

Here In their position paper, “This We Believe,” The Association of Middle Level Educators, AMLE, have identified a variety of “elements of a successful middle school.” This paper will discuss five of these elements, justifying why they are associated with successful schools, primarily through aspects of adolescent development they are related to. Implementation strategies will also be mentioned.

The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.

A poor school environment is detrimental to the primary goal of a school (to educate its students). Students engage to a greater degree when they are comfortable in their environment, and student engagement is a critical component of student achievement (Jeanne & Glenda, 2019). For this reason, a successful middle school should be aware of the many dimensions involved in achieving this comfort for all students. This fact is not exclusive to middle schools; however, it is especially relevant to them.

As children enter into adolescence, they begin to value the opinions of their peers more highly. Simultaneously, they are also developing more advanced social skills. A successful middle school should encourage and monitor this social development, being aware of the complex and dynamic effects of peer relationships on students and their self-concept. Broadly, schools should aim to support social developments wherever possible. Particularly, they should work to eliminate instances of peer harassment (bullying, ostracization, among others) as these are highly associated with negative outcomes in later life (Graham, 2005). This can in part be addressed through active monitoring of peer hierarchies as well as interactions in and out of the classroom (Penny & Lisa, 2020). Regular inclusion of social-emotional health themes (e.g., empathy) in lessons can also help to maintain quality peer relationships (Penny & Lisa, 2020).

All students, of any (non)arbitrary distinctions, should be specifically included and valued in a successful middle school. To do this, the successful middle school must be aware of the very real influences of race, gender, and religion on its student body. Particularly, it should be aware of the well-established positive correlation between minority students and punishment and exclusion from education: if it is not, students of particular groups will demonstrate markedly decreased achievement (Natasha & Stacy, 2016). The school must also act on this awareness, creating systems to address the school culture, including anti-discrimination and student reporting policies, and implementing other practices that support inclusivity for staff and students.

The faculty of a school plays a large role in the successful implementation of these ideas. Even with careful consideration and management, staff can still reinforce racial stereotypes or act in discriminatory ways unconsciously (often termed “implicit biases”) (Natasha & Stacy, 2016). This does not, however, discount the need for examination of these biases. Many students, especially those identifying as female or being in a minority racial group, can be subject to them on a daily basis (Penny & Lisa, 2020). Specific training opportunities exist for staff to work to address this. Active examination of teacher behavior and data, especially discipline rates and grades, can help to inform where these issues could be present and how they can be addressed. A purposeful effort by the administration and staff should be made to ensure all students are equally valued in the school community.

Educators Respect and Value young adolescents.

The quality of student-teacher relationships has a tremendous effect on the success and wellbeing of adolescents in the middle grades: It is associated with increased student motivation, engagement, belonging, and achievement, and with decreased risk behaviors (Sarah, Kathleen, & Cheryl, 2015). Students and educators develop a positive relationship when educators promote mutual respect, interaction, and support (Helen, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007). As such, educators should those who value,

respect, and care about adolescents—they should enjoy being around them and promoting their academic and emotional development.

Educators must demonstrate their respect and support in a variety of ways. Student perceptions of these qualities are also highly relevant to positive outcomes previously mentioned (Helen, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007). Through careful listening and observation (especially of their peer interactions), teachers can develop a knowledge of their students' different needs, and shape learning experiences to best fit these needs. These experiences should additionally encourage student autonomy (Sarah, Kathleen, & Cheryl, 2015). Another effective way to demonstrate the respect and value for young adolescents needed in adolescence is advisory programs.

Varied and Ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.

Many traditional aspects of assessment, particularly the prevalence of multiple-choice tests, leave much to be desired, both by teachers and students. In many cases they simply are not a good measurement of knowledge. They can be tremendously biased towards or against a particular group, especially through culture or language (Penny & Lisa, 2020). The diversity of students' learning (Bonnie & Backes, 2019) suggests employing a diversity in assessment types. A more effective middle school should (being aware of their many flaws) defer from these traditional means of assessment, emphasizing autonomy and multiple techniques, including projects, presentations, and interviews, among others.

It should also emphasize assessment as a tool to guide learning as opposed to exclusively summarizing it—distinguishing assessment from evaluation, while still understanding and using both for their appropriate purpose. In particular, employing formative assessment strategies often is a key component of understanding student needs, and is often associated with increased student success (OECD, 2005).

Instruction fosters learning that is Active, Purposeful and Democratic.

Adolescence is a dramatically different and more complicated time of life when compared to early childhood and adulthood. The variety of theories and continued developments surrounding the topic suggest we still do not fully understand it. Still, most accept it is very significant. Middle schools should work to create learning opportunities that are specifically relevant for adolescent students, accurately based on the most up-to-date research suggestions about them. “Active, Purposeful and Democratic” learning(s) serve as a guide to creating these learning opportunities. They should be hands on and engaging, useful to adolescents, and encourage and value students’ contributions, as all of these qualities are associated with specific aspects of adolescent development.

