Vilus (Family & Community Engagement).*

### Tell us a story about how you were able to be a lifesaver or a hero for your families and students.

I was approached by an individual who wanted to use their stimulus check to help the students I work with. With that idea in mind, I put the word out to see if anyone else was looking for an opportunity to serve others. My friends stepped up and the money was used to purchase \$100 Aldi's gift cards to provide families with food insecurity much needed support. The fourteen families were surprised and extremely grateful.

### What reasons did you find for students not engaging in school and what assistance did you offer?

Accountability is much higher in this space. The students I work with have a lack of basic computer skills. This was frustrating and sometimes no one at home was able to help. I am reaching out via video meetings, e-mails, or text messages to provide step by step instruction and provide much needed encouragement. Families were not on an island and I felt it important to provide all available resources.

### What is one thing you wish teachers knew about your students?

My students thrive when you focus on their positive traits.





## PARTNERS IN EDUCATION

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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.

## 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  
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Broward's Tribute to Children Fund  
The Sherman "Red" Crise and Evelyn R. Crise Memorial Fund  
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