

The evolution of Academic Lab

Being a former middle school teacher and principal, I am aware that middle school students must have additional enrichment opportunities to keep them motivated and meet their varied needs. In the past, time was created for these opportunities by taking minutes from each class period to create a homeroom. Over time, though, I realized that taking time from instruction was not the best solution to address these needs. A new plan needed to be developed, and the opportunity to build enrichment and support into the school day was appealing to me.

The new plan began with mid-level educators and committee members discussing changes to the middle school schedule. Through this discussion, it became apparent that setting time aside to sup-

port kids should be driven by the middle school teams. These teams of teachers work directly with the students and have the best understanding of students' needs. Therefore, these teams could best structure the time, termed Academic Lab, to effectively meet those needs.

Academic Lab, and the middle school model change, is in its second year of implementation. An independent consultant has been studying the changes and, according to his report, Academic Lab needs to be addressed. It was recognized by the administration that critical support would be needed, and to prepare for this an Academic Lab Advisory Committee was established consisting of teachers, middle school administrators, the Kyrene Education Association president and



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myself. The group shared materials, offered professional development and drafted the expectations and parameters for Academic Lab.

I have put a strong focus on the program this school year. The parameters were shared with all middle school teachers and principals asked each team of teachers to plan for Academic Lab during their team meetings. In addition, principals are to provide reports to district administrators about how Academic Lab is being used. In fact, I have personally visited every middle school and I see clear evidence that teams are addressing their students' needs. This includes observing a math teacher

working with students from across the team to provide academic support, as well as witnessing a group of students producing a movie based upon a Character Counts pillar.

As the year progresses, we will receive more information about the impact of Academic Lab and how the additional support has affected it. As the program moves into its third year, we will be striving for excellence, so that each student can meet their full potential.

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