Adolescents have a developmental need for greater autonomy (Edwards, 2015). By engaging in **active** learning, instruction can address and take advantage of this developmental need. Likely due to this fact, active learning is strongly associated with increased student achievement and engagement (Edwards, 2015).

Psychology has determined that purpose is a major determinant of life outcomes—employing **purposeful** learning during this critical time will help students to develop it later. It is also particularly important for adolescents, as it is associated with immediate positive academic effects (Damon, Menon, & Cotton-Bronk, 2003). Erikson and his theory of stages of psychosocial development—particularly, those on “industry”, and “identity”, directly speak to this need. Specific practices, like project-based and service learning that are primarily based in purposeful learning, although uncommon due to difficulties and inconsistencies with implementation, are associated with positive student outcomes (Farber & Bishop, 2018).

Adolescents are just beginning to develop and practice higher-level thinking skills (Wall, Massey, & Margaret, 2018). **Democratic** learning engages with those higher-level thinking skills and encourages

students to use them to advance their learning. Democratic learning also works to address the increased need for autonomy highly associated with adolescence.

Teachers should work to implement these learnings through varied lesson types and be aware of their value, however, it is not possible for an individual to master all of these learning strategies.

Collaboration is key, both between staff and administration. A successful middle school should work to implement these ideas (democratic learning in particular) on a larger scale in order to reach their maximal effectiveness.

The curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse.

The lessons students learn in school leave a long-lasting (hopefully, positive) impact on their life (Jackson, 1968). Because of this, an effective curriculum should address personal and interpersonal life skills. It should include multiple perspectives on issues relevant to the world today, to give students the opportunity to develop their own perspectives in a safe space with the best information possible (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017). It should also emphasize both specific content areas (math, English, science), and “extracurricular” activities in conjunction with this “hidden curriculum” wherever possible.

Curriculum should be **challenging** and differentiated to students’ abilities whenever possible. There is no method to have control over these abilities prior to a student’s arrival at a school, but they always certainly exist (Norma, Moll, & Amamti, 2005). Schools should emphasize these existing abilities, in turn more rapidly engaging students with higher levels of thinking than comprehension or memorization. Teachers should collaborate with students, among themselves, and with families to best achieve this differentiation. It is not being suggested that a truly differentiated curriculum can be easily achieved, however, even slight efforts in the direction of this goal can have visible positive effects.

An **exploratory** curriculum presents students with the opportunity to develop experiences in a variety of disciplines in a safe and valuable manner. Adolescents need varied opportunities to develop experience

with. Marcia's Identity Status Theory indicates the range of things they could potentially do is directly proportional to the range of things they experience in adolescence—that is, students who try more in adolescence are able to do more in adulthood (Ferrer-Wreder, 2019). Employing an exploratory approach to curriculum development addresses this developmental need.

An effective curriculum should be **integrated** with significant issues in the world, school, and community. This idea is integrally linked with the previously mentioned democratic learning. Both concepts find their roots in research demonstrating that children in general, and early adolescents in particular, are increasingly and exceptionally curious about the world around them, even if this curiosity is not presented in a traditionally obvious way (Linquin & Lombrozo, 2020). Educators should work to tap into and encourage this curiosity wherever possible. They should design the curriculum around the questions students already have. They also should implement action into these questions. This will push students to develop a healthy cultural intelligence and give them the skills they need to succeed later in life.

A **diverse** curriculum should be aware of the many legacies shaping the goals and implementation of the (primarily, US) education system today. Less than 100 years ago, many students found in schools today would not have been allowed to attend (Paris & Alam, 2017). A diverse curriculum should, in contrast to hiding or discouraging it as “unacademic”, engage with and appreciate its (newfound) student diversity. It should work to create more meaningful learning experiences for all of them, through employing diverse cultural references in materials and demonstrating acceptance of all students. The diversity of a curriculum will inherently contribute to student's understanding of the diversity of the world—only a diverse curriculum is one that can effectively contribute to an understanding of this diversity and its significance (Paris & Alam, 2017). In addition to effectively discussing diversity and its value, a curriculum should not disguise the biases that exist in the world—it should address them and educate their students as to the flawed nature of discrimination and ready them with tools to work against it.

In conclusion, I feel it is important to note two things. First: these are not the only factors relevant to successful middle level education, nor are they being touted as any more important than others, they are merely ones that I personally agree and identify with. I would posit there are likely more future (and current) educators who agree and identify with other principles, and success will be best achieved through collaboration with them. Second: there are major, not obviously solvable difficulties (particularly, monetary and temporal) in achieving these goals on a wide level. I do not have any solutions to these problems, and they seem unlikely to cease to exist. While it is true that it often isn't feasible to fully implement many of these ideas (and in schools today, most of them are not), it is not true that they serve little value in the classroom. An awareness of what makes successful middle schools successful (and unsuccessful) is critical to developing solutions to these problems even if they are not immediately obvious.

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