

The logo for the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) is a red speech bubble with the letters 'AMLE' in white, bold, sans-serif font. The background of the entire cover is a colorful, abstract watercolor wash in shades of pink, blue, yellow, and green, with a white outline of a human head in profile. Various white line-art icons are scattered throughout, including gears, a lightbulb with the word 'idea' inside, musical notes, a smartphone, a pie chart, a paint palette, a xylophone, a globe, a beaker, an open book, a heart with an ECG line, a calculator, a soccer ball, and a skateboard.

**AMLE**

*STUDY GUIDE*  
for  
**The Successful  
Middle School**

*This We Believe*

Developed by Linda Hopping

## Study Guide for *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*

This guide has been prepared to facilitate a study of *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (2021), the landmark position paper of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) that is widely recognized as the best articulation of the middle school concept. The fifth edition of this document provides a narrative of beliefs and practices today as well as the challenges schools will face in the coming years.

A study of this book that engages all faculty and staff will frame a common understanding of the middle school concept and build a foundation for an honest evaluation of current middle grades practices in your school. It also will generate rich conversations around current challenges that will serve as a basis for targeted professional development activities to meet those challenges. The assessment of practices in your school can provide a blueprint for school improvement initiatives.

It is recommended that your school establish a steering committee that includes teacher leaders and administrators to oversee and direct this study. This committee should develop a plan for the entire staff to engage in the study with a variety of interactive strategies and a timeline for completion. Each section of the book is significant, so all sections should be examined by the total staff.

In addition to being creative in the development of numerous strategies for the book study, it is important to provide flexible time slots—time during faculty meetings, team meetings, PLCs—as well as longer blocks during professional development days that can be used to complete the book study. Sometimes a retreat format during pre-planning can be structured to provide time for an initial overview and discussion of how the study will be conducted and an introductory look at goals for this work. It is suggested that a digital collaboration tool, such as Google Docs, be used to record the observations, questions, and recommendations from each of the small groups, with recorders from each group entering their information following the small group sessions. This will allow all staff to see the work of the smaller groups and help to identify trends, opportunities, and challenges, and highlight the positive aspects of the school. The steering committee can use this information for planning purposes and to identify school improvement needs.

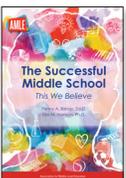
Once the steering committee has been established and time blocks delineated, the faculty and staff should be organized into small discussion groups that will discuss the questions presented in the guide. Existing interdisciplinary teams, exploratory teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school personnel should be included in the small groups. At specific intervals during the study, the groups should come together as a total faculty to share their thinking and ideas.

It is strongly suggested that a personal copy of the book be provided to everyone who is participating so they can highlight and make margined notes as desired. If this is not possible, secure enough copies for each small group to share.



## Steps in the Book Study Process

1. Establish a steering committee to plan the implementation of the study
2. Develop goals for the book study with the entire staff
3. Assign every member of the staff to a small learning community
4. Create a calendar and provide dedicated meeting times
5. Determine the structure for the book study:
  - a. Section by section
  - b. Independent reading followed by group discussion
  - c. Strategies to be used during reading
  - d. Norms and roles for meetings
6. Debrief with the entire staff at designated times
7. Review significant findings to discover areas of consensus or disagreement as well as strengths and weaknesses
8. Identify next steps to implement the components of *The Successful Middle School* as part of your school improvement process



## Conducting the Book Study

### Reflection

- Take a few minutes to study the student artwork entitled “Dream Big” (opposite page 1). What does this drawing tell you about young adolescents? How does our school support the theme represented by this student?
- Read and discuss the poem on page 2, “The First Day.” Does this describe our school? Provide examples of how this poem does or does not describe our school. Are there certain groups of students who are more likely to feel there is a place for them in our school than others? How might we change this?

### The Importance of Middle Level Education (pp. 3-7)

- To be responsive to the needs of our young adolescent learners, what specific programs, practices, and activities currently are in place at our school to ensure that we are responding to the profound personal changes (physical, cognitive, psychological, and social-emotional) and identity development (racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) students are experiencing?
- Which area of need do you think is least served by our school’s programs? Best served? Why?
- Are the practices and policies in our school just and equitable for all students? In what ways? How do you know? What data supports our conclusions?
- Do we provide a safe environment that encourages students to engage actively in divergent thinking and learning, honoring multiple viewpoints, and respecting each other in that process? Provide specific examples of ways we do this.
- Are the development of critical thinking skills and appropriate academic challenges an integral part of the culture of our school? Is this evident in all areas of the curriculum and for all students? If not, which areas of the curriculum need to address this? What groups of students may not be appropriately challenged? Cite examples that speak to this.
- Note Dr. William Alexander’s statement calling for a new “middle school” (p. 5). Are his assertions still relevant today? Why or why not? What are the challenges our school would face if it embraced Dr. Alexander’s statement as a core value?
- What does our school do to prepare young adolescents to be successful in a global society? What data supports this conclusion?



