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Ensuring Success and Closing the Achievement Gap for All of California's Middle Grades Students

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# Recommendation Five Relationships

"Real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject. We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom."<sup>1</sup>

**Recommendation 5 — Relationships.** Foster close relationships for accountability and engagement among students and with adults who share extended time through grade-level, subject-area, or interdisciplinary small learning communities. Provide an advisory program to ensure that each middle grades student has frequent contact with an adult mentor to plan and assess his or her academic, personal, and social development.

Relationships is one of the Recommendations in the Focus Area on [Developmental Responsiveness](#).

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**Footnote**

<sup>1</sup>Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: Harper, 1993, xvi.

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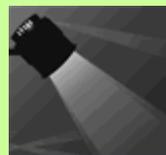
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## Quality Middle Grades Foster Relationships

Even though relationships are a thorny issue at all stages of human development, more careful consideration is required in middle grades schools where hormones, gawky physical growth, and a need for peer bonding replaces an earlier reliance on adults. In addition to the students' unique developmental stage, there is the complexity of overlapping layers of relationships within the school. For example, there are groups of teachers (leadership teams, professional learning communities by grade level and by subject, and friendships), small learning communities for students, peer groups, clubs, and sports teams. To be successful, all these groupings and teams need explicit norms, objectives, training, and facilitation to achieve their goals, resolve conflicts, and ensure effective communication.



### In the Spotlight

#### Mistletoe School—Built on a Foundation of Close Relationships

Mistletoe School is a K–8 school located in Redding, California of Shasta County. Mistletoe prides itself on creating a family atmosphere that goes beyond just serving the intellectual needs of the child. The school provides a personalized environment that supports students' ethical, social, and physical development as well. Each student connects with a homeroom teacher as a primary mentor/advisor to enhance and develop a sense of community pride and character. However, the trust and relationships built among students extends beyond the homeroom into their electives, extra-curricular activities, support systems, and sense of family.

The campus is physically divided into grade-level sections or pods which encourage collaborative relationships among adults and children. Primary and intermediate teachers foster relationships with middle grades students through a variety of contacts, including:

- Coaching sports teams and activities.
- Offering clubs such as the Cinco de Mayo group.
- Supporting activities and development of students through the Associate Student Body and Student Leadership teams.
- Connecting middle grades students to younger students through the Reading Buddies program.

Mistletoe's small learning communities are built on a solid foundation of 16 common character traits that define the stable, close, and respectful relationships the school staff enjoys with students and families.

- [Mistletoe Elementary DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Mistletoe Elementary School](#) (Outside Source)

Relationships are critical to learning. More and more research data suggest that students will have greater academic achievement in schools which foster caring relationships and prevent factors that create risk. Researcher William Daggett emphasizes the importance of relationships when talking about increasing rigorous and relevant learning:

Most successful schools have created learning environments that are not only rigorous and relevant, but also safe, secure, engaging, and caring for staff and students. Leaders in these schools know that humans are social creatures and that socialization based on strong relationships – between and among students, among students and staff, and with the larger community outside the school – are critical to optimizing growth for every individual. Socialization is also critical in language development, in the sharing and interchanges of ideas, and in fostering creativity. Socialization matters, whether a part of everyday classroom learning or in the more subtle but critical learning that takes place elsewhere in the school, whether in arts and music programs, clubs, extracurricular activities, or through coaching and mentoring. Ensuring that every student feels cared about, valued, and respected by the adults in the school is key.<sup>1</sup>

In *Schools That Develop Children*, James Comer, M.D., cites examples of exemplary schools:

. . . schools must create the conditions that make good development and learning possible: positive and powerful social and academic interactions between students and staff. When this happens, students gain social and academic competence, confidence, and comfort. Also, when parents and their social networks value school success and school experiences are positive and powerful, students are likely to acquire an internal desire to be successful in school and in life, and to gain and express the skills and behavior necessary to do so.<sup>2</sup>



## In the Spotlight

### **San Lorenzo Valley Middle School—Where every student is connected to a caring person on campus**

Knowing how vulnerable middle grades students are and how caring relationships can support their resiliency, the principal of San Lorenzo Valley Middle School wondered if each student in the school had a meaningful connection with at least one staff member. To find out the answer, the principal put a list of all the students' names on the wall of the faculty room and asked the staff to place a dot next to any student's name with whom they knew well. For example, they had conversations with the student and learned of his or her interests, friends, families, what they did over the weekend, or other nonschool-related activities. The students with no dots next to their names were then "adopted" by staff members so those students would know that someone on campus cared about them.

[Connecting with Kids](#) (WMV; 5:06) | [MOV](#) shares more information on the No Dot Program.

### **Rio Norte Junior High—Where team meetings focus on relationships**

A strategy used by some middle grades schools is to form interdisciplinary learning communities. At Rio Norte Junior High, team members plan time at each regularly scheduled team meeting to discuss students' needs and strengths. They understand that teachers are more influential when they take time to get to know each student. With teaming, students feel a part of a family. Through teaming, teachers are able to personalize learning strategies because each teacher brings a different perspective

of the student. The outcome of teaming is looking at the whole child where the socio-emotional aspect becomes as important as the academic.

[Making Connections](#) (WMV; 5:19) | [MOV](#) shares more information on relationships building through teaming.

In developmentally responsive middle grades schools, educators go out of their way to help students handle new pressures, including new perceptions of gender, changing roles in their communities, and the conflicting messages they receive through popular culture. Successful middle grades educators make sure students feel that they belong.<sup>3</sup>

Research also demonstrates the negative consequences that emerge from a lack of positive relationships such as isolation, cliques, and gangs. “In addition to low grades, lack of motivation, relationships with deviant peers, and social alienation from school-based peer networks during grades eight and nine all independently contributed to the risk of dropping out among students.<sup>4</sup>

More recent research supports correlations between caring relationships and graduating from high school on time. While there is a variety of reasons for dropping out, students often suggest that having smaller classes or small schools would have helped. Both of these really have to do with building relationships and connections to school. <sup>5</sup>

Successful middle grades schools, as those in the [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#) model school program, foster relationships among students and between students and teachers. The Schools to Watch™ criteria under “Developmental Responsiveness” and “Social Equity,” delineate specific practices that support young adolescents’ need for a personalized environment. Based on some of the Schools to Watch™ criteria, below are some specific examples schools provide students:

- Design fun or engaging standards-based activities (drama, skits, mathematics games).
- Allow students to work in small groups on projects and provide them with specified tasks and norms.
- Deliberately include newcomer students and loners into leadership and interest groups.
- Create several focus groups of students – from a broad representative spectrum of students in the schools to examine and explore their ideas on how to improve adult-student relationships. Take the students’ recommendations to heart and act on them.
- Create a school climate task force consisting of students, teachers, and other adults in the schools who continually assess the quality of the school environment.
- Establish rewards or recognition for positive behaviors.
- Make one-to-one time with students—check in!
- Make personal contact with students every day by doing something as simple as saying hello or giving a smile.
- Pay attention and actively listen to students.
- Learn the names of students and their life context.
- Be available to students by having an open-door policy where students feel comfortable dropping in if they need help or just want to talk.

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#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Daggett, Willard R. and Paul David Nussbaum. [How Brain Research Relates to Rigor, Relevance and Relationships](#) (PDF; Outside Source), October 2007.

<sup>2</sup> James P. Comer, [Schools That Develop Children](#) (Outside Source), The American Prospect , Vol. 12, Issue 7, April 23, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Rick Wormeli, [Moving Up to the Middle](#) (Outside Source), Educational Leadership, Vol. 68,

April 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Jaana Juvonen, Vi-Nhuan Le, Tessa Kaganoff, Catherine Augustine, and Louay Constant, [Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source). Arlington, Va.: Prepared by the Rand Corporation for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, 2004, 48

<sup>5</sup> Baenen. Nancy, ed. [Best Practices to Promote High School Graduation](#). Research Watch. E&R Report No. 8.15, January 2009.

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## Small Learning Communities

Generally, a [small learning community](#) (SLC) is any individualized learning unit within a larger school setting. Schedules allow students and teachers to meet together often. Frequently a SLC shares a specific location within the school. Combinations of small learning communities, teacher teams, and vertical looping are used to create learning environments where students and teachers come to know and care about one another.<sup>1</sup> The rationale behind SLCs comes from both research and common sense as far back as the turn of the twentieth century.

In 1888, Harvard University president Charles Eliot was concerned about the number of students who were dropping out after eighth grade. He proposed a change in the educational experience for young adolescents with more rigorous curriculum and opportunities to have enrichment and vocational classes. This instigated discussions among educators and the result was the start of a new school configuration: junior high school. The first one opened up in 1910 in Berkeley, CA.<sup>2</sup> This school was designed to be flexible for individual attention and for interdisciplinary instruction. In essence, the vision was to use the elements of SLCs.

Unfortunately, junior high schools slipped into an organizational structure that mimicked that of the high school. Most junior high teachers were prepared in programs that supported high school-like curriculum, instruction, and organization. Without structures and practices tied to young adolescent development and without specialized preparation for teachers, the junior high school did not survive.<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, William Alexander and Emmitt Williams proposed the formation of a new school configuration for young adolescents—the middle school. The middle school movement recognized that young adolescents are not simply older elementary school students nor younger high school students, but that there are dramatic changes that occur during this time of life requiring a radically different and unique approach to education. In line with this important insight, they saw the need for providing special instructional, curricular, and administrative changes in the way that was developmentally responsive for young adolescents. Among those changes were the establishment of a mentor relationship between teachers and student, the creation of small communities of learners, and the implementation of a flexible interdisciplinary curriculum that encourages active and personalized learning.<sup>4</sup>

Research as proven since the 1960's that students do better socially and academically when they feel safe and valued as members of a community. Kathleen Cotton found that student affiliation with the school community increases when students participate in small learning communities.<sup>5</sup> A 2006 compilation of research about small schools found that when socioeconomic factors are controlled, children in smaller schools:

- Are more academically successful than those in larger schools.
- Have higher graduation rates.
- Are more likely to take advanced courses.
- Are more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities.<sup>6</sup>

Similar findings have been made through many studies aimed at finding early warning signs to prevent high school drop out. The creation of small learning communities with teacher teams who share responsibility together for a group of students is a crucial component in reform efforts. There is growing evidence that such reforms are associated with higher rates of attendance, higher

rates of course passing, and higher rates of high school graduation. \_

To foster the positive aspects of a small school, many larger schools create smaller schools-within-schools or SLCs. However, size in and of itself does not constitute a successful small learning community. To be successful, a SLC provides a safe and secure learning environment where students feel known and valued by peers and staff.



