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## Press Release FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Middletown LEADS Model Engenders a Love of Learning while Improving Literacy Rates**

**Middletown:** One day, a small group of Nut Swamp fifth graders were engaged in discussion, pondering the question, “What caused the demise of the Mayan Empire?” One young man was convinced that drought, which destroyed all their staple crops, was a major contributor for such an advanced society to disappear from the earth. His classmate, who was reading from a website on her classroom lap top computer, interjected that things started going downhill for the indigenous civilizations with the invasion of the Spanish Conquistadors, Cortez and his ilk. Another recalled that the Mayans were also embroiled in their own civil war. They even drew parallels between the Mayan demise and the social and financial problems in today’s American society.

This was not a social studies class per say, but the project based learning of the newly implemented elementary school literacy model called LEADS. Nor was this a group of students identified as “Gifted and Talented”. This was a heterogeneous class of children who were genuinely interested and even enthralled by what they were learning. Here social studies themes are infused into the reading curriculum to not only teach social studies but to give the reading lessons interest, meaning and continuity.

“The essence of LEADS,” explains Superintendent Karen Bilbao, “is that students ‘read to learn’. In the formative elementary school years, kindergarten to second grade, the students ‘learn to read’. By third grade, reading should be more of a tool for learning about all other content. If a model engages a student’s interest, provides the necessary instructional support and allows for team and self-directed study, the students are motivated to learn more by improving their overall literacy.”

LEADS, an acronym for **Literacy is Essential to Adolescent Development and Success**, was developed by the State of New Jersey’s Department of Education via a grant it won from the National Governor’s Association. Criterion for the model was pooled from renowned and long standing research for improving literacy. Its architect, Fred Carrigg had been working on literacy improvement long before he was tapped by the State to spearhead this new initiative, which is currently being implemented in 17 school districts in New Jersey. Middletown is one of just a few suburban districts presently working with LEADS.

Mr. Carrigg states, “LEADS is actually a professional development model giving teachers a variety of suggested tools so they have a significant guidance with room for choice and creativity.”

While at the Union City School District, Mr. Carrigg had developed a similar award-winning program which attracted Presidential attention from none other than President Bill Clinton and Vice

President Al Gore. The President and Vice President visited Mr. Carrigg's Union City classrooms in the late 1990s to tout the benefits of technology proliferation in education, which is also an important component of the LEADS model. (This past year, Middletown invested in 700 laptops stored on rolling carts for its elementary program.) Middletown is very fortunate to have engaged Mr. Carrigg as its Interim Assistant Superintendent over the past two years to help implement the model. (As a retired professional, he can only remain in a school district for a two-year period of time.)

LEADS was originally created for the middle school grades to address the sharp decline of reading scores experienced by New Jersey middle school students statewide. Since its implementation in the original Abbot school districts, where the need was greatest, literacy rates have remarkably improved. Mr. Carrigg helped launch LEADS in Middletown's middle schools last year. Consequently, the district also experienced a remarkable improvement in its 8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school reading scores. Thompson School improved its proficiency rate from 92% to 95% and Bayshore from 84.9% to 93.5%. Most strikingly, Thorne (previously designated as a *School in Need of Improvement* by NCLB measures) increased its proficiency rates from 79.3% to 87.7% while demonstrating the greatest increase in Advanced Proficiency percentages in Middletown middle schools, moving from 6% to 16%.

Last spring and summer, a committee of elementary teachers ardently worked to develop a LEADS curricular model for 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade to bring the program benefits down to the youngest practical age group. The teachers decided on four, age-appropriate curriculum units per grade level and then researched and recommended a variety of supportive reading material. A core novel based on a Social Studies theme was selected for all students to read. (For example, the fifth grade, Unit One core novel is the *Well of Sacrifice* by Chris Eboch on the Mayan Culture).

Additional novels for "guided reading" (i.e., small, leveled reading groups) were selected in a range from easy, to average to challenging as well as independent supplemental novels. The teacher assigns additional readings to groups according to their level of difficulty. Additional non-fictional information accessed via appropriate informational internet sites, along with teacher resource sites where also identified. For example, an applicable internet resource for the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Mayan Unit would be the PBS *Nova* video presentations *Cracking the Maya Code* and *Lost King of the Maya*, all of which the fifth graders can view on their lap tops while working on group projects. (The school district made a major investment in the program by purchasing the researched materials recommended by the LEADS curriculum committee.)

