

# Guiding Curriculum Decisions for Middle-Grades Language Arts

Margaret Russell Ciardi  
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with assistance from  
Anne Shure

**Series Editors:**  
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Education Development Center, Inc.

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# Acknowledgments

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One of the most rewarding parts of completing a project like this guide is the opportunity to thank the people who have participated in its development. The guide has benefited from the contributions of a substantial number of colleagues, and it is our distinct pleasure to acknowledge them here.

Without the foresight and support of Hayes Mizell, program director at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, and Leah Meyer Austin, program director at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, this guide series would never have come about. Hayes and Leah, along with their colleagues from the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, have championed the efforts to reanimate middle-grades education nationwide. Through their foundations, Hayes and Leah have been providing support to a number of districts and schools throughout the country to promote standards-based instruction. As they worked with their grantees, they learned that many of these districts have faced considerable challenges in identifying and implementing high-quality curriculum materials. Hayes and Leah recognized that educators were in need of more assistance in making curriculum decisions that will promote academic excellence in their districts, schools, and classrooms.

Nancy Ames, our colleague at Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), who guides the National Forum and shares its members' commitment to middle-grades reform, had the initial vision for this project. Her work provided a solid and substantial foundation from which to build, and she supported our efforts throughout.

EDC has been a supportive environment for this work. Nancy and other colleagues helped us to shape the focus of this guide series and to frame its content; still others helped us interview teachers, work out conceptual knots, and prepare the manuscript. Our project staff spent many hours thinking and talking through the overall plan for the guide series: thanks to Barbara Brauner Berns, Christine Brown, Michele Browne, Doris Santamaria Makang, Kristin Metz, Nadine Nelson, Marian Pasquale, Anne Shure, and Marianne Thompson. Anne Shure displayed her incomparable interviewing skills and contributed to the writing as well as planning. Shelley Isaacson also did some preliminary research. Mark Driscoll and Barbara Miller displayed their usual collegial generosity in helping us think through a number of difficult questions and issues. Christine Brown helped us stay on track. Deborah Clark picked up loose ends in the final months and supervised the manuscript production with her signature skill and good humor. Other



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members of the design and production team included Jennifer Davis-Kay, Dorothy Geiser, Gail Hedges, Catherine Lee, Jennifer Roscoe, and Jane Wilson. Thanks to Kristen Bjork for her design consultations.

It was our good fortune to have assembled an encouraging and thoughtful advisory board whose members helped us to plunge into the task with fortitude and enthusiasm. Members included Ron Adams, Loretta Brady, Everly Broadway, Nancy Clark-Chiarelli, Gerard Consuegra, John D’Auria, Georgette Gonsalves, Kristi Kahl, Lloyd King, Greg Kniseley, Gerald Kulm, Joan Lipsitz, Barbara Reys, Linda Rief, Karen Smith, Albert Talborn, Rob Traver, and Anne Wheelock. We would like to extend a special thanks to Nancy Clark-Chiarelli, Kristi Kahl, Joan Lipsitz, Linda Rief, and Anne Wheelock for their careful reviews of portions of the manuscript. Anne in particular made a tremendous contribution to shaping the content of the critical questions and practitioner stories in the science guide, which carried over to this guide as well.

Finally, we would like to extend our thanks to the practitioners who took the time to share their thoughts and experiences with us—their voices can be heard throughout the guide—and to the reviewers who reacted to portions of our manuscripts. These include Geri Belle, Kathleen Bisson, Vera Blake, Sharon Breitenstein, Jennifer Bryant, Stacey Casanave, Bill Chiquelin, Ruth Diane Cichocki, Toby Kahn Curry, Mark Destler, Ree Dillon, Fred Ducat, Ellen Eberly, Leslie Jo Elmore, Pam Fortier, Laura Graham, Brian Haas, Lynette Herring-Harris, Sandra Hollingsworth, Christi Howarth, Lew Kerns, Joellen Killion, Jed Lippert, Brett Mayhan, Ashley McDonald, Shirley Mullin, Julie Nann, Timothy O’Brien, Sara Oelkers, Jeri Ortego, Cecelia Osborn, Nancy Patterson, Melody Raymond, Laura Roop, Leah Robertson, Stephanie Robins, Jane Skelton, Natalie Solomon, Cathy Tabor, Jennifer Tendero, Lillian Villarreal, and Anne Walker. We also thank Kathleen Daniel and Julie Koenig of Holt, Rinehart & Winston for helping us to understand the influence of standards on language arts textbook publishers.

