MEETING THE NEEDS OF HIGH ABILITY AND HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS IN THE MIDDLE GRADES
A JOINT POSITION STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL ASSOCIATION AND THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR GIFTED CHILDREN

The National Association for Gifted Children and the National Middle School Association share a commitment to developing schools and classrooms in which both equity and excellence are persistent goals for each learner. Equity refers to the opportunity of every learner to have supported access to the highest possible quality education. Excellence refers to the need of every learner for opportunities and adult support necessary to maximize his or her learning potential.

Early adolescence is generally described as the time between ages 10 and 15. During this developmental span, young adolescents experience a wide range of growth rates in cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and moral dimensions. Change in young adolescents can be rapid and uneven. In addition to the diversity of development implicit in early adolescence, middle schools also reflect diversity in student gender, culture, experience, economic status, interests, and learning preferences. Every middle school classroom also represents a wide array of talents.

In light of the inevitable variance in middle school populations, it is critical that middle school educators develop increasing awareness of and skill necessary to address the full range of learner needs—including needs of those who already demonstrate advanced academic abilities and those who have the potential to work at advanced levels.

High-ability adolescents may differ from fellow classmates in cognitive skills, interests, modes of learning, and motivation. As a result, their educational needs may also differ in some important ways from those of other young adolescents. Attending to those needs requires informed attention to both equity and excellence in all facets of schooling.

IDENTIFICATION

All middle school learners need educators who consistently use both formal and informal means of recognizing their particular strengths and needs. In regard to advanced learners, identification requires specific plans to seek out students with advanced abilities or advanced potential in order to provide appropriate educational experiences during the transition into adolescence. Both the National Middle School Association and the National Association for Gifted Children share a strong commitment to appropriate use of multiple approaches to identify high potential in students from minority and low-economic groups. Identification of high performance and potential are precursors to helping young adolescents maximize their potential during these critical years. Identification of student performance and potential should be followed by educational planning to maximize the potential.

ASSESSMENT

Ongoing assessment is critical to informing classroom practice. Preassessment, in-process assessments, and post assessments should give learners consistent opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skill related to topics of study. Assessments related to student readiness, interests, perspectives, and learning preferences provide educators with a consistently emerging understanding of each learner's needs in the classroom. Middle level educators should use data from such assessments to modify teaching and learning plans to ensure that each student—including those who already perform well beyond expectations—have consistent opportunities to extend their abilities.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Equity in the middle grades requires that all learners have an opportunity to participate in curriculum that is rich in meaning and focused on thought and application. Excellence requires support necessary to

show continual growth in knowledge, understanding, and skill. Advanced middle grade learners thus require consistent opportunities to work at degrees of challenge somewhat beyond their particular readiness levels, with support necessary to achieve at the new levels of proficiency. In addition, educators should address student interests and preferred modes of learning in planning curriculum and instruction that is appropriately challenging for individual learners. Educational resources should be of a sufficient range of complexity to ensure challenge for advanced learners. Flexible pacing and flexible grouping arrangements are important instructional adjustments for many highly able middle level learners. Because of the inevitable variance among high-ability learners, advanced learners, like other middle school students, need curriculum and instruction proactively designed to accommodate their particular needs.

AFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

Critical to healthy development in the middle grade years is development of positive student affect. Students benefit greatly from learning environments that reinforce their worth as individuals and simultaneously support them in becoming more powerful and productive. For advanced learners, this may require helping students affirm both their abilities and their need to belong to a peer group. Middle level educators need to understand and address the unique dynamics that high-ability and high-potential young adolescents may experience as they seek to define themselves and their roles among peers.

EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Building a middle school culture that supports equity and excellence for each learner requires sustained attention to partnerships among all adults key to the student's development. This includes partnerships between home and school, specialists and generalists, and teachers and administrators. Middle level schools should assist parents in recognizing, understanding, and nurturing advanced abilities and potential in young adolescents. Partnerships among team members and between classroom teachers and gifted education specialists should ensure appropriate challenge for advanced learners and appropriate attention to the particular talents of advanced learners. Administrator/teacher partnerships should define what it means to accommodate the individual needs of learners and develop conditions that lead to such accommodations for all middle level learners—including those who demonstrate advanced performance or potential.

PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE STAFF DEVELOPMENT

To ensure equity and excellence in the middle grades, teachers must be adequately prepared to provide academically rich instruction for all students and to teach in ways that enable all students to work at appropriate and escalating levels of challenge. Teachers with training in gifted education are more likely to foster high-level thinking, allow for greater student expression, consider individual variance in their teaching, and understand how to provide high-end challenge. Appropriate staff development for middle level teachers will continually focus on high-quality curriculum, understanding and teaching in response to individual as well as group needs, and developing a repertoire of instructional strategies that support and manage flexible classrooms. Central to the success of these endeavors is shared responsibility for meeting the needs of each learner, evidenced in systematic and consistent planning, carrying out of plans, and evaluation of effectiveness of plans in terms of individual learners and small groups of learners as well as the class as a whole.

With these shared beliefs, the National Association for Gifted Children and the National Middle School Association call on middle level educators to adopt and support processes and actions that ensure developmentally appropriate practices for the full range of students they serve.

A CALL TO ACTION

The National Association for Gifted Children and the National Middle School Association urge administrators, teachers, gifted education specialists, school support personnel, parents, and students to collaborate for the purpose of ensuring equity and excellence for all learners, including those with advanced performance or potential.

District and School Leaders Should:

1. Provide leadership in creating a school climate that vigorously supports both equity and excellence.
2. Ensure that teachers have meaningful knowledge and understanding about the needs of gifted adolescents, including training in differentiated instruction so that the needs of all students—including those with advanced performance or potential—are appropriately addressed.
3. Develop and implement an appropriate and flexible system for identifying high-ability learners from diverse populations.
4. Use organizational structures such as teaming and advisory programs to ensure that needs of young adolescents, including high-ability young adolescents, are central in instructional planning.
5. Encourage consistent collaboration among all teachers and support personnel in the school to ensure appropriate services for high-ability learners.
6. Ensure a continuum of services including options such as differentiation, advanced classes, acceleration, short-term seminars, independent studies, mentorships and other learning opportunities matched to the varied needs of high-potential and high-ability learners.
7. Provide counseling-related services for students with advanced academic performance or potential.
8. Develop and maintain a written plan to guide educational planning for advanced learners and to inform the community of those plans.
9. Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum, instruction, resources, and other services in supporting the development of high-ability learners.

Teachers, Gifted Education Specialists, and Support Personnel Should:

1. Be knowledgeable about students with advanced academic abilities and those who have the potential to work at advanced levels.
2. Meet regularly to discuss the needs of all students, including those with high ability.
3. Provide curriculum, instruction, and other opportunities to meet the needs of students with high ability.
4. Use a variety of developmentally appropriate instructional practices to enable each student to experience a high degree of personal excellence.
5. Collaborate with colleagues at elementary and high school levels to ensure a smooth transition as students progress throughout the grades.
6. Keep parents informed about their children's growth and invite parent participation in educational planning for their children.

Parents Should:

1. Strengthen family connections with young adolescents.
2. Be knowledgeable about the needs and concerns of young, gifted adolescents.
3. Understand and contribute to the district's plan for identifying and serving high-ability learners.
4. Help their children take appropriate responsibility for their own learning and develop related skills and attitudes of responsible independence.
5. Collaborate with the school to ensure that their children's needs are being met.
6. Be their children's best advocates.

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