



EduGuide

Your inside source for a smarter education

The
Middle School
Years

7 Steps to Stay Ahead p2

How kids get hurt:
Know your odds p3

Discipline that works p4

Parents: Be your
child's academic
advisor p8

What we learned the hard way p10

Choosing after-school programs p12

Become a Michigan Scholar p16

Cosponsors:



7 Steps TO STAY AHEAD

By Bryan Taylor



Bryan Taylor addresses 1,500 conference participants in Detroit.

Most people think middle school doesn't really count. The big failures and successes — dropping out, pregnancy, graduating with honors or a good job — usually show up in high school. But education experts say you can predict high school success by what students do in middle school. Here are leading tips to improve your child's odds.

1. Stop assuming and start planning.

By the end of eighth grade, nine out of 10 students say they want to go to some type of college. After all, a college degree can mean an extra \$1 million in lifetime earnings and a ticket out of the unemployment line. But about half of those students never reach their dreams because they fail to take the right steps along the way. Those steps begin in middle school.

That's why you shouldn't assume that schools will do everything. They can't. The students who stay ahead have parents who get engaged planning their education and choosing challenging classes, such as algebra and a foreign language in eighth grade. My parents missed getting me into eighth grade Algebra. In college, that put me behind for pursuing a wide range of technical and medical careers.

2. Get an inside source. During middle school, your child may have more than

a dozen teachers. Sooner or later, you're going to run into questions or problems. So build a relationship now with someone — a teacher, counselor, principal or active parent — who can help you work through the school system to get what you need.

3. Back up your child's teachers.

Teachers want to treat all kids the same. But many teachers admit they're more likely to go out on a limb for a child when they know her parents will support them. That's because bad experiences with other parents have made many teachers back off. You don't have to agree with teachers on everything, but it's a good idea to let them know you will support them. To build the relationship, get five minutes face-to-face with them in the first three weeks of school. Then put three dates on your calendar when you'll email or call them during the year to see how things are going.

4. Refocus your child's time. You know about sex and drugs. But did you know that spending too much time in front of the tube also puts your child's success at risk? Kids who spend too much time in front of TVs and computers don't do as well on tests; they may have a harder time staying focused on school work. Doctors say your children should not spend more than one to two hours a day in front of screens. So pull the plug on TV and video games. And help your child use a calendar and daily schedule to manage her time. Learning to pay attention now will help her hold down a good job later.

5. Choose a dream career and college. Career paths begin in middle school,

when students learn how the classes they're taking will affect what they can do later in the real world. Don't worry now about picking the right two- or four-year college program; just give them something to aim for. Most kids who make it to college are told early and often that they are going. Even better, have your child take a college course. Many colleges offer special summer and evening classes geared to middle students, or they let them participate in adult learning programs.

6. Consider the SAT test in middle school. It's not just failing kids who fall behind. One study found that gifted kids were almost as likely to drop out after eighth grade. But teachers and parents often don't recognize when a child is gifted. One solution is taking the SAT, a college entrance exam also used to identify gifted students in seventh or eighth grade. High scores on the exam can help them qualify for Talent Search and other special programs that will keep them using all those smarts in useful ways. But few middle school students take the SAT, so you'll need ask someone at school if you want your child to take it.

7. Monitor motivation. Ask your kids every week what they like and don't like about school. It will give you an idea early on when something — a bully, bad grades or worse — is going wrong. Don't accept a one-word answer; get your child to talk about all of these things. Remember, kids who like learning keep learning.

Want to help your child stay ahead? Circle one of the steps above and do it this week. Then keep reading to find more first-hand advice on how to follow these tips.

Bryan Taylor, publisher of *EduGuide*, is a speaker for parents, students and educators. He addresses more than 1 million people annually through his writing, speaking and media work.

KNOW YOUR ODDS: HOW MIDDLE SCHOOL KIDS GET HURT

By Jaime Millard

Kids get hurt in lots of ways during the middle years. But sometimes knowing the odds can help you be better prepared for, or even prevent, the worst. Here are some of the biggest risks based on the hard numbers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other sources. The good news: School fights and weapons have declined more than 25 percent in the last decade.

Want to improve your odds of protecting your child? Circle your biggest risk and take action.

Jaime Millard is former Program Coordinator for Partnership for Learning.

SEX



Odds: 1-in-10 kids have had intercourse by age 13. Kids are bombarded with images of sex through television, music, and video games without hearing about the consequences: pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and emotional turmoil. **Antidote:** *The biggest factors in stopping teen sex are you and the clock. When you can't be with your child, make sure they are with another adult. Get your daughter involved with a program during the after school hours, which is when kids are most likely to have sex. Have your son volunteer to tutor elementary students.*

DRUGS



Odds: 1-in-5 kids have smoked tobacco and **1-in-4** kids have consumed alcohol by age 13. Studies have shown that use of drugs at this age greatly increases the possibility of other risky behavior and later substance abuse. Not concerned yet? Consider that **1-in-10** students have already tried marijuana before entering high school.

Antidote: *While your child deserves some privacy, if you suspect drug use, be a snoop. You may be the "bad guy" for a while, but it will pay off in the end. If you see someone abusing drugs in the media, ask your child why he thinks they're doing it. Not getting through? See if your local police department or hospital has an educational program for kids. Sometimes shock is the only way to scare a child straight.*

DEPRESSION



Odds: By ninth grade, **1-in-4** students have suffered from prolonged depression — feeling sad or helpless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row. How do you know when your child crosses the line from normal teenage angst to depression? Well, that's a tough one.

Antidote: *Watch for signs. Typically the first is a lack of interest in activities she used to enjoy. Other warning signs include a change in sleep patterns, irritability, loss of appetite, significant weight gain or loss, and risky behavior like sex and drug abuse. Ask teachers if they've noticed anything different or if her work habits have changed. Still unsure? Enlist the help of a school counselor or a mental health professional.*

BOREDOM



Odds: 1-in-3 kids report that they're bored in school. So what? Well, bored kids are more likely to get into other kinds of trouble and to act out in the classroom. Some kids get bored because they're struggling with difficult subjects or tasks. They find it too painful to do the work. High potential students get bored with work that does not challenge them. Both types may drop out for real when they hit high school if they don't get help.