- To what degree does our school base its curriculum, pedagogy, and programs on the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of our students? Provide specific examples for each of these areas: curriculum, pedagogy, and programs. Does everyone in your group agree with the examples? Why or why not?
- What one change do you feel is most important to align our school with what you have read on pp. 3-7?

### Essential Attributes (p. 8)

As you conduct the book study you should first discuss the essential attributes and how they are embodied in your school. The five attributes contained in *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*, (responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, engaging) have always been identified with the middle school and serve as guiding points in developing an educational program that best serves the needs of students in the middle grades.

- Does our current vision/mission ensure that all five of the essential attributes are an integral part of who and what we are as a school? Provide specific examples to illustrate your answers.
- As an individual, rank the five essential attributes from 1 to 5 using 5 as the attribute that is most evident in our school to 1 as the attribute least evident. Compare your rankings with those of the other members of your group. Come to consensus as a group and share your results with the larger group.
- What are some specific examples that would demonstrate that each of these attributes is working well in our school?
- What policies does our school have that ensure these attributes are part of our culture?
- Share some ideas for how we might amplify some of these attributes.

### Characteristics (pp. 11-53)

The major portion of study in *The Successful Middle School* is in this section, for it is here that school and classroom practices, policies, and programs are addressed directly. The 18 characteristics are grouped into three areas: Culture and Community; Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; and Leadership and Organization. These three areas help schools identify strengths and areas of growth and will be of great value as your school develops a school improvement plan that is closely aligned with best practice. At the end of each of the three sections there are a series of quotes that can serve as starting points for rich discussions centered on where your school currently finds itself in relation to that particular area or topic. Staff could be asked to read and reflect on the quote, then write a brief paragraph to connect the quote to the work in your school.



The study of this section is likely to take more time than will be given to the other sections combined. When embarking on the study of this section, the steering committee should reinforce the need to consider each of the attributes and characteristics. Each characteristic should be discussed in light of existing school programs and practices and within the context of your school and community population. It is recommended that the small discussion groups maintain notes on its responses to these questions for periodic sharing with the total faculty.

## Culture and Community Characteristics

*“For educators to engage in true collaborative inquiry there must be a culture of trust established.”* Erin Elmhurst

Read the poem on page 10 entitled “I am ... True.” What characteristics of a middle school teacher resonated with the author? How do the teachers in your school exhibit those characteristics?

### **Educators respect and value young adolescents.** (pp. 11-12)

- Does the atmosphere in our school show that we value students as individuals as well as learners? What are some examples that support this belief?
- As we examine practices in our school that speak to the developmental needs of students, are we considering the multiple identities reflected in our students and how they see themselves (age, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, gender, disability, religion)?
- How are we collecting formal and informal data related to the lived experiences of our students? How are we using this data to respond directly to what our students need?
- What specific examples are present in curriculum and the learning environment that support the holistic view of students as stated in the question above?
- How do the adults in our school show a genuine interest in youth culture beyond the school setting (the way they live, the norms, practices, and values they share, and trends in music, fashion, language, social media, sports, and dating)?
- What are some of the major personal and educational challenges our students experience? What structures do we have in place that actively support these challenges? How much control or decision-making ability do they have to address these challenges?
- In what specific ways do the adults in our school serve as role models for our students?

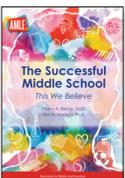


**The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.** (pp. 12-15)

- In what ways do teachers, staff members, and students model respect for one another? For students?
- What structures and opportunities exist in our school to provide positive emotional and academic supports among students?
- Describe the norms and practices that exist within our school that support a collaborative rather than a competitive atmosphere, both in classrooms as well as in other areas.
- Is every student in our school well known by at least one adult? How do we know that? What can we do about those “invisible students” who don’t have connections to an adult advocate?
- Is it part of the culture of our school to value each student as an individual and as a learner? Support your answer with specific examples.
- What practices and policies are in place to eliminate racism, xenophobia, ableism, religious intolerance, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and classism in our school? Which of these “-isms” are most prevalent in our school and community? What steps are needed to eliminate them?
- How are the demographics of our school and community similar or different from that of our staff and administration? How might the differences we’ve identified impact how welcoming, inclusive, and affirming our school environment is to students and families?
- How are adults encouraged to reflect individually and/or in groups on their own explicit and implicit biases and how these might impact their interactions with students and families? How do they impact curricular choices?

**Every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.** (pp. 15-16)

- Why is it so important for every young adolescent to have an adult advocate/advisor?
- In what ways does our school reach out to parents and the larger community to identify and provide role models, mentors, and advocates for students?
- How do staff members develop positive relationships with students and parents/guardians?
- What organizational structures in our school support advisory or offer opportunities for adults and students to meet beyond traditional academic time?
- Do we presently have an advisory program in which students meet regularly in advisory groups during the school day? If not, brainstorm some ways we might move toward this model.



- What types of programs/initiatives would be valuable during this advisory time, and how might we facilitate consistency across the school?
- How would you define the current roles and responsibilities of a student’s advisor? After reading this section in the text, would you make any changes to those current roles and responsibilities?
- How do advisors work as liaisons between our school and its families? What additional ways might we increase communication between families and advisors?
- What training currently is in place for advisors? Who conducts the trainings? What additional training would be helpful?

