

# THE MIDDLE SCHOOL ARCHIVE PROJECT

By

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## *Introduction*

The Middle School Archive Project was born out of the frustration of watching too many middle school students with no concept of their future or goals. Too many valuable hours from their lives were lost forever in aimless activity. The Archive Project came from the tragic dropout rate and documentation<sup>1</sup> that less than 40% of our students were making it through high school graduation.

The Archive Project is centered on a 10 year rotating time-capsule system designed to improve middle school student motivation by providing a physical connection to their future. The Archive Project provides multiple new opportunities for teachers and staff to speak of the future with students.



**The Achievement & Goals Archive “lounge” (above) at Quintanilla Middle School, is located between the stairs going up to the 8th grade floor.**

The Archive Project involves a vault called The Achievement & Goals Archive. It is a large vault bolted to the concrete floor inside a closet with a locked, clear Plexiglas door. It is secured under spotlights in a central location of the school passed more than 4 times a day by all students. This vault has 10 shelves to hold letters from graduating 8th grade classes for 10 years. Students write these letters to themselves, before graduation, in their Language Arts Classes. The letter is about their achievements and

1. The revised April 2002 version of “High School Graduation Rates in the United States” (originally published November 2001 by Jay P. Green, Ph.D., Senior Fellow, The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research) shows that Dallas had a 1998 Hispanic student graduation rate of 39%. Table showing data is online at [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_baeo\\_t9.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo_t9.htm). The full study is at [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_baeo.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo.htm). Quintanilla Middle School is over 94% Hispanic.

contains stories from their lives. It documents their efforts toward personal growth and their goals for the next 10 years.

Each student seals their finished letter into a self-addressed envelope and then goes with their Language Arts class to pose for a photo in front of the Archive. Each student will be holding their finished letter. After the photo each student places their letter into the Archive themselves.

A copy of the photo is given to each students in the photo. A label is on the back of the photo describing the project and telling students to expect to be notified of their 10 year reunion before November of that 10<sup>th</sup> year.



**Three of the 26 Language Arts classes who posed in front of the Achievements & Goals Archive in 2006 for photos.**

Here is the wording from the back of the photo given each student from the 26 Language Arts Classes photographed in 2006:

This is your Language Arts Class on May 12, 2006 posing in front of the Achievements & Goals Archive at Quintanilla Middle School, 2700 Remond Dr., Dallas, Texas 75211, phone 972-502-3200. A letter you wrote to yourself is now inside the Archive. Sometime the fall of 2015 you will be invited to the reopening of the Archive before Thanksgiving. Please call Quintanilla if you have not heard from us by November of 2015, or **if you want to help with the reunion**, or if you no longer can receive mail at the address placed on your envelope in the Archive. We want you to be able to join us for the opening of the Archive, and your class reunion. If you cannot attend the Thanksgiving, 2015, Reunion we still need a correct address so you will get your letter when it is mailed the first week of May, 2016. May you prosper these next 10 years, Your Quintanilla Family

These students will be invited as adults, Thanksgiving week of that 10<sup>th</sup> year, to return to open the Archive for their letters. At the reunion they will also be invited to give their "10 years of Wisdom Talk" to then current 8th grade students, answering questions such as: "What would you do differently if you were 13 years old again?" Such annual mentoring

experiences holds immense potential for future students at Quintanilla. They will be able to think more clearly of what they will write in their letters for the Archive and of what they themselves may say as adults in 10 years to future 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.

### *The goal is to think of the future*

This project was started at Quintanilla Middle School, an inner-city public school in Dallas Texas serving 1200 students in the 7th and 8th grade. The original proposal was written, presented to school staff and PTA, and approved in March of 2005. It was funded the next month by the local Lowe's Home Improvement Center.

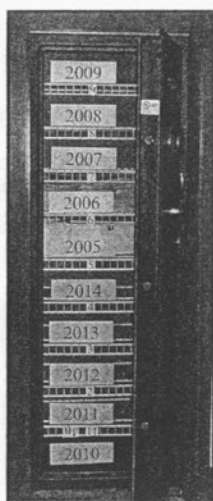
Every student is introduced to the vault when they enter as 7th graders. They will know that before they graduate from the 8th grade they will be allowed, but not required, to write a letter to themselves to be added to the letters already stored in the vault from previous graduating classes. It appears, based on the 2006 experience with taking class photos, that almost all students will be choosing to write letters.

The letter 8th grade students write may become a valued family history document. It should be a snapshot of their lives to date, a part of their written history. It will include stories about them and their friends, family, neighborhood, and school, as well as anything else from the history of their lives to date. It will help to document their efforts and work toward personal growth. They will then also write about their goals for the future. The letter should be limited to 4 sheets of paper, front and back if needed. It must fit inside a normal business size envelope. They are to address the envelope to themselves either at their current home address, or, if no family members may be at that address in 10 years, in care of a relative or friend, someone who will probably still be at their same address in 10 years.

## Achievement & Goals Archive

## Archivo de los Logros y de las Metas

This safe contains letters written by Quintanilla 8<sup>th</sup> graders to themselves about their lives, achievements, and goals. They will return to open these letters in ten years. On their return alumni will be invited to speak with students of the most valuable lessons they took from Quintanilla. What would they do differently if they were 13 years old again?



