

Supporting Young Adolescents: Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education July 2003

Introduction

Young adolescents from ages 10 to 14 are undergoing personal transformations – physical, intellectual, emotional, social and psychological. The Board of Regents believes that the time these students spend in the middle grades, 5 through 8, is critical to both their personal growth and development and their success in high school.

Based on a series of statewide discussions with many groups and a thorough review of the research on effective middle level education practices, the Regents and the State Education Department have identified seven essential elements of standards-focused middle-level schools and programs. This policy statement reflects these seven key factors.

The challenge to middle-level education is to make the change from childhood to adolescence and from the elementary grades to the high school a positive period of intellectual and personal development. For many students, this is a hopeful time of life. However, for some youngsters emerging adolescence is a stressful time. These personal difficulties may be exacerbated in cases where either the home or the community (including the school) in which the young person lives and learns offers limited opportunities for positive role models, employment, and a satisfying lifestyle.

Educators, parents, families, and communities must recognize that they need to work together to assist students in a changing society. Educators need to recognize and assume a shared responsibility not only for their students' intellectual and educational development, but also for their students' personal, social, emotional, and physical development. The entire school community must share responsibility for the success of all students, assuring high-quality instruction, course content, and support and other services in the middle-level grades, and promoting high expectations for all students, regardless of disability, limited English proficiency, religion, sex, color, race, or national origin.

The following seven essential elements must be in place in standards-focused schools with middle-level grades if young adolescents are to succeed academically and develop as individuals:

1. A philosophy and mission that reflect the intellectual and developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents.
2. An educational program that is comprehensive, challenging, purposeful, integrated, relevant, and standards-based.
3. An organization and structure that support both academic excellence and personal development.

4. Classroom instruction appropriate to the needs and characteristics of young adolescents provided by skilled and knowledgeable teachers.
5. Strong educational leadership and a building administration that encourage, facilitate, and sustain involvement, participation, and partnerships.
6. A network of academic and personal support available for all students.
7. Professional learning for all staff that is ongoing, planned, purposeful, and collaboratively developed.

In a standards-focused middle-level school or program, the goals of academic achievement and personal development for each student are not in conflict or in competition. Rather, they are compatible, complementary, and mutually supportive. From a young adolescent's perspective, the essential elements of a successful standards-focused middle-level school or program must contain the following components.

Philosophy, Mission, and Vision

Every young adolescent deserves a school that values academic achievement and personal development and provides a supportive environment free from violence, bullying, harassment, and other negative behaviors. Students in the middle grades are in a unique period of development, a period of rapid intellectual, physical, social, and emotional change. The philosophy, mission, and vision of a school with middle-level grades must reflect the dual purposes of middle-level education (academic achievement and personal development). They must also stress the positive development of the individual and affirm the school's responsibility to assist all students in making a successful transition from the elementary grades to high school and from childhood to adolescence.

Educational Program

Every young adolescent needs a challenging, standards-based course of study that is comprehensive, integrated, and relevant. They need an educational program that is enhanced by genuine involvement of students, their parents, their families, and the greater school community. Further, they need an educational program that emphasizes and promotes the requisite academic knowledge and skills needed to succeed in school — both middle-level and high school — and in later life. The educational program should be fully aligned with the State's 28 learning standards and emphasize the natural connections and linkages among the standards. Middle grades instruction must build upon the foundational knowledge and skills of the elementary grades and, in doing so, prepare students for success in high school.

Literacy and numeracy are key to the educational program. English language arts — reading, writing, listening and speaking — and mathematics are emphasized across the subject areas with expectations for performance that are consistent across and within the disciplines and commonly understood by both teachers and students. Strategies for reading are applied in all the content areas and writing experiences are provided in a

variety of forms. Mathematics instruction builds on basic skills and emphasizes conceptual understanding and problem-solving skills. The educational program also promotes both an understanding and the use of the concepts of technology; fosters an understanding and an appreciation of the arts; teaches how to access, organize, and apply information using various media and data bases; helps students understand and apply positive health concepts and practices and participate in healthful physical activities; and develops skills to explore new subject areas.

The educational program also encourages students to pursue personal interests, engage in school and community activities (e.g., sports, clubs, etc.), explore potential futures and careers, and develop useful social, interpersonal, and life skills needed to live a full and productive life. It also offers opportunities for the development of personal responsibility and self-direction.

Up-to-date learning aids (e.g., textbooks, current adolescent literature, laboratory equipment, etc.), instructional materials, and instructional technology are used to support the educational program. Targeted and timely academic intervention services must be provided so that students do not fall behind in meeting the learning standards. These additional academic instruction and/or student support services that address barriers to learning are critical in the middle grades to ensure that all students achieve the State's learning standards and graduate from high school. Such services are particularly important to students with disabilities and those who are English language learners to ensure they are successful in the general academic program.

Organization and Structure

Young adolescents learn and develop best in a school that is organized and structured to promote both academic achievement and personal development.

Organizational effectiveness and school success are not contingent upon a particular grade or school configuration. What is critical is that a school is organized and structured to help young adolescents make the transition from the elementary to the high school grades, from childhood to adolescence.

The organization and structure should help make all students, staff, parents, and families feel secure, valued, and respected as significant contributors to the school community. Teachers must be provided with regular opportunities to interact and collaborate to ensure that instruction is consistent and inter-related across and within the subject areas. Scheduling flexibility is necessary to provide a comprehensive educational program, interdisciplinary curricula, targeted and timely academic intervention services, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and opportunities for students to engage in leadership and community service projects.

