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Middle School Matters: Laying the Foundation for College and Career

Middle school represents a critical window for shaping students' academic trajectories and expanding their sense of what's possible for their futures. This curated collection of ISTE+ASCD *Educational Leadership* magazine articles explores how educators can make the most of these pivotal years. Topics include introducing students to diverse career possibilities early, mapping essential skills across the curriculum, implementing policies that increase access and opportunity, and creating daily engagement practices that keep students connected to their learning. This collection is sponsored by Project Lead The Way.

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Teaching Middle Schoolers to Dream Big

If we're not introducing students to college and career options by middle school, we're doing them a disservice, says school counselor of the year Alma Lopez.

The lead school counselor at Livingston Middle School in Merced County, California, Alma Lopez has been named the 2022 National School Counselor of the Year by the American School Counselor Association. She is the first Latina school counselor of the year and one

of only a handful of rural counselors to earn the title. As a first-generation college student and daughter of Mexican immigrants, Lopez hopes to inspire her students—many of whom come from a similar background—to think big early on.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALMA LOPEZ/ASCA

You often talk about your experience as a student—and the lack of exposure you had to college. What do you wish your high school counselor had done differently?

I never met my high school counselor. I knew her name—she would be at rallies, and she would promote activities. But I was in the academic middle, and her focus was the high-achieving kids who needed scholarships to get to college and the low-achieving kids who needed credit to graduate. Those of us in the middle never really knew too much about college. We never felt like it was within our reach.

I really wish that she would've had the time to connect with me and offer me information and resources. Here at my middle school, we have the AVID program, which intentionally reaches out to first-generation, low-socioeconomic kids that qualify for extra support. It's an amazing program! We take the kids on college tours, bring in college tutors who show them how to study, and host events like Fun Fridays where they get to ask college kids questions. We also have an active California Junior Scholastic Federation chapter.

Why is middle school such a key time to talk about college and career options?

It's such an important time because adolescence is about curiosity, inquiry, and exploration. We're even doing some work with our elementary students. Young kids will start off saying, I want to be a teacher or a first responder or a doctor. But as they develop, I want them to know that sure, you could be a teacher, but you could be a preschool teacher, which requires a community college education, you could be a middle school teacher, which requires multiple subject credentialing, you could be a college professor, where you need your master's degree. Every job is like that. By the time they leave middle school, I want students to understand that they have all these opportunities and pathways.

They can start to rule in and out some of their interests, especially when participating in elective and enrichment opportunities. That's what middle school is about: Exploring interests and then developing habits to be successful in the future. As middle school educators, we're in this unique position to help our students understand that if you work hard and you really want something, you can achieve it—you just have to know what the next step is.

What are one or two practices middle schools can put in place to spark students' interest in college?

The key thing is college awareness. When I was in high school, I saw a kid wearing a T-shirt that said Fresno State, and I was like, "What is that?" He responded, "Oh, my brother goes there." And I thought, I should look into that. California State University-Fresno turned out to be the only college I applied to. I was accepted, but it shouldn't have been by chance; it shouldn't have been because I saw a T-shirt.

But because that T-shirt sparked an interest for me, I wondered if it could do the same for my students. So, now, every Wednesday at our school is college awareness day. Our teachers wear their college T-shirts and post their degrees and any special certificates they have in their classrooms. Students also wear college gear. But the initial turnout was underwhelming.

Then, one day I was sitting in a school counseling advisory and I had a parent tell me, "Alma, I didn't go to college. How am I supposed to get my kid a shirt?" It was in that moment, I was like, *duh*. I went to my principal at the time for funds and I've since gone to my superintendent. This last year, we got \$7,000 from the district to buy college T-shirts, and we give them away as incentives during College and Career Week and throughout the year.

When you identify with the brand of something—think of the Apple logo—it does something to your psyche. You want to be a part of it, you want to belong. Now, kids are seeing all these different T-shirts and logos and names. There's a lot of power in that.

Visiting colleges is also part of the awareness-building. I'm so impressed with how college tours have changed students' mindsets. We'll take a busload of kids to a school, and on the way there, they'll ask, "When are we gonna get there? Can we eat at McDonald's? Where's Starbucks?" But on the way back, the kids are suddenly like, "I wonder if I could be an engineer if I go there." "I wonder if they have a law program." "I really like that school; I could see myself there." In one day, their thinking shifts big time.

How can school leaders better support counselors right now, especially in their efforts to prepare students for postsecondary success?

First, if you don't have a school counselor, hire one. We're trained to support students

academically, socially and emotionally, and for college and career readiness. In California, having a school counselor is not a requirement at any level. It's insane. So, that's the first step.

And then, once you have a school counselor, allow them to facilitate a comprehensive school counseling program. In some places, counselors are doing lunch duty, or counselors are doing testing, or counselors are doing anything *but* their job. It's understandable; there is a need for those additional supports. However, we're master's-level educators who get a good salary to do this job and we want to do it. But if we're not allowed to our job because the principal needs us to cover a class, that presents a challenge. Our students don't get the services they need—the services that the school counselor is supposed to be providing.

Another way leaders can help is by supporting and funding those programs that I mentioned. AVID, for example, requires teachers to have some professional development to be able to facilitate support classes. It also requires time for teachers to interview and select the college tutors that come into the classroom.

When I first started here, my colleague and I would sell snow cones for \$1 so we could pay for a charter bus to take kids on college tours. But now, our superintendent is pretty much like, "What do you need?" If we value higher education, if we believe we want it to be an option for our students, we have to put the money there.

In this particularly challenging time, how can educators give students hope about their futures?

