

6 Challenging Trends for Middle Schools



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Not long ago, the article “[8 New Characteristics of Young Adolescents](#)” reached thousands of middle school educators. This overview of new traits in our middle school students was met with overwhelming response from readers. We received a multitude of comments about how our descriptions of the characteristics and suggestions for responding to them were resonating with teachers and district leadership teams. Because of this feedback, we decided that this is the time to continue our candid observations by addressing some other trends and observations that we find are now impacting our young adolescent students and their educators.

The reality is: some recent changes affect all of us in education. We want to affirm that you are not alone in grappling with these developments. It is not just your students, your classroom, your school, your district, or your community feeling the effects. This is a matter of collective transitional change that is widespread over recent years — new or pervasive trends, behaviors, and challenges that occur daily in many of the middle schools across the country.

Since the publication of the “8 New Characteristics” article, we have seen evidence of positive changes in the trends we addressed. Educators report some improvement in school and class attendance as well as increased willingness of students to speak up in response to harmful or inappropriate behaviors by other students. We have also noticed a growing front of educators uniting around the issue of holding students accountable to basic classroom expectations. For example, some schools are using holiday breaks to re-

set their student expectations when the students return to school. And we are highly encouraged to find that discussion is flourishing — teachers are talking more about how our students have changed and what we can do to handle the changes.

Yet, there are still some new challenging trends that we notice in middle schools and classrooms. We can confront these with worry, complaining, or passing responsibility on to politics, society, or families. But, instead, we must meet them head-on. Let's dig into the underlying causes and background situations that confront our young adolescent students, their teachers, and their families today. We can work together to understand what is happening, find wise solutions to cope with the changes, and help our students learn and grow in healthy settings with ample support.

In addition to identifying these trends, this article offers some practical ideas for addressing each one. If you find any of these challenges in your individual classroom or school, we hope that you will find the following insights and suggested responses helpful. Use them as ways to jump-start your efforts to make changes in a positive direction.

What we are seeing:

1. Students' Loss of Empathy

Today's young adolescents live in a world of constant social media use, access to everything imaginable on the internet, heavy influence from online personalities, and hours of video gaming. In this world — often virtual — an individual can be anything, do anything, say anything, hurt anything, or even kill anything without guilt, remorse, or consequences. They can express "like" or "dislike" with a keystroke — without any thought about or connection to the person on the receiving end of the message. And often, they do this anonymously. These realities and influences have resulted in many of our children (and adults) losing the ability to care about or empathize with others. Shaming, laughing at, cruelly excluding, or exposing others has become the norm for their entertainment and communication. When we humans lose our ability to see others as valuable humans, we lose the ability to empathize. Unfortunately, this is a new fact of life in our schools: there is a general desensitization to harmful behaviors and painful situations. Too many students just don't seem to value or connect to the feelings or wellbeing of others.

Schools across the nation are experiencing heightened levels of disrespect, meanness, verbal and physical aggression, and violence. Many schools report an increase in fighting. Minor arguments escalate more quickly. And "We were just playing" situations now turn into major physical altercations. In many places, teachers and other school staff feel overwhelmed by the accelerating frequency of such actions. Yes, middle school students will always be attracted to the touching, slapping, pushing, wrestling antics of being 10 to 15. However, now many of our students respond to those common acts with more aggression and, at times, brutality. Schools also report more deliberate, planned incidents of violence by students towards other students.

What Can We Do?

- **Prioritize building community within your classrooms and schools.** By this we mean: build strong relationships among all members of your school community. Leaders can start by emphasizing the importance of connections and encouraging staff to take the time to build relationships with one another and with students. When staff members create a school environment where **every student** has a voice and is valued, empathy begins to take hold. Make connections among students a part of your lesson planning. Include multiple learning experiences and short brain breaks for students to work together and rely on each other. The more our students see the individuality and humanity in one another, the more likely they are to show care for one another and the less likely they are to demean others.

