

Vol 68, NO 7

# Movin' Up to the Middle

*Some students struggle as they transition to middle school; others take to it naturally. But both groups want to know that someone is looking out for them.*

## Rick Wormeli

**A**t the beginning of each middle school year, teachers stand near their classroom doors and greet arriving students. They smile, shake a few hands, and direct the wide-eyed students to their seats, remarking to themselves, *They're getting shorter every year.*

By June, after a year of body growth, intense hormones, intellectual sparring, and distancing themselves from anything "so last year," these young adolescents are dramatically different beings. But even as educators pause to acknowledge the newly competent students standing before them who can hold their own in political debates and band competitions, a crop of fresh young faces once again demands its turn at bat.

And this is where it gets interesting.

### Those Important Middle Years

The way we handle life in later years can often be traced back to specific experiences in middle school; it's that transformative. Robert Balfanz, a principal research scientist at Johns Hopkins University, presents compelling evidence that the middle school experience has direct correlation with gradu-

ation rates, particularly in high-poverty environments.<sup>1</sup> And everyone from classroom teachers to the National Governors Association recognizes the powerful influence that high school graduation has on individuals' capacities to build meaningful lives and create workforce readiness.

It's interesting, too, how some adults revert to adolescent responses when stressed by conflict, failure, and risk taking. If we learn to handle issues constructively during these formative years, ages 10–15, we tend to respond positively to challenges later on.

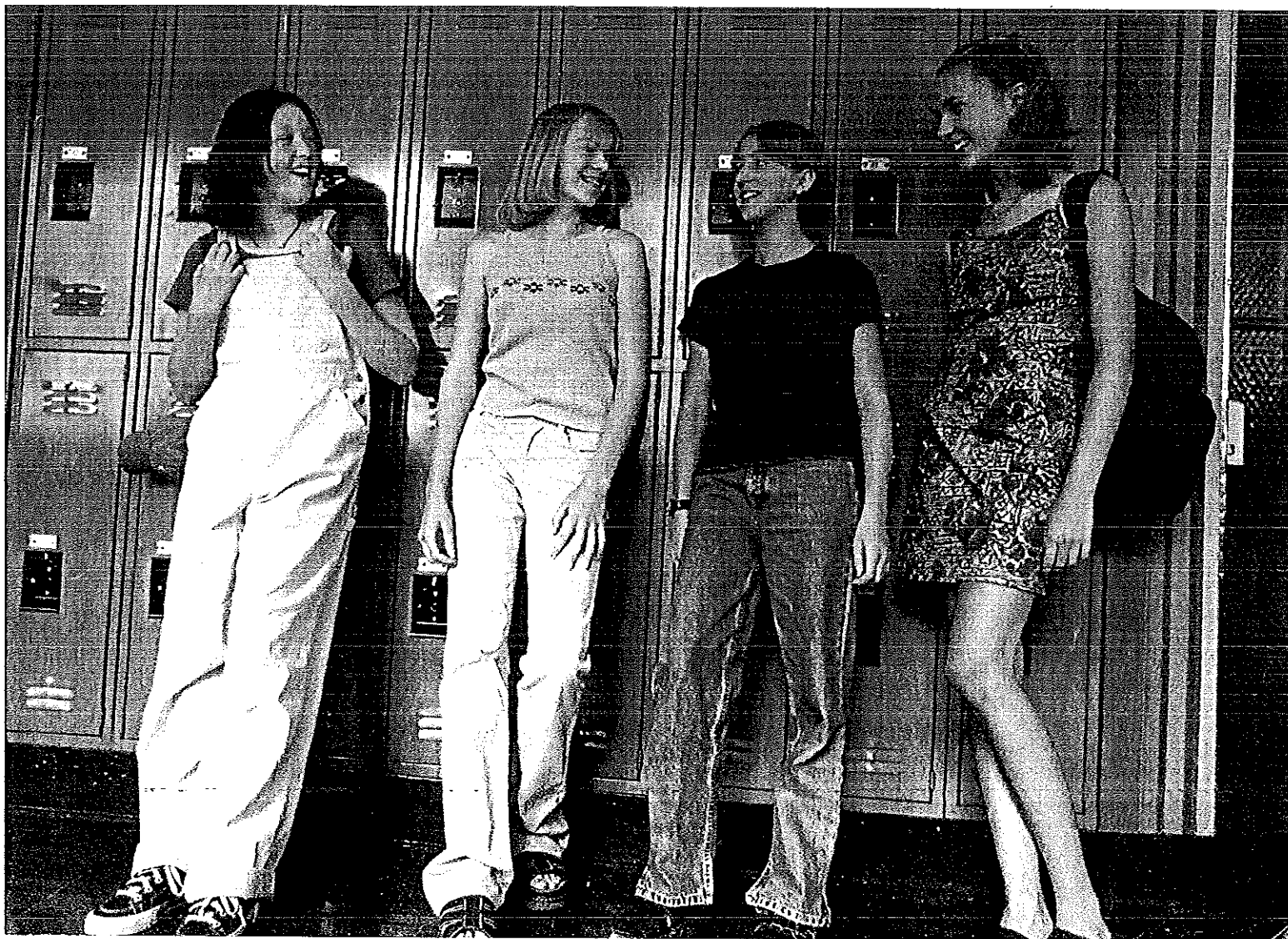
So, if high school success, navigating the larger world, and discovering the direction we want our lives to take all have roots in young adolescence, why would anyone leave the transition into this impressionable phase to chance?

