

Quality Instruction in Middle Schools

Middle school leadership teams and teachers are the main audience for *Success at the Core*. This reading provides you with some background about the unique traits and learning needs of early adolescents. You will find this background to be helpful as you work to improve instruction.

What are the Key Traits of Early Adolescent Learners?

Better than anyone else, you know that the middle school years mark a turbulent developmental phase. From your work with these students, you know that they experience constant growth spurts. From ages 11 to 14, they gain physical, emotional, and intellectual strengths that help propel them through life. During these years, they reach some impressive milestones. They develop the ability to reason abstractly. Slowly, they start to see the world from perspectives other than their own. And, they begin to embrace a new awareness of the world around them. At the same time, they become keenly interested in—and able to—create hypotheses. They are ready to consider conjecture. Most are quick (as you know, often very quick) to argue a position and to question authority.

As your students explore and discover their interests at school, you will hear, “I’m bored.” This complaint is common from this age group. It signals that their environment does not offer enough variety. At this age, they are eager to try new things and test their new abilities. Most middle schoolers find social activities and technology interesting and important. They value physical tasks that challenge them and help them burn their high levels of energy. To “meet these students where they are” and reach them, you must take these unique traits into account.

What are the Elements of Quality Instruction for Early Adolescents?

With quality instruction, one size never fits all. You know that approaches must vary based on setting, student, and content area. Even so, there are some constants. Studies have found that there are four Elements of Quality Instruction in middle school. These Elements are rooted in the work of the field’s leaders. They reflect the thinking of such organizations as the National Middle School Association, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and national subject-area associations. The Elements also mesh with how Washington State’s OSPI defines quality instruction for middle school subject areas.

- **Rigorous, relevant, and real curricular content**
Regardless of the topic, content must have a few key qualities. It must stress a deep understanding of challenging, important, and engaging material. It must also help students connect new learning with prior knowledge, their lives, and the world. When this happens, students take ownership of their learning. They see the purpose and they apply what they learn to new contexts. A “real” curriculum gives students a chance to apply content to real-world problems. It also helps them make interdisciplinary connections.
- **Active and exploratory instructional strategies**
What is the best way to deal with “I’m bored”? To reach students at this age, it is vital to use a variety of strategies. All should engage students in active ways. Some proven ways include hands-on activities, cooperative learning, discourse, and peer teaching. Strategies should also build on students’ strengths during this volatile growth period. To do so, they should foster curiosity, exploration, and creativity. They should also require students to learn by questioning, examining, and questioning again.
- **Authentic and student-centered assessment practices**
Assessment practices for early adolescents align with clear, high standards that have been communicated to students. They use a variety of formal and informal measures to monitor, provide feedback, and evaluate and report on student learning, offering students multiple opportunities and ways to demonstrate mastery. These assessment practices support students to reflect on their learning, develop meta-cognitive skills, set goals, and assess their work.

- **Support structures to help all students meet high expectations**
Structures that support early adolescents to meet high expectations ensure that all students have the opportunities, access, resources, and extra help they need to succeed in meeting clearly-communicated expectations. They include structures within the classroom that promote students' self-efficacy and confidence, structures within the curriculum that offer multiple entry points or pathways to mastery, and structures within the school day and after school to provide extra help when needed.

These four Elements of Quality Instruction form the foundation of *Success at the Core's* efforts to support leadership teams guide the work of instructional improvement at their schools.

Reflect: How does this reading define quality instruction in terms of: curricular content, instructional strategies, assessment practices, and support structures?

REFERENCES

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