Child-Centered Middle Schools

A Position Paper

Association for Childhood Education International

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Child-centered middle schools provide 10- to 15-year-olds, commonly known as young adolescents, with developmentally appropriate educational experiences that emphasize learners' education and overall well-being. Ideally, these schools' teachers, counselors, and administrators, as well as the students' parents, collaboratively work to address young adolescents' developmental needs and to ensure some degree of success for all learners. The curriculum, instructional methods and materials, guidance efforts, and the overall learning environment of a child-centered middle school demonstrate an understanding of the early adolescence developmental period and a commitment to the education of young adolescents. Specially trained teachers provide educational experiences that address young adolescents' needs, interests, and perspectives. Similarly, educators recognize and address young adolescents' differences resulting from culture, gender, and sexual orientation. Young adolescents know that educators value academic achievement, especially when the educational experiences reflect their physical, psychosocial, and cognitive development.

ACEI's Definition

The Association for Childhood Education International (and, specifically, the Association's Intermediate/Middle Childhood Standing Committee) defines the child-centered middle school as a school organization containing grades 6-8 (and sometimes grade 5) that, foremost, emphasizes 10- to 15-year-olds' education and overall well-being by providing developmentally appropriate and responsive curricular, instructional, organizational, guidance, and overall educational experiences in a safe, violence-free, and peaceful environment; and, second, provides young adolescents with opportunities to participate in service learning and to learn values, citizenship, and socialization skills.

Characteristics of Child-Centered Middle Schools

For years, the middle school was a "transitional" school between elementary and secondary school, and thus it lacked defining characteristics or guidelines for best practice. Fortunately, specific characteristics of child-centered middle schools now can be identified. ACEI strongly supports child-centered middle schools that:

- Base educational experiences on young adolescents' physical, psychosocial, and cognitive development (Manning, 1993b); their gender (Butler & Manning, 1998) and cultural differences; and their learning styles, multiple intelligences (Reiff, 1997), and individual interests
- Provide teachers who are trained in middle school concepts and the early adolescence developmental period; who have opportunities for ongoing professional development; and who want to teach young adolescents, especially through student-centered experiences
- Provide exploratory programs (both curricular and special interest), so that young adolescents will have opportunities to discover their talents, abilities, and values
- Provide interdisciplinary teaming supported by district and school administrators (i.e., offering professional development and sufficient time for planning)
- Provide comprehensive guidance and counseling programs that demonstrate knowledge and concern for young adolescents' development, including adviser-advisee programs, as well as opportunities for small- and large-group counseling
- Provide flexible scheduling and variable learning group sizes that accommodate young adolescents' diverse academic and social needs
- Ensure equal access to all educational experiences, rather than presenting students with "either-or" choices (e.g., having to choose between art and computer classes) (Manning, 1993a)
- Harbor high expectations for all young adolescents, in terms of both behavior and academics
- Ensure a positive and safe learning environment that emphasizes cooperation, collaboration, and peaceful existence, and that is physically and psychologically safe and free from teasing, bullying, and harassment—in other words, an environment that shows care and concern

- Advocate service learning as an essential aspect of the curriculum, whereby young adolescents provide volunteer service
- Offer curricular experiences that are integrative, exploratory, and developmentally appropriate; when needed, offer curricula that continue to refine young adolescents' basic skills that were originally learned in elementary school
- Invite family and community members to be involved in the education and well-being of young adolescents.

Simply having an educational program that reflects these characteristics is not enough—these characteristics must emphasize a *child-centered focus*. While the necessity and importance of subject matter deserves consideration and the essential middle school concepts (e.g., adviser-advisee programs, exploratory programs, interdisciplinary teaming, flexible schedules and organizations, and positive learning environments) must be effectively implemented, the emphasis on subject matter and middle school concepts *must reflect genuine concern for young adolescents and their unique developmental needs and interests*. Child-centered middle school educators value young adolescents' diversity, place emphasis on their developing cultural and gender identities, bolster their self-esteem, and ensure some degree of success for all students in all facets of the middle school program.