**School safety is addressed proactively, justly, and thoughtfully.** (pp. 17-18)

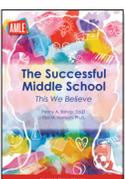
- In what ways are students involved in the development of proactive, positive behavioral expectations for their learning community?
- How do we work with students to teach them strategies to resolve conflict constructively? Do we have specific programs in place that speak to this issue and, if so, what are they? Are these programs sensitive to the cultural norms of our student population? What data do we have to indicate the effectiveness of these programs?
- Do we, as a school staff, engage in honest conversation centered around potential biases we might have and how those biases may affect the safety and well-being of our students? Cite examples.
- Are we aware of the variety of cultural backgrounds, languages, religious beliefs, and identities reflected in our student body? Provide examples of ways in which we demonstrate a sensitivity to these differences in our policies and practices.
- Who is involved in the development and implementation of policies and practices related to school safety? Do we include students and families in that process? If so, how? If not, how can we begin to do that?
- In what ways do we track disciplinary data across identity groups to ensure equity in disciplinary procedures and policies? How often is this data examined? What examples do we have of the data being used to create more equitable and just policies and practices?
- What policies are in place that ensure we promote restorative justice practices?
- Is our physical facility clean and attractive? How do we instill in our students a sense of shared responsibility to help keep it clean and attractive? What could we do to improve our physical facility to make it more attractive?



- Do visitors to our building feel welcomed and valued? How do we know?
- Is student work displayed regularly in classrooms, hallways, and other public areas of the building such as the lobby, auditorium, library/media center, gymnasium, and cafeteria? Is it representative of all students and curriculum areas? How often is it updated?
- In what ways does our school resource officer work with students and families to help them feel safe and promote positive relationships? How can we work proactively to improve our current relationships between law enforcement and the school and larger community?

**Comprehensive counseling and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.** (pp. 18-20)

- What are the components of an effective counseling program? Are those components included in our counseling program and what might be missing?
- What is the ratio of students to various counseling and support staff? Is it possible for all students to receive the specialized supports they need?
- What percentage of time do our counselors spend working directly with students? Are they able to meet with each student several times during the year? What other duties do they perform?
- What specific services are in place in our school for students with learning challenges, social adjustments, homelife issues, health concerns, or marginalized identities? For example, are needs-based or affinity groups available for students to join?
- What specific protocols ensure students equitable access to support services? Do all staff members know how to refer students for these services? How do these protocols prevent the overrepresentation of students with marginalized identities identified as needing specialized services such as special education services?
- What types of alternative environments are provided for students (a place to reflect, to calm down)? Who monitors these areas and what are students expected to do while they are in that environment?
- Do we have programs for peer mediation and peer tutoring? If so, what are they? If not, what type of programs should we put in place?
- What specific transition programs are in place to transition students into and out of our school? Are they ongoing, and do they provide students with comprehensive information so transitions are seamless?
- How are the following stakeholders involved in the transition to and from the middle school: students, teachers, parents/guardians, administrators, counselors?



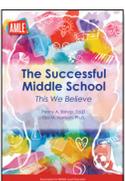
- When there is more than one feeder school, what steps are taken to bring these students together before the start of the school year?
- What are the specific transition supports for students who transfer into the district after the start of the school year?

**The school engages families as valued partners.** (pp. 20-21)

- How do we ensure that we have regular and frequent channels of communication with the families of our students? In what ways can we improve our current system?
- Do we know how parents/guardians like to receive communication from the school, and do we provide those communications in the language of the parent/guardian?
- What are examples of ways we solicit input from our families? How have we used this input to make changes to our policies, practices, or procedures?
- Given middle school families' uncertainty about how to engage with their child's school, what are we doing to reach out to new parents/guardians to make them feel they are an integral part of their child's schooling experience?
- How are we taking into consideration varying family norms, compositions, cultural backgrounds, language, and socio-economic status as we investigate our personal understanding of family engagement? How have we created ways for all families to feel listened to, respected, and considered valued partners?
- Are we currently engaged in student-led conferencing? If so, in what ways could we enhance its effectiveness? Do we engage in follow-up feedback from these conferences and utilize the input to make them more effective? If not, how can we investigate this tool and incorporate it into our school culture?

**The school collaborates with community and business partners.** (p. 21-23)

- How is our school proactive in seeking community and business partnerships that enhance our understanding of the lives of our students and provide connections between learning and the real world?
- Do we regularly examine our curriculum to ensure that learning is connected to real-life experiences? What are some ways we currently do this? How might we expand this effort to include community partners?
- How can we further community involvement in the everyday life of our school? In specific learning experiences for students? What type of projects in the community could be supported by our students?



- Do all of our community partnerships involve members of the community coming into the school, or do we also find ways for groups and individual students to engage out in the community (i.e., apprenticeships, job shadowing, service-learning projects)?
- In what ways does our school support our community and business partners? In what ways can we improve in this area?

