

***Report to the public on Middle States at Old Bridge High School  
Thursday, January 20, 2009 Board of Education Meeting  
Remarks by Dr. James Hickey, Principal***

Dr. Bosco, thank you for the opportunity to speak about our experience with Middle States at Old Bridge High School. Before I talk about the results, I'd like to take a few moments to explain what Middle States is and the process that brought us to this point.

***History of Middle States***

The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA) was established in 1887 and is a voluntary, non-governmental, nonprofit, peer-administered association of educational organizations. MSA provides leadership in institutional improvement for its member institutions in six states in the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, the subcontinent of Asia, Africa, and other overseas regions. The purposes of the Association are to encourage, advance, assist, and preserve the achievement of quality education. MSA works in the public interest and in cooperation with all interested federal, state, public and private educational organizations, agencies, and institutions to grant accreditation to member schools.

## ***What is Accreditation?***

The activity known as accreditation is traceable to medieval academic communities. The word “accreditation” is derived from middle French, old Italian usage. The first meaning of its root term is “trustworthiness.” Since the early 1900s, accreditation has had a major impact on the field of American education. Accreditation responds to the public’s demands for improved quality and greater accountability for institutions serving society’s needs. Accreditation agencies enjoy a unique “public trust” role in the United States. Accredited schools can be trusted by the public to be what they claim they are and to do what they claim to do. Whatever an accredited school says about itself has both the sanction and the confidence of the profession.

- Accreditation encourages and facilitates school improvement. The accreditation process examines the entire school—its philosophy and goals, its community, its programs and services, the facilities and financial stability.
- Accreditation provides a way to manage change through regular assessment, planning, implementation, and reassessment.
- Accreditation provides a means for public accountability. The accreditation process validates to the public the integrity of a school’s program and student transcripts.
- Accreditation provides opportunities for grass roots, broad-based involvement of stakeholders in charting the direction of the school. It helps staff to broaden its view of community

expectations and fosters closer school and community collaboration.

### ***The Protocol***

In choosing to renew to our accreditation with Middle States, we selected a relatively new protocol offered by the Association called *Accreditation for Growth* or AFG. The AFG protocol differs from other accreditation formats historically used by accrediting agencies because AFG brings a new focus to the most important work of schools and school communities – increasing the performance of their students. Quite simply, the AFG protocol seeks to change the traditional school culture of focusing primarily on the inputs of school improvement (facilities, programs, services, etc.) to focusing on the outputs desired in student performance.

Using strategic planning as a vehicle for school improvement and growth in student performance, the Accreditation for Growth protocol provides linkages to various planning and school improvement efforts. AFG requires the school to establish objectives for improving student performance based on a vision of a preferred future for the school. Therefore, AFG is a future oriented and visionary process.

In this era of educational accountability, student performance is and should be the essential focus of schools, school communities, and educators. The AFG format aligns the work of schools with expectations set forth under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

## ***The Process***

Over the course of 18 months, Old Bridge High School prepared for a visit of a Middle States Validation Team by conducting a self-evaluation using feedback from all stakeholders in our community. In developing our goals, we encouraged students, parents, staff members, and citizens at large to complete Middle States surveys. The surveys were available to the entire community. My colleagues in the elementary and middle schools sent the surveys home to parents in their respective schools. Every student and staff member at Old Bridge High School was asked to complete a Middle States survey. The opportunity to complete a survey was posted on the school website, broadcasted on this television station, and made available at the township's public library and municipal center.

We formed a Planning Team at Old Bridge High School Planning Team which consisted initially of more than 100 people representing all stakeholders – students, parents, faculty, secretaries, custodians, central administrators, high school administrators, board members, and citizens at large. Essentially anyone who wanted to be a part of the process had the opportunity.

