

# **Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs**

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Developed by: The New York State Education Department's Middle-Level Education Program in collaboration with The New York State Middle School Association The Statewide Network of Middle-Level Education Liaisons and The New York City Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform

The standards-focused middle level school or program is purposeful. It has two basic goals:

The intellectual development and academic achievement of all students, and the personal and social development of each student.

In a standards-focused middle-level school or program these two goals are not in conflict or competition; rather, they are compatible, complementary, mutually supportive, and inextricably linked.

The seven essential elements of standards-focused middle-level school programs are:

- A philosophy and mission that reflect the intellectual and developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents (youth 10-14 years of age).
- An educational program that is comprehensive, challenging, purposeful, integrated, relevant, and standards-based.
- An organization and structure that support both academic excellence and personal development.
- Classroom instruction appropriate to the needs and characteristics of young adolescents provided by skilled and knowledgeable teachers.
- Strong educational leadership and a building administration that encourage, facilitate, and sustain involvement, participation, and partnerships.
- A network of academic and personal support available for all students.
- Professional learning and staff development for all staff that are ongoing, planned, purposeful, and collaboratively developed.

## **Essential Element 1: Philosophy and Mission**

A philosophy and mission that reflect the intellectual and developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents (youth 10-14 years of age).

Every young adolescent deserves a school that values academic achievement and personal development and provides a supportive environment.....

The middle-level educational program has a purpose beyond linking the elementary grades and the high school. Its basic aims are to educate and nurture. It has a culture of collective and shared responsibility. To be successful, it must attend to both the intellectual development and the personal needs of young adolescents. The philosophy and mission of a standards-focused middle-level school or program must reflect a set of shared beliefs.

The school and staff within the school must commit to:

- Developing the whole child, intellectually and academically, personally and socially, physically, emotionally, and ethically.
- Working together to ensure that all students achieve at high levels and, with appropriate guidance and structure, develop independence and responsibility.
- Accepting - individually and collectively - responsibility for the educational and personal development of each and every student.
- Ensuring for each student a safe, inviting, trusting, and mutually-respectful learning environment that offers both physical and psychological safety.
- Connecting each young adolescent in positive ways with the school and with caring adults within the school.
- Providing each student with a variety of learning experiences that are academically challenging, developmentally appropriate, and personally relevant in order for each of them to make informed educational and personal decisions.
- Providing a successful transition from the elementary grades to the middle grades to the high school grades and from childhood to adolescence.
- Establishing partnerships with the home and the community.

## **Essential Element 2: Educational Program**

An educational program that is comprehensive, challenging, purposeful, integrated, relevant, and standards-based.

Every young adolescent needs a challenging, standards-based course of study that is comprehensive, integrated, and relevant.

A standards-focused middle-level educational program:

- Emphasizes not only intellectual development but also personal, social, physical, and ethical development.
- Is challenging, rigorous, and purposeful.
- Is comprehensive and inclusive, embracing and encompassing all of the State's 28 learning standards.
- Reflects interdependence, emphasizes cross-program connections, and promotes shared responsibility.
- Is articulated vertically and horizontally, within and across the various curricular areas, learning standards, and grade levels.

- Has a set of learning skills (e.g., how to study, how to conduct research, how to read for understanding, how to take notes, etc.) that are common across all grades and subject areas and taught and reinforced in each grade and subject area.
- Emphasizes reading, writing, and mathematics (literacy and numeracy) across the subject areas with expectations for performance that are consistent across and within the disciplines and commonly understood by teachers, students, and parents.
- Has performance expectations that are common across all grades and subject areas (e.g., students must write in complete sentences).
- Is articulated with the elementary feeder schools and with the secondary receiving schools, building on the foundational knowledge and skills of the elementary grades and, in doing so, preparing students for success in high school.
- Has up-to-date written curricula (that are based on and aligned with the State's learning standards), instructional support, and learning aids for all subject areas.
- Includes diagnostic assessments (similar in design to the State's assessments) that regularly and routinely monitor the learning of each student relative to the State's standards and community expectations.
- Offers opportunities for the development of personal responsibility and self direction.
- Encourages students to pursue personal interests, engage in school and community activities (e.g., sports, clubs, etc.), explore potential futures and careers, develop useful social, interpersonal, and life skills needed to live a full and productive life, and nurture a "love of learning."
- Provides targeted and timely academic intervention services that are based upon a careful assessment of the academic, social, and emotional needs of students at risk of not meeting the State's learning standards.
- Engages and involves the family, local community, and the world outside school in the education and personal development of young adolescents.

### **Essential Element 3: Organization and Structure**

An organization and structure that support both academic excellence and personal development.

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

Standards-focused schools with middle-level grades are organized to promote academic excellence and personal development, to establish within staff and students a feeling of belonging and a sense of personal identification with the school and its purposes, and to help young adolescents make a successful transition from the elementary grades to the high school grades and from childhood to adolescence.