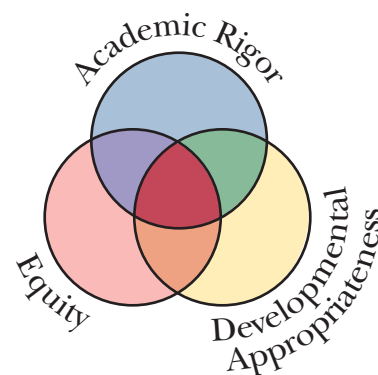


# Aiming for Academic Excellence in Middle-Grades Curricula

*Third period ends with a few, hurried instructions about homework from the teacher as students pack up their pens, pencils, and notebooks. They pour into the halls, moving in small packs to their next classes. Some scurry and others adopt a leisurely stroll, using the time to catch up with friends. The energy bounces off the lockers lining the corridors. Waves of students surge through open classroom doors—they plop books onto desks and slide into their seats. A soft sigh slips into the emptying hallways as students unpack those pens, pencils, and notebooks and prepare to think and work hard.*

When classroom doors close and lessons begin, we want our children to be intellectually challenged and engaged by their work. And indeed, good things are happening in many middle-grades classrooms throughout the country. Students are learning to think deeply about the subjects they are studying and are enthusiastic about their coursework. Their work requires them to think hard, explain and support their ideas, and apply their understanding to new situations.

How can we extend these conditions to more students in more schools? The answer involves making a number of interconnected changes: establishing district policies that promote and support quality instruction, adopting clearly articulated standards for student learning and performance, using high-quality curricula, improving teacher education, providing ongoing professional development for teachers already in the classroom, and developing community support. This guide will help educators address one of these areas of change—designing and using high-quality curriculum to promote high standards of student achievement. *Guiding Curriculum Decisions for Middle-Grades Language Arts* is part of a series of curriculum guides for middle-grades language arts,



**Good things are happening in many middle-grades classrooms throughout the country. Students are learning to think deeply about the subjects they are studying and are enthusiastic about their coursework. Their work requires them to think hard, explain and support their ideas, and apply their understanding to new situations.**



**In order to meet these standards, teachers face new academic and pedagogical challenges. They must teach more demanding and extensive subject area content, they must develop different instructional strategies, and they must reach a wider range of students. Having a high-quality curriculum to guide instruction is a key to meeting these challenges.**

mathematics, science, and social studies.<sup>1</sup> This guide offers a set of principles for making curriculum decisions and illustrates these principles with practitioners' descriptions of their experiences in implementing standards-based curricula.

This guide series was developed at Education Development Center, Inc. with the support of the Edna McConnell Clark and W.K. Kellogg Foundations. It is based on interviews with more than 100 middle-grades educators who are using standards-based curriculum approaches and materials in their districts, schools, and classrooms. This introductory chapter sets the scene for the scope of the guide series, focusing on language arts but drawing examples more broadly from all of the major middle-grades subject areas.

The need for new approaches to curriculum and instruction is clear. Over the past fifteen years educators have been taking a hard look at American students' academic performance. Educators and employers alike express concerns about the educational accomplishments of America's youth. American students are outperformed by peers in many other countries. Within the last decade each major subject area has developed academic standards that raise the bar for student achievement and performance.<sup>2</sup> In order to meet these standards, teachers face new academic and pedagogical challenges. They must teach more demanding and extensive subject area content, they must develop different instructional strategies, and they must reach a wider range of students. Having a high-quality curriculum to guide instruction is a key to meeting these challenges.

While the school or district may specify a grammar text or literature anthology to use, or stipulate particular novels for students to read, most language arts teachers construct their own curriculum

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<sup>1</sup> The anticipated publication date for the social studies guide is in the fall of 2001.

<sup>2</sup> In 1989 the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) was the first national organization to produce a set of K-12 curriculum standards for a major subject area. Since then, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) have collaborated on language arts standards; the National Research Council (NRC) and Project 2061 of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) have each published science standards (the AAAS uses the term "benchmarks" instead of "standards"), and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has authored social studies standards. In addition, the National Center on Education and the Economy has published *New Standards™ Student Performance Standards* for language arts, mathematics, science, and applied learning. Information about subject area standards can be found on the websites of all of these organizations.



from these and other components. The availability and use of published curriculum materials are more limited in language arts than in other subject areas. We have puzzled a good deal about why this is the case since, in principle, it should be no more of a challenge to develop and publish quality curriculum materials for language arts than for other subject area disciplines. Although we have no definitive answer to our own question, it does seem that several factors contribute to this situation. Language arts curriculum tends to be less prescriptive in part because the content is less constrained. Language arts teachers have a huge range of choices of literature to teach. Moreover, the skills and processes that students learn in language arts overlap with a variety of other subject areas. Another factor is the desire of teachers to tailor language arts experiences to the particular circumstances of their own students. In addition, perhaps because so much of the content of language arts is literature and writing, realms of creativity and personal expression, language arts teachers tend to guard their autonomy with particular zeal.