### Give Me Five

Five mind-sets for educators are key to designing successful transition programs for incoming middle school students.

### Understanding Students' Concern about Belonging

Belonging is one of the primary concerns for new middle-level students; addressing it is crucial for a successful transition. Teachers and administrators should assure students that



their classes are a good match for their readiness, that their teachers understand them, and that they have roles to play in their own success.

Design classrooms and hallways with student interests in mind, with student work prominently displayed. Find ways to help students see themselves “doing

middle school.” For example, the year before they enter, invite students to shadow a middle school student for half a day. If that’s difficult to arrange, show rising middle schoolers “A Day in the Life of a Middle School Student,” a video that you’ve guided current middle school students to create for

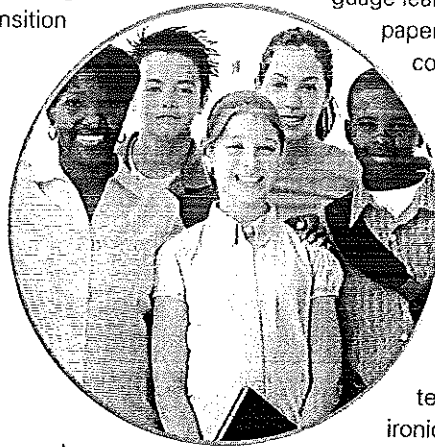
the incoming class. Let rising middle schoolers discuss middle school life with current middle school students. To make new students comfortable, conduct these conversations in students’ elementary classrooms, not at the middle school.

In the first few weeks of school,

## 20 Double-Duty Strategies

Teachers can use the following strategies, which help English language learners transition to an English-speaking environment, to aid all new students in their transition into middle school.

1. Speak clearly.
2. Repeat important words and information several times.
3. Extend time periods for responding to prompts as necessary.
4. Avoid using idioms, colloquialisms, and shorthand references unless you’re going to take the time to explain them.
5. Point to what you’re referring to.
6. Label things in the classroom and hallways, such as “Computer Lab 2,” “Student flash drives,” “Mrs. Silver’s stapler—Please return to her.”
7. Provide specific models and hands-on experiences.
8. Use visuals during instruction, such as pictures, illustrations, graphs, pictographs, and real objects.
9. Demonstrate what you mean, rather than just describe it. For example, use a scientific balance when explaining equal values right and left of the equation sign in algebra. When teaching parallel sentence structure in English, write the model sentences parallel to each other on the display board.
10. Make students feel that they belong and have a role to play in classroom learning. Find something in a student’s background that connects to the topic you’re studying and incorporate it into the lesson. Have students take on leadership positions, and ask them to demonstrate their talents.
11. Use think alouds to model sequences of tasks.
12. Use cooperative learning groups, with more seasoned students partnering with less seasoned ones.
13. Find ways to enable new students who may be tentative about their abilities to demonstrate their intellectual skills and maintain dignity.