A standards-focused school that enrolls young adolescents should:

- Have teacher teams sharing responsibility for the education and personal development of a common group of students.
- Have common planning time for those teachers and teacher teams sharing responsibility for a common group of students.
- Have schedules with flexible time assignments within blocks of time to encourage interdisciplinary programs and the creative use of time.
- Contain at least three of the four middle grades (the four middle grades being grades 5, 6, 7, and 8).
- Have comparatively small enrollments so that every student is viewed as an individual and receives personal attention. When the school population is large, have "houses" or schools-within-schools to promote a sense of family, to reduce the feeling of anonymity and isolation among students, and to engender within staff, students, and the community a feeling of belonging and personal identification with the school and with its purposes.
- Be structured to create close, sustained relationships between students and teachers.
- Ensure that all students, staff, parents, and families feel secure, valued and respected as significant contributors to the school community.
- Provide, for those students needing additional help to meet the State's standards, opportunities for additional time, instruction, and personal support (e.g., after school, before school, summer school, reduced class size, tutoring, pupil personnel services, etc.).
- Provide a variety of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.
- Provide opportunities for students to participate in youth service, community service and/or service learning activities.
- Encourage active parent involvement through a variety of activities.
- Establish ties with the school community that strengthen connections between school/education and career opportunities.
- Promote and encourage appropriate participation of pupils with disabilities in all curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities.
- Have students with disabilities or other special needs, as well as their programs and services, integrated throughout the school building to ensure access to the same instruction as their peers.
- Provide support services such as guidance, counseling, and health-related services to all students.
- Integrate technology into the educational program so that it supports student learning in a purposeful way.
- Provide a gradual transition from the more self-contained classrooms of the elementary school to the more departmentalized structure of the high school, providing students with opportunities for increasingly independent learning experiences and responsibilities within a safe and structured environment.

## **Essential Element 4: Classroom Instruction**

Classroom instruction appropriate to the needs and characteristics of young adolescents provided by skilled and knowledgeable teachers.

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

Teachers in middle-level classrooms understand and appreciate the emotional, intellectual, physical, psychological, and social changes that are occurring within their students and recognize the behaviors manifested by these changes. They use instructional techniques and processes that capitalize on the unique developmental characteristics and individual needs of early adolescents.

Successful middle-level teachers in a standards-focused school:

- Are caring and respectful in their interactions with students and with other adults.
- Provide instruction that is standards-based, challenging, rigorous, and purposeful.
- Know and understand the needs and developmental characteristics of young adolescents.
- Have a deep understanding of their subject matter, of different approaches to student learning, and of diverse teaching techniques.
- Know and understand each of the State's 28 learning standards and - when and where appropriate - reinforce them routinely during regular classroom instruction.
- Use a range of successful, research-based teaching strategies that are developmentally and cognitively appropriate, matching instruction to the students' varied learning styles and different intelligences.
- Involve students in their learning, encouraging them to contribute to their learning experiences, to make choices, to explore, to question, to experience, to learn, to grow, to develop social, interpersonal and leadership skills in addition to academic proficiency.
- Vary activities to maintain student interest.
- Use technology and other instructional resources purposefully to support and enhance learning.
- Focus instruction on thinking, reasoning, and problem solving and, at the same time ensure that students acquire necessary content and subject matter.
- Use interdisciplinary approaches to help students integrate their studies and meet learning standards.
- Use flexible grouping based upon student needs and interests to help each student achieve the learning standards, with students changing groups often, depending on individual needs and program purposes.
- Use classroom assessments that reflect the State's learning standards and are aligned with State assessments.
- Use classroom assessments that are instructionally useful indicators of individual student growth and performance not only to monitor each student's progress in meeting the State's learning standards but also to plan instruction.
- Use student data, both personal and achievement, to make curricular and instructional decisions.
- Use cooperative learning groups and peer-tutoring opportunities to develop social and interpersonal skills in addition to academic proficiency.

- Consult with each other and with other school personnel. Teachers with regular education assignments and those assigned to programs for students with special needs work closely together.
- Maintain performance expectations that are consistent and interrelated across and within subject areas.
- Inform and involve parents of middle-level students in their children's education by helping them understand the learning standards their children must meet, the instructional program, their children's progress, and how to help their children at home with schoolwork, school decisions, and successful development through adolescence.
- Are themselves learners who are constantly engaged in professional and intellectual growth activities.
- Recognize that they must work together cooperatively and collaboratively - rather than individually and in isolation - to ensure that all their students achieve at high levels and meet all the State's learning standards.

## **Essential Element 5: Educational Leadership**

Strong educational leadership and a building administration that encourage, facilitate, and sustain involvement, participation, and partnerships.

Every young adolescent should be educated in schools that have knowledgeable, effective, and caring leaders.

Standards-focused middle-level schools and programs need purposeful leadership if they are to develop and prosper.

Those in positions of leadership must:

- Know and understand the needs and developmental characteristics of young adolescents.
- Know and understand the essential elements of a standards-focused, high performing middle-level school or middle-level program.
- Know and understand each of the 28 learning standards and how they interrelate.
- Know and understand the State's assessment system.
- Have an understanding of the subject matter in the middle grades and its interconnections, of different approaches to student learning, and of diverse teaching strategies.
- Create, promote, and sustain a school culture of mutual support and collective responsibility for the educational and personal development of each and every young adolescent.
- Articulate and maintain high standards for classroom instruction and student performance.
- Have high expectations for students and staff.