## For Reflection

*"Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything."* — George Bernard Shaw

*"Building a positive school culture is everyone's responsibility."* — Unknown

*"The only impossible journey is the one you never begin."* — Tony Robbins

*"Don't be afraid to give up the good to go for the great."* — John D. Rockefeller

*"The very problems you must overcome also support you and make you stronger in overcoming them."* — Daniel James Brown

*"The greatest glory in living lies not in never failing, but in rising every time we fall."*  
— Nelson Mandela

*"Strong, positive school cultures result in increased student achievement and motivation."*  
— Jeanne Gibbs

*"Creating a collaborative culture is the single most important factor for successful school improvement initiatives."* — Unknown

*"Great schools are as one; they are quite clearly in the same boat, pulling in the same direction in unison."* — Lickhona and Davidson

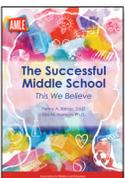
*"The great thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving."* — Oliver Wendell Holmes

*"Trust is the glue that holds a collaborative culture together."* — Platt and Tripp

*"You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you don't try."* — Beverly Sills

*"A sign you have a positive workplace culture is laughter. Just listen to how much laughter there is where you work."* — Sam Glenn

*"Building and sustaining a positive school culture is the all-encompassing factor of a successful school."* — Alicia Bond



## Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Characteristics

*“I believe the good middle school teacher is one who instructs in reality but suggests dreams.”* John H. Lounsbury

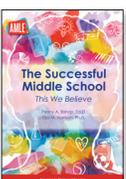
Read the poem on page 24 entitled “My Favorite Teachers.” What does this poem tell you about the teachers who made a difference in this student’s life? What characteristics did they exhibit? How did they foster relationships with their students?

Look at the picture on page 37 entitled “A Dance to Remember.” Read the student’s explanation for drawing the picture. What does this tell you about her teacher, her interests, and the message conveyed to students about failure and success?

Look at the picture on page 43 entitled “The Reunion.” How does this student express the importance of belonging and acceptance?

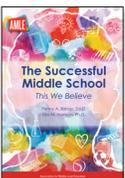
### **Educators are specifically prepared to teach young adolescents and possess a depth of understanding in the content areas they teach.** (pp. 25-27)

- Why is specific preparation for teaching in the middle grades important?
- What professional learning opportunities are available in our school that ensure all staff members are cognizant of the needs and experiences of their young adolescent learners?
- What are some specific areas we need to explore as a staff to enhance our ability to teach and advocate for the specific students in our school?
- What qualities and characteristics should outstanding middle level educators bring to middle level teaching? Why are those qualities and characteristics important for the success of our students?
- How do our hiring practices and procedures ensure that we are hiring the staff most prepared and suited to work with the young adolescents in our school?
- Has our school made commitments to provide appropriate resources and professional development opportunities for staff through membership in AMLE and our state middle level organizations, as well as subject area associations?



**Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse.** (pp. 27-33)

- In what specific ways does our school meet the standard of each of the four components of curriculum: challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse? In which areas can we improve and how?
- How can we weave together the four components of curriculum to enhance students' interest in the subject, engage them in the lessons, and further their ability to learn?
- In what ways could we modify current practice to make certain that issues related to racism, diversity, multiple viewpoints, and social justice are interwoven seamlessly into the curriculum?
- How do you make time in our classrooms to intersperse the “unplanned” curriculum and capitalize on the “teachable moments?”
- Are ALL students in our school held to high expectations and given the supports needed to reach those expectations? What measures currently are in place to ensure this, and what do we need to do to adhere more fully to this idea?
- In what ways does our school utilize inclusion and co-teaching for the majority of our special needs students?
- Discuss ways in which the curriculum provides opportunities for students to make significant and meaningful decisions about their learning.
- Are students provided opportunities to study topics, concepts, and skills in areas of interest to them? Provide examples and brainstorm ways this might be further incorporated into curriculum topics.
- How are the cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds and prior experiences of students interwoven into curriculum planning? Is every student able to see themselves represented in our current curriculum?
- In what ways does the curriculum provide opportunities for students to explore various perspectives, values, assumptions, and basic principles?
- In what ways do we help students explore and develop an awareness of a wide array of cultures and the ways in which these cultures have contributed to the world?
- What examples of essential questions do we use to encourage genuine learning experiences?
- How is the concept of scaffolding woven through the curriculum so students master content commensurate with their current levels of understanding? How do we then move them to increasingly challenging content?
- How can we expand use of technology in ways that are meaningful in the context of curriculum and used when appropriate to facilitate learning?



- Where and how are students afforded opportunities on a regular basis to participate in independent study, small group work, special interest enrichment experiences, and apprenticeships? Do all students have equal access to these opportunities?
- In what specific exploratory and enrichment activities do all students participate? How do we ensure that every student is provided a wide array of these experiences during their time in the middle school?
- Do all students participate in planned experiences in the fine and applied arts? Technology, health and physical education, family and consumer science, foreign languages, digital literacy/citizenship? If not, how might we change our program to enable them to participate in all of these experiences?
- In what ways does our curriculum provide an integrated approach that enables students to examine problems they have identified so they develop skills in critical thinking, decision-making, and creativity?
- Does our school engage fully in interdisciplinary studies? Why or why not? Provide specific examples of interdisciplinary units that enable students to see the integrated nature of knowledge and themes that cross subject areas.