## In the Spotlight

### **Toby Johnson Middle School, Elk Grove Unified School District, a 2006 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

To compensate for a large student population (1,475), Toby Johnson's staff members subdivided the campus into smaller learning communities called teams. Each team carries the name of a local university and serves 210 grade-level students. The teams include six teachers, a counselor, and an administrator who work with the same set of students for two years (looping). The team advisory program allows all students to have one of their core teachers advising, monitoring, and encouraging their social and academic progress.

In weekly team meetings, teachers talk about who is not doing well and where that student needs help. They also share what *is* working. They challenge each other to find out what students like and do not like and get to know their students' families. The two-year connection is a catalyst for teachers to hold seventh-grade students academically and behaviorally accountable because the students will be returning to their team for another year.

- [Toby Johnson DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Toby Johnson Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™ -Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Toby Johnson Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™ -Taking Center Stage](#)
- [Recommendation 5—Looping](#)

SLCs provide opportunities for meaningful participation,<sup>8</sup> encouraging students to take responsibility for learning. For more information, refer to the section on [meaningful participation](#) in Recommendation 4—Relevance. To learn responsibility, students engage as partners with their teachers to write individual learning plans (ILPs) and set goals based on what was difficult for them in earlier grades and what they would like to accomplish in school. Teachers help students set goals that are consistent with grade-level standards. Advisory programs link adults with students during their time at the school so students are free to discuss issues that concern them.

- Common SLC configurations found in both middle grades and high schools are as follows:
  - ◆ House Plans
  - ◆ Students/teachers are assigned to smaller groups.
  - ◆ Students share courses and teachers.
  - ◆ House plans are usually organized by grade level or sometimes vertically with two or more grade levels





## In the Spotlight

### **Goleta Valley Junior High School, Santa Barbara High School District**

After noticing an increase in bullying, fighting, suspensions, and racial segregation, Goleta Junior High's faculty used research on small learning communities to design a four-house system of teaming. Teachers involved students in designing the plan, which ultimately resulted in an improved school climate, a decrease in bullying and suspensions, and a significant rise in the school's API score.

The houses foster student bonding through friendly competitions with the other houses, involving community support, leadership opportunities, and other various activities.

- [Goleta Valley DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Goleta Valley Junior High School](#) (Outside Source)

- Career Academies

- ◆ Teachers and students are self-selected.
- ◆ Academic focus on a broad occupational area. The research supporting the Multiple Pathways Approach (Multiple Pathways to Student Success, also known as Linked Learning), makes it clear that career guidance for middle grades students is critical to a successful transition into high school academic and career technical courses.
- ◆ Academics include school-based and work-based learning experiences exposing students to career and exploration activities.
  - ▶ in-class projects integrate curriculum with the kinds of problems students might find outside the classroom or are set in the context of the world outside of school;
  - ▶ in-class career exploration curriculum games or activities with which teachers can integrate standards-based lessons, such as [The Real Game California™](#) (Outside Source) to show connections between academics and later career choices.
  - ▶ exposure to careers first hand through speakers, field trips, and job shadowing.
  - ▶ reflection, guidance and the beginnings of planning, facilitated by a guidance professional, resulting in educational and career plans that are revised over time.
  - ▶ Courses like **Gateway to Technology**, Project Lead the Way, or **Exploring Technology**, International Technology Education Association, are examples of career exploration courses that are specifically designed for middle grades.

- Pathways, Pods, or Cluster

- ◆ Provide sequenced career-related and academic courses
- ◆ Students are often scheduled together.
- ◆ Teachers form a team for interdisciplinary instruction in the pathway. [10](#)



## In the Spotlight

### **Mulholland Middle School, Los Angeles Unified School District**

Teachers and students are clustered in both house teams and academies. For example, the school offers a police academy, communications-technology academy, and a multicultural academy, in addition to both a humanities house and school for advanced studies houses.

- [William Mulholland DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [William Mulholland Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [House Teams and Academies](#) (Outside Source)

According to the 2001 *Taking Center Stage*, interdisciplinary team teaching fosters SLCs by building relationships so students feel connected. Experienced teachers report the following benefits of SLCs:

- **Guidance.** Teaming provides greater flexibility in planning and implementing counseling programs. Increased opportunities for tutoring and mentoring are provided because the teachers can work with the same students over longer periods.
- **Relationships.** Teachers and students get to know one another better. In most cases, a close relationship helps people to understand and support each other's goals, and the closer relationships help the students embrace the academic goals of the school.
- **Differentiation.** Teachers can learn from each other in frequent team meetings about how to work effectively with students who possess a wide range of learning abilities.
- **Learning.** Students experience a greater sense of personal identity, an enhanced ability to connect concepts across subject-matter areas, and an increased opportunity to engage in cooperative learning activities.
- **Intervention.** Teachers can identify at-risk students more easily so that earlier intervention and alternative instructional opportunities respond to individual needs. <sup>11</sup>



## In the Spotlight

### **Alvarado Intermediate School, Rowland Unified School District, a 2004 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

One of the purposes of Alvarado's interdisciplinary teams is to have students from diverse backgrounds and abilities work together in friendly competition against other teams in achieving positive goals for the school. Alvarado's interdisciplinary teams create heterogeneous groupings across students' academic abilities, English acquisition levels, special education needs, grade levels, and gender ratios. In addition, teaming students in small communities supports learning and relationships. Teams collectively earn points for friendly competitions. Each week, the team with the most points gets to fly its flag on the flag staff below the American and California flags. Small learning communities create a strong sense of belonging and pride.

### **Millikan Middle School and Performing Arts Magnet, Los Angeles Unified School District, a 2005 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

Designed as a performing arts magnet school, Millikan clusters non-magnet students in other interest-based small learning communities that are called academies (Outside Source).

- [Alvarado DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Alvarado Intermediate School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Alvarado Intermediate School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

- [Millikan DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Millikan Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Millikan Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)
- [Academies](#) (Outside Source)

According to [Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle School Reform](#) (Outside Source), a supportive environment is essential for attaining high achievement by all students. Providing students with opportunities to develop a sense of belonging to the school, a sense of ownership over the direction of one's learning, and the ability to recognize options and to make choices based on one's own understanding of the options are all strategies that help middle grades schools achieve their reform goals.<sup>12</sup>



## In the Spotlight

### **Castaic Middle School, Castaic Union Elementary School District, a 2003 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

Castaic Middle School features small learning communities within a six period day that includes an additional 17-minute advisory period.

- [Castaic DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Castaic Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Castaic Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

## Related Links

- [California Distinguished Schools Program](#), California Department of Education.
- [Converting to Smaller Learning Communities](#) (Outside Source), SchoolsMovingUp, WestEd.
- [Exploring Technology, Second Edition: A Standards-Based Middle School Model Course Guide](#) (Outside Source), International Technology Education Association
- [Gateway to Technology—Middle School Engineering Program](#) (Outside Source), Project Lead the Way
- [Policy Statement: Small Schools and Small Learning Communities](#) (PDF; Outside Source), Issue 4, June 2004, The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform.
- [Raise Your Students' Emotional-Intelligence Quotient](#) (Outside Source), Edutopia.
- [Tips for School Administrators for Reinforcing School Safety](#) (PDF; Outside Source), National Association of School Psychologists, (NASP).

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Balfanz, Liza Herzog, Douglas J. Mac Iver, [Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Track in High-Poverty Middle-grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions](#), (PDF; Outside Source) Educational Psychologist, 42(4), 223–235.

<sup>2</sup> [Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood History and Society](#), (Outside Source) faqs.org.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong, Thomas. The Best Schools. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Cotton, New Small Learning Communities: Findings from Recent Literature, Portland, Or.: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Lorna i, [The Hobbit Effect: Why Small Works in Public Schools](#), (PDF; Outside Source) The Rural School and Community Trust, 2006, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Martha Abele MacIver, Robert Balfanz, Vaughan Byrnes, Dropouts in the Denver Public Schools: Early Warning Signals and Possibilities for Prevention and Recovery, The Center for Social Organization of Schools Johns Hopkins University, 2009, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Resilience & Youth Development Module, Prepared by WestEd and the California Healthy Kids Survey: California Department of Education, 2002, 8.

<sup>9</sup> [Multiple Pathways to Student Success](#) (PDF; 4/85MB; 224pp.), California Department of Education, 2010, 95.

<sup>10</sup> Rose Owens-West, [Some Big Ideas About Smaller Learning Communities](#) (PDF; 426 KB; 24pp.), Middle Grades Spotlight, 2006, 4, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Taking Center Stage. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2001, 131.

<sup>12</sup> [Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform](#) Alexandria, Va.: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006, 24.