Through concern and care, child-centered middle schools let young adolescents know that they have adult advocates. While they know educators consider academic achievement to be a mainstay of the school's efforts, they will also feel confident that the teachers, administrators, and counselors are equally concerned with students' overall welfare. They believe educators value them as individuals, regardless of their culture, gender, sexual orientation, or developmental rate. They believe educators value positive self-esteem and want students to succeed. In essence, young adolescents in a child-centered middle school know that the school's goals, activities, and overall mission are designed for them.

Curriculum

The curriculum in the child-centered middle school reflects young adolescents' interests, concerns, and thinking levels. Simply offering a "little more difficult elementary content" or a "little less difficult secondary content" does not meet middle school students' needs. Child-centered middle schools base curriculum upon young adolescents' physical, psychosocial, and cognitive levels (Manning, 1993b; Manning, 1994/1995), as well as upon their needs to achieve, experience success, and have continuous progress in their learning and overall development. Teachers, counselors, administrators, and curriculum developers need to consider both the curricular content that middle school students learned in the elementary school and the curricular content that they will learn in the secondary school, in order to determine a developmentally appropriate middle school curriculum. The curriculum, as unique and diverse as young adolescents themselves, must be grounded in child-centered perspectives.

Three documents, *Teaching and Learning in the Middle Level School* (Allen, Splittgerber, & Manning, 1993), *A Middle School Curriculum* (Beane, 1993), and *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), provide essential directions for educators wanting to design and implement a child-centered middle school curriculum. It is interesting that while all three documents offer similar and helpful insights, they differ in some ways. Middle school educators can draw upon the best from each document, to design a curriculum that meets their students' needs.

Academic, personal, and social contexts. An appropriate middle school curriculum balances those academic, personal, and social contexts that match young adolescents' needs. The *academic* curricular context consists of mathematics, science, language arts (i.e., skills related to reading, listening, viewing, writing, and visual representation), social studies, foreign languages, health, physical education and dance, unified arts (i.e., music, fine arts, and crafts), technology education, and independent living. These curricular areas involve and challenge young adolescents in specific subject areas while strengthening the basic skills; they also broaden knowledge, social skills, and personal experiences.

The *personal* context integrates content from subject matter areas, personal experiences and interests, career education, and exploratory activities to assist young adolescents in constructing and creating knowledge, values, beliefs, and attitudes. The emphasis is on self-awareness through personal experiences. The personal curriculum integrates content with the thinking, feelings, and actions of young adolescents; recognizes the importance of self; and develops the whole person within the school and society. The *social* curriculum focuses on developing socially competent individuals, and emphasizes citizenship and intergroup relations. Middle level students need opportunities for interacting with peers, teachers, and adults, both at school and outside, in classes, extracurricular activities, and community activities.

The social curriculum also includes the recognition and appreciation of young adolescents' cultural diversity as an essential part of living in a democratic society (Allen, Splittgerber, & Manning, 1993).

Personal and social concerns. James Beane, in his book *A Middle School Curriculum* (1993), advocates for

a middle school curriculum that addresses young adolescents' needs and interests by focusing on young adolescents' personal and social concerns (e.g., common needs, problems, and interests). Young adolescents' *personal* concerns include: 1) understanding and coping with physical, intellectual, and socio-emotional changes; 2) developing a personal identity and a wholesome self-esteem; 3) exploring values, morals, and ethical questions in social contexts; 4) securing and finding a level of status in the peer group; 5) balancing independence from adult authority with dependence on adults for security; 6) coping with commercial pressure, as related to fashion, music, and leisure activities; 7) negotiating expectations in home, school, community, and peer group; and 8) developing commitments to people in order to obtain a feeling of self-worth, achievement, and efficacy (Beane, 1993).

The *social* issues that Beane recommends for the curriculum framework include: 1) interdependence among people in a global society; 2) students' diversity (e.g., cultures formed by race, ethnicity, gender, and geographical region); 3) environmental problems; 4) political processes and organizations; 5) economic problems; 6) the significance of technology; and 7) the increasing incidence of self-destructive behaviors (Beane, 1993).

A curriculum designed to meet these personal and social needs supports reflective thinking, critical ethics and values, problem solving, self-esteem, social action skills, and the search for completeness and meaning. Three essential curricular contexts are the idea of democracy, the concept of human dignity, and opportunities to explore and appreciate the workings and values of diverse cultures (Beane, 1993).

