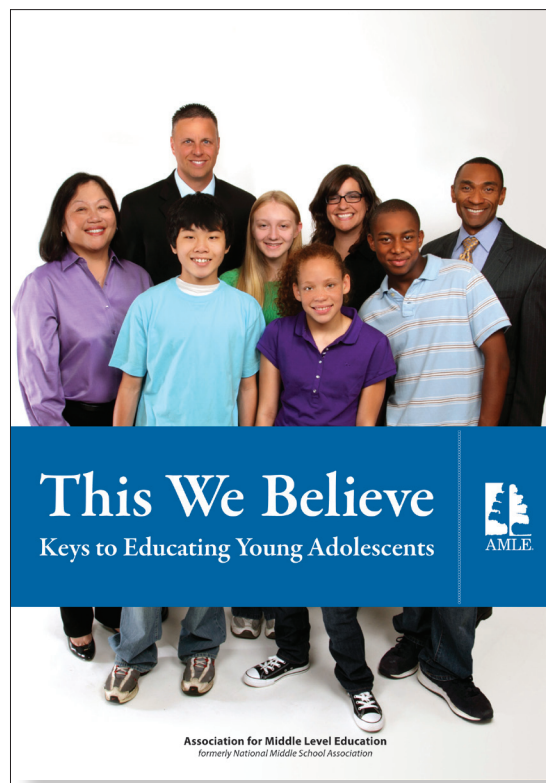




Study Guide for

This We Believe:

Keys to Educating Young Adolescents®



Study Guide for *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*

This study guide has been prepared to guide your school through a study of *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010), the foundational work of the Association for Middle Level Education. This fourth edition, although expanded, is still a small book, but it is not one simply to be read. Its contents need to be internalized, reflected on, and then used to drive school improvement initiatives.

The guide will assist your faculty in studying this book so that all staff will have a common understanding of the middle school concept. It is important that the entire faculty and staff participate in this study, building the necessary foundation for the evaluation of current middle level practices in your school and for later professional development activities.

The first step in preparing to study TWB is to establish a Steering Committee that includes teacher leaders and an administrator to oversee and direct the study. This committee should map out a plan with a timeline for completion. Each section of TWB has its special importance so all sections must be examined by all participants. Be creative in using flexible time slots – time during faculty meetings, time during team meetings, longer blocks of time during professional development days, and, for some aspects, using digital tools.

Organize the faculty and staff into small discussion groups with an identified facilitator. These groups will discuss the questions presented. Existing interdisciplinary teams may be the basis for the groups, but exploratory, special education, and other school personnel should all be a part of some small group. At various times during the study the thinking of these groups should be shared with the entire faculty.

It is strongly suggested that a personal copy of TWB be provided to all persons participating so they can highlight and make marginal notes as desired. If this is not possible, a school should secure enough copies so each small group can have a copy to share. Several copies of *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe* (2010) should also be available for individuals or small groups to use.

When the materials are in hand and the plan finalized proceed with considering the sections as indicated in the steps on the following pages.

Conducting the Book Study

The Importance of Middle Level Education (p. 1 – 9)

Following the brief introduction on pages 1–2 that sets the stage for the document, this first major section, pages 3–9, gets to the heart of the vision.

Note William Alexander’s 1963 statement on p. 3–4 at the beginning of the middle school movement.

- Are these statements still relevant? How or how not?
- What are the challenges our school would face if it embraced this statement as a core value?
- Does our school/system have a vision/mission that speaks to the importance of including both the academic and personal development of each young adolescent? When was the vision/mission developed? By whom?
- What does our school do to prepare young adolescents to be successful in a global society?
- To what degree does our school base its curriculum, pedagogy, and programs on the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of our students?
- Consider the statements on p. 5 that speak to the interdependence of the characteristics of *This We Believe*. As you continue this study, keep this point in the forefront of your thinking. How does your school ensure that all of the characteristics are working together to provide an optimum learning experience for students?

Young Adolescents (p. 5–7 & 53–62)

Although everyone may feel that they already know the nature of the age group, a reconsideration of young adolescents is still in order. In conjunction with examining pages 5–7, the full, authoritative listing of the characteristics of young adolescents found on pages 53–62 should be studied and commented on.

- What characteristics surprised you?
- Which of the five areas is least served by our school’s program? Explain why you chose this one.
 - Physical development
 - Cognitive-intellectual development
 - Moral development
 - Psychological development
 - Social-emotional development

- How could our school address areas currently being under-emphasized?
- In all honesty do these characteristics define our program, the way it is organized, administered, and envisioned? If not, what kind of changes in our school and its program could be made?
- Are there other societal changes not recognized here? What are they?

