



What Middle Schools Should and Can Be

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by Sue Swaim

What are the key elements needed to implement effective middle schools for young adolescents, ages 10 to 14? Is there a grade configuration that addresses their needs better than others? What type of support and leadership do middle schools need to be successful? Today, questions like these are being asked as communities seek to ensure that every young adolescent receives a quality education.

While researchers have tried to answer the question of which of a wide variety of grade configurations is best, national studies repeatedly tell us that it is effective programs and practices, not grade configuration, that determine the quality of middle-level education. Furthermore, research makes it clear that when educators serving young adolescents incorporate the knowledge of learning and human development into their instructional practices, students will achieve.

The Effective Middle School

Communities have serious issues to address if they are to ensure that every middle-level student achieves to his or her highest potential. But by focusing on the following qualities of effective middle schools they can be well on their way to achieving that goal.

Effective schools:

- Engage every student in a relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory curriculum, and do so in an environment that fosters respectful and supportive relationships among students, faculty, families, and the community;
- Provide teachers and administrators who are specifically prepared and committed to teach students ages 10 to 14;
- Offer ongoing professional development for all faculty and staff;
- Utilize accountability and evaluation strategies that promote quality student learning and instructional practices;
- Make learning decisions based on data that go beyond single test results;
- Emphasize the key role parents and families play in building a positive attitude toward education and in supporting the work of the schools; and
- Build connections between the community and school that expand and enhance the educational opportunities of all students.

As John Lounsbury, a pioneer of middle-level education, points out: "The effective middle school is not just a teaching factory; it is a laboratory of living where important lessons are derived from the relationships among and between students and teachers, as well as from the formal instruction provided...Effective middle schools accept responsibility for goals broader than the temporary acquisition of information or the mastery of basic skills."

How to Get There

So, what is needed to ensure a quality, middle-level education for every young adolescent? There are a variety of issues that must be addressed if we are to be successful. There is no single element, such as grade configuration, that can do the job alone.

The National Middle School Association's *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* (1995) describes six characteristics needed to make appropriate program decisions in effective middle schools:

- Educators committed to young adolescents;
- A shared vision;
- High expectations for all;
- An adult advocate for every student;
- Family and community partnerships; and
- A positive school climate.

This We Believe also identifies and describes six critical program characteristics:

- Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory;
- Varied teaching and learning approaches;
- Assessment and evaluation that promote learning;
- Flexible organizational structure;
- Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety; and
- Comprehensive guidance and support services.

Together, these 12 characteristics provide a framework for what middle schools should and can be. Implementing these qualities signifies the willingness of all stakeholders—students, teachers, administrators, parents, school board, central office, and community members—to collaboratively develop and realize a shared vision of the foundation on which their school is built.

Leading at the Middle Level

While every stakeholder plays an important role in the implementation process, the principal plays a particularly important role. Many middle-level principals are re-examining how they manage their time and resources so they can focus on the priorities of student learning and informed curriculum, instruction, and assessment in their schools. By creating a school culture that embraces the 12 characteristics of effective middle schools, principals signify a renewed commitment to a learning community where the education and well-being of every student and faculty member is a top priority.

We know the key elements of effective education for young adolescents. Our collective challenge is to ensure that effective middle schools, focusing on developmentally appropriate achievement for all young adolescents, are available in every community. Our common goal must be to provide every young adolescent a quality education that also develops his or her unique skills and talents to the fullest possible extent.

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