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### **What do we mean by “curriculum”?**

In a broad sense, curriculum refers to the ideas, skills, processes, and dispositions that educators and content specialists identify as the important ones for students to learn. Many states and districts have developed curriculum frameworks that articulate these learning goals. (Districts may further refine this articulation by indicating the concepts and skills to be learned at each grade level.) The written lessons, activities, exercises, and supporting materials provide the means through which teachers engage students in learning, articulating the important content to teach and offering teachers a structure and organization for instruction. Language arts teachers build their curriculum programs by defining their goals for student learning and planning activities and selecting materials that will support those goals.

Adapted from Lynn T. Goldsmith, June Mark, and Ilene Kantrov, *Choosing a Standards-Based Mathematics Curriculum* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000), 2. Copyright © 1998 by Education Development Center, Inc., K-12 Mathematics Curriculum Center. Published by Heinemann, a division of Reed Elsevier, Inc., Portsmouth, NH.

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We have designed *Guiding Curriculum Decisions for Middle-Grades Language Arts* to help language arts educators make their curriculum



decisions in thoughtful and principled ways. Like its companion guides for the other major subject areas, this guide includes:

- Critical questions that embody a set of principles to guide curriculum decision making.
- Vignettes about curriculum design and implementation that use practitioners' own voices to illustrate how the principles are addressed in practice.
- Curriculum profiles that provide examples of standards-based language arts curriculum programs.
- An annotated list of other resources that may be useful to curriculum decision making.

The principles we propose to guide decision making are general ones that pertain to any subject area. They articulate three essential components of any academically excellent curriculum—academic rigor, equity, and developmental appropriateness. These three components provide the foundation on which the guides are based. The next section introduces these components, and is followed by some additional information about this guide: a brief tour of the remaining chapters of the guide and a description of our process for identifying and interviewing practitioners about their experiences bringing the standards into their classroom instruction.

## **Principles to Guide Curriculum Decisions: Three Components of Academically Excellent Curricula**

The framework we describe below specifies three key components of academically excellent curricula—academic rigor, equity, and developmental appropriateness. These components were first proposed by members of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, a coalition of funders, educators, researchers, state and local leaders, and representatives of national associations that promotes a vision of effective schools for young adolescents.<sup>3</sup> The three components are illustrated by the diagram of interlocking circles pictured throughout this introduction. This section describes each of the components and discusses how each pertains to middle-grades students.

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<sup>3</sup> Joan Lipsitz, Hayes Mizell, Anthony Jackson, and Leah Meyer Austin, "Speaking With One Voice," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78, no. 7 (1997): 553.



## A view of middle-grades students

“Teaching middle school is like being inside a kaleidoscope—the view of the kids is always changing, and it’s always interesting. I’ve heard middle-grades kids described in a lot of ways—mostly contradictory. For example, they’re really learning how to take responsibility for themselves; they’re really wild. They’re vigilantly watching everyone and everything around them so they can figure out who they are; they’re completely oblivious to the rest of the world. They’re kind and thoughtful; they’re rude and obnoxious. You can get someone in this school to agree to every one of these descriptions, and most of us would say that, at one time or another, they’re *all* true.

“I think about middle-grades students like kernels of popcorn. They pretty much all enter sixth grade as young kids, and during the three years we have them, they start popping at different rates, transforming into these new adolescent creatures. The most obvious part of the transformation is the physical one. There are always a few kids who enter the sixth grade looking 16 instead of 11 or 12 (or who are older to begin with because they’ve repeated grades somewhere along the way), but mostly the sixth graders still have the bodies of children. And then, they start popping. By the end of the first year, there are a handful of boys who are shooting up and have feet the size of canal boats, and a bunch of girls who are beginning to look like young women. When everyone comes back to school the next fall, there are more kids who are making the change, and during seventh grade, even more. It’s fun to watch friends catch up with each other—one month, two boys will walk down the hall looking like Mutt and Jeff, and two or three months later, they’re standing shoulder to shoulder. By the time they leave for the high school, better than half of the girls are taller than I am—and let’s not even talk about the boys!

