

High AIMS February Update

February 2025 Tom Burton & Dr. Mari Phillips

Leadership success starts with authenticity.



Message from Tom Burton, Executive Director

First Annual High AIMS Middle Level Symposium Evaluation Report.

Overview

The First Annual High AIMS Middle-Level Symposium was a resounding success, providing educators with meaningful insights, practical strategies, and rich collaborative opportunities. This report highlights the overwhelmingly positive feedback from attendees and identifies key areas to further enhance future symposiums.

1. Relevance and Applicability of Topics

An overwhelming majority of attendees found the topics covered to be highly relevant and directly applicable to their roles. The symposium's content was praised for addressing key educational challenges and offering actionable strategies. While a small number of attendees marked topics as "Somewhat" relevant, this feedback presents an opportunity to refine future content to meet an even broader range of needs.



2. Effectiveness of the Keynote Presentation

Many attendees rated the keynote presentation as "Very effective," appreciating its insightful and thought-provoking content. Some respondents suggested incorporating even more engagement strategies and middle-level education-specific examples to enhance impact. The few neutral responses largely stemmed from attendees who were unable to attend the keynote.

3. Breakout Session Analysis

Session One:

- Standout sessions included *Maximizing Student Engagement and Learning Through Co-Teaching*, *Level Up: An Introduction to Classroom Gamification*, and *Warrior Workshop*, all of which received excellent feedback.
- A couple of sessions received mixed ratings, providing an opportunity to refine session formats for greater engagement.

Session Two:

- The majority of sessions were rated "Excellent," reflecting strong engagement and high content value.
- *Getting to Yes – Empowering Teachers and Student Ideas* sparked a wide range of feedback, from "Excellent" to areas for growth, reinforcing the importance of aligning session styles with attendee expectations to enhance engagement and impact.

Session Three:

- *Making Middle School Bussin'... No Cap!* was a clear favorite, consistently receiving "Very effective" ratings.
- *Every Day Counts: Building a System of Attendance Support* was also well-received, with a few attendees expressing interest in even more practical applications and implementation strategies.

Session Four:

- *Learning and Planner Together* and *Building Connections: The Power of Small Groups in Middle School* were among the most attended sessions and received a mix of "Very effective" and "Somewhat effective" ratings.
- Some participants suggested adding more structured facilitation to maximize session impact.

4. Overall Symposium Quality

Attendees overwhelmingly rated the symposium as "Excellent," citing rich networking opportunities, engaging discussions, and exposure to fresh, innovative ideas as key highlights. The symposium was recognized as a valuable professional learning experience that fostered collaboration and inspired actionable change.

5. Most Valuable Aspects of the Symposium

Participants identified the following as the most impactful elements of the event:

- **Networking and collaboration** with fellow educators.
- **Innovative instructional strategies** that can be applied immediately.
- **Real-world examples and school-wide initiatives** that provided practical insights.

- **Opportunities to present and share** ideas, reinforcing a culture of professional growth.

6. Suggestions for Future Enhancements

To build on this year's success, attendees suggested a few refinements:

- **More Interactive Sessions:** Attendees appreciated hands-on activities and engaging discussions and recommended increasing interactive elements.
- **Venue Considerations:** A few participants noted minor noise distractions between session rooms, suggesting soundproofing solutions or a venue layout adjustment.
- **Diverse Session Offerings:** There was interest in additional topics, such as instructional coaching, co-teaching best practices, and intervention strategies.
- **Facilitated Roundtables:** Attendees expressed interest in structured discussions tailored to specialized roles, such as instructional support teachers.
- **Expanded Networking Opportunities:** Structured networking sessions, informal meet-ups, and post-event social gatherings were suggested to enhance professional connections.

Conclusion

The First Annual High AIMS Middle-Level Symposium was an outstanding event that successfully empowered educators with relevant knowledge, practical strategies, and invaluable networking opportunities. The overwhelmingly positive feedback underscores its impact, and with minor refinements in session facilitation, venue logistics, and content variety, future symposiums will be even more impactful. By incorporating these enhancements, High AIMS is well-positioned to continue inspiring and equipping educators for success!

With gratitude,

Tom Burton
High AIMS Executive Director

SAVE THE DATE - MIDDLE-LEVEL SYMPOSIUM FEBRUARY 5, 2026

Highlights of the Middle-Level Symposium, February 6, 2025



Creating Magical Moments in the Middle



Tom Burton, kicking off the symposium by welcoming participants to the event.



Ice Breaker activity to get to know others



Keynote Speaker, Barry Balaski, Superintendent of Moon Area School District in Pittsburgh, PA

"Culture, Connections, and a Touch of Magic: Building Relationships That Inspire."



Keynote Speaker, Barry Balaski

Call to Action. Barry is reminder middle level educators to cultivate leadership, attitude and people.