Esta caja fuerte contiene las cartas escritas de los alumnos del 8vo grado para a sí mismos sobre sus vidas, logros, y metas. Volverán en diez años para abrir estas cartas. Al regresar, serán invitados para hablar con los estudiantes sobre las lecciones más valiosas que tomaron de Quintanilla.

¿Qué harían diferente si tuvieran 13 años nuevamente?

**Above is the wording and photo from the sign hanging inside the Plexiglas door of the Archive.**

Nobody can promise a student that they will be the ones who open their letter in 10 years. Alumni no longer able to receive mail through the old address they had placed on the envelope will need to contact the school before November of that 10th year so they can be invited to the opening of the Archive for their letter. If they do not provide a corrected address before that May then the letter they addressed 10 years before will be mailed to a bad address and potentially lost. There are also accidents in life. Two Quintanilla students died tragically the summer and fall of 2005, one in a drowning accident during the summer and another in an automobile accident that fall. Such realities of life must be spoken of before students write their letters. In a situation when a student dies this letter may become an especially valuable family possession for a grieving family. Students must know this letter may become a treasured part of their written family history. Most probably they will share it someday with their spouse, children, and grandchildren.

The archived letters will be mailed by the 10th anniversary of their writing to all students who have not been able to come to Quintanilla to pick up their letters by May. The letters will be mailed in May to the addresses

placed on the envelopes 10 years earlier, or to corrected addresses received. This will allow for room to be made in the vault for the new letters current Quintanilla 8th graders will write each May to continue the tradition.

The letter writing process can be personally difficult for students, as was found with the class of 2005, the first class to write such letters. Most students were very excited by the process and wrote at length of their history and future plans. One young student, a new single parent, was very upset at the idea and cried at the very idea of writing such a letter. She was stuck in what Dr. Carol Dweck<sup>2</sup> would call a fixed mentality, not seeing the opportunities for her own growth and that of her child. Her letter was never written. Could that student's life have been different if this project, reinforcing the potential for growth no matter what the situation, had started years sooner? Hopefully that student, and the other students who chose not to write letters, will still write letters for the vault. They could certainly be some of the most proud alumni returning to their 10 year reunion.

Liability issues are certainly present and cannot be ignored. Hopefully many students will invest multiple hours drafting and redrafting their letter for the Archive. It is recommended students be encouraged to keep a copy of any letter they value. In spite of the locked and secured vault, it is possible that letters can be lost in many different ways. It also must be emphasized that letters may fall into the hands of others who may not respect confidential information. Thus, caution should be exercised in what is written. Such acknowledgments should be documented.

Many students may see the similarities between this project and life. What they do and what they write is what will be there when the Archive is opened in 10 years. What they achieve over the next 10 years is what they will bring with them to share with the then current students when they return in 10 years. They control this project and nobody else. Their efforts and their work can help them grow and change their world, and their children's world.

As traditions are established or modified relating to the Achievement & Goals Archive, hopefully evidence will begin to collect of a strong growth mentality among our middle school students as they are more

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1.2. The fixed mindset vs growth mindset division was researched and then documented by Dr. Carol S. Dweck of Stanford in her February 2006 book, "Mindset: A new Psychology of Success." If the Middle School Archive Project can be another force in helping ALL teachers and students move toward obtaining the "growth mindset" described in Dr. Dweck's masterpiece, then the world of education will begin a sustained revolution.

actively investing in their own futures through work, study, and academic achievements. Hopefully the student dropout rate will be lowered, especially once the potentially powerful mentoring component of the “10 years of wisdom talk” becomes an annual tradition.

Dr. Robert Coles in his 1989 book *“The Call of Stories : Teaching and the Moral Imagination”* provides powerful support for the value of having students write their stories. A professor who taught under Dr. Coles at Harvard spoke of the lessons in this book after he was told of the Middle School Archives Project the summer of 2006. This book has profound potential applications within the Archive Project.

The book, published February 2006, by Dr. Carol S. Dweck of Stanford , *“Mindset: A new Psychology of Success,”* may have the most profound impact on the Archive Project. Dr. Dweck’s research has very documented the benefit of a growth mindset as opposed to a fixed mindset, which is all too often the mindset of too many teachers and students in today’s schools. If the Middle School Archive Project can be another force in helping ALL teachers and students move toward obtaining the “growth mindset” described in Dr. Dweck’s masterpiece, then the world of education will begin a sustained revolution.

The Middle School Archive Project ideas and material found here, and on the [www.studentmotivation.org](http://www.studentmotivation.org) web site, may be used freely at no cost by anyone interested in motivating students. It is only asked that results be shared, along with any positive changes made to the project design, so that more students may benefit. Please let us know of any judgments as to the value of this project and any changes that may improve the Archive Project effectiveness with students. Also let us know if students and staff are documented as moving from a fixed mentality to a growth mentality, as described in Dr. Dweck’s new book, as your Archive Project begins to have an affect on students and teachers.

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Bill Betzen is retired from 28 years of social work as a Child Protective Services worker, Supervisor, and infant adoption manager. He now teaches computer literacy to middle school students and remains active in adoption reform legislative efforts while authoring and maintaining web pages on student motivation, open adoption, rammed earth housing and other issues.