“These kids are such a funny mix of becoming more grown up emotionally and intellectually and still remaining quite young. I really enjoy their class discussions, because you can see the kids revving up their mental engines. They’re thinking deeply and figuring out some really sophisticated stuff. Kids will argue for their ideas and make pretty convincing cases, too. Even though they’re beginning to become really passionate about some of their ideas and beliefs, they’re also learning to listen to other people. Lots of times they can understand why someone else might see things differently. Sometimes they can even convince others to change their minds.

“But this growing intellectual power is only part of the story. Kids can be having this really intense and interesting discussion in class, say about how to control variables in an experimental



design. Then, as soon as class ends, the girls may shift seamlessly into a debate about the ‘hottest’ TV star on their way out the door and the boys may start to talk up the latest basketball game or exchange tips for avoiding skateboard wipe-outs.”

— Middle-grades educator



## **Academic rigor: Meeting high standards**

The current efforts to set standards for student performance at national, state, and district levels are, in essence, efforts to define academic rigor. At the heart of the standards movement is the question, “What is the essential knowledge of the discipline?” Or, as one Massachusetts teacher has put it, the fundamental question is, “What do I want my students to know ten years after they’ve been in my class?” For reform-minded educators the answer to these questions includes understanding the major concepts of a subject area (the “big ideas”), acquiring characteristic ways of thinking within the discipline (“habits of mind”), and learning its particular methods of investigation and argumentation. The answer also includes mastering skills, facts, and useful procedures, but it reframes these as part of a larger intellectual enterprise rather than as the primary goal of curriculum and instruction.

Standards are more than a list of expectations for student accomplishment—they’re not simply a scope and sequence for the topics to be covered over the course of a year, a grade level, or an entire K–12 career. Standards are guideposts to help keep students on track for learning the fundamental ideas of the subject area, reasoning according to the methods and conventions of the discipline, and presenting (and, if necessary, defending) their thinking to others.

This view of standards is pushing curriculum and instruction in new directions. Drawing on models of apprenticeship-style learning and on the theory that students construct their knowledge and understanding by actively engaging with the central ideas of a discipline, the current educational reform movement focuses on creating opportunities for students to build and use their understanding in rich and complex learning contexts.

An academically rigorous curriculum articulates a clear set of goals for learning. It gives teachers and students a reasonable picture of the nature of the discipline and connects them with the same kinds of work that engage professional practitioners. For



example, students research and write persuasive essays, make and test mathematical conjectures, or design science experiments to test hypotheses. A rigorous curriculum helps students exercise general reasoning processes, develop ways of thinking that are particular to the subject area, and acquire an understanding of the methods for establishing and evaluating knowledge in the discipline. For example, the language arts curriculum should help students read and write about complex ideas, think critically, and understand the criteria by which we judge a well-reasoned essay, while mathematics classes should help students develop an appreciation for the characteristics of a convincing mathematical argument.

In addition, a rigorous curriculum offers students (and teachers) a coherent view of the subject area by making connections among important ideas within the discipline. These connections have an effect similar to that of viewing an Impressionist painting from across a room. From up close, the painting looks like little more than individual patches of color floating on the surface of the canvas. From a distance, these colors coalesce into the rendering of a three-dimensional scene. A rigorous curriculum offers connections that help students recognize and appreciate the recurring themes, ideas, and methodologies of the discipline instead of only small, isolated pieces of the picture. In addition, it emphasizes connections between classroom study and real-world applications, helping students to recognize the practical utility of their developing knowledge. Finally, a rigorous curriculum uses a variety of strategies for assessing students' understanding and ability to apply their knowledge to new problems or in different contexts.

In the particular case of the middle grades, it is important that curricula not underestimate students' intellectual capabilities. Early adolescence is a time of significant growth in reasoning capacity, and students' coursework should reflect their increasing ability to think hypothetically and systematically. Jean Piaget, the grand master of cognitive developmental psychology, characterized the young adolescent as navigating the final major stage of intellectual growth.<sup>4</sup> Young adolescents become increasingly adept at considering a variety of perspectives, examining situations from different angles, assessing contingencies, and acknowledging

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<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to Piaget's theories, see Herbert Ginsburg and Sylvia Opper, *Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), or Jean Piaget, "Piaget's Theory," in *Carmichael's Handbook of Child Development*, ed. P. H. Mussen (New York: Wiley, 1970), 702–732.