I once heard Jeff Duncan-Andrade, an associate professor at San Francisco State University, speak at a conference about hope, and he referenced Tupac Shakur's poem "The Rose That Grew From Concrete." Tupac was killed years ago, but young people still gravitate to his message. The poem really is about recognizing that no matter how tough things are—the concrete—no matter all the

challenges, the rose can still bloom. It can bloom and come to life if it has water and rain, if something gets in there to nourish it. And that's us, the educators. Right now, we have an incredible opportunity to really matter.

I could show you five notes right now of parents who've called me because someone's died in their family. That's a very real thing that's happening. I'm getting messages saying, "We're losing our home because we're getting evicted." "We don't have food; what's the meal situation at the school?" I have all these calls that come in—so that concrete is hard—it's tough. But all of us, the kids and the adults in the building, we're still growing and developing and going through this together. So, we have an opportunity—and I think an obligation—to do more than just literally survive this. We need to thrive.

If we need a moment, we should take it. Rest and recharge, but then roll your sleeves up and do the work because our kids are depending on it. And we're depending on it. If we stop and think about it, these are our future doctors, mechanics, delivery drivers. I want these young people to be solid. I want them to be productive and respectful and contribute. And so there's also this vested interest as a human being to ensure that the kids are OK. 🍀

—Sarah McKibben

Editor's note: This interview has been edited for space.

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Like a rose growing through concrete, students can thrive even in tough circumstances. Scan to hear Alma Lopez's powerful message about hope and student potential.



Can College-Ready Graduation Requirements Close the Opportunity Gap?

When San Francisco implemented a new policy to improve graduation rates and college enrollment, district officials realized their work was only beginning.

Julie Yu, Bill W. Sanderson, Jennifer Fong, and Laura Wentworth

Bill Sanderson, a principal in the San Francisco Unified School District and one of the authors of this article, walked into a college-readiness task force meeting in the fall of 2008 with one of his students on his mind. He had just learned through some talk in the lunchroom that a junior at his high school, Andrea, was going to fail her Spanish class. At the task force meeting, the district's then-superintendent, Carlos Garcia, charged the group with designing the new college-ready graduation policy to align with course requirements for university admissions. By ensuring that all students participate in required courses for college entrance, this graduation policy would aim to remove a major barrier to college access.

The goals of the new policy were understandable. San Francisco's board of education recognized many students did not have access to the college-preparatory high school coursework because their schools did not offer it or have enough staff to teach it, so these students were excluded from taking advantage of certain career and college options after high school. For example, in 2010, only 29 percent of district Latino and

16 percent of Black graduates completed college-preparatory courses with a C or better, compared to 51 percent of all high school graduates in the district. This made them ineligible for the University of California/California State University admission requirements.

But Sanderson immediately had concerns about how the new policy would work in practice. He knew that Andrea, for example, was struggling to pass year one of Spanish and had a personality conflict with the only Spanish teacher at the school. How in the world would he and his school staff help her pass not just one, but two Spanish classes under this new college-readiness policy? How would the staff be able to monitor and support students like Andrea so that they could meet these new requirements? The district's systems of tracking course-taking and student support were relatively decentralized. It would be easy for a student like Andrea to miss one requirement for graduation, let alone all the other steps to transition to postsecondary schooling.

This kind of challenge is not unusual for principals. Many school leaders struggle to keep their students on track for graduation and postsecondary success. High schools in San Francisco,

and many schools across the nation, have historically not been successful in graduating high rates of Black, Latino, Pacific Islander, English learner, and low-income students, let alone getting them to enroll and persist in postsecondary schools.

To attempt to close these gaps in recent years, several large urban school districts in California have increased their high school graduation requirements to align with University of California/California State University A-G college admission requirements, mainly to systematically remove barriers to college and career readiness (Betts et al., 2013). A-G signifies a set of course requirements needed to gain admission to the UC/CSU higher education system. Following suit, after multiple discussions with various stakeholders and analysis of the proposed college-ready policy, San Francisco's school board voted in 2009 to add a third year of mathematics and a second year of world language to the high school graduation requirements.

As researchers and leaders in implementing San Francisco's A-G policy, we played various roles to shift the culture, create structures, and establish regular monitoring to improve graduation outcomes—and prevent students like Andrea from falling through the cracks. Over the more than 10 years our policy has been in place, the district has seen gains in high school graduation rates and has been able to offer students access to dual enrollment and priority enrollment at a local community college. Yet gaps still remain. A closer look at the district's successes and challenges offers lessons for other districts in implementing these kinds of policies. It tells a story of persistence and continuous growth for a district that wants to ensure the best opportunities for all its students, especially struggling ones like Andrea.

Challenges of Implementation

Sanderson knew it was one thing for his district to adopt a college-ready policy and another thing to implement it successfully. Prior to the adoption of the policy, Sanderson participated in an A-G study team to assess the potential impact and implications of the college-ready graduation policy. The team named specific changes the district needed

to make to implement the policy: Additional teachers and professional development, increased awareness of higher graduation requirements across preK–12 levels, the development of key K–12 indicators and benchmark skills to identify students who need interventions, strong safety nets for struggling students, and continuous monitoring (Jimenez, 2009).

The superintendent promoted Sanderson to Executive Director of College and Career Readiness to lead systemic changes to create the culture and conditions needed to improve graduation and on-track rates and support struggling students under the new policy. Key changes Sanderson oversaw included:

1. *The development of administrative regulations and a centralized A-G course submission process.* Sanderson, with other central and school site leaders, developed a cross-departmental effort that established administrative regulations to standardized graduation practices across school sites. Previously, school sites determined their own promotion, graduation, attendance, and discipline policies, which proved problematic in implementing a districtwide graduation policy (Jimenez, 2009). After the adoption of the A-G policy, district departments created regulations that delineated graduation course requirements and waiver processes, approved alternative means to meet graduation requirements (such as credit recovery, non-district coursework, independent study, or middle school language immersion courses), and course exemptions.

