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C. Kenneth McEwin: North Carolina Middle Grades Education Groundbreaker, Trailblazer, and Caretaker

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C. Kenneth McEwin has lived a life characterized by important “firsts.” He was born the *first* son of Charles Kenneth and Lois Higgins McEwin in Paris, Texas, and he was the *first* grandchild for both sets of his grandparents. From an early age, he saw and heard daily first-hand accounts about the lives of dedicated educators. His grandfather, W. Lloyd Higgins, was a school superintendent, his father was a vocational/agricultural education teacher, and his mother was a music teacher. Dinner conversations in his childhood home nearly always focused on the day’s events in his parents’ classrooms. From an early age, he saw and heard daily accounts about education as a public service. While his father was serving overseas during World War II, Ken lived with his superintendent grandfather. He recalls that his grandfather regularly completed and helped families in his district file their tax returns. It was not until he was older that he realized that school superintendents do not always act as tax advisors to the citizens in their district. Indeed, in his small Texas community, educators were respected public servants. At an early age, Ken began to understand the potential of education to transform the lives

of students and communities. Not surprisingly, he chose a career path that focused on serving others by educating them.

Ken earned his B.S. and M.Ed. degrees from East Texas State University in Commerce, Texas, and his Ed.D., from North Texas State University in Denton, Texas. Though his college education was focused on Elementary Education and then School Administration, Ken always had an interest in middle level students. In fact, it has been his dedication to young adolescents and middle level education that have earned him a place in the history of middle level education reform as a groundbreaker, trailblazer, and caretaker.

In Texas, Ken worked as a sixth grade teacher, a teaching-assistant principal, and then a principal before taking an assistant professor position at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. Ken was young and adventurous, so when he was serendipitously offered a faculty position and meager salary increase, he took it. He joined the Elementary Education Department at Appalachian State University (ASU) in 1973. He planned to stay for a year or two and then return to his home state of

Texas. However, Ken quickly realized that the North Carolina mountains were a great place to live. As he began investing his time and professional life into programs at ASU, he decided to stay. He and Jenelle, his wife of 28 years have made Boone, NC their home. Now, 37 years after he took the position, Ken McEwin is still serving as a highly respected and valued professor at Appalachian State University.

During his first year, the dean of the College of Education, Joe Logan, summoned Ken to his office. He had been receiving phone calls from area personnel directors and principals expressing concern that districts were being forced to re-train teachers they were hiring to work in their middle-level schools. Neither elementary nor high school trained teachers were receiving the training they needed to work with students in middle and junior high schools. They asked Dr. Logan what Appalachian State University might do to correct this problem and to prepare teachers for teaching young adolescents in middle schools that were opening or converting from junior high schools in the region. Dr. Logan told Ken McEwin that he wanted him to look into starting a middle school teacher preparation program. It is doubtful that Dr. Logan had any idea what that auspicious meeting would mean to the history of middle level education in North Carolina and beyond.

As Ken began his research about the new middle school model of education that was spreading across the United States, he read an article by Dr. Paul George, a young new professor at University of Florida. Ken contacted Paul and asked if he might come to Florida and visit him to discuss his ideas about beginning a middle school teacher preparation program. Ken and Pat Knight, an ASU colleague (who later became the second president of NCMSA), went to visit Paul. During the visit, Paul told Ken about

an upcoming national meeting of middle grades educators that was to be held in Columbus, Ohio. Ken registered to attend the meeting – and it was another important first. He attended the first annual conference of the newly-formed National Middle School Association (NMSA) in 1974. In fact, he became a charter member of the organization. He has attended every annual conference of NMSA since then. At this first conference, he met John Lounsbury, Gordon Vars, Conrad Toepfer, John Swaim, Al Arth, and Tom Gatewood. At this meeting, Gordon Vars asked Ken to be the North Carolina state representative for NMSA. Soon after this conference, Ken was asked to be on the planning committee for the second annual national conference to be held in Atlanta, Georgia the following year. The connections and friendships Ken initiated at the first NMSA Conference became critical to the work he was to do back in North Carolina.

A Groundbreaker

Ken is a visionary. Over his long career, he has often been the leader of initiatives intended to increase the quality of education for young adolescents and those who teach and serve them. In the first of many groundbreaking innovations in North Carolina middle grades education, Ken McEwin organized and began the first middle level teacher preparation program in North Carolina. ASU's program was also one of the first teacher preparation programs focusing exclusively on the middle grades in the United States. For the first time, prospective middle-level teachers in North Carolina could obtain specialized preparation to teach young adolescent students. At first, teacher candidates seeking middle-level preparation obtained bachelor's degrees in elementary education with specialization in middle grades/junior high

school. Along with other middle level teacher educators and administrators across the state, Ken worked with State Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) representatives and University of North Carolina General Assembly officials to develop middle grades degree requirements that would lead to specialized middle-level licensure. In 1985, ASU graduated its first group of candidates with bachelor's degrees in middle grades education.

