

THE SCARY WORLD

How to
be sure
your kids
are ready.

By Caralee Adams

“You have to love roller coasters,” says Susan Kandyba, a language arts teacher at Casey Middle School in Boulder, Colorado. “Middle schoolers are up and down—sometimes manically happy, sometimes gloomy. A sense of humor is key.”

Middle school, which is generally thought of as sixth to eighth grades, isn't easy for anybody. It's a rough time to be a student, and, as you probably know, a tough age to teach. You're expected to ease the transition of students from elementary to middle school. But if you're an elementary teacher, you may not know what kids will be facing in middle school, and if you're a middle school teacher, you aren't always aware of what skills incoming students have already mastered (or not, as the case may be).

“Cross-level communication is very rare,” acknowledges Patrick Akos, assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH). “Teachers are very busy. On the elementary school side, the incentive isn't there. You want to see your students do well, but the kids are leaving. You are more worried about the rising fourth



graders,” he says. On the other hand, if you teach sixth grade, you might spend your entire first quarter trying to find out what the kids know—a sure source of frustration. “It is not a seamless transition,” he adds.

“We have felt for a long time that middle grades have been the forgotten connection,” says Al Summers, director of professional development with

the National Middle School Association (NMSA). “It's a challenging time and too many educators are not given the preparation they need.” Currently, fewer than half the states require specialized preparation before teaching middle schoolers.

What preparation do middle school teachers need that they're not getting? NMSA believes professional preparation programs must teach teachers about the

OF MIDDLE SCHOOL



What Middle Schoolers Need

Four keys to students' success

1. Organization

Staying on top of multiple classes and long-term assignments is a big challenge for many middle school students, experts say. To make it easier, students at Casey Middle School in Boulder, Colorado, use a single binder to keep track of their work. Free planners are provided to every student at Mill Creek Middle School in Dexter, Michigan.

2. Communication skills

In middle school, students are expected to be more independent and accountable than in elementary school, says Nate Meyer, an eighth-grade teacher at Tri-Valley Middle School in Downs, Illinois. This means being able to initiate a conversation with their teacher if they don't understand something or have a concern.

3. Academic basics

If students lack basic math and reading skills coming into middle school, it makes life difficult for them and their teachers. Middle school teachers are trained to teach the curriculum, not basic skills, says Debbie Blanton-Warren, principal at Southeast Middle School in Kernersville, North Carolina.

4. Emotional awareness

At this age especially, peer pressure, a desire to conform, and other social issues can interfere with learning. Kids who can recognize and accurately describe their own emotions and the emotions of people around them will have an easier time getting along with friends and negotiating their way through middle school, says Maurice Elias, professor of psychology at Rutgers University.

development and needs of young adolescents; address middle-level philosophy, organization, curriculum planning, and assessment; and require middle-level field experiences.

The "Middle School" Muddle

Part of the confusion is that "middle school" can mean different things. What currently exists is a patchwork quilt of

middle school approaches in different districts and a host of other configurations, including K-8 and 6-12 schools. "Middle school" is often simply an alternative name to "junior high" or "intermediate" school, essentially a physical bridge between primary and secondary schools with a pre-high school focus. In some districts, however, middle school now implies a distinct pedagogical

cover story

departure away from primary and secondary school practices. This approach is called the middle school model.

In the last few decades, the middle school model has emerged in an attempt to be developmentally responsive to early adolescence. Generally with a sixth- to eighth-grade configuration in one building, these middle schools emphasize teacher teams, where the core subject teachers can together plan integrated units and discuss how best to educate their students.

But regardless of their approach, the middle grades get less than their fair share of funding. The National Middle School Association has stepped into the political arena to push for middle-grade education improvements, but currently only 15 percent of the Title I funds, the program that drives No Child Left Behind, are given to middle and high schools.

Moody but Right on Track

There is clear research that as students enter the middle grades, motivation and academic achievement decline. It can be hard for kids to manage multiple classes, ramped-up homework, and peer pressure at the same time they are going through puberty.