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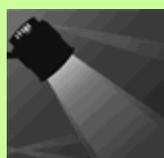
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## Relationships with Peers

Peer influence (sometimes negatively labeled “peer pressure”) is another powerful developmental force. However, rather than being inherently negative, resilience research has documented the positive power of peers and the need to belong. Studies have shown that supportive friendships and positive **peer role models** are critical protective factors for youths who need many opportunities to form positive, healthy peer relationships both during school hours as well as in after-school programs.<sup>1</sup>

**Peer helping** strategies in schools combine the adolescent needs for peer relationships with adolescents’ need for meaningful participation. Peer helping strategies include one-to-one helping relationships, support groups, tutoring, service learning, conflict mediation, peer education, cooperative learning, and all services of a helping nature. Peer helpers who serve as tutors improved their academic achievement in terms of test scores, grade point averages, and course pass rates.<sup>2</sup>



### In the Spotlight

#### Calavera Hills Middle School, Carlsbad Unified School District, a 2011 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School

**Coyote Crossroads**—This program was developed to highlight the unselfish dedication and hard work exhibited by student assistants that work with special needs peers. The students support the autism classroom in an effort to build self-esteem and confidence of the Crossroads student.

- [Calavera Hills Middle School DataQuest Profile](#)
- [Calavera Hills Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School—Visitor's Guide: Calavera Hills Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
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### In the Spotlight

### **Diablo Vista—Where Everyone Belongs**

Diablo Vista Middle School, San Ramon Valley Unified School District, Contra Costa County, is one of the 2009 California Distinguished Schools. Diablo Vista Middle School is featured on the California Department of Education's (CDEs), Closing the Achievement Gap Web site for its "Signature" Practice, WEB: Where Everyone Belongs. This exemplary practice addresses relationships, one of the CDE's 12 Recommendations for Middle Grades Success.

Three years ago, during its annual review of testing and climate survey data, Diablo Vista Middle School's site council found that there was need for renewed focus in the areas of respect and safety. Also of concern was a decrease in standardized test scores based on grade five performances as compared to grade six.

To address these issues, the WEB program was implemented. Designed to help sixth grade students transition to middle school by creating a safe, welcoming social and academic atmosphere, the program is also intended to alleviate anxiety brought about by entering a new school and encourages student success during the first year of middle school by pairing small groups of sixth graders with eighth grade WEB leaders.

The program begins with a morning orientation filled with games, activities, presentations, and a school tour and culminates with WEB leaders giving sixth grade students ("Webbies") their class schedules. This early distribution of schedules allows the students to find all their classes before they start the school year, alleviating some of the anxiety of getting lost on the first day. Between 85 and 90 percent of incoming students attend the orientation.

WEB leaders visit their Webbies at least four times a quarter to facilitate discussions and provide some sort of social activity one or two times a quarter. Discussions range from typical concerns—I'd like to know how to prepare for a test—to more topical issues like dealing with rumors and gossip, bully prevention tactics, and how to become fully involved in all the opportunities that Diablo Vista has to offer. The WEB leaders also plan and practice activities that enhance social interaction among the sixth grade students which have included an after-school ice cream social and a country line dancing event during lunch.

For many transitioning sixth graders, fear of older students on campus was reported as a source of anxiety. Through WEB, eighth grade students are assigned as mentors and instead become their friends.

By all accounts, the program has proven itself successful. It has grown in size from one coordinator and 39 leaders at its beginning to two coordinators and 48 leaders.

During the 2007-08 school year, all sixth grade students completed a survey about the transition to middle school. When asked what scared them the most, 68 percent responded not knowing their schedule/getting lost, and 50 percent reported the balancing of homework with outside activities.

When asked how the WEB program helped, 50 percent reported it helped make them feel more comfortable, safe, and welcome at school. When asked what could be done to make the WEB program better, 77 percent reported that they would like more activities, and 50 percent wanted to meet more often with their WEB leaders.

The targeted outcomes for this program were to help in the academic and social/emotional transition from elementary to middle school. The test results indicate that sixth grade students are performing at a higher level with the WEB program in place. The drop in test scores from fifth to sixth grade has been decreased or eliminated.

- [Diablo Vista Middle School DataQuest Profile](#)
- [Diablo Vista Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Signature Practice: W.E.B. Where Everyone Belongs](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Closing the Achievement Gap's School Profile: Diablo Vista Middle School](#)

(Outside Source)

- [Practices In the Spotlight Index](#)

[Peer Assistance and Leadership \(PAL\)](#) (Outside Source) is a peer helping program that combats problems such as violence in schools, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, gang participation and school dropouts.



## In the Spotlight

### **Bernice Ayer Middle School, Capistrano Unified School District, a 2005 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

The PAL program at Bernice Ayer Middle School is part of a comprehensive program that has helped the school become a School to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School.

### **Rio Norte Junior High School, William S. Hart Union High School District**

Associated Student Body (ASB) leaders receive training from the district psychologist to become lunchtime “Yes I Can!” buddies for special education students. The student helpers share lunch and introduce the special education student to their friends. They also invite them to join into sports and games.

### **Serrano Intermediate School, Saddleback Valley Unified School District**

The Peer Assistance Leadership (PAL) class was recognized as the top Orange County PAL program for three years in a row. The class includes 40 students yearly. The teachers report that the program has made numerous contributions to the school.

- [Bernice Ayer DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Bernice Ayer Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School—Visitor's Guide: Bernice Ayer Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)
  
- [Rio Norte DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Rio Norte Junior High School](#) (Outside Source)
  
- [Serrano Intermediate DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Serrano Intermediate School](#) (Outside Source)

Schools play an important role in channeling peer influence in a positive direction—providing another reason for the establishment of small learning communities.

From a developmental perspective, the middle grades are generally a time of growing concern for popularity, with students placing increasing importance on interpersonal relationships. This shift in emphasis often results in increasingly nonconforming peer values, social competition, and negative behavior. The issue is more problematic in middle schools, some argue, because adults in the school do not have as much of an opportunity to know what goes on among students, as instruction is structured such that students move from classroom to classroom. Similarly, students spend more time outside the classroom, which means that adult intervention in the social arena is scarce.<sup>3</sup>

The middle grades are a time when students experience a growing need for belonging.<sup>4</sup> As a

result, seasonal events such as school dances and Valentine's Day require a different kind of sensitivity to relationships. Such events tend to be highly charged with expectations. Teachers and staff need to make sure that students are positively included in schoolwide events and provide alternatives if students cannot participate due to religious, medical, or other reasons. Successful school communities find ways to involve all students and to help them feel that they belong. In one school, officials organized a project for students to write Valentine's Day cards to a local senior center so that the focus moved from the haves and have-nots of teen romance to a "feel-good" service project.<sup>5</sup>



## In the Spotlight

**Rio Norte Junior High School, William S. Hart Union High School District**  
To engage those students who often feel marginalized, Rio Norte established "Wings Wednesdays." It is a time set aside at lunch every Wednesday for students to "hang out" in a designated room, play cards, and meet others who—for a variety of reasons—are not as comfortable in the large common lunch areas and activities.

- [Rio Norte DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Rio Norte Junior High School](#) (Outside Source)

California schools face the additional challenge of helping immigrant students and English learners to feel included. One way to do that is to recognize the resources they bring into classrooms. Although most reports focus on the services English learners need, immigrant students can also provide their classmates with valuable lessons. For example, recent immigrants can bring stories, food, and dress to help students understand other cultures and countries. Students at multicultural schools have an opportunity to learn about other cultural perspectives, which will help them in the global community of work.<sup>6</sup>

Possible projects that involve middle grades students with their peers include:

- Writing and research projects on standards-based essays.
- [Service-learning](#) projects in teams.
- Visual and performing arts projects such as dramatic presentations, choir, band, poetry readings, or school beautification murals.
- School gardens as part of a life science unit.

## Related Links

- [Building Community Among Tweens](#) (Outside Source), ASCD Express.
- [On the Minds of Middle Schoolers: Students in their first year of middle school talk about teachers, peers, homework, and stress](#) (PDF; Outside Source), Educational Leadership: April 2005, Volume 62, Number 7, ASCD Express.
- [Resilience and Youth Development](#) (Outside Source), California Health Kids Survey.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> [Youth Development Strategies, Concepts, and Research: a supplement to the Healthy Kids](#)

[Survey Resilience & Youth Development Module report](#) (PDF; Outside Source). Prepared by WestEd and the Safe and Healthy Kids Program Office. Sacramento: California Department of Education, n.d., 22.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>3</sup>Christopher C. Weiss and Lindsay Kipnes, [Reexamining Middle School Effects: A Comparison of Middle Grades Students in Middle Schools and K-8 Schools](#), American Journal of Education (February 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Resilience & Youth Development Module, 1; Getting Results: Developing Safe and Healthy Kids Update 5-Student Health, Supportive Schools, and Academic Success , 43.

<sup>5</sup>Judith Baenen, The Valentines Conundrum, Middle E-Connections (January 2006).

<sup>6</sup>Eileen Gale Kugler, [What We Owe Immigrant Children](#), Education Week (May 17, 2006).

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## Opportunities to cooperate (cooperative learning)

Cooperative learning is a strategy that helps to build relationships while increasing academic skills.

Young adolescents need to socialize, be a part of a group, share feelings, receive emotional support, and learn to see things from other perspectives. Cooperative learning groups do not separate students on the basis of class, race, or gender, and the goals of middle schools are consistent with the goals of cooperative learning theories.<sup>1</sup>

Building consensus and resolving issues is an important skill for adolescents.

Cooperative goal structuring increases student achievement in middle grades. Research examined ways to enhance early adolescents' positive relationships and increased academic achievement. The finding specified that when middle grades teachers implemented cooperative goal structures in learning situations, the following results occurred:

- Higher achievement for students
- Greater positive peer relationships

This research also indicated that the more successful students are in building positive peer relationships, the more likely these students are to achieve academic success.