At the second annual conference of the National Middle School Association, Ken asked Dr. John Lounsbury, one of the speakers, to make an announcement from the podium: If anyone who is here from North Carolina is interested in beginning a state middle level education organization, please go to a particular room to meet. About 10 enthusiastic people showed up for the meeting. They made plans to meet in Boone, North Carolina, where Appalachian State University is located, a few weeks later. The small group met at a local restaurant in Boone and discussed plans for beginning a state organization. At the end of the meal, they collected a small amount of money (less than \$10.00) to begin their organization. Ken went to a local bank and opened an account, and the North Carolina League of Middle/Junior High Schools was born. Of course, he was a founding member. He was also the *first* executive director and the *first* journal editor of the organization.

A Trailblazer

Ken certainly broke ground on important innovations in NC middle grades history, but he never stood still on those accomplishments. Rather, he blazed trails and charted paths for others to follow. John Arnold recalls discussing middle grades teacher education and the program at ASU with Ken before organizing a program at North Carolina State University, the second

UNC-system University to develop a specialized middle level teacher preparation program.

In 1988, the first award for outstanding service in middle grades education in North Carolina was given to C. Kenneth McEwin and then named in his honor. Many important NC middle level leaders have followed this path of service, and subsequent recipients of the C. Kenneth McEwin Distinguished Service Award include John Arnold, Joan Lipsitz, John Van Hoose, David Strahan, Theresa Hinkle (an ASU alumnus), Elaine Boysworth, and John Harrison.

Ken served on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards committee that wrote the first set of middle level certification standards. Currently, about 650 teachers have Early Adolescence/Generalist Certification and over 82,000 teachers have pursued and achieved National Board Certification since that first set of standards was developed almost two decades ago.

Ken served on the NMSA Professional Preparation Advisory Board that wrote the first national middle level teacher preparation standards. These standards have guided program development and review in middle level programs across the United States and have provided criteria for evaluating the quality of middle level teacher preparation programs.

A Caretaker

Since his beginnings as a pioneer in middle school education, Dr. McEwin has become a leading authority in middle level teacher preparation and has written extensively about the importance of specialized preparation for teachers of young adolescents. For over 35 years, Ken McEwin has devoted his professional life to providing quality education for young adolescents and their teachers in North

Carolina, across the United States, and beyond. Dr. McEwin has served as coordinator for the national review of middle level teacher preparation programs seeking national recognition as part of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. In these roles, he has become a caretaker for middle level education in North Carolina and across the United States. Because of his diligence, over 1,370 undergraduate and graduate students at Appalachian State University have received specialized preparation for providing developmentally responsive education to young adolescents. Countless other undergraduate and graduate students across America have been the beneficiaries of Ken's vision for specialized middle level teacher preparation because their programs have been created, reviewed, and/or revised under his leadership.

Ken's longevity, scholarship, wisdom, and commitment to middle grades education have created a legacy of which North Carolina middle grades educators can be especially proud. Ken is author of more than 150 professional publications that focus on middle school education, middle school sports, and the professional preparation of middle level teachers. Dr. McEwin has extensive experience as a middle level consultant to schools, school districts, universities, and policy-making groups. Consultant work has been conducted in over 80 North Carolina school systems, school systems and state departments of education in more than 30 other states, and in several countries in Europe, including Germany, England and Belgium. A former sixth grade teacher and principal, Dr. McEwin is currently Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Coordinator of Graduate Middle Grades Teacher Preparation at Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

Many North Carolina educators have been influenced by the passion, vision, commitment, dedication, and vigilance of Ken McEwin. A few of them provided comments to be included here as a tribute to their esteem, respect, and admiration for him. John Harrison, Executive Director of the North Carolina Middle School Association provided this praise for Ken:

You can't talk about middle school education—in North Carolina or across the nation—without quickly getting around to Ken McEwin. Ken has been a leader, a guide, a mentor, and a friend to me and to countless educators, and his efforts have improved the lives of who knows how many thousands of students.

The North Carolina Middle School Association wouldn't be where it is today without Ken McEwin. Ken literally passed a hat around a lunch table to get NCMSA started. Thirty-six years later, the organization includes almost every middle grades school in the state, and has almost 30,000 members. Ken's vision and efforts have made incalculable contributions to middle level education in our state, and around the country.

I can't tell you how many times I have been in a classroom talking with a middle grades teacher, and somewhere in the conversation about pedagogy and practice, the name of Ken McEwin comes up. Ken is synonymous with middle school.

