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**The Struggle for the Middle School in North Carolina:
Taking the Long View**

**A Speech to Commemorate the Life and Work of
John Van Hoose**

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School Association
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Delivered By

**Paul S. George, Ed.D.
University of Florida**

It is an honor and a particular pleasure to be invited to deliver the John Van Hoose memorial lecture. Because I care about North Carolina and have warm memories of John, I have been thinking about this talk for months, and I keep coming back to this question: What would John want us to know, if he was here today??

To begin answering this question, you must know, you have to know that the John Van Hoose I knew believed that the middle school concept, as it has developed in North Carolina, represents progressive education at its finest. He was convinced that the middle school concept, when implemented, draws *on* and draws *out* the best that North Carolina's children and adults have within them.

You must know, you have to know that middle school educators, in North Carolina schools, actually discovered, developed and pioneered much of “What really works” with young adolescents many years ago and you have faithfully labored to implement those best practices for decades. I clearly recall, for example, that the central idea of the middle school concept, the interdisciplinary team organization, took shape right here in Guilford County, more than three decades ago, under the leadership of a fellow named Bill Anderson.

During this same period, North Carolina middle school educators also made teacher-based advisory programs work. You offered richly textured curriculum to your students, often of an interdisciplinary, thematic type. You pioneered the block schedule, and you developed wonderful exploratory programs. You made cooperative learning your preferred method of engaging students. And you must know, you have to know that you did all this, and more—with the most incredibly meager resources for program implementation or training. Middle school educators in North Carolina had no giant labs like drug companies or vast testing grounds like automobile companies. There were no large grants given to early North Carolina middle schools.

It was just the opposite in many cases. It often happened in the face of finger-pointing and severe criticism from the media, resistance from traditional secondary educators, with punitive and harsh measures from the state, instead of supportive and affirming leadership. Like the Hebrews in Egypt, you and your predecessors have literally, been making great middle school bricks without straw.

Sadly, in 2013, you also know that more and more North Carolina young adolescents are arriving at middle school less ready to learn. Not less intelligent, but less ready to be good students. As teachers work under great pressure to increase academic achievement, they are constantly confronted with a decline in the fundamentals they could take for granted 40 years ago when I first began to visit North Carolina schools: regular attendance, focused attention, industry, responsibility and just plain courtesy and respect. Many students are more difficult to reach and teach, their concentration and perseverance more fragile, their language more challenging, and behavior more provocative. Their attire is more blatantly sexualized.

Miraculously, in the face of all of this, careful examination of the facts of school life for young adolescents in North Carolina, and across the nation, indicates that there is no crisis in the middle school. We do have a crisis—a crisis in family life and in the state and community’s support for your school systems. What has really deteriorated over the last 30 years in North Carolina is not the quality of teaching or school leadership, not curriculum, or expectations. I can tell you, from four decades of personal experience watching you closely, that middle schools in North Carolina are better than they have ever been.

If I was a betting man, and I am, I would bet a year’s salary that: Teachers and school leaders, in your buildings especially, are better-trained and more professional than in any prior period. Am I right? I’ll bet that the curriculum in your school is far more rigorous than it used to be, and expectations have never been higher. Am I right? I’ll bet that parents in your schools continue to give high grades to the schools their

children attend. Am I right? I'll bet that by virtually any measure, academic achievement in your schools is higher than it has ever been. Am I right? Education at the middle level in American schools is better than ever, and you, in North Carolina, are among the best. Am I right? Over a period of many years, I have reviewed hundreds of research studies on the efficacy of the middle school concept.

The evidence in favor of the middle school concept, here and elsewhere, is not only clear and unequivocal, it is enormous. But, in spite of your success, and the success of middle school programs around the nation, many of middle school educators' accomplishments have been diminished or erased as a part of the attack on public schools launched all the way back in 1983 and continuing today. State and national systems of so-called accountability have had a devastatingly negative effect on student-centered middle school programs.

