



## A Middle School for Every Student

The middle school curriculum continues to be the most elusive of targets, highly controversial, fraught with deadends, and rarely achieved. Why should deciding what and how to teach 10-14-year-olds be so difficult? The answer lies partially in the continuing lack of knowledge about the purposes and functions of middle level schools by some educators and by the general public, but the answer also lies in our unwillingness to do what we know is right for young adolescents. In this regard, teachers and parents have failed middle level students.

Since the early '60s, the middle school movement has improved life considerably for young adolescents in newly restructured middle level schools throughout the country. As has

been documented elsewhere, the change from junior high schools to middle schools first included changing the name, then the grades present, and eventually several structural pieces related to the organization of the school (teams, groups of students, schedules) and the school climate (primarily a focus on some type of advisory program). But, the



curriculum has NOT changed. The basic curriculum question, "what should the middle school curriculum be" is as vital a question today as it was 40 years ago.

Today, however, we know what the curriculum should be. The experiences of middle level schools in the early to mid-1990s saw much work done on connecting curriculum, making the middle school curriculum truly responsive to the needs of young adolescents. Later in the '90s with the advent of standards and high-stakes testing, much of the focus on a truly responsive middle level curriculum was shelved, as teachers were encouraged to return to a more traditional, subject-based, teacher and test-driven, teach what can be tested curriculum.

So, what should be the middle school curriculum? The position paper, *Middle Level Curriculum: A Work in Progress* by the National Middle School Association, highlights some of the key areas:

We believe learning experiences for young adolescents should:

- address their varied intellectual, physical, social, emotional and moral development
- help them make sense of themselves and the world about them
- be highly integrated and connected to life
- include their questions, needs, developmental issues and ideas
- involve them in rich and significant knowledge about the world
- open doors to new ideas that evoke curiosity, the desire to explore, and, at times, awe and wonder
- challenge students and encourage them to take maximum advantage of educational opportunities
- develop caring, responsible, and ethical citizens who practice democratic principles

To be perfectly clear about what should be included in a responsive and high-level curriculum, the position paper ends with...

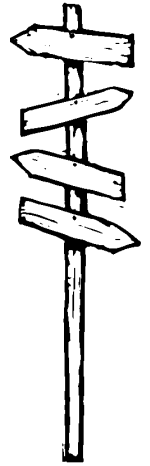
Because of these convictions, we believe the following conditions should be phased out:

- the curriculum consists of separate subjects and skills taught and tested in isolation from one another
- content is judged to be more important than the process by which it is learned
- students are labeled and tracked into rigid ability groups
- lecturing, rote learning, and drill are used excessively
- textbooks and worksheets dominate
- faculty is organized by departments
- staff development efforts are short term and non-productive

The challenge to offer the curriculum that middle school students need is immediate. Now we need the will to see it through.

To access the entire Position Paper, see the NMSA website at [www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org).

# ParentsAsk



## QUESTION:

My daughter's middle school offers many terrific activities, but sometimes those activities seem too old for the middle school age group. I know that some parents support cheerleaders, interscholastic championships, honor rolls, 8th grade proms, and the like, but such activities seem like too much, too soon for most young adolescents. As only one parent, what can I do?

## ANSWER:

Answer: Thanks for recognizing that 10-14-year-olds don't need to "practice" in middle school all the activities they will be exposed to in high school. The key issue, of course, is that none of the activities mentioned are right or wrong by themselves. The question is whether they are appropriate for young adolescents at a particular age. Don't hesitate to advocate for activities that are "developmentally appropriate" -- that are suitable for this age group and their unique needs. Many middle level schools downplay the heavy boy-girl aspects of dances by doing "Fun Nights" (or afternoons) with dancing in one part of the building, games like volleyball or basketball in the gym, and board games in another room. While a contentious issue, other middle level schools try to involve all its students in intramural sports, instead of an elite few in interscholastics. Talk to the principal at your daughter's middle school and enlist the support of other parents who feel as you do.

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## TIPS

### Help your child become a better writer by wanting to write!

1. Share what you write for your job or for other aspects of your life. If your job requires some type of writing, share that writing with your young adolescent. Ask her to proofread or make suggestions for revisions. Talk about the process you use to write, for example, clarifying the purpose for a piece of writing, brainstorming content and format, or writing all the way through without stopping just to get the ideas down. Ask your young adolescent how she approaches a piece of new writing. If you take notes for a civic club or a church group, show your young adolescent what and how you are writing for that task, as well.
2. Make writing a part of life, not a highly specialized activity. Show your kids how to write friendly or business letters, postcards, and thank you notes. Set aside specific times when everyone sits down to write after birthdays or holidays or just on regular occasions to friends and family. And have ready access to writing supplies - plain notepaper, envelopes, and stamps. While e-mail may be faster, learning the writing habit of putting pencil to paper is a very different, yet important process.
3. Read, read, read. And talk about what you read. Writers are voracious readers who bring a unique perspective to their own writing from wide reading. Probably the best thing that parents can do is to have quiet times in the house when tv, telephone, and computer do not intrude on reading time. Go hear what authors say about writing. Many bookstores like Borders regularly invite authors to speak to the public about their writing and many young adolescents have opportunities to hear writers at their schools.

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## Rigor or Rigor Mortis?

Have you heard the one about "rigor"? Like the term "excellence" in the '90s, rigor has different meanings for students, teachers, parents, and policy makers. While no one disputes the notion of high expectations for students and perhaps more importantly, working with students to reach those high expectations, the rhetoric of rigor is more punitive than positive. More and more we hear phrases like "holding kids accountable" or "holding their feet to the fire". Often these negative analogies are played out when success is measured by scores on yet another standardized achievement test.

The next time someone says, "Our curriculum is rigorous," ask about how it is so. Does rigor mean more seat time for kids, more practice for upcoming tests, more worksheets, and less student involvement? Or does it mean that students have opportunities to pursue answers to questions they have about themselves and the world? Are students shown how to conduct research, read widely, and write in depth, all the while receiving feedback from their teachers? Finally, are students shown and then expected to think deeply about ideas, work collaboratively with others on significant projects, and demonstrate responsibility for their own learning? Now, that's rigorous!

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