Major Goals of Middle Level Education (p. 11-12)

This section, new to the fourth edition, calls for a thorough review.

- What does the concept of each young adolescent becoming a fully functioning, self-actualized person mean to you?
- What characteristics would a self-actualized person display?
- Are the goals you hold as a teacher represented in these statements? If not, what goal is lacking?
- Does our school's current curriculum address all the goals?
- Do our parents recognize and understand these goals? If not, how can we improve their understanding?

Considerable dialogue among participants should be fostered as individuals, groups, and the school consider these major goals that incorporate the broad and varied responsibilities the middle grades carry.

Essential Attributes and Characteristics (p. 13 – 42)

The study of this prime section found on pages 13-42 is likely to take more time than will be given to the other sections combined, for it is here that classroom practice comes into play most directly. When embarking on the study of this section, the Steering Committee should reinforce the need to consider each of the attributes and characteristics. Each characteristic should be discussed in light of existing school programs and practices. It is recommended that the small discussion groups maintain notes on its responses to these questions for periodic sharing with the total faculty.

Before considering questions specific to each of the 16 characteristics, however, the groups should first discuss the concept of “essential attributes.” These four terms—**developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable**—might be called inherent characteristics and have always been identified with the middle school concept.

- What are some specific examples that would show each of these attributes is, in fact, alive and well at our school?
- What policies does our school have that seek to ensure these attributes are in force?

Note that the 16 characteristics are divided into three major areas—**Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Leadership & Organization; and Culture and Community**. These divisions help schools identify strengths and areas of growth in each of the areas and will prove to be of value in developing the school’s improvement plans.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Characteristics

Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them. (p. 15-16)

- Why is specific preparation for teaching at the middle level so important?
- What qualities and characteristics should outstanding middle level educators bring to middle level teaching?
- Describe the importance of collaboration in teaching in the middle grades?
- Does our school engage fully in interdisciplinary studies? In integrative learning? Why or why not? How could the school work toward this developmentally appropriate approach?
- There are at least five specific roles teachers who are committed to serving young adolescents play:
 - Student advocate
 - Role model
 - Supporter of diversity
 - Collaborator
 - Lifelong learner
- How do you see your role in terms of each of these five areas?

Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning. (p. 16-17)

- What does active learning mean to you?
- What does active learning look like in our school? Describe the teacher and students in a classroom with active learning in place.
- Do students and teachers work together in planning and carrying out hands-joined activities? Provide specific examples.
- How do students play an active role in their own learning?

- How is technology integrated in core subjects to engage students in accessing content and communicating and collaborating with others?
- How do you demonstrate to students that you are still a learner?

Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. (p. 17-22)

- What does Challenging mean? Exploratory? Integrative? Relevant?
- How can our school fulfill these curriculum characteristics and still be accountable to state and federal standards?
- What are the essential differences between these curriculum approaches—separate subject, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and curriculum integration?
- How is the role of the student different?
- How does our school and/or classroom reflect and recognize the powerful “hidden curriculum?”
- How do you make or take time to interweave the “unplanned curriculum” in your classroom?
- Are ALL students in our school held to high expectations? How? If not, why not?
- How is the regular, integrated use of technology by students infused in your classroom experiences?
- Are students “tracked” in our school? Why? If so, what strategies might be employed to minimize or eliminate this practice?
- Are students provided opportunities to study topics, concepts and skills in areas that interest them? How could they be?
- Does the curriculum provide opportunities for students to examine varying values, assumptions, and basic principles?
- How are students provided opportunities to make significant and meaningful decisions about their learning?
- How are the cultural backgrounds and prior experiences of our students considered when planning instruction?
- Are reading, writing, and other fundamental skills taught in context where they are used rather than as isolated lessons? Describe how this is done in our school. How could this practice be improved?
- Do our students have opportunities on a regular basis to participate in independent study, small group work, special interest enrichment experiences, and apprenticeships? If so, where and when?
- Are all students able to participate in a variety of enrichment and exploratory activities? How often? If not, what steps could be taken to infuse such activities into the school?

- Do all students participate in planned experiences in the fine and applied arts? Technology? Health and Physical Education?
- Are integrative learning experiences provided for all students? Is the content relevant to their lives?
- Does our school practice inclusion or co-teaching for special needs students? How extensive is it?

Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches. (p. 22-24)

- What are some teaching and learning approaches used in our school that address the diversity of middle level students?
- Have staff members been prepared in multiple intelligences and learning styles? Do they incorporate strategies based on these understandings in their classrooms on a regular basis?
- How does our school provide experiences for students with special talents or interests in intellectual, athletic, or artistic endeavors?
- Is technology used in instruction throughout the curriculum? What courses regularly incorporate technology into teaching?
- Are students provided with multiple opportunities to “present” their learning to others? In what areas and to whom do they present?
- Are students grouped heterogeneously on teams? Why or why not?
- Are instructional groupings flexible for some part of the school day so students can advance as needed? Describe how this is done.

Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it. (p. 24-26)

- How do assessment and evaluation practices used in our school reflect the unique characteristics of young adolescents?
- Give several examples of authentic assessment that is used to meet the needs of your students.
- Does assessment emphasize individual progress rather than comparison with other students? Share examples of this practice.
- Does evaluation rely on extrinsic or intrinsic motivation? Share instances of intrinsic motivation in your classroom.
- How can the school move toward providing more instances of authentic assessment?
- Do parents and community members have an understanding of authentic assessment? If not, what could the school do to develop the desired positive attitude about authentic assessment?

- Does our school practice student-led conferencing? If not, how could the school adopt this powerful practice?
- Are data disaggregated regularly (at least 3-5 times a year) and used to craft instruction? How are these data used?

Leadership and Organization Characteristics

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A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision. (p. 27-28)

- What is a vision? A mission statement? How can they help improve a school?
- What should be at the heart of a shared vision?
- How should our school vision be developed? Or reviewed?
- What stakeholders should be included in developing and implementing a vision?
- Is our school's vision a living and breathing document that guides the school?
- How is our school's vision communicated?
- Do you believe our school's practices relate directly to the vision and mission? If not, what would be an appropriate strategy to rectify this situation?

Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices. (p. 28-29)

- Does the administrative staff in our school exhibit a thorough knowledge of young adolescents and their sub-culture? Do they reflect that knowledge in decisions they make?
- Are the programs in our school centered around and reflective of the unique needs of the students? Give some examples.
- Do administrators communicate effectively with the school and the community about middle grades practices and the programs of the school? Provide examples.
- How does the administrative staff use its knowledge to advocate for a comprehensive, student-centered education program?

Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration. (p. 29-30)

- What does courageous, collaborative leadership mean to you? Give several examples from your experience of what such leaders do that sets them apart.
- Does our school have a leadership team? What is its composition and duties?

- Is the culture of our school one of collaboration, where the input of each individual is solicited and valued? If not, how could that culture be changed?
- Does the administrative staff of our school encourage teacher leadership? Explain how it does.
- Are administrators committed to a long-range plan for school improvement? Give evidence of the plan.
- Do the administrators and all adults in the school model best practices, both academically and personally, for students? Give some recent examples.
- Do the administrators in our school regularly evaluate current practices and work to change them if they are not in the best interests of students? Describe a recent change and why it was made.

Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices. (p. 30-31)

- How does professional development occur in our school? Who has input into topics? Who plans and delivers it?
- Is professional development based on data collected about the school as well as the identified needs of teachers in our school? Give a recent example.
- Does the administrative team facilitate and model learning, listen to others, and build a supportive culture? Describe.
- Does the school provide professional development activities that are long-term and collaborative, and are assessed regularly for effectiveness?
- Has training been provided on establishing Professional Learning Communities? Describe the PLCs currently in place at our school.
- Are opportunities provided for staff members to attend conferences related to their needs and the needs of the school? Do they share those experiences with the total faculty?

Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.
(p. 31-33)

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of partner teams versus four- or five-person teams?
- Does our school utilize a block schedule for instruction? What are the clear advantages of this organizational structure? If not in place, what steps could be taken to establish this practice?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of multiage and/or looping teams?

- How can the needs of diverse learners be met without using ability grouping or tracking?
- What processes are in place in this school to promote organizational structures that support meaningful relationships?
- Do teams have common planning time apart from personal planning time?
- How is common planning time used in our school? What percentage of this planning time is spent discussing curriculum and instruction? Are minutes kept and shared?
- Does our school utilize cooperative learning, independent study, enrichment programs, and other practices to respond to student interests and abilities? If these are not used, what can be done to initiate these proven practices?

Culture and Community Characteristics

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The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all. (p. 33-34)

- Do teachers and staff members model respect for one another and for students in our school? Provide examples.
- Is the overall atmosphere in the school and classrooms positive and encouraging? Give some examples or evidence that this is so.
- What programs are in place to foster student mediation, conflict resolution, and problem solving?
- Do all adults work to eliminate harassment and bullying in the school?
- Are students in our school encouraged to take intellectual risks and explore new challenges? When and how?
- Is every student in the school well known by an adult?
- Is it part of the school's atmosphere to value each student? Give some examples.
- Do teams in the schools foster a sense of family and community? How?
- Is the physical facility clean and attractive? Who sees that this happens? What could be done to improve the physical facility?
- Is student work regularly displayed in classrooms and hallways? How often is it changed?
- Are transition programs in the school ongoing and able to provide students with comprehensive information so that those transitions are seamless? Describe the programs. How are families included?

Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.

(p. 35-36)

- What organizational structures in the school support advisory?
- Why is it so important for every young adolescent to have an adult advocate/advisor?
- How many students are assigned to an advisory group?
- Does our school provide training for serving as an advisor? Give examples.
- Do advisors contact parents of students in their group? How often?
- Do all adults in the school see themselves as advocates for students? How is this evident?
- Is advocacy part of the mission statement of this school?

Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.

(p. 37-38)

- What are the aspects or components of an effective guidance system?
- Do the counselors in our school spend the majority of their time working directly with students? What other duties do they perform?
- What services are provided in this school for students who are at risk or have serious social, emotional, or other problems?
- What specialized personnel are available to support student needs? In the school? The district?
- Does our school utilize peer mediation and/or peer tutoring programs? Explain.

Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies. (p. 38-39)

- What are the elements of a comprehensive health and wellness program?
- What specific programs and practices does our school employ in these areas?
- How does the school nutrition program support a program of health and wellness?
- Do all students participate in regular physical education activities that promote fitness and lifetime skills? Give examples of lifetime skills taught in our physical education program.
- Does our school have a health advisory council? If so, explain its composition and responsibilities.
- Are both intramural and co-curricular activities available? Are these activities developmentally appropriate?
- Are intramural and co-curricular activities open to all students? If not, what could be done to ensure that this occurs?
- Does our school have a “no-cut” policy for afterschool programs and, if not, what steps can be taken to establish such a policy?

The school actively involves families in the education of their children. (p. 40-41)

- How are families in our school encouraged to become involved in meaningful ways in the life of the school?
- What specific programs are in place to promote parental involvement? Does the school reach out to the families in the school, particularly with those families who are reluctant to come to the school?
- Do parents have opportunities to be involved in decision-making groups? Explain.

The school includes community and business partners.(p. 41-42)

- How is our school proactive in seeking community and business partnerships?
- Do community members partner with the school to provide specific learning experiences for students? Explain.
- Do students become involved in apprenticeships with community and business partners? Describe.
- Does the school participate in community service learning initiatives? Describe.

Call to Action (p. 43-44)

This short section might be called a rallying cry. It calls for readers to become committed or recommitted to the ideas and ideals presented in TWB. It urges educators to do exactly what you have been doing in this study, preparing yourselves to be agents of change.

Research Supporting This We Believe (p. 45-52)

This section should be reviewed carefully to know of some recent research studies that support our advocacy and particularly to become familiar with the narrative statements that summarize research findings in each of the three categories of characteristics. Also review the 2010 edition of *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe* that contains much more research.

Characteristics of Young Adolescents (p. 53-62)

This major listing of characteristics in five basic areas will have continuing use as a reference when preparing reports or making presentations with parents and other groups. While it was studied earlier in this study, if time permits it would be worthwhile in the small groups to call each one out for comment, an example of its validity, or a ways it presents a challenge; in short, to put flesh and bones of the characteristic.

Concluding the Book Study

To bring this study to closure the following questions might well be discussed:

- What do we need to do at our school to align ourselves more closely with the characteristics of young adolescents as stated in *This We Believe*?
- How might we prioritize our alignment efforts?

About the Association for Middle Level Education

Since 1973, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) has been the voice for those committed to the education and well-being of young adolescents and is the only national association dedicated exclusively to middle grades youth.

AMLE's members are principals, teachers, central office personnel, professors, college students, parents, community leaders, and educational consultants in the United States, Canada, and 46 other countries. A major advocacy effort is Month of the Young Adolescent. This October celebration engages a wide range of organizations to help schools, families, and communities celebrate and honor young adolescents for their contributions to society.

AMLE offers publications, professional development services, and events for middle grades educators seeking to improve the education and overall development of 10- to 15-year-olds. In addition to the highly acclaimed *Middle School Journal*, *Middle Ground* magazine, and *Research in Middle Level Education Online*, we publish more than 100 books on every facet of middle level education. Our landmark position paper, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*, is recognized as the premier statement outlining the vision of middle level education.

Membership is open to anyone committed to the education of young adolescents. Visit www.amle.org or call 1-800-528-6672 for more information.