



ClassroomLeadership

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The Adolescent Learner

To Teach the Impossible

Meeting the Needs of Young Adolescent Learners

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Teaching middle school students is one of the most rewarding and self-fulfilling careers in education today. We can say this because we are proud teachers of 7th and 8th grade students at Abraham Lincoln Middle School in Selma, Calif., the raisin capital of the world.



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Unfortunately, the majority of educators and most people outside of education do not share our optimistic view of young adolescent learners. In fact, adolescent learners are often considered to be a challenge—and for good reason. Middle school students go through a period of extraordinary emotional, social, physical, and cognitive change. As a result, you never know what to expect. Their attitudes can often depend on the week, the day, the hour, or the minute.

The challenge of learning to deal with these often complicated individuals, however, is what makes us love our jobs so much. Any successful middle school teacher knows that the key to working with middle school students is to care about and attempt to understand them.

Keeping the Kids' Mind in Mind

Understanding what makes adolescents tick makes it easier to create a learning environment that responds to their unique needs. The middle school structure, for example, should emphasize small communities of learning to accommodate students' basic need for acceptance and a sense of belonging. Another example: Trudy Knowles and Dave Brown, authors of *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know* (2000, Heinemann), write that young adolescents have a keen sense of right and wrong. A curriculum that includes service-learning projects, therefore, can answer the students' desire to find solutions to social problems.

We wanted to know how middle schools in the San Joaquin Valley are meeting the academic and emotion needs of adolescent learners, so we polled approximately 30 different middle schools to find out. Our survey found that a wide range of activities and programs are being provided to better meet the needs of today's adolescent learner and to help students transition into middle school. We found that middle schools offer

- Academic block classes (thematic instruction)
- Math and reading intervention classes
- After-school tutorial opportunities
- Early bird classes
- Study skills programs

- Student planners or calendars
- Leadership classes and student government (giving student an opportunity to voice their opinions, make decisions, and form committees)
- Spirit rallies
- Dances
- Lunch time activities and dress-up days
- Student of the month recognition
- Academic awards assemblies and rallies
- After-school sport programs
- Intramural sports
- Peer counseling
- Peer tutoring and mentoring
- Classes in cultural dance (e.g., Mexican dance)
- Community service projects

Information from the transition surveys indicates that most schools value extracurricular activities and athletics as a key component to their organizational structure. At Abraham Lincoln Middle School, we encourage students to participate in extracurricular and cocurricular activities—opportunities that are essential in helping them develop appropriate social skills. Extracurricular activities serve as an outlet for our students, giving them an opportunity to experience success outside the classroom. In addition, getting involved in lunch-time, intramural, after-school activities and attending spirit rallies and school dances helps to build school spirit and make school more enjoyable.

Students often work harder in the classroom so that they can be eligible to participate in these “fun” activities. These opportunities for involvement become a motivator and something students enjoy and look forward to on a daily basis.

You, Too, Can Teach Middle School

When the adolescent student's basic need for acceptance and a sense of belonging are met, school becomes much more pleasurable both for the students and the teachers. Schools with administrators and teachers that understand and care for their young people know that middle school students are not “difficult to work with” or “impossible to teach.” In fact, knowing that we have an opportunity to make school a place that makes sense to students is exciting.

The saying that it takes a special person to teach at a middle school is a myth. We enjoy teaching middle school students not because *we* are special but because the *students* are. It is our job to listen and understand them, to facilitate their learning, and to help them find out who they really are. We love our jobs!

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