

Listening to the Voices of Young Adolescents

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Over 2,700 middle school students from diverse schools (urban, suburban, rural) across North America were asked the question, "What do you think every middle school teacher should know about middle school students?"

Responses were coded and analyzed several times to search for common themes and insights. The responses can serve as a viable source of data to drive school reform. Raising student voice to front and center can help us move towards schooling owned, in part, by those it claims to serve.

Ask your students this question and then discuss the results with fellow teachers, during faculty meetings and as a whole school community. Use the data to make decisions with students about policies and practices in your school or classroom.

Attached are some sample unedited responses from students. How can this inform our practice?

1. "I think that every teacher should know that every 7th grade student is smart in one subject or another. You may not be great at spelling or science but I bet you're pretty smart in another area. I've learned that no one is dull or unintelligent. We all flourish in one way or another."
2. "I think that all the middle school teachers should know how each individual student learns. They should know how they learn and change the way they teach around all different methods. Sometimes they need to see it drawn out, sometimes they need scrap paper to write out the numbers and sometimes they can do it in their head in 10 seconds. We all learn different and we need different teaching."
3. "8th graders need a special form of teaching. We could never learn about a subject by reading a textbook. We need it explained and compared to life. It would help if the learning was fun."
4. "Teachers, teachers, teachers, when will they learn. I have the attention span of a raisin. I need to be kept busy with things that are fun. Teachers need to find out what interests kids and what stuff they like to do. So for a less whiny, annoyed and temperamental class, make it fun."

5. "I think every middle school teacher should know what there (sic) students like for example they should know if they like learning with music, by games, by spelling, they should know what's there (sic) style of learning. My style of learning is with games. Another thing they should know is how there (sic) students feel. They shouldn't yell at us and start jumping to conclusions like most teachers. They should hear our side of the story before they start sending kids to the bench and giving out detentions. Teachers should know how their students feel. They need to know that by yelling at us and sending us to the principal ain't doing nothing but making us worse than we already are. That's all I think middle school teachers should know about their students if they want to be considered the best teachers."
6. "I think that middle school teachers should know that everybody is different. Everybody thinks and works differently so there shouldn't just be one way to do things. For some students it can be really hard to explain their thoughts or work in a certain way. Teachers should give students some freedom to present their work in a way that they can comprehend, that way the student can learn more and it can stay with them longer. Students are also different in a more personal way and teachers should be aware of those differences."
7. "Middle school teachers should know that we are starting to go under pressure. Pressure meaning many things: peer pressure, pressure from homework, and maybe family problems. Like your family pushing you to do better and better, so you would get into good colleges and stuff like that. It might be nice for them to know that we are living human beings, we have feelings and we are people. Sometimes teachers think of you just as a student not a person, so they push you over your limits and sometimes they maybe might talk to you a little louder than they usually do if it is taking you a long time to answer a problem or you don't understand. We are people too! We are not perfect. We can't do everything perfectly the first time. If teachers understand this, it might make us feel more comfortable and we might do better in school."
8. "I think one of the most important things they should understand is that every single student has their own hopes and dreams. For some it may be to be on the honor roll all through high school, go to Harvard, and grow up to be a very "successful" person. For others, it may just be not to flunk out of high school. You need to embrace everyone's wants. That doesn't mean that you should give more attention to those with higher hopes – just work with each one and encourage them to do their best. The key to being a good teacher is knowing the kids. You have to know every single one and have a relationship with every single one. I think that one thing that really allows me to work hard is knowing that my teacher knows where I am in life at that moment. If they don't know me, I will tend not to work hard for them."

