



## **This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents** **Position Paper of National Middle School Association**

### **Executive Summary**

Every day, millions of diverse, rapidly changing 10- to 15-year-olds make critical and complex life choices and form the attitudes, values, and dispositions that will direct their behavior as adults. They deserve an education that will enhance their healthy growth as lifelong learners, ethical and democratic citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient individuals who are optimistic about the future and prepared to succeed in our ever-changing world.

In *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*, National Middle School Association describes the nature of an educational program that reflects what research and vast experience have demonstrated to be best for 10- to 15-year-olds.

#### **Major Goals of Middle Level Educators**

To become a fully functioning, self-actualized person, each young adolescent should

- Become actively aware of the larger world, asking significant and relevant questions about that world and wrestling with big ideas and questions for which there may not be one right answer.
- Be able to think rationally and critically and express thoughts clearly.
- Read deeply to independently gather, assess, and interpret information from a variety of sources and read avidly for enjoyment and lifelong learning.
- Use digital tools to explore, communicate, and collaborate with the world and learn from the rich and varied resources available.
- Be a good steward of the earth and its resources and a wise and intelligent consumer of the wide array of goods and services available.
- Understand and use the major concepts, skills, and tools of inquiry in the areas of health and physical education, language arts, world languages, mathematics, natural and physical sciences, and the social sciences.
- Explore music, art, and careers, and recognize their importance to personal growth and learning.
- Develop his or her strengths, particular skills, talents, or interests and have an emerging understanding of his or her potential contributions to society and to personal fulfillment.
- Recognize, articulate, and make responsible, ethical decisions concerning his or her own health and wellness needs.
- Respect and value the diverse ways people look, speak, think, and act within the immediate community and around the world.
- Develop the interpersonal and social skills needed to learn, work, and play with others harmoniously and confidently.

- Assume responsibility for his or her own actions and be cognizant of and ready to accept obligations for the welfare of others.
- Understand local, national, and global civic responsibilities and demonstrate active citizenship through participation in endeavors that serve and benefit those larger communities.

## Essential Attributes

To guide and support students in their quest to achieve these goals, National Middle School Association affirms that educational programs for young adolescents must be

**Developmentally responsive:** using the distinctive nature of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school organization, policies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are made.

**Challenging:** ensuring that every student learns and every member of the learning community is held to high expectations.

**Empowering:** providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take responsibility for their lives, to address life's challenges, to function successfully at all levels of society, and to be creators of knowledge.

**Equitable:** advocating for and ensuring every student's right to learn and providing appropriately challenging and relevant learning opportunities for every student.

These four essential attributes of successful middle level education can be realized and achieved best through programs and practices that are in line with the following 16 characteristics. These characteristics or qualities, while identified independently, are interdependent and need to be implemented in concert.

## Characteristics

To comprehend their breadth and focus, the characteristics are grouped in three general categories:

### Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Characteristics

- Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.
- Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.
- Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.
- Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.

### Leadership and Organization Characteristics

- A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.
- Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices.
- Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.
- Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.
- Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

### Culture and Community Characteristics

- The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.
- Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.
- Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.
- Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.

- The school actively involves families in the education of their children.
- The school includes community and business partners.

Research studies and extensive, cumulative, empirical evidence have confirmed that when programs implement these characteristics over time, higher levels of student achievement and improved overall development of students result. In the position paper itself, the 16 characteristics are elaborated fully.

### **A Call to Action**

The special importance of middle grades education as we enter the second decade of the 21st century carries an urgency to establish programs that incorporate the ideas and ideals advanced in this document. The Call to Action requires a commitment—or recommitment—to the philosophy of middle level education followed by specific actions individuals can take appropriate to their role in middle level education.

### **Supporting Research**

The expanding research base that supports the advocacy of *This We Believe* is briefly presented in this foundational document. Summaries of the major research findings in the three characteristic categories are provided, followed by a number of specific studies that support these findings. Published simultaneously, a companion report, *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe* (second edition), provides an extensive treatment of salient research findings that make it clear that the concepts advocated in this position paper are sound, have been proven successful, and should be implemented in every school that encompasses the middle grades.

### **Characteristics of Young Adolescents**

Since middle level education is grounded in the nature of young people ages 10 to 15, the position paper concludes with a full list of the characteristics of young adolescents in the physical, cognitive, intellectual, moral, psychological, and social-emotional dimensions of development.



The full position paper provides the rationale and specifics, and the spirit and commitment of National Middle School Association's vision of what middle level education could and should be. To obtain your copy of *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* visit [www.nmsa.org/store](http://www.nmsa.org/store) or call 1-800-528-NMSA.

National Middle School Association • 4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300  
Westerville, OH 43081 • [www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org) • 1-800-528-NMSA