

# Make the Most of the Middle

Educators discuss how to foster engagement as kids rapidly start to develop their own interests and personalities

**M**iddle school is a time of transition. Not only are students undergoing many confusing physical and hormonal changes, but they are also coming into their own intellectually and exploring new interests—really starting to find out who they might be. It's an exciting (and sometimes challenging) time for students and educators alike.

We asked three experts in middle-level education, Henry McCain, Shanna R. Speakman-Spickard, and Jeffrey Wasem, about what makes this such a crucial time in a child's education and development and how schools can help children and their parents prepare for a period of intense curiosity, upheaval, and potentially unlimited personal growth.

McCain, principal of Clayton Junior High School and Kiser Elementary in Clayton, New Mexico, served in the U.S. Army for more than 30 years as a military policeman, a field artilleryman, an engineer, and a chaplain. Speakman-Spickard is principal of Milan Middle School in Milan, Michigan, and a longtime advocate of professional education and a student-centered, constructivist approach. And Wasem, principal of Creekside Middle School in Bentonville, Arkansas, and one of NAESP's 2018 National Distinguished Principals, champions engagement with parents and community members in working toward school success.

Here's what they said:

**Why are kids in middle school so vulnerable to mental health issues, and what can be done to encourage the development of positive behaviors?**



**Shanna R. Speakman-Spickard:** Adolescence is such an important stage in the development of who we are. Unfortunately, our young people are becoming desensitized to actions that once shocked

people and were considered taboo or inappropriate. It is vital that schools, families, and communities work together to incorporate

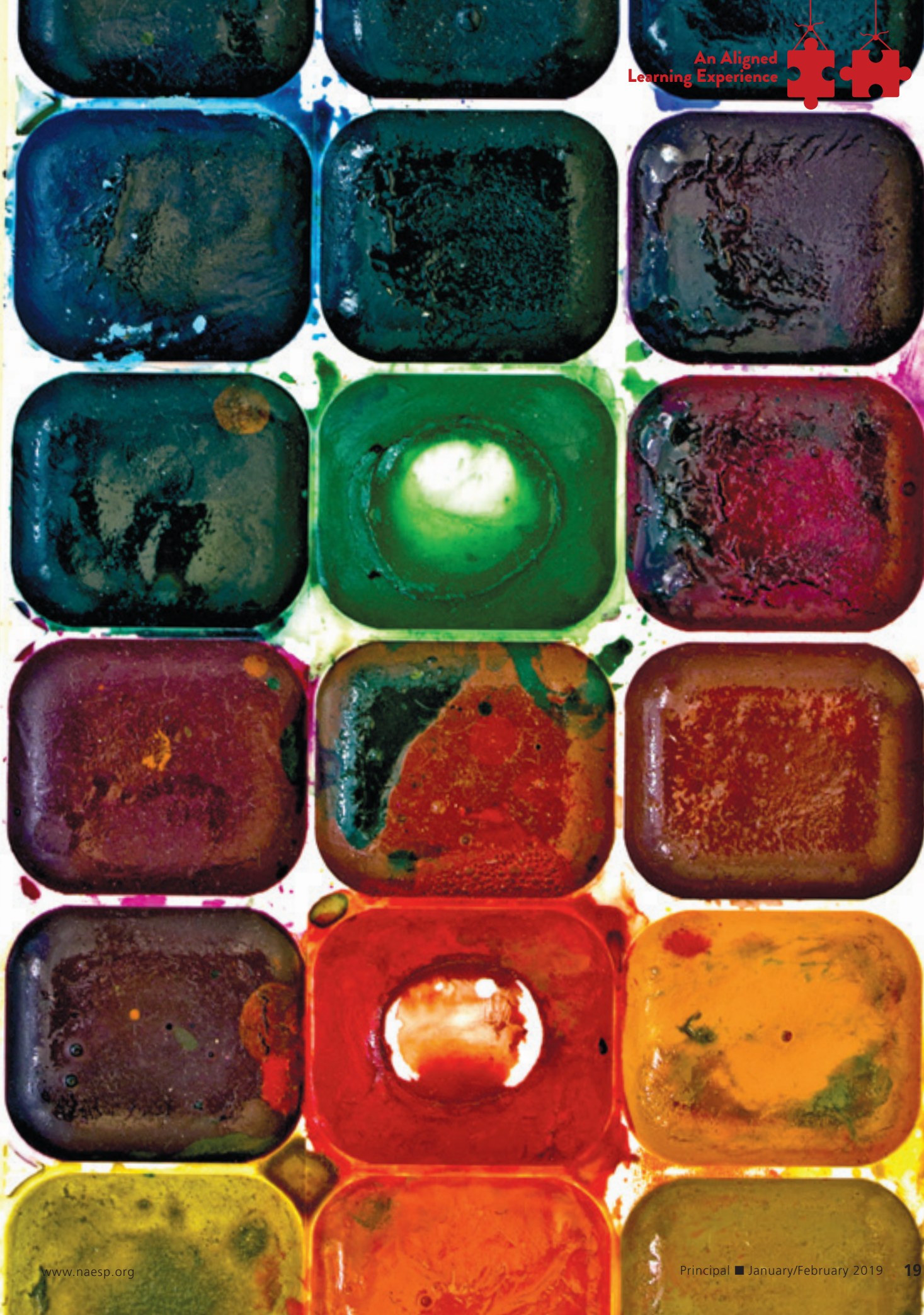
character education and teach—and even more importantly, model—the values of respect, responsibility, caring, and citizenship.