"Kids are very volatile at this age, but that's a natural part of their cognitive development," says Maurice Elias, professor of psychology at Rutgers University and author of *Raising Emotionally Intelligent Teenagers*. "In middle school, this incredible feeling of self-consciousness leaves kids walking around feeling uncertain and unworthy. They have a tendency to

amplify negative feedback," he says.

This makes it important for teachers to be overtly positive and encouraging. Too often middle school teachers are trained in content, but not the developmental aspect of connecting with adolescents, he says, echoing NMSA's concern.

The price of failing to connect with students can be high. If kids don't experience a smooth transition from elementary to middle school, it can be destabilizing for many. It's a time of increased risk for smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, violence, truancy, damage to self-esteem, and referrals to mental health services.

Getting It Right

"We need to let kids know that there are high expectations but couple that with an enormous amount of support," says Jennifer Bergmann, a school counselor at Christopher Columbus Middle School in Clifton, New Jersey. At the earliest sign of trouble with a new middle schooler, tap into the resources of the school counseling staff for help, she

recommends. "But no matter how many times a student falls, tell them you will not give up on them," she says.

"The schools that get it right have a 'culture of caring,'" says Deb Schrock, executive director of the Association of Illinois Middle-Level Schools. Illinois is one of the few states with social-emotional learning standards to help kids work through growth issues.

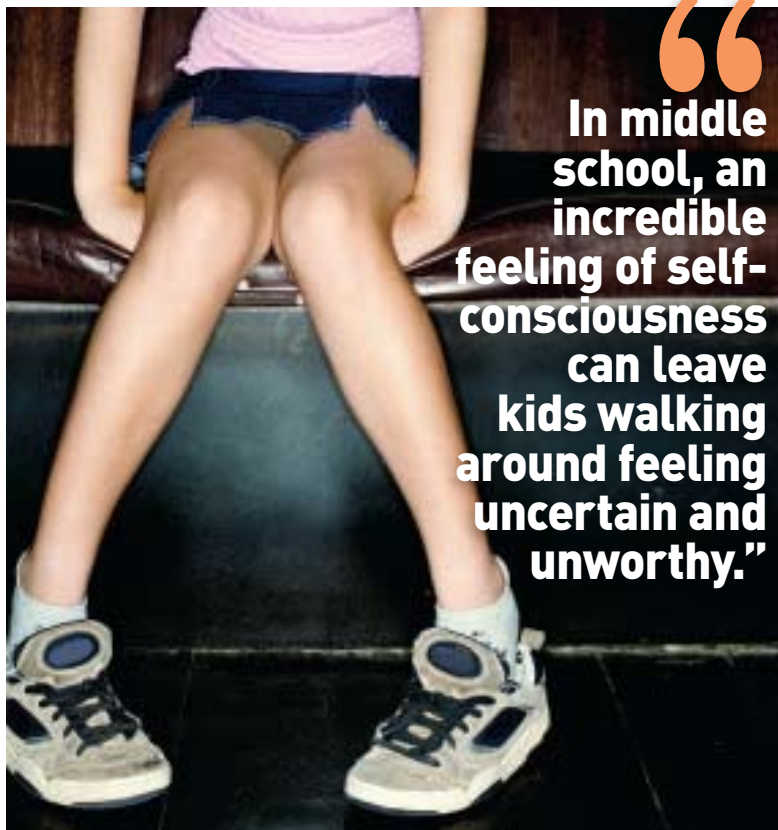
She suggests thinking in terms of a year-long transition program that spans January of the fifth-grade year through December of the first year of middle school. Orientation, tours, and school transition communication should be about building excitement, not purely information.

To ease students into their schedules and new building, many schools host incoming students for a shortened day prior to opening. The week before school starts in Daviess County, Kentucky, incoming middle school students and their parents attend a half-day program at their new school called Jumpstart. It consists of 10-minute

mini-sessions for all their classes, and because new sixth graders are often concerned about being lost, getting to class on time, using their combination lockers, and being around older students, no one else is in the building during this session.

