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**Looking Back to Look Forward:
An Interview with John Swaim on the Making of *This We Believe***

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John Swaim

Abstract

In the early 1980s, John Swaim was the president of the National Middle School Association (NMSA) Board of Trustees. John Lounsbury, then editor of *Middle School Journal*, collaborated with John Swaim and the Board of Trustees to commission the writing of the original document, *This We Believe*. Nancy Ruppert contacted John Swaim to ask him to tell the story of how *This We Believe* was conceived. They collaborated using an interview format. The most recent version, *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) like the original document was recorded with input from leaders in middle level education, and just like the original document provides preservice and inservice teachers with tools and inspiration on the best way to respond to the needs of young adolescents. John Swaim's story provides a backdrop for professors to use with preservice teachers to honor and acknowledge the work of those who have come before us, and it highlights the power and value of collaboration in support of middle level education.

A Brief Overview of Middle Level Education

In the early years, middle level education ignited a 'movement' to support young adolescents differently. Junior High Schools had been initiated in the early 1900s as an alternative to high schools. Early researchers like Anna Freud, Eric Erickson, and Jean Piaget documented and supported the idea that adolescence was and is a 'stage' between childhood and adulthood.

Fast forward to 1958, when William Alexander shared a vision that junior high schools were not meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents, and middle level education was born (Powell, 2010). However, starting a national association was not an easy task. In the 1960s other educational associations assumed the responsibility for providing professional development ~~needs~~ for middle level education and questioned a need for an association that would be dedicated to just middle school. At the 1972 ASCD Conference in an open meeting, John Lounsbury and Conrad Toepfer made a proposal to work collaboratively with ASCD, which received a noncommittal "wait and see" response, in the words of John Swaim. Independent and driven, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) was established in 1972.

The Development of a Position Paper for Middle Level Education

In 1972, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) was established, and, by 1982, specific practices were being shared at their national conferences. In 1983, the first whitepaper was produced to support educators interested in knowing more about middle level education. The

document was called *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1983), and it laid out theoretical and practical explanations and elements associated with what the NMSA supported as exemplary middle schools. *This We Believe* (1983) was developed by seven thought-leaders who were professors: Drs. John Lounsbury, William Alexander, Donald Eichhorn, Gordon Vars, Conrad Toepfer, Charles Cherry, and Al Arth. It was supported by Dr. John Swaim, then president of the NMSA Board of Directors, and the Board.

Since 1983, there have been four editions added to the first. Each revision brings to light more current issues, research, and practices that help guide all who seek ways to meet the needs of young adolescents. Professors of Middle Level Education have been instrumental in leading revisions and have continued to work closely with the national organization, now named the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), and its Board of Trustees to ensure that all stakeholders contribute to this important document.

In 1997, the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education established themselves as an affiliate of the national middle level organization, now the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). John Lounsbury led that charge as well, and more than 50 professors and 15 institutions signed the original Charter (shown in Figure 1). For more than two decades, middle level professors have convened at AMLE, at the state level, and regionally to promote best practices and share research in support of *This We Believe*.

Figure 1. The Charter for the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education

In 2021, Professors of Middle Level Education were invited to convene virtually to celebrate the fifth edition of *This We Believe*, called *The Successful Middle School: This We*

Believe (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Professors from 15 states gathered in May 2021 to “look back in order to look forward” a concept described by the Ghanaian word *Sankofa*.

We began with a timeline of events that represented where we have been, followed by a panel of Faculty of Color who helped set the stage of where we need to be going. We brought in the 2021 authors of *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* to lead discussions on various elements that provided us tools to create a more intentional focus on equity and student voice. We engaged in discussions and expanded our own knowledge, our networks, and our commitments to preparing the next generation of middle level leaders.

Figure 2. A Timeline of Different Versions of This We Believe.

Prior to the symposium, John Swaim shared insights into how the original *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1983) came about. In 1982, John Swaim was the president of NMSA. He worked closely with John Lounsbury and the original authors who brought us the first edition.

The following is an interview with John Swaim, who was able to share the purpose and importance of supporting middle level education and the value and power of speaking with a common voice. As we look back to begin to look forward, what you will see is the passion, the commitment, and the vision of those who came before us. What you will hear is their commitment to having a “living document” that provides middle level educators with insights and practices that support all students. John reminds us that by looking back, we are truly looking forward. In his words, “My commitment and professional background to middle level education gave me the opportunity to be a part of the creation of *This We Believe*.” He shared, “I was at the right place at the right time to be a direct part of *This We Believe*. ”

An Interview with John Swaim

Nancy Ruppert interviewed John Swaim in April, 2021. Excerpts from this interview are below.

Nancy: In 2023, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), formerly the National Middle School Association (NMSA), will celebrate its 50th anniversary as an organization. In 2021 AMLE published the 5th edition of *This We Believe*, called *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). But where did *This We Believe* begin?

John: In the early 1980s, NMSA consisted of an Executive Director, a Board of Trustees, and the editor of the *Middle School Journal*. Bob Malinka was the Executive Director of NMSA, John Lounsbury was the editor of the *Middle School Journal*, and I served on the Board of Trustees. It was John Lounsbury's vision to create the original *This We Believe*. I was the President of NMSA and convened the first team of middle level leaders to pen the first edition of *This We Believe*. *This We Believe* began with John Lounsbury's vision and communication with NMSA Leaders.

