

What Everyone Who Cares About Middle School Should Know

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1. High performing middle level schools take seriously what is known about the needs of young adolescents, the specific needs of the young people they serve and the call to provide developmentally appropriate programs and practices.
2. High performing middle level schools are highly personalized cultures, where caring, mutually respectful and nurturing relationships are the norm. As such, students and teachers are organized to promote social trust, and positive student-student, teacher-student and teacher-teacher relationships. Students and teachers are organized in small interdisciplinary learning communities where 2 or more teachers share the responsibility for a common group of students. In this setting, students are at the center of cross-faculty concern and collaborative teaching. Teachers find support for inventive and responsive teaching. In addition, middle level schools further enhance social trust with Advisory programs, expanded Homerooms, and social and emotional literacy initiatives.
3. Best middle schools willingly listen to the call for relevance and meaning in curriculum and seek to address the perils of often fragmented and shallow curriculum. Using a combination of models and approaches, (eg; Understanding by Design, Interdisciplinary Studies, Integration), these schools work to investigate how best to present curriculum content and concepts to young adolescents. They organize curriculum maps that do more than archive old curriculum. They find ways to bring curriculum back to life, using organizing themes, big ideas or provocative questions.
4. Best middle level schools balance affect and academic goals and priorities, insuring the school day is a blend of opportunities that develop students, minds, hearts, dispositions, talents and bodies.
5. Best middle level schools are equitable places where all students are members of a heterogeneous, inclusive community. This implies that students spend most of the school day in class settings where the population represents the racial, ethnic, social and intellectual composition of the entire school. Where diverse needs suggest, these needs are met largely through differentiated lessons within the regular classroom, alternative assignments or projects.
6. In best middle schools, the teaching faculty engage in ongoing professional learning seeking to face, study and address problems and shortcomings and create alternative ways to help all students learn and succeed in school. Faculty meetings are frequently

learning meetings. Team meetings and department meetings often function as decentralized professional learning communities.

7. Teachers working on Interdisciplinary teams organize ways to insure that their students experience consistency in classroom norms, procedures and expectations across the team. Moreover, they work to create varied means to support all learners with helpful organization tools, such as common notebooks, common homework guidelines and so on.
8. Best teaching teams apply common literacy for learning strategies, such as reading comprehension tools, vocabulary, and writing to learn tools, note-taking methods and so on. This insures that students internalize a useful set of methods that can repeatedly apply across subjects.
9. Best middle level schools incorporate a recess and water/snack time to insure optimum learning capacity for active young adolescents.
10. Middle school classrooms must become places where students are actively doing authentic work: actively researching, discussing, making, presenting, creating, and discovering. Moreover, they are places where students work collaboratively more often than not. Best classrooms are places where teachers talk less and students talk more. (See “best practices” summary)
11. Middle level students seek to have voice and choice in their learning and best middle school classrooms continually seek to give students choices in what and how they learn, and voice to participate in a democratic classroom experience. In such classrooms, teachers facilitate appropriate ways for young adolescents to contribute to classroom rules, rubrics, unit themes, writing and reading choices and so on.
12. Redoing and polishing work is a far more rigorous intellectual task than merely creating work for in the first draft. Middle school teachers recognize the power in polishing work and advocate for quality work above mere completion.
13. Best practice suggests that teachers cover far too many topics in far too short a period of time. Many teachers are caught in what has been called, “curriculum by mentioning”. Teaching fewer topics more deeply is preferred. Leaders need to support such adjustments in advocating for depth and understanding over breadth and coverage.

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