Core curriculum. *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) recommends a common core of knowledge for middle school students that centers around teaching students to: 1) think critically through mastery of an appropriate body of knowledge, 2) lead a healthful life, 3) behave ethically and lawfully, and 4) assume the responsibilities of citizenship in a pluralistic society. Learning activities that allow students to participate actively in discovering and creating solutions to problems will foster critical thinking. Teaching around integrated themes can help students see relationships, rather than only learning disconnected facts. Teaching young adolescents to lead a healthful lifestyle can be accomplished through the health, science, physical education, and dance curriculum. Simply warning students about self-destructive or dangerous behaviors probably will not suffice, however; educators will need to include training in such coping skills as collaboration, problem solving, and conflict resolution. Youth service can teach valuable lessons about behaving ethically and lawfully, and about assuming the responsibilities of citizenship in a pluralistic society. Through service, students will learn valuable lessons about compassion, regard for human worth and dignity, and tolerance for, and appreciation of, diversity.

Interdisciplinary and integrated. Regardless of the curricular model(s) selected, a middle school curriculum that centers on the child should include interdisciplinary or integrated curricular approaches, so that young adolescents will perceive the relationships among curricular areas. Also, the interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum can be an effective means for addressing young adolescents' developmental characteristics (Clark & Clark, 1997). While meeting all state and district curriculum mandates, these curricular approaches integrate subject matter usually taught separately (e.g., literature, history, science) under a single, integrated curricular theme. Rather than only learning isolated facts, young adolescents can begin to see the relationships among, and interconnectedness of, curricular areas.

Service learning. A sense of belonging to a community larger than the school, family, and peer groups emerges during young adolescence, and can be strengthened through service learning, in which students perform community service. When activities reflect the various curricular areas, service strengthens the school program. In performing service learning, young adolescents discover new skills, refine socialization skills, participate in the adult world, test value systems, and make decisions.

Exploratory curriculum. Effective middle schools provide an exploratory curriculum, sometimes called minicourses. This essential middle school concept provides a developmentally appropriate response to young adolescents' shorter attention spans, fluctuating motivational levels, and often shaky self-esteem. Exploratory programs also build interest (i.e., young adolescents can learn about what they like and might want to pursue in terms of a career). While exploratory programs vary with schools and young adolescents' needs, they can fit easily into the daily school schedule, and can proceed for a matter of weeks or an entire semester. Typical exploratory courses include business, keyboarding, independent living, print making, drama, foreign languages, arts and crafts, independent study, dance, or music. ACEI advocates that all students explore at least one area of the arts and one type of community service.

Other selected curricular essentials. Other selected curricular essentials include efforts to increase young adolescents' self-esteem; provide appropriate responses to differences resulting from culture, gender, and sexual orientation; demonstrate an understanding of young adolescents' physical, psychosocial, and cognitive development; and provide a balance among skills, academic content, and experiences. Also, when needed,

the child-centered middle school curriculum teaches basic skills, using proven materials and methods. Curricular experiences also should emphasize good health, since education and health are inextricably linked (Minneapolis Public Schools, n.d.). Finally, the middle school curriculum should provide young adolescents with opportunities to learn and engage in worthwhile play and leisure activities that reflect their interests (Manning, 1998). It is important to recognize that a child-centered middle school curriculum does not have to occur only in the classroom.

Instructional Practices and Learning Environment

The instructional practices and learning environment in a child-centered middle school:

- Recognize and accept differences in young adolescents' physical, psychosocial, and cognitive developmental levels and rates by providing developmentally appropriate instruction
- Place emphasis on thinking and learning how to learn, rather than focusing only on isolated and disconnected facts
- Provide sufficient flexibility to accommodate young adolescents' diverse learning needs and interests, including a variety of methods such as discovery, inquiry, cooperative learning, and career exploration
- Place value on gender and cultural differences, and provide classroom organization and instructional approaches that recognize these differences
- Provide instructional materials that enhance young adolescents' acceptance of self and others and enable them to accept differences and similarities among people
- Allow young adolescents to make significant academic and management choices and decisions about grouping and organizational practices
- Provide instruction and learning environments that ensure some degree of success for all young adolescents
- Utilize classroom management procedures that enable students to function as a community of learners, as well as to feel self-directed and responsible for their own behavior
- Recognize the importance of self-esteem and its influence on academic achievement, socialization, and overall personal development
- Promote heterogeneous grouping, and seek other alternatives to homogeneous ability grouping and tracking
- Enhance instruction through technology, and help young adolescents become technologically literate (Gilstrap, 1997)
- Promote a culture of achievement (Allison & DeCicco, 1997), whereby young adolescents place value on, and work toward, achievement.

