

It's the Students

It takes a purposeful combination of academic, social, physical, and emotional factors to develop an effective and rigorous educational experience at the middle level.

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Growing up, my family made frequent trips from our home in Oregon to visit relatives in Washington. And, of course, I always asked, Are we there yet? But I learned at an early age that we were almost there when we passed a brewery in Tumwater, WA, that was well known for its slogan, "It's the water." I think of this story when I'm asked what makes leading at the middle level different from elementary and high school. Although some educators may wonder if it really is what's in the water that makes a difference when working with this age group, the answer really is "It's the students."

March is Middle Level Education month, so it seems appropriate to look at this issue in a little more depth. If the difference is the students, what implications does that have for leading middle level schools? The *Breaking Ranks* framework articulates 29 recommendations that are appropriate across the K–12 continuum, but that in no way suggests that elementary, middle level, and high schools should look or operate in the same manner—the recommendations must be applied according to the needs of the students served by the school.

It is generally accepted that the initial call for the creation of middle schools came in 1963 when William

Alexander called for the development of schools for young adolescents that promoted learning by being more responsive to the developmental needs of the age group. Unfortunately, many schools focused more on the developmental piece than the academic piece, but "middle schools have been committed to academic growth since their inception. The middle school, however, seeks to accomplish the always-important academic growth in ways that are developmentally appropriate" (Kinney & Swaim, 2010, p. 32).

Today's middle level schools face a great deal of pressure as they work to increase test scores; implement the Common Core State Standards; and comply with other federal, state, and local requirements. In many places, the pendulum has swung toward academic achievement with little attention paid to the needs of the young adolescent. But it's not an either-or proposition—if young adolescents are to be held to high expectations and meet current academic standards, decisions about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the structure of the school must capitalize on a clear understanding of their development.

Middle level students are experiencing the most rapid, significant changes of their lives—changes that are physical, social, emotional, and

cognitive in nature. Therefore, it becomes essential for school leaders to ask, Does my school take into account the following characteristics of young adolescents and do the school's practices and policies reflect that?

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Cognitively, young adolescents:

- Have a wide range of intellectual abilities.
- Are curious, especially about the things that interest them.
- Are more willing to learn material they consider useful and relevant.
- Are increasingly able to think abstractly and metacognitively.
- Tend to be egocentric and can have difficulty in seeing another's viewpoint.

Therefore, educators should:

- Build lessons from concrete to abstract.
- Ask questions that require higher-level thinking, such as What if? How do you know? Are you sure? Will you share your thinking with me? Of what value is this to you?
- Create an environment where taking risks is encouraged, supported, and safe.
- Involve them: show *and* tell *and* do.
- Prepare for off-the-wall responses.

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Emotionally, young adolescents:

- Experience chemical and hormonal changes that affect their emotions.
- Often overreact to seemingly minor issues.
- Are still children emotionally, although they resemble adults.
- Are increasingly aware of themselves individually and in comparison to others.
- Tend to be unrealistically self-critical and are easily offended.
- Have a need for privacy.
- Have an emerging sense of humor.
- Are basically hopeful.

Therefore educators should:

- Analyze and correctly respond to the typical behaviors of the age group—are they being “appropriately” inappropriate or defiant?
- Be an honest, available role model.
- Be an attentive listener.
- Avoid sarcasm—it’s not always seen as humor.
- Help students feel skilled and competent.
- Use praise and reinforcement in appropriate ways.
- Create an environment of acceptance with peers and adults.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Physically, young adolescents:

- Experience rapid, irregular physical growth that may cause poor motor coordination.
- Are developing sexually.
- Experience mood swings and abrupt transitions from alertness and high energy to fatigue and lethargy.
- Have increased nutritional demands but often make poor food choices.
- Need plenty of rest and sleep.
- Need frequent and somewhat-continuous movement.

Therefore educators should:

- Vary the pace of lessons and

incorporate movement.

- Assure them that they are not the only ones experiencing difficulties.
- Develop a comprehensive health and physical education program that’s relevant to their specific needs and capabilities.
- Plan opportunities for all student to experience physical success.
- Encourage adequate nutrition and hydration.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Socially, young adolescents:

- Are concerned with acceptance and seek approval from peers.
- Do not flourish in uncompromising settings.
- Can be argumentative.
- Experience flashes of social consciousness.
- Are self-conscious in social settings.
- Often reject adult standards or viewpoints on social issues.
- Follow social trends and fads.
- Can demonstrate extremes of social shyness or extroversion.

Therefore educators should:

- Design appropriate school-based social activities.
- Promote and model acceptance by adults and peers.
- Help students understand how they fit into the complex role society expects of them.
- Allow students to work in groups and teach one another.
- Provide opportunities for students to work with others from socially different walks of life.
- Include community involvement and service learning in the curriculum.
- Understand and respect students’ needs for social self-definition.

Young adolescents can be challenging—at once confused and confident, awkward and articulate, passive and passionate. Those who work with this



age group must advocate for them to receive an education that is designed expressly for them by adults who connect with them, challenge them, and care for them. They deserve schools leaders who are not afraid to ask the tough questions: Is our curriculum challenging, integrative, and relevant? Do we use varied and appropriate teaching and learning strategies? Do our assessment and evaluation practices promote learning? Is our staff adequately prepared to work with young adolescents?

If a school cannot honestly answer that progress is continually being made in each of those areas, it is doing its students a disservice—because recognizing that it’s the students who make the difference is truly the key to successfully educating students in the middle grades. **PL**

REFERENCE

- Kinney, P., & Swaim, S. (2009). *Voices of experience: Perspectives from successful middle level leaders*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association & National Association of Secondary School Principals.

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