Antidote: *Talk to your kids about what being bored really means. For a struggling student, look for tutors and work with teachers and counselors to pinpoint the problem. For instance, some kids have lots of great ideas but fall apart trying to put those ideas on paper. For a gifted student, ask the school about changing courses and finding more challenges both during and after school.*

CHEATING



Odds: 1-in-2 kids say they have cheated on schoolwork in one form or another. If your child hasn't, one of his friends probably has. It's not surprising, given our culture of winning by any means in sports, politics and business. But cheating not only means he'll learn less now; it could lead to other forms of lying and stealing that will burn him later.

Antidote: *Lead by example. Show your child how doing your own work is satisfying to you. Coach him on his homework, but keep the ball in his court. Reward him when he does well on a test or learns something new, even if he doesn't score an "A." You can also point out examples in the news about cheaters who get caught.*

Discipline THAT WORKS

By Chastity Pratt



For most of his life, my cousin Dion has been a witty cutie-pie in school. He charmed elementary school teachers with his large, puppy-dog eyes. He always did enough work to get decent grades.

But Dion is 11 now and spending many school nights at my house. He has shown me how difficult it is to motivate a child who is going through puberty.

Fifth-grade Dion always had a smile and a knock-knock joke. Sixth-grade Dion thinks he knows everything. So far, he has not done well in middle school. His teacher says he doesn't turn in homework even on days I have helped him to do it. That's baffling.

I recently asked Dion when his book report was due. He shrugged and said, "I dunno."

"Well, where are the instructions on how to do it?" I asked. "Uh, uh..." he answered.

"Who is this kid?" I asked myself, "and how do I get him to be a self-motivated worker before it's too late?"

Teachers repeatedly say that their number one priority for families is to teach good work habits. They even rank it higher than reading with your child every day.

And the middle school years are where the rubber meets the road when it comes to self-discipline, as children take on more responsibility, work in groups, participate in multiple classrooms and tackle bigger projects. Parents can't expect children in middle school to totally outgrow the carefree attitude of the elementary years. But now is the time to develop a healthy

“They will say they don’t want parents to butt in, but if you don’t give them attention, they will do something to get your attention.”

Patrick Montesano, vice president, Middle Start center

attitude about work that will help them hold good jobs in the future.

Yet before anyone can get them to do all of that, parents have to understand their kids.

TALK, TALK, TALK

“Their bodies are changing so much, they’re developing as a human being and trying to understand their role in the family and community,” said Dorothy Rich, founder and president of MeGaSkills Education Center, a family-oriented nonprofit group that operates in 4,000 schools nationwide.

Don’t be surprised if your little darling becomes a back-talking, know-it-all in middle school. At this age, that’s how children assert their independence, Rich said. The more you talk to them, the more open they will be to your guidance. “I cannot overestimate the value of talking. Talk with children a lot, a lot, a lot — not nagging — but talk with them,” Rich said. That openness will come in handy when parents have to pressure children to get to work.

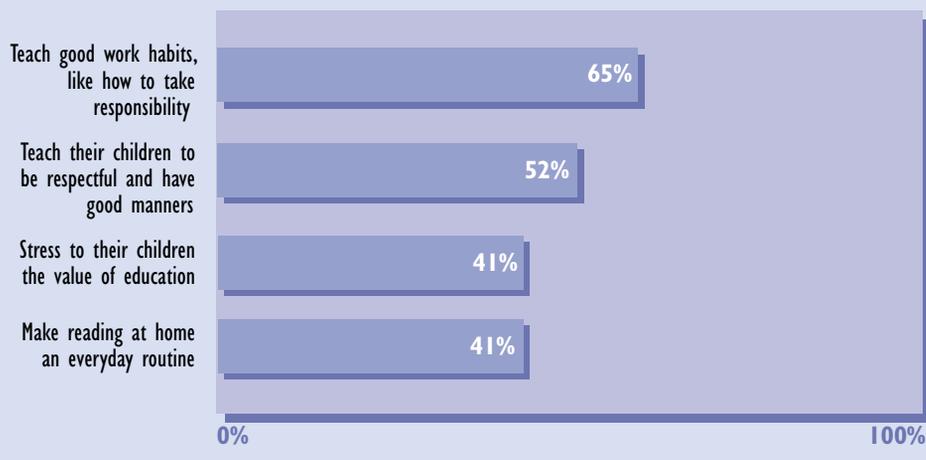
Middle school children also say they don’t want parents to butt into their lives so much. That’s a myth.

“They will say they don’t want parents to butt in, but if you don’t give them attention, they will do something to get your attention,” said Patrick Montesano, vice president and director of the national Middle Start center.

Once parents have opened the lines of communication, the first step to building children’s work ethic is to get them to understand the big picture. When children don’t understand why work is important or relevant, they don’t want to do it. That goes for everything from fractions to chores.

Priorities

Here’s how teachers in a recent national Public Agenda survey ranked the top four things families can do to help their children succeed.



Al Summers, who taught middle school science for 28 years in Ohio before going on staff with the National Middle School Association, shared the following example. “Once in class, we were talking about mixing things and what happens when they dissolve. One girl said she was sure that the experiment wouldn’t work at her house because their water was orange. So I told her to bring in some of her water.

“She did,” said Summers, “and then we talked about how iron in the ground mixes with well water to make it orange. She learned the concept because she could see how it worked in her own life.”

LICKING LAZINESS

After a few weeks with Dion, we’d been through the whole conversation about why his lessons were important. He said he understood, yet he did not work harder. I decided that he was smart, but lazy.

The best weapon to lick laziness is patience. Create a good routine and stick with it.

The second weapon is to make the consequences clear, Summers said. Punishment should fit the child. Consequences should fit the crime. Not putting in enough time on homework should mean less time for TV and video games.

Parents should also be careful not to mistake a child’s fear of failure for laziness. As the demands of middle school get more and more complex, children often feel like they’re being pushed out of their comfort zone; that’s part of growth. The problem gets worse, though, when children find that the skills that got them through elementary school aren’t cutting it anymore.

