

BULLETIN

Middle School Programs for Gifted Students

by

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Gifted students in middle schools pose a dilemma for educators. The middle school philosophy relies heavily on heterogeneous groupings of students into teams, thereby attempting to address the developmental needs of early adolescents. However, often the specific intellectual and social-emotional needs of gifted students are neglected.

The middle school movement is a positive and sensible educational initiative. The old junior high school model typically ignored the special needs of early adolescents and treated them as miniature high school students. The shock of this transition occurred simultaneously with the physical and psychological changes of puberty. The middle school model intends to ease this transition by grouping students so that heterogeneous teams share the same groups of teachers. The aim of the team approach is to provide a stable peer group. The teachers plan interdisciplinary instruction emphasizing cooperative learning, and are alert to students who may be experiencing difficulties. This philosophy is designed to address certain demands placed on all middle school students. It allows for adjusting to the styles and requirements of several teachers, and then matching these styles to raise achievement and expectations for all students. The middle school

philosophy is also one that shifts greater responsibility for learning to the student, away from dependence on the teacher—and requires them to practice more self-discipline as they move through the complex physical, social and emotional changes of adolescence. One additional aspect of this movement is based on findings from early brain research (since called into question) that claims middle school students are at a learning plateau and should not be expected to progress intellectually. This led some middle schools to de-emphasize academic challenge and place the curriculum virtually in a holding pattern. Of course, middle schools across the nation implemented various combinations of the recommendations of this movement and few followed the entire philosophy.

Some proponents of middle schools have gone so far as to attack gifted programs and gifted students themselves. Their argument is that gifted students can have all of their needs met in the regular classroom. This may be true if the classroom teachers have extensive training in differentiating instruction, and expend the time and effort to meet individual needs. Other specious arguments put forth hold that providing gifted programs deprives other students of their proper share of resources, with the result that gifted students' need and potential for intellectual growth are ignored. Again, it seems that

anti-intellectualism rears its ugly head.

The emphasis on social-emotional growth and the effort to offer a sense of belonging in a group leads to glossing over individual differences and recognition of intellectual giftedness. The stresses and needs specific to gifted adolescents are not addressed. Students' efforts to accommodate to school and personal changes, coupled with increased quantity of expectations, frequently leads parents to perceive a dip in achievement. In addition, students may perceive the lack of academic challenge, along with a greater quantity of work, to be a waste of time. Cooperative learning may simply mean that gifted students spend most of their time teaching others who have not yet mastered the concepts. This often is an obstacle that does not allow bright students to move on to challenging work. At the same time, parents realize that school work now has bigger stakes in terms of preparation for competitive colleges, causing them to increase pressure to succeed. Furthermore, heterogeneous grouping may rob them of their support network of gifted peers. *Figure 1* summarizes certain middle school philosophies that have negative impacts on gifted students.

Tips for Parents of Gifted Middle School Students

Establish expectations for homework

- monitor completion of homework
- communicate with teachers and learn their expectations
- provide a quiet study area free of distractions
- seek help with homework when needed
- make use of excellent homework resource web sites, such as b.j.pinchbeck's homework helper, <www.bjpinchbeck.com>.

Provide organizational strategies

- establish priorities
- budget time
- set deadlines
- establish filing system for papers and homework
- use assignment books and binders with divider tabs

Encourage achievement

- help the child find his/her passion in life
- encourage involvement in extracurricular activities (better predictors of real-world success than IQ or grades)
- participate in leadership and/or peer counseling classes for the interpersonally talented
- investigate summer enrichment programs
- avoid excessive parental pressure for achievement—encourage but don't demand

Acknowledge the influence of peers

- invite friends to spend time at your house

Develop strategies for dealing with stress

(applicable to students and their parents!)

- use humor
- get some exercise
- find a hobby
- talk to someone

Prepare for high school

- develop an ambitious reading list
- visit museums, historical sites, and other places which encourage curiosity and investigation

(Adapted from Brug, L. (1999). What parents want to know about gifted middle school students and aren't afraid to ask. California Association for the Gifted Newsletter, Spring.)