**Health, wellness, and social-emotional competence are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.** (pp. 33-35)

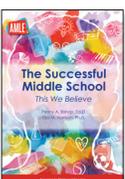
- In what ways can we expand the concept of health and wellness so it is present throughout our curriculum and culture and represents the diversity of human experience?
- Describe how the social-emotional needs of our students are addressed in equitable and culturally sensitive ways. Is there a specific program used to help students develop social-emotional skills and address those needs? If so, have we evaluated that program to ensure that it doesn't privilege certain ways of being that are in contrast with the cultural norms of our students and families?
- In what ways do we ensure that the social and emotional needs of students are the responsibility of all staff and not just counselors?
- Do we provide a comprehensive, developmentally responsive health education curriculum that includes addressing our students' changing bodies and minds, the risks associated with drug and alcohol use, and healthy eating habits?
- Do all students have access to a wide variety of regular physical activity throughout their middle school experience, such as physical education classes and self-selected opportunities like intramurals and lifelong fitness activities (e.g., dance, martial arts, and leisure sports)? If not, how could we move toward this important goal?



- Do we offer healthy and well-balanced food options in our cafeteria that are made available to all students in non-stigmatizing ways? If your answer is no, what can be done to change this approach so all students have healthy, well-balanced options? Are students provided with adequate time to take advantage of breakfast programs?
- Do we encourage and make provisions for students to be well hydrated throughout the day?
- Does our school provide dedicated time for recess or breaks so students can engage in physical and social activity with their peers? If not, how could we incorporate this practice into the school day?

**Instruction fosters learning that is active, purposeful, and democratic.** (pp. 35-39)

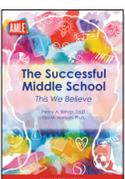
- In what ways does our curriculum ensure that all students are engaged in learning that fosters creative thinking and teaches a variety of ways to pose and answer questions? Provide examples.
- What are examples of ways we use asset-based pedagogies—learning experiences that capitalize on students’ cultural, experiential, and personal backgrounds—to build new knowledge in relevant ways? Are these examples the exception or the norm?
- How do we involve students in shared decision-making, promoting an increase in personal responsibility for their own learning and development?
- What are some specific teaching and learning approaches that we employ to address the diversity of our students? Are there groups of students who would benefit from approaches we do not regularly implement?
- Many students come to school with difficult life circumstances. Are our teaching methods trauma-informed, acknowledging both the trauma that students bring to school and addressing the ways schooling can be traumatizing for students?
- Do we vary instructional approaches to offer students opportunities for regular physical movement?
- Do students engage in active, hands-on, and experiential learning through approaches such as project-based learning and service learning? How can we expand these opportunities so all students can participate in them?
- How does our school ensure that all students are engaged in collaborative learning? Provide specific examples. How is this monitored?
- Are students provided with multiple opportunities to present their learning to others? Provide specific examples from each grade level and subject area. How can we expand this component of best practice?



- How is the regular, integrated use of technology by students infused into our classroom experiences to enhance instruction and student learning? Are students taught how to use technology responsibly and safely? Have we provided teachers with professional development related to effective and equitable technology use for teaching and learning?
- Have we provided equal access to technology and the Internet for all students? If not, how are we addressing these inequities?
- Is the work that students in our school engage in purposeful and meaningful? Does it promote skills applicable across disciplines such as problem-solving, effective communication, innovation, and collaboration?
- How do we promote democratic education by providing students with multiple opportunities to actively plan and pursue their learning through strategies such as goal setting, passion projects, genius hours, and negotiated curriculum?

**Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.** (pp. 40-42)

- How do assessment and evaluation practices used in our school reflect the unique characteristics of young adolescents?
- In what specific ways do we ensure that assessment is fair and unbiased?
- How do we share assessment strategies with students so they have a clear understanding in advance of expectations?
- In what ways do we provide students with the opportunity for self-assessment?
- How do we use ongoing formative assessment data for self-reflection and adjustment of instruction?
- How do we offer students choice in the ways they demonstrate their learning?
- Do our assessment practices tend to emphasize individual progress or comparison with other students? What changes need to be made so the focus is on individual growth?
- How can our school move toward providing more instances of authentic assessment?
- In what ways do we involve parents and the community in celebrating student learning?
- Do we engage in student-led conferences with parents? If so, how could we improve this experience? If not, how can we move toward adopting this practice?
- Do our assessments tend to promote rote memorization or foster deeper learning outcomes such as critical thinking and complex problem-solving?



- Do we involve students in setting their learning goals, sharing how they best learn, and seeking additional help when needed?
- Are data disaggregated regularly (at least 3-5 times a year) and used to craft instruction?