9. "I personally feel that middle school teachers should know who the students are deep down inside because when a student constantly says that they can't do something the teacher will always baby them and give them help. So if the teacher did know about their personality and a student was to say that they would know how far to push them and keep encouraging them, but which a teacher should always encourage a student no matter who they are or what kind a work they're doing as long as they are not taking the students down the wrong path towards life. So what I'm really trying to say is that a middle school teacher should know who the student really are and what they're capable of. "
10. "Middle school students learn a whole lot better when they are not being lectured to, being directed, forced, or ordered, but when choice is given and learning is interactive. Traditional classrooms in our society today define teacher and the classroom in general as a straight-answer, fact-feeding, dictatorship that cares little for the opinions and interests of the pupils, and that teaches little about the reasons behind the facts. Schools are meant to prepare kids for life and make them more apt to be successful in their life. One would suppose that the government having authority over public schooling would want the generations of the future to be more successful in life, thus feeding the needs of the economy and the requirements of democracy, the spread of freedom, the reduction of discrimination in all forms, and exercising the rights and morality of citizens. One would assume that the government—wanting such a society—would encourage the development of these attributes through schooling. However as we look at the teaching of present schools, we see suspension of constitutional rights, undemocratic classrooms, and the implementation of the fact-feeding teaching methods and passive roles for students. Now maybe it's just me, but I would have to think that we should be promoting the opposite of these things: am I wrong?
11. "We all learn at different paces and through different methods."
12. "We'd like to have a say in what we do."
13. "Any student would rather experience things instead of writing about it."
14. "Middle school teachers should know a lot about us middle school students. We can be very tricky and somewhat aggravating, but the teachers just need to cope with us, and here are some tips. We like working with others. We like to interact and learn in groups. Although sometimes the work may land on one member alone, try not to make this the case. Group projects and activities have us depend on one another, and not wanting to get a bad grade or letting your fellow students down, the work is almost always brought promptly and correct. You should also know that we get stressed easily. With too much of a workload, the stress suddenly becomes a force, causing us to rebel. I am not saying one should not give homework whatsoever, but sometimes a break is

- necessary. Also, we need to know and feel that our teachers are open. Open to small mistakes, and open to answer all of our questions. Intimidation causes errors and fright. Teachers should welcome any inquisitions we might have. Lastly, we like praise. Making a student feel good about themselves inspires us. It inspires us to work up to your expectations. A simple compliment can make a huge difference, and make a better and eager student.”
15. “The first important point about kids in our age group is we hate being singled out. Being treated differently is a curse so a way to help us learn is to treat us equally and not focus attention on one student. The second point is that students of all ages hate to be babied. You will be surprised at what we can handle if we put our minds to it. We don’t have to be shielded away from the truth.”
16. "Middle school teachers should know many things about middle school students. One thing that I feel is most important that middle school teachers should know, is that students like to be active. Being active helps children focus in school, and only one in three children are physically active every day. If we don’t get up and move around during class, then we won’t be focused and concentrated on our work. Teachers need to know that we need some time to be active to focus."
17. "Middle School teachers should know that students have a ton of energy, and they need recess. This energy sometimes causes students to not pay attention to what the teacher is saying because they’re looking outside because they want to play, or because they’re fidgeting with something they have near them. This fidgeting can also be out of boredom because the student already know the lessons. So when a student isn’t paying attention, know there is usually a reason, students can just get distracted."
18. "Some things they should know about us kids is that we are shy. We're shy because we're afraid we're gonna be laughed at or you fell like your not smart so encourage us to not worrying about being shy. Middle school students in general can sometimes have trouble adjusting to the middle school atmosphere. Their teachers should be aware of how nervous some students can be, coming into a whole new school with a ton of more kids than they previously had. Even though the students have spent years and years with some of the students, it can be a massive adjustment having double or triple that. Middle school teachers should also know that for most students, time management can be one of the most difficult changes. The workload difference between elementary and middle school is a lot bigger most of the time. So for the teachers to give their students tools and strategies to help them manage their time is an enormous help."
19. "I think that middle school teachers should know the qualities that each student possesses. These qualities include intelligence, curiosity,

diligence, and leadership skills. The teachers should then leverage each student's skills for the benefit of the entire community. For example: you could use someone with good leadership skills by putting them as the main leader of the projects. You could use someone with a strong sense of curiosity by doing an activity that really sparks everyone's sense of curiosity. Diligent people should be assigned to help out with more tedious tasks. By doing all of this, you will not only begin to improve a student's academic skills, but also watershed's academic skills as a whole."

20. "Middle school teachers should know that middle school students are at the most stressful points of their lives so far. Life at home has its up and down, socially life is stressful, and kids are always worried about their grades so their parents don't get mad. So I think that middle school teachers should know that students are going to have quite a few really bad days, a couple really good days, and mostly ok days because we young adolescents are always worried about multiple things."
21. "It is important for middle school teachers to know that we, middle school students are not babies and don't need them to walk us through each step of the learning process but we are not adults and we are not 100% independent at this point in our lives."