

Great Schools Meet Students' Developmental Needs

Jane Sonenshein, Ohio State Board of Education, District 10
e-mail: Jane.Sonenshein@ode.state.oh.us

In Ohio we are working to provide more pre-school education because we know children entering Kindergarten with little learning readiness are already far behind, academically.

In Ohio, many high schools have created small schools or Ninth grade academies because studies have shown that high school students need more support and connection to learning than was assumed throughout most of the Twentieth century. Ohio will require a more rigorous "Ohio Core" curriculum for graduation by 2014.

Five regional STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) schools are being developed with state financial support because all studies indicate that is the greatest opportunity for the economic success of Ohio graduates.

The complexity of education becomes evident as each new area of study indicates a new emphasis needed to help our children achieve academic success. Over the past six months I have served on a national study panel for the National Association of State Boards of Education focused on the middle grades. Grades 5 through 8, serving our early adolescents ten to fourteen years old, are awkward because no one knows where they fit. We have K-8 elementaries, 5-8 middle schools, and every combination in between. We often seem to think the building this age student sits in should determine the way he or she is taught.

We know the rigor being added to the high school curriculum can't begin in the ninth grade. For students to be ready for the math and science required to graduate they will need to have a much deeper knowledge of these subjects and reading before high school.

We know that our adolescents are reading less and playing video games more. To increase reading comprehension, you have to read more than school assignments.

We know that 85% of high school dropouts can be identified as at risk by 8th grade. Disengagement from learning, increased absenteeism, more difficult behavior – all begin in the middle grades.

We also know that all these concerns about our young adolescents can be addressed. Some of the challenges are greater than others. Some students will have many challenges from home, neighborhood, or just the way adolescence hits them.

Ten through 14 year olds are entering puberty. They are fully immersed in popular culture and they want desperately to be like the 18 year olds. They are also still children who want adult attention, need guidance, support and praise, and want to learn anything they see as important to their lives and the world surrounding them.

The challenge is that teachers need to collaborate to teach across subjects. All adults in a school need to model respect for each other and respect for their students. Everyone needs to clearly explain the academic and behavioral high

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expectations. Teachers teaching 10 -14 year olds need to like the age group and know their subject and how to share that knowledge with variety. Expectations, discipline and trust must be clear to students and everyone entering the building. And parents and community must be welcome in the school.

Wait a minute! Shouldn't all these things be happening in every school? Yes. In addition, every student should feel safe and supported. Along with clearly expressed expectations, support – academic, emotional, social – must be available to all of our children. It is a subtle, important difference between the needs of children, early adolescents, and high school learners. Success in school depends on educators working together to create the best conditions for each child to learn.

Resources are available from the Department of Education, www.ode.state.oh.us, to meet the needs of our students. Educators and parents need to use these resources. This is our summer assignment.