Using the feedback from the survey, the Planning Team crafted 5 comprehensive goals for Old Bridge High School. The general goals are as follows:

1. Goal I: to improve the academic performance of students, specifically to improve student performance in the area of mathematics by 2015.
2. Goal II: By 2015, graduates of Old Bridge High School will understand the importance of functioning democratically, diversify their interests and develop a variety of life-long skills embodied in the experiences of extra curricular activities and the unique course offerings presented in a large school community.
3. Goal III: By 2015, graduates of OBHS will exhibit a greater sense of pride and respect while maintaining the self-esteem necessary for successful learning.
4. Goal IV: By the year 2015, 100% of Old Bridge High School students will develop the skills necessary to use relevant and emerging technology.
5. Goal V: By the year 2015, it is the goal of Old Bridge High School to increase communication among all stakeholders so that those involved at all levels in the school community are able to feel enfranchised.

The specific components of each goal are available in the Middle States document which will be posted on the high school website.

### ***The Preparation***

After 18 months of intensive preparation, the Middle States validation team arrived at Old Bridge High School for visit on April 29, April 30, May 1, and May 2, 2008. The Validation Team was composed of professional educators hailing from 3 states – New Jersey,

Pennsylvania, and Maryland. The role of the Validation Team was to review the self-assessment we conducted on Old Bridge High School and measure our work against 12 standards that member schools must embody in order to be eligible for Accreditation.

Middle States accreditation standards are qualitative statements that reflect research-based best practices for schools. These standards complement content area standards, which designate what students are expected to learn in various curriculum areas. The standards serve as a school improvement mechanism. Because the standards are based on research and reflect best practices, they serve as a qualitative guide to expectations for an accredited school. Adherence to the standards leads to the Commission's decision on accreditation. More specific information on the standards is available at the Middle States website: [www.css-msa.org](http://www.css-msa.org).

### ***The Results***

After a lengthy review of our goals and action plan by the Middle States Association, ***I am proud to report that Old Bridge High School received accreditation from the Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools.*** The accreditation is valid for seven years – until December 1, 2015. At that time, Old Bridge High School will undergo an evaluation to renew our accreditation as a member school for another 7 years.

The Middle States Report is quite comprehensive and will be available on the high school website for those who wish to read the report in its entirety. I'd like to take the opportunity to highlight some findings of the Validation Team. These verbatim excerpts are findings of the Validation Team as they relate to the 12 standards of the Middle States Association:

- Overall, the action plans are comprehensive with significant detail and collectively span the school's accreditation term, thus serving as an effective road map to the attainment of the school's objectives. (18)
- Simply stated, these action plans are highly impressive and will serve the school well as a blueprint for its desired growth and improvement. (18)
- The Mission Statement of Old Bridge High School and its succinct motto is the direct result of the work done by the Planning Team. (20)
- The motto has quickly become part of the daily life of the community...it is committed to memory by many of the students with whom the Validation Team met and conversed. (20)
- It is clear that there has been a transformation of the school in the last two years and the governance and leadership standard is met without exception. (21)

- By allowing students to take ownership of the school, the administration develops rapport that supports a positive environment. (21)
- An open door policy of the administration is evident while the size of the building causes challenges as the administration must cover literally “many acres” in order to be visible. The administration provides adequate opportunity for the stakeholders to share thoughts, concerns, and ideas with them that will continue to allow the school to grow and flourish. (21)
- Demonstrated cooperation among the staff, supervisors, and administration is evident. (21)
- The entire group concurred that each supervisor is spread too thin, with responsibilities pertaining not only to the high school, but two middle schools and twelve elementary schools as well. (24)
- ...not having a department chair position in the high school results in discipline overload on the vice principals....the vice principals agreed that the number one improvement to their jobs would be less time spent on traditional discipline with more time free to work on curriculum, teacher development, alternative discipline projects, etc. in addition to their numerous other duties. (24)