14. Give students quick and accurate feedback. An English language learner might say in halting English, “This correct paper?” Reply in affirmation, “Yes, that *is* the correct paper. Thank you.” A middle schooler might ask, “Am I doing OK?” Respond, “Yes, you’re doing well, and here’s how I know. . . .”

15. Spend time building background knowledge. If you’re about to teach students about magnetic fields, for example, let them play with magnets, pouring iron shavings near the poles to watch their pattern of dispersal or gathering. Before teaching students about irony, orchestrate an ironic happening in the classroom and ask for comments.

16. Stay focused on how students are moving toward their own learning goals—not on how they’re doing in relation to other students. We do students a disservice when we compare them with their peers or try to motivate them by parading others’ success in front of them. English language learners and middle-level students desperately want to be successful.

17. Recognize the difference between conversational and academic language and understand that students need help with both. Go out of your way to explain terms like *similar*, *math exercise*, *vocabulary*, *compare*, *instead of*, *not only*, and so on.

18. Take the time to learn about students’ interests and cultures. This engenders good will and enables you to make connections in the curriculum.

19. Teach new content through a medium or topics that students already know. In the case of English language learners, this means teaching content in or making connections to their native language whenever possible. In the case of all middle schoolers, it means building on familiar knowledge.

20. Remember that students are *individuals* worth our time and energy. Labels such as *English language learner*, *gifted and talented*, *hearing impaired*, *gamer*, *Goth*, and *gang member* blind us to the individual underneath.

give new middle schoolers meaningful tasks that foster a sense of belonging, such as doing the morning announcements, maintaining and operating classroom technology, and assisting in lesson delivery. This creates purposeful inclusion. Students at this age balk at superficiality and find it distancing, the opposite of belonging.

Joining clubs and organizations goes a long way to creating belonging as well. Team-building activities and participation in outdoor experiences, such as a ropes initiative course, are helpful here. A note of caution, however. Students are hungry for academics in their first few weeks of school. Contrary to stereotyped assertions about students at this age, day after day of get-to-know-you and team-building activities wears thin if students don't get to study specific course content as well. Set a can-do tone and high expectations early on by teaching intense course content during this time. Students will transition more readily if they feel that they're doing real middle school work, not just summer camp.

### *Empathizing with Students*

Given the fact that a year in a middle school student's life is a much larger percentage of his or her overall life than it is for an adult; and given all the growth taking place—the mistakes, conflicts, insights, joy, tension, wisdom, and risk taking; and given that students lack the perspective that comes from life experience, it's no wonder that students experience their first year of middle school as intense and tumultuous. Every day is the end, or beginning, of all life as they know it.

Middle schools with the best transition programs are the ones in which faculty members are in touch with their inner, young adolescent; these educators can empathize with students because they remember what it was like when they were that age. This empathy helps teachers understand students' major worries: homework, demanding

teachers, bullying, and getting lost. Schools should build practical advice for handling each one of these concerns into their transition programs.

To promote empathy and respond constructively to new students, it's helpful to think of your middle schoolers as having arrived in a new country in which they don't speak the language and don't know the customs. In fact, many strategies that are effective with transitioning new English language

of students' maturing brains. The pre-frontal cortex is not fully developed in most 10- to 15-year-olds. As a result, the navigating tools for academics and life are not completely "online" yet. These include decision making, impulse control, moral and abstract reasoning, planning, understanding consequences of words and actions, and other executive functions. There is an increased tendency toward addictive behaviors<sup>2</sup> and pleasure seeking.

Students experience their first year of middle school as intense and tumultuous. Every day is the end, or beginning, of all life as they know it.

learners work equally well for helping incoming middle school students (see "20 Double-Duty Strategies").

### *Understanding the Characteristics of the Age Group*

Can everyone on your faculty identify what makes a middle school developmentally appropriate for young adolescents? Many educators have little to no training in the specific needs of these learners. This lack of knowledge can limit the success of transition efforts and student learning.

Consider how teachers are meeting the physical and mental needs of this age group in the months before and after the first day of school. In the area of physical characteristics, girls mature faster than boys. In both genders, bones grow faster than muscles, so coordination is a big issue. With all the growth comes almost ceaseless appetite. The explosion of hormones coursing through the body causes increased development in sexual features as well as worry over body changes. There is an increased need for good hydration and nutrition.