Cooperative goal structures in the classroom require students to interact while working on academic assignments, thus building relationships while making academic progress. A cooperative goal structure exists when students perceive that they can reach their goals if and only if the other students with whom they are cooperatively linked also reach their goals. When goals are structured cooperatively, students tend to seek outcomes that are beneficial to all students with whom they are cooperatively linked.

Cooperative goal structures are applicable to school-related achievement and social goals. Examples of school-related achievement goals include mastering subject matter or meeting an achievement standard, such as earning an "A," a 100 percent on a test, or striving for a 4.0 grade point average. Examples of school-related social goals include gaining approval from others, making personal relationships with peers, gaining a sense of belonging (i.e., feeling included, liked, respected, accepted, and supported), and being dependable and responsible.

This 2008 research reviewed 148 independent research studies comparing the relative effectiveness of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic goal structures. These studies represented over eight decades of research on over 17,000 early adolescents, ages 12–15 years in grades 6–9. To learn more about this research, view [Promoting Early Adolescents' Achievement and Peer Relationships: The Effects of Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Goal Structures](#) (PDF; Outside Source).





## In the Spotlight

### **Kennedy Middle School, El Centro Elementary School District, a 2005 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

Staff members at Kennedy plan frequent lunch activities that engage both students and teachers in fun competitions, skits, and food festivals. Students appreciate seeing their teachers join with them in fun activities that bond them in teams or in challenges.

- [Kennedy DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Kennedy Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Kennedy Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

One of the state-adopted science textbooks, *Methods of Teaching: Applying Cognitive Science to Promote Student Learning*, lists nine core concepts of instruction based on cognitive research findings. One concept is that human beings learn best in cooperation with other human beings when they use information they find to be personally meaningful. The authors suggest having students communicate using technology to encourage working together and using each other's expertise to check homework and prepare for tests.<sup>2</sup>

Other resources on cooperative learning are noted below.

## Related Links

- [Cooperative Learning](#), California Department of Education.
- [Cooperative Learning: College of Education + Human Development](#) (Outside Source), University of Minnesota.
- [Cooperative Learning Institute And Interaction Book Company](#) (Outside Source).
- [Cooperative Learning Is a Brain Turn-On](#) (Outside Source), March 2007, Volume 38, Number 4, Middle School Journal, Association for Middle Level Education.
- [Jigsaw classroom](#) (Outside Source).
- [The Cooperative Learning Network](#) (Outside Source).
- [The New Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom and School](#) (Outside Source), David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson and Edythe Johnson Holubec. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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<sup>1</sup>Jeanie M. Dotson, [Cooperative Learning Structures Can Increase Student Achievement](#), Kagan Publishing & Professional Development, 2001.

<sup>2</sup>Preston D. Feden and Robert M. Vogel, "Methods of Teaching: Applying Cognitive Science to Promote Student Learning". Columbus, Ohio: *McGraw-Hill*, 2002.

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# Relationship building through student clubs and connections

Clubs, sports, and other [co-curricular](#) or extra-curricular activities offer students many opportunities for meaningful participation. Among other things, clubs allow students to grow in leadership, project planning, and social skills. Relationship building is also one of the key outcomes of clubs and co-curricular activities.

Extra-curricular middle school programs might include:

- arts
- clubs
- science challenges such as Robotics, Odyssey of the Mind, and technology centers project-based activities
- leadership or service opportunities

In addition, many schools offer sports, including basketball, volleyball, soccer, track, softball, flag football, or tennis.

Student clubs provide activities that help forge relationships among peers. Aside from their academic and career-preparation qualities, clubs and other co-curricular activities help students grow emotionally and socially. According to resilience research, clubs, after-school activities, and other social groups are ways to infuse the curriculum with meaningful participation.<sup>1</sup>

The 2005 California Distinguished Middle Schools Web site lists middle schools that have identified student clubs and connections as one of their signature practices.

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<sup>1</sup>Resilience and Youth Development Module, Prepared by WestEd and the Safe and Healthy Kids Program Office. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2002, 18.

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## Sports

Sports play a powerful part in molding the character of the nation, especially the character of millions of the nation's youths who participate in organized sports programs. Healthy, meaningful relationships are often cited as the primary factor contributing to students' positive athletic experiences. Coaches and parents must strive to cultivate relationships based on respect and caring. A sports program that seeks to build character in youths needs a shared philosophy that guides all aspects of athletics. This overarching philosophy should define a set of core ethical values such as respect, responsibility, caring, compassion, honesty, cooperation, fair play, and perseverance.<sup>1</sup>

In the middle grades when students are dealing with dramatic physical, cognitive, and emotional changes, sports plays a particular role in assisting with their developmental growth. Because of the hormonal impact on the brain, early adolescents experience intense fear and anger (especially in boys), higher rates of depression (especially in girls), along with mood swings, impulsivity, rebelliousness, confusion and irritability. In addition, and perhaps as a consequence, new cognitive and metacognitive abilities are emerging. On this stage, the young adolescents are struggling to find out who they are as they leave the cocoon of childhood. According to sociologist Eric Erikson, they do this by trying on identities with their peers and seeing what sticks. Consequently, adolescence is an intensely social time, when the hunger for belonging, community, social status, and emotional closeness provide the context within which they discover their identity. Failing to do this, they could develop a negative identity.<sup>2</sup> With sports as an extracurricular activity at school, students learn sportsmanship and fair play that help to shape a healthy identity. Participating on sport teams facilitates building positive relationships which in turn gives them the needed sense of belonging and peer acceptance. Researchers theorize that people who choose to do sports might naturally be more inclined to participate in civic affairs.<sup>3</sup>

To ensure fairness and social equity, middle grades schools have a responsibility to promote equal access to sports opportunities. Although not all people can participate on competitive teams, socially equitable schools will provide other ways to participate through lunch leagues, after-school games, and supervised games during lunch. For more on equality and fairness, refer to [Recommendation 7—Access](#).

Sports can be especially empowering for middle school girls. Researchers found that girls had lower self-esteem than boys in middle school.<sup>4</sup> Through participation in athletic programs, girls were given opportunities to develop leadership skills because competitive sports bolstered self-esteem, empowerment, and self-confidence. When started in the middle grades, it was found that girls had a better chance of reaching their leadership potential later in life.

### Research Summary: Physical Development

Participating in many sports and physical activities maximizes physiological development among young people. Growing bodies are predisposed physiologically to non-specialized physical activities; therefore, physical development and success in sports are enhanced by participating in multiple sports on a schedule that allows for periods of active rest and recuperation throughout the year. Specialization in a single sport is more likely to inhibit or distort balanced physical development, restrict skill-development opportunities and undermine the forms of sport participation that maximize lifelong fitness and well-being.

### **Research Summary: Social Development**

Social development among young people is maximized when they play multiple sports before age fifteen. This expands their interests, identities and experiences, and provides a basis for informed sport participation choices beyond age fifteen. When a young person plays multiple sports, parents are less likely to be drawn into a specific sport culture in which their children's overall development is not the highest priority.

### **Research Summary: Psychological Development**

Learning a wide range of physical skills and being exposed to diverse experiences and relationships promotes psychological development among young people. Playing multiple sports expands their options and choices as they grow older, and it fosters the intrinsic motivation that sustains lifelong sports participation and leads to achieving excellence in particular sports.

The National Middle School Association gives the following recommendations for middle grades sports:

### **Recommendations**

- The most appropriate practice for middle school sport and physical activity programs is to provide a comprehensive array of after-school programs to meet the diverse experiences, interests and ability levels of students. These programs must always be based on the needs of middle school students and should include intramurals, activity clubs (e.g., sport, dance, exercise), special events, and open gym days/nights. Such programs should take precedence over interscholastic sports competition.
- The activities offered through after-school programs should include those introduced in middle school physical education classes as well as novel programming concepts that may capture the interests of diverse groups of middle school students.
- All students should be encouraged to participate in such after-school programs regardless of their ability and prior experience with organized sports. The primary purposes of these programs are to provide opportunities for students to:
  - ❖ improve self-esteem and feelings of competence through positive interactions with their peers and adults
  - ❖ acquire new skills and refine those previously learned
  - ❖ learn to function effectively as members of a team or group
  - ❖ improve personal health and fitness levels
  - ❖ to have fun and enjoy physical activities
- If middle schools decide to offer interscholastic sport programs, they should be progressively phased in. For example, the types of after-school programs listed above should be the only ones available to sixth graders. This policy has several benefits for middle school students including:
  - ❖ providing a transitional experience so they become accustomed to staying after school to participate with classmates
  - ❖ introducing them to sports that they might have been previously unfamiliar with
  - ❖ bolstering confidence and self-esteem by letting students experience equitable competition and developmentally appropriate activities
  - ❖ allowing them to participate in an environment that is less structured and less demanding than typically found in interscholastic sports
- The types of interscholastic sports offered to middle school students should be carefully considered. Sports that encourage students to concentrate on personal improvement (e.g., track and field, swimming, etc.), accommodate large numbers of participants, and are inherently safe should take precedence over contact sports or sports that require extensive amounts of equipment or space.
- If interscholastic sports are offered at the middle school level, they must address the unique characteristics of middle school students. Therefore, playing rules, equipment, field dimensions, etc. must be modified to accommodate the ability levels and capacities of the participants. Middle school athletic programs must not attempt to imitate those conducted at the high school level. Safety and developmental appropriateness must be the primary concerns. In addition, middle school athletic

programs should have skill refinements, basic tactics and effective team membership as their primary goals instead of winning or entertaining spectators.