**An academically rigorous curriculum for the middle grades acknowledges students' growing cognitive capacities and provides them with intellectual challenges to help them shape and sharpen their growing interests.**

possible outcomes. They can think about what might happen (or what might have happened if conditions had been different). Their reasoning becomes more complex and systematic as they develop the capacity to coordinate their thinking about several ideas at once. A classic example is the young adolescent's developing ability to understand that a balance beam's balance point is affected by the coordination of several factors: the amount of weight on each arm, the placement of the weights, and the location of the fulcrum.

The typical middle-grades curriculum is often criticized as a rehash of previous material, a time for review to ensure that students are prepared for their work in high school. Students are often seen as marking time instead of encountering new ideas and challenging work. An academically rigorous curriculum for the middle grades acknowledges students' growing cognitive capacities and provides them with intellectual challenges to help them shape and sharpen their growing interests. It helps students develop their reasoning abilities and their capabilities for inquiry. It also helps them learn to monitor and critique their work by tapping their growing "metacognitive" ability—the capacity to guide their learning by reflecting critically on their own thinking.

Many schools have looked to using interdisciplinary approaches as a way to create more overall curricular coherence and enriching experiences for students. The team structures common in many middle schools can facilitate this effort by providing opportunities for teachers to work more closely together to establish and coordinate lesson plans. In some schools, the same teacher may be responsible for instruction in more than one subject area. In addition to emphasizing connections among different disciplines, interdisciplinary studies have the potential to explore subject area content in much richer and more realistic contexts. After all, the activities and studies that comprise adult work rarely require the skills and ideas of only a single discipline.

It is important, however, to beware of a potential pitfall to interdisciplinary studies. In practice, it is less common to create a truly interdisciplinary curriculum than it is to integrate some of the themes, skills, and tools of one discipline into the study of another. For example, it is becoming increasingly common to ask students in mathematics class to write about their solution strategies, or even to write and present reports. This is a valuable addition



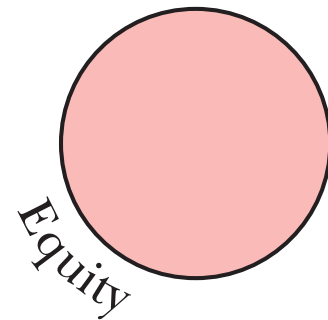
to mathematics classes, as it provides opportunities for students to articulate their thinking and use communication skills. However, teachers rarely respond to this written work as they would to writing assignments in language arts class. It would be unusual for teachers to require several drafts of writing done in mathematics class in order to help students to clarify their ideas, shape their reasoning, and produce effective and grammatically correct prose. Writing assignments may integrate language arts skills into mathematics class, but they generally are not treated with equal weight. Similarly, having students read a novel about the Revolutionary War in language arts class while they study the colonial period in social studies does not, in itself, constitute an interdisciplinary approach to language arts and social studies. But a truly interdisciplinary curriculum addresses the full set of academic standards for each subject area involved, and requires more time than is allotted for study of a single subject.

## **Equity: Holding all students to high standards**

Our public education system is built on the commitment to prepare all of the country's children for productive lives as adult members of our society. Unfortunately, the realization of this commitment has been imperfect, and it is often those students at most risk for being marginalized—those with the fewest resources and poorest prospects—who receive the least adequate education.<sup>5</sup> By articulating high standards for all students, the current education reform movement raises expectations for student performance, with particular attention to students who have traditionally not excelled in school. Hand in hand with these higher expectations comes the assumption that all students can learn important concepts and skills when instruction builds from their current understanding, focuses on making learning meaningful, and engages students' intellectual strengths to drive the learning process.

Educators who embrace this assumption commit themselves to finding a wide range of instructional approaches and classroom activities in order to meet the specific learning needs of individual students. In the past, the most common approach for working

<sup>5</sup> Some also make the case that our educational system fails to meet the needs of very academically oriented students, who would benefit from more accelerated and in-depth learning.



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**An equitable curriculum promotes high levels of achievement among a wide range of students by having more than one way to convey ideas and help students acquire skills.**

with students at risk of falling behind has been to “re-teach,” going over material students have previously failed to learn by using similar (if not identical) explanations and exercises in the hopes that more exposure will eventually lead to greater understanding. This “more of the same” approach is the educational equivalent of trying to communicate with someone who doesn’t speak a word of English by repeating yourself, taking extra care to enunciate clearly and to speak more slowly and more loudly. If the listener has no way to make sense of your speech in the first place, you won’t accomplish much by saying it again. You might, however, make some progress if you try something different, like supplementary gestures or even pantomime.