Or consider various characteristics

Middle schoolers are fiercely curious and independent, yet almost paradoxically, they crave social connection. They make insightful, candid observations about their learning, themselves, and the adults who guide them. They realize for the first time how wrong or misinformed adults can be, and they're not sure what to make of it. They move from concrete to abstract thinking, becoming skeptical about some things—"I want the school board to prove to me how knowing algebra will make me a better adult"—yet swallowing without complaint the ridiculous—"If I don't forward that chain letter to 13 of my friends, I'm going to fail the civics test on Friday."

Despite their natural egotism, young adolescents are extremely compassionate toward those who are less fortunate. Middle schoolers also make many connections among topics, recognizing and using patterns, relationships, metaphors, and nuance; and they enjoy asking questions to which there are no answers. They sort and apply complex data, solve problems, and argue from more than one position; and they are fascinated by real-world applica-

tions, morality, and justice.

Where in our transition programs do we respond to these needs and strengths?

### *Focusing on the Positive*

The world excites these students, and they are eager to explore it, so it's jarring for them to spend the first week of school listening to an endless litany of edicts. With each information session on rules and limitations, wise teachers offer something positive that middle school students can do, even something as simple as being able to check out 10 books at a time from the library instead of the limit of two they had in elementary school.

Because middle schoolers seem so young, some teachers make the mistake of thinking they are less competent than they really are. They may not have experience in everything, but they're quick learners. Show them how to set up accounts on the school server, for example, and they'll post their own work, weave in content applications from multiple classes, create stylized presentations, and participate in problem-based wiki groups within the first week. Explain that there's a shortage of lab equipment, and they'll figure out the best way to maximize everyone's time using it.

Opening doors like this aids students' transition, so open them frequently and clearly. When scheduling a guest speaker, ask students to make the first contact with the speaker. Invite students to participate in planning an evening education event for parents, landscaping a portion of the school's property, or redesigning the school's website. Occasionally, ask students what kind of practice with today's topic would most benefit their learning; assign one of their suggestions as homework that evening.

It's also useful to teach students self-regulation, although they display this

Why would anyone leave the transition into this impressionable phase to chance?



quality unevenly at this age. Marching as a class to the cafeteria for lunch and back, with the teacher monitoring their every move, is insulting. Teach students instead how to monitor themselves: What do they need to do to maintain a civil, learning atmosphere for others while they move through the hallway? Although it's fine to correct students' behavior, the goal is to build autonomy, not dependence.

For example, if chaos erupts when a visitor enters the classroom, suspend the lesson for a moment and discuss solutions to the problem. Have the class practice those constructive responses, including asking a volunteer to cause a fake interruption while the class maintains focus on the lesson. If students don't have the necessary supplies for the day's lesson, help them determine how they can continue their work until they get the necessary supplies instead of simply letting them off with, "Take the zero." For adults and middle schoolers alike, self-efficacy aids transition.

### *Building Hope*

The only reason students raise their hands to answer a question, turn in assignments, or participate in the world is because there's hope for a positive outcome. Without hope, a child will throw down the ball and go home—and we can't teach a child who is not physically or emotionally present. Let's put hope into every day. This is not

a syrupy greeting card sentiment—it's visceral. *Maybe the teacher won't know what a jerk I was on the bus this morning, and I can start the day again in first period*, Kellan hopes. *Why did I just say that to Melissa?* Adam worries. *Can I fix this? Will she text me about it?* And moments later, Lakiesha chants in her internal monologue, *Please tell me I left my science notebook in my locker and not at home; please, please, please!* Middle school hallways are filled with such longings: *Maybe English class won't be so bad today*, or,

*Maybe I'll get taller; my dad did when he was my age.* To young adolescents, hope is oxygen.

Interestingly, parents and teachers often offer warnings instead of hope as their way of preparing students for middle school. Students do better with a clear picture of what to expect, advice on how to handle potential issues, and assurance they will be OK. This hope has a real effect on school performance.


When students are late for class, for example, they should expect a teacher response that preserves their dignity rather than demeans them in front of others. If students can't get their computer program to function so they can finish an assigned task within the class period, the teacher should provide additional resources and time for them to accomplish the task. If students break the trust by missing an assignment due date or cheating on a quiz, teachers need to identify clear avenues the students can take to rebuild that trust,

## Tips for Great Transitions

including a finite window for being on probation for the infraction.