In *The Myth of Laziness*, author and pediatrician Mel Levine writes about children who suffer from different

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

forms of what he calls “output failure.” They may be smart in other ways, but when it comes to projects that require certain skills that their brains haven’t learned how to process — like writing or creating new ideas or organizing tasks — their output level gets choked off. The dread that children come to associate with such tasks often gets confused with laziness.

Helping children to understand what part of a process they struggle with is often the first step in turning them around. They need to be reminded of what they are good at. They need help finding new strategies to deal with their weak areas. Small rewards for small steps of progress can help, too.

“For children who are afraid to fail, punishment may not work; it may make matters worse,” Summers said. “When you reward them for accomplishments, it gives that good feeling that when you do something right, someone will notice. With children who struggle, you need a reward system.”

OOPS!

Remember what it was like to be in middle school? All of the mistakes and troubles? Remember how those problems with a late research paper or disastrous science project worked out? Don’t just remember it. Tell the kids. Children may be more likely to accept hard work after hearing adults’ horror stories. It lets them know that they can learn from mistakes — and survive.

It may sound simple, but parents also have to make sure they set a good example. Work and don’t grumble.

“Don’t complain about not wanting to work,” Rich said. “Parents themselves have to demonstrate the attitudes and skills they want their children to have.” 🍌

Chastity Pratt has two young children and covers education for the *Detroit Free Press*.

Make a learning routine

Make space. Set up a place solely for school work. It can be a card table or a desk in the child’s room. This space should be free from distractions such as TV and video games to reinforce the idea that work time is important.

Make time. A homework and chore chart will help middle school children learn the time management skills they’ll need for the rest of their lives. Allow the child to help set times for completing tasks plus a regular time when homework will be done each day. Write it on a calendar and post it.

Ask. Ask your child daily about assignments and what he or she intends to do to complete them. Use questions to coach her while allowing her to make her own plans. Also ask her about how she thinks she performed on tasks, helping her to identify her own strengths and weaknesses and get used to self-evaluation.



Tackling big projects

Never do your child’s project or research for her. The work ethic she learns from doing it herself will have far more impact than how well she does on the project itself. Good help keeps the ball in her court while leading her through key project management steps:

- Help her see the big picture. If she doesn’t understand what she’s doing and why, she’ll have less energy and focus to get it done. Talk about how the project relates to something she’ll need to be able to do when she’s older or have her ask her teacher what she’s expected to learn from the project.
- Clarify the required outcomes for the project: when it’s due, what it needs to look like and what ingredients are needed for “A” quality work. Send her back to the teacher to fill in any missing info.
- Ask her questions about what she already knows about the subject.
- Ask how and where she might find answers for what she doesn’t know.
- Ask what major steps she’ll need to take to complete the project. Then help her breakdown each phase into smaller “to do” steps.
- Make a schedule with her for completing the project bit by bit.
- If your child is working on the project with other students, help her sort out how her part of the project connects with her teammates’ parts.
- Take her to the library and let her lead the way; help her write down some questions she can ask the librarian about where she might find information on her subject. Sit with her as she searches the Internet and talk about what sites provide better information than others.

Learning to manage big projects is one of the most important skills children learn in the middle years. Get a project planning template to use with your child on the *EduGuide* link for this publication at www.PartnershipForLearning.org.

A NEW WAY TO HELP KIDS TAKE RESPONSIBILITY



How do you keep kids pointed in the right direction during the middle school years? We asked dozens of parents and experts. A lot of the talk focused on discipline. Richard Schalter, father of three, talked about building on children's strengths.

Schalter is a first generation college graduate who now serves as president of manufacturer Spartan Chassis of Charlotte, Michigan. He told *EduGuide* publisher Bryan Taylor that he realized the same tool that helped his company make better choices could help his own kids do the same: branding.

Taylor: What does branding have to do with raising kids?

Schalter: Kids get really attached to brands like Nike or Coke or Disney. They know that these brands are more than just a product. Each has its own attitude and makes us feel a certain way.

As kids wrestle with who they are in the world, creating their own brand is a way for them to make positive choices rather than just letting life happen to them. They choose expectations for themselves, so they're more motivated to live up to them. And those expectations get reinforced by friends

and adults who come to see them as a certain kind of kid.

Taylor: How does it work?

Schalter: I ask each of our kids to answer the same three questions our company asks itself: Who am I? What do I do? Why does that matter?

Next I ask them to pick four words that describe their personalities. These words create the focus for who they are and what other people can expect from them. For example, what do people count on my ninth grade son Adam for when he's in band: a hard-worker, comedian or leader? What's their emotional response: respect, laughter, appreciation? What does Adam want their response to be?

I help them think through and write down their answers. I also give them time to sleep on their decisions and revisit them periodically.

Taylor: What do they do with this list?

Schalter: Bring their brand to life. First, I help them use it as a filter to make decisions about what fits into their brand and what doesn't. For instance, my fifth grader Kellen is creative so I talked with her about

where her creativity might show up, whether it's being imaginative, flexible, or by solving problems. And I try to help her develop her own agenda to build her brand. Does she want to take after-school art classes, try out for a community play or put together the family photo album?

As a parent, it's fun to nurture their plans with special Christmas gifts and other activities. My daughter Lindsay is a dancer, so taking her to a ballet was a chance to see those skills in real life.

Second, I use it to help them get in the habit of evaluating their own choices. I ask the kids questions like, 'How did you live out your brand today? Is your behavior consistent with who you've said you want to be? If you want to be a peacemaker like Jesus, is it enough to ignore gossip or do you need to confront it in some way?' I ask the questions and let them work through the answers themselves.

Taylor: How has personal branding changed your kids?

Schalter: They've changed their responses to different situations. It makes them more proactive and gives them ownership of their identity.

My son Adam made a difficult decision to be in the high school musical instead of playing lacrosse. He said, 'I see myself now as not just an athlete, but also as a singer.' Having a personal brand helps kids choose what is important to them and stick with it.

Taylor: How does this relate to school?

Schalter: I always point out to my kids that the classes they take and the grades they earn are just a way for them to create opportunities for themselves. The lower the grades, the fewer the doors that will be open to them and the harder they'll have to work later to get where they want to be.

Provided by the Office of School Improvement

Parents: Be your child's academic advisor

The courses your child takes in middle and high school are more important than ever.

