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Improving the Success of Middle Grade Students

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A student's experience in the middle grades is a selection of classes they go through in a day. If they experience inconsistent expectations across those classes, they and the school will struggle to achieve high outcomes. Middle grade students need to have common behavioral and academic expectations, recognitions, and consequences throughout the school day in all their classes.

THE GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE'S MIDDLE SCHOOL MATTERS INITIATIVE SEEKS TO INCREASE THE NUMBER OF MIDDLE GRADE STUDENTS WHO ARE PREPARED FOR HIGH SCHOOL AND POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS.

Middle School Matters' mission is two-fold: to transform the middle grades by promoting research-based tools, practices, and solutions and to drive the development of policies that lead to better student outcomes. Middle School Matters has two primary elements that will help us achieve these goals: 1) Develop practical tools and supports based on solid research for middle grade reform initiatives, school districts, and middle school campuses so they can drive research into their work and 2) Promote middle grades reform through an alliance with individuals who influence decisions made for/in middle grades.

For middle grade students to succeed in high school, they need to have positive learning experiences as well as a healthy school environment and culture that support academic achievement, social and emotional development, and self-regulation. This paper presents a few recommendations in comparison to existing practice at their middle grade school. Then they can consider ways to improve the current discipline policies and student support structures to lead to improved outcomes for all students.

A positive school climate is more likely to promote the emotional well-being and growth of every student while providing a safe, secure environment with firm and consistent guidelines for appropriate student behavior.

Teaching and learning are very challenging in an environment that poses psychological and physical threats to individuals; that is chaotic, disorderly, and distracting; and where expectations and consequences for appropriate behavior are not clearly and consistently applied. Without a positive climate, middle grades students may experience inconsistent expectations across the classes they attend. Therefore, it is important to have common behavioral and academic expectations, recognitions, and consequences. This takes strong school leadership, coordination, professional development, and teamwork among all stakeholders.

There are research-based principles and practices related to school leadership and student behavior supports that can be applied in middle grades education to improve student outcomes. School leaders and teachers can consider these strategies for establishing a positive climate for learning and for assisting students in demonstrating positive behavior. These research-based strategies will enable middle grade students to have the behavior skills they need not only for high school success, but also success in post-secondary education and/or future careers. What follows are a few questions school leaders might ask while providing instructional leadership, observing classrooms, and working with teachers, and how Dr. Balfanz would respond based on his knowledge of research in school leadership and student behavior supports.

QUESTION:

How can I improve my school's discipline policies and procedures?

School leaders should provide leadership in developing an appropriate school discipline code that includes: 1) a description of expected adequate student behavior and conduct, 2) mechanisms for teaching, modeling, and recognizing positive behaviors, and 3) guidelines and consequences for students who are not displaying appropriate behaviors, that are consistently and fairly applied and do not inadvertently lead students to attend less, get in more trouble, or fail their courses. Such a code should reflect the input of parents, students, teachers, youth-serving professionals, and community leaders and be informed by current evidence of effective and ineffective strategies and policies. Many effective educational leaders have school safety and behavior plans that include systematic, ongoing, and consistent processes that try to prevent and eliminate disruptive behaviors, intimidation, drugs, violence, and gangs in the school. These leaders also have teachers who play an important role in the implementation of such policies by promptly reporting incidents of violence or crime before, during, or after the school day.

QUESTION:

How can I determine if the changes I make to the discipline policies and procedures are effective?

School leaders should routinely monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the discipline and behavior programs in their schools and make appropriate changes when necessary. Monitoring and evaluation can take place by establishing a school safety and behavior council or school safety and behavior planning team, with representatives from school staff, students, parents, and the community. This council can meet frequently to discuss the state of school safety and behavior policies, examine data on who is being suspended and disciplined for what, monitor the effectiveness of prevention and positive behavior strategies, provide advice, and propose suggested revisions to the school's discipline code and behavior support systems. District leaders, principals, and teachers should also work collaboratively to design and implement a system for early intervention with students who are just beginning to display problematic behavior, and more intensive supports for students who enter the school with prior histories of behavioral struggles.

QUESTION:

What can I do to support my teachers in improving their classroom management so that learning is maximized?

School leaders should support teachers by consistently instructing, modeling, and recognizing appropriate and positive academic and social behaviors across all classrooms. By modeling, teaching, and encouraging appropriate behaviors, it is possible to significantly reduce antisocial and maladaptive behaviors that reduce and inhibit effective classroom instruction and student learning. Maladaptive classroom behaviors, such as acting out, being disrespectful, or not paying attention, can be modified and reduced through consistent teaching, modeling, and recognition of more positive classroom behaviors. Maladaptive classroom behaviors can be reduced by teaching students how to appropriately and respectfully gain attention from adults and students, how to effectively participate in group activities (disagree without being disagreeable), and how to develop emotional awareness and self-regulation (learn to recognize situations or behaviors that lead to negative behavior and have alternative strategies ready).