Lastly, the Committee developed suggested independent group projects and activities which engage each small learning group while the teacher may be involved with guided reading instruction. These projects could take the form of a scaled model of a Mayan temple, or a power point presentation on the favored cuisine of the day. One little boy was so excited that he uncovered an ancient recipe for hot chocolate (secret ingredient—hot peppers) that he plans to make it for his entire class.

Key to any new instructional program is staff development, which Middletown has committed to this initiative throughout 2008. One other wonderful teacher tool has been the district intranet where teachers can share lesson ideas and successes via school email.

The LEADS model is best explained in pictorial succession using Mrs. Ellen Vannucci's 5<sup>th</sup> grade class at Nut Swamp School as an example.

(Right) The LEADS instruction occurs in a 120 minute block of time beginning with a group lesson (Tier I) where the teacher may be teaching new vocabulary, building background knowledge, or focusing on a specific reading or writing skill which she tailors to the needs of the class. She is fully cognizant of each student's strengths and weaknesses through a student profile compiled by the Diagnostic Reading Assessment or DRA 2. Students are assessed by DRA2 three times during the year to update the profile.

Nut Swamp Principal Anne Facendo explains, "The



DRA assessments are so accurate we know within the breadth of a hair as to the exact reading level of each student.” The DRA2 allows the teacher to create a group focus plan for the purpose of whole-group instruction. DRA2 results will also be used to set up small reading guided groups based on children’s strengths and weaknesses.



(Left) During Tier 2 of LEADS instruction, Mrs. Vannucci meets with a small group of students for Guided Reading (at similar reading levels according to their DRA evaluation). The purpose is to stretch this group to reach the next reading level by working on areas of weaknesses to improve comprehension. In addition, students practice the core curriculum content area standards modeled during Tier I.



While the classroom teacher is meeting with guided reading groups, the rest of the class is engaged in “PBLs” (Project Based Learning.) They are assisted, if necessary, by the co-teacher in the classroom. (Last year, Middletown realigned its entire teaching staff to provide for co-teachers at the elementary level during the important LEADS timeframe.) (Right – Mrs. Vannucci’s 5<sup>th</sup> graders are assisted by their co-teacher.) Students in this phase work with laptops to research teacher-suggested websites where they can find information germane to their project. This is also an example of the educational practice of “differentiated learning instruction.”

The Project Based Learning component produces some amazing results and a great deal of enthusiasm. Pictured (right) are the members of Mrs. Vannucci’s 5<sup>th</sup> grade Builders and Cities Team. Left to right are Alex Keating, Daniel DiBenedetto, Saif Elfar and David Mangarelli holding their scaled model of an ancient Mayan temple. They spoke incessantly and proudly of their project displaying intricate knowledge of the Mayan civilization and cultural practices. The boys took real ownership of the project they created as a team. Their Principal emphasizes that Project Based Learning fosters invaluable life skills that will serve them well in their future professions.



There is also a Tier III or intervention component in LEADS, where the teacher might identify certain students that need additional guidance during the course of the lessons; she will meet with those children to reinforce the skill on an as need basis. According to Principal Facendo, the overall goal is to improve or stretch everyone’s reading abilities, a process the LEADS model refers to as scaffolding.

She comments, “This model is so different from the way we have taught in the past where instruction was aimed at the middle. Now we can challenge our gifted and talented students and at the same time support our special needs students to become sufficient readers.” She adds, “I believe our schools literacy rates are going to skyrocket with this approach, because our kids will know how to read, write, and communicate effectively. It’s a win-win, no matter how you look at it.”

The complete syllabus of the LEADS program can be easily accessed by parents on the district website, [www.middletownk12.org](http://www.middletownk12.org), under the LEADS Models of Instruction tap. Parents can view the reading choices, websites and all supporting material their students will be using in school. They can even explore additional project ideas according to their child’s interests.

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