

Motivating Students in the Middle Years



Eighth grader Matthew Foster listens to a classmate describe project ideas during language arts class at Rogers-Herr Middle School in Durham, N.C. Rogers-Herr has been designated a “school to watch” by a national organization.

—Sara D. Davis for Education Week

A decade after a national group formed to put more rigor into middle schools, educators are still searching for the right blend of academic and developmental strategies.

By [Kathleen Kennedy Manzo](#)

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Durham, N.C.

It's not easy to hide in Amber Cline's math class.

Even the most skilled evaders among the 7th graders at Rogers-Herr Middle School here can't dodge the veteran teacher's questioning and prodding during a lesson on scale factors and ratios.

The earnest teacher has learned just how hard to push to keep her students focused on the illustrated math problems they are working on, and when to ease up if one gets frustrated or seems close to turning her off. She's honed that instinct throughout the school year as she's gotten to know each of her students' academic strengths and weaknesses, as well as their personalities, moods, and quirks.

"For the kids who aren't self-motivated and don't have support at home, we need to stand over them and say get this done," Ms. Cline said. "We know what each kid needs as far as applying pressure or giving support. ... They know we will not allow them to fail."

Ms. Cline and her colleagues in this school have worked at melding rigorous subject matter with the demands of test-driven accountability, while also attending to the developmental, family, and social issues their 625 predominantly minority and lower-income students face.

More than a decade after a prominent group of middle-grades reformers set out to infuse higher academic standards into what critics deemed the touchy-feely world of middle schools, many teachers are still grappling with ways to motivate students to excel intellectually while helping them adapt to the dramatic physical and emotional changes that come with puberty.

That mix of rigor, relevance, and responsiveness, experts say, is crucial for guiding students, particularly those most at risk of dropping out, on the path to high school graduation and later success. Too many schools serving 6th through 9th graders, however, have yet to find the right prescription for keeping those youngsters engaged at a time when their growing curiosity, independence, and need for the acceptance of their peers may lead them to act out or zone out in school.

"Our belief is they'll grow out of it. But the evidence shows that in high-poverty environments, they don't grow out of it" without intervention, said Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at the Center for the Social Organization of Schools, based at

Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. "As soon as kids are off track, we need to aggressively approach these issues."



Language arts teacher Eric J. Ziegler discusses with his 8th grade students their group project. Teachers at Rogers-Herr employ various strategies to keep their middle schoolers engaged.

—Sara D. Davis for Education Week

In his studies on dropouts in large urban districts, Mr. Balfanz has found that tracking several classroom indicators for individual students and addressing problems in those areas early can prevent later troubles. Attendance rates, behavior, and grades, he concludes, are far more accurate predictors of who will graduate or drop out than test scores, race, or socioeconomic status.

About 40 percent of eventual dropouts could be identified in the 6th grade, he estimates. "The only way to intervene is if we know who the kids are," he said, and are familiar with their records in school.

Mr. Balfanz and his colleagues, like several researchers before them, contend that many students begin to go astray well before they reach high school. Middle schools, he believes, should be the first line of defense in tracking those warning signs and intervening.

"Some kids do OK in middle school, and it's the transition to high school that will get them in trouble," he said. Programs designed to support 9th graders with the transition, however, may not address the difficulties of those students who Mr. Balfanz says are already on their way to becoming dropout statistics.

"Now we can show that for a significant segment of kids, 9th grade doesn't throw them off track," he added, "it finishes them."

By many indications, middle schools are not heeding that message. Researchers and policymakers have pointed to the poor performance of 8th graders on national assessments as evidence that they are not prepared to meet high academic standards. On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, only about three in 10 could demonstrate proficiency in reading and mathematics. Advocates of high school reform often point to the failure of middle schools to prepare students to tackle a challenging secondary-level curriculum.

“Why are schools not systematically monitoring early signs of academic withdrawal?” said Sandra L. Christenson, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in Minneapolis. “If you are systematically monitoring alterable variables, then you can target students for intervention to change their future.”

Ms. Christenson helped develop the **Check & Connect program** more than a decade ago. The intervention program assigns a mentor to students considered at risk academically to check attendance, grades, and other concerns and to work with students and their families to head off school failure. Despite evidence of the success of her program and others like it, Ms. Christenson said, it has not spread to middle schools because of the time and expense. Check & Connect costs about \$1,300 per student.

Although still widely considered the weak link between elementary and secondary education, middle schools have not garnered as much attention as the earlier and later grades, which have begun to benefit from federal initiatives and privately financed school improvement efforts.

Last fall, legislation was introduced in Congress to support a middle-grades clearinghouse, research projects, and grants to districts using instructional models that have been found effective. Those bills were referred to the Senate education committee and a House subcommittee, and could be attached to proposals for reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act.

The movement to create schools more responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents began more than 30 years ago. Then in 1996, American middle and high school students lagged on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS—results that put a harsh spotlight on the middle grades. The next

year, a group of advocates formed the **National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform** to help improve curricula, instruction, and research in the field.



Seventh graders Alexis Seeney, right, and Alexa Bumpass laugh at their video mix while working on their science video.

—Sara D. Davis for Education Week

Now, the accountability measures required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, observers say, have been raising the stakes for middle school educators and again putting the focus on academic rigor.

Middle school advocates say that push requires more than an emphasis on test scores.

“While we prepare students for testing, it’s also important to prepare them for other aspects of living and knowing,” said Drew Sawyer, the principal of Rogers-Herr Middle School.

Here in North Carolina, the 33,000-student Durham school district is working with all its middle schools to do both. Officials here have instituted a number of strategies to ensure consistent monitoring and support of students, particularly those in the middle grades.