Now that Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm has signed into law improved high school graduation requirements, parents should know there is no better time to prepare their children for high school than during middle school. In fact, the new law, called the "Michigan Merit Core Curriculum" allows students entering grade eight in 2006 to earn high school credits for any of the new requirements. This is great news for students who want to get a jump start on high school.

For example, middle school students may earn Algebra I or Geometry high school credits while they are in middle school. Studies show students who earn high school credits build a stronger foundation in, and feel more comfortable about, math and science courses that are challenging.

The goal is to make sure students learn the skills they need for work or college. Before now, Michigan's only graduation requirement — one-half credit in civics — was insufficient in preparing our students for a global economy.

In recent years, many states, including Michigan, have been debating whether state high school graduation requirements adequately prepare students. The concern is justified: According to the American College Test (ACT) report *Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work*, only 32 percent of U.S. students entering ninth grade graduate prepared for college. For African Americans, the number is 20 percent; for Latinos, it is 16 percent.

In fact, most high school graduates readily admit they were not significantly challenged in school or ready for employment or college. Forty percent say they wished they had worked harder, especially in math, science and English.

Michigan students need a rigorous curriculum of math and science, along with strong reading and writing skills. There have been too many stories of American jobs being sent overseas to China or India. Those nations are training their students in math, science, and engineering to meet the employment needs of this new global-knowledge economy. Michigan must insist on nothing less for its students as well.

But what credits should students take to meet the real-world demands of the 21st century? At what grade should they begin? Those questions prompted the State Board of Education to review research, adopt more rigorous high school requirements, and forward them to the Michigan Legislature for action.

Michigan's new high school requirements mean your middle school child's education and the courses he or she takes are more important than ever. As a parent, you play the most important role in guiding your middle school student's courses, credits — and future.

How you can help

- Talk to your child's teachers, counselor or principal about creating an Educational Development Plan.
- Have confidence that your child can achieve at high levels and encourage him or her to work hard and study.
- Seek immediate assistance from teachers if your child is struggling or falling behind.

Michigan Merit Core Curriculum

Class of 2011 graduates need to earn 16 credits in the following subject areas. Beginning with the Class of 2016, two credits of world language also will be required sometime during the student's K-12 career.

CREDITS	CURRICULUM
4	*English
4	*Math: Including Algebra I, Algebra II and Geometry
3	*Social Studies: Including US History, World History, Geography, Economics, Civics
3	*Science: Including Biology, Chemistry or Physics
1	Physical Education and Health
1	Visual, Performing or Applied Arts
16	Total Curriculum Credits

*These credits may be earned in a Career and Technical Education program.

Is my middle school student on track?

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) has developed "A Parent's Guide to Grade Level Content Expectations" for parents of elementary and middle school students. The guide outlines what students should know and be able to do after each grade completed. The recommendations are nationally recognized by educators across the country. They also are used by the MDE to develop state grade level tests given to students called the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, known as the MEAP. You can see or download the guide at www.michigan.gov/mde.

Parents can use these guides when talking to teachers. They can:

- Learn what their child should know after completing each grade.
- Ask how information will be taught in school.
- Discuss their child's progress, especially during parent-teacher conferences.
- Explore ways they can support learning in the classroom.
- Ask for activities and learning tools their child can use at home to support classroom instruction.
- Review and understand the MEAP test results.

Grade Level Content Expectations

EXCERPTS FROM SIXTH GRADE GUIDE

Sixth Grade Math

Mathematics is the science of patterns and relationships. It is the language and logic of our technological world. A mathematically powerful person should be able to:

- Reason mathematically.
- Communicate mathematically.
- Solve problems using mathematics.
- Make connections within mathematics and between mathematics and other fields.

Number and Operations

By the end of 6th grade, your child should be able to...

- Multiply and divide any two fractions, including mixed numbers. Example: $\frac{1}{3} \times \frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{6}$

Algebra

By the end of 6th grade, your child should be able to...

CALCULATE RATES

- Solve applied problems involving rates such as speed.
Example: If a car is going 50 mph, how far will it go in 2 hours? Answer: $2 \times 50 = 100$ miles.

SOLVE DECIMAL, PERCENTAGE AND RATIONAL NUMBER PROBLEMS

- Solve word problems involving percentages such as sales tax. Example: A CD costs \$9.99 plus sales tax. Sales tax is 6%. How much is the CD altogether?
Answer: $\$9.99 + .60 = \10.59

USE VARIABLES, WRITE EXPRESSIONS AND EQUATIONS, AND COMBINE LIKE TERMS

- Use letters, with units, to represent quantities in a variety of contexts, such as y lbs, k minutes, x cookies. Example: A student eats x cookies in a minute, so 5x represents the number of cookies eaten in 5 minutes.

SOLVE EQUATIONS

- Solve equation $ax + b = c$
Example: $3x + 8 = 14$
Answer: $3x = 14 - 8 \rightarrow 3x = 6 \rightarrow x = 2$

Measurement

By the end of 6th grade, your child should be able to...

CONVERT WITHIN MEASUREMENT SYSTEMS

- Convert between basic units of measurement within a single measurement system. Example: How many square feet of carpet is needed to cover a floor that is 5 square yards?
Answer: $5 \text{ yards} \times 5 \text{ yards} = 25 \text{ square yards} \rightarrow 25 \times 9 \text{ (3 feet per yard squared)} = 225 \text{ feet.}$

Continued on the MDE web site, www.michigan.gov/mde

EXCERPTS FROM SIXTH GRADE GUIDE

Sixth Grade English Language Arts

English Language Arts (ELA) is more than just reading and writing. It also includes skills like speaking, listening, and viewing. ELA offers us a way to communicate. Through ELA, your child can apply what he or she learns to solve real problems at home, at school and in the community.

Word Recognition

By the end of 6th grade, your child should be able to...

- Use word structure, sentence structure and prediction to learn and understand the meanings of words when reading.
- Fluently read sixth grade text and text that increases in difficulty throughout the year.

Narrative Text

By the end of 6th grade, your child should be able to...

- Think about how characters in good literature form opinions about one another in ways that can be fair or unfair.
- Analyze elements and style of narrative texts such as folktales, fantasy and adventure.

Writing

By the end of 6th grade, your child should be able to...

