

Social-Emotional To-Dos for Middle Schools

To transition successfully from middle school to high school, students require more than just academic knowledge. How can you be sure your students are prepared for success? One approach is to strengthen key social-emotional competencies and 21st century skills, such as perseverance, empathy, and goal setting.

Once the purview of youth development organizations, schools are increasingly called upon to teach these skills. This article offers tips for helping students gain these skills and competencies. It draws from “Middle School Pathways to Success: A Practitioner’s Guide,” a report based on programming at three youth development organizations in New York City. Use the questions and answers below to identify the opportunities you already have in place at your school and build on them.

For All Students

Middle school students benefit from strong adult relationships and safe spaces that allow them to be vulnerable and practice taking risks. Reflect and assess how your curriculum lines up.

1. How do you cultivate strong adult relationships? When students move from middle school to high school, they can feel lost. Strong relationships between students and adults enable students to discuss challenges and feelings of self-doubt with caring adults, and to find resources to manage their transition.

2. What are the safe spaces for students at your school?

Early adolescents need safe environments to learn how to take risks, act autonomously, and explore. Structured activities such as mock interviews and small-group collaboration offer opportunities to experiment with newfound competencies while creating little risk to social and emotional well-being.

3. How do you address the unique needs of each student? Individual development is affected by factors like

socioeconomic status, grade-by-grade variations, and individual differences. For example, students from low-income families or underserved communities may have had fewer opportunities for enrichment or career development than their more affluent peers, so they may feel less prepared. But they may exhibit strengths in persistence or problem-solving. Educators can help students recognize these assets and use them to achieve their goals.

For Younger Students

At the beginning of middle school, students are just starting to explore newfound independence and learning to navigate social groups. They need support to master these skills. Ask yourself these questions to determine how your school is supporting students.

1. Are you providing the right amount of structure within each activity? In the younger grades, schools should include highly structured activities that include modeling and examples. For instance, help students “market their assets” as part of a career development curriculum.

2. Have you created explicit learning opportunities for your students? Be deliberate when you introduce new skills to younger students. For example, when introducing students to the idea of leadership, educators need to first explain what it means to be a leader. A classroom activity that explicitly teaches what leadership looks like—and how this varies between individuals—is a crucial first step.

For Older Students

As students move through middle school and into high school, educators should emphasize autonomy and encourage students to work in more diverse groups. Use these questions to track your progress.

1. What are the opportunities for students to practice independence?


One youth development organization addressed independent skill-building by asking students to serve as ambassadors for the program. As ambassadors, they represent their peers and meet with influential adults from outside the program. For many students, this marks the first time they are asked to share their perspectives with adults whom they do not know—an independent and self-directed task. They also practice numerous competencies aimed at success beyond middle school: verbal communication, leadership, and career readiness.

2. Are your students able to increasingly take risks (in a safe space)?

For many students, interviewing for a job feels like a risky situation. Mock interviews offer students chances to take that risk within the safe environment of a youth program. Students receive honest feedback, practice multiple times, and truly develop the competencies needed to succeed in an interview in the real world.

3. How are you preparing students to thrive in diverse environments?

Early on, students may feel most comfortable working with their old friends. Educators can push students to work in more diverse peer groups and spaces as they move through middle and high school. This is a vital skill to succeed in school, career, and life.

By learning from the best practices of youth development organizations, middle school educators can build the social and emotional skills students need to thrive in high school, college, and beyond. 

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