

## In Session with the “Oriole” Superintendent

*This week’s Oriole Corner has been written by guest columnist Matt Maitland, Charlotte Middle School Principal*

### “For the Love” of Middle Schoolers!

For 13 years now, I’ve had the pleasure of being a middle school teacher and principal. I can’t count the number of times I’ve been told “you’re crazy” for choosing to work with this particular age group. With physical and cognitive changes, social pressures, and many other factors, the middle school years are arguably some of the toughest for children to navigate. On the other hand, they are developing a sense of increased independence, creativity, and sense of humor. They question their surroundings and are looking to “make sense of it all” in their own way. I love working with this age group! Based on my experiences and from doing a little bit of research, I’d like to share some things that we can all do to support these students through this very important time of their life.

### Build Authentic Relationships

Peer pressure is a major factor that comes into play during the middle school years that can impact decision making for our students. In one of our recent character building lessons at CMS, the presenter said, “show me your friends and I’ll show you your future.” This is very true. Young adults are trying to determine who they are. Naturally, they are impacted by those that are closest to them. In many cases, those closest to them are their peers. As adults, it’s going to be difficult to compete with peers for influence if we do not have authentic relationships with them. At the middle school, we’ve made building positive relationships with students our number one priority. We accomplish this by going out of our way to have personal conversations with students about their interests. We have a goal of having at least 4 times as many positive interactions as negative or constructive interactions. Once a positive relationship is established we are much more likely to have an impact on our students as their role models.

### Encourage Incremental Growth

We’ve all made mistakes! Some mistakes are bigger than others. However, all mistakes are an opportunity to learn and grow. As I said before, the middle years are tough. We should avoid piling on guilt and lectures for our students. These tactics

rarely work. A more effective approach is to set firm boundaries and expectations for our students to ensure that our students are clear about what we expect of them. This is why we have our PBIS system at CMS. The foundation of our PBIS system is a clear set of expectations. For every area of the school and for every time of the day, students have been taught these expectations. When students do not follow them, we review them and use mistakes as a learning opportunity. Depending on the mistake, there may be a consequence associated with it, but that is also an opportunity for growth. Through this time, it's important to allow our students to have a voice to communicate, even if they're wrong. Allowing students to be an active participant throughout this process maximizes the chance that they will learn as a result and be better off in the end. Focusing on the journey that students are on, rather than the destination is what is most important. Once again...we all make mistakes. And more important than the mistake is how we respond to it.

### Celebrate and Encourage

Students at this age are sponges. They take in everything around them. This is one of the things that I love most about working with this age group. However, this can also be a challenge. Association with negative things can produce negative results. To combat this, we must be in tune with our students and constantly encourage them to explore and pursue their passions. As educators and parents we need to help our children have mind-blowing, positive experiences in and out of school by connecting them to whatever their interests are. It could be a sport, a hobby, a favorite book series, or any number of other things. Once we find what makes them tick, it's important to celebrate and encourage them in their efforts. At CMS, one of the most important parts of high quality instruction is to connect student interest and engagement to the content. We are currently in the middle of a school-wide engagement study. As a part of this study, we have been uncovering what engagement looks like in classrooms in order to support teachers in making their classrooms as engaging as possible. Research shows that in order to improve instruction we need to have teachers observing teachers. One process for facilitating teacher observations is called Linking Walks. Through the "Linking Walks" process, teams of teachers are taking time to get into each other's classrooms to study what truly makes students tick. Furthermore, two years ago, CMS created our "Enrichment Block." For the first 30 minutes of school, there are 20 enrichment classes offered to students. Students are able to select 4 of these classes throughout the year and have the opportunity to be exposed to content and information that they enjoy and find passion in. After all, if students at this level are not engaged or passionate, it will be difficult for them to find success. We will continue to pursue growth in this area.

At CMS, we recognize that we are on a journey too. We value and will continue to focus on building relationships with our students, our parents, and our community. We welcome feedback and suggestions about how we can grow. We also want to celebrate and encourage the good things that are happening at the middle school and in the district. Thank you for partnering with us as we strive to meet the needs of all students, but specifically, meeting the needs of our wonderful middle schoolers.