"By the time they leave, the teachers and children know what to expect," says Yvonne Austin, a teacher and the Jumpstart coordinator at Daviess County's F. T. Burns Middle School. "It's a positive start of the transition from elementary to middle school," she says.

Finally, because at this age, especially, students look to their peers for information and advice, some of the most effective programs use stu-



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dent ambassadors or assign buddies to incoming students to help them learn the ropes. Getting everyone in the act and starting the transition process early are sure ways to reduce the pain—for students and teachers alike.

Teacher Tips to Ease Transition

○ **BE POSITIVE.** You should avoid sensationalized warnings, such as “Just wait until you get to middle school,” says UNC-CH’s Professor Akos. Instead, capitalize on the enthusiasm that kids express about middle school: the increased independence, new friends, and new setting. Talk up the electives and clubs, and help prepare them with realistic expectations.

○ **SHIFT EXPECTATIONS.** As the year progresses, fifth-grade teachers can start shifting classroom expectations—both behavioral and academic—to what kids will encounter in middle school. Make homework count, as middle school teachers do. Encourage kids to be more self-reliant as they near middle school, and help them build emotional skills and recognize the feelings of people around them.

○ **START A DIALOGUE.** If you teach upper elementary or middle grades, reach out to your colleagues on the other side of the divide. Just as students benefit from a preview of their new schools, middle school teachers can learn lots about incoming students by visiting the elementary schools where they’re coming from. “Kids are switching from a cozy, insular classroom where they are all day to the bigger world,” comments Kandyba, who, along with her Boulder middle school colleagues, visited a fifth-grade classroom to see the environment and swap ideas. (However, it’s worth noting that because of the time away and expense of hiring substitute teachers, Kandyba has done that only once in the past four years at her school. The trick is to find out what works and convince districts that it is cost-effective.)

○ **PROVIDE GROUP STRUCTURE.** At Mill Creek Middle School in Dexter, Michigan, incoming middle schoolers are divided into teams and travel

together as a group from class to class. Each day the students have just four subjects with block scheduling, and the classrooms are next to each other with teachers standing outside to greet them. Lee County Middle School in Leesburg, Georgia, uses the team approach too. Each hall has a theme with team names, which helps to create “a school within a school,” says Principal Gail



In Verona, New York, teachers who teach the same subjects in grades 5 to 8 meet annually to talk about curriculum and what works.

“**N**obody is an island anymore,” says James Kramer, principal at Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School, who came up with the concept of “congruency teams” about six years ago when New York state began benchmark testing in fourth, eighth, and eleventh grades. Kramer wanted to be proactive and help teachers understand the curriculum across the grades. “Now everyone knows exactly what is being taught,” he says. “The curriculum is flowing all the way through.”

The teachers convene as a group at least one full day each year and talk about what instructional strategies work best. For example, instead of using different graphic organizers for fifth grade, teachers agreed on the most effective one and streamlined. “Before it was independent brokers—everyone was doing his own thing. The kids become overwhelmed,” says Kramer. “Now everybody is on the same page.”

Melvin, and helps kids to bond.

○ **FORMALIZE PROCEDURES.** Research shows that kids need simple explanations of procedures as they enter middle school. Debbie Blanton-Warren, principal of Southeast Middle School in Kernersville, North Carolina, says conveying procedures and expectations helps the students be organized. “We have no rules. Rules are made to be broken,” she says. “We have procedures and standards. We tell the students: ‘This is what we expect.’”

It helps, too, when there is consistency among teachers. It’s less confusing for students when teachers can agree on common expectations and behavior rules for all classrooms, says NMSA’s Summers.

Finally, a reward never hurts. Louisa County Middle School in Mineral, Virginia, has a behavior incentive plan, “Behavior Baseball,” for all sixth graders. Kids who avoid three strikes each week get 20 minutes of free time with rotating activity options on “Fun Friday.”