- Write a narrative piece such as an adventure, tall tale or personal narrative story that includes well developed characters and plot.
- Write a well organized essay to support key ideas in the form of a persuasive, personal or comparative piece for a real audience.

Spelling

By the end of 6th grade, your child should be able to...

- Spell commonly misspelled words correctly in papers composed.

Handwriting

By the end of 6th grade, your child should be able to...

- Write legible essays and other papers.

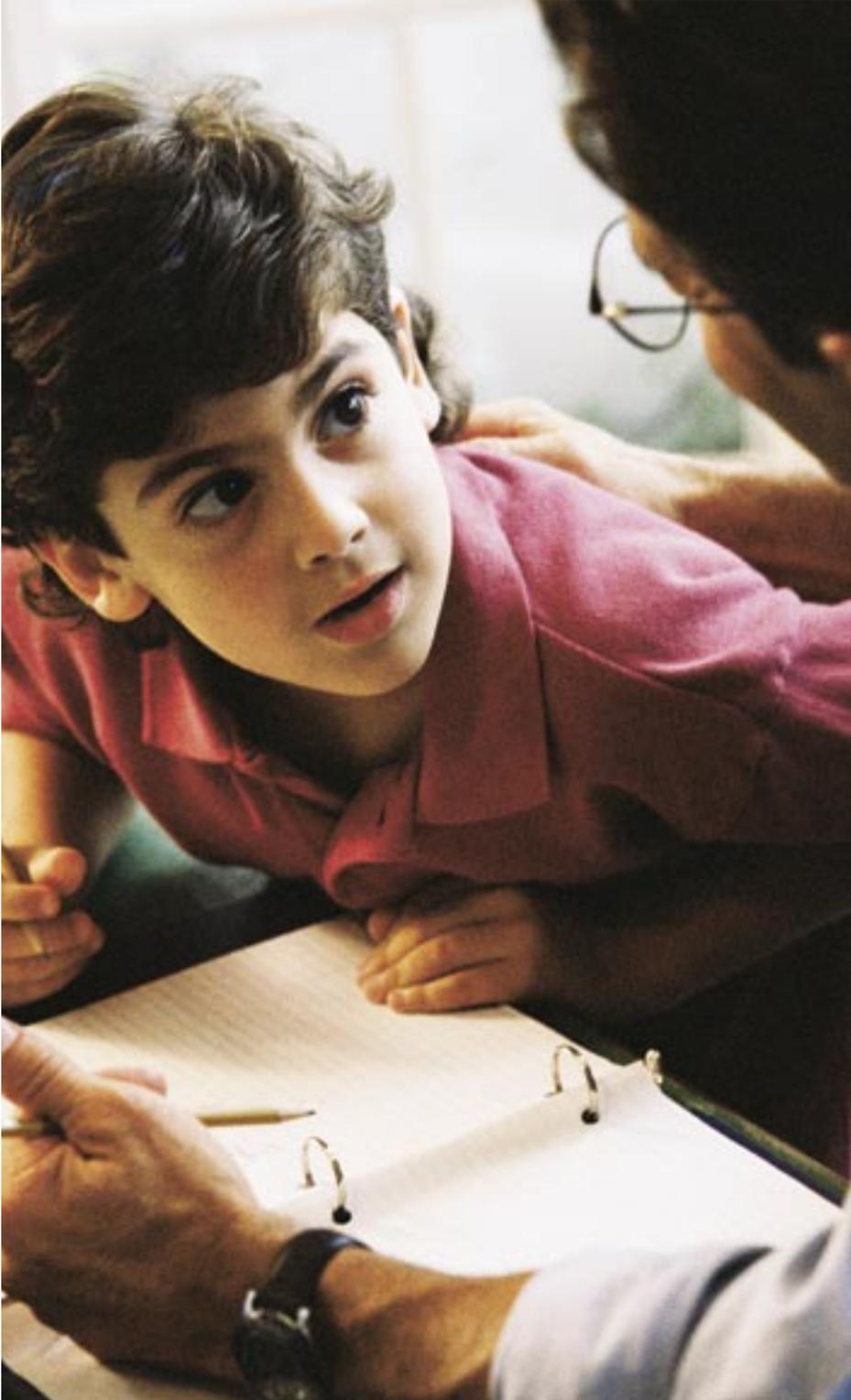
Continued on the MDE web site, www.michigan.gov/mde

For more information, contact:

Betty Underwood, Assistant Director
Office of School Improvement
Michigan Department of Education
517-241-4285, or email underwoodb@michigan.gov

What we LEARNED the hard way

by Marian Gormley



“**M**om, the teacher must have made a mistake. I got a D in science, but it must be a mistake because I think I got all As and Bs on my tests!” cried my 12-year-old son Jake, handing me his second quarter report card. His grades were very good, with the exception of the D in science.

I was as shocked as he professed to be. I didn’t know what to think. Had he flunked a test or missed an important assignment? As I studied the report card more closely, I noted the low science grade was accompanied by a below-average effort grade in science. It looked like the D was no mistake.

There was nothing I could say to Jake until I found out more. Hiding my own worries, I simply hugged him, telling him that before we did anything, I needed to speak with his science teacher.

The science teacher informed me that Jake had not done well on most of his tests and that his failure to hand in two assignments earned him the D grade.

When I told the teacher that I wished I had known about these problems before the end of the quarter, he responded that I should have known. All tests were sent home with Jake, and Jake was responsible for showing them to us. I set up a conference for the following morning.

THE FAMILY MEETING

That evening, my husband Pat and I told Jake about my phone conversation with his teacher and of our planned conference for the next morning. We explained to Jake that his failure to

I've thought more than once that this D grade may have been a blessing in disguise.

hand in his homework assignments had pulled his grade down significantly.

Jake said that the assignments were turned in to the teacher and were misplaced. When the teacher told Jake that he did not have those assignments, Jake did not feel the need to redo them. Jake strongly disagreed with me when I told him it was his responsibility to redo the work.

At the conference, the teacher told us that the issue was Jake's low effort. Jake didn't have much explanation, but apologized and assured us and the teacher that he would work hard to bring up the grade.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks for Jake was that the teacher's teaching style and Jake's learning style did not mesh. I explained to Jake that it was his responsibility to learn the material no matter what. I also explained that he needed to be able to learn from and work with all types of people.

