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Improving Schools for Young Adolescents



The Middle Grades Assessment Program combines findings from effective schools research with knowledge about the development of 10- to 15-year-olds to help school leaders plan for change.

Making schools work for young adolescents and the adults in them is one of public education's greatest challenges. By combining what we know about academically effective schools in general and 10- to 15-year olds in particular, we can define the outcomes we want from middle-grade schools and work to improve them.

For instance, we know from the research of Rutter and others (1979), Edmonds (1979), and Weber (1971) that effective schools have strong instructional leadership; high expectations of students and staff; a safe, orderly climate; a clear instructional focus; and a measurement system to provide feedback to students on achievement. We also know that academic achievement and attendance are higher in secondary schools where students perceive the environment as comfortable and pleasant, that achievement, attendance, and behavior are better in schools where large numbers of students have opportunities to assume responsibility and participate in the school's operation and that achievement and behavior are better in schools where students and staff accept the philosophy, expectations, and rules (Rutter, 1979). In other words, effective schools take into account students' needs for increasing levels of self-determination and participation.

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What We Know About Young Adolescents

Early adolescence is a time of rapid growth and change, as young people begin the physical and social transition from childhood to adulthood. Socially, young adolescents begin to separate from their parents, test their developing sense of autonomy, establish close

peer relationships, and reach out beyond the family to connect with a larger social sphere. They also begin to develop the cognitive ability to think abstractly, to think seriously about their personal futures in relation to their social context, and to reflect on social and personal values and motives. These changes come at

different times and at different rates, thus creating the notorious diversity of this age group.

That adolescence necessarily is a period of storm, stress, and outright rebellion is a myth. For a large percentage of youngsters, adolescence is marked by progression toward maturity with only few or intermittent times



of distress. Profound changes do occur, however, and integrating these changes into the past, present, and future in a way that makes sense can be a confusing and consuming task for young adolescents. Nor do they shed their excitement and confusion about these changes when they enter the school door.

Unfortunately, there is a considerable lack of fit between what we know about young adolescents and what we do with them five days a week in schools. While educators generally agree on the nature and structure of elementary and senior high schools, there is a lack of consensus concerning grade configurations for 10- to 15-year-olds. Decisions about schooling more often are made on the basis of buildings, budgets, and buses than on

the needs of the students who are experiencing profound physical, emotional, social, and cognitive changes. This does not mean that schools are *responsible* for all these aspects of development, but that they must be *responsive* to these students' needs.

Developmental Needs of Students

In establishing a framework for school improvement, the Center for Early Adolescence (Dorman, 1981; Lipsitz, 1984) has distilled research on normal early adolescent development into seven developmental needs of this age group: (1) diversity, (2) self-exploration and self-definition, (3) meaningful participation in their schools and communities, (4) positive social interaction with peers and adults, (5) physi-

cal activity, (6) competence and achievement, and (7) structure and clear limits (see box, below).

These needs and ways in which schools respond to them cannot be compartmentalized. Fortunately, they are interrelated. For instance, appropriate structure makes it possible for young adolescents to experience competence and achievement. The sense of competence is enhanced as students participate in the life of their school and community. Similarly, social interaction with peers and adults often becomes an opportunity for self-exploration and self-definition. To design environments that encourage healthy adolescent learning and growth, educators must take into account these seven interrelated developmental needs of young adolescents.

Developmental Needs of Young Adolescents How Schools Can Respond*

1. **Diversity.** Schools can match the varied abilities and interests of students with an equally diverse educational environment through a variety of teaching styles, methods, and materials; a curriculum with a balance among core and high-interest exploratory courses; and flexible scheduling that mixes short and long periods based on the nature of the task and the maturity level of the students.

2. **Self-exploration and self-definition.** Schools can help students to integrate their developing capabilities, interests, and relationships into a sense of who they are by focusing units in courses in these areas. For example, a language arts project might include keeping a diary and writing weekly summaries. A social studies unit could focus on adolescence in various countries and eras. Students should be encouraged to pursue answers to their own questions as well as the teachers'. The guidance program could focus on self-exploration and self-definition in areas like career guidance, family relations, and sexuality.

3. **Meaningful participation in their schools and communities.** Student-initiated study and activities, student councils and committees, and school improvement projects such as designing and constructing recreation areas or learning resources are only a few ways schools can engage students in these areas. Schools can also offer opportunities for students to extend their new knowledge and competencies by contributing to their communities through service projects.

4. **Positive social interaction with peers and adults.** Because of their changing relationships with adults, especially parents, and the increasing importance of peers, positive social interaction with these groups is extremely important to young adolescents. Schools can encourage peer interaction by offering small-group learning activities and by providing space for small groups of students to informally congregate. Positive social interactions between adults and students are facilitated by adviser-advisee relationships, staff participation in activities, and informal contact outside the classroom.

5. **Physical activity.** Responsive schools provide structured outlets for the physical energy of young adolescents, rather than ignoring or trying to suppress it. Noncompetitive physical education is an integral part of the curriculum and physical activity can be encouraged during breaks and lunchtime. Teachers can also provide opportunities for students to move around in the classroom.

