



WHAT iGNITES US

Relational Focus Through a Lens of Engagement

Derry Area Middle School: Derry, PA

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Joy Rosser is currently serving as secretary on the DVR-PASCD board, teaching sixth grade science at Kennett Middle School, serving on the Pennsylvania Don Eichhorn Schools: Schools to Watch State Evaluation Team and is president of the southeast regional PAMLE board. Joy is expanding her research and writing; discovering ways people are being ignited within educational institutions, among student interactions, and within families affiliated with education.

Through a lens of engagement, Derry Area Middle School is making a difference in *every child, every day*. Set along the Laurel Mountains ridge of western Pennsylvania, 35 miles east of Pittsburgh, Derry Area was recently honored with a Schools to Watch designation. Middle-grades schools in several states that exemplify strength and growth in the domains of *academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures and processes* are honored through the Schools to Watch Program; these schools demonstrate a collective commitment to doing what is developmentally appropriate for young adolescents. To date, 465 schools nationwide have been honored; for countless reasons, Derry Area Middle School is among the best.

Everyday lives of children are enhanced at Derry Area through a lens of engagement with an acute focus on making a difference emotionally, socially, cognitively and developmentally. Students grasp the vision and intentions of the staff through the understanding of *The Starfish Story* by Loren Eiseley. A well known story with a lesson in making a difference, a young man emphasizes the importance of rescuing one small, seemingly insignificant starfish amidst millions of others quoting, "It made a difference for that one." Lisa Dubich, principal at Derry Area, emphatically embraces the story as definitive of their school culture sharing that the middle school staff and students live by the story everyday. Tentacles of desirable characteristics help all students gain an understanding of what it truly means to make a difference in a school where generosity and a kindred spirit are boundless.

Zooming in on the pixels of life at Derry Area reveals students who learn through collaboration, meaning centered lessons, and an appreciation for human interactions at all levels. Student potential is maximized through increased engagement and the mindset that every student is equally afforded opportunities to learn and succeed. Specifically, professional development adopted from John Hattie, author of *Visible Learning*, impacts relationships and instruction at Derry Area. Throughout the school, teacher actions are making a difference because they are aware of their broad influence, adjusting their approaches and techniques to best meet the needs of each student. Effective instruction is grounded in passionate teachers who monitor impact, teach with clarity and actively seek to improve their own teaching. Students benefit from meaningful relationships with staff - a core value at Derry Area.

Improving student engagement in an effort to simultaneously improve school culture is an embraced mission throughout the middle school. Focusing on the *care* aspect of school is foundational to learning. At Derry Area Middle School, teachers model respect, incorporate social skills into curriculum, create a family-like classroom environment, build homework time into the school day to reduce stress, remediate, target specific learning interventions and provide wrap-around support services. None of these are simply daily routines but are embedded practices in the school climate of Derry Area with the most important beneficiaries - students.

The focus, zoomed in or out, at Derry Area Middle School is engagement with the intention of making a difference. Effectively engaging students socially and emotionally yields academic *engagement* with a newfound zest for achievement and the ability to inspire others. Making a difference to every child, every day resonates throughout the school but more importantly, resonates within the hearts of the students and staff at Derry Area Middle School.