**Jeffrey Wasem:** Students in middle school are required to learn social norms at very fast rates. A school should ensure [that each child's] toolbox is filled with appropriate skills to model positive behaviors—for

example, how to respond to negative verbal conversations or how to serve those around them when they see a need arise.









**Henry McCain:** There are major changes to the body and mind going on. [We] use a paper-money system to reward students through a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) mentality. We reward

random acts of kindness, from keeping the campus clean to holding doors for fellow students, [and] there is a student store where they can spend that money when they have done a number of positive routines.

**Are middle school educators more susceptible to mental health issues? And how can you ensure that a school's staff is ready to give their best every day?**

**Speakman-Spickard:** Working with students who are no longer as innocent and naïve as their elementary peers or haven't learned as many coping skills as their secondary peers can be taxing on educators—especially those who have exhausted their resources. No educator wants to give up on a child, and this can be a challenging part of the job. Making sure that we, as leaders, support our staffs, care for them, demonstrate appreciation, and make sure that they have support is extremely important [to] keeping our positivity “buckets” full.

**Wasem:** I do not believe middle school educators are more susceptible to mental health issues; I believe each one of us has a story that's informed by life events. Any staff member facing a mental health issue should be given every opportunity to work through it in a healthy way. A building leader should provide an environment where it is safe to process these needs and provide supports to help the teacher who is in need.

**How can middle school principals help enhance intrinsic motivation among students and help them achieve greater academic success?**

**Wasem:** I heard a presenter this summer ask the question: “Are you inviting learning in your school, or are you *guaranteeing* learning in your school?” At our school, we guarantee high levels of learning for each student through service, passion, innovation, collaboration, and empowerment. At the heart

of guaranteeing learning is relationships—knowing your students well academically, socially, and emotionally. Students have passions, and these areas should be empowered within the school.

**McCain:** I think [principals] have to be seen taking opportunities to teach in the classroom and participating in P.E. [I reward students'] positive behavior by having a pizza party once a month for hand-picked students.

**Speakman-Spickard:** Intrinsic motivation is so valuable, but many of our students don't come in with it. Really good PBIS programs can help bridge the gap between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Making sure we point out the good, recognizing what students are doing well, showing gratitude, and modeling kind, accepting behaviors are all ways to help our students trigger internal feelings of happiness and accomplishment.

