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Getting to Know Your Students

Teaching middle school students starts with knowing and understanding them. We can accomplish this by familiarizing ourselves with scientific studies on the stage of life called early adolescence, but we also can learn about students when we simply take time to get to know them. What extracurricular activities do they engage in? Which friends do they hang out with? What makes them laugh? It takes a spectrum of information about our students to give us all we need to inspire them in their learning and help them grow as lifelong learners and engaged citizens.

In this issue, Nita Paris shares recent research on the adolescent brain. Neuroscience offers us the what and why of our students’ motivations and behavior, helping us to be deliberate in planning their learning experiences. Maxey and Hancock use this information in district-wide decisions and planning as they describe a dual effort that focuses on best practices in middle school while implementing a district digital transformation.

Segal and McCormick take advantage of students’ enthusiasm for extracurricular activities—in this case, sports—to help them recognize transferable skills, while Chandler opens the door for students to read what they love and share with others, deepening their own learning.

We all know that when working with young adolescents, there’s nothing more important than building relationships with them. Crable offers that having teachers who demonstrate that they believe in students and care about them is more important to student engagement and learning than the best curriculum in the world. Sowell focuses on the principal-student relationship, often overlooked in favor of teacher-student relationship development, as an additional part of the young adolescent learning experience.

Wormeli helps us explore the advantage of using humor in the classroom to relate to students and open creative channels, boost enthusiasm, and build memorable learning experiences that stick. His wealth of ideas—from slapstick to puns to satire—can be taken as-is, modified, or hopefully inspire you to try infusing humor—in ways that work for you—into your school or classroom.

April Tibbles, Editor
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