An equitable curriculum promotes high levels of achievement among a wide range of students by having more than one way to convey ideas and help students acquire skills. It includes approaches and activities that accommodate a variety of learning styles and provides different kinds of opportunities for students to gain understanding of the subject area content and demonstrate their knowledge and skill. For example, in language arts classes, students might read aloud as well as silently; create story webs to help them follow the plot and structure of their reading selections; view video versions of the literature they are using in class; act out parts of the stories themselves; and express their ideas in essays, journal responses, artistic renderings, and oral presentations. By offering a variety of approaches, equitable curricula make it possible for students with different cognitive strengths and preferred ways of accessing information to grapple with the important ideas of the curriculum. However, because students have different “ways in” to the material does not mean that they can stop working to strengthen areas of weakness. When a teacher shows a video of *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* in class, she may make it possible for a struggling reader to follow the plot of the story and engage in discussions about themes of loss and self-reliance. But showing the video is not a substitute for helping the student become a more fluent and competent reader. This work still remains to be done.

An equitable curriculum offers content that is rich and deep enough that students with different levels of understanding can all extend their learning. Both the kinds of topics addressed and the kinds of work students are asked to do must be sufficiently broad



to allow everyone room to learn. In language arts, learning activities can offer all students the chance to analyze literature, discuss and defend their perspectives, and practice writing in different genres. An equitable curriculum creates opportunities for all students, not just the most successful, to do work that challenges them to take charge of their work, reason, organize their thoughts, and communicate them to others. As educator and author Anne Wheelock has observed, “All students can benefit from the thinking skills and enrichment activities often offered only to those labeled ‘gifted’ and ‘talented.’”<sup>6</sup>

Student diversity takes a number of forms: different approaches to learning; gender-related differences; a variety of home cultures, languages, and life experiences; different forms of physical challenge. Curricula should be sensitive to such differences. The contexts (and, where appropriate, content) should represent a variety of perspectives and experiences. The work and lives of those “dead, white, European males” are only part of the picture. An equitable curriculum broadens the traditional canon, ensuring that all parts of the picture are developed.

How do issues of equity apply to middle-grades curricula in particular? Curricula for young adolescents need to be particularly sensitive to providing all students with opportunities to exercise their newly developing logical and critical thinking skills. Because early adolescence is a time of intellectual growth spurts as well as physical ones, middle-grades students are developing their new cognitive resources and capacities at different rates and times. A typical middle-grades classroom, therefore, is likely to contain students with an especially wide range of cognitive resources and capabilities. This intensifies the challenge of creating curricula that can promote learning for students who bring a range of skills, prior knowledge, and reasoning abilities into the classroom.

## **Developmental appropriateness: Attending to characteristics of young adolescents**

Effective curricula are geared to the students they are designed to reach. Their subject area content is developed at a level of complexity that builds on students’ current knowledge and encourages them to push toward deeper and more extensive understanding.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Wheelock, *Crossing the Tracks* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 13.

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**In the middle grades, a developmentally appropriate curriculum takes into account the young adolescent's growing cognitive capacities.**

If the ideas developed in the curriculum are too far removed from students' experience or current ways of understanding, they will be too difficult to grasp; if the ideas are too simplistic, students will be bored by work they already understand. Developmentally appropriate curricula are based on knowledge of how students' thinking develops. This ensures that the curricula deal with central ideas and skills in ways that address students' typical questions, confusions, and evolving understandings. As they develop curriculum, language arts educators use their own experiences with students, along with educational and psychological research regarding children's acquisition of subject area concepts and skills, to address the needs of all their middle-grades students.

Curricula must not only engage students at an appropriate intellectual level; they must engage students' interest and attention as well. Unless students are motivated to connect to the ideas in the curriculum, they will just mark time with studies that they don't "own." Developmentally appropriate curricula must therefore set students' academic work in contexts that are suited to their age and interests.