- It seems the supervisors, principal, and vice principals and as a result the students, would benefit from the creation of department chair positions...(24)
- Although staffing is a primary concern in terms of the supervisors and administration, the teachers do not feel that their materials are adequate or up to date. They mentioned text books and technology. (24)
- There seems to be an environment at the school that encourages students to do well and take academics seriously. (25)
- Due to budgetary restrictions, the technology staff admits that getting technology up to par has not been easy, most noted by lack of funds for hardware. (26)
- When the Validation Team met with selected staff members of the Planning Committee, the unanimous main concern was that of technology – specifically related to the staff’s inability to take attendance, enter and post grades, and create web pages. (27)
- Old Bridge High School’s 3,100 students are served by only 11 guidance counselors, who are highly qualified and well-versed in the needs of today’s high schools. (28)

- Given the large size of the district and student body, transportation services are of the utmost importance and this is an area that is well-handled by the district. (29)
- School spirit seemed to permeate the room during the meeting with the President's Council. The students were consumed by spirit and were eager to speak the Validation Team and thoroughly enjoyed discussing their pride in OBHS. The spirit is so strong among these students that one particular student stated that he now "bleeds purple" which is the school color. (30)
- Most of the students agreed that televisions in each classroom would enhance learning and would make better use of the television production room... (31)
- Old Bridge High School can be proud of its physical environs. Halls are clean, facilities are well maintained, and the individual classrooms are sufficient for the job required. (32)
- Continued opportunities for students to be exposed to performance based questions and higher level thinking skills would be in order and greatly support various objectives and standards. (35)

The Validation Team unanimously concluded that Old Bridge High School

1. has clearly defined appropriate objectives.
2. has established conditions under which they can be achieved.
3. is working toward achieving the objectives now.
4. should be able to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

As the principal of Old Bridge High School, I must admit that I feel a strong and profound sense of pride for all we have accomplished. Although there were so many who were involved in this process and deserve recognition for their hard work and commitment, I would be remiss if I did not publicly commend two members of the faculty who served as the Internal Coordinators of the Middle States accreditation process at Old Bridge High School: Elinore Delaney and Nancy Bosco. Put simply, we would not have been able to complete the daunting task of navigating Old Bridge High School through the Middle States waters without them. Without question, we owe a debt of gratitude to these fine ladies.

## ***Conclusion***

This Middle States Accreditation process came at a unique – and fitting – time in our school’s history. For more than 15 years, Old Bridge High School has experienced a transforming school culture that was galvanized by the merger of the former Cedar Ridge and Madison Central High Schools to become Old Bridge High School East and West Campuses. Our physical transformation culminated in the fall of 2005 when two campuses became one and Old Bridge High School, as we now know it, was born.

Since our unification, the culture of Old Bridge High School has continued to transform. Administrators, teachers, parents, and students alike are fulfilling their responsibility to marshal the flourishing renaissance in one of the largest high schools in the state of New Jersey. In preparation for Middle States, we found renewed appreciation for our heritage, restored traditions established by our predecessors, and deepened our commitment to providing the best educational experience for the students in our care.

I’d like to close with an excerpt from the Middle States report that best captures what we are about:

“Even before the arrival of the Visitation Team, some of the action plan began. A ‘tail gate’ gathering for the first football game of the season, a tale told by several stakeholders as a “turning point” in the school’s search, is a story worthy of a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie. The images of the band in full uniform marching through the halls, cafeterias, and the grounds; literally thousands of high school fans and their parents sharing a pre-game repast; and die-hard fans chanting into the night, long after the game was over seem almost of another era – yet many of those interviewed indicated it was the high light of the year...School spirit was key to the new identity. “Catch it and spread it” were words repeated to us by students and staff as they told us of another event that almost literally shook the rafters. All 3,100 students under one roof, participating in a Battle of the Classes, raised school spirit exponentially. ‘It’s a new age for Old Bridge’ said one student. And spirit is essential in both the view of the students and the administrators. Eerily echoing each other at different times and places, they agreed that ‘school pride is everything. If the environment is positive everything else will come along.’”

Thank you.