



## *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*

### **A Summary of a Position Paper National Middle School Association**

Every day, twenty million diverse, rapidly changing 10- to 15-year-olds enrolled in our nation's middle level schools are making critical and complex life choices. They are forming the attitudes, values, and habits of mind that will largely direct their behavior as adults. They deserve schools that support them fully during this key phase of life. Therefore, National Middle School Association seeks to conceptualize and promote successful middle level schools that enhance the healthy growth of young adolescents as lifelong learners, ethical and democratic citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient young people who are optimistic about the future.

For middle schools to be successful, their students must be successful; for students to be successful, the school's organization, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs must be based upon the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of young adolescents. This concept is at the heart of middle level education.

The association's vision for a successful middle school is primarily delineated in 14 characteristics. Eight are facets of the culture of such schools, while six are programmatic characteristics that can evolve in such a culture. While presented as a list, the most profound and enduring lesson learned in 30 years of active middle school advocacy is that the characteristics are interdependent and must be implemented in concert. Research and cumulative, empirical evidence have confirmed that these characteristics when present over time lead to higher levels of student achievement and overall development.

#### ***National Middle School Association believes successful schools for young adolescents are characterized by a culture that includes***

- **Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so.** Effective middle level educators understand the developmental uniqueness of the age group, the curriculum they teach, and effective learning and assessment strategies. They need specific teacher preparation before entering the classroom and continuous professional development as they pursue their careers.
- **Courageous, collaborative leadership.** Middle level leaders understand adolescents, the society, and the theory and practice of middle level education. As the prime determiner of the school culture, the principal influences student achievement and teacher effectiveness by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining an effective instructional program.
- **A shared vision that guides decisions.** All decisions made about the school should be guided by a shared vision and the mission statement derived from it.
- **An inviting, supportive, and safe environment.** A successful school is an inviting, supportive, and safe place, a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students' physical and emotional well-being. In such a school, human relationships are paramount.
- **High expectations for every member of the learning community.** Educators and students hold themselves and each other to high expectations. Such confidence promotes positive attitudes and behaviors and motivates students to tackle challenging learning activities. Successful schools recognize that young adolescents are capable of far more than adults often assume.
- **Students and teachers engaged in active learning.** The most successful learning strategies are ones that involve each student personally. When students routinely assume the role of teacher, and teachers demonstrate that they are still learners, a genuine learning community is present.

- **An adult advocate for every student.** Academic success and personal growth increase markedly when young adolescents' affective needs are met. All adults in successful middle level schools are advocates, advisors, and mentors.
- **School-initiated family and community partnerships.** Successful middle schools promote family involvement and take the initiative to develop needed home-school bonds. The involvement of family is linked to higher levels of student achievement and improved student behavior.

*Therefore, successful schools for young adolescents provide*

- **Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory.** An effective curriculum is based on criteria of high quality and includes learning activities that create opportunities for students to pose and answer questions that are important to them. Such a curriculum provides direction for what young adolescents should know and be able to do and helps them achieve the attitudes and behaviors needed for a full, productive, and satisfying life.
- **Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity.** Since young adolescents learn best through engagement and interaction, learning strategies involve students in dialogue with teachers and with one another. Teaching approaches should enhance and accommodate the diverse skills, abilities, and prior knowledge of young adolescents, and draw upon students' individual learning styles.
- **Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning.** Continuous, authentic, and appropriate assessment and evaluation measures provide evidence about every student's learning progress. Grades alone are inadequate expressions for assessing the many goals of middle level education.
- **Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning.** The interdisciplinary team of two to four teachers working with a common group of students is the building block for a strong learning community with its sense of family, where students and teachers know one another well, feel safe and supported, and are encouraged to take intellectual risks.
- **School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety.** A school that fosters physical and psychological safety strives to build resiliency in young people by maintaining an environment in which peaceful and safe interactions are expected and supported by written policies, scheduled professional development, and student-focused activities.
- **Multifaceted guidance and support services.** Developmentally responsive middle level schools provide both teachers and specialized professionals who are readily available to offer the assistance many students need in negotiating their lives both in and out of school.

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We urge every reader of this summary to secure, read, and act on the full position paper, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, and the supporting publication *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe*. To implement National Middle School Association's strong statement about exemplary middle level schools, actions on the part of many individuals and agencies are needed. The position paper's **Call to Action** offers specific steps people in various roles should take to revitalize middle level schools. Finally, since middle level education is grounded in the nature of young people ages 10 to 15, the position paper includes an authoritative listing of the characteristics of young adolescents. All those who interact with young adolescents, and ultimately young adolescents themselves, will benefit from these recommendations.

AVAILABLE FROM NATIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

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*This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003)

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