In the middle grades, a developmentally appropriate curriculum takes into account the young adolescent's growing cognitive capacities, helping students move from their informal and intuitive ways of understanding toward more formal and systematic approaches to the subjects they are studying. It is also particularly important that curricula motivate and engage middle-grades students, since young adolescents begin to question the purpose and value of adult-initiated assignments. As many students move to the middle grades, they leave their tractability behind as a souvenir for their elementary school teachers. Many students become less willing to work hard simply because a teacher requests it, asking, "What's the use of learning about this?" Students are more likely to put effort into their schoolwork when they perceive the contexts for lessons and activities to be interesting, important, and relevant to their lives. A developmentally appropriate middle-grades curriculum capitalizes on students' growing interest in their own communities, other cultures, and other eras to motivate their studies.

On the social front, the young adolescent's more flexible and far-reaching ways of thinking lead to a seeming paradox: an increasing attention to others which is paired with a growing self-consciousness.



Students in the middle grades begin to think more deeply about the consequences of people’s thoughts and actions, and are willing to consider complex and important questions like, “What makes a good friend?” “What does it mean to be a slave, or a slaveholder?” “What do the statistics on driving age and accident rates tell us?” “What is the effect of human activity on the environment?” Middle-grades students also think a lot about their own role in the world. Their questions about identity aren’t idle ones. With bodies that often look and feel alien, and with newly emerging observational and analytic skills, young adolescents are often genuinely in a state of flux. As middle-grades students grapple with questions about themselves and their world, they turn to their compatriots in struggle—their peers—for self-definition and validation.

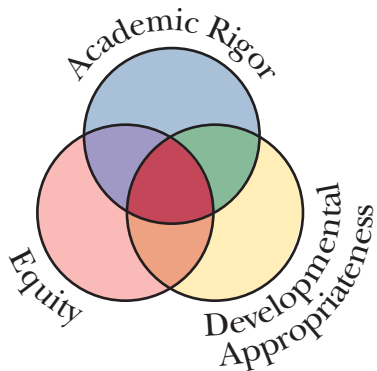
Developmentally appropriate curricula for the middle grades capitalize on this attention to self and peers by offering students opportunities to develop social skills and to use their classmates as resources for learning. Because middle-grades students are particularly oriented toward their peer group, providing them opportunities to work together offers a way to harness their keen interest in one another toward productive educational ends. Students can develop their collaborative skills as well as engage their capacity to compare and critique ideas from different perspectives.

**A caution.** A common misinterpretation of standards-based reform is that it is first and foremost about offering students motivating and engaging activities. But an effort directed only at making lessons appealing and engaging may lead to trivial intellectual work—in an effort to hook students on learning, students may be let off the hook of mastering content.

Choosing fun classroom activities, using concrete, “hands-on” lessons, and having students work in cooperative groups do not by themselves guarantee student learning. Without clear academic goals and an understanding of how to reach them, efforts to provide engaging and interesting activities are simply form without substance. Although subject area standards all stress the importance of student involvement, educators should not assume that active and engaged students provide adequate evidence that substantial learning is taking place.

There is no question that it is better for students to find their work engaging and interesting than to be bored and unconvinced of the value of their efforts. However, activities may prove engaging

**Developmentally appropriate curricula for the middle grades capitalize on this attention to self and peers by offering students opportunities to develop social skills and to use their classmates as resources for learning.**



without stretching students' understanding. When this is the case, neither the criterion for academic rigor nor that for developmental appropriateness is being met. Quality education isn't simply about having students busy and happy in the classroom. It's about having them engaged in work that has intellectual teeth.

## Integrating the three components

Only when all three components described above are present can a curriculum offer the intellectual depth and pedagogical perspectives that create powerful learning opportunities for a wide range of students. Academic excellence lies at the intersection of academic rigor, equity, and developmental appropriateness.

Because the three components work in concert to support learning, when one or another is missing or weak, the curriculum will not promote academic excellence. Without academic rigor, the curriculum will have no edge as a tool for intellectual growth and students will be denied important resources for building knowledge and understanding. However, if an academically rigorous curriculum is inequitable (by being successful at promoting learning for only a narrow segment of the student population), its effectiveness is also compromised. It runs the risk of shortchanging students who have interesting minds and the potential to make significant contributions, but whose modes of learning or whose academic or social experiences are inconsistent with the limited approaches taken by the curriculum. And even an admirably rigorous curriculum will fail to promote learning if it does not address students' typical patterns of developing concepts and skills, or if it fails to capture students' interest or attention. In curriculum, as in other aspects of life, a balance among important components is the key.