The centerpieces of the middle school concept have been badly damaged:

- Advisory programs-gone
- Heterogeneous grouping-replaced
- Integrated, thematic curriculum-mostly a memory
- Interdisciplinary team organization-weakened
- Cooperative learning –far too rare
- Flexible scheduling--disappeared

In place of these tried and true components, critics of your schools want:

- merit pay for teachers,
- national negotiation of teacher contracts,
- independent contractors who will run public schools,
- national standards and
- national multiple choice exams,
- breathtaking budget cuts

Even though middle schools are demonstrably better than ever, under the so-called accountability movement, teachers and principals have been pressured to work ever harder and asked to make ever more terrible choices in their curriculum. Stress among educators remains higher than it has ever been, and morale in our public schools is at the lowest point in many decades, perhaps lower than it has ever been. Many of your colleagues are discouraged, dispirited, and leaving the profession.

But not you! Not yet! Not those of you here, and not hundreds of your colleagues across the state, committed to the education of young adolescents! What can you do—you who have made the commitment to go beyond just staying, made a commitment to create great schools, schools that offer hope and encouragement to other educators around the nation? How can you face the challenges ahead? Ironically, the wisdom we need for the future can often be found in the past.

You may be familiar with the old Native American elder's tale about the grandfather imparting a life lesson to his grandson. He tells him, "Grandson, I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is vengeful, fearful, angry, greedy, and deceitful. The

other wolf is loving, compassionate, generous, truthful and trusting.” The grandson asks, “Grandfather, which wolf will win the fight?” The grandfather answers, “The one I feed.” Historically, actually for many thousands of years, human beings have struggled with deeply conflicting worldviews, as if we have always had wolves fighting in our hearts.

The United States, from its founding, has always been the scene of debate and disagreement about whatever might be the central, and even the tangential, concerns of a particular era. In the early years of the 21st century, Americans seem to have lost little of our disputative nature; indeed we seem more divided than ever. Media pundits remind us that this is true in many areas (e.g., religion, socioeconomic status, race, politics, social issues, foreign policy, and certainly, education).

As with so many aspects of our culture, we have inherited our divisions. For thousands of years of Western history, two paradigms have been at the bottom of virtually every real struggle in the history of the West, at least since the time of the great biblical struggle between Elijah and Jezebel and their two deities, Jehovah and Beelzebub. Over the centuries, these two dramatically different worldviews have captured the minds and hearts of millions of men and women. These two contrasting ways of seeing the world are directly related to today’s gaping divisions in the worlds of politics, religion, government, and education,

John Van Hoose took a stand on the deeply fundamental belief that both as individuals and as societies, we are at our *best* when we struggle to overcome a worldview rooted in selfishness, greed, fear, and anger and, instead nourish, intentionally feed, a worldview based on a spirit of optimism, trust, hope, love, cooperation, and community in our own lives-- and with young adolescents.

We middle school educators have a right to be proud of our place in this history, as the 21st century representatives of a fundamentally life-affirming philosophy. The middle school concept we celebrate by our presence here arose from a set of elemental beliefs in essential human goodness and the possibility of progress that can be traced back thousands of years. This, in itself, is worth celebrating with pride.

And, during the 70’s and 80’s in North Carolina and elsewhere, the central components of the middle school concept appeared more and more frequently. Academic achievement rose steadily, students became more engaged, self-concepts were strengthened, teachers loved their teamwork--everything that mattered seemed to improve. Middle schools were, undoubtedly, a great success, if not truly miraculous, given the circumstances in which they arose. At least two whole generations of NC’s young adolescents and their families and communities are much the better for it, as are those of us privileged to participate in the middle school movement.

I think it is fair to say, however, that the middle school concept in North Carolina is, in the short run, in very real danger. The emphasis on progressive educational values is now officially and publicly demeaned, mistrusted and even ridiculed. Policy-makers and pundits value, instead, so-called accountability, high standards set by

distant bureaucrats, frequent testing, punishment for those who fail, and moves toward privatization such as vouchers and charter schools.

Why are progressive educators targeted so viciously? When we don't get the results we want from our military, we don't blame the soldiers. We don't pass legislation to tie their salaries and benefits to outcomes. We don't demand steep cuts in their pension plans. We don't eliminate the record of their years of service. And yet, in education today, many states are doing just that: blaming the teachers and restricting their resources. Some states even have the audacity to suggest that entire state budgets should be balanced on the backs of teachers, who are getting paid about the same as turnpike toll takers and bartenders.