- All students who want to participate and are willing to make the commitment necessary for team membership should be allowed to participate in interscholastic sports at the middle school. An exclusive interscholastic program (cutting) has no place at the middle school since it contradicts the very tenets on which the middle school was founded. A variety of policies can be implemented to overcome any and all obstacles related to achieving this goal.
- Even if interscholastic sports are offered at the middle school, the after-school programs listed in the first recommendation should continue to be offered since they are more consistent with the overall philosophy of the middle school. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Emotional Intelligence: What Coaches Can Do](#) (Outside Source). Edutopia.

i Armstrong, Thomas. 2006. The Best Schools, ASCD Publication, 116.

<sup>2</sup> Armstrong, Thomas. 2006. The Best Schools, ASCD Publication, 116.

<sup>3</sup> Ann McClure, Sports & Civics—A New Report Shows That Participation in Sports Might Make Students Better Citizens, [District Administration](#) (Outside Source), (May 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Hart, Lawrence, et al. Building Leadership Skills in Middle School Girls through Interscholastic Athletics. Counseling and Student Services Clearinghouse. Sept. 2003.

<sup>5</sup> [Co-Curricular Physical Activity and Sport Programs for Middle School Students: A Position Statement by The National Association for Sport and Physical Education's \(NASPE\) Middle and Secondary School Physical Education Council \(MASSPEC\)](#).

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## Competitions

Although competitions offer opportunities for school faculty members to highlight student achievements, they also have the potential to leave some students feeling marginalized and others embarrassed by defeat. However, carefully planned events can build school spirit, student confidence, and individual academic and social skills. In planning competitions, school staff members need to consider the following:

- What are the academic goals of the competition?
- How will it reinforce schoolwide spirit?
- How will it engage students in relationships with peers? With adults?
- How will it allow students at all skill or ability levels to participate? For example, are there ways to build participation as scorekeepers, organizers, decorators, etc.?
- How will the competition reinforce citizenship?

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## Academic competitions

Academic competitions between teams, or small learning communities, often spur students to work hard and “win one for the team.” Team-oriented academic competitions include:

- [California Academic Decathlon](#) (Outside Source), is designed for teams of high school students. However, teachers who want to encourage highly motivated students to prepare for high school can develop programs that mimic the California Academic Decathlon.
- Chess competition. Friendly chess tournaments at lunch can help introduce students to this game that stimulates critical thinking. The members of chess club can demonstrate their chess skills while learning organizational skills to host the event.
- [Constitutional Rights Foundation: Mock Trial Program](#) (Outside Source), like the academic decathlon, is a high school event. However, middle grades teachers who want to enhance their social studies lessons can challenge other teams to a mock trial over an event in history. The California Mock Trial site gives some guidelines that would prove helpful in setting up the event.
- [4th Arts Olympiad \(2009-2012\) Theme: My Favorite Sport](#) (Outside Source), is a free global program for children ages 8 to 12, commences in classrooms with structured lesson plans that bridge the divide between athletic students and those not athletic by introducing the *artist-athlete ideal* of a creative mind and healthy body. Ensuing lesson plan activities result in paintings and digital art on the theme *My Favorite Sport*.
- [Invention Convention](#) (Outside Source), challenges teams from clubs, science classes, or a small learning community, including both science and math classes, to design inventions for a schoolwide Invention Convention. Such an event offers a great opportunity to involve local science and engineering firms, the media, and families.
- [MATHCOUNTS®](#) (Outside Source), is a national math enrichment, coaching, and competition program that promotes middle school mathematics achievement in every state and U.S. territory.
- [Odyssey of the Mind](#) (Outside Source), is a competitive program that encourages students to solve challenges creatively and to the best that they can be. They learn from and even cheer on their competitors. Odyssey of the Mind is not a competition about knowledge; instead, it focuses on how students work in teams to apply their knowledge, skills, and talents.
- [Oracle@ThinkQuest](#) (Outside Source), organizes students into teams to create the best educational Web sites and compete for exciting prizes.

[U.S. Department of Energy: Office of Science-DOE National Science Bowl®](#) (Outside Source) is similar to Quiz Bowl. Two teams of four students each compete to answer various science-related questions. In order to determine which student has the right to answer the question, a buzzer system is used, similar to those seen on the television show called Jeopardy!. This competition was organized and is sponsored by the United States Department of Energy since 2002.

While encouraging individual students to do their best in academic competitions such as spelling bees, school faculty members can also organize competitions that build team spirit and can recognize many people for different contributions to the events. Such team-building exercises are another way to enliven the school culture. Some examples are listed in the following section on nonacademic competitions.

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## Nonacademic competitions

Teamwork, excitement, and school spirit often grow from events that reward extra effort. School faculty members can encourage student excellence by building on friendly competition among teams in a variety of nonacademic events, including:

- Friendly competitions through homerooms, including a trivia question of the day (each class instantly responds through e-mail)
- Number of students who dress up on spirit days
- Door-decorating contests
- Student body fund-raising contests
- Teacher-student team competitions, such as an after-school volleyball tournament or noontime activities (such as a student/teacher egg tossing contest)
- Attendance (competitions among teams or houses, or with neighboring schools)
- Team test-day attendance
- Money raised for a community service project
- [Sports](#), Recommendation 5—Relationships, TCSII.

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## Celebrations—a culture based on caring and success

Competitions involve winners and losers. Celebrations, on the other hand, are for all and are integral to building community, or school spirit, around a culture of caring and success.



### In the Spotlight

#### **Alvarado Intermediate School, Rowland Unified School District, a 2004 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

Staff members at Alvarado recognize that positive reinforcement motivates student effort and involvement. Recognition events honor students for their academic achievement, school participation, perfect attendance, service, and concern for others.

- [Alvarado Intermediate DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Alvarado Intermediate School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Alvarado Intermediate School](#)(PDF; Outside Source)
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### In the Spotlight

#### **Calavera Hills Middle School, Carlsbad Unified School District, a 2011 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

**Coyote Community:** The student body assembles weekly for twenty minutes in the gym. Staff and students celebrate student successes, the school's successes, and program successes. The Associated Study Body prepares activities for the students from each TEAM class to participate.

- [Calavera Hills Middle School DataQuest Profile](#)
- [Calavera Hills Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)

- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School—Visitor's Guide: Calavera Hills Middle School \(PDF; Outside Source\)](#)
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## Academic celebrations

Events such as History Day engage the entire school community in academic celebrations that encourage creativity. The school community recognizes students for their talent in a variety of ways, including costuming, project displays, dramatic skits, and readings. Teams can build a sense of community by preparing demonstrations and by inviting parents and the community to participate.



### In the Spotlight

#### **Rancho Cucamonga Middle School, Cucamonga Elementary School District, an On the Right Track School**

To build student buy-in to testing, staff members host “Cat Chat” celebration days. Students who bring their STAR testing results to the celebration get raffle tickets. Staff members circulate and discuss the test results with the students, who receive encouragement for increases in their scores, as well as adult guidance in goal setting for future progress. At other times, team members cover for each other or they hire substitutes so that teachers have time to meet individually with each student and go over score results. This is one of the strategies the school (formerly on program improvement) used to increase API scores by 170 points over the past five years.

Students know in advance when the celebration will take place, and teachers talk with them about what reports to look for at home. If students cannot find the report at home, teachers can get copies of the test results for students who want to talk about where they are and where they need to go academically. Also, if students have moved, the administration contacts the other school to get copies of the test results for the students. The school staff members make every effort to ensure that they do not punish students because their parents lack an adequate filing system.

The principal reported that since the Cat Chat is now a standard practice in the school, students know to look for test results in the fall. If the results do not come, students complain to their teachers that they have not received them. The program has helped to raise student awareness about the value of using the results for educational planning. For example, one of the school’s resource (special education) students came on preview day (before school starts) to pick up her schedule. When she saw that she was scheduled to take a math intervention class, she said, “I have a math intervention class, but I got 355 on my CST math test and that’s basic, and that means I get an elective this year, right?”

#### **Rio Norte Junior High School, William S. Hart Union High School District**

Celebrations and having fun are central to maintaining a positive school climate at Rio Norte in north Los Angeles County. “Student of the Month” luncheons honor

three students from each of the eight teams (or small learning communities). This means that 240 students (24 students per month times ten months) are recognized each year out of a total population of approximately 1,200 students. Honored students share lunch with their teacher and then receive an award in a ceremony that follows.

- [Rancho Cucamonga DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Rancho Cucamonga Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [On the Right Track 4 Symposium](#)
  
- [Rio Norte DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Rio Norte Junior High School](#) (Outside Source)

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## Effort/motivation celebrations

Motivational celebrations seek to encourage those students who may not get top honors for academics. For example, some schools celebrate the number of books students read,<sup>1</sup> hours of community service, school cleanup, or nonacademic pursuits such as drama and music.



### In the Spotlight

**Millikan Middle School, Los Angeles Unified School District, a 2005 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

In an effort to encourage parents and students who are learning English to "reclassify" as fluent English proficient (RFEP), Millikan staff members host large ceremonies to celebrate when students reclassify. The events double as parent education, and show both students and family members the benefits of working toward proficiency. In addition to the fun of the ceremony, one of the benefits that motivates the students is the ability to take electives.

**Rio Norte Junior High School, William S. Hart Union High School District**

Rio Norte has a "red flag/green flag" system after each lunch hour to designate whether or not the campus was clean. A week of green flags earns five extra minutes of highly prized time for games on the following Friday.

- [Millikan DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Millikan Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™ -Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Millikan Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™ -Taking Center Stage](#)
- [Rio Norte DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Rio Norte Junior High School](#) (Outside Source)

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<sup>1</sup> Suzy Elliott, [Lunch Limos for Literacy](#) (Outside Source), Decatur Intermediate Learning Center, 2006.

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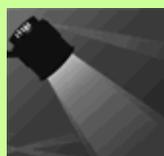
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## School spirit celebrations

Zany and fun school spirit days help many middle schools promote student belonging and a sense of community.