"Warrior Workshop - An Innovative Approach to Middle Grades Intervention"

Presenters: Carolyn Petty and Kelly DeNu - Goshen Middle School



"Maximizing Student Engagement and Learning Through Co-Teaching, Stations, and Cross-Curricular Projects,"

Presenters: Ally Stiller, Kelsey Ramicone, Tracy Smith - Deer Park Jr/Sr High School



"Transform the Norm: Reimagining Time and Instruction for Student Personalization"

Presenters: Paul Destino, Principal, Shannon Saunders, Teacher, Vicki McGarry, Teacher, and Rachel Trentanelli (6-8) Mayfield City School District, Mayfield Heights, Ohio



"School-Wide House Incentive Program"

Presenters: Kelsey Rybak, Literacy coach, and Jake Ohnmeis, 8th grade Math teacher, Goshen Middle School - Activity - Team Markers



"Getting to Yes - Empowering Teachers and Student Ideas"

Presenters: Lauren Gentene, Sandy Gemmel, Jimmy Rapp, Brandon Nelson, Alex Fries. Indian Hill Middle School



"Practical Approaches to Co-Teaching"

Presenters: Mike San Marco and Val Casto, Kings Junior High School,



Teaching Takes Two: Empowering Students with Choice

Presenters: Linsey Farroh and Becky Morris Sycamore Junior High School



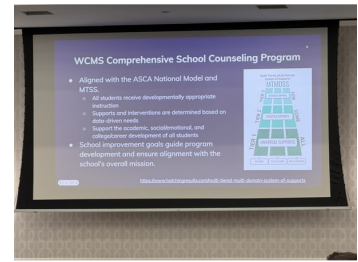
"Making Middle School Bussin'...No Cap!"

Presenters: Jen Bruce, Alison Mendralski, Brian Ruck - Milford Junior High School



"Every Day Counts: Building a System of Attendance Support"

Presenters: Rachel Dietsch, Jessica Arnold - West Clermont Middle School



Building Connections: The Power of Small Groups in Middle School

Presenters: Robin Hater, Sandra Stricker, and Nicolette Dilbert - West Clermont Middle School Counselors, West Clermont Middle School



"Learning and Planner Together"

Presenters: Courtney Ward, Paula Fahrenkamp, Lee Jimenez - Indian Hill Middle School - Thinking Groups. How can you school create a system where you can learn from each other? What are the restraints?



"Learning and Planner Together"

Presenters: Courtney Ward, Paula Fahrenkamp, Lee Jimenez, Indian Hill Middle School - Thinking Groups. Working in teams to accomplish the task.



The First Annual High AIMS Middle Level Symposium

Thank you for making the Middle Level Symposium a meaningful and impactful event!

**SAVE THE DATE - MIDDLE-LEVEL SYMPOSIUM
FEBRUARY 5, 2026**

New Changes Across the Country Around DEI Policies in School Districts and Universities - Explore Replacement Language

The state of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in education continues to evolve as schools strive to create environments where all students can succeed. While there is ongoing debate around DEI policies, many districts remain committed to ensuring every student—regardless of background, ability, or identity—has access to high-quality education. Schools are focusing on inclusive curriculum, equitable funding, and extra support programs and services for students who

need it. Programs that provide specialized interventions, culturally responsive teaching, and social-emotional support are designed to help all students do well. Even though there are challenges, the goal stays the same: to give every student a great education and opportunities to succeed.



February 2025, the Trump administration ordered schools and universities to remove all DEI programs or risk losing federal funding. The U.S. Department of Education gave schools two weeks (February 28) to follow this rule. Many educators and leaders are worried about this change because DEI programs have helped create inclusive and welcoming schools. Now, schools must decide whether to remove these programs to keep their federal funding. Superintendents and other educators are concerned about how this decision will affect educational equity and access to education in the future.

While there are different opinions on this issue, one approach is for schools to move forward by continuing to offer equitable programs and support for all students. It's also important to ensure schools stay warm and welcoming for students, families, and staff. Schools can change the words they use in policies to follow new rules while still focusing on helping all students. By using clear and positive language and focusing on important values like student success, belonging, and access to good education, schools can keep creating safe and supportive places for learning while following the policies in place. Click on the link to see [Explore Replacement Language for DEI](#).

Your dedication to creating a supportive, inclusive, and inspiring learning environment makes a lasting impact on every student—keep believing in the power of education to change lives!

Dr. Mari Phillips. Lead Cohort Director

Location Updates for Upcoming Cohort Meetings!



Click [HERE](#) to see the **updated meeting locations for the remaining leadership cohort meetings**. Please mark your calendars and join us as we continue to collaborate, learn, and lead together: **The Elementary Principal Cohort Group needs a space to meet on March 4. Do we have a volunteer?**

Motivation Quotes to Inspire Resilience and Vision for 2025

- *"Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking care of those in your charge."* – Simon Sinek
- *"The best way to predict the future is to create it."* – Peter Drucker
- *"Success is the sum of small efforts repeated day in and day out."* – Robert Collier



High AIMS Team

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