

## **TURNING A CHALLENGE OF TEACHING TEENAGERS INTO A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY**

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It's easy for adults who've forgotten the wonder and uncertainty of the adolescent years to declare that students today are more uninterested in school and undisciplined in life than they were at that age. It's a false observation, however. Each new set of mature adults has declared the same thing about the set of young teenagers behind them—yet so far, humans are still thriving.

It's true that instructing a class of adolescents is no easy feat. It's a tenuous walk on a rope suspended high above a canyon of many competing priorities. We maintain a delicate balance, telling students, "Stay in the classroom and do as I say, and I'll tell you what's important so you can live your lives." At any moment, students can misinterpret what we say, tune us out, or leave the room. So what keeps students in the room and engaged?

The single most motivating practice teachers can employ in the middle-level classroom is to teach in developmentally appropriate ways. We are, teachers have to understand the unique nature of young adolescents. We can point to specific experiences in their lessons that are appropriate for 10- to 15-year-olds.

Young adolescents respond well to thematic instruction and integrated curriculum. Motivation flourishes as students apply skills taught in one class to tasks done in another class. They will discover that scholars do quantitative and qualitative analysis in both science and poetry units and that people interpret data visually in every subject. The key to solid learning, though, is for students to make these connections themselves, not just be told about them.

Teachers, working in the classroom with teenagers should provide coursework in motivation studies, because inspiring everyone we teach will be crucial to their success. Without serious training in student motivation, new teachers are left with a limited repertoire of responses and unexamined—sometimes harmful—notions of what inspires middle-grade students to engage in something new or stick with something challenging.