Central office leaders also centralized the A-G course submission process that brought more consistent A-G course offerings to all high schools. Regardless of the high school students enroll in, courses now have common course titles and credits related to graduation. Grade 9 mathematics at one high school has the same meaning as Grade 9 mathematics at another.

2. *Capacity-building of school counselors and improved data system.* School counselors were trained on the policy so that they could support off-track students toward graduation, through regular check-ins and referrals to credit recovery options. In addition, the San Francisco district,

in partnership with Stanford University's Leadership for Equity & Accountability in Districts and Schools, developed categories of graduation status based on credit accumulation to identify whether a student was on the path to graduate high school under the new requirements. District leaders, including Julie Yu, a coauthor of this article, coordinated a biannual intervention process, where school administrators and counselors monitored students' graduation status with "on-track reports" and provided off-track students timely counseling support. They could also register students in credit recovery opportunities.

3. *Safety net programs and supports.* The district, through the leadership of Sanderson and later Jennifer Fong, another coauthor of this article, coordinated programs that offered credit recovery courses to students who needed to make up an F grade or retake the course to improve a D grade for college eligibility. It distributed funds for site-based credit recovery and intervention programs to meet school-specific needs and targeted populations. Since 2013, San Francisco's voter-approved education-enrichment funding initiative has provided additional support for these credit recovery programs. By the 2015–2016 school year, about a quarter of San Francisco Unified high school students had made up credits in A–G courses through these programs.

A "Grad"ual Improvement

After 11 years of the policy, Yu, the district's data and policy manager, conducted a research review that showed that the implementation of the new college-readiness policy had helped more students from historically underserved groups to graduate and reduced the racial opportunity gaps. She found that four-year graduation rates had improved for the district and across racial groups during the implementation period, narrowing equity gaps between Black and Latino students and their white and Asian peers (Yu, 2021). District graduation rates increased about four percentage points, from 85 percent in 2013, the year before the policy, to 89 percent in 2016, and Black and Latino students experienced even greater gains

(7 and 9 percentage points respectively).

Despite these gains, however, there was no significant improvement in college enrollment and completion rates districtwide. While the opportunity gaps in college enrollment for Black and Latino students did narrow, these students still did not have the same opportunities to enroll in or complete college as their peers. For example, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, about 15 percent of Black and 28 percent of Latino San Francisco high school graduates in 2014 completed a degree in six years, compared with 69 percent of Asian and 56 percent of white students from the district (2020).

Quality and Coherence Matter

Even with notable gains in high school outcomes and postsecondary success, the minimal improvement and persisting equity gaps in college outcomes suggest that the college-readiness policy was too limited in scope to prepare students to succeed through college. As a result, we are continuously working to improve the district's policies and procedures to increase college access, persistence, and completion for all students. Here are some strategies we are working on to better support students:

Support students in danger of not meeting university course requirements and enhance student learning through consistent grading practices.

Because San Francisco's graduation policy accepts D as a passing grade, the policy does not guarantee that our graduates will meet the minimum C grade for state university course admission requirements. In addition, the district needs to establish fair and consistent grading policies across all schools.

Adopt an internal K–12 indicator system with student supports. Our district's on-track/off-track data system has been proven effective in improving graduation rates, but the district lacks a comprehensive K–12 indicator system that links early warning indicators at the K–8th grade levels to the high school on-track/off-track data. Research has shown that middle school attendance is linked to high school graduation rates and

college enrollment. In one study, middle school students with chronic absences reduced their probability of high school graduation by 7 percent and college enrollment by 8 percent (Liu, Lee, & Gershenson, 2019). There were similar findings in a Chicago study, in which middle school attendance and grades were predictive of high school outcomes (Allensworth et al., 2014).

With an integrated K–12 data system, our schools can use timely data to monitor students’ progress and attendance in earlier grades and intervene when they show early signs of falling behind. Central office leaders can use this information to establish systems of support at strategic points where students struggle.

Strengthen external partnerships with higher education systems. The San Francisco district has made considerable progress in expanding access to college-ready courses so students are eligible to apply to college, but there has not been a similar effort in helping students persist and earn a college degree. Local efforts like the Bridge to Success Initiative, a partnership between the district and City College of San Francisco started in 2010, included several policy changes to streamline the college’s matriculation process, while state legislation and funds expanded dual enrollment opportunities for San Francisco students.

We’ve been further strengthening these partnerships by establishing formal data-sharing agreements, where shared data can inform potential points of interventions and foster goal-setting and collaboration between agencies (Lee et al., 2013). For example, San Francisco’s district shares information with the City College of San Francisco about incoming students’ course completion to help with placing students in appropriate courses in their first year. In the past, college leaders placed incoming San Francisco graduates in courses without knowing what courses students passed in high school.

Since the adoption of the college-ready graduation policy, the district has learned that increasing academic standards for all students, with the necessary structures and supports in place, can improve outcomes for students,

especially for our most vulnerable populations. Though there is a lot of work to be done to actualize the hope that all students can access and be successful in a postsecondary path (if they choose to), students facing challenges similar to Andrea’s are now in a school environment where counselors are more aware of their academic standing—and can connect them to the academic supports they need to graduate high school and pursue a career. 🍌

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Mapping Skills for the Future

College- and career-readiness skills can easily get lost if you don't have a clear schoolwide plan for teaching them.