### In the Spotlight

#### **Alta Sierra Intermediate School, Clovis Unified School District, a 2008 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

To foster school spirit, Alta Sierra Intermediate School staff members host a variety of awards, including the following: Bruin of the Month Luncheon/Awards for outstanding character, Principal's Pride Aware for improvement in academics, Bruin Pride luncheons for school spirit, Principal's High Honor for academic excellence, Athletes of Character. In addition, the school hosts large ceremonies to celebrate English Language Learners achieving reclassification (RFEP).

- [Alta Sierra DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Alta Sierra Intermediate School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Alta Sierra Intermediate School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
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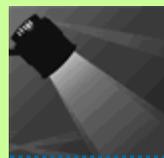
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## Character celebrations

Building character is an important mission of middle school, but students tend to be cynical about anything “preachy.” Nonetheless, middle grades students appreciate being recognized.



### In the Spotlight

#### Aliso Viejo Middle School, Capistrano Unified School District

At Aliso Viejo Middle School, student reward programs are an integral part of the daily routine. The academically successful students with exemplary GPAs are invited to attend a movie/snack party once a quarter. In a quarterly ceremony, students with perfect attendance receive awards as well. Both groups receive certificates validating their outstanding achievements. Additionally, students with perfect attendance are entered in a grand prize drawing at the end of the quarter. Eighth-grade students who receive Student of the Year trophies from their content area teachers are invited, along with their parents, to attend a special evening awards ceremony. All students are eligible to be recognized by a teacher every month as their Student of the Month. These students do not necessarily earn the award for academic excellence. They might be recognized for showing improvement, doing a good deed, or having an exemplary attitude. Another recognition award, called the “Gotcha” program, is administered by the Peer Assistance League/Associated Student Body classes. Students earn “Gotcha” tickets from their teachers for displaying kindness, consideration of others, great attitudes, and much more. Students who earned “Gotcha” tickets are automatically enrolled in a drawing with some enticing monthly prizes, such as movie tickets. Aliso Viejo’s Gold Coin program is another positive reward. Once each quarter students and faculty who received a gold coin for going “above and beyond” attend a luncheon in the library sponsored by the principal and made by the culinary arts students. Finally, all students are eligible to earn a “You Being You” ticket for giving 110 percent in class by being dedicated and doing their best on all school tests as well as the state STAR tests.

- [Aliso Viejo DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Aliso Viejo Middle School](#) (Outside Source)

## Related Links

- [Character education](#), Recommendation 8—Safety, Resilience, and Health, TCSII.

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## Promotions

Celebrating the transition from middle school to high school helps students appreciate the steps they are taking to maturity. Some middle schools host a farewell dance to celebrate the move, most stage an awards assembly to honor eighth-grade achievements, and still others perform more formal promotional ceremonies.



### In the Spotlight

#### Alvarado Intermediate School, Rowland Unified School District, a 2004 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School

With the help of a very active Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA), Alvarado devotes the last week of school to activities recognizing eighth graders. The focus on student assets rather than deficits creates a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.

- [Alvarado Intermediate DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Alvarado Intermediate School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Alvarado Intermediate School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

## Related Links

- [Transitions](#), Recommendation 6—Transitions, TCSII.

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## Bullying

Bullying may be direct or indirect and varies between boys and girls. Direct bullying includes physical violence, taunting and teasing, threats of violence, and extortion or theft. In recent years, the academic definition of bullying has been expanded to include indirect bullying, such as name calling, spreading rumors, and exclusion from a peer group. Indirect bullying socially isolates children and is also known as relational aggression. Relational bullying is a subtle type of aggression. It is important that adults prevent and stop not only overt aggression (e.g., hitting, pushing, teasing) but also relational aggression (e.g., passing rumors, isolating someone).<sup>1</sup>

Research conducted with students from third to sixth grade found that spreading rumors decreased 72 percent when an anti-bullying program, Steps to Respect, was instituted.<sup>2</sup> The three-year program included teacher training and lessons for students that showed them how to respond when they were confronted with malicious gossip about themselves or others. “The study adds to growing evidence that bullying is a school-wide ecology, involving not just the bully and victim, but onlookers who enable the bullying, adults that ignore the problem, and even the victim and friends who may escalate a bad situation.”<sup>3</sup>

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is a multilevel, multicomponent program designed to reduce and prevent schools' bully problems. School staff members are largely responsible for introducing and implementing the program, and their efforts are directed toward improving peer relations and making the school a safe and pleasant place to be.

## Related Links

- [Safety, Resilience, and Health](#), Recommendation 8—Safety, Resilience, and Health, TCSII.

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<sup>1</sup> [Getting Results: Developing Safe and Healthy Kids Update 4—Violence Prevention and Safe Schools](#) (PDF; 402KB; 113pp.), Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2005, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Low, Sabina, Karin S. Frey, and Callie. J. Brockman. [Gossip on the Playground: Changes Associated with Universal Intervention, Retaliation Beliefs, and Supportive Friends](#) (PDF; Outside Source), School Psychology Review, 2010, Volume 39, No. 4, 536-551.

<sup>3</sup> [Inside School Research](#) (Outside Source), Education Week, January 2011.

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## Relationships with Adults

Most researchers join parents and students in agreeing that frameworks and content standards are only as good as the professional learning communities that provide the instruction. However, many studies indicate that a caring relationship with a teacher can be the most powerful motivator for academic success. Meeting academic standards, therefore, requires that schools put relationships at the heart of schooling. It is obvious to many successful teachers that children work harder and do things for people they care about and trust.<sup>1</sup> For middle grades kids who are trying to gain some independence and figure out which way is up, relationships with classmates and teachers are crucial to success.<sup>2</sup>

In a 2010 issue of the National Middle School Association's *Middle School Journal*, an article highlights the unique and complex challenges faced by middle grades teachers in a classroom of young adolescents. Research has clearly indicated that building relationships with these students is key to student achievement and effective classroom management. Effective teacher-student relationships are defined by a teacher's specific behaviors, strategies, and fundamental attitudes. However, reaching difficult students may require further understanding.

[Classroom Management Strategies for Difficult Students: Promoting Change through Relationships](#) (Outside Source), explores three unconventional strategies used by counselors and psychotherapists to build relationships. In addition, the authors suggest ways in which teachers may better connect with students from culturally different backgrounds.

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### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Nel Noddings, An Ethic of Caring and Its Implications for Instructional Arrangements, *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 96, No. 2 (February 1988), 215-230.

<sup>2</sup> Tara Brown, [The Power of Positive Relationships](#) (Outside Source), *Middle Ground*, August, 2010, 8.

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## Adult mentors

Even though American adolescents begin to withdraw from adults and develop a heavier reliance on peers at this stage of their development, they still need adult friendship, guidance, and support. Adult mentors help students set academic and personal goals, appreciate their accomplishments, and deal with the stresses of changing relationships both at home and school.

Research on the results of long-term mentor relationships found that they provide youths with the support and guidance that allow them to grow into responsible adults.<sup>1</sup>

Effective middle schools employ many different strategies to pair each student with a mentor, adviser, advocate, or other adult for the duration of the middle grades. Schools can do this through a variety of strategies, including:

- Advisory classes to help attach one teacher to a smaller number of students.
- Looping to connect teachers to students on a continual basis year to year.
- Small-group seminars with counselors on high-interest teen topics.
- Making lunch dates with the administrators and staff members to connect small groups of students with a caring adult.
- Special lunch dates to reward students for attendance improvement, high scores, or other achievements.

Community partnerships introduce more adults who can serve as mentors to the students. Please refer to [Adult mentors. Recommendation 12—Partnerships](#), for more details about community members who serve as mentors.

Researcher Dr. Emmy Werner followed all 698 infants born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai in 1955. Her research spanned 30 years, making it one of the longest longitudinal studies of its kind. Werner found that many high-risk children displayed resilience and developed into normal, thriving adults despite numerous challenges and problems during their youth. The study identified a number of *protective factors* in the lives of these resilient individuals. One of the most important protective factors helping children to overcome adversity included experiencing a strong bond with a non parent caretaker (such as an aunt, baby-sitter, or teacher).<sup>2</sup> For more on this topic, view the WestEd document, [Resilience: A Universal Capacity](#) (PDF; Outside Source), (2004).

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<sup>1</sup> [Works in Progress: A Report on Middle and High School Improvement Programs](#) (PDF; Outside Source). Washington, D.C.: Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, January, 2005, 29.

<sup>2</sup>E. E. Werner, [Risk, Resilience, and Recovery: Perspectives from the Kauai Longitudinal Study](#), Development and Psychopathology, 1993, 503-515.

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## Qualified and caring teachers

Studies about the effect of transitions on student achievement highlight the importance of caring teachers in the middle grades.

Research on middle school transitions shows that, although grades and engagement tend to decline after students transition to middle school, student perceptions of the school environment can buffer negative changes . . . students whose perceptions of teacher support declined between elementary and middle school valued the school subject less, but those who viewed teacher support as having increased valued the subject more. In sum, student characteristics and school and classroom environments interact in ways that either decrease or increase the risk of academic and adjustment problems during the middle grades. Although it has been shown that community climate and support alone are insufficient to promote achievement gains in the middle grades, a balance between perceived support and academic demands seems to promote both achievement and social-emotional well-being, and this balance is particularly important for certain groups of youth.<sup>1</sup>

The [California Standards for the Teaching Profession](#) (PDF; Outside Source) include two key elements for highly qualified teachers in relation to the developmental needs of students. According to the standards, teachers are responsible for:<sup>2</sup>

- Promoting social development and group responsibility
- Drawing on and valuing students' backgrounds, interests, developmental learning needs

The federal No Child Left Behind regulations for highly qualified teachers rest on the premise that "Middle grades teachers must know academic content and how to teach young adolescents."<sup>3</sup> However, middle grades educators face a challenge in certifying qualified teachers. Regulations about highly qualified teachers vary depending on whether the teacher works in an elementary (K-8) school or in a self-contained sixth-grade classroom. In those cases, the teachers are subject to the regulations for elementary teachers. Other middle grades teachers must be qualified to teach single subjects (secondary certification) since students rotate to teachers by subject. In spite of these difficulties, most California middle schools are well on their way to meeting the federal guidelines. For updates on NCLB regulations for highly qualified elementary and secondary teachers and courses, refer to the CDE Web page on [Improving Teacher && Principal Quality](#).