Nancy: When did you take your academic knowledge about middle school to actual practice?

John: During the 1970s I was the Director of the Laboratory School at University of Colorado. Knowing my interest in middle school and my doctoral work, the Dean approached me about creating a middle school within the K-12 Lab School. We had tried to incorporate all the major components in middle school that I had researched in my doctoral program. Our middle school included such things as multiage grouping, interdisciplinary team teaching, daily activity period (that included intramurals), a week-long outdoor education experience for all students, and an advisory period.

The Dean funded two colleagues and me to attend the first NMSA conference. I was doubly excited because it gave us a chance to see how the middle school program we had developed at the Lab School stacked up nationally with other middle schools. After we attended the conference, we felt that we were not just a middle school, but *the* middle school.

Equally important to me, it gave me an opportunity to meet John Lounsbury in person and possibly have him critique what we had done. One of the sessions I made sure to attend was a panel that John Lounsbury was on. One of the questions that came up was, "Is the middle school movement based on an abstract philosophy or is there any concrete evidence to support it?" John [Lounsbury] was the first on his feet to respond. He spoke passionately about the need for middle schools to be developed upon the unique developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents. Furthermore, he built a strong rationale for how the curriculum and instruction in these schools must reflect these needs and characteristics. He also spoke to the importance of this movement and to be able to change as appropriate based upon a continual growth in research and common practice.

Nancy: How did John Lounsbury influence you as President to form an NMSA committee to develop a strong vision statement for the association? Whom did you contact?

John: Ten years later, when I was President of NMSA, John and I were having the same conversation. It was obvious that NMSA had established itself as *the association* that represented middle school education and John felt it was time to solidify the movement and develop a national position paper that brought together the essential beliefs and practices of middle schools. I developed a task force of recognized middle school leaders who were willing to help further define the programmatic characteristics that were essential for fulfilling the vision that had already been articulated for the middle school. The original composers consisted of John Lounsbury, William Alexander, Donald Eichhorn, Gordon Vars, Conrad Toepfer, Charles Cherry, and Al Arth. Each brought their unique focus and provided their expertise.

Being an optimist, I thought that the initial meeting plus a few weeks for writing and editing would get the job done. However, to the benefit of middle level education's future, this group earnestly debated the needs of the field and sometimes spent hours deciding specific terms to be used. Also realizing that the use of technology was still a limited means of communication between the members, most of these correspondences were in writing. It was John Lounsbury's people skills, personal middle level knowledge base, and superior editing skills that brought this document to life about one year later.

Nancy: How does the most recent edition of *This We Believe* reflect the original *This We Believe*?

John: At that time, 1982, the NMSA Board approved *This We Believe* as its official position paper. They agreed it should be a "living document" which would be reviewed and revised, if necessary, as we went forward. Since the initial release of *This We Believe*, it has been updated and expanded on four additional occasions, each time focusing on the needs of young adolescents, each time reflecting more insights to research related to structures and ways to prepare middle level advocates, and most recently a stronger focus on how equity and student agency permeates what happens in schools.

The original team provided us with a vision that continues to expand and deepen middle level education.

Closing

As the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education (NAPOMLE), we have the opportunity and responsibility to prepare the next generation of middle level advocates and leaders. *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), like the first edition, was created with insights from leaders in the field of middle level education. This edition helps us as university professors to lead with a view of the power and importance of collaboration, commitment, passion, and purpose.

There are three takeaways from this reminder. First, middle level professor helped guide the original writings. They brought their expertise and their passions to the table. As we look forward, we see the editions that followed brought in more and more stakeholders to guide the

focus. As we move into this next iteration of This We Believe, we must remember that it takes all of us and that listening to stakeholders and the voices of our young people must be captured in the writings, in the advice, and in the vision of our role as academic leaders.

A second takeaway is that our Legacy Leaders, the early adopters of middle level education, former teachers, principals, counselors, and coaches have much advice to share. Their historical perspective can remind us that our own passion and willingness to advocate for young adolescents has its roots with fearless thought leaders. Those of us in middle level education are also seeing those future leaders and those who are currently establishing amazing settings for young people to thrive, where school communities and partners are collaborating to bring support and inspiration to classrooms. As middle level professors, when we support administrators, school districts, communities, and future middle level teachers, we are getting to walk next to those who will carry this movement forward.

Finally, the power of story needs to be upheld. We need more stories of those currently in the field, those who are successfully navigating and breaking systems that have not supported all students equally. Collectively, we need to keep sharing the power and passion of those who are inspiring other teachers, inspiring other principals, inspiring other professors who are making a difference in small private schools and large universities. Ultimately, we must continue to believe that middle level education is one of the most powerful places to make a difference in this world.

Today we celebrate those, like John Swaim, who worked tirelessly in the early years and as we look forward, we celebrate those who are leading this work now. May we as the next generation of leaders collaborate to explore ways to serve the developmental, the cultural, and the visionary needs of young adolescents. May we as educators find ways to advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion in middle schools that highlight the student voice. And may we continue to find intentional ways to champion middle level education, like those who have come before us.

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