- **Change the mantra from “I teach English” to “I teach children.”** By changing our thinking in this way, we recognize that we teach the whole person. This means that we help students recognize their choices and learn from each one. Instead of relying solely on a stand-alone program to teach SEL skills isolated from real life, we teach in the moment when situations arise that offer immediate opportunities for authentic learning and practice. This also allows us to connect with students where they are in the moment, and it helps us to connect them with each other at that moment — fostering empathy, compassion, and humanity.
- **Deliberately practice kindness.** Consider integrating such activities into your advisory lessons as some of the many found in the Kindness 101 Library. This program, under the guidance of Drake University, is part of a worldwide “Character Counts” initiative. Find dozens of free, engaging videos, lessons, and activities online at https://charactercounts.org/digital_classroom/kindness-101-library/#.
- **Address student attitudes about meanness and violence.** Most schools and districts have a zero-tolerance policy for fighting among students. But even if those students are disciplined or suspended, some students walk around school telling everyone, including teachers, how cool the fight was and how awesome it was that a kid got attacked! These are all-too-frequent examples of the lack of emotional attachment to acts of violence — and to the absence of empathy for anyone who gets hurt. In some cases, students even take pride in witnessing, video recording, and sharing the violent events. So how should an adult respond when a student says, “Wasn’t that fight so cool?” First, don’t respond with the question, “Why do you think that is cool?” Instead, start by making a statement, “No, there was nothing cool about that fight. In fact, it’s extremely sad.”
- **Teach and practice skills of empathy.** Part of teaching young adolescents is to teach them appropriate responses that are beyond the popular, “That was cool.” Give clear, specific examples of why it is not cool to enjoy acts of violence. Describe how the attacked student might feel, and identify ways that attack could impact their life. Explain how the impact of violence that someone receives or witnesses might lead to other acts of violence.
- **Give students advice on how to demonstrate empathy** to the student who was attacked or otherwise mistreated. Provide students with simple statements they can use, such as: “I am sorry that happened to you. Are you going to be okay?” “Is there anything I can do to help you?” “If you need to talk, I will listen.”

2. Students’ and Parents’ Diminished Ownership of Responsibility

“It wasn’t me; I didn’t do it.” “It’s not my fault.” These phrases, or similar denials, form a common response from some students. (Yet, they might even say, “I didn’t do it,” **while** you are showing them the video of them doing exactly what they said they did not do.) Even in the face of evidence, there seems to be this overall lack of willingness to admit when they have done something wrong.

For this trend, we can blame many things such as societal models, social media, video games, the political climate, or parenting. But remember, students spend more waking hours in school than in most any other setting. So, even though some voices claim that teaching students to be responsible is the job of families, not the educators — we need to make **accountability** and **responsibility** top priorities for our part in the education of young adolescents. This includes responsibility for their academic tasks and performance, their social connections and treatment of others, and their personal behaviors and self-management.

Even parents or caregivers sometimes pass the blame. You might hear such excuses as, “Well, the other kid started it.” The adults may become upset, use foul language, or, in some cases, threaten staff

members. Overall, there is lack of ownership or responsibility. Could it be that parents are embarrassed by the situation or that they are not sure how to handle their child's behavior?

In general, many teachers and schools also report that their students seem disconnected from ownership of their academic matters. They wait for us to **do the work for them** —without eager participation in school life. This includes their lack of desire for good grades or completing of assignments.

What Can We Do?