Jeanneine Jones, Professor in the College of Education at UNC Charlotte and recognized leader in NMSA teacher preparation work, offered this tribute to Ken:

I don't recall a time when Ken McEwin wasn't a guiding influence in my career. I began teaching at Western Middle School about 30 years ago and, within no time it seems, our principal Wilma Parrish was quoting his work to our faculty. He was everywhere! From his guidance on middle level licensure to better preparing young teachers for the specifics of middle grades education, his work and strong voice joined that of others to shape our faculty and outreach into a school that was recognized for our successful work and strong heart.

The years past that have found me guiding my own teacher preparation program at UNC Charlotte, and Ken is even more prominent in my work today. It is difficult to describe that fully unless you've been outside of North Carolina to witness his middle level advocacy first-hand. Not only does the North Carolina Middle School Association depend on his contributions to our state, but NMSA does to our nation as well. He is truly a leader in all facets of that word and has provided middle level education with a voice heard and respected from California to Congress.

I would be remiss in closing without a personal note. I love Ken for so many reasons! His sincere joy over life, the value he finds in relationships, and his deep humility are characteristics that I strive for every day. He has truly been a career-long inspiration for me, and I am all the better for it.

Christine Waggoner, the principal of South Charlotte Middle School, a US Department of Education Blue Ribbon School, and a

North Carolina School to Watch, had this to say about Ken:

Ken McEwin has had a dramatic impact on middle grades education, both in the United States and internationally. In addition to sharing his knowledge across the United States, he was one of the first presenters at the European League of Middle Level Education annual conference. Ken is humble about his contributions to the thousands of practitioners who read his materials, but everybody knows, he is the "guru in the mountains." I am honored he is a friend and mentor.

Erin Hemric, a teacher at Carrington Middle School in Durham, North Carolina, and an alumnus of both the ASU undergraduate and graduate programs discussed Ken's influence on her own professional confidence:

I am honored to be able to say that I studied under Dr. McEwin's leadership at Appalachian State University. What I will remember most about Dr. McEwin from my time at Appalachian is his humility as a leader in the Middle School Movement and his great pride in his students and this profession. He taught me the importance of perseverance and not backing down from what I believe in and am passionate about. He has spent his career advocating for young adolescents. Because of his leadership and guidance, I have entered my career as a strong and passionate advocate for young adolescents.

Perhaps one of the most poignant comments came from David Strahan, Distinguished Professor at Western Carolina University, who said, "If we had a middle grades Mount

Rushmore, Ken McEwin would be on it.”
Indeed, Ken McEwin has been rock-solid.

This article is a small effort to pay tribute to Dr. Ken McEwin, the best friend and advocate of middle grades education in North Carolina. In Fall 2010, Ken will begin a three-year period of phased retirement. We wish him well in his retirement, but we know we will continue to see him and feel his influence. He will likely continue to attend middle grades professional meetings when he can; he will likely continue writing because he has told us he has ideas for great articles and books about middle level

Selected Accomplishments of C. Kenneth McEwin

- Past President, National Middle School Association
- Recipient, NMSA John H. Lounsbury Distinguished Service Award, 1989
- Member of National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Committee to write the Early Adolescence Generalist Standards
- Member of the National Association of Secondary School Principals National Task Force on Middle Level Leadership, 2005-2008
- Past Vice-President and President of NMSA
- National Middle School Critical Issues Task Force and many other NMSA committees and task forces
- Charter member of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, now a Member Emeritus
- Presidents Award, NMSA, 1977
- Addresses and/or Presentations have been made at conferences of the

education that he still needs to write. Even if he stopped working right now, his influence will continue for generations to come as his writings are read and studied; as his own students and students in programs he has influenced, provide compassionate, developmentally responsive education to their students and leadership among their colleagues. Middle level students, teachers, administrators, and schools across North Carolina and the United States have benefitted immeasurably because of the life and legacy of Ken McEwin because he boldly and courageously lead the way toward excellence in middle level education.

National Middle School Association; Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; American Association of School Administrators; National Association of Secondary School Principals; National Association of Elementary School Principals; International Reading Association; Association of Teacher Educators; American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education; Oklahoma Association of Middle Level Educators; Alabama League of Middle Schools; Florida League of Middle Schools; Kansas Association of Middle Level Educators; South Carolina Middle School Association; Pennsylvania League of Middle Schools; Indiana Middle School Association; Western Regional Middle School Consortium; New Mexico Association of Middle Level Educators, Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals; Texas Middle School Association, West Virginia Association for Middle Level Education, Indiana Middle Level Education Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and others.

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Dr. Melanie Greene, Ed. D., (ASU B.S. Early Childhood Education, 1976; M.A., Early Childhood Education, 1977; Ed.S., 1979) is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Appalachian State University. She completed her doctoral program at East Tennessee State University in the field of Educational Supervision and Leadership. Prior to coming to Appalachian State University, she worked as a reading specialist for middle grades students in the Watauga County School District in northwestern North Carolina. Currently, Dr. Greene serves as the program coordinator for the Curriculum Specialist graduate program and as a faculty member in the middle grades undergraduate and graduate programs.