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## Introducing Pre-AP Strategies in Middle School

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🔗 **Middle Matters** » June 2008, Vol. 16, No. 5

by Jennifer Tavernaro

Using Pre-Advanced Placement (Pre-AP) standards in the middle-level classroom may seem out of reach for many students. But with the right strategies and tools, students can increase their achievement as they prepare for high school. Allowing all middle school students to learn and practice higher-level thinking, reading, and writing can open doors for many kids who traditionally would not have considered an Advanced Placement or honors course.

Unfortunately, the concept of the middle-level classroom as a “feel good” place for kids can make it difficult for teachers to gain credibility. What we must remember is that middle school is a time of transition, when students change from day to day as they deal with the stresses of puberty and social pressures. However, it is also a time when we must give students the opportunity to learn and achieve at higher levels in order to prepare them for life beyond middle school.

Academic expectations have risen sharply in the past decade, and middle schools must meet these expectations for all students. However, differentiation must occur in order for the “typical” middle school student to be successful using coursework designed for a future Advanced Placement and honors curriculum. One way to achieve this is through Pre-AP strategies. Given the proper tools, middle school students can use these strategies to find success and push themselves to achieve more. Our job as educators is to make sure that by the end of the year our students have the strategies and techniques that will help them throughout the rest of their education.

### **The Pre-AP Process**

The first step in the Pre-AP process involves pre-assessment and finding out what the kids already know. This allows us to evaluate each student for a personal plan of progress. During the first three to four weeks of school, students complete a series of activities ranging from performance and writing to analysis and standardized testing. These activities help us to determine where our students’ strengths are and what to focus on during the year.

Each student then sits down with a teacher and writes a personal plan and goals, similar to a special education document. The student chooses two areas on which to work and develops a timeline for assessment of his or her goals. The plans are kept in each student’s notebook, along with a tracking system to evaluate progress. As we work our way through the traditional curriculum, the progress plans show each student when extra effort is required or when extra help is needed. The teachers provide intensive support for the first nine to 12 weeks of the school year. Then we re-evaluate each student’s goals and progress, and make necessary adjustments.

The second step in the process starts with a simple idea that has been used at elementary grade levels for years. We create a flipbook or a set of flash cards that contain all of our state standards, along with the Pre-AP standards for the year. As the year progresses, the students add examples from their own work to show progress on each objective. We use the cards as a springboard for our mini-lessons on strategy tools. A typical card in the flipbook contains an objective, a strategy for understanding the objective, a class example, and personal examples.

For the flipbook, we use the formula TP-CASSTT, which stands for title, paraphrase, connotation, attitude, shift, title, and theme. To analyze a new piece of poetry, for instance, students would go to the poetry section of the flipbook to find strategies and examples provided from past poems analyzed in class. Prior knowledge is the key to taking learning to the next level.

The next step in the process involves the use of an interactive notebook for writing and analysis. The students set their notebooks up with chapter and page numbers that are based on the units to be covered during the corresponding nine weeks. The level of challenge in the notebooks increases with each new grading period.

The first interactive notebook is similar to a traditional journal, with the addition of a text marking section for analysis. For the eighth grade, we introduce text marking early in the year, add an inference journal during second quarter, a literary analysis section during the third quarter, and an advanced analysis section during the final quarter. Building this strong foundation for learning is essential for student achievement in high school.

**The Final Step: Practicing Skills**

Our final step in the Pre-AP process is having kids practice the skills they have acquired in analyzing and evaluating their own progress throughout the year. This experience helps them understand what they know and what they need to know before they leave the classroom at year's end.

Our students have been given the tools and have practiced the strategies they will need to analyze and question at higher levels throughout their high school years. They have—we hope—pushed their ideas to the limit in learning how to develop clear, concise, and confident analysis skills.

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**Jennifer Tavernaro** is a communication arts/reading teacher at Lakewood Middle School in Overland Park, Kansas. Her e-mail address is [jtavernaro@bluevalleyk12.org](mailto:jtavernaro@bluevalleyk12.org).