

Middle Years Leadership Series



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THE MARK OF  
**LEADERSHIP**

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Strategies for Leading with  
Purpose, Plans and Passion

Tom Burton



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## Preface

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When I was in middle school, my mother would find solace in walking the sandy beaches of Lake Erie and searching for sea glass. Pieces of broken bottles that had been tossed around for who knows how long, those polished gems of sea glass ultimately ended up washing ashore. Noting that she had collected thousands of remnants, I asked her why she continued to pick up sea glass and she said, “I think every piece is beautiful – look at this one, I don’t have any that are like it.” She continued, finding beautiful piece after beautiful piece, and the collection grew.

One day, when I was a young teacher, it occurred to me that students are like pieces of sea glass. Sometimes they feel discarded, tossed around during the day following hectic schedules, slammed against the floors of the school, wondering when they will finally wash ashore. But, as great teachers and leaders focused on true practices, we will recognise the sea glass in the sand and polish even the most hardened glass into a beautiful gem.

Apple founder Steve Jobs has a quote intended to highlight difference-makers in our world, but the quote so aptly fits the potential of middle school students we are trying to shape:

*Here’s to the crazy ones – the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently – they’re not fond of rules. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can’t do is ignore them because they change things. They push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.*

This book is a collection of columns I wrote for the Association for Middle Level Education’s *Middle Ground* magazine. I hope they will inspire you to look for the very best in each of the young adolescents and the staff that you lead on a daily basis and to meet their needs so they become the people who change the world.

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TOPIC ONE  
PLANNING  
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## Deciding Your Purpose

Don't say you don't have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Louis Pasteur, Michelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson and Albert Einstein.

—H. Jackson Brown, Jr, author

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As a novice teacher, my revelation came at the end of that first year. As the last student left my classroom, I was swept with emotions. That's it? It's over? There was so much more that I wanted to accomplish. I wasn't ready for the year to be finished. Had I done enough? Had I tried to do too much? As I asked myself these questions, I realised that I was asking the questions too late. I should have *started* the year by asking myself core questions about my practice and curriculum. More than 20 years later, I still carry the lessons of that first year. I know that I haven't seen it all, and I certainly don't know it all. But now I am more deliberate about making every year count.

A good friend often talks to his staff about how lucky we are as educators because we have a start and finish every year. At the end of the year, we get time to reflect and make plans for the next year. What a powerful time it is: springboard from a great year to a better one or, if it was a year marked by difficulty, learn from the year and then put it in the past.

**The bigger picture.** An emotional stop and start motivates me each year. But I always tend to look at each year as a discrete time period. This year is over; next year, I'll do this or that. I rarely look at longer chunks of time. Recently a book title caught my eye: *Where Will You Be Five Years from Today?* The title reminded me of a question I had asked many times in job interviews. It made me think about my students, too. Where did I want them to be in five years? Have I done what it takes to help them get where they need to be in five years?

**Where will you be?** Very simply, the book encourages each reader to plan the next five years of their lives. The author gives some examples of what can be accomplished in five short years. Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel in fewer than five years. Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and five other plays in fewer than five years. Though I could never paint the Sistine Chapel or write like Shakespeare, I know that I can accomplish a number of things in the next five years if I set goals and create a plan – if I look for opportunities rather than focus on roadblocks. The book encourages readers to live life with purpose. So, I pose these two questions to you: What is your purpose? What do you want your students' purposes to be? Whether you are a teacher or administrator, think about what your life's work is. Then break your life's purpose down to the next five years.

**What is your purpose?** I am not encouraging you to set unattainable goals. Instead I ask you, this year did you live your life with purpose? Did you help your students live each day with purpose? Did you help your colleagues live each day with purpose? Five years from today, what do you want to look back at with satisfaction? As educators, we are used to thinking about years. Our lives have been nicely chunked into year-long slots that have a beginning and end. But we rarely think of a long-term goal, or a project that can take several years to accomplish. When I began to think this way, five years seemed like a long time, but it can certainly pass by very fast.

**What do you want your students' purpose to be?** As middle years educators, I want you to think about where your students will be five years from now. If you teach Year 5 students, those students will be in Year 10 within five years. If you teach Year 8 students, those students will graduate from secondary school. Where do you want your students to be five years from now? Did you do enough to help them get there? Begin to think of your students not as Year 5, 6, 7 or 8 students, but as middle years students. As you think this way, you will begin to develop a vision for where you want your students to be five years from now.

We tend to do a good job thinking of individual curricula with a long-term view. For example, a Year 5 history teacher probably has a good idea where their students should be when they study history as Year 10 students. But, do we think about the whole child and where they will be five years from now? What types of skills should we help them develop? What can we do to encourage them to be creative thinkers? How can we teach them to be responsible citizens?

One of America's greatest leaders was Abraham Lincoln. He had a vision of a country that he was willing to risk his political career on. He once said "And in the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years." Let's make sure that from now on, we make each year count, as well as each of the next five years.

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### EXTENDING YOUR THINKING

- On the first day of the next school year when you meet with staff members, how will you communicate your purpose for the year? For the next five years?
  - Create a timeline to plan your key leadership goals for the upcoming year, including attention to some of the unfinished business from last year. Be specific about the times.
  - Create two lists of professional and leadership goals for yourself. One should encompass the next two years. The other list should include goals for Years 3–5.
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