

The Push/Pull of Growing Up

Richard W. Riley

Adolescence is a unique period in the life of every youngster in America. Teenagers are at one and the same time children and budding adults, insecure beings stepping out into the world and monitored every step by billion-dollar corporations that view them as prime customers.

The young people in our nation's middle schools are a wonderful handful, eager to define themselves in some individualized way and, at the same time, are anxious to be part of the group mentality that defines everything that is popular.

A National Geographic Society special showing a herd of 10,000 wildebeests—swerving this way and that—always seems to be the apt allusion.

I am reminded, too, of Mark Twain's advice. When youngsters reach the age of 13, according to the Twain theory, we should put them in a barrel, seal the top, and feed them through a knothole. When they reach age 17, Twain says, close the knothole.

I am sure that parents and teachers all over America have had that desire at one time or another. But instead of burying our heads in our pillows as they play the same song 20 times over, we need to turn our attention to improving our nation's middle schools and being an active presence in the lives of our adolescent children.

The young people in our middle schools are intensely curious, open to discovery, full of energy, and ready with an opinion—all of the characteristics that define an active and engaged learner. This is why America's middle schools need to find a new balance between meeting students' developmental needs and raising their expectations about what they can achieve academically.

One of the problems we face in improving our nation's middle schools is simply that they are "in the middle." Most of the attention of policymakers is currently focused on the front end of our education system—creating more Pre-K and kindergarten opportunities and making sure that all children can read by the end of the third grade.

I fully appreciate this strong emphasis on the early years. As I have always said, the stronger the start, the better the finish. But this intense focus on the early years should not come at the expense of the middle years and, unfortunately, that is exactly what seems to be happening. Our nation's secondary schools, for example, have 33 percent of all Title I students, yet they receive only 15 percent of the funding.

Stumping the Translator

Equally important, we are not paying enough attention to the issue of teacher quality. In too many cases, we are throwing a warm body into the classroom, closing the door and hoping for the best. The results, as we now know, do not meet our expectations by any measure.

It is just about hopeless to talk about improving education and raising standards when one-quarter of our nation's teachers, according to the Education Trust's report *All Talk, No Action: Putting an End to Out-of-field Teaching*, are teaching out of field.

This new report tells us that the problem of out-of-field teachers has reached "crisis proportions" in our middle schools. More than 50 percent of all teachers in high-poverty and high-minority middle schools do not even have a minor degree in the subject they are teaching.

I am sure this is not what these teachers want, nor is it what the students need. Until we solve this very specific problem, we'll just be spinning our wheels when it comes to closing the achievement gap. We can do better, and one of the strongest aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act is the requirement to put a highly qualified teacher in every classroom.

Leadership Makes the Difference

One of the most important ways to improve the middle school years is to develop a cadre of principals who are determined to create a culture of excellence, getting students, parents, teachers, other educators, and school staff to adopt and adhere to a no-excuses attitude.

In his new book *Shooting for the Sun*, Hayes Mizell makes the powerful argument that a new type of principal is needed who can harness the "raging intellect" of middle school students and drive home the message that these young people should be looking beyond their freshman year and thinking ahead about what they will do after they graduate from high school.

At first glance, this challenge may seem daunting to an eighth grader who thinks that just being a high school freshman is a very big deal, a rite of passage equal in importance to getting one's driver's permit. But the fact of the matter is simply this: compared to other nations, we allow our students to run in place academically and, as a result, too many are intellectually disengaged. Middle school students in other nations are, in some cases, two academic years ahead of our students.

Instead of seeing middle schools as the last best chance to provide the real academic grounding our students need to succeed in high school and even a first opportunity to raise their expectations about going on to college, we seem content to let the middle school years slip by without a real commitment to engaging the minds of our students.

Mizell suggests that too many middle school leaders are "unclear about the academic mission" of their schools and have, in fact, made it an objective secondary to the developmental needs of their students. As Mizell notes, "it is not learning, but sympathy for students or control of students that sets the school agenda."

I agree. Instead of looking only as far ahead as their freshman year in high school, our middle school students need to get tuned in to thinking about their freshman year of college. Extremely important to this effort are programs like GEAR UP, which supports the creation of partnerships between high-poverty middle schools and a college or university and other partners to provide tutoring and mentoring to middle school students.

To create a new culture of excellence in our middle schools, we need to change expectations. Getting young adolescents to think about college early and to take gateway courses like algebra in the eighth grade can make a powerful difference in getting ready for high school, college and, indeed, life as an adult. Some eighth graders can even take Advanced Placement classes if their school is able to make the arrangements.

We also need to recognize that middle school students want new and hands-on experiences. They want to be challenged and stretched and they still have that marvelous inquisitive nature that makes learning so enjoyable. Service learning opportunities are a wonderful way to release all of their pent-up energy in a constructive way.

And why not tap the experience of senior citizens, people involved in the arts, and even college students to make learning more exciting in quality after-school enrichment programs?

Pay Attention to Our Adolescents

Young people grow up fast these days and adolescents are making critical choices about their lives and what they hope to become. The gawky eighth grader who is struggling to define who he or she wants to be may decide to be a high school dropout by the tenth grade or may realize that going on to college is much more rewarding.

If ever there was a time to pay attention to our children, it is in these middle years. For that reason, I believe it is absolutely essential that every student have a parent, a counselor, or a caring adult mentor who can help guide them as they make important choices about their present and their future.

Growing up is full of pushes and pulls, stops and starts, and detours along the way. The middle school years are the starting point for this unique phase of our children's lives. Kids try out new versions of themselves, experiment, stop, start and go in other directions, and certainly test boundaries.

Adults have an important role to play during this intense period when growing up takes place in so many different ways. We need to "hang in there," despite all the ups and downs and trials and tribulations that occur during the adolescent years.

Parents who have attended countless PTA meetings during the elementary years have a tendency to cut back when students get to those middle years. The truth of the matter is that parents need to be just as much of an active presence in the lives of their children during these transition years and stay involved in school activities.

Above all, parents, educators, and other adults need to help children develop a value system that allows them to make healthy and smart choices about who they are and what they hope to become.

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