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IN AN effort to provide general guidelines for use by educators in planning middle school programs, several tasks are necessary. First, the growing body of literature dealing with the middle school concept must be examined to identify important principles essential for these programs. Second, educational leaders prominent in developing and carrying on successful middle school programs must be interviewed for their views on what are important elements in a successful middle school program. Third, observations of actual middle school programs in operation will be necessary, as these will provide additional input for the development of needed guidelines.

Next, and certainly not the least important, is the consideration of the nature, the characteristics of the youth to be served, and the kind of society in which he lives. As in any worthwhile educational program, this is a most important consideration. The findings of such studies as have been made have led to the identification of 16 characteristics of the middle school and these are briefly cited here. These guidelines may be useful as criteria in evaluating existing or proposed programs, with a view toward determining whether they truly provide for students in the middle school years.

Criteria for Evaluating the Middle School

1. *Is Continuous Progress Provided For?*

Regardless of chronological age, students should be allowed to progress at their

These criteria can help you evaluate your program in terms of the characteristics of the pupils, the nature of knowledge, and the needs of the society.

own individual rates. This transescent stage of growth is one in which individual differences are most pronounced. Forcing students into a rigid chronological grouping pattern ignores this important developmental characteristic and defeats the effectiveness of educational plans. Instead, the curriculum must be built on continuous progress, permitting each student to move through sequential learning activities at his own rate.

2. *Is a Multi-Material Approach Used?*

While the basal text approach to teaching is the dominant approach today, it has disadvantages which give cause for serious concern. One of the major disadvantages is its inflexibility, since it assumes that all students respond to the same approach equally and progress through the text at the same rate. More consistent with the nature of the transescent is the use of a wide range of easily accessible instructional materials and a variety of activities to appeal to varied abilities and interests of students. The multi-material approach is consistent with the wide intellectual and physiological range of middle school age students who may compare with 7- to 19-year-olds.

3. *Are Class Schedules Flexible?*

In the traditional school, rigid time

MIDDLE SCHOOL?

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schedules often interfere with learning rather than serve it. Logically, the schedule should be based on instructional needs for various activities. To do this, the schedule should be varied and flexible, with changes made in class periods where these are necessary to fit the kinds of study activities being carried on.

4. *Are Appropriate Social Experiences Provided For?*

Some middle school age students are still children, immature, and not yet ready for more sophisticated social activities. Others are already adolescents with strong interests in social contacts with members of the other sex. Many are in transition between these two stages. Therefore, a program of social activities based on a high school model is inappropriate. Instead, there should be a program which provides for the unique needs of the transescent. These include wholesome social contact with members of the other sex through interaction in small groups, large-group activities in common areas of the school, club activities, dancing of the "mixer" type such as square dancing, and others. Serious dating and pairing off of couples are more appropriate at later ages.

5. *Is There an Appropriate Program of Physical Experiences and Intramural Activities?*

Highly competitive athletic programs are not appropriate for transescents, who are generally unprepared for the serious pressures these activities generate. Instead, physical education classes should center their

activity on helping students understand and use their bodies. A strong intramural program which encourages widespread participation is greatly preferred to a competitive, selective program of athletics which benefits only a few. The stress should be on the development of body management skills.

6. *Is Team Teaching Used?*

Every teacher possesses certain teaching strengths as well as weaknesses. In addition, transescent students benefit from a carefully planned schedule which puts them in contact with more than one teacher. However, they are not yet ready for the highly departmentalized approach of the high school. Therefore, a team teaching approach which utilizes teacher strengths in working with students individually and in groups is the logical way to meet the transescent's needs.

7. *Is Planned Gradualism Provided For?*

Another characteristic of the transescent is his eagerness to make more of the decisions concerning his own behavior, his own social life and choice of friends, his learning activities. While he is ready for some decision making at this stage, he is not quite ready for assuming the full burden of such planning, as the high school student must do. The transescent still requires some security and continues to depend heavily upon adult guidance. Therefore, the program of experi-

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ences in the middle school should satisfy the transescent's needs for more independence while it also continues to offer him the assurance of sound adult guidance.

8. *Are Exploratory and Enrichment Studies Provided For?*

The transescent has a strong interest and curiosity in the world in which he lives. To provide for this, the middle school should offer a wide range of educational opportunities for the student. Electives should be part of the program of every student so that his unique needs can be met. Time should be spent in enriching the student's concept of himself and the world around him rather than confining him to learning only required subject matter in traditional form.

9. *Are There Adequate and Appropriate Guidance Services?*

The transescent has many problems troubling him and these often stem from the rapid physical changes he is experiencing. These problems require careful counseling from teachers and from trained guidance counselors. Group and individual counseling services are an important part of a successful middle school program.

10. *Is There Provision for Independent Study?*

Strong individual interests and curiosity characterize the transescent. This serves as a highly effective motivational force when there is adequate provision for independent study by the student, with the teacher available for assistance in planning and as a resource person. The value that this has in fostering self-direction by students makes it an important provision of the middle school.

11. *Is There Provision for Basic Skill Repair and Extension?*

Because of individual rates of growth, some youngsters have not entirely mastered the basic skills. These students require an extension of the program of basic skills development begun in the elementary school. There should be many opportunities to practice reading, listening, map and arithmetic skills, questioning, debate, etc. In some instances, the special services of remedial

teachers may be necessary for some students.

12. *Are There Activities for Creative Experiences?*

The creative talents of transescents require opportunities for expression. Students should be free to explore interests in many areas and to do so without pressures. Student newspapers, dramatic activities, art, musical programs, and others should be carried on in such a way that they encourage students to select, conceive, plan, and carry out activities in these areas.

13. *Is There Full Provision for Evaluation?*

The middle school program should provide a system of evaluation that is personal and positive in nature. If an individualized program is to be carried on, then the evaluation should be individualized. The student should be encouraged to assess his own progress and plan for future progress as well. The present common grading system using letters provides little information useful in understanding his progress and his areas of needed improvement. As part of an effective evaluation system, student-teacher conferences on a regularly scheduled basis are valuable. Additional conferences including parents can aid in reporting progress. The whole atmosphere in conducting evaluation should be constructive and positive rather than critical and punitive.

14. *Does the Program Emphasize Community Relations?*

The truly effective middle school is community-minded. It seeks to develop and maintain a varied program of community relations. Programs to inform, to entertain, to educate, and to understand the community are part of the basic operation of the school.

15. *Are There Adequate Provisions for Student Services?*

Providing adequately for the many needs of middle school students calls for a broad spectrum of specialized services. These should include health services, counseling services, testing services, and opportunities of both a curricular and a cocurricular nature. The important point is that the major

needs of every student should be met by the school through its own services or through county or state services available to schools.

16. *Is There Sufficient Attention to Auxiliary Staffing?*

Every community has many human resources that can be useful in a school program. The middle school recognizes this and seeks to utilize people from the community in many ways. Volunteer parents, teacher aides, clerical aides, student volunteers, and others can do a great deal to facilitate the operation of the middle school program.

Many communities today are considering the development of middle school programs. Other communities have begun

programs which they feel are middle school programs. Unfortunately, the pressures of time and an inadequate understanding of the true nature of a sound middle school program will result in disappointing or inappropriate programs in some of these communities.

The criteria outlined here can be useful in assuring effective planning for a new middle school program. They can also be useful in evaluating a middle school program already in operation. Use of these criteria in a carefully conducted planning or evaluation program can do much to facilitate the important decisions made by educators and citizens faced with the task of planning and implementing a middle school program which adequately meets the needs of its students. □

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