Critics of the teaching profession attempt to persuade us that states can literally "fire their way to excellence." If one believed the news, it would seem that there is a long line of highly-qualified, well-educated liberal arts majors just waiting to take the place of today's greedy and wildly incompetent teachers. These new teachers, untrained and unprepared for the challenges of urban multicultural populations, will supposedly

- accept food-stamp level salaries,
- teach 6/7 periods,
- spend hours every evening planning great lessons,
- work under tremendous pressure for elusively higher academic achievement by which they will be evaluated,
- have little say in their professional lives, and contemplate a future in the classroom that promises little if any improvement or advancement.

Recent events suggest that some would have teachers accept cuts in benefits so burdensome that they threaten to reduce teachers to poverty in their retirement years.

Of course, we know that these mythical raw recruits, because they have choices, if they ever come to the schoolhouse, will quit in droves after the first, second, and third years of their teaching. They already do.

Under such circumstances, it does not seem unreasonable to be pessimistic, if not absolutely depressed, about the future of education, at least in the short run. One evening not too long ago, I think it was shortly after an election, my natural tendency towards pessimism and cynicism was peaking. I envisioned the total collapse of the middle school movement and other aspects of progressive public education, which would be replaced by an education characterized by pauper schools for the many and private academies for the privileged few. We would end up with a system of schools consistent with a culture increasingly prizing markets, militarism, and money. I guess that at least a few of you have had similarly nightmarish visions.

As she often does in matters like this, Reisa, my wife of 45 years, came to my rescue. Perennially positive, she reminded me then, as I now remind you that if one takes the long view, it is crystal clear that the progressive view of life, of which the middle school movement is a most recent example, has achieved tremendous successes over the many centuries of its existence, and it will continue to do so.

Over many centuries, the values and beliefs of the worldview (on which the middle school concept is based), translated into action in the Western world, have led to an astonishing series of bold steps in the direction of moving away from the primitive, brutal, cruel past that has been our common bloody human history.

Here are a just a few of the many things that, at least in the Western world, our moral development has largely overcome:

- The divine right of kings
- Feudalism
- Bear baiting and a host of other cruelties to animals
- The caste system
- Arbitrary political executions
- Forced castration, chastity belts, and genital mutilation
- Trial by ordeal,
- Stoning of heretics and witches
- Cannibalism
- Human and animal sacrifice
- Medical experimentation on unknowing patients and prisoners
- Taboos against contraception
- Caning and other beatings of school children
- The apartheid movement
- Colonialism.

In spite of the plethora of hideous, horrendous things that still happen frequently, all we need to do is to look at the news of the world these days, to see more and more dramatic instances of a moral momentum moving human history slowly forward in places like Eastern Europe, South Africa, and now the Middle East. I, like some of you, have lived in the American South for most of my life, and I have seen it change, dramatically. We now have a President, for one example, who just a few decades ago, could not have taken a drink from a water fountain where I lived, in Nashville, Tennessee.

You may not be aware that the middle school concept was used to make school desegregation more palatable in virtually every school district in the South. In fact, middle school educators can take great pride in having offered, during the '60's and 70's, a model of better, more progressive schooling for all young adolescents, which at the same time helped school districts all over the South, and in dozens of districts here in North Carolina, make the transition to racially desegregated schools with far less turmoil and greater enthusiasm than might have otherwise been the case. We can recognize, from examples like these and many others, here in your own state, the continuing, contemporary, almost daily small but significant victories of life's best impulses.

It may have made sense, thousands of years ago, for the survival of our species, for the savage virtues of the warrior to predominate on every continent. Moral virtues may have been a luxury when saber tooth tigers were stalking the land. But there is

reason to hope that more and more of humanity recognizes that many of those old values are now dysfunctional in the modern interconnected world in which we live.

There is, in fact, a rapidly increasing amount of evidence to support the assertion that the genetic basis of our nature is not to be violent and vicious, but to be caring, cooperative and democratic. You will be interested to know, for example, that Charles Darwin, in the *Origin of Species*, mentioned survival of the fittest twice, and *love*, 95 times.

Darwin argued at length that the human capacities to cooperate and to sympathize were the most important components of our survival as a species. Exciting new research at places like the Institute for Noetic Sciences confirms Darwin's insights. Or, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu proclaims, "We *are*, because we *belong*."