- **Teach the art of making amends.** Ask students to suggest ways to make amends. They **are** capable of thinking about this and of generating ideas. They **do** have the ability to learn to forgive and the ability to take some ownership; they just need the skills, training and advice to put these into action. For example, ask a student: "How can you make this right?" This gives them the ownership of a situation. Often it is hard for anyone to verbally state what they have done and express remorse. A good way to start is to have them write down their thoughts about how to say they are sorry or how to make things right. Next, model with them the art of apologizing, making things right, and accepting apologies yourself.
- **Embrace mistakes.** Part of the experience of being a middle schooler (or being a human) is making mistakes. It's critical to learn how to learn from mistakes. Make your classroom and school places where mistakes are seen as opportunities for discovery and for practicing new behaviors or academic skills. For example: Instead of asking a student, "Why did you do this?" start with, "We all make mistakes. What matters now is that you tell the truth so we can move forward." You might go on to say: "Okay, now we know what happened. What can you do next?" Give students opportunities to make a plan for learning from the mistake and doing something different. The goal is to turn mistakes into teachable, positive lessons that further responsibility, accountability, ownership of behavior, and respect for everyone in the building. Students are empowered when they can clearly and truthfully identify a mistake and then follow it up with a repair or success.
- **Let parents and caregivers know that you understand it's hard for them to hear about their child.** Begin any difficult conversation with something like this: "I'm sorry Taylor made a mistake today. Let's problem-solve together to help your child avoid making the same mistake again." We suggest telling caregivers something we say often: "Middle school is about learning and, therefore, we want to give the student a consequence that will help in that learning process."
- **Set expectations for parent and caregiver behavior, especially when you are working with challenging parents or caregivers.** Find ways to define for adult family members — at the beginning of the year and with reminders as necessary —proper etiquette for their school behavior. Every school can start by addressing this topic in the student-family handbook. Then, use other tactics to reinforce. For example, when holding a meeting with family members, post a sign that states, "We welcome all parents and caregivers. We are here to listen, support, and advocate for you and your family. We do not wish to pass judgment or cause discomfort for anyone. We also know this is a tough time for you as the parent or caregiver. We try to make things as honest and caring as possible. If, at any time, foul language is used and/or a threat is made towards any staff member, the meeting will end. We will then send the information to you via e-mail. Remember we all have the same goal: the success of your child."
- **Form support groups for parents and caregivers:** Parents need a support group offered at the school to talk about the new attributes of young adolescents. Families don't need to be judged; they need to know how to set boundaries and offer positive solutions to questions from their child such as, "Why do I need to worry about my future? Will there even be one?" That may seem dramatic, yet many of our middle school kids do worry about the future and what it holds for them.

- **Explain to parents and caregivers how important it is to support your school, teachers, and staff.** Tell them these intentions: “We are here to help your child grow up to experience success in school, to take ownership of their actions, to learn to apologize, and to be polite to others. We need your help. We want to work together with you as a team to accomplish these goals.”

3. Curriculum and Instruction that Isn’t Capturing Student Interest

Now more than ever, we see a major disconnect between what curriculum is offering our students and what they truly want to learn. Middle schools need to start asking. “Has the push for test scores really helped to engage our students?” and “Have we moved away from some of the great, engaging hands-on activities that keep our students up, moving, and thinking?” You may remember that, before the pandemic shutdowns, middle schools were moving into more creative instructional approaches, student groupings and interactions, and debate. Has your school or classroom moved back into more of an intriguing, active approach, or are you feeling too tied to less-engaging curriculum and instructional strategies?

Traditional teaching cannot reach students who have access to unlimited creativity, novelty, and excitement that they can access today on digital apps, video games, and internet platforms. Our students are pushing back against some of the usual content and instruction, asking such questions as: “Why are you talking to me about this? I can Google it!” or “Why should I read instructions for this when I can just watch it on YouTube in half the time?”

Young adolescence is a time for exploration. Most middle schools offer choice through elective (*essentials*) classes; yet there is little or no choice in the content-area curriculum classes. Students’ digital world offers them limitless topics and ways to learn. So, let’s not limit them in their school learning possibilities when they are craving more choice, relevance, and variety.

What Can We Do?

