

"Musts" for Middle Schools

By Sue Swaim From *Middle Matters*

WHAT are the key elements needed to implement effective middle schools for young adolescents, ages nine to 14? National studies tell us *effective programs and practices*, not grade configuration, determines middle-level education quality. Further, research says that when educators of young adolescents incorporate the knowledge of learning and human development into instructional practices, students achieve.

To ensure every middle-level student achieves to highest potential, communities must focus on these qualities. Effective schools:

- Engage every student in a

relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory curriculum, in an environment fostering respectful and supportive relationships among students, faculty, families, and the community;

- Provide teachers and administrators who are specifically prepared and committed to teach students ages 9 to 14;

- Offer ongoing professional development for all faculty and staff;

- Use accountability and evaluation strategies promoting quality student learning and instructional practices;

- Make learning decisions based on data that go beyond single test results;

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- Emphasize the key role parents and families play in building a positive attitude toward education and supporting the schools' work;

- Build connections between the community and school that expand and enhance all students' educational opportunities.

Middle-level education pioneer John Lounsbury says, "The effective middle school is ... a laboratory of living where important lessons are derived from the relationships among and between students and teachers, as well as from the formal instruction.... Effective middle schools accept ... goals broader than the temporary acquisition of information or the mastery of basic skills."

We Believe

The National Middle School Association's *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* describes six characteristics needed to make appropriate program decisions in effective middle schools: educators committed to young adolescents, a shared vision, high expectations for all, an adult advocate for every student, family and community partnerships, and a positive school climate.

It also cites six critical program traits: challenging, integrative, exploratory curriculum; varied teaching and learning approaches; assessment and evaluation promoting learning; flexible organizational structure; pro-

grams and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety; and comprehensive guidance and support services.

Together, these 12 traits are a framework for what middle schools should and can be. Implementing them signifies the willingness of all stakeholders—students, teachers, administrators, parents, central office personnel, and community and school board members—to collaboratively develop and realize a shared vision of the foundation on which their school is built.

While every stakeholder is important, the principal has a particularly important role. Many middle-level principals are re-examining how they manage their time and resources to focus on student learning and informed curriculum, instruction, and assessment in their schools. By creating a school culture embracing the 12 traits, principals signify a renewed commitment to a learning community where the education and well-being of every student and faculty member is a top priority.

We know the key elements of effective education for young adolescents. We must ensure that effective middle schools, focusing on developmentally appropriate achievement for all young adolescents, are available in every community, and that all get a quality education developing his or her unique skills and talents to the fullest. 