6. **Competence and achievement.** Schools can meet these two needs by emphasizing academics, high-quality instruction, positive expectations of all students, generous (but honest) rewards and praise, and opportunities for increased independence and responsibility. A variety of teaching methods and a balanced curriculum of basic subjects, high-interest exploratory courses, and extracurricular activities help provide a diversity of rewards so that each student can be successful at something.

7. **Structure and clear limits.** Schools that are responsive to the young adolescent's need for structure have clearly stated rules and expectations that are generally accepted and understood by students and staff members. One way of assuring acceptance is to involve students in the establishment of rules and the consequences for failing to observe them. Young adolescents need the security provided by clear limits in order to learn and grow during a time of rapid and pervasive change. However, schools should avoid rigid structure and excessive limits because they invite dependency, hostility, withdrawal, and rebellion.

*Identified by the Center for Early Adolescence (Dorman, 1981; Lipsitz, 1984).

The *Middle Grades Assessment Program* (Dorman, 1981) helps educators use research on early adolescent development, academically effective schools, and educational change to assess their schools accurately and then develop and implement school improvement activities.

With the support of the Ford Foundation and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, ten schools in six districts across the nation are now using the Middle Grades Assessment Program. Other schools have used the program on their own, without foundation support. The project schools vary greatly in school size, location, physical facilities, and racial and socioeconomic makeup of their students. One is a K-8 school; several are grades 7-9 junior highs; and a number are grades 6-8 middle schools. Enrollment ranges from 150 to 940 students. One school is in a new \$5.8 million building, but most of the facilities are 20 to 30 years old. Urban, suburban, and rural schools are represented. The racial composition of the student bodies ranges from 92 percent minority to almost 100 percent white. One school is located in one of the wealthiest districts in the country, while in others more than one-third of the families receives AFDC benefits. This diversity is testimony that such factors are not deterrents to successful school improvement programs. One of these schools is the Francisco Middle School.

Francisco Middle School: A Case Study

Helen Hatcher became Francisco Middle School's principal in the fall of 1982, having 21 years experience as a teacher, staff development specialist, and elementary school principal. At Francisco, she found 940 6th through 8th graders who spoke 23 different languages. Seventy percent of the students were eligible for free lunches. Eighty percent were foreign born; some were engaged in their first formal schooling. Teacher morale was low. Discipline was a problem as well; students did not know what was expected of them.

Hatcher came to this school, within walking distance of San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf, with two goals: to strengthen the school academically

and to make it a more enjoyable place for students and staff. She identified the Middle Grades Assessment Program as a tool to assess how well the school was doing its job and to help get the staff working together, along with her, to improve the school.

The Middle Grades Assessment Program uses a team approach. Francisco's team—some appointees and some volunteers—was composed of Hatcher, two team leaders, two vice principals, six teachers, one counselor, one paraprofessional, and one parent. The team held its first meeting in March 1983 to clarify its goals, to examine the philosophy that undergirds the program, and to review research on effective schools and adolescent development. The team leaders and a project consultant trained the team in interviewing and observation.

The Middle Grades Assessment Program tools consist of (1) forms for interviewing the principal, teachers, other staff members, students, and parents; and (2) forms for observing the school's physical facilities, classroom instruction, and general environment. To develop the data base for improvement, each observation item is keyed to one of nine criteria (safety, academic effectiveness, and the seven developmental needs).



“Francisco’s continuing effort to improve illustrates how the Middle Grades Assessment Program builds a mindset, momentum, and support for change among a school’s staff.”

In April, team members observed all 45 classrooms and interviewed 52 staff members, 39 randomly selected students, and 29 parents, translating questions into native languages when necessary. The team reconvened in mid-May to compile its data. They concluded that Francisco was addressing the nine needs to varying degrees and identified a number of the school's strengths. For example, teachers routinely used a variety of instructional materials, responding to the students' need for diversity. Interviews with students and teachers made it clear that Francisco was well on the road to creating a positive working and learning environment. Teachers said they had opportunities to do things at school that they really enjoyed, and 99 percent of the students interviewed said they had opportunities for success.

The team also found room for improvement. Based on what the assessment process had shown them, team members identified as top priorities improving structure and limits for students, enhancing student participation, and responding to students' developmental and ethnic diversity. Team members believed the first priority was to strengthen the school in those areas, followed by efforts to improve instruction and increase academic effectiveness. The faculty as a whole met at the beginning of the 1983-84 school year to confirm the school's improvement plan.