The organization and structure connect youngsters to adults and to other students in the school and community and provide opportunities for increasingly independent learning experiences and responsibilities within a safe and structured environment. Each student needs a caring adult advocate in the school who knows that student personally and

well. The organization and structure provide time during the school day that is necessary to ensure opportunities for additional instruction and personal support are available for students who need extra help to meet the State's standards.

Classroom Instruction

Every young adolescent requires skilled and caring teachers who have a thorough understanding of their subject(s) and of the students whom they teach.

Young adolescents learn and develop best when they are treated with respect, involved in their learning, engaged with challenging content that has meaning and connections for them, and receive assurances that they are capable, worthy people. Teachers need to recognize and understand the changes that are occurring within their students, design and deliver a challenging curriculum based on the State's learning standards, and accept responsibility for each student's learning and development. They need to have an extensive understanding of their subject matter and of different approaches to student learning. A variety of successful instructional techniques and processes that reflect best practices (e.g., differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, etc.) must be used and capitalize on the unique characteristics and individual needs of young adolescents.

Teachers must provide instruction that is purposeful, challenging, relevant, integrated, and standards-based and use classroom assessments that are useful indicators of individual student growth and performance to monitor each student's progress and to plan instruction. They ensure that performance expectations are consistent and interrelated across and within subject areas. Student data, both personal and achievement, are used to make curricular and instructional decisions and technology and other instructional resources support and enhance learning. Teachers use flexible grouping based upon pupil needs, ways of learning, and interests, and employ interdisciplinary approaches to help students integrate their studies and to fulfill their potential. Opportunities are created for students to develop social, interpersonal, and leadership skills in addition to academic proficiency.

Teachers consult with each other and with other school personnel about instructional, curricular, and other student-related issues. They also inform and involve parents in their children's education by helping them understand the instructional program, their children's progress, and how to help their children at home with schoolwork, school decisions, and successful development through early adolescence.

Educational Leadership

Every young adolescent should be educated in schools that have knowledgeable, effective, and caring leaders. Students learn and develop best when the adults in the school community have high expectations for students and staff, share and support a common vision, and work together to achieve common purposes. The personnel in effective schools with middle-level grades share leadership responsibilities. For the school to prosper, those in positions of leadership must know and understand the needs

and developmental characteristics of young adolescents and the essential elements of a standards-focused, high-performing school with middle-level grades. They must articulate and maintain high standards for classroom instruction and student performance and support and encourage teachers to take risks, explore, question, and try new instructional approaches. They must also ensure and facilitate inter-school cooperation, collaboration, and communication with feeder elementary schools and receiving high schools.

Educational leaders promote school/community partnerships and involve parents and other members of the community in school activities and initiatives that benefit students. They create, promote, and sustain a school culture and climate of mutual support and collective responsibility for the educational and personal development of every young adolescent. They also ensure students are provided with opportunities to assume significant and meaningful leadership roles in the school.

Student Academic and Personal Support

Every young adolescent needs access to a system that supports both academic achievement and personal development. Caring adults are a significant positive influence for young adolescents. To ensure a comprehensive network of academic and personal support is available for students and their families, schools with middle-level grades must maintain two-way communication with parents and families and ensure that all students and their families have access to counseling and guidance services to make educational, career, and life choices. Trained professionals (including school counselors who know and understand the needs, characteristics, and behaviors of young adolescents), special prevention and intervention programs, and community resources must be available to support those who require additional services to cope with the changes of early adolescence and/or the academic demands of middle-level education, especially students with disabilities and those who are English language learners. Students also need to be provided with opportunities to have access to adult mentors and positive role models. Parents, families, and community groups must be informed of the essential role they play in ensuring students attend school and access available services, expanding and enhancing venues for significant learning, promoting youth development, and supporting positive school change.

Professional Learning

Every young adolescent deserves an educational setting that values continuous improvement and ongoing professional learning. Young adolescents need highly qualified, well-trained, knowledgeable, caring teachers, administrators, and other school staff if they are to succeed. Schools with middle-level grades need to be professional learning communities where adults in the school engage in programs of growth and development that are ongoing, planned, purposeful, and collaboratively developed. At the core of professional growth should be specific subject area expertise, a knowledge and understanding of the linkages among the 28 learning standards, research-based instructional practices that have proven successful in raising student achievement and,

at the practical level, the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. School staff must understand, not only theoretically but also operationally, how to implement the essential elements of a standards-focused, high-performing school with middle-level grades.

Summary

The University of the State of New York and all of its resources are unified in the mission to raise the knowledge, skill, and opportunity of all people in the State. The Board of Regents believes that the middle-level grades, grades 5 through 8, are a vital link in the education of youth, a critical period of individual growth and development, and a key to success in high school. A high performing, standards-focused school with middle-level grades addresses both academic performance and personal development. It ensures that young adolescents are prepared and ready to make a successful transition to high school, academically and personally. Creating effective schools with middle-level grades will necessitate systemic change and require a philosophy and mission committed to developing the whole child, a challenging and rigorous educational program, a supportive organization and structure, skilled and knowledgeable teachers who use effective instructional practices, strong leadership, a network of support appropriate to the needs and characteristics of young adolescents, ongoing professional learning, and a strong will to succeed.