As part of its high school completion plan, the district has begun to track students’ attendance, discipline records, and academic performance, and it sends that information to schools each month. School counselors and truancy officers have ramped up home visits for students who have missed a significant number of days and haven’t responded to phone calls and letters. Local judges volunteer time once a

week to hold truancy court for students with patterns of poor attendance, their parents, social workers, and school officials to outline state mandates and the potential consequences of flouting them.

“Truancy is often a symptom of other, underlying family and personal issues, and a lot of times that’s brought out in truancy court,” said Debra Pitman, the district’s assistant superintendent for student-support services. “In truancy court, the problem-solvers are right there in a formal setting, and with a layer of compassion, the message is that this is very serious.”

School officials have instituted more effective discipline approaches that have reduced suspension rates, and built formal partnerships with other agencies in Durham to help families get the health, legal, and financial services they need. They have also retrained school counselors to seek out students who need help, rather than waiting for them to knock on their doors. The counselors give extra attention to students who have a history of academic difficulties or attendance problems.

Each middle school offers after-school academic and recreation programs, as well as daily classes to help students catch up in their schoolwork or move ahead with a more challenging curriculum.

The district’s dropout rate for seniors has fallen over the past several years—to 4.9 percent for the 2006-07 school year—and is now below the state average.

With its diverse enrollment—69 percent black, 16 percent white, 10 percent Hispanic, and nearly 40 percent low-income—Rogers-Herr Middle School has seen results from the district’s efforts. Its attendance rate hovers above 96 percent, and it received a “high growth” designation from the state last year for its improved test scores. Last year, it also was recognized as one of North Carolina’s “schools to watch” by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform in Champaign, Ill. The designation goes to schools that infuse academic excellence, developmental appropriateness, and democratic education principles.

Each day, students here are welcomed with hugs and handshakes from teachers and administrators—as well as reminders on the dress code and expectations for conduct.

First period is “core plus,” designed for catching up on classwork or doing extra-credit assignments.



Students at Rogers-Herr change classes. Test scores have gone up at this middle school, where children are welcomed each day with hugs and handshakes.

—Sara D. Davis for Education Week

One recent morning, Karine Thate, a 7th grade science teacher, checks a grade book that lists incomplete assignments, projects, and homework for each student. Ms. Thate moves from student to student, reviewing their homework binders, helping them organize their work, and clarifying instructions.

“Aren’t you supposed to show your work?” she asks one boy as she checks his math homework. “This is your chance to change some of your zero grades by giving me a completed assignment,” she tells her students just as the chatter grows louder. “You have 15 more minutes,” she reminds them. “Use it well.”

Several students are doing just that, as they prepare a multimedia presentation for an honors English/language arts class.

Later, during her science class, the teacher helps students produce video presentations that illustrate what they have been learning about the genetic characteristics of fruit flies. The stars of those movies—hundreds of red- and brown-eyed flies—flutter in the glass vials that line the windowsill of the science lab. Illustrations of the flies’ life cycles, and the Punnett squares that show the probabilities of the genetic characteristics of their offspring, line the room.

“Raising the fruit flies and making the movie have really helped to bring [the lesson] to life,” says Adam Brown, who sits in a computer lab with classmate Lionel Nelson recording the narration for their movie.

"I've learned a lot about how traits are passed down from generation to generation," Lionel says.

Even this kind of interactive, multimedia project doesn't hold the attention of all students. Several pairs get distracted by the novel features of the software, while others sit idle, seemingly at a loss for what to record after having failed to prepare their scripts. Ms. Thate offers students a chance to catch up after school, but just a handful indicate they will use the extra lab time.

Blog: Motivation Matters

Education Week's Kevin Bushweller and Katie Ash tackle the question: What works, and what doesn't work, to motivate students to do better in school?

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In other classes, similar signs of student indifference are on display. One boy spends much of the school day disrupting classes or distracting others. He loudly sharpens his pencil while the teacher lays out the day's lesson. He tugs at a girl's long hair, and shouts out inappropriate answers. One diligent student in the class complains that the teacher has to spend much of her time attending to the "troublemakers," making the class tedious or boring at times.

The boy's behavior and teachers' concerns about other students are raised later in a daily meeting Ms. Thate has with Ms. Cline and other members of their grade-level team.

"We have some kids who are working real hard to fail," Ms. Cline says. "We just keep trying to find what they're good at and use that to get them more involved. We tell them all the time that we care about them."

That philosophy carries throughout the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade corridors and other corners of the building, too, as is evident in the ease with which students and adults here interact.

Outside the lunchroom, for example, a group of 6th graders chats with Vince Bynum, a police officer assigned to the school, about their classes. Later, the officer shares a laugh with two students who volunteered to pick up trash in front of the school.

The principal's office is a stop-off for students throughout the day, but not because they're in trouble. Several sit at the table in Mr. Sawyer's office to discuss a conflict they have with their classmates. A student who has missed several weeks of school for medical reasons asks the principal to review his new class schedule. Another boy explains an argument he's had with a teacher, trying to convince Mr. Sawyer that there was no good reason for her to reject one of the boy's assignments.

"Now I know you didn't speak to [the teacher] in the same tone you're using now," the principal says, reminding the student to be respectful. He sends him off with some tips for continuing the discussion with the teacher.

Despite the progress, Mr. Sawyer still sees his share of discipline and academic problems.

But he and his colleagues are working at devising the strategies and building the relationships that can help head off those problems for most students.

"We are every other middle school, with the same challenges and celebrations," Mr. Sawyer said. "Our problems are just not as visible because we try to get out ahead of them."