GAME PLAN

Pat and I agreed that how we responded to this was critical. We didn't want to make this a bigger deal than it was. At the same time, we wanted to emphasize that honesty and school effort are very important and that there are ways for him to overcome hurdles.

We told Jake that while we do not expect him to earn straight As, we do expect him to put forth his best effort, which includes working hard in class, studying for tests, and handing in all assignments on time.

Pat and I agreed on three courses of action:

1. We would require Jake to write a paper on honesty, including what he had done wrong, why it was wrong, the consequences of his actions, and what he would do differently next time.
2. Jake and I would review his science lessons and assignments each night.
3. Jake would lose certain privileges, such as watching Friday night family movies and computer time, until he earned them back by receiving good grades on future science tests.

Jake at first resisted the science review each evening. But after realizing that I was not going to back down, he settled in, worked hard and progressed quickly. One evening, he even commented, "Mom, this is kinda fun learning this stuff with you."

Jake's paper on honesty required a lot of thought and soul searching and was written from the heart. I hope it has served its purpose. As for Jake's privileges, he earned them back, taking great pride in bringing home his A science test and homework grades.

I've thought more than once that this D grade may have been a blessing in disguise. Jake now realizes that there are consequences for being dishonest, for not doing his best, and for not handing in all required assignments. He has learned, the hard way, that it is his responsibility to learn his school material, regardless of what method he chooses to use. He knows that despite roadblocks he may meet along the way, he can choose to work hard to overcome them and earn the results he wants.

And most important, he has been reminded that his parents are his partners, and that we're always ready to help him face life's hurdles with generous doses of guidance, encouragement and love. 🍎

Marian Gormley is a mother in Falls Church, Virginia. This story first appeared in *Welcome Home*.

"He lashed out at us, hurling nasty words, yelling and screaming for no apparent reason. Before his first week was out, hives blanketed his body..."
Read about Jake's transition to a new school and how his parents helped him overcome a bully in the section for this *EduGuide* at www.PartnershipForLearning.org.

Does "D" mean dummy?

By Peggy Walsh-Sarnecki

What does a "D" really mean? Does your child not understand the subject, or did he not put in the effort? Did the whole class stumble on this test, or did he just have a bad day?

The effects of grade inflation are still being debated, but what has become clear is that grading is less of an exact science and more of a way for the teacher to send signals home. Teachers say they often add up effort, attitude, and the quality of work to decide the grade. They also are influenced by how other kids in their class are doing. So an "A" at one school could mean a "B-" at another.

What is clear is that sending home a "D" is a sign that your child needs help. A string of "D"s means he needs serious help. But ask the teacher what kind of help: a nudge to work harder, some extra practice at home, or tutoring to help him master the topic?

*To read more of Peggy Walsh-Sarnecki's thoughts on recognizing learning disabilities and the roots of behavior problems, check out **What Can Go Wrong** in the section for this *EduGuide* at www.PartnershipForLearning.org. To find out where to get help check our online *EduGuide* feature, Choose the Right Tutor.*

Provided by the Early Childhood Education and Family Services

Life after elementary school: How after-school programs can help middle schoolers

By Lorraine Thoreson and John Taylor

The transition from elementary to middle school can be frightening for parents and children. Adolescents between 10 and 15 want to be independent, but they still need nurturing and adult guidance. They also need to earn respect, establish a sense of belonging in a valued group, and build a sense of personal worth by developing their talents. At the same time, they're looking for things to do, places to go, people to talk to and a choice of academic and recreational activities.

A good after-school program can help accomplish all of these goals. But according to a 2003 survey *America After 3 PM*, conducted by the Afterschool Alliance, 14.3 million children care for themselves after school — including nearly 4 million middle school students. Only 6.5 million — 11 percent — of children in kindergarten through 12th grade are in after-school programs; in Michigan the figure is just 8 percent. Research shows that middle school students who participate regularly in after-school or other out-of-school programs get better grades and display positive emotional health. The following information can help parents select appropriate, safe and high quality after-school programs for their middle school children.

Why is a quality after-school program important for my child?

- Kids are likely to spend as many hours in after-school programs as in school.
- Quality programs help children grow socially, emotionally, and physically.
- Middle school students in after-school programs tend to do better in school and are less likely to engage in criminal behavior.
- Youth in quality after-school programs are less likely to smoke, drink alcohol, and use drugs.
- Parents will be more productive at work when they know their children are safe after school, during school vacations and in the summer.

Parents can guide and support their children by providing them with access to after-school activities that challenge and support their interests. After-school programs exist in a variety of settings throughout most communities. Schools may sponsor programs such as learning centers, clubs, enrichment classes, and athletic or academic teams. Community and faith-based organizations may offer many comprehensive or single-purpose programs. These opportunities may be available during out-of-school time or on weekends, holidays and school breaks.

How do I select a quality program for my child?

- Consider programs that will fit your child and meet the needs of your family. Are they open when you need them? Are they located nearby? Do they offer gymnastics for Susie, who has been taking lessons for years, or just chess, which she hates?
- Ask friends, family members, and school employees for recommendations.
- Look for local programs that are dedicated to continuous improvement and are accredited by the National Afterschool Association or other reputable organizations.
- After you have a few possible programs on your list, make appointments to visit the programs and to interview the staff.
- Resources in your community for quality after-school programs may include:
 1. Your neighborhood school
 2. Community education programs
 3. YMCA or YWCA
 4. Boys and Girls Clubs
 5. Faith-based centers
 6. City parks and recreation departments
 7. Community centers
 8. Cooperative extension programs
 9. Local United Way agencies
 10. The Salvation Army

Contact the Michigan 4C Association, a statewide resource and referral agency, at (800) 950-4171, or the Michigan Department of Education, 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, at (517) 373-8483. They can provide help to guide your search for quality programs.

Lorraine Thoreson and John Taylor are consultants for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Michigan Department of Education.



Is this the right after-school program for my child?

How do you figure out if an after-school program meets your child's needs? Here's a three step process.