Finally, child-centered middle school teachers adopt new modes of teaching as they face the challenges and opportunities presented by changing demographics, technology, and the changing face of education delivery (McKnight-Taylor, 1997).

Guidance and Counseling

Child-centered middle schools provide developmentally responsive guidance programs that are specifically designed to meet young adolescents' needs, not those of elementary or secondary students. The latter two groups have their own unique demands. Elementary school guidance programs address younger children's needs, such as learning about school and being away from home; secondary school programs address finishing school and preparing adolescents to find their place in society. Rather than adopting a "one guidance program fits all" philosophy, middle school guidance programs address 10- to 15-year-olds' diverse needs. Child-centered guidance efforts demonstrate a commitment to the middle school philosophy, essential middle school concepts, knowledge of the early adolescence developmental period, and the challenges facing young adolescents.

Developmentally appropriate functions. Middle school guidance programs have a number of developmentally appropriate functions, usually complementing one another in some way. While listing all guidance functions would be an impossible task (especially when one considers the vast diversity among young adolescents), five broad functions can constitute the middle school philosophy:

- Counselors and teachers serve as advocates for young adolescents and offer a source of support in the school, so that learners have someone with whom to talk and confide
- Counselors and teachers address 10- to 15-year-olds' special needs, such as developmental problems, school pressures, and at-risk conditions and behaviors
- Counselors and teachers play fundamental roles in furthering the development of young adolescents' cognitive and academic goals
- Counselors and teachers address psychosocial needs, such as dealing with friends, coping with widening social worlds, experiencing a declining self-esteem, dealing with peer pressure, and resolving interpersonal conflicts
- Counselors and teachers promote and articulate guidance roles between elementary and secondary schools.

Counselors and teachers working collaboratively. Child-centered middle school guidance involves both teachers and counselors working collaboratively for the welfare of young adolescents. Several advantages accrue when middle school educators work in guidance teams. First, they are better able to address young adolescents' broad array of guidance needs. Second,

young adolescents receive ongoing assistance throughout the school day. Teachers can serve as advisers as they teach and interact with students. They listen and offer advice; they also, when listening to students' problems, determine the need for a counselor's intervention. Third, the guidance team works collaboratively to help young adolescents develop respect for themselves and others. Fourth, as a team, teachers and counselors can develop cooperative, decision-making, and goal-setting skills.

Teachers' roles. Classroom teachers play major roles in middle school guidance efforts. Rather than limiting guidance to only one hour a week or to scheduled appointments, teachers can serve integral guidance and advisory functions all during the school day (MacLaury, 1995). Middle school teachers can play major guidance roles in both planned advisory programs (such as in the adviser-advisee program discussed below) and their daily interaction with young adolescents.

Adviser-advisee program. The adviser-advisee program (also called advisories, teacher advisories, or home-based guidance) can be defined as efforts to include each student in small, interactive groups with peers and staff to discuss school, personal, and societal concerns. The advisory program provides young adolescents with a sense of "family," or of belonging to a group. It also helps each student develop a meaningful relationship with at least one educator in the middle school. Advisories seek to promote young adolescents' social, emotional, and moral growth while also providing personal and academic guidance. To reduce the student-teacher ratio in advisories, all faculty serve as advisers.

The most successful advisories occur at the beginning of the day, usually lasting at least 25 minutes (Arnold, 1991). Advisers serve advisees as advocates, guides, group leaders, community builders, liaisons with parents, and evaluation coordinators. They also provide a warm, caring environment; plan and implement advisory programs; assist advisees in monitoring academic progress; provide times for students to share concerns; refer advisees to appropriate resources; communicate with parents and families; maintain appropriate records; and encourage advisees' cognitive and psychosocial growth (James, 1986). The teacher plans advisory sessions, preferably with the help of other team members and the guidance counselor (if needed).

