



POSITIONS

THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Why The Essential Elements are Essential

As Social Emotional Learning becomes ever more recognized as a critical need for student success, educators of Middle Schools and Middle Level programs must seriously engage in a deep study and implementation of the Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs. Better known as the Essential Elements, this researched based, comprehensive, integrated approach to surrounding and supporting Middle-Level students both instructionally as well as socially-emotionally is critical to student success. There are two basic tenets of a Standards-Focused Middle Level School or program:

- Intellectual development and academic achievement of all students, and
- The personal and social development of each student.

These two tenets are complementary to one another and are critical to student success at the Middle Level. As the need to address the social/emotional needs of students increase, Middle Level educators must implement a comprehensive student centered approach to teaching and learning. The Essential Elements are critical to providing both quality instruction and a comprehensive, inclusive culture for all student “In the Middle.”

There are seven Essential Elements:

1. A philosophy and mission that reflects the intellectual and developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents.
2. An educational program that is comprehensive, challenging, purposeful, integrated, relevant, and standards-based.
3. An organization and structure that supports both academic excellence and personal development.
4. Classroom instruction appropriate to the needs and characteristics of young adolescents provided by skilled and knowledgeable teachers.

5. Strong educational leadership and a building administration that encourage, facilitate, and sustain involvement, participation, and partnerships.
6. A network of academic and personal support available for all students.
7. Professional learning and staff development for all staff that are ongoing, planned, purposeful, and collaboratively developed.

Taken as a whole, the Essential Elements demand a comprehensive approach leading to cultural change and inclusive reform which is program-wide. Implementing the Essential Elements requires a deep understanding of purpose from administration, teachers, students, support staff, parents and community partners. Collaboration is the key to successful implementation of the Essential Elements. As educators we must develop and implement a culture of collaboration that recognizes families as partners and understands the importance of community resources available to assist with the mission of student success both academically and socially emotionally. Whatever programmatic decisions a school may make in the realm of academics or SEL, it is critical that stakeholders collaborate. As the needs of students, families, communities and- yes- educators become increasingly diverse we must seek out the resources within the community to assist us in our mission of surrounding and supporting Middle-Level students.

Implementing the Essential Elements can be done without exorbitant professional development costs or facility redesign. One needs simply to start by completing a comprehensive review of what currently exists in your school district grades 5-8. What is the culture of the current Middle- Level program? Do those responsible for young adolescents understand the unique characteristics and needs of their students? Is there an integrated approach to teaching and learning? Do teachers work in a collaborative environment sharing ideas and strategies leading to success for all students? Is the educational program challenging and purposeful? Is the student support network inclusive of community resources and implemented collaboratively throughout the school? Are support staff, teachers, administrators, and parents aware of the needs of the school community? Is the student support program (Guidance, Social Workers, etc.) integrated as a critical element of the instructional program? Researching these questions can be the beginning of the development of a comprehensive, valuable professional learning community. Focusing those responsible for the success of students at the Middle Level can prove to be an enriching professional development experience at little cost to districts with potentially significant outcomes for students.

In an environment with ever increasing demands being placed on educators, students and communities, now is a good time to reflect on our practices and look for partners who can assist us in ensuring all students are surrounded and supported as we guide them to success. The goal of success for students requires educators and partners to collaboratively reflect on the needs of their students. Using the essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs will provide the focus necessary for reflection and planning for a comprehensive approach to student success at the Middle-Level. There are several resources available online at NYSMSA.org to assist you as you work towards excellence at the Middle Level.