After the assessment stage, Francisco worked creatively toward improve-

ment. The staff addressed the top priorities first. To improve structure and limits, Hatcher, several classroom teachers, and the school counselor met over the summer and developed a schoolwide discipline program. When school opened in the fall, staff members made a concerted effort to ensure that students knew and understood the staff's expectations and schoolwide discipline policies. Teachers, counselors, and students reviewed the rules together. In addition, staff members agreed on a uniform process for referring students to the principal's office for discipline, including both "The Wanderers"—a program for students who were tardy or cut class—and a detention room. Student discipline improved dramatically. At the beginning of the school year, as many as 66 "wanderers" spent Friday afternoon

with Hatcher, but the number was down to 15-25 by midspring. The average number of students in detention was cut to 30 compared to 60 the year before. In the 1983-84 school year, referrals to the principal for serious infractions such as fighting or stealing were down 19 percent from the previous year. The suspension rate for the first two months of school has fallen dramatically both years since the assessment, dropping 16 percent in 1983 and an additional 31 percent in 1984. "We're looking at guidance in new ways and working in classes on positive reinforcement," Hatcher said. "Kids don't feel the need to act out." The school has come so far that if the assessment were done today, according to Hatcher, structure and limits would no longer be a major priority.

San Francisco also began the 1983-84

school year with a "Spirit Committee" working to enhance student participation in planning and implementing school activities. The committee received a \$1,000 grant from the San Francisco Education Fund for a variety of school activities, including a field day, dances, and movies. A new "service point" project enables students to receive points for their successes in academics, leadership, and service that they can trade in for awards. Students have organized several assemblies, including a multicultural show aimed at bringing together the school's two predominant cultures—black and Asian. Student participation has produced school pride, which has reduced vandalism. Bulletin boards, some created by students, have gone up and stayed up. A new hallway mural has not been damaged. Before, Hatch-



er said, such things would have been torn down or covered with graffiti.

Another important example of Francisco's responsiveness to the school's developmental and ethnic diversity is a biweekly "Club Day." Teachers sponsor high-interest activities, ranging from jewelry making to learning leadership skills. Ethnic and racial understanding has been enhanced as students have interacted with each other in enjoyable activities of their own choice. Bilingual students are not isolated. Hatcher observed, "Students used to stand in the school yard with friends of their own ethnic group. Although they still tend to prefer friends of their own ethnicity, they are more actively involved in multi-ethnic groups during school activities."

At least as important as the concrete, activity-oriented results of the assessment is that everyone is working together energetically for improvement. Initially, some teachers feared the assessment was actually an evaluation or that it would yield "just another report." But as staff members became more involved in the assessment (teachers not on the team were kept informed through inservice programs) and more strongly committed to making their school responsive, Francisco was able to reach consensus about its mission and goals.

Hatcher used the Middle Grades Assessment Program process as a tool for obtaining a clear picture of her new school and for uniting her staff. She is confident it would work for other schools: "It goes right into the classroom and looks at teaching to see if teaching and learning styles match. It helps teachers realize what they need to focus on. It looks at the tone and atmosphere of the school. And it lets everyone be participants in the process."

Francisco's improvement efforts did not end with the actions aimed at addressing the three priorities identified. As the assessment team had envisioned, strengthening the school's academic program became a priority as soon as progress was made in the other three areas. The school began the 1984-85 school year ready to zero in on academic improvements. Inservice programs are aimed at improving instruction and at curriculum development. Teachers are so supportive of

the goal of improving academic effectiveness, and of their principal, that they want something done about the school's handful of ineffective staff members—they want to remove all obstacles to making their school more academically effective.

Hatcher believes that the school's curriculum and instruction could not have been addressed her first year, because the staff lacked consensus about the school's philosophy and goals. The Middle Grades Assessment Program process gave teachers a positively sanctioned method to participate in setting priorities for their school, resulting in staff members who felt empowered to make their school a better place and who were committed to academic effectiveness as an agreed-upon goal. For many schools, this consensus is essential before tackling the difficult issues of curriculum and instruction. The principal of another school that used the program put it this way, "You can bring in consultants all day long to talk about curriculum and instruction improvements, but teachers will slide back into their old ways. The Middle Grades Assessment Program gives the staff an opportunity to buy into a direction. The administrator then has a lever to use in improving instruction."

Academic Effectiveness/ Developmental Responsiveness

Francisco's continuing effort to improve illustrates how the Middle Grades Assessment Program builds a mindset, momentum, and support for change among a school's staff. Research has shown that changes will be implemented to the degree that teachers come to support and feel a sense of ownership about the innovation. The experiences of schools that have used the process support that conclusion. Schools can also use the model for planning and carrying out other projects, such as re-accreditation self-study, a new program mandated by the central office, or conversion from junior high to middle school.

Perhaps the most important lasting effect of the Middle Grades Assessment Program process is a new thoughtfulness in the school about what makes a successful school; that is,

the intention is to build a school that considers both academic effectiveness *and* developmental responsiveness. The most striking feature of the four schools described in *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (Lipsitz, 1984) was their willingness and ability to adapt all school practices to the individual differences in intellectual, biological, and social maturation of their students.

With school-based indigenous leadership, middle-grade schools can use what is known about early adolescent development, academically effective schools, and educational change to assess themselves accurately, build consensus about goals, develop workable school improvement plans, and make specific changes. This is an essential beginning to making successful schools for young adolescents. □

To obtain a copy of the Middle Grades Assessment Program, call (919) 966-1148 or write to the Center for Early Adolescence, 223 Carr Mill Mall, Carrboro, NC 27510.

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