Programs that focus on leadership skills, team building, and conflict resolution combine to create a strong transition program at Andrew W. Mellon Middle School.

Middle level educators constantly experience the ebb and flow of the emotional and social energy of young adolescents. Quality middle level schools seek ways to channel this energy in positive directions. One of middle level educators’ responsibilities is to provide students with opportunities to grow through a variety of educational experiences, some of which go beyond the curriculum into areas of personal growth.

Schools approach this task in a variety of ways. Andrew W. Mellon Middle School has
selected leadership as an area of concentration for student development. We believe that each student has leadership potential and can be taught skills to enhance that potential. To accomplish this task, our school has implemented a program called LEAP: Leadership Education for Action Program.

LEAP advances the understanding, practice, and development of leadership through age-appropriate student activities and training. Designed to identify and develop potential leaders, LEAP teaches leadership skills that last a lifetime and gives students opportunities to make a difference in their school and community. Students work with both peers and adults in settings that offer real-life experiences. LEAP provides opportunities to:

- Develop leadership skills
- Accept responsibility
- Set goals
- Communicate effectively
- Make decisions
- Solve problems
- Establish friendships

These opportunities are provided through:

**Workshops** All students have the opportunity to develop, lead, and participate in age-appropriate workshops on topics that improve the quality of life in our learning community. Workshops focus on the areas of leadership development, communication, conflict resolution, diversity, organization and management, and team building.

**Advisory Sessions** Student representatives meet with administrators to discuss issues pertinent to our learning.
community. Students brainstorm to identify specific areas for school improvement. After issues are identified, they are processed through problem-solving activities and plans for improvement are formed.

**School and Community Service.** Students plan and implement activities to become involved in their school and community. Last year Mellon Middle School students supported the Make-A-Wish Foundation. The goal was to make a difference in the lives of deserving children. Through a variety of service activities, students helped make two wishes come true. A fund-raising garage sale was a curriculum-based project in which students were asked to design a garage sale proposal in math class to support our goal.

This year, Mellon Middle School students selected The Children's Institute. Each of our grade-level teams raised money with such activities as donut sales, valentine messages, carnivals, talent shows, school dances, and popcorn sales.

In its first year, LEAP involved more than 100 students in grades 6 through 8. Now, in its third year, it continues to grow and involves all sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students through programs that extend the original program, such as Kids Teaching Kids, License to Lead, and the Summer Leadership Camp.

**Kids Teaching Kids**

This program links our eighth graders with sixth grade students through a series of student-led workshops on important early adolescent issues. Topics have included conflict resolution, tobacco prevention, and drug and alcohol awareness. The Kids Teaching Kids program originated from the American Cancer Society under the direction of Pam Connolly.

The program focuses on the dangers of tobacco use, why kids start using tobacco, advertising strategies used to attract kids, and decision-making strategies that help kids avoid making wrong choices. Eighth grade students work in groups of four to team teach lessons that raise their younger peers' awareness of the dangers of tobacco. This particular program emphasizes problem-solving skills that will help students make sound decisions when faced with such lifestyle choices as whether to use tobacco.

To be effective teachers, LEAP students had to educate themselves about tobacco. They also had to develop basic teaching skills. Students participated in a three-hour training session preparing them for each of the three two-hour workshop sessions. Holding sixth graders' attention for two hours—on any subject—is a challenge, and the student leaders had to plan a variety of activities. The tobacco workshop began with a brainstorming session about the consequences of tobacco and why kids start using it and continued with a series of hands-on demonstrations on the effects of lung cancer.

Perhaps the most important part of the day is role playing, which begins with discussions of strategies that can be used to avoid tobacco. Students are moved into small groups and act out scenarios where they might be offered tobacco. The goal? How to say no. Students end the workshop session by signing a pledge to not smoke or chew tobacco.

The conflict resolution program and alcohol awareness program sessions follow a similar format. The conflict resolution program focuses on dealing with relationships: knowing what behavior to expect, recognizing different or hurtful behaviors, and promoting positive behaviors. The drug and alcohol prevention program focuses on essential decision-making skills necessary to avoid these high-risk behaviors. Because of its success, the program has expanded to include seventh grade student leaders who provide workshops for fifth grade elementary students.

**License To Lead**

Administrators and guidance staff members teach students about leadership characteristics, decision making, and conflict management. During the opening week of school, we conduct expectation sessions with sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students in the auditorium. The expectations sessions help students understand the rules in the middle school handbook. Part of this session explains the school philosophy of communication, cooperation, and care. The remaining sessions for License To Lead are conducted during student team time.

The second session in the License To Lead program focuses on positive leadership characteristics. During this session, students choose individuals they recognize as positive leaders, identify the characteristics they admire in these individuals, and explain their choices. Finally, students are presented with a checklist of items that helps them identify what is important to them and why.

The third session in the License To Lead program is about making good choices. Students learn a process for sorting out difficult problems and apply the process in role plays. The role-play situations specifically pertain to challenges that middle level students confront on a day-to-day basis.

LEAP is supplemented by a parent education component that addresses such topics as understanding the middle level child, learning styles, and decision making by answering questions:

- How do I communicate with my middle level child?
- How can I help with homework hassles?
- How do I deal with changes that are occurring?
- How much freedom should I allow?
These sessions teach parents to become advocates for our learning community and to develop better understanding of the complex nature of early adolescence.

Summer Leadership Camp
This program facilitates the transition of incoming sixth graders to the middle school. It focuses on leadership development with a particular emphasis on team building and communication skills and helps young adolescents move from an elementary school setting to a middle school philosophy.

Students engage in a variety of experiential learning activities that help sixth grade students understand:
- What works in problem solving—cooperating, trusting, etc.
- What does not work in problem solving—withdrawal, yelling, etc.
- The positive effects of working on a team—less work, more fun, a lot gets done
- The negative effect of not working on a team—more work, less fun, nothing gets done.

Phase 1
Eighth grade student volunteers train for the summer leadership camp by participating in the activities beforehand. They learn to consider both physical and emotional safety issues, as well as how to conduct and debrief on a session. These eighth graders come to understand that students will not gain insight from an activity unless they reflect upon the activity after completing it. Their role is to make sure a reflective component takes place by asking the following or similar questions:
- Was this an individual or team effort?
- How was the problem solved?
- Was your solution effective?
- Who were the leaders? Who were the followers?
- What skills were needed to be a good leader or follower?
- What did your group learn that you will use on the next activity?

Phase 2
Incoming sixth graders are invited to attend a summer workshop. Students participate in activities to enhance problem-solving skills, build teamwork, and create positive relationships. Both the participants and the student leaders reflect on the events by completing an evaluation to help students understand the purpose of the day and provide us with feedback when planning future programs.

Phase 3
As a follow-up to the summer leadership program, each sixth grade team conducts an experiential learning activity after school starts to continue the team building and problem solving by incorporating the students and staff members. Students and staff members are divided into groups of 10 to 15 and taken through a series of activities facilitated by a member of the guidance and administrative team. These sessions include time for processing and suggestions for improved performance. Students and staff members are asked to complete an evaluation to facilitate future planning.

Conclusion
Every middle school strives for a positive learning atmosphere. Because LEAP is an inclusive approach to leadership training, it has been instrumental in developing and maintaining that atmosphere. In our third year at Mellon, we have seen a remarkable improvement in the culture of our school—a school that prides itself on its spirit. This includes a dramatic decrease in discipline referrals and an increase in school satisfaction.

Reference

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