- **Greatly expand students’ choices and voices regarding curriculum and instruction.** We can infuse choice for students into most of our academics — choices about what to learn, how to learn it, and how to demonstrate it to others. Even when elements of the curriculum are must-have requirements, there are still innumerable choices for students in planning and carrying out their learning. But we teachers don’t have to envision all the choices. We can listen to our students’ voices. Ask them about topics and concepts of interest. Ask them how they can gain knowledge on these topics.
- **Ask students to plan the learning process.** Before starting a pre-described lesson, talk to your kids about the learning outcomes. Or show them the questions that will be on a quiz or other assessment. Then ask them: “How can we accomplish this together?” Get their ideas for how those outcomes can be accomplished, and make a plan together for the learning activities. They might fall out of their chairs in amazement that you are asking them how they want to learn something! But, believe us, you’ll certainly grab their attention. Create a timeline for what they will do. Final tasks on the timeline can be the assessment and a follow-up discussion of how well the assessment measured their accomplishments.
- **Turn over some teaching tasks to the students.** Take advantage of their abilities. For example, choose a different student each day to lead the start of class. Every classroom should have a set routine to start the class; it helps students get focused, on task, and ready to begin the day or class. (This can be a question or quote of the day, 6-minute silent reading, brief oral reading, entering assignments into the day’s agenda, community-building activity, etc.) When students take turns guiding this portion of the day, they are empowered. This process builds confidence, strengthens student voice, and fosters leadership and responsibility.

- **Allow students to show what they know in a variety of ways.** There are countless ways to assess what students are learning. Take detours from the test-and-quiz routine. For students to show one another what they have learned, go for more presentations, skit creations, demonstrations, artistic performances, and small-group round table discussions. This may mean that the teacher tells or evaluates less, and the students show more!
- **Go outside the content bunker.** If we (the authors) could make all the decisions about curriculum and teaching, we would teach all core classes through our electives (*essentials*) format. Imagine a physical education teacher teaching with a math teacher — using the gym as their chalkboard. After all, the gym is all about math: it's addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, proportions, equations, geometry of all kinds, time, distance, measurement, data, and statistics! All these can be taught while creating and playing games in the gym.
- **Use instructional time wisely.** Maybe instead of spending five days of instructional time working on a classroom project, we could do it all in one day for four hours by combining the core time. Yes, students would still go to their electives (*essentials*) classes, but during the core time they would just work on that social studies project. And yes, that means they would not have a science or language arts class that day (but they are likely using many language arts and possibly science skills on the project anyway). Imagine following this same process for extended science labs or for finishing and sharing polished essays. The best part of this is that you'd have other grade-level team members in the classroom to help support students while they work on their projects, experiments, or essays.

4. Teachers' Fear of Teaching Certain Topics or Lessons

Many teachers express that they feel stressed about how to (or whether to) address and teach certain novels, historical facts, or some scientific topics. They have such questions as:

- “Do our students really know the difference between facts and opinions and how do we deal with angry parents who disagree with facts?”
- “Has opinion become more powerful than historical facts and scientific research?”
- “How can our students gain knowledge when so much is politicized or anything remotely political or societal is questioned?”
- “How do we now teach debate while respecting others' opinions?”
- “Will I get into trouble for even dealing with this topic — even if it is in the standards or curriculum?”

Teachers don't want to be afraid to teach parts of their subject area, but there is a climate of uncertainty and caution about many areas of curriculum. This leads to skipping some topics or concepts and diminishes the value of the education students receive. The aura of caution can also cause confusion and anxiety for students.

What can we do?

- **Start with a climate of safety.** In order to have discussions or lessons that involve challenging topics, students need to know that they are in an environment where everyone's backgrounds and views are respected. Established practices must be in place wherein students have learned how to listen to one another without interruption, honor each other's opinions, and respond to each other kindly. Students need to be able to trust that the teacher will manage a discussion where all voices are heard and given value. We remind you of the necessity of building strong relationships with students and fostering real relationships among students (see the community-building advice under Trend #1). Without a foundation of caring and positive relationships, difficult conversations will crumble into chaos.