○ **COMPARE NOTES AND COLLABORATE.** Daily teacher team time (45 minutes every afternoon) helps teachers better serve students, says Nate Meyer, an eighth-grade teacher at Tri-Valley Middle School in Downs, Illinois. “If I’m having trouble with a student in class, I go to my team and see if they are having trouble,” he says. “If it’s across the board, we know it’s a larger issue. If it’s just me, I know I need to do more.” This collaboration also helps teachers design projects that are interdisciplinary. Every spring students at Tri-Valley build a mini-golf course with each hole representing one decade of American history. Students incorporate historical research, writing, science, art, and teamwork into their creations. The finished course is unveiled at Science Night and is open to the public to play, with proceeds helping fund a student trip to Washington, D.C.

○ **STAY CURRENT.** To develop the best teaching strategies, you need to keep up with the latest research. Ongoing staff development is critical for middle school teachers to understand how to best connect with the adolescent brain and address the needs of the whole child. □

THEIR OWN WORDS



Middle School Kids Speak Out

What do middle schoolers wish teachers knew about them? Kathleen Cushman and Laura Rogers talked to 40 urban students from over a dozen schools to find out. Their answers may surprise, even inspire.

“Teachers say it’s okay to raise your hand. Sometimes I want to ask the question but I don’t want to seem like I’m dumb. Or I’m not sure if the teacher said it already, and I don’t want to get the teacher on the wrong side.” —*Gabe*

“[I like it] if teachers do something a little bit extra, not just ‘Okay, that’s the correct answer,’ but if they write you a note or a comment like ‘That’s really good. You’ve been studying.’” —*Alma*

“I would really, really like it if my teacher would call home for a good thing that I do. My dad never seems to realize any good thing that I do; it’s like he’s blind. So if my teacher, instead of calling home whenever I do a bad thing,

she would sometimes call home and let my dad know that I actually try hard, then I would do better.” —*Amelia*

“There’s not an ideal, perfect teacher. So teachers should maybe take a survey, like a quarter of the way through the semester. ‘How’s my class going? Should I explain things more clearly? How can I make you a better student, or how can I help you learn better?’ Just so students can tell them what to improve on and what was good.” —*Gabe*

“Teachers let that favored student do more, even if it’s just a little thing like moving around in the room, or leaving when you want to. As much as students say, ‘I don’t care,’ they know deep inside they care.” —*Heather*

“The way the teachers teach, that’s what made me want to act more mature. I can remember my [English] teacher in eighth grade. He stayed on us about doing

our essays and stuff. Nobody liked essays, but now it’s my favorite subject. Writing an essay. I could write one in about five minutes, because he taught us the formula so many times, really trying to get it across.” —*Brian*

“Sometimes we come to school upset about something, just not in the mood, and it does affect a lot of things. Teachers do not even ask to see what’s wrong; they just ignore it completely. Then they wonder, ‘Why are you guys not paying attention?’” —*Alma*

“Kids may know something, but they tend to forget when they’re nervous. Sometimes when I take a test, maybe I forget at that moment, but after the test, it might just come right off my hand. It doesn’t make sense. They base everything you know on how you do on testing. What if you don’t do so good, but you’re really, really smart?” —*Kenson*

“Many times, the kids who behave good in school, teachers don’t know them that much. You have to do something bad so the teachers will know your name, so the teachers will think you’re somebody.” —*Amelia*

“I had a math teacher and she wouldn’t sugarcoat it for people. She would actually sit you down to look at all your grades, and show you what would happen. She would bring you down to reality, give you the straightforward of what would be the end result. But the way she would speak about it, you wouldn’t be hurt or offended; you’d have a good mind set.” —*Geoffrey*

Excerpted with permission from *Fires in the Middle School Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from Middle Schoolers* by Kathleen Cushman and Laura Rogers (The New Press, 2008).