**How can a principal balance the needs of exceptional or “gifted” students in middle school with the needs of students in the general education program?**

**Wasem:** I believe strongly that each student in our school is exceptional and gifted. The school's responsibility is to find out where these gifts lie, then drive them home with instruction and learning.

**Speakman-Spickard:** We need to make sure that we are offering avenues for all students to be successful. It is important to have just as many character, leader, and service recognition clubs as there are academic [clubs].

**McCain:** “Gifted” or high-performing students need to be challenged in the classroom, but it is a priority to measure growth among lower-performing students.

**What can principals do to produce more parent involvement in middle schoolers' education, and why is this crucial at this level?**

**Speakman-Spickard:** Having learning tours and inviting parents to tour during classes is one way to get parents involved. Our parents love to chaperone and volunteer for events; the use of social media, text messaging, and email blasts is helpful for busy families, as well. Middle-level involvement is important because although students are becoming



more independent, they are also making decisions that could affect the rest of their lives. Staying connected with schools and [understanding] some of the risks at this age is important. Schools can host information sessions on substance abuse, sexting, and other risk factors at this age.

**Wasem:** It is easy to fall into a belief that parents who are not visible at school are not involved. We have parents who work to provide the basic necessities for their family to be able to come to school—that is involvement. We have parents who are at the school every week volunteering, organizing Tuesday folders, stocking our Cardinals Give Back Closet—that is involvement. As long as we can team together and partner for the benefit of the child, however that might look, they are involved. Ultimately, I want our parents to know and feel that their voice and support are crucial, because middle-grade students have a strong need for support, care, love, and discipline.

#### **What can be done to increase the student voice in middle school education, and how can this help students achieve?**

**Speakman-Spickard:** From classroom expectations and assignments to schoolwide policies, students can and should have an avenue of expression. Student councils, peer mediation, National Junior Honor Society, and student representatives on school committees are some ways we use to develop leadership skills and student voice at the system level. Student voice is so important to the development of our next generation of leaders.

**McCain:** There needs to be a student council as well as student-sponsored rules. There must be activities where students push their ideas forth.

#### **What are “microaggressions,” and what can middle school educators do to recognize bullying and head it off?**

**Wasem:** Relationships with students and understanding the culture of your school are vital. According to [psychology professor and author] Derald Wing Sue, microaggressions are everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that

communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.

We should seek to lead safe environments for students to communicate bullying to adults. We talk to our students about direct and indirect ways to communicate a concern. Each student in our school has access to a document online they can fill out if they need to see a counselor or principal. And we encourage them to approach any adult if they have an immediate concern that needs to be addressed.

**Speakman-Spickard:** Name-calling and some teasing always seem to be present, but nonverbal behaviors and isolation can happen under the radar. Creating a caring culture, classroom, and building through relationship development is one of the best ways to head off this behavior.

**McCain:** You have to identify the leaders of bullying, contact the police if necessary, and be willing to contact [the local youth and family services agency] if the situation warrants the authorities' involvement.

#### **How can principals better align learning between elementary and middle schools in order to prepare for student transitions and help middle school teachers understand kids' prior performance?**

**Speakman-Spickard:** Having transition meetings is a great way to help understand students and their needs. May is a great time to get current teachers or staff together with the next year's team.

**Wasem:** Middle schools where I have worked have done everything from welcoming tours and conversations with elementary staff to pink/blue cards communicating important information about the students who will transition to middle school. [They have] developed online data portals to see a student's data for previous years and hosted events for parents to welcome them to middle school.

Middle school is a great time to carry on the incredible work taking place in elementary schools and to provide a fresh start for a student who needs one. I am always seeking to balance how much information I want our team to acquire about the individual students who are coming to our school and at the same time, providing each student with a clean slate. **P**