



BRIEF

Leading for Young Adolescent Development

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The University of Virginia’s Youth-Nex Center and Curry School of Education and Human Development have launched the Remaking Middle School Initiative, an effort to elevate the middle grades and realize their promise for all students. To achieve these goals, the Initiative commissioned a set of four working papers that synthesize a robust body of research on early adolescence, informing supports and resources that can help the field make the most of this developmental phase. This brief highlights key ideas from the fourth paper in the series, which highlights how education leaders at all levels can support young adolescent development.

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To date, there has been relatively little research that examines educational leadership as it relates specifically to young adolescents and their development. Yet, effectively educating adolescents in the middle grades depends on the ability of educators and leaders to work toward a shared set of developmentally-aligned beliefs and goals. In fact, education leaders at all levels are in a position to build consensus and align resources, instructional strategies, curricula, and personnel in ways that support the developmental needs of young adolescents.

Shared Vision Across Levels

District leaders can support developmentally appropriate teaching and learning by identifying educational priorities for early adolescents—and aligning resources to those priorities. Districts that establish clear priorities for middle grades education can empower their middle school principals and school leadership teams to establish a vision that is meaningful and relevant to all stakeholders, including students, families, and teachers. This vision can then help inform long-term and intermediate goals for young adolescent development.

Education leaders at all levels can rethink how to allocate resources, assign personnel, and rethink the very structure of the school day in a way that aligns to young adolescents’ developmental needs.

Principals and school leadership teams can best establish and advance this shared vision by incorporating the input of a wide range of stakeholders, especially that of teacher leaders.

Organizational Structures

At the middle school level, organizational structure and planning should be responsive to students' social and psychosocial developmental needs, intrinsic motivations, and their connection to school. Such considerations are especially important in the context of serving young adolescents from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Organizational structures, like interdisciplinary teaching teams and flexible block scheduling, can pave the way for educators to shape curricula and instruction that help address the developmental needs of young adolescents. Such structures also account for the potential development of meaningful student-student, student-teacher, and teacher-teacher relationships, which can have impacts on early adolescents' academic and social outcomes.

The decisions that shape organizational structures have far-reaching effects on student engagement and learning.

Developmentally Responsive Leadership

Leaders at all levels must recognize and understand the cascading changes of early adolescent development—and prioritize the supports that students need to effectively navigate those physical, emotional, and social changes. This aspect of leadership necessitates the hiring of principals, teachers, and other staff who can structure learning experiences that support early adolescents' developmental needs. Middle school counselors, for example, are well-positioned to help students acquire effective interpersonal skills; manage emotions; explore career interests; and realize their academic potential.

Leaders also should provide relevant professional development opportunities that enable educators and staff to strengthen their capacities to foster belonging, offer student-centered learning opportunities, and promote growth mindset across their lessons. This is particularly imperative as most states do not require a specific certification to teach in the middle grades, even in light of the need to address unique developmental needs of students at this age.

Education leaders should promote distributed leadership practices, working in tandem with other staff to enact a developmentally-appropriate vision and direction for their middle school.

At the very least, middle schools can provide additional professional development opportunities throughout the school day to fully assess those needs. They can also structure professional learning communities that enable principals, teachers, and counselors to come together and address them in their interactions with students.

Developmentally responsive practice extends to instructional leadership. Leaders must ensure that curriculum and instruction is relevant, challenging, and promotes exploration and engagement. They must also focus on providing the instructional coaching and supports that ensure educators can effectively respond to the interests and needs of young adolescents, assuring their healthy development. In a distributed leadership model, principals can work alongside teacher-leaders and other staff at different leadership levels to enact the vision and direction of the school, collectively addressing problems of practices related to student learning and development.

Leadership to Meet the Needs of Young Adolescents in Practice

Leaders at all levels can address the educational needs of young adolescents by:

- ▶ **Assuring policies, programs, initiatives, and interactions are intentional and aligned to positively affect adolescent growth, development, and achievement.**
- ▶ **Prioritizing students' developmental needs in policies and expectations that outline how adults work with each other, how schools are organized, and how to train school leaders and teachers to be developmentally responsive.**
- ▶ **Ensuring teacher leaders play a pivotal role in disseminating knowledge, understanding, and practices that are responsive to the needs of adolescent learners.**

A full list of specific implications for practice are included in the corresponding [working paper](#).