Andrew Miller

The curricula in our schools are, among other things, meant to support students in being ready for college and careers. Many standards call for students to engage in critical thinking, communication, creativity, and collaboration—all skills meant to equip them for the future. However, these standards may not be enough to ensure all students end their K–12 journey with the capabilities they need. Standards are often discipline specific, meaning a student may only get exposure to that skill in one course. It is educators' responsibility to move from *hoping* students gain career-readiness skills to *ensuring* our students walk away with what they need to be ready for life beyond K–12. Singapore American School, where I work, embarked on a five-year process to do just that.

Start with Mission and Vision

It's important to start with the "Why?" behind this work. Schools often have a clear mission and vision

to guide purposeful decision making around curriculum and instruction. School leaders must facilitate reflection on the mission and vision and the goals that drive the daily work of teachers (DuFour et al., 2016). A school mission articulates "Why do we exist?" while a school vision answers the question "What must our school become to accomplish our purpose?"

When it comes to college and career readiness, school leaders should hold input sessions with all stakeholders of the community to refine their school's mission and vision so it articulates language that expands upon their guiding principles. For example, the vision statement of Singapore American School is "Cultivating exceptional thinkers prepared for the future." We expanded that language into phrases such as:

- "Creating lifelong learners ready for their futures"
- "An education prepared for the future"

- "Critical thinkers, collaborators and problem solvers ready for college, career and life"

By committing to a clear mission and vision like this, school leaders set the stage to develop a curriculum that teaches and assesses key college- and career-readiness skills.

Articulate Necessary Skills

Once everyone across the school has agreed upon the mission and vision, it's time to unpack them into specific college- and career-related skills. In the case of Singapore American School, our vision mentions "exceptional thinkers," but we wanted to define what exactly we meant by that. Teams of educators, community members, and students held a series of discussions to determine the skills that we call our "Learning Aspirations" (Figure 1), articulating specific skills that would create "exceptional thinkers." They also looked at research such as the World Economic Forum's Top 10 Skills of the Future

FIGURE 1. Learning Aspirations



to learn what key skills and competencies students need to be successful.

The teams shared these ideas with the larger school community, including parents and students, to gather perception data, asking questions such as, “What are the most important skills and dispositions you want for your students?” and “What skills and dispositions should an ideal graduate of our school have?” It’s important to focus on a select number of skills that are critical for college and career readiness and reflect the identity and values of the school. In addition, before making final decisions on which skills to include, leaders should facilitate feedback sessions on drafts as ideas begin to emerge and become more concrete.

Develop Competencies

Once you have a set of learning targets you want to emphasize, the next step is to describe them in detail through a measurable learning progression. College and career competencies are often personal success skills—valuable workplace habits, self-management skills, social-emotional learning skills, and skills for interacting effectively with others (Hess, Colby, & Joseph, 2020)—that are transferable across courses, grades, and learning experiences. One challenge in developing the

learning progressions is keeping these competencies succinct. For example, describing “collaboration” could result in a laundry list of skills.

To avoid confusion, Singapore American School came up with a “1-2-3” approach for structuring target capabilities: For one “learning aspiration,” there are two competencies and three skills that are learning targets to measure in the classroom (Figure 2). For example, “Collaboration” has two competencies (“Engage in Teamwork” and “Navigate Conflict”) each with three skills (“Recognize and manage emotions,” “Recognize others’ feelings and perspectives,” and “Apply strategies to work toward resolution”). While this

doesn’t encompass all collaboration skills, it does identify the ones that emerged as most important through our design process.

To create a draft set of competencies to share, school leaders can form teams of P–12 curriculum leaders who have a high knowledge of standards, assessment, rubrics, and other curriculum development skills. Teams need to articulate a learning progression that works across grade levels and identifies novice-to-expert demonstration of specific skills. They should use student-friendly “I Can” statements that reflect increasing complexity and cognitive demand to describe the performance (Hess et al., 2020). The language also needs to

FIGURE 2. 1–2–3 Structure for Delineating Competencies

LEARNING ASPIRATION COLLABORATION	
<i>I can work effectively toward a common goal in the process of shared creation while optimizing group and individual contributions within diverse teams.</i>	
COMPETENCY ENGAGEMENT	COMPETENCY NAVIGATE CONFLICT
Build a shared purpose and plan	Recognize and manage my emotions
Monitor progress and manage challenges	Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others
Reflect on teamwork	Apply strategies to work toward resolution

be task neutral to provide multiple opportunities for assessment and performance (Figure 3).

Our school took a slightly different approach: we contracted with an outside vendor to draft the progressions, instead of writing the full progressions ourselves. This saved us a lot of time. Once the draft progressions were done, we held feedback sessions with faculty, and then tested the progressions in classrooms with students to see if the language was accessible. In places where students said the language was too technical or confusing, we revised it.

Map Competencies to Curriculum

While educators should have autonomy as they integrate competencies into their instruction, there is always a tension between complete instructional freedom and the need to guarantee that all students get equitable access to effective learning

experiences. If educators are allowed full choice of which competencies to implement, students may not grow effectively. So it’s important for the competencies to be clearly linked to existing curriculum to make sure they are embedded and not “one more thing” outside of the curriculum. To make this happen, you can create a map that assigns competencies to specific grade levels, teams, and/or disciplines. Figure 4 shows three competencies assigned to specific disciplines or grade levels.

To build this map, school leaders should engage in the following process (which is similar to what our school followed):

1. *Audit the existing curriculum for opportunities to leverage strengths.* For example, look at how a course might already include collaborative learning activities.
2. *Draft a map that assigns competencies to curriculum areas to ensure*

all students get equitable amount of exposure (Figure 4). For example, you might assign both grade 7 science and grade 9 English the competency of “Engage in Teamwork.”