Topics for adviser-advisee sessions include peer pressure, substance abuse, friendships, health-related issues, career exploration, development (e.g., early and late maturers), school rules, understanding parents, contemporary issues, and leisure time activities. Other activities during adviser-advisee sessions include meeting with individual students about problems; offering career information and guidance; discussing academic, personal, and family problems; addressing moral or ethical issues; discussing multicultural and intergroup relations; and helping students develop self-confidence and leadership skills (Epstein & MacIver, 1990).

Community organizations and social services. Teachers and counselors should be on constant watch for problems and concerns that extend beyond the purview of the middle school and that call for more specialized attention from mental health professionals. In these more acute situations, responsible educators and counselors should be prepared to suggest community organizations and social services agencies that provide assistance. Selected sources of help include area health departments, mental health professionals, social service agencies, Tough Love, AIDS information hotlines, Urban Leagues, departments of social services, area mental health centers, self-help support groups, groups such as Big Sister and Big Brother, YMCA and YWCA, Quest International, Planned Parenthood, and crisis pregnancy centers. In fact, it will be a worthwhile endeavor for the guidance team to make a list (including addresses, telephone numbers, and resources provided) of social service agencies, referral services, and service organizations in the community. It also would be helpful to prepare a list for distribution to families.

Textbooks and Materials

Child-centered middle schools provide textbooks and curricular materials that are written *with the middle school student in mind.* Too often, middle school educators have to choose between books written either for younger or older learners. Middle school educators and students deserve books and other curricular materials that reflect young adolescents' cognitive levels (e.g., their thinking levels progress from the concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage), their personal interests and needs, their desire for socialization, and their need for curricular exploration. These materials also should recognize and respect cultural, gender, and sexual orientation diversity. These textbooks and curricular materials also accommodate this group's vast developmental diversity, and emphasize curriculum integration. Finally, child-centered educators avoid the seemingly endless use of worksheets; worksheets are used only when they provide the most effective instructional means.

Teachers for Young Adolescents

Dickinson and McEwin (1997) note that many educators have called for specialized professional preparation of teachers of young adolescents (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Dickinson & Butler, 1994; McEwin, 1992; Van Til, Vars, & Lounsbury, 1961). These calls, however, have remained largely unheeded in the majority of teacher preparation institutions, due to lack of knowledge of young adolescents' special

characteristics and needs; too few advocates at the university and other levels in the profession; the desire for a plentiful supply of teachers who are licensed to teach any age group; the public's lack of knowledge about middle level curriculum, teaching, and schooling; a lack of prestige for teaching this "difficult and crazy age group" (Dickinson & McEwin, 1997, p. 272); a low confidence level among teachers about teaching this age group effectively; and the general practice of ignoring the needs of young adolescents and their teachers (Dickinson & McEwin, 1997).

Child-centered middle schools need teachers trained in essential middle school concepts, the early adolescence developmental period, and the characteristics of child-centered middle schools. While this knowledge is a prerequisite for making child-centered schools a reality, educators face yet another requirement: They must be genuinely committed to child-centered middle schools and to providing young adolescents with educational experiences that demonstrate caring, concern, and nurturing. Administrators at both the district and middle school levels support and provide professional development and inservice opportunities that focus on child-centered educational practices. Middle school educators need continuous learning experiences that contribute to their ability to teach young adolescents.

Middle School Support

Middle school educators will succeed in their efforts to provide child-centered educational experiences only with the support of administrators, both at the school and district levels. Other sources of program support include professional associations, parents and families, and the overall community. *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) called for parents and families to become re-engaged in the education of young adolescents. Parent-teacher organizations are sufficiently flexible to include young adolescents and community members who share responsibility for making middle schools more child-centered (Minneapolis Public Schools, n.d.). In fact, parents and community members can resolutely encourage administrators and school boards to support child-centered educational experiences. Middle schools can become child-centered when teachers, administrators, and parents work collaboratively to advocate child-centered educational programs.

Summary

The Intermediate/Middle Childhood Standing Committee and ACEI believe caring and concerned middle school educators need to maintain a constant vigilance to ensure all aspects of the school day have a child-centered focus. Well-meaning educational plans and goals to ensure a child-centered middle school sometimes fall short as educators succumb to the many pressures facing schools. Fortunately, educators still can offer genuine commitments to monitor curricular, instructional, guidance, and environmental practices to ensure a child-centered middle school.

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