## About This Guide

This guide, like the others in the series, uses the framework described above to examine standards-based curricula and their implementation. It also relies on the insights of a number of teachers and advisors, who shared with us their thoughts and observations about using standards-based approaches to curriculum. In addition to providing information about the implementation of particular curriculum approaches, they talked about the "big picture"—how curriculum related to their standards for



student performance, the instructional approaches they saw as most effective for student learning in diverse populations, and their commitment to professional development. Below is a summary of the contents of *Guiding Curriculum Decisions for Middle-Grades Language Arts*.

## A brief tour of the guide

*Guiding Curriculum Decisions for Middle-Grades Language Arts* looks at curriculum from several different perspectives. The introduction has offered a set of principles—the three components of academically excellent curricula—as an overarching guide to curriculum decision making. Subsequent chapters use these principles as a framework for considering curriculum decision making and implementation.

**Chapter 1.** In this chapter, we look at practitioners’ experiences to help us draw explicit connections between these principles and the ways teachers actually plan and implement curricula to promote students’ learning. We want this guide to speak to educators (teachers, curriculum specialists, staff developers, principals, and central office administrators) from the place where, ultimately, the work of the curriculum is carried out—the classroom. By grounding the guide in practitioners’ own descriptions of their experiences, we aim to give readers a fuller and more vibrant picture of what makes an excellent curriculum excellent.

The chapter is organized around “critical questions” to ask when making curriculum decisions. These questions are tied to the three critical components of academically excellent curricula we have described above: academic rigor, equity, and developmental appropriateness. Each of the critical questions is then illustrated by vignettes with practitioners’ observations of ways they (or their districts) have addressed the question.

**Chapter 2.** This chapter offers two profiles that are examples of standards-based language arts curriculum. The first profile was developed by a group of sixth-grade teachers. We developed the second. These profiles are intended as models for how to go about constructing a comprehensive, year-by-year curriculum that uses high-quality literature and that addresses national standards for reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These profiles are also designed to give you a sense of the complexity of the curriculum development process.

**We want this guide to speak to educators . . . from the place where, ultimately, the work of the curriculum is carried out—the classroom.**



**Chapter 3.** This final chapter provides an annotated list of additional resources to assist you in making curriculum decisions. These resources include standards and frameworks, professional organizations, websites, curricula that provide teachers with professional development opportunities, professional development resources, published literature programs and anthologies, management tools, and examples of books that provide both theoretical and practical guidance about language arts curriculum, teaching, and learning.

### **Interviews with language arts educators**

In preparing this guide, we spoke to a number of language arts educators throughout the country about their language arts curricula. We were interested in learning from them about district- and classroom-level curriculum choices and decisions, their thoughts about different curriculum materials and approaches, some of the challenges they had encountered in implementing standards-based curricula, and ways they had resolved those challenges.

The 40 language arts educators we interviewed for this guide included a curriculum coordinator from a large urban district in California, a staff developer for a group of districts in the Midwest, a teacher in New York City, and another working on a reservation in the Southwest. We identified educators to interview in several ways. Colleagues and members of the advisory board for this guide recommended practitioners they knew and respected. Sometimes these practitioners, in turn, recommended that we speak with colleagues of theirs. Curriculum developers also recommended teachers who were familiar with standards-based instruction and articulate about meeting the challenges of implementing a standards-based curriculum. We also contacted several of the curriculum supervisors and coordinators whose districts were associated with our granting agencies, the Edna McConnell Clark and W.K. Kellogg Foundations. The practitioners in this last group were quite helpful in assisting us to develop a fuller picture of the kinds of challenges that teachers face as they work to meet standards in their classrooms.

The interviews themselves consisted of conversations of approximately an hour in length, which followed a flexible interview protocol. The interviews included descriptions of standards-based



language arts curricula teachers had developed, discussion of the literature and other resources teachers included in these curricula, ways that local and state standards influenced teachers' curricular decisions, and approaches to working with students who were succeeding or struggling in class. We have used these interviews in creating the vignettes in Chapter 1 and in developing the example grades 6–8 curriculum profiled in Chapter 2.

## **A final word**

As we have worked on this guide, we have spoken with many teachers who have come to believe that a standards-based curriculum has helped them to teach better because it has helped them focus on providing rigorous, equitable, and developmentally appropriate instruction for their students. For many, learning to implement these curricula effectively has been a challenge, but ultimately a rewarding one. We hope that you, too, will find that organizing your curriculum decisions around careful consideration of standards for language arts learning can be a powerful force in your district, school, or classroom. And we hope that this guide will help you to make thoughtful decisions about planning and implementing language arts curriculum in the future.