3. *Seek feedback from teacher leaders on level of “lift” and ease of implementation.* For example, school leaders can label and share the competency map with “red lights,” for challenges, and “green lights,” for skills that are easily to implement. Teacher leaders can give feedback on the accuracy of the changes.

4. *Revise draft from feedback.* While some competencies may be a larger lift to fit in a course or grade level, there may some that don’t fit at all. For example, you might want to reassign “Design Solutions” to a different course and instead assign “Navigate Conflict” when there isn’t an appropriate unit or assessment that would call for students to engage in the design process.

Once the map is complete, it’s important that school leaders clearly

FIGURE 3. Sample Skill Progression for ‘Navigate Conflict’ Competency				
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4
Recognize and manage my own emotions	I can practice a way to calm myself down (e.g., count to 10, separate myself, take a deep breath), with guidance.	I can use a strategy to calm myself down when I am feeling upset, with prompting. I can say how I feel.	I can use one or more strategies to calm myself down when I am feeling upset. I can identify the specific emotion/s I am feeling.	I can recognize the emotion/s I am feeling by pausing to notice and reflect (e.g., What am I feeling? When did I start feeling this way? What is causing this feeling?), and I can use one or more strategies to calm myself down. I can locate where in my body I feel my emotional response (e.g., anxious in stomach, tightness in chest). I can determine when I feel ready to talk to others about how I’m feeling.

FIGURE 4. Sample Cross-Curriculum Competency Map

			Collaboration	Communication	Creativity
	Competencies		Critical Thinking	Cultural Competence	
Grade Level	Total	Per Grade Band	Competency 1	Competency 2	Competency 3
Kindergarten	3	10	Produce Creatively	Engage in Inquiry	Advocate for Others
Grade 1	3		Navigate Conflict	Design Solutions	Advocate for Others
Grade 2	3		Engage in Discussion	Navigate Intercultural Settings	Advocate for Others
Grade 3	3	10	Produce Creatively	Engage in Inquiry	Advocate for Others
Grade 4	3		Navigate Conflict	Design Solutions	Advocate for Others
Grade 5	3		Engage in Discussion	Navigate Intercultural Settings	Advocate for Others
6–8 ELA	3	10	Engage in Inquiry	Navigate Intercultural Settings	Advocate for Others
6–8 Math	3		Engage in Discussion	Design Solutions	Engage in Inquiry
6–8 Social Studies	3		Navigate Conflict	Design Solutions	Produce Creatively
6–8 Science	3		Engage in Discussion	Deliver Presentations	Consume Critically
9–10 ELA	3	10	Engage in Inquiry	Navigate Intercultural Settings	Advocate for Others
9–10 Math	3		Engage in Discussion	Design Solutions	Engage in Inquiry
9–10 Social Studies	3		Navigate Conflict	Design Solutions	Produce Creatively
9–10 Science	3		Engage in Discussion	Deliver Presentations	Consume Critically
11–12 ELA	3	10	Engage in Inquiry	Navigate Intercultural Settings	Advocate for Others
11–12 Math	3		Engage in Discussion	Design Solutions	Engage in Inquiry
11–12 Social Studies	3		Navigate Conflict	Design Solutions	Produce Creatively
11–12 Science	3		Engage in Discussion	Deliver Presentations	Consume Critically
K–12 VPA	3	n/a	Engage in Teamwork	Deliver Presentations	Navigate Intercultural Settings
K–12 PE/Health	3		Engage in Teamwork	Navigate Conflict	Advocate for Others
K–12 World Languages	3		Produce Creatively	Navigate Intercultural Settings	Advocate for Others
K–12 Tech, Electives, Catalyst	3		Deliver Presentations	Engage in Inquiry	Consume Critically

communicate the “What, Why, & How” of the finished product. Teachers can refer to the map to know what competencies they are required to teach and use it in their planning and team meetings to create lessons and modify assessments.

Develop Performance Assessments

One way to effectively measure student progress in developing college- and career- readiness skills is to use performance assessments that call for independent knowledge transfer.

Teachers might assess skills such as “navigating conflict” and “designing solutions,” for example, through observable performances, such as presentations, demonstrations, or products that require the students to apply their learning in new and novel

situations. In fact, these transdisciplinary skills place value on students being able to think critically about new information and complex issues throughout their lives, and persevere in challenging tasks year after year (McTighe, Doubet, & Carbaugh, 2020).

One example from our school was in a Grade 1 science unit. Students took on the role of engineers and used materials to design a solution to a human problem by mimicking how plant or animal external structures function to help them survive and grow. This performance assessment gauged not only science content, but also the skills for the competency “Design Solutions,” which aligns to our learning aspiration of creativity. The students tested out ideas and received feedback on both science skills and creative skills, such as brainstorming, experimenting, and reflecting. This is where the teaching and learning of these skills come to life, assuming the tasks are complex, relevant, and authentic to students’ lives.

Monitoring Progress

As implementation continues, it is important for leaders to continually monitor progress with clear goals and expectations through classroom observations, curriculum artifacts, and teacher surveys. For example, during one year at our school, we asked teachers to design or refine a performance assessment aligned to a competency and implement it with

students in the classroom. Supported by professional learning opportunities, teachers worked in teams to implement and reflect on their learning. Leaders then used these assessments as a measure of accountability. In addition, leaders assessed the quality of the performance assessments to identify areas of strength and areas of growth, which informed professional learning and goal setting for the following year. Our next step is to engage in intentional classroom walkthroughs to collect evidence that the skills are taught in the classroom.