## For Reflection

*"Embrace learning, not teaching, as the fundamental purpose of your school."*

— Rick DuFour

*"Find the teachers who are the LEARNERS in a building and become their friends."*

— Carol Ann Tomlinson

*"My teacher thought I was smarter than I was, so I was"* — Anonymous

*"Teachers have been and still are our nation's greatest resource for good."*

— John H. Lounsbury

*"I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the water to create many ripples."* — Mother Teresa

*"Happiness lies in the joy of achievement and the thrill of creative effort."*

— Franklin D. Roosevelt

*"The beautiful thing about learning is nobody can take it away from you."*

— B. B. King

*"A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."*

— Henry Brooks Adams

*"Teachers plant the seeds of knowledge that last a lifetime."* — Unknown

*"When we do the best we can we never know what miracle is wrought in our life, or in the lives of others."* — Helen Keller

*"Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds you sow."*

— Robert Louis Stevenson

*"You can teach a lesson for a day, but if you teach curiosity, you teach for a lifetime."*

— Unknown

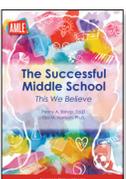
*"There is always more than one right answer. We need to seek to find it."* — DeWitt Jones

*"Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think."*

— Albert Einstein

*"In order to grow you must push against the edge of your comfortable envelope."*

— DeWitt Jones



## Leadership and Organization Characteristics

*“Leaders are visionaries with a poorly developed sense of fear and no concept of the odds against them. They make the impossible happen.”* Dr. Robert Jarvik

Read the poem on page 44 entitled “My Locker.” How is that locker a metaphor for the life of a student in middle school?

Look at the picture on page 52 entitled “Creativity Flow.” What does this image tell you about this student and her middle school experience?

### **A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.** (p. 45)

- What is a vision? A mission statement? What purposes do they serve?
- On what tenets should a middle school’s vision and mission be built? What tenets were our current vision and mission built upon?
- What stakeholders were involved in developing and implementing our current vision statement? Were they representative of our larger school community?
- Do you feel our school’s vision is a living document that guides the school? Why or why not?
- Do you feel our current vision represents the values we want to promote and uphold in our school?
- In what ways is our school’s vision communicated to various stakeholders?
- Do you believe the practices in our school are directly related to the vision and the mission? If so, how? If not, what steps should we take to align practice to the vision and mission?

### **Policies and practices are student-centered, unbiased, and fairly implemented.**

(pp. 46-47)

- Are the policies and practices in our school student-centered, anti-racist and academically rigorous? Do the policies and practices within our school meet the academic and personal needs of all students? What examples support this?
- Do we examine our school’s policies and practices on a regular basis to ensure they are fair and equitable for all of our populations? Cite examples in each of these categories:
  - o Culturally and linguistically diverse students
  - o Economically disadvantaged students
  - o LGBTQ students
  - o Students of color
  - o Students with disabilities (physical and developmental)



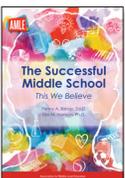
- In what ways does our school engage in self-reflection centered around our policies and practices to ensure they are unbiased, diverse, and inclusive?
- How do we use data to support decisions concerning fair and unbiased policies and practices?

**Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about young adolescents, equitable practices, and educational research.** (pp. 47-48)

- Does the administrative team in our school exhibit a thorough knowledge of young adolescents and their sub-culture? In what ways do they exhibit this knowledge? Is it reflected in the decisions they make?
- Are the programs in our school centered around and reflective of the diversity and the unique needs of our students? Give some examples.
- In what ways do administrators communicate effectively with the school and the community about middle grades practices and programs in our school?
- How does the administrative team use its knowledge to advocate for a comprehensive, student-centered, and inclusive education program?

**Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.** (pp. 48-49)

- How does our school's team demonstrate courageous, collaborative leadership?
- What are the composition and duties of our school leadership team? How are members selected and how long do they serve?
- How does the administrative team address staff members who are underperforming or who express attitudes and behaviors that are inconsistent with what is best for young adolescents?
- Reflect on the culture of our school and think about the following:
  - o Is it collaborative?
  - o Is the input of every individual solicited and valued?
  - o Do multiple individuals have opportunities to voice opinions and concerns and be an integral part of enacting changes?
  - o Do we seek input from the larger school community in decisions we make?
- In what ways does the administrative team of our school encourage teacher leadership?
- What is the long-range plan for school improvement in our school, and in what ways does the administrative team promote it?

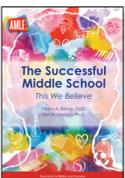


- Can every staff member articulate the goals for the school? Support your answer.
- Do you feel the adults in our school model best practices—both academically and personally—for our students? Cite some examples and share ways in which we might improve in this area.
- Does the administrative team engage in ongoing reflection on current practices and initiate changes to those practices when needed? Do they involve the leadership team in these efforts? Cite examples.