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Middle School Philosophies

- Emphasis on self-esteem
- Cooperative learning
- Heterogeneous grouping

Negative Impacts on Gifted Students

- Decreased academic expectations
- Gifted as teachers/risk of underachievement
- Lack of access to intellectual peers
- Slower pacing and lowered level of challenge

Figure 1

School districts who seek to avoid the above pitfalls and provide quality programming for their gifted students in middle schools must follow several basic principles:

- Acknowledge the presence and needs of gifted learners in the middle school
- Challenge students to develop talents without sacrificing peer acceptance
- Consider flexible grouping for gifted learners in some academic subjects based on abilities
- Understand potential limitations of some forms of cooperative learning
- Define and articulate appropriate curricula for the middle school
- Understand that while using teaching strategies which benefit gifted learners may enrich instruction for all learners, use of these strategies is not equivalent to appropriate education of gifted learners
- Provide for classroom teachers models of individualization and differentiation of instruction
- Provide continuous staff development for regular classroom teachers

Quality gifted programs in middle schools might adopt one or a combination of the following models:

- Pull-out programs—IEP and enrichment driven
- Interdisciplinary and humanities courses in lieu of regular education content
- Special topics or seminars
- Honors sections
- Content acceleration
- Gifted specialist as resource consultant to regular classroom teachers
- Gifted specialist teaming with classroom teachers (inclusion model)
- Tiered and differentiated instruction by regular classroom teacher
- Mentoring opportunities
- Clustering of gifted students within regular classes or teams
- Curriculum compacting

(Adapted from Roeper Review, volume 16.)

An example of a strong middle school gifted program framework has been developed by the Centennial School District. This framework provides for self-selection of topics and individualization based on students' areas of strength and ability. Ten strands are woven into curriculum units and students immerse themselves in professional roles.

Strands:

- Leadership
- Creative thinking
- Problem-solving
- Decision-making
- Critical thinking
- Research and independent study
- Self-reflection
- Organization/management
- Technology
- Individual/group communication

Students take roles of:

- Researcher
- Scientist
- Mathematician
- Social scientist
- Reader
- Writer
- Oral communicator
- Inventor
- Artist
- Scholar

Checklist for Middle School Gifted Programs

Advocacy

- Do administrators, teachers, and researchers work together to address the needs of gifted learners?
- Are parents consulted in determining the best educational programs for gifted learners?

High Expectations

- Do regular teachers habitually pretest for mastery of curricular goals?
- Do teachers avoid requiring gifted students to repeat material already mastered?
- May students learn material at an accelerated pace, and demonstrate mastery as they progress?
- Do teachers avoid holding back gifted learners or making them wait for slower learners before allowing them to move on in their intellectual pursuits?

Teaching/Learning Strategies

- Are problem solving and investigatory processes developed?
- Is ability grouping of gifted learners planned and consistent?
- Are cooperative learning activities monitored to ensure appropriate learning opportunities for all, avoiding use of gifted students as teachers?
- Are meaningful opportunities provided for students who are gifted in intellectual, athletic, and/or artistic fields?

Curriculum

- Is the curriculum regularly modified to challenge gifted learners?
- Do teachers provide challenging options for assignments?
- Are meaningful independent study opportunities, small group work, special interest courses, and apprenticeships available?
- Does the curriculum center on real problems and issues?
- Are student interests incorporated?
- Is the curriculum more abstract and complex, emphasizing depth over coverage?
- Does the curriculum include inquiry, higher level thinking, and development of creativity?
- Does the curriculum address psychological needs specific to gifted students— self-esteem, perfectionism, acceptance of giftedness, dealing with others' expectations, feeling different, stress management, and coping with failure?
- Do students have opportunities to explore the connections between the school curriculum and students' personal qualities, personal interests, possible careers, and quality of life?

Assessment

- Are systems for continuous, authentic, and appropriate assessment and evaluation of gifted learners implemented?

(Adapted from (1999) Measuring up to Philosophy and Middle School: The Balancing Act. [California Association for the Gifted Newsletter](#), Spring, 1999)

What Middle School Differentiation Is—And Is Not

A differentiated classroom offers a variety of learning options designed to tap into different readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. In a differentiated class, the teacher uses (1) a variety of ways for students to explore curriculum content, (2) a variety of sense-making activities or processes through which students can come to understand and “own” information and ideas, and (3) a variety of options through which students can demonstrate or exhibit what they have learned.

A class is not differentiated when assignments are the same for all learners and the adjustments consist of varying the level of difficulty of questions for certain students, grading some students harder than others, or letting students who finish early play games for enrichment. It is not appropriate to have more advanced learners do extra math problems, extra book reports, or after completing their “regular” work be given extension assignments. Asking students to do more of what they already know is hollow. Asking them to do “the regular work, plus” inevitably seems punitive to them (Tomlinson, 1995).