- Know a range of successful, research-based teaching techniques that are developmentally and cognitively appropriate, matching instruction to the students' varied learning styles and different intelligences.
- Involve staff and others in the operation of the school or program, empowering and encouraging them to contribute and to make decisions that benefit students.
- Provide students with opportunities to assume significant and meaningful leadership roles in the school.
- Support and encourage teachers, individually and collectively, to take risks, to explore, to question, to try new instructional approaches, to continue as learners, and to grow.
- Promote and facilitate inter-school cooperation, collaboration, and communication with feeder elementary schools and receiving high schools.
- Inform and involve parents of middle-level students in their children's education by helping them understand the needs and developmental characteristics of young adolescents, the learning standards their children must meet, the instructional program, their children' progress, and how to help their children at home with schoolwork, school decisions, and successful development through adolescence.
- Promote school/community partnerships and involve members of the community in school activities and initiatives, empowering and encouraging them to contribute and make decisions that benefit students.

## **Essential Element 6: A Network of Academic and Personal Support**

A network of academic and personal support available for all students.

Every young adolescent needs access to a system that supports both academic achievement and personal development.

Middle-level students need academic and personal support as they experience the changes associated with the transition from childhood to adolescence and from elementary school to high school.

Academic and personal support includes:

- Adults and older youths to provide positive role models and constant affirmation and recognition.
- Respect and caring to engender a feeling of self-worth, self-confidence, and personal efficacy.
- Opportunities to examine, explore, discuss, and understand the changes associated with early adolescence.
- Counseling and guidance services to assist students and their families in making life, career, and educational choices.
- A system of two-way communication between the school and the parents and families of its students.

- A process for informing parents, families, and community groups of the essential role they play in ensuring students attend school and access available services, in expanding and enhancing venues for significant learning, in promoting youth development, and in supporting positive school change.
- A network of trained professionals, special programs, and community resources available to assist those who have extraordinary needs and require additional services to cope with the changes of early adolescence and/or the academic demands of middle-level education. Schools need to collaborate and cooperate with other human service agencies in the community.
- An adult mentor in addition to a guidance counselor, either formally through a teacher/student, advisor/advisee program or informally through a school culture of caring in which teachers or other adults assume responsibility for individual students.

## **Essential Element 7: Professional Learning**

Professional learning and staff development for all staff that are ongoing, planned, purposeful, and collaboratively developed.

Every young adolescent deserves an educational setting that values continuous improvement and ongoing professional learning.

Teachers, administrators, and other school staff in a standards-focused middle-level school or program need regular, planned opportunities for professional and intellectual growth. Schools with middle-level grades need to be professional learning communities.

Teachers, administrators, and staff need to:

- Know the needs and characteristics of students in the middle grades and the instructional strategies and techniques that work best for these students.
- Understand the philosophy and mission of the standards-driven middle-level school.
- Understand and implement the Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and the Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs.
- Have high expectations for all students.
- Be familiar with each of the State's 28 learning standards and incorporate in their own classrooms and work spaces educational experiences that help all students achieve all the standards - including those that are outside their own area of content expertise.
- Know and understand their subject matter and course curriculum thoroughly.
- Know and understand the State's assessment system.
- Know and understand how to use data to make curricular and instructional decisions to improve students' academic performance and/or enhance personal development.



- Collaborate and cooperate in planning and providing professional learning opportunities.
- Routinely and systematically monitor and evaluate student learning to assess and improve instructional effectiveness.

## Conclusion

The middle grades play a critical role in the educational continuum. Schools with middle-level grades that are standards-focused attend to the twin purposes of academic preparation and individual self-development for all young adolescents. They do this by:

- Accepting collective responsibility for ensuring that all students are successful and learning at high levels.
- Creating small communities for learning and providing comprehensive guidance and support services.
- Providing an academically excellent and developmentally responsive educational experience for every student.
- Establishing and maintaining a climate for learning that is respectful, purposeful, physically and psychologically safe, and personalized to ensure close, sustained relationships between students and teachers.
- Providing a comprehensive educational program that is standards-based - reflecting the State's 28 learning standards - challenging, integrative, and exploratory.
- Using flexible organizational structures and creative use of time.
- Using a variety of research-based, instructional strategies that are cognitively and developmentally appropriate and that respect individual experiences, learning styles, and learning needs.
- Employing knowledgeable and qualified personnel who are committed to the education of young adolescents.
- Creating within the school a vibrant professional learning community.
- Fostering each student's personal development, health, wellness, and safety.
- Engaging families in the education of young adolescents.
- Connecting schools with the larger community.

A high-performing, standards-focused middle-level school or program that successfully addresses both the intellectual and personal needs of young adolescents is profoundly different from many middle-level schools today. To create schools that are true standards-focused, middle-level schools will necessitate systemic change that will not be easy to accomplish. It will require leadership, persistence, additional resources, time, and a strong will to succeed. The task is challenging and daunting. However, it is necessary, and it can be done.