

The Importance of Middle Level Education

This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents



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. In this document, National Middle School Association sets forth a vision to guide the decisions of those responsible for shaping educational programs that are committed to improving both learning and learners.

Contemporary society presents remarkably different challenges from those educators faced just a few decades ago. While the traditional school functions—sharing our national heritage, acquiring fundamental knowledge, teaching the tools of scholarship and the workplace, and promoting democratic citizenship—remain valid, achieving these functions today and meeting the academic imperative and other new responsibilities require relevant curriculum and varied, engaging teaching strategies that complement contemporary students. Middle level educators, therefore, promote schools that build on effective traditional practices as they create schools where learning is both expedient and joyful and where learners are celebrated for their initiative and accomplishments.

When developing successful middle level schools, educators and others must consider the intent of the various concepts, specific programs, or operational features recommended. They should weigh the “spirit” behind any proposal by asking “What is the ultimate purpose of this program?” “What are we trying to accomplish?” or “How will this program affect student growth, development, and achievement?”

Perhaps the most profound and enduring lesson learned in 30 years of active middle school advocacy is that the several distinct elements of successful middle level schools work best as parts of the larger whole. In the early years of the middle school movement, educators implemented what were then seen as middle school characteristics such as advisory programs, teams, and exploratory offerings. While research and cumulative, empirical evidence have confirmed that these characteristics when present over time lead to higher levels of student achievement and are supportive of the middle school concept, they have limited value when implemented singly. Schools should not choose among characteristics, implementing only those that appear to be more achievable or seem more appropriate for a school or a particular situation. Rather, successful middle level schools recognize that the 14 characteristics described in *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* are interdependent and must be implemented in concert.



YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

Young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes between the ages 10 and 15 than at any other time in their lives. Although growth in infancy is also very extensive, infants are not the conscious witnesses of their development. Early adolescence is a period of tremendous variability among youngsters of the same gender and chronological age. Dissimilar rates of growth are common in all areas of their development. Changes occur irregularly, and no two young adolescents enter puberty at the same time or progress at the same rate. Individual differences proliferate, making dubious such assumptions as, “All seventh graders are....” Race, poverty, or ethnicity may play an important role, as these conditions add to the tremendous variability of students. It is vitally important to recognize that the areas of development—intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral—are inexorably intertwined. With young adolescents, achieving academic success is highly dependent upon their other developmental needs also being met.

Changes in middle level students’ patterns of thinking become evident in the ideas they have about the world and how it functions. These shifts may be apparent through the questions they pose to each other and to trusted adults, in their reflections about personal experiences, in their views on moral issues, and through their perceptions of stories, images, and humor. Young adolescents reveal growing capacity for thinking about how they learn, for considering multiple ideas, and for planning steps to carry out their own learning activities. Such evidence heralds growth toward more mature and abstract ways of thinking. However, because cognitive growth occurs gradually and irregularly, most middle level students require ongoing, concrete, experiential learning in order to develop intellectually.

Early adolescence is characterized by accelerated movement toward reproductive maturity. Hormonal shifts trigger physical transformations such as redistribution of body fat, increases in weight and height, abrupt bone and muscle growth, and changes in voice, hair, and complexion. In general, physical maturation begins much earlier for girls than boys. Sexual development prompts new physical, emotional, and social concerns for both sexes. Early or late physical maturation affects self-perception as well as status with peers and adults.

Concerns about appearance and body image usually generate heightened interest in personal grooming among young adolescents. Yet, their health choices are often inappropriate, for example, eating foods inadequate for meeting the nutritional needs of their changing bodies. In addition, many youngsters begin experimenting with tobacco, alcohol, other harmful drugs, and sex, all of which pose serious, potential threats to personal health. Rapid physical changes combined with the multiple hazards of contemporary life make early adolescence a crucial period for developing healthy personal habits.

Parents or guardians almost always retain primary authority and continue as the source of basic values for children. However, young people’s desire for peer acceptance and the need to belong to particular social groups are often intense and sometimes lead to shifting allegiance from adults to peers. Issues of right and wrong, good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate are increasingly influenced by other young adolescents and by the media. Parents should recognize the reticence of young adolescents to communicate with family members as part of their striving for independence. Families, however, should take care to keep their end of the communication line open. At the same



time, remember that young adolescents hunger for positive relationships with caring adults and opportunities for informal interactions and conversations with them.

Another concern is the effect of social forces on the moral development of young adolescents. For the most part, young people make good choices, but those decisions become more difficult in a world where violence and the exploitation of vulnerable youth are all too prevalent. Young people receive conflicting messages about sexuality and appropriate behavior, and often their schools and even parents may shy away from discussing such issues with them. Developmentally responsive middle level schools construct curricula that actively assist young people as they formulate positive moral principles. This crucial guidance, of course, must reflect sensitivity and consider family and community expectations.

All in all, the several developmental processes associated with adolescence, while natural and necessary, present challenges to those entrusted with the responsibility for the healthy development and education of young adolescents, and it is very clear that the schools of yesterday are ill-suited for meeting the challenges of today.

THE CHANGING SOCIETY

The many transitions individuals undergo during early adolescence would make growing up difficult enough in an unchanging world. Societies today, however, are evolving rapidly, and virtually every aspect of life has been altered. The second half of the 20th century brought about unprecedented changes, especially in gender roles, family structures and traditions, influences of electronic and print media, the increasingly diverse and multicultural nature of communities, and a growing international influence on life. Although modern life is richer in many ways, the roles and markers for youth have become ambiguous, offering fewer opportunities for making meaningful contributions to family or society.

Family structure is also undergoing redefinition. Nuclear and extended families once provided clearer roles and responsibilities, and many still do. However, with diverse family configurations, some young adolescents are growing up in situations that vary in the number, gender, race, or ethnicity of parents or guardians. In addition, far too many children grow up lacking adequate supervision. Without responsible adult role models present, unhealthy situations exist when young adolescents live in an environment rife with temptations.

Although physical maturity occurs earlier than in previous generations, children still confront the same developmental hurdles. During early adolescence they need supportive adult guidance and advocacy as much or more than ever as they struggle to maintain the hope and optimism that have typically characterized youth.

The economy also directly affects young adolescents. A substantial number have considerable disposable income and are a major target of marketing campaigns, most of which are clearly manipulative. Others have little or no disposable money, yet live exposed to the same marketing pressures. Many of the entertainment options available to young adolescents foster superficial and selfish values, depict gender roles inappropriately, and promote a passive, consumer-oriented, and at times, a self-destructive lifestyle. Young adolescents also witness the negative results of poverty,



racism, drug and alcohol abuse, crime, and child abuse, often without opportunities to understand why these conditions occur and what they might do about them. Schools and community programs must do more to cultivate responsible, moral decision makers and discriminating, enlightened consumers.

The guidelines for selecting educational goals, curriculum content, and instructional processes grow out of an awareness of and respect for the nature of these distinctive young adolescents. Educators who understand them and the cultural context in which they grow to maturity will make wise decisions about the kinds of schools needed.

THE VISION FRAMED

National Middle School Association's vision for a successful middle school is delineated in the following 14 characteristics. Eight are facets of the culture of such schools. The remaining six are programmatic characteristics that can evolve in such a culture. As previously noted, all of these features or attributes of a successful middle school, while necessarily presented as individual items, must work in harmony.

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
- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- A shared vision that guides decisions
- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- High expectations for every member of the learning community
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- An adult advocate for every student
- School-initiated family and community partnerships.

Therefore, successful schools for young adolescents provide

- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity
- Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning
- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning
- School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Multifaceted guidance and support services.

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