**Professional learning for all staff is relevant, long term, and job embedded.**

(pp. 49-50)

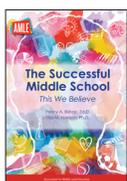
- In what ways is professional learning in our school customized and personalized to honor the varying needs of our staff?
- When and in what ways does professional learning occur in our school? Who is involved in developing the professional learning?
- To what extent and in what ways does data drive professional development experiences?
- In what ways does the administrative team facilitate and model professional learning?
- Are professional learning initiatives long term and collaborative? Provide some recent examples.
- Does the administrative team, along with the leadership team, regularly assess professional development initiatives for effectiveness and timeliness and make changes as needed? Provide examples.
- What opportunities have teachers had to collaboratively engage in professional development by discussing shared readings, student data and work, and instructional and assessment strategies?
- What are the various ways our school staff engages in professional learning (e.g., attending in-person or virtual professional development events, visiting other schools, taking courses)? How do we share our learning from these experiences with other members of the school community?
- What type of program is in place to mentor new teachers in our school? How is it implemented and monitored? What could be done to improve it?
- Does the administrative team plan ongoing, job-embedded professional development that shares current research and best practices for middle grades instruction?



## Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

(pp. 50-53)

- In what ways does teaming benefit each of the groups below? How could we improve?
  - o Students
  - o Teachers
  - o Administrators
  - o Parents
  - o Counselors
  - o Social workers
  - o Nurses
- What are the advantages of smaller (2- to 3-person) teams over larger teams (4 or more persons)? If our school only has larger teams, how can we move toward a smaller team configuration?
- How do we ensure that students remain within their teaching team for the core academic portion of their day? If this is not the case, what can we do to maximize time spent within their team structure?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of multiage and looping teams? How can we explore further the success of these approaches?
- Does our school include both team and personal planning time for interdisciplinary teachers? Do we have sufficient time for meeting as a team? If not, how can we change this?
- How do teams utilize team planning time? What percentage of that time is spent discussing curriculum and instruction? What steps can we take to increase time spent in that way?
- What opportunities are available for teachers to plan together by subject area?
- What are some instructional and learning opportunities that are enabled through a flexible block schedule for students and teachers? If our school does not have this type of schedule, how could we establish this?
- How can the needs of diverse learners be met without using ability grouping or tracking?
- What processes are in place in our school to promote organizational structures that support meaningful relationships?
- Does our school utilize cooperative learning, independent study, enrichment programs, and other practices to respond to student interests and needs? If not, what can be done to initiate these proven practices?



## For Reflection

*"A good principal knows how to shape a culture in which the vision can be achieved."*  
— Jody Spiro

*"Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those within your charge."* — Simon Sinek

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."* — Margaret Mead

*"There are no good schools without good principals. It just doesn't exist. And where you have good principals, great teachers come, and they stay, they work hard, and they grow."* — Arne Duncan

*"The real role of leadership is climate control. Great leaders create a climate of possibilities."* — Sir Ken Robinson

*"I have seen that in any great undertaking it is not enough for a man to depend simply upon himself."* — Lone Man, Sioux Indian

*"In all my travels around the world, the most important decisions were made where people sat in a circle, facing each other as equals."* — Dan West

*"A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but where they ought to be."* — Rosalynn Carter

*"The great thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving."* — Oliver Wendell Holmes

*"One of the most important things principals can do to improve student achievement is to spread leadership around."* — Jody Spiro

*"Put the team before yourself."* — Pat Summitt

*"Shared leadership means many more people than the administrators have the information and the power to make decisions and enact changes."* — Turning Points 2000

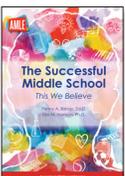
*"The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture."*  
— Edgar Schein, MIT Professor

## Young Adolescent Development and Implications for Educators (pp. 55-64)

This listing of the characteristics of young adolescents and accompanying implications for educators provides a quick reference tool that can be used when preparing reports or making presentations with parents or other groups. It would be worthwhile as a culminating activity of this book study to have small groups identify examples of the validity or challenges of each of these within the context of your school.

Each small learning group should consider the following questions in relationship to each of the characteristics of young adolescents:

1. Has this characteristic impacted practice in my classroom and, if so, how?
2. How has the characteristic influenced my planning?



3. What impact does this characteristic have on student learning?
4. What programs, policies, or practices address these characteristics of young adolescents?
5. How can we make sure we are considering the diversity of student experiences within each characteristic?

Review the implications for educators in each area and generate a list of how those implications are addressed in our school.

How does the list of characteristics compare to the experiences of our student population? What traits would you add to each list to make sure the experiences of all students are represented in these lists?

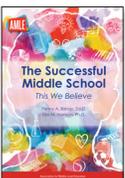
## Concluding the Book Study

To bring this study to closure the following questions might be discussed:

- What do we need to do at our school to align ourselves more closely with the characteristics of young adolescents as stated in *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*?
- How might we prioritize our alignment efforts?
- What resources will we need to accomplish our alignment goals?

