Voices from the Middle Grades

What do students in the middle grades most need from their teachers? WKCD offers their answers in a sequel to our groundbreaking book *Fires in the Bathroom*—this time, listening to the voices of early adolescents.

Talking in depth with 40 students in middle grades around the country, WKCD’s Kathleen Cushman asked them questions like these:

- What helps you want to try hard in school—or keeps you from doing so?
- How can your teachers help you deal with social issues and pressures you face?
- What’s fair in the classroom, and why?
- What helps you understand your challenging academic subjects?
- When it comes to your parents, what do teachers need to know and do?
- How can teachers prepare you for the transition to high school?

The first-person answers kids gave—piercing, funny, eloquent, and revealing—shed new light on teaching and learning in the middle grades.

Cushman teamed on this project with Laura Rogers, a developmental psychologist who has worked in middle schools for the past 12 years. The book that results is a humane and pragmatic guide to the ever-changing journey that middle-schoolers make as they cross the bridge between elementary school and high school.

Here, WKCD presents early excerpts from *Fires in the Middle School Bathroom: Teaching and Learning According to Middle Grades Students* by Kathleen Cushman and Laura Rogers, Ed.D. Generous support from MetLife Foundation made the project possible, and recent MetLife surveys uncovering the importance and pitfalls of student transition into and out of middle school provided the book’s fuel. The New Press will publish the book in 2007.

Journey Over a Bridge

*Kids know they will face big changes as they move from the elementary to the middle grades—but they may not feel sure what to expect. They know they are growing up—but they don’t know what that means, and they don’t know how to do it yet. They have left the shore of childhood, with its literal, concrete markings showing how things go. They have taken their first steps onto the bridge of middle school, and they can already tell that things are different.*
"In middle school, it’s harder to focus because we have a lot more peer pressure. It might be like, ‘Let’s jump this kid,’ or something. You’ll do it, but it’s not like you have a choice. Sometimes you get threats, like, ‘Oh, I’m going to get you after school if you don’t do this.’" —Kenson

“In sixth grade, oh my gosh: I was happy and then sad, then I almost got into a fight with a boy. I don’t want to talk about it, but it was funny. And while you’re doing homework you’ll think of a guy, and you’ll think about what you accidentally did, and you’ll go ‘Man!’ You’ll just keep nagging yourself.” —Carmela

Everything Is Off Balance

Unlike in younger years, the self-image of kids in the middle grades increasingly derives from their social interactions outside the home—how they present themselves, how they imagine that others see them, how their peers interact with them, and how adults at school treat them. They find themselves changing hour by hour—and everything seems perpetually off balance.

“Eleven-year-olds going into, like, thirteen, they’re starting to turn into adults, so they’re not really sure what’s expected of them.” —Geoffery

“Like at school, they have to be this perfect student. And then at home, their family expects them to be that perfect child again. But with their friends, they do all these bad things, just to get away from everything they have to be.” —Alma

“If you go to a school where people swear and do bad things, but you didn’t do that stuff in elementary school, then it’s sort of hard to stop yourself from doing it. ‘Cause you don’t want to stand out, since you’re basically the only one that doesn’t do that thing.” —Edward

A Teacher on Our Side

Early adolescents see themselves not as a block of kids in a classroom with you at its head, but as part of many shifting group alliances—which may include the teacher, or not. How they respond to you keeps changing, based on whether they think you like them, how they perceive that you treat them, how you react to their learning needs—even how they are feeling about themselves and their peers.

“You can show you really want to teach math. But some teachers do it with a frown on their face, and they don’t let you talk about nothing.” —Alma

“She was real down-to-earth, really talkative, but she was also very . . . ‘teach-ative’—I don’t know what word. She was very smart. She’d teach you. Like, she’d try with you until you got it, and she was real nice. She’d offer to stay after school, so you could go there if you didn’t get it." —Kaitlyn
Social Forces in the Classroom

The social world of young adolescents comes into the classroom with them. It can cause kids to sit with blank or glum faces while you present your most fascinating assignments. It can drive them to make inappropriate comments at moments that should elicit serious thought. Although we tend to think of middle schoolers as risk-takers, that’s not so in classrooms. Instead, kids are worrying about where they stand in relation to others.

“Everybody grew up together but still, we don’t talk to each other as much as you would think.” — Kenson

“Sometimes, some kids will go through physical torture, like getting in fights at school, just to fit in with the other kids. It makes no sense at all.” — Daquan

“At the beginning of this year, the teachers made all of us act silly in front of each other. When we’re playing games, we’re all acting silly and everyone is laughing at each other. You can see other people doing it—not just one person.” — Javier

Helping Us Grow into Confident Learners

How they are doing in school affects middle school students’ sense of themselves. They are newly able to measure themselves through the eyes of others, their peers, and their teachers. They are eager to feel confident and successful, even when the rest of their lives feels so out of balance. And they look to their teachers to notice their competence, even before they see it themselves.

“My math teacher pushed us and pushed us, and if you needed help, he’d take his lunch break off and teach it to you a million times until you got it. By the end of the year, I got that I had to study. But he was also very funny. If we were having a bad day, or if you looked like you were really sad, he would find a way to make us feel better.” — Heather

“One thing that makes me feel kind of dumb is when the teacher acts sarcastic with you. Like if you say something that you think is correct and she just says, ‘Oh yeah, that’s correct’—and then goes, ‘Not.’” — Canek

“The science teacher, one time he kept me after school. I thought it was for like a bad reason, but he just wanted to talk to me. He wanted to get me more involved and he said that he knew I could be outspoken and participate, if I just knew what I was doing. So he helped me. It made me feel like I knew what I was doing, and I just started to get more ideas.” — Kenson

Using Our Energy to Help Us Learn

Even when they come to class eager to learn and ready to work, students in the middle grades are still learning to manage their attention and energy. As kids’ attention wanders, their restless energy goes up. When you vary what you do in
class, however, the focus of middle schoolers takes a turn for the better. Students are better able to harness their attention and energy when they find the work—both what they do and how they do it—appealing.