1. Plan. Decide the top three things you want your child to get out of the program: Just a safe place to hang out? Thirty minutes of aerobic exercise? Or an academic challenge? Ask your child's teachers what skills he needs help with.
2. Search. Check with the agencies on page 10 to get recommendations. Then ask people you know about programs they have used and why they like or dislike them.
3. Read program websites. Always visit programs before enrolling. And use this checklist to measure how reliable, effective and safe programs are.



RELIABILITY: CAN I TRUST THIS PROGRAM?

Good programs have clear goals and welcome parent participation; are licensed or accredited; and model positive values such as service, compassion and cooperation.

ASK PROGRAM DIRECTORS:

- Is your program licensed or accredited?
- What is your mission and philosophy?
- What are the top three things you expect children to gain from this program?
- Can I have a contact list of people who have brought their children here? (Avoid getting a few hand-picked references of people who love the program.)
- Can I get a copy of your policies, schedules and fees?
- How are families involved here?
- What kinds of financial aid do you provide?
- About what percentage of children stay with the program?
- What is your discipline policy?

EFFECTIVENESS: HOW EXACTLY WILL THIS PROGRAM HELP MY CHILD?

The best programs have caring, well-trained teachers and children who are happy to be there. Activities should have specific goals and outcomes based on sound research.

ASK PROGRAM DIRECTORS:

- What training do you require or offer staff?
- How do you measure results of your program?
- What happens in a typical program period?
- Can children get help with homework?

ASK CHILDREN:

- What do you like about coming here? What don't you like?
- Do you want to come back next year?
- How often do you help plan or choose activities?
- How safe do you feel?
- How many friends do you have here?

ASK STAFF WORKING DIRECTLY WITH YOUTH:

- How long have you worked here?
- How do you keep track of youth?
- How have you handled emergencies?
- How do you deal with sick children?
- Can you tell me about a recent fight or argument you dealt with? How often does that happen?

SAFETY: CAN I REST ASSURED MY CHILD IS SAFE?

Good programs should be clean, orderly, cheerful and proactively address safety and bullying issues.

ASK PROGRAM DIRECTORS:

- What specific steps have you taken to deal with bullies recently?
- How many employees are trained in CPR and first aid?
- Do you run background criminal checks on staff?
- Are dangerous cleaning chemicals, art materials or cooking utensils out of sight and reach?
- Is the playground fenced in and does it have cushioning material beneath swings, slides and monkey bars?

DURING YOUR OBSERVATIONS, DETERMINE:

- Are the building, bathrooms and food preparation areas clean and organized?
- Is there a place for quiet time and study?
- How large and attractive are activity areas?
- Are play structures and toys in good condition?

Information from KidSource.Com and the National Afterschool Alliance (www.naaweb.org) contributed to this report.

Saving for the FUTURE

By Chastity Pratt

It's never too late to start saving for college, even if your child is already in middle school. Whatever can be squirreled away today will offset rising college costs and loan payments tomorrow. Even parents who don't have much money to spare can start a fund.

You can buy a few semesters or even a few years' worth of college tuition at today's locked-in rates under plans such as the Michigan Education Trust. Or you can open an account under the Michigan Education Savings Program

for as little as \$25 to cover tuition and other expenses.

If you're starting late, the key is to keep saving, even if you can't save enough to cover all college costs by the time your child graduates. At the very least, every penny saved now will reduce loan payments down the line.

Terry Gallagher, of Ann Arbor, said he knows he will not have enough in his two children's MESP accounts to cover all of their college costs. His daughter, Mary, is in sixth grade and his son just entered high school. Mary's college account was opened shortly after her birth. By the time she graduates it will be at about \$20,000. The family income is already stretched because his wife just went back to college.

"It's not enough. [But] it's not the only option," Gallagher said. "The MESP is just to give us a little more cushion."

Gallagher said the college fund money is drawn directly from his

bank account every month. He likes it because it makes the payments invisible and painless. Another advantage is that other family members have been able to contribute to the fund. The children can also drop a few dollars into their accounts.

There are always options to offset small savings. More than 2-in-3 students receive financial aid in college. Loans are a typical route for middle income families. "A financial planner reminded us that you can always borrow for college," Gallagher said. "People are not afraid to borrow money for a car. College is something you only pay for once, usually."

As children get older, some costs such as day care disappear; that money can be put into a college plan, Gallagher suggested. "The more you can save, however you do it, the better." 

Chastity Pratt has two young children and covers education for the *Detroit Free Press*.

College Savings

Tool Box

You can use one or all of these tools to save for college tax-free. Most plans can be switched to pay education expenses for a sibling or relative without penalty if the registered child can't use them for some reason.

529 PREPAID PLANS

Gist: Pay tuition now with your state prepaid tuition program at locked-in rates. With the Michigan Education Trust (MET), for instance, pay for four years of tuition and mandatory fees at a public university in one lump sum for \$35,436.

With MET, you can buy your fifth grader six months at a community college for as little as \$17 per month for 84 months. Pay for four years of tuition at a public university for \$35,816.

Since MET only covers tuition and mandatory fees, use an extra tool listed here if you want to save for room and board expenses.

Pro: A guarantee against rising college costs. A contract for monthly payments will help you follow through on saving. Like other plans, you can use your investment to pay for out-of-state and private colleges, though pre-paids don't always cover all costs. The total contract price is eligible for a Michigan income tax deduction.

Con: The child must be a Michigan resident. You cannot transfer to another child or cash out until the child turns 18 years old.

529 SAVINGS PLANS

Gist: The most popular program. Savings are invested based on options you select from guaranteed small returns to riskier larger returns. You can pick which state has the best plan for you, but most states offer tax or other benefits for using your own state's program. You can start an account for as little as \$25 with the Michigan Education Savings Program.

Pro: You can transfer to a new beneficiary at any time. The child does not need to be a Michigan resident. However, the program does offer a matching grant for Michigan children. You can get a Michigan tax deduction up to \$10,000 if you are married and filing jointly, and \$5,000 if you are filing as a single person.

Con: In 2010, the plan's tax-free status is up for renewal by Congress.

EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNT

Gist: Open an account with any bank, broker or mutual fund just like retirement savings.

Pro: Can be used for college plus any educational expenses K-12 including books, uniforms, computers, even private school tuition or tutors. If you want to pick your own stocks, bonds and mutual funds, this is the way to do it.