## Next Steps

In moving forward from this book study, a logical next step is to conduct an assessment of your school in relation to the attributes and characteristics embodied in *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*. AMLE has a school improvement assessment instrument that can be taken by your faculty and will serve to outline a professional development plan personalized for your school based on the data collected. Further information about this important school improvement tool can be found at [amle.org/sms](http://amle.org/sms)



## Glossary of Middle Level Education Terms

*A common understanding of the terminology used in The Successful Middle School: This We Believe, is important before beginning the book study. Staff members may be asked to define each term individually, share with their small group, and then compare their definitions to those listed below.*

**Advisory** – Regularly scheduled times when young adolescents have the opportunity to interact with a small group of peers and a teacher-advisor to discuss school and personal concerns. The group may be grade level or multi-grade level. In many schools, advisors and their students remain together for three years.

**Advocacy** – The role middle school educators play as active supporters for and of young adolescents.

**Authentic assessment** – Methods that measure a student’s achievement or progress in ways that approximate real life, such as simulations or demonstrations.

**Block schedule** – A large block of time for teams of teachers and students so flexible groupings and varied periods of time can be arranged. This should not be confused with the high school form of block scheduling, which provides double periods for single subjects.

**Common planning time** – Regularly scheduled time during the school day for teaching teams to meet for planning the integration of curriculum, reviewing student assessments, conducting parent conferences, and engaging in professional development.

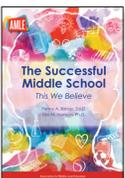
**Cooperative learning** – Instructional strategies that have students working in small groups sharing responsibilities and rewards. Both individual and group accountability are essential features of these strategies.

**Continuum of curriculum integration** –

- **Conventional** – no integration, separate subjects are taught independently.
- **Correlated** – two or more teachers emphasize the same vocabulary, skills, or concepts at the same time.
- **Interdisciplinary** – Teachers coordinate their instruction around a theme that is central to all subjects.
- **Integrated** – Instruction is focused on a theme chosen by teachers, but activities are pursued without regard to traditional subjects.
- **Integrative** – Students are actively involved with teachers in choosing themes for study, planning activities, and making decisions about time, materials, and assessment without regard to traditional subjects. This approach makes extensive use of flexible scheduling and grouping.

**Cross-grade grouping/multi-age grouping** – Grouping students from more than one grade level, often for advisory programs or exploratory courses.

**Curriculum matrix** – A chart that visually represents the relationships or connections between a set of curricular topics within a given subject area and the corresponding skills, attitudes, or concepts.



**Exploratory courses** – Regularly scheduled, short-term enrichment experiences in which students may choose courses to investigate areas of knowledge and interest.

**Interdisciplinary instruction** – Instructional programs that combine or relate subject matter that is ordinarily taught separately into learning under a single organizational structure.

**Interdisciplinary team organization** – Teams of two to five teachers representing the core subjects. The team shares the same schedule, students, area of the building, responsibility for the core courses, and has common planning time.

**Looping** – An arrangement in which a team of teachers and students stay together for two or more years.

**Multi-age grouping** – A team of teachers and students from more than one grade or age level remain in the same team for their entire time in the middle school in order to facilitate continuous progress.

**Multi-disciplinary programs** – Similar to interdisciplinary programs but broader, the program includes content from other areas such as art, music, health, physical education, technology, and other unified/related arts courses in a unit.

**Performance assessment** – A form of authentic assessment based on the professional judgment of the assessor through observation of the student performing a predetermined task.

**Portfolio assessment** – A form of authentic assessment that is a meaningful collection of student work exhibiting overall efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas.

**Product assessment** – A form of authentic assessment that requires a concrete end result such as a display, video, script, experiment, or exhibit.

**Problem-based learning** – A student-centered approach in which students learn about a subject by working in groups to solve an open-ended problem. This problem is what drives the motivation and the learning. The product may be something tangible or a proposed solution.

**Project-based learning** – A teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge. This approach spans more than one subject area.

**Student-led conferences** – Students take responsibility for sharing their learning with their parents/guardians through review of their portfolios and assessments.

**Thematic unit** – A unit, usually lasting several weeks, that is centered on a specific theme or topic rather than a phrase or aspect of a particular subject. The theme might be something such as “Growing Up.”



## About the Association for Middle Level Education

For nearly 50 years, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) has been a voice for those committed to the educational and developmental needs of students ages 10 to 15. AMLE helps middle grades educators reach every student, grow professionally, and create great schools. AMLE members are principals, teachers, counselors, school district personnel, professors, college students, parents, and community leaders across the United States and around the world. Our network of affiliate organizations in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia strengthens our outreach to the regional, state, provincial, and local levels.

AMLE provides thought leadership, professional development, research, books, articles, and other services and resources to assist educators on an ongoing basis. Our annual conference and leadership institutes offer the largest and most comprehensive professional learning opportunities for middle grades educators.

## Resources for conducting a book study:

### FLDOE Professional Learning Toolkit

<https://fl01803656.schoolwires.net/cms/lib/FL01803656/Centricity/Domain/13712/PLC-Book-Study-Guidelines.pdf>

### Professional Book Study

<https://www.uft.org/files/attachments/professional-book-study.pdf>

### Discussion Protocols – Harvard Graduate School of Education

[https://www.gse.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Protocols\\_Handout.pdf](https://www.gse.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Protocols_Handout.pdf)

### The School Reform Initiative Protocols

<https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols/>

