

Middle School Years: No time to disengage.

by Hayes Mizell, Guest Columnist

Dear Mom,
Our school is having parents' night next week and my language arts teacher wants us to write our parents asking them to come. It's hard for me to write because lately we don't seem to be communicating too well. I'm not sure what happened, but last year when I went to middle school things started changing. School got harder and more confusing. Everybody was always telling me it was time to "grow up" and take more responsibility. Then they treated me like I was still in elementary school. I know what I should be doing, but it's so hard to do it. You can't help me with my homework like you used to, and when you ask if I've done my homework we seem to end up arguing. That's why I try not to talk about it. The funny thing is that I really wish you knew more about my school, my teachers, and what I am supposed to be learning, but I don't know how to explain it. Anyway, the school is having this parent's night next Tuesday, and I hope you can come.

Most parents would not like to receive this letter, but few would be surprised if they did. It seems that everyone—parents, educators, students—acknowledges that the "middle grades" can be difficult. Whether students are in K-8, a middle school, or a junior high school, the years between the sixth and ninth grades are characterized by profound changes.

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Developmentally, young people experience significant, physical, cognitive, psycho-emotional, and social growth. Like growth at any stage of life, young adolescence can have short-term, unpleasant side-effects. Children who were once compliant may resist parental authority. Whereas, parents once experienced their children's behaviors as relatively stable, they may find the emotional highs and lows of young adolescents unpredictable and extreme. Previously "responsible" young people may become more self-centered or experienced with risk-taking behaviors. As most adults can attest, these symptoms do not last and both parents and children survive this unique stage of human development. Indeed, without it, young people could not transition to adolescence and young adulthood.

The fact that young adolescence is a natural stage of life does not make it easier for parents to cope with it. Indeed, there is no institution in our society that systematically prepares parents to understand this developmental stage, or how to support children experiencing it. In spite of the mixed messages young adolescents send their parents, these young people desperately want and need the love and guidance parents can best provide. Young adolescents may challenge the values and expectations of their parents, but it is this very give-and-take that helps young people shape their own values. Wise parents bend but do not break.

Just as the trials of this developmental period tempt parents to disengage from close relationships with their children, it can also cause parents to become less active in their children's school. For many parents, school-related issues are one more occasion for potential conflict with their children in the middle grades. At the same time, young people beginning to assert their independence often discourage their parents' involvement in their schools. This may account for why there is a dramatic decrease in parent involvement from the elementary to the middle grades. Researchers have found that the percentage of parents highly or moderately involved in their child's education drops from 74% in grade school to 57% in junior high.

Yet, grades six, seven, and eight are critical in the educational development of children. If parents do not closely monitor their children's education during these years, the futures of their children may be in jeopardy. Many students do find the middle grades confusing and impersonal, less nurturing and fun than elementary school. However, it is possible to structure schools to prevent student isolation and anonymity.

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In many middle schools, students spend most of their time in a "house" of several hundred students that is one of several smaller units within a larger school. Within the house, students belong to a "team" of up to 140 students and consistently interact with the same group of four or five teachers who work closely together. In some schools, this team of teachers continues to teach the same group of students for three years, capitalizing on a deep understanding of each student's strengths and weaknesses.

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These structures are not panaceas for more effectively educating young adolescents, but they can provide the framework for a more personal and supportive education. Parents should demand that schools structure themselves to support the education of young people in the middle grades.

Even more important than these structures are teachers who understand the developmental characteristics and needs of young adolescents. Teachers need this knowledge to shape effective instruction for their students. Whereas young adolescents learn best through active experiences that engage both their minds and bodies, and relate to "real world" problems and issues, the instruction in most middle level classrooms consists of teacher-talk and seat work. It is no wonder that the academic performance of so many students plunges in the middle grades. Parents should demand that schools train teachers in effective methods of teaching young adolescents.

It is also in the middle grades that students begin to envision their education futures. Many students have the ability to pursue one year or more of education after high school, but their middle level schools fail to communicate high expectations. These schools neither provide students with information about post-secondary education opportunities, nor prepare students to obtain the most education they can. It is especially important for parents to be vigilant about the subjects their children take, and the levels of these subjects, because certain courses of study will not provide

the foundation students need in high school to enroll in college preparatory curricula. Parents should demand that middle level schools support all students to perform at high levels and aggressively prepare them to seek and obtain more education after high school.

Finally, parents need to know what they can expect their children to learn during the middle grades. Each year when a student begins the sixth, seventh, or eighth grades, parents should meet with the school principal and ask, "Exactly what can I expect that my child will know and be able to do at the end of this year as a result of having attended this school?" This is a fair and necessary question, but it is one parents seldom ask. Middle level schools should be able to describe what they want students to achieve, and how they will help students achieve it. If they cannot, it may indicate that education is an unfocused process in which the schools emphasize the "delivery" of instruction at the expense of student achievement.

The cracks are wide in middle level schools and too many students fall through them. Parents who send their young adolescents to school and hope for the best are exposing their children to risks that the parents would not otherwise tolerate. The early adolescent years provide a great opportunity for parents and schools to collaborate to support and nurture young people, as well as foster high levels of competence. This can only occur, however, if parents engage both their children and the middle level schools their children attend.

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Hayes Mizell is Director of the Program for Student Achievement of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in New York City. The Foundation has made a significant investment in middle school reform. Mr. Mizell suggests, "the best single resource on parental involvement in middle level schools is: *The Middle School Years: A Parents' Handbook* by Nancy Berla, Anne T. Henderson, and William Kerewsky. The book is available for \$12.45 from the Center for Law and Education; 1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 510, Washington, D.C. 20009. For information on bulk orders, call 202/462-7688.