Although federal law does not mention caring as a requirement, highly effective middle grades teachers are those who care about their students and who enjoy being with young adolescents. Students are emotional beings; and for their brains to engage, they must want to learn. How individuals feel about a learning situation plays a large role in determining the amount of attention they will devote to it. In most cases, emotions interact with reason to support or inhibit learning.<sup>4</sup>

Based on current research, the best practices for improving achievement for all middle grades students include grouping students to help them connect what they are learning across the curriculum and linking them to a caring adult within

the school.<sup>5</sup>

Teachers communicate caring in many ways, including how they structure the learning environment. Although the study of learning styles<sup>6</sup> and multiple intelligences<sup>7</sup> remains primarily in the theoretical stage somewhat controversial, it is generally known that people learn in a variety of ways and that schools can adapt the learning environment<sup>8</sup> to assist in differentiating instruction for students with different learning needs. For more information please refer to [differentiated instruction](#) in Recommendation 2— Instruction, Assessment, and Intervention.



## In the Spotlight

### **Olive Peirce Middle School, Ramona City Unified School District**

Teachers meet in their vertical professional learning community teams every Wednesday. At the beginning of each meeting, members spend 15 minutes writing postcards to students who have made significant improvement in some area during the past week.

- [Olive Peirce DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Olive Peirce Middle School](#) (Outside Source)

Research indicates that even in schools where many of the students experience challenges, the way teachers interact with students, showing approval and praise for appropriate student behaviors while decreasing their reliance on disapproval, may have a positive effect on students' on-task behaviors.<sup>9</sup>

In longitudinal and ethnographic studies, youth of all ages continually state that what they want is a teacher who cares. Stanford University's Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching found in a study of adolescents that, 'The number of student references to wanting caring teachers is so great that we believe it speaks to the quiet desperation and loneliness of many adolescents in today's society.'<sup>10</sup>



## In the Spotlight

### **Reyburn Intermediate School, Clovis Unified School District**

Teachers take students to lunch to make a special time for getting acquainted, applauding successes, and encouraging students in goal setting. To provide more students an opportunity to be honored, teachers have several recognition categories, including academics, behavior, and most improved in either academics or behavior.

- [Reyburn Intermediate DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Reyburn Intermediate School](#) (Outside Source)

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that students who felt cared for by their teachers and connected to their school were far less likely to be involved in all health risk behaviors, including alcohol, tobacco, drug use, and violence. Compelled by these results, the former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley stated that, “The number one priority of schools should be making sure that every student is connected to a caring adult in the school.”<sup>11</sup>

The effect of teacher caring on student performance is often profound.<sup>12</sup> Teacher caring, or connectedness, has impact beyond pure academics.

Adolescents who reported low teacher connectedness were two times more likely to use marijuana and amphetamines, and two times more likely to be sexually active, have sex while high on alcohol or drugs, have a partner who was high on alcohol or other drugs during sex, and have multiple sexual partners.<sup>13</sup>

When school staff members work in a supportive and caring environment, they are better able to care for students. Recommendation 9—Leadership, includes a section called [Create a climate for learning](#) that discusses how school and district leaders can support school personnel who have frequent contact with students so that the school community fosters adult-student relationships.



## In the Spotlight

**Rio Norte Junior High School, William S. Hart Union High School District**  
Teacher teams go to great lengths at Rio Norte to show students that they care and want every person to be part of a team that includes teachers and students as partners. For example, during a Rio Norte lunch dance contest, teachers showed they cared enough to be silly for their team.

- [Rio Norte DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Rio Norte Junior High School](#) (Outside Source)

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- [Virtual Library](#), California Department of Education.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jaana Juvonen, Vi-Nhuan Le, Tessa Kaganoff, Catherine Augustine, and Louay Constant, [Focus on the Wonder Years—Challenges Facing the American Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source). Arlington, Va.: Prepared by the Rand Corporation for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, 2004, 50.

<sup>2</sup> [California Standards for the Teaching Profession \(CSTP\) \(2009\)](#) (PDF; Outside Source). Sacramento: California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, October 2009.

<sup>3</sup>[Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does the Research Tell Us?](#) (PDF; Outside Source), Atlanta, Ga.: Southern Regional Education Board, 2003, 19.

<sup>4</sup>David A. Sousa, *How the Brain Learns*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press/Sage Productions, 2005.

<sup>5</sup>Foreword, [Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does the Research Tell Us?](#) (PDF; Outside Source), Atlanta, Ga.: Southern Regional Education Board, 2003.

<sup>6</sup>Sara G. Tarver, [Reading Instruction and Learning Styles . . . Should They Be Matched?](#) (Outside Source), Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995.

<sup>7</sup>James Collins, "[How To Make A Better Student: Seven Kinds of Smart](#)" (Outside Source), *Time Magazine*, Understanding Psychology, Unit 5: Personality and Individuality, 1998.

<sup>8</sup>"[Learning Styles and the Environment](#)" (DOC; 25.5KB; 2pp.) in *Taking Center Stage*. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2001, 139.

<sup>9</sup>Dan Laitsch, [Student Behaviors and Teacher Use of Approval versus Disapproval](#) (Outside Source), Research Brief, Vol. 4, No. 3 (March 27, 2006).

<sup>10</sup>*Resilience & Youth Development Module*. Prepared by WestEd and the Safe and Healthy Kids Program Office. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2002, 14.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>12</sup>B. Benard, Fostering Resiliency in Urban Schools. In B. Williams (Ed.), *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision to Guide Change in Beliefs and Practice*. Oak Brook, Ill.: Research for Better Schools and North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. (1995). Summarized in [Caring and Support](#) (Outside Source). North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (online).

<sup>13</sup>Dexter R. Voisin, Laura F. Salazar, Richard Crosby, Ralph J. Diclemente, William L. Yarber and Michelle Staples-Horne, Teacher Connectedness and Health-Related Outcomes among Detained Adolescents, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 37, Issue 4 (October 2005), 337.

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## Advisory programs (homeroom)

Advisories and homerooms are not necessarily synonymous. Beyond roll call and daily bulletin announcements common to homerooms, advisory programs deliberately establish a connection between teacher and students. This connection can be in the form of academic advisement and coaching, student-led conferences and portfolio development, character and study skills development, discussion of current events, and packaged advisory program curricula.



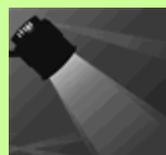
### In the Spotlight

#### **Castaic Middle School, Castaic Union Elementary School District, a 2003 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

The Castaic Middle School schedule includes a 17-minute advisory period every day. The advisory period allows students to feel safe with one teacher who knows them well and who encourages them to develop their “voice” as an effective communicator.

- [Castaic DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Castaic Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Castaic Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

Research studies demonstrate the effectiveness of middle grades advisory programs. One study found that the majority of students felt that advisory groups strengthened the bond between teachers and students. Another survey of seventh graders found that students in advisory programs reported higher levels of satisfaction with student-teacher and peer relationships than did students not enrolled in advisory programs. After controlling for differences in grade configurations and in student, school, and regional characteristics, another study found that principals whose schools had enacted advisory programs expected lower dropout rates than did those who did not have advisory programs in place.<sup>1</sup>



### In the Spotlight

**Granite Oaks Middle School, Rocklin Unified School District, a California Middle Grades Partnership Network School**

Teachers and students are grouped in "academy" teams with similar numbers of students. Students stay in an academy so that it functions like an advisory program, giving students a community of adults and peers who know and support them. Each team takes care of discipline, scheduling, meetings with parents, and meetings with the principal. In addition, each team ensures that there is no difference in the curriculum: students in one grade level receive the same expectations, the same tests, and the same education no matter which academy houses them.

All staff members focus on knowing students and on learning. Whenever the principal or staff members see a student who has been struggling, they stop the student to ask how the work is going and often call the parent to see if the student can stay later to get additional help with difficult material.

**Summit Intermediate School, Etiwanda Elementary School District, a 2005 California Distinguished School**

Staff members at Summit are committed to helping both students and staff attain Personal Responsibility In Developing Excellence (PRIDE). During the daily 30-minute PRIDE period, teachers are able to develop a personal relationship with every student. This advisory period involves having students return to their homeroom teacher every day. Activities during PRIDE include roundtable discussions, team-building activities, and participation in the schoolwide character education program.

- [Granite Oaks DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Granite Oaks Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Middle Grades Partnership Network School](#)
  
- [Summit Intermediate DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Summit Intermediate School](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Distinguished Schools Program](#)

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform developed criteria for high performing middle grades schools. Its School Self-Study and Rating Rubric asks schools to measure themselves against the criterion that "every student has a mentor, advisor, advocate, or other adult he/she trusts and stays in relationship with throughout the middle school experience".



## In the Spotlight

**Rio Norte Junior High School, William S. Hart Union High School District**

Rio Norte teachers offer the "Teen Issues" class once each quarter so that every seventh grader can take it. The class discussions cover self-esteem, drugs, sexually transmitted diseases, conflicts, and bullying. Guest speakers talk with the students about goal setting, success, and abstinence. At the beginning of the course, all members of the class sign a Privacy Pledge and the teacher does not proceed until all students raise their hands agreeing to it. Once a quarter the school hosts a Parent Night where the teacher shares anonymous student concerns that surfaced during the course. The Teen Issues class rotates with the quarter-long "Exploratory Peace" class that explores diversity topics and helps students understand other cultures and ethnic groups.