Positive behavior needs to be taught like any other skill by breaking them down into concrete, teachable steps, and explaining to students the rationale for learning the skill, creating opportunities for guided and independent practice, prompting and cuing students about the use of the behavioral skill, and recognizing the effective use of the skill. For students to internalize the new behavioral norms, they need to be consistently taught and recognized across the classrooms in which students participate. What follows are some sample topics for a teacher to use with their students to assist them in developing appropriate behavior skills:

- How to gain attention from the teacher in an appropriate and respectful manner.
- How to gain attention from peers in an appropriate and respectful manner.
- How to take turns sharing, communicate ideas, cooperate, and problem solve during small-group settings.
- Ways to self-monitor and self-manage one's own social behavior and completion of academic work.
- How to develop emotional awareness, tolerance, self-regulation of emotions, and personal responsibility.

QUESTION:

What about the students who are not responding as well to instruction and continue to misbehave?

School leaders should implement an intervention framework generalized to student attendance, behavior, and course performance. An effective intervention framework will include whole-school prevention programs, targeted supports of moderate intensity or duration delivered to groups of students, and cases managed one-on-one or small group supports. Schools should make early warning indicator data (daily attendance, behavior, and course performance) available to teacher teams and other adults who provide student supports (counselors, community-based organizations, and national service corps members). Schools should also analyze the data to ensure that student supports of sufficient intensity and scale are available. On a regular basis, schools should have teacher teams and other student support providers meet and review the early warning indicator data, assign students to appropriate interventions, monitor student progress and intervention effectiveness, and make adjustments as needed.

QUESTION:

What other kinds of opportunities can I provide for students to encourage positive behavior?

Administrators, principals, teachers, and community organizations should work collaboratively on programs to develop extracurricular activities and recreation programs that provide positive alternatives to juvenile crime and violence. Examples include youth-service networks, student leadership, peer assistance, organized school sports, and academic enrichment programs. They should also work together to develop specific programs directed at preventing drug use and abuse, and eliminating gang influence in schools. One good way for middle grade students to develop important academic and healthy behaviors is through activities that are linked to their developmental needs, including activities for adventure and camaraderie. Service learning, in which teams of students participate in the design of the service project and its execution, and electives that combine rich cognitive content with teamwork, performance, and tangible outcomes over relatively short durations (a few weeks or a month or two), are particularly well suited for this task.

SUMMARY

The mission of public schools is not only to impart academic knowledge to students but to educate students to become productive, well-functioning citizens as well. There are behaviors that are positive and contribute to a student's success in school and behaviors that are maladaptive and prohibit them from maximizing their opportunities to learn in school. In addition, past research has found preliminary evidence not just that behavioral skills are important for the social development of students, but also that such behavior, both positive and negative, shows relationships with academic outcomes. School leaders play an important role in setting up the behavior expectations and consequences, and working with teachers to implement these expectations consistently.

Middle School Matters worked with Dr. Balfanz and other research experts to find principles and practices supported by the best available research evidence to support schools in reaching their goals. On February 1, 2013, the Middle School Matters program launched its Middle School Matters Institute website (www.middleschoolinstitute.org), where schools can review research-based principles and practices, assess where they are at on a continuum of effective implementation of these principles and practices, and then develop a plan of action for implementing change in their school.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Robert Balfanz is a research scientist at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University, School of Education and the co-director of the Talent Development Secondary School Project. He has published widely on secondary school reform, high school dropouts, and instructional interventions in high-poverty schools. As a Bush Center Education Fellow, Dr. Balfanz has participated in Middle School Matters since its inception, providing key research-based principles and practices to guide middle schools in establishing an effective school climate and culture, providing students with behavior supports, and engaging the family and community in partnership with the school.

Dr. Gina Rodriguez has a Ph.D. in Special Education with an emphasis in social, emotional, and behavior disorders and is the Program Manager for Middle School Matters at the George W. Bush Institute. Gina was a Behavior Specialist seven years and has an additional three years of experience as a teacher.

Dr. Sarah Brasiel has a Ph.D. in mathematics education and has more than 18 years of experience as a regular education and special education teacher and instructional leader in the areas of mathematics, science, and reading.

RESOURCES

To learn more about these recommendations, we provide a list of a few resources. The complete reference list is available as part of the Middle School Matters Research Platform.

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