A Map for the Future

The work of integrating college and career readiness into the curriculum is both exciting and challenging. It allows teachers to work together to intentionally teach and assess students’ progress in critical skills, but requires a clear and inclusive implementation process with ongoing support and professional learning opportunities for teachers.

Because of this, school leaders will need to develop their own multi-year plan that includes parent, faculty, and student voices, and they will need to allow feedback to drive decision making. While there may be changes to the process in terms of timeline and structure, leaders should remain committed to this work, to arrive at the finish line where they can say, “We intentionally support our students’ college and career readiness.” 🐼

REFLECT & DISCUSS

- What methods do you currently use to track whether students are developing “future-ready” skills?
- How might you start creating a map to track competencies you want students to develop over time?

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The Middle Matters

Regular attendance in middle school is one of the strongest predictors for success in high school—and beyond.

Jennifer Ciok

The bell rings. You are standing in the hallway welcoming students as they arrive. You overhear an intense conversation happening between a group of 8th grade boys about the newest drama between two celebrities. A few 7th graders share with you a good thing that happened in their social studies class. A bunch of 6th graders are racing to make it to class on time. You are glad to see so many of them in the building, but in the same moment are worried about the quarter of middle school students who are likely absent that day (Hays, 2024). Questions are swirling among staff: *Why are so many students not coming to school? How can we get them to come? How can we get them here on time? How can we continue to teach the students who are in class every day, but also support the ones who are not?*

Though concerns about attendance are not a new issue, they have become more pressing and pervasive since 2020. Almost double the students nationwide are considered chronically absent (missing more than 10 percent of the school year for any reason) compared to pre-pandemic levels (Hays, 2024).

For middle schoolers in particular, being chronically absent in these critical years can be the start of a pattern that persists throughout the rest of their school career. A pre-pandemic longitudinal study (<https://hqpbl.org/>) of students in Utah found that chronic absenteeism begins to rise in middle school, and that the more consecutive years of being chronically absent for students led to a greater likelihood of a student dropping out. For each year that a student is chronically absent starting in 8th grade, the odds that he or she will drop out approximately double (Utah Education Policy Center, 2012).

More recently, in 2022, the University of Chicago's To&Through Project released a report (<https://hqpbl.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/FrameworkforHQPBL.pdf>) finding that students with strong grades and attendance in elementary and middle school were far more likely to graduate from high school and then enroll in college. In fact, students who had above a 3.0 GPA and 90 percent attendance were twice as likely to graduate and almost four times as likely to attend college than those who fall below in both of those metrics (Seeskin et al., 2022).

Understanding Student Experience

Knowing that attendance is one of the strongest predictors of success for middle schoolers in high school and beyond, and that higher attendance is linked to a higher GPA and high school graduation, it is important to understand why students who are coming to middle school continue to come and why those who don't aren't. There are many reasons why middle school students may be absent from school, and many of those problems may not entirely be in their locus of control. Barriers like illness, food insecurity, having to help care for younger siblings, other responsibilities at home, or unreliable transportation can cause students to be late or not come at all. Violence in a community can lead to students being afraid to travel to and from the school campus. Some middle schoolers are unsure of how they fit into their community and can experience anxiety or bullying, which can lead to missed days or weeks. Each of these factors requires a different approach and level of support for students and their families.

A short culture and climate survey can be helpful to better understand the perceptions students have of the school and their experiences overall.

(See the sidebar for examples of questions to ask.) For students who are regularly in school, this type of survey can help give school leaders information about both the positives of the school experience and what potential changes need to be made. Educators should share the purpose of the survey with students and let them know what they will be doing with the information. This will help to get more truthful and robust answers from students.

It is also important to find out why students aren't attending school regularly. In these cases, surveys are not enough. Often-times, because they are chronically absent, these students' voices are missing in survey data, or students haven't been in school enough to feel like they can accurately answer the questions. Conducting a focus group (<https://app.definedlearning.com/project/B53604B2-1607-47CC-9E31-4BBA528CFAB1>) or an empathy interview (<https://educurious.org/courses/untold-stories-of-the-revolution/>) with students (and potentially their families) may help to gather additional information. The principal, counselors, or other team leaders can create a focus group of chronically absent students to give them an opportunity to build off one another as to the barriers they face in coming to school. Watch for body language and for those who do not participate to see if follow-up is needed. For an empathy interview—a one-on-one conversation with a student to understand their story and challenges—make sure that the student knows that they are not in trouble and that you are there to listen and understand what is keeping them from attending school. Stay curious when having these conversations and

use them to better understand the experiences of your students.

Once you have a better understanding of why students are missing school, you can start to assemble teams who can support them and their families. These teams are most effective when made up of staff who can bring different approaches to problems, such as administrators, counselors, teachers, or attendance coordinators.

Building Trusted Connections

Having a trusted adult at school is essential for middle school students in a time of development when they are trying to figure out who they are, who they might want to become, and how they fit into the school community. As Brooklyn Raney writes in *One Trusted Adult*, having a trusted adult during the period of adolescence “can significantly reduce risk, give you a safe place for processing normal life questions, provide a teacher and model of important life skills, and help you calibrate your inner compass” (Raney, 2019, p. xviii).

Having a positive, trusting connection to an adult at school has also been shown to “have tremendous benefits that include reduced bullying, lower drop-out rates, and improved social-emotional capacities” (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2023).

Here is a strategy that I have used effectively with schools to identify students who may not have a strong connection at school and help them start the process of building that connection.