“Teachers should take things serious, but not very serious. They should let the kids have some free time once in a while and just do fun things. After being in class a couple of hours, you need to have a break in the yard and play on the structure and play some ball and stuff. I sometimes get a headache. And I feel like there’s too much stuff in my head and it’s going to blow up.” — Edward

“Steal the Bacon is not only fun, but actually kids want to get the right answers. Everybody wants to win, so people go and study. You actually feel excited to learn it, instead of like, ‘Oh, I have to learn this, I don’t care.’” — Amelia

Make Way for Parents

By the time kids reach the middle grades, they are renegotiating their relationship with their parents. They want their parents’ help and support, but they want it in new ways.

“In school, a lot of the kids don’t act the same when their parents [are] around. Because some of the kids just act up when the parent isn’t around. You see some of the loudest kids in my school so quiet, when the parents come in to meet them.” — Amelia

“I want him to be there [at parent conferences] so that he knows what’s going on with me and homework and school. And I don’t want him to be there, because he might find out some stuff that might be bad, and then he might get mad at me.” — Canek

“If I had a problem because of the teacher, my mom would come to the school and start arguing with the teacher, saying, ‘Why are you doing this to my daughter?’ and asking a whole bunch of questions. And I feel embarrassed. Like, after that, the teacher would take all of his anger out on me, like give me bad grades, because my mom came to the school.” — Genesis

The Ninth-Grade Transition

Young teenagers realize that ninth grade marks the beginning of a new, high-stakes period of their lives. Out in the real world, people tell them, it will really matter how they behave and whether they succeed in high school.

“That’s all I was thinking about all summer long, staying up late, was what’s high school going to be like.”—Heather

“All my buddies told me that high school was going to be a zoo, people running around, nobody going to class. Up on every corner, people just
standing there like light posts, with no worry about getting an education. It’s so big, there’s like 2,000 kids. I’m thinking, ‘How they gonna manage it?’” —Brian

“The high schoolers can come talk to the kids about how it feels to be in high school. What changes they have to go through, who they have to go through it with. And where they will be going—like if the campus is big, they can bring maps, they can take them to the school and give tours.” —Nyesha

What Do I Know About Myself?

Middle schoolers learn about themselves by locating themselves in their social world. First, they compare themselves to their schoolmates in appearance, stature, color, and other physical characteristics. Then they start making distinctions based on how they act. Even later, they start taking a more reflective view of themselves—the beginning of creating an adolescent identity. We can see this progression in the statements by students that follow:

I’m taller than most people in my grade, and some people in the next grade. —Edward

I don’t eat a lot at school. But when I’m at home, I eat the whole fridge practically. And I’m known for that at school, and for not being fat, too. —Jason

Everybody thinks I’m so little, but my friends they all look up to me. When they call me “shorty,” I’m like, “Hey, that’s how I’m made, I can’t help it.” I have a lot of mouth, but I can back it up. I do the right thing. People do pick on me, ’cause I guess my voice is deep and squeaky. At least some people like it. And I wear glasses, but that’s okay, ’cause I’m pretty no matter what. I’m not conceited but I know my mom did not make no ugly kids, and if I wear glasses, it’s me. —Thea

My weight, maybe, is more than what it’s supposed to be for my grade. And my personality, it’s more loose, more “mess around.” Not uptight. Fun. —Gabe

I stutter. It’s not a big deal, I still talk, but most kids don’t stutter. Some kids stutter worse than me, so it don’t matter. —Eric Q.

In class when people aren’t doing their work, I do my work and I’m not talking. And I don’t hang with that many people, so I don’t get in much trouble. I can’t read that good, there’s some words I can’t pronounce, and this lady she’ll come in and help. Other kids, they’ll get those big words, but I’m the person who don’t. —Katelin

Some people talk about videos on TV or whatever, and I don’t really pay attention to that stuff. And sometimes I act like I know about that stuff, but I really don’t. —Eric

I’m one of the youngest eighth graders, ’cause I’m twelve years old in the eighth grade. And I act different than everybody else—individual. I don’t like to follow people. Sometimes that makes it harder for me, but some people like the way I act. —Amanda
I’m the one that cracks a joke and makes everybody look on the bright side and be not mad anymore. In gym class, the kids call me a geek. They don’t pick me on the football team a lot. But I won a couple of games for my team, so now they know that I’ve got the brains and the athletics. —Denue

I’m not shy. I’m not scared to go up out of nowhere on the bus and start singing to my favorite song. I have a lot of things that I’m insecure about but I try not to show them, ’cause when you do show them, that’s what bullies pick on. —Alma

People know me as smart and good at football and most of the time in basketball. Kids would say that I’m like a geek. I like doing my work, and I always listen to the teacher. But then, as the year went on, people would just look past that and be my friend. They decided to notice me for who I really am. And I’m comfortable now. —Kenson

I try to be different. I don’t sway with the wind. Like what that poet said on the commercial for the anti-drugs. I love that poet. —Carmela