

Secret to successful schools in Middletown: 'High expectations'

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Middletown High School junior Jonathan Gomez is going to make the best lip dub video that [YouTube](#) has ever seen. He has formed a committee, recruited a student videographer and mapped out the route through the school -- ending, of course, in the district's impressive sports stadium.

"It's a great school. I have a lot of pride," the junior said Wednesday. "And I want to spread that pride to other students."

Gomez's enthusiasm for Middletown schools is a testament to Superintendent Ken Eastwood's seemingly simple recipe for success in a low-income, urban school district: Give every student confidence, opportunities and high expectations and those students will thrive, Eastwood said.

On Tuesday, that approach made Middletown one of 16 schools to receive major Race to the Top grants from the [U.S. Department of Education](#). The district will get \$20 million to develop programs that can serve as models nationally. There is no arguing about Middletown's success. Eight years ago, just 52 percent of Middletown's seniors graduated from high school. In 2011, 83 percent did so.

As Eastwood walked the high school campus Wednesday, teachers, parents, principals -- even the front desk monitor -- offered congratulations and told stories about the high expectations that have made the difference.

NOT AFRAID OF A NEW APPROACH

Next to Jessica [Turner](#)'s desk was a handmade poster that said "Missing School = Missing Out."

Westchester Meadows

*Live in the moment while
planning for the future.*



The poster is one of many projects she has worked on as one of the district's new instructional leaders. For the 2012-2013 school year, the district eliminated the title of high school principal. Now leadership comes from the instructional leaders, who guide teacher practices using data on student performance, and from deans, who work on student behavior.

Some predicted the change would be a disaster, Eastwood said. Instead, the reorganization saved \$180,000 and improved the work environment for staff members.

"I absolutely cannot say anything but amazing things about the new structure," Turner said.

This year, the high school has the largest honor roll in its history, 630 of 2,100 students; a five-point increase in the attendance rate, which is now at 97 percent; and half the disciplinary referrals of recent years.

"Middletown's awesome," Turner said.

The district has engendered an environment in which good ideas bubble up and thrive, she said. That is, if they are research-proven and focused on students.

"We look at kids and what's helping them to be successful," Turner said. Instead of grouping kids and looking at a swath of data, the district takes scores and questions how to help each student. "There wasn't this level of drilling down to the actual kids before."

Students seem to feel that teachers are listening and are supportive of good ideas. Gomez first explained his lip dub idea to a teacher but eventually found himself sitting in the superintendent's office.

Dr. E., as students call him, was quick to offer his support.

"Dr. E. thought it was awesome, and he's helping us do it," Gomez said.

High school senior Marie Johnson said her work as a reporter on the Middie News team has introduced her to a plethora of activities at the high school -- from sports to music to mock trials.

"You need to find things that you're interested in to figure out college and your career. This school gives you a lot of options to choose from," Johnson said.

Middletown students say they are encouraged to look ahead to college and career.

"Students are finally taking initiative," senior David Anzini said. "The teachers' main goal is to get us to college."

TEACHERS GET HELP

At John W. Chorley Elementary School, kindergarten teacher Bridget Curley pulled a folded-up newspaper article about the district's Race to the Top grant from her pocket.

"I was so excited," Curley said.

Curley has worked in the district for 25 years and has seen the ups and downs of education in Middletown. The city's demographics have changed drastically during that time, she said. Once mostly white and middle class, Middletown is now a racially diverse community with high

poverty.

"Even though we have high poverty, there's school spirit," Curley said. "The kids are proud to be in Middletown and the teachers are, too."

One key ingredient is that teachers get plenty of support from their leaders, Curley said. As an example, she opened up a copy of "Literacy in Action."

The custom publication describes what elementary school students need to know and how to score student work in Middletown. The examples in the book are art projects and essays by Middletown's own students.

"A teacher knows exactly what our expectations for the students are," Principal Lisa Collopy said.

Parents are noticing the changes, too.

With one kid slung on her back and another holding her hand, Cassandra Cardinal toted ice cream fixings into Chorley on Wednesday afternoon to reward students for participating in school spirit day. She said she was nervous about the city school district when she dropped her daughter off for kindergarten for the first time. Now, she's effusive in her praise.

"All the changes they are making in Middletown, the emphasis on grades, it seems like the focus is coming back to the child," Cardinal said.

With the new federal grant in hand, Middletown educators intend to continue to innovate. They want to try two years of kindergarten for students who need it, new ways of grading students who are struggling, and new technology for secondary school classrooms.

The literacy guide encourages Middletown to face future challenges bearing in mind the words of American businessman and entrepreneur Sam Walton: "High expectations are the key to everything."

[< back to article](#)