Begin by asking students if they feel connected to an adult at the school and why. This can be done in a quick entrance or exit survey. Just make

Survey Students About Their Connection to School

Why aren't students coming to school regularly? A simple survey can help you understand the root causes of absenteeism—and also highlight areas for improved student connection to school. Questions like the ones below can help identify themes and patterns of students' experiences.

Scaled Questions

(1-strongly disagree to 4-strongly agree)

- Our school is a welcoming place for all students.
- I can go to a teacher when I have a question about their class.
- I can go to a teacher when I have a problem.
- I am happy to come to school each day.
- The work we do in class is connected to things I am interested in.

Open-Ended Questions

- Which teacher do you have a connection to? Why?
- Which project/assignment/unit has been your favorite this year? Why?
- What has been your favorite moment at school this year?
- What is something that you think our school does well?
- What is something that you think our school could improve?

Source: Jennifer Ciok

sure that you have a way to track the information and gather all voices. Flag students who note that they don't have a connection to anyone in the building.

Then ask teachers to identify students who they think would come to them with a problem. Flag students who are not identified by any teacher. Then compare the lists. If there are students who didn't feel a connection to any teacher, but certain teachers felt those students would come to them with a problem, ask the teachers to build a connection to those students. For students who named a teacher, but teachers didn't name them, make sure that the trusted teacher knows that the student feels connected to them. If there are students who said they didn't have a connection to anyone and teachers also didn't identify them, then find teachers who are willing to build an intentional connection with those students.

Once teachers have their individual lists of students to build intentional connections, ask them to check in with those students as often as possible throughout the week about something other than their performance in school. Aiming for even a two-minute check-in each day can make a huge difference in building that connection.

Every two to three weeks, ask teachers to share any important information that they learned about their list of students in a team meeting. Keep track of relevant information (such as students' interests, challenging home situations, or interactions with peers) in a spreadsheet so that you can see patterns and trends and note if additional support is needed. Midway through the year, have students answer the

same questions again, and see if more students feel a connection or if additional students need to be added to the intervention.

Having trusted adults who are looking out for specific students helps not only to build connections, but also to problem solve when troubling patterns arise around social-emotional needs, attendance, behavior, or grades. One middle school team I worked with who put this into practice saw a big improvement. Two-thirds of the students who said that they did not have a connection at the beginning of the year were able to name a trusted adult halfway through the year. Teachers also reported that they understood their students better and that they became better listeners to students' needs when they intentionally sought connections with them. They also saw students that they check in with taking more accountability for their grades, attendance, and behavior.

Engaging Students in Learning

Though some attendance barriers go beyond what an individual educator can solve, there are some challenges that can be improved by making changes in the classroom to help students feel more connected to their learning. Middle school is the second most active period of brain development, a time when synapses are being strengthened and students are exploring their identity in a variety of new ways. To engage students in learning, educators need to show students they are seen, valued, and heard. They need to give students opportunities to build peer

relationships, share their own stories, and feel like their work is connected to their life and contributing to their community.

Understanding how students are experiencing the classroom is the first step in knowing which area to focus on. After analyzing survey results and information collected from focus groups or empathy interviews, school leaders can share relevant findings with teachers so they can improve the experiences of students in their classrooms. Here are a few examples of ways educators can better engage students.

Encourage students to share their stories.

Knowing that your story matters and people see you for who you are is one of the most important things for middle school students seeking belonging. As adolescents grapple with who they are and how they fit into their community, storytelling is a way for them to see each other's humanity and perspectives and find common connections.

Storytelling can happen in many ways. Teachers can give students time to share a story about their lives outside of school (*What is an experience that you have had where food was an important part of the story?*) or something connected to their past (*Share a time when you felt celebrated?*). Teachers can assign a bigger project where students have to interview someone from their family about an experience or time period in history and share it with the class. They can give students

choice in how to share their story and make sure their peers have the opportunity to give positive feedback. Sharing of stories can break down barriers and build a strong sense of belonging where students feel connected to their classroom and school community.

Help students build intentional connections.

Building structures where strong peer-to-peer relationships are central to the success of the classroom is one way to make students feel valued in the classroom. This could take the form of a peer buddy system in the classroom where students meet to hold each other accountable for the goals they set. It could also be opportunities where students come up with and lead the opening question of the day. *Would you rather?* questions are always a favorite, as are any questions that generate some controversy. You would never guess how much discussion comes from asking the question, *Would you rather have pizza or tacos?* or *Which is more important to you, loyalty or humor?* These activities can help make school feel more relevant to students and show them their voice is valued.

Connect learning to life outside of school.

Why are we doing this? How will this ever help me? are questions that students often ask and teachers dread having to answer. Telling students that they will “need this later in life” often seems like an inadequate and unsatisfying response. Helping students to make connections between

what they are learning in school and life outside of school builds relevancy and a greater understanding of the content. This can happen in small ways, like giving students a choice in what they are learning or how they are sharing their learning, having them practice a relevant skill like public debate, or having students make and share their own connections to the content through writing or group share-outs. This could also become an entire unit where students engage in a passion project or a service-learning project that allows them to take some action to help their community. Giving students the opportunity to have this type of choice and voice allows them to know that they are being heard and that their voice matters and can make a difference.

Paving the Path for Future Success

For many middle schoolers, school can bring up a lot of emotions and can come with a lot of barriers. Understanding how students are currently experiencing school, making sure that all students have a trusted adult in the building, and figuring out new ways to engage students based on their current development and the need to feel seen, valued, and heard, can truly make a difference in growing a strong community where students know that they belong. 🍌

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RELECT & DISCUSS

- What are a few ways that you currently gather data from students about their experiences at school? How do you and your colleagues act on that data?
- Of the three strategies—sharing stories, building connections, and connecting to life outside of school—which do you think is most needed in your school or district? Why?

