

# The 16 Characteristics of Successful Middle Schools

## Essential Attributes

An education for young adolescents must be

### Developmentally responsive

Using the distinctive nature of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school organization, policies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are made.

### Challenging

Ensuring that every student learns and every member of the learning community is held to high expectations.

### Empowering

Providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take responsibility for their lives, to address life's challenges, to function successfully at all levels of society, and to be creators of knowledge.

### Equitable

Advocating for and ensuring every student's right to learn and providing appropriately challenging and relevant learning opportunities for every student.

## Characteristics of Successful Schools

*This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010), organizes the 16 research-based characteristics of effective middle grades education into three areas: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Leadership and Organization; and Culture and Community.

### Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

**Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.**

*(Value Young Adolescents)*

Effective middle grades educators make a conscious choice to work with young adolescents and advocate for them. They understand the developmental uniqueness of this age group, the appropriate curriculum, effective learning and assessment strategies, and their importance as models.

**Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.**

*(Active Learning)*

Instructional practices place students at the center of the learning process. As they develop the ability to [hypothesize](#), to organize information into useful and meaningful constructs, and to grasp long-term cause and effect relationships, students are ready and able to play a major role in their own learning and education.

**Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.**

*(Challenging Curriculum)*

Curriculum embraces every planned aspect of a school's educational program. An effective middle level curriculum is distinguished by learning activities that appeal to young adolescents, is exploratory and challenging, and incorporates student-generated questions and concerns.

**Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.**

*(Multiple Learning Approaches)*

Teaching and learning approaches should accommodate the diverse skills, abilities, and prior knowledge of young adolescents, cultivate multiple intelligences, draw upon students' individual learning styles, and utilize digital tools. When learning experiences capitalize on students' cultural, experiential, and personal backgrounds, new concepts are built on knowledge students already possess.

**Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.**

*(Varied Assessments)*

Continuous, authentic, and appropriate assessment measures, including both formative and summative ones, provide evidence about every student's learning progress. Such information helps students, teachers, and family members select immediate learning goals and plan further education.

**Leadership and Organization**

**A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.**

*(Shared Vision)*

When a shared vision and mission statement become operational, middle level educators pursue appropriate practices in developing a challenging academic program; they develop criteria to guide decisions and a process to make needed changes.

**Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices.**

*(Committed Leaders)*

Courageous, collaborative middle level leaders understand young adolescents, the society in which they live, and the theory of middle level education. Such leaders understand the nuances of teaming, student advocacy, exploration, and assessment as components of a larger middle level program.

**Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.**

*(Courageous & Collaborative Leaders)*

Leaders understand that successful schools committed to the long-term implementation of the middle school concept must be collaborative enterprises. The principal, working collaboratively with a leadership team, focuses on building a learning community that involves all teachers and places top priority on the education and healthy development of every student, teacher, and staff member.

**Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.**

*(Professional Development)*

Professional development is a continuing activity in middle level schools where teachers take advantage of every opportunity to work with colleagues to improve the learning experiences for their students.

**Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.**

*(Organizational Structures)*

The ways schools organize teachers and group and schedule students have a significant impact on the learning environment. Interdisciplinary teams common planning time, block scheduling, and elimination of [tracking](#) are related conditions that contribute to improved achievement.

**Culture and Community**

**The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.**

*(School Environment)*

A successful school for young adolescents is an inviting, supportive, and safe place, a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students' physical and emotional well-being.

**Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.**

*(Adult Advocate)*

Academic success and personal growth increase markedly when young adolescents' affective needs are met. Each student must have one adult to support that student's academic and personal development.

**Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.**

*(Guidance Services)*

Both teachers and specialized professionals are readily available to offer the assistance many students need in negotiating their lives in and out of school.

**Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.**

*(Health & Wellness)*

Abundant opportunities are available for students to develop and maintain healthy minds and bodies and to understand their personal growth through health-related programs, policies, and curricula.

**The school actively involves families in the education of their children.**

*(Family Involvement)*

Schools and families must work together to provide the best possible learning for every young adolescent. Schools take the initiative in involving and educating families.

**The school includes community and business partners.**

*(Community & Business)*

Genuine community involvement is a fundamental component of successful schools for young adolescents. Such schools seek appropriate partnerships with businesses, social service agencies, and other organizations whose purposes are consistent with the school's mission.