Con: Limited to \$2,000 per year per child. Tax benefits phase out for some families with incomes above \$95,000. Will it tempt you to plunder college savings for a middle school tutor?





Middle-school youth who master school skills may qualify more easily for college scholarships.

UPROMISE

Gist: Buy selected name-brand goods at neighborhood stores and restaurants with your credit card or theirs and get 1 to 10 percent back for your child's college savings account. EdExpress.com, BabyMint.com and MBNA Fidelity credit card have similar but smaller programs.

Pro: Save while you spend: typical UPromise members earn between \$50 and \$500 per year for their child's account. Registered friends can also direct their earnings to your account.

Con: Limited dollar value. Fewer investment options. If the UPromise product promotions make you buy more stuff, you'll end up with less to invest in other savings options.

ROTH AND TRADITIONAL IRAS

Gist: Though it's often overlooked, tax laws now let you take money from these retirement accounts to pay for college without penalty. You can open an IRA with any bank or investment agency.

Pro: Some experts recommend saving for retirement before saving for college. This way you can sort of do both and decide later how much you'll use for which.

Con: Limited to \$4,000 per person. May confuse your retirement planning. "Retirement" nest egg may not assure Junior he's college bound or attract college fund gifts from Grandpa.

...the key is to keep saving, even if you can't save enough to cover all college costs by the time your child graduates.

3 Rules for College Savings

1. Start early. The earlier you start, the more your small seed will grow. Start saving \$100 per month in the fifth grade for nine years with an 8% annual return, and you've got almost \$15,750 — about half of which is from return on your investment.

2. Invest often. Big projects are done best piece-by-piece. Commit now to set aside \$5, \$50 or \$250 per month. Better yet, have it taken out of your paycheck. Send refunds, rebates and loose change straight to the college fund. Once you've started, you'll be surprised how fast it can grow when you let others know that instead of buying a toy that will soon be broken, gifts can be made directly to the college fund.

3. Don't wait. Yes, you should make saving for retirement or a home a higher priority. But even if all you can set aside right now is \$25, pick up the phone or hop online and do it today. Telling your kids that they've got money set aside for college will nurture their dreams. Asking them to contribute something to the pot will double their commitment to realizing that dream while teaching them to save. Ask them to drop a dime in their college jar for every dollar they get. No matter how small the amount, it will teach them to work toward a goal.

Will saving now cut my child's financial aid later? A little for some people, but you're still better off having money — just like you're better off earning wages, despite income taxes. Using today's aid formulas, a low or medium-income family could lose up to \$5 in aid for every \$100 extra that they saved in any of these tools. But higher-income families probably won't qualify for need-based aid anyway.



PUT YOUR MIDDLE SCHOOLER ON THE MICHIGAN SCHOLAR TRACK!



What is a Michigan Scholar?

A Michigan Scholar is a high school graduate who has voluntarily completed a certain, rigorous curriculum set forth by the Michigan Scholars program. By successfully completing these courses, students qualify for Michigan Scholar recognition and may list this designation on college applications.

Why become a Michigan Scholar?

Most middle school students say they want to go to college some day, but only about half make it. Becoming a Michigan Scholar increases a student's odds of:

- Getting better jobs, better pay and more promotions.
- Reaching college and earning a degree.
- Avoiding costly catch-up classes in college.
- Getting more financial aid.

How does it increase students' odds of success?

The biggest factor in college success isn't grades or good looks; it's whether or not students complete a rigorous set of courses.

Employers report that the Michigan Scholar-recommended set of core courses also best prepares students for good paying manufacturing, technical, medical and other jobs. Both the Presidents Council — State Universities of Michigan and the Lt. Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth have recommended this set of courses to students.

While the classes may be challenging, research shows that students are more likely to succeed by getting a "C" in a hard course than an "A" in an easier one.

By completing these courses, a student may qualify to be a Michigan Scholar at graduation. The Michigan Business Leaders for Education Excellence, which coordinates the Michigan Scholars program, launched in 2005, will recognize and reward Michigan Scholars in officially designated school districts.

For more details on the Michigan Scholars program, call 1-866-MI-SCHOLARS (866-647-2465), or visit www.michiganscholars.org.

What does that have to do with middle school?

Too often students miss opportunities in middle school. That makes it harder to catch up later and succeed as a Michigan Scholar. They get tracked into an easier math class and never work their way back out. They fail to identify career paths and never plan for the future. They get to high school and can't fit in all of the recommended courses because they're behind or face schedule conflicts.

What can we do in middle school?

Ask for the most challenging courses your student can handle. For instance, look for English classes that not only teach grammar fundamentals and vocabulary, but also give students lots of weekly writing practice.

Sign up for the high school equivalent of one year of Algebra I and a foreign language by the eighth grade. It's a proven formula for success and it also closes the success gap between poor and rich families. Past students who took one of these courses in eighth grade were about twice as likely to directly enroll in a four-year college after high school. Students who took both were almost three times as likely. How do you know if the classes are about equal to a high school class? Ask if they use the same text book and if they will allow your student to go directly to the next level. If your school doesn't offer these courses in middle school, ask about making special arrangements with the teacher, a high school or college.

Begin looking into local high school programs with your child. Some programs make it easier than others to complete the Michigan Scholars courses. Some are even designed so that students can earn up to two years of AP or other college credit or a technical degree by the end of high school — a big savings on future college costs. By planning ahead you'll be better prepared to get what you need.

"Your gentle pushing may have to start even before your child gets to high school. When my daughter was in seventh grade, I discovered that she had been put in a math track that would not prepare her for AP calculus in her senior year. [AP Advanced Placement classes provide high school students with college level course work and credit.] She was a good math student, but her advisor thought she was more interested in literature, and did not want to work that hard in math. We argued otherwise, her courses were changed, and today she is thinking of making math her college major."

Washington Post Education Columnist Jay Mathews writing for the High School Years *EduGuide*.

The Michigan Scholar Core Courses

CORE COURSES	CREDITS
Math Algebra I Algebra II Geometry	3
Science Biological Science Physical Science Chemistry	3
English	4
Social Studies World History/Geography American History/Geography Economics/Government/ Civics	3
Languages Other Than English	2
TOTAL	15

1 credit = 1 year = 2 semesters.

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