How to Create Daily “Sparks” of Connection with Middle Schoolers

Themed days and months help make student learning more meaningful and memorable.

Jennifer Ciok

Middle school represents a pivotal moment in students’ development—a time when they begin asking deeper questions, seeking greater meaning, and facing new social and academic pressures. Unfortunately, it’s also when classroom engagement often begins to wane.

In *The Meaningful Middle School Classroom: How to Spark Engagement That Fosters Deep Learning*, educator Jennifer K. Ciok addresses this challenge head-on, drawing from more than 25 years of experience to offer

practical approaches that reconnect students with their learning. Ciok shares that meaningful education requires consistent, intentional effort to help early adolescents see themselves and their experiences reflected in their learning.

This excerpt provides teachers with accessible frameworks that make such connection-building a regular part of classroom life, ensuring that middle school students receive the support they need during this critical developmental stage.

A Calendar of Connection

Helping students to connect to their learning can’t be a once-a-month or once-a-quarter thing. As a teacher, take at least five minutes every day to plan how to help students create those meaningful connections. Whether it’s through storytelling, the arts, or tying a topic to something in their life outside school, the sense-making that comes from those intentional activities will help students remember what they learned, connect it to other learning, and see ways

to integrate it into their lives.

One way to be intentional about this “spark time” is to create weekly themes or a monthly calendar to make the effort visible to students. For each of these ideas, students can share their thoughts in pairs or small groups, through a collective or individual written response, or as a whole class. For example, a weekly calendar could include days of the week that focus on a different theme:

- **Meaningful Monday:** Have students share one

thing that they learned the week before or in the unit you are currently studying that they used outside school.

- **Talented Tuesday:** Have students connect a form of art to the content you are learning. This could be a piece of art that they find or something that you have them react to or create.

- **Why Wednesday:** Give students a dedicated opportunity to ask questions about what they are learning. The questions could be about things they find confusing, places where they need additional information, or the ever-present “Why are we learning this?” question. Some students can be apprehensive about asking for help, so giving them the opportunity to do this every week can make the practice more routine and help all students to advocate for what they need.

- **Talkative Thursday:** Have students share a story about themselves related to the content they are learning or something that is happening in the school.

- **Facts and Figures Friday:** Share data from the week with your students to gather additional feedback from them on one or more aspects of your class. This data could come from a more formal survey regarding classroom culture. But it also could be looking at one question that many students missed on an assessment or an assignment that many students didn’t turn in to find out why. Make sure this is information that you are ready to hear and that you do this in such a way that the students feel that their voice will be valued and that their thoughts and opinions will be heard and acted upon.

If monthly themes fit better into your planning, here are examples of specific focuses for each month:

- **Storytelling September:** To build connections to start the year, use this month to have students share their own stories in a variety of ways.

- **Options and Opportunities October:** Giving options and new opportunities to your students could be as simple as letting them choose which question they answer as an opener. Having students making choices about what works best for them gives them more confidence and allows them to see that their opinions have value.

- **Noticings November:** Take time each day to

gather noticings, opinions, and ideas from students.

These might be about how their first months of school have gone or what they thought of a particular assignment or project. Soliciting your students’ voices early and often will give them practice in sharing their thoughts and feelings throughout the year.

- **Data Dive December:** As the first semester comes to an end, use this month to share data with students and gather additional feedback from them to make changes for the second semester.

- **Journaling January:** The beginning of the calendar year is always a good time to reflect on the year that has just ended and set goals for the new year. Throughout January, give students the opportunity to engage in a dialogue journal with you or reflect on goals they set for themselves. The second semester in any grade in middle school often sees big changes, especially as 6th graders are getting comfortable with being middle schoolers, 7th graders are thinking about what it will mean to be the oldest students in the building in just a few short months, and 8th graders are thinking about high school. Journaling can give students the opportunity to share their thoughts, and it allows teachers to gain insights into how students are feeling.

- **Flair February:** February can be a tough month at school. It can be cold and dreary, depending on your location, or maybe it’s just the time of year that seems to drag. Use this month to brighten up your curriculum by intentionally sharing art that connects to the students’ learning each day. The “flair” that comes from visual art, music, cartoons, photographs, and other forms can revitalize this time of year and give students landmarks to connect their learning to.

- **March Madness:** Playing off the annual basketball tournament, create a bracket of various activities for students to do each day that connect to your curriculum. An example of this could be a storytelling activity versus an art activity, or a drawing activity versus a music activity. Throughout the month, have students choose (and do!) the activity, while voting along the way to get to a final winning activity that students connected to the most. This activity allows you to revisit themes from the past months and see what really stuck with students or what they found most engaging throughout the year.

• **Advice April:** Throughout the month, have students do a series of reflection activities, beginning with the advice they would give to students coming into the grade or class. Then have them think about things that they wish they had known before starting the year. Find ways to share the insights with incoming students, whether through short videos or writing or even presenting to their younger peers, if possible. These activities can be beneficial for both you as the teacher and for your current and future students. They give students the opportunity to reflect on how they have grown throughout the year, what changes they have made, and points at which they wish they had done something differently. For you as the teacher, hearing this advice can help you to think differently about how to welcome students into your classroom, or it can help you to consider small changes that can help students be more successful.

• **Making Meaning May:** As the year comes to an end, May is a good time to review everything students have learned during the year, have them create a through-line between the different units, and think about how the skills and topics they learned about in all their classes connect to one another. This thematic focus helps to build relevancy and student understanding of the interconnectedness of the various elements of their learning. 🍌

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