

Teaching Organizational Skills in Middle School

By Barbara Boller

From *The Clearing House*

IN a middle school hallway, a student is sifting through reams of paper spilling out of his backpack and mutters, "I know it is in here, I did it last night." Inside a classroom, a student sits with a puzzled look on his face as the teacher asks everyone to take out the finished project. Next door, a teacher hands back a written assignment with the comment, "You need to answer part two of the question." Teachers and parents scratch their heads and wonder why it is so hard for some students to stay organized.

The transition to middle school is an educational milestone, marking significant and sometimes unspoken changes in expecta-

tions. The overriding expectation is that students will become more independent. Fifth-grade teachers begin to share this expectation with comments such as "Next year, you will have to do this on your own." Sixth-grade teachers follow with orientations that include class schedules, homework logs, and supply lists. Routines and rules are clearly articulated and the importance of completing homework and being prepared for class is reinforced. So why do many students begin to struggle in middle school?

Curves in the Road

Middle school teachers provide rules and structure that guide stu-

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dents on the road toward independence, but they sometimes forget to teach them how to navigate the curves. These curves come in the form of subtle and often unspoken developmental assumptions, the most common being the notion of "old enough."

Assuming Too Much?

Middle school students are assumed to be old enough to remember to bring books home, finish a project without nagging, and write assignments down. On the surface, these seem like reasonable expectations, but are they? Let's walk through the first few classes of a typical middle school day.

In first period, the social studies teacher assigns a project. The teacher outlines each part, hands out a written guide, provides an example of a finished product, and tells the class it is due next week. The class understands the expectation that they need to complete a project and dutifully write it down in their homework log. In second period, the English teacher assigns a book report and spends the first part of class discussing what needs to be included. Time runs out and the bell rings as the teacher shouts, "Don't forget to write it down." In third period, the math teacher tells the class there will be a test on Thursday.

By day's end, the homework log is full and we assume students understand what they need to do,

but are they really "old enough" to tackle all these assignments alone? Do they realize that they need to look at their homework pad and map out a plan? Are they aware that they need to start to work on projects days ahead of each due date? Do they have a sense of how long each assignment will take? Can they break each assignment down into manageable steps? Do they know how to prioritize and allocate time and energy?

It's easy to underestimate the organizational skills students need to juggle multiple assignments, especially when the subject matter is the focus. However, if we shift our attention to the process of learning, we can gain insights that will help us guide students along their journey.

Anticipating the Curves

As a school psychologist, I have spent more than a decade working with teachers, parents, and students in a middle school setting. When asked to describe characteristics of model students most teachers include traits such as planning, time management, memory, self-monitoring, paying attention, and controlling behavior and emotions.

A student's ability to manage learning tasks has been found to be as predictive of academic success as IQ. If organizational skills are an important component of academic success, shouldn't they receive the

same attention given to subject areas? Where do teachers start?

Understanding the processes involved in organization is a beginning. Neurologically, our ability to direct and organize our behavior involves processes associated with the frontal lobe, an area of the brain associated with higher-level processes. These processes come under a heading called executive functions, referring to a role as the director or leader. Frontal lobe and executive skills include planning, time management, working memory, self-monitoring, and behavioral regulation, all of which are needed for organization.

From a neurological perspective, the frontal lobes are not fully developed until young adulthood, a developmental perspective that challenges our assumptions about "old enough." Looking at organization as a developmental process helps us appreciate students' different skill levels. There is general agreement that executive skills are sensitive to both genetic and environmental influences. Although each student is unique in terms of the learning process, environmental supports can help guide them. By middle school, students have begun to develop the skills needed for independent learning but are far from the goal.

Navigating the Curves

To design and implement educational supports we need to un-

derstand the processes involved in executive skills and become cognizant of their manifestations in the classroom. The student who always forgets to raise his hand and blurts out the answers may not have the internal skills needed to regulate his own behavior.

The student who cannot ignore a disparaging comment from a peer or speaks back to a teacher may not be ready to manage complex emotions. The student who hands in late assignments may not have a strong sense of time. These behaviors provide developmental snapshots about each student and offer clues about the type and level of support they need to manage themselves in a classroom.

Performance Behaviors

Behaviors related to performance are also important to note. Students who need help starting a task may look unmotivated but, in fact, may not know where to begin. Modeling the first few steps of a task may be all they need. Others may never finish a task because they find it difficult to direct and maintain attention and mental energy. Breaking a task into manageable steps and checking each step for accuracy is helpful.

Following oral directions, "Open the book to page three and begin the first five problems," working through a complicated math sequence, or juggling the multiple demands of written language all

require working memory. Providing visual cues and models and repeating and reinforcing instructions may eliminate misunderstandings.

Planning skills can be taught directly. Working through a project as a group can help model organizational skills. Problem solve how to begin, make a list of materials, and talk about what information is needed and where it might be found. Ask students to estimate how long it may take to complete a step and then ask them to time themselves as they do it.

Design a group time line that provides a clear outline of what needs to be done and when. In addition to these skills, organizing and managing oneself requires the ability to think about thinking and the flexibility to change course when needed. As you work through the project, model problem-solving skills. What do you do, for example, if you cannot find the needed information? Teaching the process is as important as the content.

Smoother Course

To help students become more independent and responsible for learning, we first need to recognize the neurological underpinnings of behavior. Just as we do not expect young readers to tackle a Harry Potter book until they have the necessary decoding and fluency skills, we should not expect middle school students to manage themselves

until they have the skills they need. Students will have individual needs at individual times. One student may be able to tackle the English assignment independently but fall short on the science project. Another may need help with planning, but has the time-management skills needed to follow through.

School Wide Strategies

How can teachers meet these varied needs? To begin, direct instruction in organizational skills, study skills, time management, and behavioral regulation can be interwoven into daily lessons. Simple building-wide strategies, such as providing 10 minutes during homeroom at the beginning and end of each day, could be one way of establishing a time to copy assignments and file papers.

All teachers could focus on one skill each week, providing consistent practice across disciplines. Providing verbal and visual models of problem solving and organizational steps helps students become more cognizant of the process. Sharing ideas and strategies with parents can reinforce skills.

Looking at organization as a set of skills that can be taught throughout middle school opens the door for instructional changes. Our middle school students may not be fully equipped to be in the drivers' seat, but with the right support, they can begin to take the wheel.

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