- **Practice respectful listening.** Venturing into controversial topics is and never has been easy. Yet varied experiences and viewpoints are valuable. So, if we don't teach our students to hear and respect one another even when they disagree — we do them and our society a huge disservice. Provide guidelines for student listening and discussion and offer plenty of opportunities for them to discuss basic topics.
- **Work with your curriculum directors** to form practices and protocols about how to address parents and caregivers when they question the content or the instructional methods.
- **Talk with your principal** about how they will handle a student or student's family member who is disgruntled or angry about a curriculum topic. We know that teachers crave someone to have their backs when they teach difficult topics. It is helpful if school leaders have pre-established processes that assure support so that teachers don't have to be afraid to teach their subjects.

5. The Inability to Find and Keep Middle School Teachers

It is harder these days to get teachers into the profession; there is a shortage of well-prepared teachers; many schools are hiring teachers that are not trained for the specific subjects or levels they are teaching; and it is challenging to keep teachers in the profession. Also, many of our experienced teachers are poised to retire. In some cases, unrealistic expectations of teachers or overwhelming requirements lead to early retirement or departures from jobs teachers once loved.

Currently (in many places), college graduates without teacher training are being emergency certified to fill shortages. Many positions are very hard to fill: there is a severe lack of special education teachers at all levels and of math and science teachers at the middle and high school levels. As many of us know, it is extremely difficult to find teachers who want to teach middle schoolers. Most teachers gravitate toward elementary or high school (and this means that more new teachers entering the middle school world have little or no training in understanding and teaching young adolescents). Even when new teachers choose the middle level, many have not been specifically trained in education for young adolescents.

These problems are more severe in some locations than others. Yet, we would guess that all of you have some recognition of these facts in your schools or communities. To be clear, we do not intend to belittle new teachers or the caliber of any teachers. We wish to describe the reality that we have a lot of new teachers and that — in addition to being new — some of them arrive not well prepared for the job they accepted. This leads to a great need for ways to bridge the gaps created by recent trends in hiring and placing teachers. We address this need by providing support and training for new teachers and for many veteran teachers who are taking on different subjects, grade levels, or responsibilities.

What Can We Do?

- **Build a welcoming community of educators.** Many teachers who are getting ready to retire will say that they stayed a few extra years because they love their school community and colleagues. Create a teaching environment where teachers are valued, encouraged, supported, and most importantly — where fun looms around every corner. This will result in teachers at all career stages who won't want to leave and who will embrace all the joys of working in a middle school.
- **Focus training on the teaching of young adolescents.** Are you providing a K-12 teacher induction process that just focuses on how to log into databases on laptops? Or does that process discuss the importance of identifying and discussing learning objectives before students begin any lesson? Do your pre-service and in-service training plans presume that all the students in your district have the same needs and characteristics? Or are you specifically teaching new middle school teachers how to understand the attributes and needs of young adolescents, how to engage

the young adolescents in relevant, meaningful learning, and how to deal with classroom management issues unique to the age group?

- **Connect new and experienced teachers.** Attention school leadership teams! Start now to take a close look at how you deliver professional development to new teachers, and find ways to entice veteran teachers to help train the next generation of teachers. Help your veteran teachers understand that they benefit from this experience as much as the newer teachers they help. This partnership leads to tremendous growth for all parties!
- **Administrators: meet with new teachers once a month.** To the principals out there who are thinking, “I can NOT put another meeting on my to-do list,” we suggest: this can be done by your AP or Dean (or shared with them). This practice provides new teachers with chances to ask questions, get help and support, and most importantly — to build relationships with administrators. Plus — you learn more about the skills, gifts, and needs of each new teacher and gain the valuable opportunity to help them develop as a fine middle level educator.
- **Give new teachers a head start.** Pair up experienced teachers with new teachers for setting up the classroom. The veteran teacher can share how to structure a classroom and suggest actions and lessons to start the first month of the school year on the right foot. Yes, this means paying both groups five to seven days before the school year starts. But there is no question about it — having the veteran teachers share discipline strategies, ideas to deal with parents or caregivers, and ways to motivate middle school learners is far more powerful than a few days reviewing district mandates and state testing processes.

