Help Wanted: Enthusiastic Middle-Level Teacher

Do you teach the hormonally disadvantaged?” a high school teacher asked a middle school colleague incredulously. “I could never work with that age group!” This statement from a high school teacher is an opinion that is broadly held by those who do not teach at the middle level and by some of those who leave it. The group of 10- to 14-year-olds in American schools is, perhaps, the least understood of all age groups simply because most teacher preparation programs overlook them in their certification processes. In “Progress in the Certification of Middle Level Personnel,” Peggy E. Gaskill reports that only 21 states require middle-level certification for teaching and only seven states have middle-level administrator credentialing. It is no surprise, then, that we must work harder to specifically develop teachers and administrators for this level.

Most elementary education undergraduates are eager to work with students in the primary grades and less so with upper elementary and middle-level students, despite certifications that include K-6, K-7, or K-8 licensure. The same holds true at the secondary level where many preservice candidates tell us they have no interest in the middle grades because, they say, “I remember what I was like at that age.”

However, after completing internships at this level, many naysayers discover that the joie de vivre of this group is unparalleled and that each day of working with young adolescents is different and exciting. For some, the experience is overwhelming, and some say that one either loves or hates this group, but no one is ambivalent. Nor, we suppose, should one be. Middle school students need adults who understand and like being around them; those who are ambivalent or dislike this group should be counseled to teach elsewhere.

Principals who have taught this level know it is a unique group because they are truly “in the middle” between childhood and adolescence, which means they can be incredibly mature, thoughtful, and independent in one moment and remarkably childlike, egocentric, and needy in the next. Each middle school student is going through tremendous changes—physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and moral—and in each classroom, there is a broad range of development in each of these areas.

What Adolescents Need

Principals must carefully select candidates whose teaching philosophies and personalities align with the middle school philosophy, who have an understanding of the developmental needs of this age group and, preferably, some congruent experience at this level.

Exemplary middle schools engage students with an integrated and relevant curriculum, with the goal of bringing together the interests of the students with contemporary social issues that connect student learning to the real world. The expectation must be that all students will learn and that the goal of classroom work is learning, not simply to generate a grade or to complete a worksheet. Students and teachers use a wide range of assessment tools to examine the quality of learning and teaching. In a given team or grade level, professional learning teams of teachers regularly examine their student data during common planning times to adjust and improve their teaching to meet student needs. Each child has an adult advocate—whether through an advisory program or other structure—and larger school populations are organized into smaller, more cohesive units such as teams, pods, and houses. In short, just as This We Believe, the National Middle
Schools Association’s foundational document, asserts, the school functions around the needs of the students and not the other way around.

Teachers who thrive at this level have knowledge of and embrace the mercurial nature of young adolescents. Cathy Vatterott confirms in *Becoming a Middle Level Teacher: The Student Focused Teaching of Early Adolescents* that teachers suited to this level understand the need for differentiation and build their curriculum, instruction, and relationships around this understanding. Effective middle school teachers are passionate about their students’ learning and believe all students can succeed, are flexible in their teaching approaches to ensure dignity and equity for all, are unconditionally caring and nonjudgmental, are involved in the lives of their students outside their classroom walls, are attuned and attentive to student issues, and are able to create inviting, safe, and supportive learning environments, argue Nancy Doda and Trudy Knowles in “Listening to the Voices of Young Adolescents.” A sense of humor will certainly go a long way toward connecting with this age as well, as is indicated in Knowles and John F. Brown’s *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know*.

**Retention Is Key**

It is just as important to retain middle-level teachers as it is to attract them. Teachers leave the middle level for a variety of reasons, including a desire to engage high school content or activities or the self-contained classrooms of the elementary level. Some teachers leave the middle level because of the increased rigidity in accountability measures, unsatisfactory working conditions or low salary (varying by state), differences with administration or colleagues, or a need for a change after many years there. Others leave teaching entirely for personal, financial, or other career paths.

However, a growing body of evidence suggests that schools that authentically integrate middle-level structures such as teaming are more beneficial to stable relationships for teachers and students, increase student achievement, and lead to higher job satisfaction.

Creating a collegial environment where teachers feel valued and that they make a difference in the lives of students goes a long way toward retaining middle-level teachers. [ ]

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