

Middle Level Education Month

..... March

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Overview & Talking Points

Overview

At no other time in the life cycle are the chances of finding one's self and losing one's self so closely aligned. —Erik Erikson

Those who work with 10- to 15-year-olds, regardless of the grade configuration of the school, must realize that their school must be designed to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of young adolescents. It's far too easy to forget that students entering the middle grades are only five or six years removed from their first days of school and students leaving are only a few short years away from the rigors of college and career.

Other than from birth to age three, 10- to 15-year-olds are experiencing the most rapid, significant changes of their lives—changes that are physical, social, emotional, and cognitive in nature. Schools that work successfully with middle grades students understand and recognize that those students are seeking new levels of independence and can be highly peer centered; that the changes they are experiencing affect their thinking and behavior; and that each student is maturing on his or her own timeline.

This understanding of young adolescent development must be considered when making decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Middle grades students must be provided with engaging learning experiences that build on their personal interests and help them develop connections between the content, their present lives, and their future possibilities. The curriculum should be relevant, challenging, and interdisciplinary—and learning must be assessed through multiple measures, including real-life application and demonstration of knowledge and skills, and not solely based on state test scores. Instruction should be as varied and diverse as the students themselves; should take advantage of the **young adolescent's need for movement and social interaction; and should be** engaging, thought provoking, and interactive in nature.

Talking Points

As a middle level educator, you may be asked to formally or informally speak to a variety of groups that make up your school community. We strongly advocate for casting middle grades students and their schools in a positive light whenever possible. March is Middle Level Education Month and can serve as an opportune time to embed positive images of our students and their schools whenever we have an appropriate forum.

Different audiences need to hear different messages; therefore, here are suggestions for you to consider as you prepare to speak in different settings.

With your staff:

- Acknowledge that middle grades students can be challenging but can also be caring, compassionate, and concerned. Share positive stories about your students.
- Decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, assessment, and classroom management must take into account and capitalize on the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. Ensure that all staff members in your school are aware of these characteristics and use them as a basis for decision making.
- Remind all staff members that they are working with young adolescents, and the adults in their lives are still important people to them—even when they act otherwise.
- For many students, friendship trumps everything, and students can be desperate to have friends. However, kind words from adults outside the classroom can work wonders.
- Consistently remind staff that middle grades students need adults in their lives who are supportive and caring. It is never too late to establish such a critical relationship.
- Cultivate an Active School environment. We know that active kids do better in the classroom and in life, so encourage your staff members to integrate at least 60 minutes physical activity into the school day through Physical Education, physical activity classroom breaks, and before- and after-school programming.

With current parents/guardians:

- Stay involved. Both your child and the school need your support.

- When in doubt, ask questions. Middle grades students are prone to making such **statements as: “I never have homework”, “Everyone’s going...”, “Her parents let her do that...”, and “My teacher never....” etc.** Trusting your child is important, but take his or her vague answers with caution, keep asking for more details, and then contact **your child’s teachers.**
- **Volunteer when possible. If you’d like to help** but your child is uncomfortable having you work in his/her class, let your teacher or school know. They can arrange for you to help in other ways.
- Attend school events in which your child is participating—concerts, sporting events, conferences, open houses, etc.
- Recognize that your child will be experiencing the challenges of puberty. They will be going through many physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes and sometimes feel they are the only one experiencing this. Acknowledge these concerns and provide them with timely, accurate information.
- **Get to know your child’s friends. Invite them** into your home, involve them in activities with your child, and stay in contact with their parents.
- Distinguish between behavior that is typical for a young adolescent and behavior that is atypical (ex. overly aggressive, manic, **defiant**). **Don’t overreact to the former behavior and don’t ignore or dismiss the latter.**
- Serve as a role model for your child by participating in and encouraging physical activity.
- **Be present in your child’s growing cyber life. Students’ social circles expand tremendously** through the internet, and parents play a crucial role in monitoring the choices they may make there.

With incoming parents/guardians:

Your child is entering early adolescence:

- During this time period, your child will face challenges and make life-impacting choices, including such things as friends, leisure activities, study habits, serious moral dilemmas that need to be addressed, etc.
- The physical challenges of puberty are real—not every young adolescent develops at the same rate or in the same manner.

- Friends are important, and your child may be unintentionally embarrassed by your actions—talking too loudly in restaurants, insisting on calling them by pet names in **front of their friends, trying to be “cool”, using “their” language, etc.**
- As your child enters early adolescence and becomes more aware of his/her sexuality, the need for accurate information is critical. Keep the lines of communication open and assure your child you will answer his/her questions honestly.
- Stay involved. Middle grades students really do want parents to be involved in their lives, even though it isn't always obvious.
- Middle school is the best place to launch a successful future, and that is best accomplished when the school and family work together.
- It is important to be patient, understanding, caring, and loving with your young adolescent, even when their actions and decisions baffle and confound you.
- Ask questions and provide information. The school needs to know if there is a concern or situation that needs to be addressed.
- Read school communications and attend transition activities that have been planned for incoming students, both in the spring and in the fall.
- Talk with your child about the upcoming school year and emphasize the positive aspects of being in the middle grades. Address his/her areas of concern and contact the school if help or more information is needed.

With community members:

- Remind community members that young adolescents are not simply bundles of hormones. They are looking for a place to belong, and when the opportunities are present, they are capable of making significant contributions to their community. Tap into their energy and leadership potential!
- Highlight the positive aspects of the learning in your school, share the good work being done by staff and students, and emphasize how those efforts impact the community.
- Let the community know that serious learning is occurring and they are welcome to come and observe. People who have not witnessed middle level education are frequently amazed to discover that students are in classes and

experiencing learning opportunities that are challenging and engaging!

- **Elicit the community's help:**
 - Create business partnerships.
 - Invite them to volunteer in your school.
 - Ask them to share their expertise with classes or during a career day/fair.
 - Invite them to become mentors for students in your school.
 - Request that they host field trips for classes or small interest groups.
 - Invite them to be a member of a school committee.
 - Encourage them to attend school activities.
 - Solicit help for students in need (clothing, medical/dental attention, housing, etc.)
 - Ask them to lead physical activities before- and after-school.

For more information on Middle Level Education Month visit www.amle.org/mlem