6. Communication Gap between Leaders and Teachers

In over 30 years of experience in education, we have never heard so many references to the idea of *us versus them* (that is *teachers versus the administration*). Have we created a gap between teachers and administrators — and if so, why? Has the role of an administrator changed from supporting teachers and staff to just holding them accountable to specific mandates? Is there a decline in good communication between teachers and leaders?

Have we changed how we communicate with each other? Many teachers feel that administrators don't understand what is truly happening in their classrooms. In some cases, administrators have even expressed that they sense a lack of teachers' urgency to show academic gains and increased proficiency. Whether its extent is minor or major in a given school, an *us versus them* mentality causes serious disconnection and drawbacks in working together for the success of everyone in the school community.

While these questions and issues might not be the norm everywhere, too many in the educational community have felt the divide. Here are comments that have been shared with us as we work with schools and school districts.

“I thought we were about educating the kids, not all about appeasing a few parents.”

“Whatever happened to holding students and their parents or caregivers accountable? After all, you hold me accountable all the time.”

“Is there a real disconnect between school leadership and the teaching force?”

“Why has leadership bowed to the power of assessments?”

“When did the classroom become a testing factory?”

“Teachers need to be more rigorous.”

“That's the teacher's responsibility—not the leader's.”

What can we do?

- **Talk to each other.** Create a setting to discuss this topic: if and why a divisive gap has grown between teachers and administrators. Principals can ask their teachers to name five things the principal can do or supply to support them in the classroom. Instead of doing exit interviews, administrators can start doing **stay interviews** — asking teachers why they stay. Imagine what you could learn to help your school climate and culture!
- **Share what we can do to support each other.** Create a list of ways teachers can support administrators and have the leadership team share all the things they can and can't do to help provide support. Live in each other's shoes — teachers, shadow an administrator to see what they deal with during the day (or **be** the principal or other administrator for the day). The admin team can do the same by taking over the job of teaching some classes — or better yet — teach for a whole day.
- **Gather input.** Start asking everyone — leaders, teachers, parents, caregivers, and students what the priority of our schools should be. See if the parents and caregivers really care about test scores or if they care more about teaching their child to be a caring, respectful person and engaged learner. Be sure to make use of the input you gather.
- **Re-visit the view of standardized testing.** We need bold and brave leaders who see standardized testing as only ONE part of a child's story! Teachers feel the pressure to produce test scores more than to produce well-rounded students. Great administrators show a balance between assessments and the fun and excitement of learning. Discuss this balance with your teachers and, together, plan ways to gain and keep the balance.
- **Promote instructional co-leadership.** We need BILT (Building Instructional Leadership Teams) in every building. These teams are made up of administrators, teachers, team leaders, parents or caregivers, and students. Their primary responsibility is to drive the school's mission, give input on instructional plans and goals, and be the ambassadors of new initiatives among the staff.

We are up to the challenge! Yes, it is true that many schools have experienced: stalls or falls in academic growth, expanded challenges of student and educator mental health, increased disruptions of many kinds, heightened student behavior issues, dwindling support among parents and caregivers, teachers leaving the profession, and the mounting need for more teachers and more teachers well-trained in their fields — including that of teaching young adolescents.

Yet we also know that we are a resilient bunch. **We teach middle school, after all!** We are resourceful and creative, hopeful and smart. **We can** face the wild ride of a fast-changing world, **we can** adapt to handle the ever-pressing changes and needs. **We can** succeed at the job of teaching our young adolescent students how to grow the skills and knowledge for the world of today and tomorrow, the personal agency and sense of responsibility they'll need for life, and the kindness and compassion for others that helps them be decent humans. **We (teachers and leaders) can do this** by valuing, collaborating with, and trusting each other — by being brave enough to work together, meet fears together, love our students together, and take risks and grow together.

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