- [Rio Norte DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Rio Norte Junior High School](#) (Outside Source)

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The [California Distinguished Schools Awards](#) Web site lists middle schools that have identified advisory programs as one of their signature practices.

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**Footnote**

<sup>1</sup>Jaana Juvonen, Vi-Nhuan Le, Tessa Kaganoff, Catherine Augustine, and Louay Constant, [Focus on the Wonder Years—Challenges Facing the American Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source). Arlington, Va.: Prepared by the Rand Corporation for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, 2004, 25.

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## Looping

The practice of having teachers continue with the same students from one year to the next (for example, from sixth to seventh to eighth grade) is called **looping**. The multiyear relationships between teachers and students can be positive for both teachers and students. For example, looping enhances the teachers' roles as advisers since they know students better and understand their unique needs. Other positive outcomes of the long-term relationships that come from looping include:

- A sense of belonging, which reduces anonymity
- Support and consistency that students need to navigate young adolescence
- Avenues for real communication, mediation, resolution, and deeper understanding of other perspectives that foster a sense of community
- Lessons about maintaining the relationships in their lives<sup>1</sup>

A limited number of studies have demonstrated the further benefits of looping, one being the increase of teacher-student connections and continuity and connection of instruction from year to year. One study found that in looped classes students showed higher test scores, self-efficacy, and better attitudes toward schools. Another seven-year study found that after looping began, student attendance and retention rates increased, disciplinary actions and suspensions decreased, and staff attendance improved.<sup>2</sup>

One model for middle grades improvement, called *AIM at Middle-Grades Results (AIM)*, creates small learning communities whose teachers loop with the students for the long term and advise them on a wide variety of topics, ranging from academic classes to socialization, tolerance, and behavior. AIM's approach to health is holistic and connects students to available health services through local community service agencies.<sup>3</sup> To date, the research on the model is inconclusive.

One of the biggest challenges for teachers considering looping is that teachers must become familiar with standards in their subject for multiple years and must develop lesson plans to deliver new material each year. Although standards-aligned textbooks provide pacing guides and comprehensive lesson plans, many teachers like to tailor the lessons to their students. Some teachers may not want to change grade levels each year. Before considering looping, the professional learning community needs a long discussion so that the team can develop plans to address the fears and anxieties of parents, students, and teachers. The most common are:

- Parents fear having their child placed in a teacher's classroom for two years if the relationship is not productive or healthy.
- Teachers fear that they will be assigned a student who will not respond to their teaching style or who will not comply with behavioral expectations.
- Students fear that they will be placed on a team without their friends and will therefore be unhappy for two years.

In truth, all parties knowing that this is a long-term assignment are actually more willing to do what is necessary to insure everyone's needs are met. Teachers are more willing to resolve issues with parents, students are more willing to behave appropriately because of consistency, and parents are more willing to work with the teachers as they see their children happier.



## In the Spotlight

### **Edna Hill Middle School, Brentwood Union Elementary School District, a 2007 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

In addition to a daily, 18-minute advisory program that connects all students to an adult, Edna Hill Middle School teachers also loop with their students for three years. Both of these sustained relationship-building strategies help students in goal setting. In addition, the focus on goals, continuous progress, and accountability to one teacher helps students prepare for their student-led parent conferences.

### **Toby Johnson Middle School, Elk Grove Unified School District, a 2006 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

Toby Johnson's approximately 1,500 students stay in seven interdisciplinary teams named for colleges: the UC Berkeley Bear team, the UC Davis Aggie team, the UOP Tiger team, or the Sac State Hornet team. Teachers named the teams after local colleges and universities to help make a connection with the career awareness program and their college and career sequence. Each of the teams has 210 students and six teachers: two humanities teachers, a math teacher, a science teacher, a "Bridge" teacher who provides additional instruction in reading and language arts, and a P.E. teacher. If there are special education students, the RSP teacher participates as a member of the team.

Toby Johnson's teachers loop so that students stay with the same team of teachers for both seventh and eighth grade. The arrangement allows teachers to build a deeper sense of ownership with students and parents, and it allows them to personalize their programs.

- [Edna Hill DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Edna Hill Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Edna Hill Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)
- [Accountability through student-led parent conferences](#)
  
- [Toby Johnson DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Toby Johnson Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: Toby Johnson Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

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#### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Robert C. Fenter, The Power of Looping and Long-Term Relationships, Middle Ground, February 2009, 29-30.

<sup>2</sup>Jaana Juvonen, Vi-Nhuan Le, Tessa Kaganoff, Catherine Augustine, and Louay Constant, [Focus on the Wonder Years—Challenges Facing the American Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside

Source). Arlington, Virginia: Prepared by the Rand Corporation for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, 2004, 26.

<sup>3</sup>[Works in Progress: A Report on Middle and High School Improvement Programs](#) (PDF; Outside Source). Washington, D.C.: The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, American Institutes of Research, January 2005, 81.

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## Classified staff

Members of the classified staff have many opportunities to bond with students and provide guidance and encouragement. For example, attendance clerks and front office personnel typically have regular contact with students, and food service workers have an opportunity to dish up more than food on a daily basis. Similarly, school maintenance staff members may encounter students who loiter after school or linger in the halls during class. When administrators provide these adults with training and encouragement to serve as mentors to these students, the classified staff members have an opportunity to have meaningful connections with students who may feel that no one cares.



### In the Spotlight

#### Rio Norte Junior High School, William S. Hart Union High School District

At one time, Rio Norte staff assigned a student who had vandalized school property to work with the school custodian to repair the damage. Because of the caring relationship that developed, the student began volunteering to help on school cleanup after school and continued to see the custodian as a mentor even after graduation.

- [Rio Norte DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Rio Norte Junior High School](#) (Outside Source)

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## Counselors

Most developmentally responsive middle schools employ on-site counselors who can meet with students to provide academic, career, behavioral, or emotional guidance. In many cases, the counselors facilitate student groups such as peer mediation, peer coaching, and diversity training. Counselors often run [Opportunity Classes](#) that help underachieving students examine behaviors that get in the way of their success and learn new skills that will help them achieve academic and social success. For more about counseling program, refer to the [California Results-Based School Counseling and Student Support Guidelines \(2007\)](#) (PDF; 612KB; 85pp.).

## Related Links

- [Counseling](#), Recommendation 8—Safety, Resilience, and Health, TCSII.
- [Middle & High School Counseling](#), California Department of Education.

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## Discipline

Caring staff team members implement discipline in ways that lead students toward positive behavioral changes.”<sup>1</sup> For example, developmentally responsive and socially equitable middle schools hire skilled and caring people to run the discipline rooms or programs. These staff members know how to motivate students to set goals and how to begin working to meet their potential. Many times, the school counselor serves in this role.

For teachers instructing middle grades students, the tasks of teaching lessons and managing students are especially challenging. The dramatic changes that occur during this time of their lives require a radically different and unique approach to educating young adolescents. The biological changes impact the cognitive, social, and emotional lives.<sup>2</sup> Research suggests that teachers who develop relationships experience fewer classroom behavior problems and better academic performance. Research also indicates that the actions of teachers in their classrooms double the impact on student achievement than other ways educators try to improve student success. Therefore; an essential part of good classroom management is building relationships.

### Strategies for Building Relationships

In [The Power of Positive Relationships](#) (Outside Source), Tara Brown gives seven relationship-based strategies that can transform the classroom into a positive learning environment.

In [Classroom Management Strategies for Difficult Students: Promoting Change through Relationships](#) (Outside Source), Mary Ellen Beaty-O’Ferrall, et al., gives three relationship-building strategies.

In [How to Develop Positive Classroom Management](#). (Outside Source), Evantheia Schibsted gives nine tips for building relationships because the secret to effective discipline is proactively building relationships, not reacting punitively to student misbehavior.

In [Student-Teacher Relationships Can Be Built Five Minutes at a Time](#) (Outside Source), Dan Ouelette tells how he created a manageable middle school classroom by establishing a personal relationship with each student.



## In the Spotlight

**McKinleyville Middle School, McKinleyville Union Elementary School District, a 2006 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School**

The opportunity room at McKinleyville is an instructional class that has caring teachers who provide students with help in setting goals, reviewing progress, and

catching up on schoolwork.

- [McKinleyville DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [McKinleyville Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School Visitor's Guide: McKinleyville Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

## Related Links

- [Classroom management](#), Recommendation 8—Safety, Resilience, and Health, TCSII.
- [Discipline: a fair, consistent, and positive approach](#), Recommendation 8—Safety, Resilience, and Health, TCSII.

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### Footnote

<sup>1</sup>Rick Wormeli, [Misleading in the Middle: A Rebuttal to Cheri Pierson Yecke](#) (Outside Source), Educational Leadership, Vol. 63, Summer 2006.

<sup>2</sup>Armstrong, Thomas. 2006. [The Best Schools](#) (Outside Source), ASCD, 112.

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## Conclusion

Staff members of developmentally responsive middle schools demonstrate caring through celebrations, kind words in the hallways, or passionate discussions that engage students in the excitement of learning. Students at such schools know that they matter and that someone cares about their success. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Resnick et al. 1997) emphasized the importance of caring relationships. Its survey of 90,000 youths in grades seven through twelve found that youths who felt connected (i.e., experienced caring relationships and received high expectation messages and opportunities to participate and contribute) to either their parents or school were unlikely to engage in problem behaviors arising from alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, emotional distress, unsafe sexual practices, and acts of violence toward others.<sup>1</sup>

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### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> *Resilience & Youth Development Module*. Prepared by WestEd and the Safe and Healthy Kids Program Office. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2002, 2.

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