Moreover, if students struggle to control impulsive behaviors, such as making inappropriate noises, sending text messages during a lesson, or making snide remarks, these behaviors should not affect their grade for content knowledge. Being rude is not mentioned in the curricular objective “Understands oxidation.” Academic grades should only report what’s in the curriculum. When teachers can separate impulsive, immature behavior from academics, there’s hope for students.

### Preparation First

Louis Pasteur reminds us that “chance favors the prepared mind.” We can prepare our students’ minds for every success by being both proactive—for example, by focusing on experiential learning—and interactive, for example, by offering team-building experiences. We create a real future on the basis of what we do *with* today’s young adolescents, not what we do *to* them. Working together, we build personalized tools for safe passage. 

<sup>1</sup>Balfanz, R. (2009). *Putting middle grades students on the graduation path: A policy and practice brief*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association. Retrieved from [www.nmsa.org/portals/0/pdf/research/Research\\_from\\_the\\_Field/Policy\\_Brief\\_Balfanz.pdf](http://www.nmsa.org/portals/0/pdf/research/Research_from_the_Field/Policy_Brief_Balfanz.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Wolfe, P. (2010). *Brain matters: Translating research into classroom practice* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

---

**Rick Wormeli** is a national education consultant and veteran educator whose classroom practice is showcased in the DVD *At Work in the Differentiated Classroom* (ASCD, 2001). He is the author of *Summarization in Any Subject: 50 Techniques to Improve Student Learning* (ASCD, 2004). His most recent book is *Metaphor and Analogies: Power Tools for Teaching Any Subject* (Stenhouse, 2009); [rwormeli@cox.net](mailto:rwormeli@cox.net).

- Invite incoming students to begin school a half or full day earlier than returning students. On these days, students can get their schedules and lockers, move from class to class, meet their teachers, experience a short lesson in each subject, get a list of supplies from each teacher, get their school server accounts, purchase items with school logos, and practice opening and closing their lockers—without having to worry about getting hassled by an older student or arriving late for class. Incoming students will start school knowing at least some of the ropes.
- If your middle school asks students to use lockers, take a locker door with a combination lock to feeder elementary schools in the last few months of school. Let students practice opening and closing the lock as much as they want for at least a week. This activity ranks as one of the most helpful experiences in student surveys.
- Ask elementary teachers to forward to middle school staff, if possible, observations and comments regarding every student they teach. Make it manageable—a single page or less. Comments can include students’ strengths, motivators, family factors that affect learning, potential issues, and anything else that might be helpful.
- Send a letter of congratulations to all rising middle schoolers on their last day of elementary school. J. F. Drake Middle School in Auburn, Alabama, does this every year. The letters are addressed directly to each child and include students’ team assignments and the dates of their Drake Summer Camp session, a transition program for both students and parents held during the summer.
- Have your leadership team visit with students in their elementary schools the year before the students enter middle school. Retired principal Patti Kinney of Talent Middle School in Talent, Oregon, notes that 5th graders pose concerns freely during these sessions, such as, “My sister says that when she was in middle school there was [insert distorted rumor here].” These sessions can clear up inaccuracies and help students see administrators as accessible and supportive. A similar program in the evening for parents is just as important. Rising middle schoolers at Talent Middle School are also invited to major middle school events.
- Invite elementary and middle school teachers to switch jobs for a day. Each gets a sense of how the other school works in terms of daily operations, content, and both student and teacher expectations. This information not only will be of value to teachers as they work with their own students, but it will also help them provide clearer advice about transitioning to parents.
- Repeatedly connect with parents. Send the middle school newsletter home to parents of rising middle schoolers. Invite new parents to serve on school committees, and provide clear lists of volunteer opportunities. Meet with new parents the year before their children enter middle school and periodically throughout the first year.
- Have all staff members wear “Ask Me” badges for the first two weeks of school. The badges nudge students to ask questions from safe and accurate sources of information.
- Include healthy doses of humor. Humor lowers stress and creates camaraderie. Students need license to laugh at themselves and life.