I firmly believe that a new consciousness is emerging, based on the attributes of this positive worldview. A new conviction is developing, one that tells us that the future of life on this planet requires our becoming responsible members of a worldwide commonwealth of conscious, caring, cooperative human beings.

Taking the long view, we can see that, in America alone in the last 200 years, this progressive social paradigm, one of radical hope, in which the middle school movement is embedded, is an astoundingly successful phenomenon, responsible for an amazing litany of triumphs. Consider these achievements, each of them victories of American citizens acting at their best, attained often in the face of violent opposition from members of the dominant life-negating culture:

- The Bill of Rights
- Religious freedom
- Abolition and the end of slavery
- Women's suffrage and women's rights
- Child labor laws
- Civil rights
- School desegregation
- Gay rights
- Person-centered psychotherapy
- Peace movements in every generation
- The environmental movement

And now we can add progressive, middle school education to this list, with its emphasis on affirming the value of every student, collaborative leadership, teamwork, flexibility, student-centered curriculum, and active instruction.

We do live in challenging times, and there is, of course, no guarantee that progressive education and the middle school movement will automatically revive and prosper in the near future. Not if you take only the short view.

John Van Hoose was right. The evidence from history is unequivocal-- human beings, drawing on the best that is within us, will continue to create ever more

enlightened societies and the schools that support them. Taking the long view, I believe it is clear that time is on the side of the moral momentum we can see--if we take the time to look closely.

But we cannot expect that the values we cherish and the programs we prize will win out simply because they have won the struggle for our hearts, just because they are an expression of the human spirit at its best. If those of us who hold to a progressive worldview fail to keep this vision alive, our society and its schools may endure a long dark period until another group gathers the courage to pick up the banner and carry it forward. Human progress may be axiomatic, but it is not automatic. We have to act!

You must know, you have to know that your North Carolina Middle School Association has a 4-decade record of acting on behalf of North Carolina's young adolescents. Because your numbers may be fewer now and the opposition often seems stronger, the challenge may be greater. But you and your colleagues have shown the courage that comes from conviction, the inner strength to champion progressive education in the face of a very loud, repetitive, and powerfully dominant paradigm that holds that most of public education must be dismantled, that a free and equitable public education is incompatible with the triumph of capitalism and private enterprise.

Fortunately, even if we are few, every one of us can act in ways that bring the rebirth of progressive education closer. Nobel Prize winner Archbishop Tutu, who understands a thing or two about change, reminds us that there is, after all, only one way to eat an elephant---one bite at a time!

Benjamin Mays, former president of Morehouse College, in Atlanta, summed up our circumstances more lyrically: "It must be borne in mind," Mays said, "that the tragedy of life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disaster to be unable to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture. It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim, is sin."

Middle school educators, especially in North Carolina, have never aimed low. Your aim, your dream, is now and has always been to create a school that will provide authentic educational success for every child. So, while we wait, watch, and work for the coming revival of progressive education, we must do what middle school educators have always done, what really is the bottom line of your work—a rock solid commitment to the education of every child. Every child, not just some children. Not just those with influential parents, the gifted, or others with powerful advocates. Every child, not just those with the right clothes, the right skin color, the right last names, the right answers, or the right language.

We must work for the success of every child, including those whose hair is dirty and matted, those whose clothes are torn and smelly, and those whose parents never come to school. We must be committed to the success of every child, including those who move three or four times a year, those who are silent as well as those who shout. We

must keep this commitment even when we are constantly criticized for what we do and blamed for the failures of others who scheme to shift the blame to us.

I know this sounds idealistic. It is. But the profession of which you are a part has always been driven by dreams like these. It has always been the pathway in North Carolina.

Eleanor Roosevelt once wrote, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” Progressive, middle level education is still the best American chance for an educational system that affirms the worth and dignity of every child and for a society that operates on trust, dignity, diversity and democratic principles. That’s worth dreaming of, and fighting for. And some things are worth fighting for, you see, even if we suffer temporary losses. So fight on, dream on. There are exciting times ahead.

Which wolf will you feed? I think I know.

Thank you, middle school educators of North Carolina.

Paul George is Distinguished Professor of Education, Emeritus, at the University of Florida. Email: pgeorge@coe.ufl.edu