

MIDDLE YEARS EDUCATION IN MANITOBA

“Middle Years education is that education which is designed specifically for middle years students . . . for students in the early adolescent years . . . [and] is best seen as a philosophy rather than a particular organizational form or structure.”

~ Ken Osborne (4)

Consistent with most other jurisdictions, Manitoba defines Middle Years as the education provided for young adolescents in Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8. Middle Years education in Manitoba is considered to be distinct from, yet connected to, both Early Years education (Kindergarten to Grade 4) and Senior Years education (Grades 9 to 12). School structures and settings that provide Middle Years education vary in Manitoba: Kindergarten to Grade 6; Kindergarten to Grade 8; Kindergarten to Grade 9; Kindergarten to Grade 12; Grades 5 to 9; Grades 6 to 8; Grades 7 and 8; Grades 7 to 9; and Grades 7 to 12.

Some jurisdictions in Manitoba have successfully implemented reforms of their Middle Years school structures and practices, but broad, systemic change is not yet widely evident across the province. School designations are not necessarily indicators of Middle Years practices. Junior high school approaches are evident in facilities labelled “Middle schools,” and innovative and progressive Middle Years practices are found in facilities labelled “junior high schools.”

Educators are pressing for guidance beyond existing curriculum and assessment documents to frame and transform education for Manitoba’s Middle Years students. This resource begins to address the needs identified by Manitoba educators.

Current Realities in Middle Years Education in Manitoba

Information gathered from Manitoba Education forums, and interviews with school division administrators, school leaders, and other stakeholders, reveal current realities in the five key action areas of Middle Years education in Manitoba.

Understanding of and Commitment to Young Adolescents

Effective Middle Years education is provided by educators who have a deep understanding of young adolescents and who are committed to meeting the needs of their Middle Years learners:

- Deep understanding of and commitment to Middle Years education varies across the province among teachers, administrators, school boards, parents, and school community members.

- Few school and school division plans submitted to Manitoba Education include a focus on systemic improvement of Middle Years education.
- Middle Years programs currently exist at all four faculties of education in Manitoba (Brandon University, Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface, University of Manitoba, and The University of Winnipeg) even though teacher preparation for Middle Years is a relatively recent development.
- Most current Middle Years teachers received their formal teacher preparation in Early Years or Senior Years education and have had to rely on local professional learning opportunities and their own teaching experience and research to develop a deeper understanding of young adolescents.
- The Manitoba Middle Years Association plays a significant role in providing professional learning opportunities for Middle Years educators at the Special Area Group (SAG) conferences held each fall in Manitoba.

Responsive Teaching and Learning Experiences

Effective Middle Years schools provide young adolescents with responsive teaching and learning experiences:

- Based on reviews of the implementation of Manitoba’s Middle Years Experiential Learning Grant, experiential “hands-on” learning is becoming more evident in Middle Years classrooms in Manitoba. For additional information, refer to *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Middle Years Experiential Learning Grant* (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth).
- A number of schools are experimenting with more flexible timetables in order to improve the structure of the school day for their Middle Years learners, but rigid junior high school timetables and subject-specific teaching assignments predominate at Grades 7 and 8.
- Opportunities for differentiated instruction are being applied by a growing number of educators in each of the mandated Middle Years subject area and grade level curricula.
- Increasing numbers of educators are using Interdisciplinary Middle Years Multimedia (IMYM) models in their classrooms to engage students through the use of information and communication technology (ICT), inquiry, and constructivism, and to develop students’ literacy with ICT across the Middle Years curriculum.
- Although educators in Manitoba have diverse opinions about the role of homework and the length of time Middle Years students should devote to it, more educators are assigning homework as an opportunity for students to develop their organizational skills and independence, and to apply and practise at home what they learned at school.
- Common meeting and planning time for teachers appears in some Middle Years school timetables but is not standard practice across the province.

- The Middle Years practice of curricular integration and interdisciplinary teaching is occurring mainly in schools where teachers are responsible for two or more core subjects for the same class, or in schools using multi-grade classroom learning models.
- While Manitoba educators generally recognize the importance of meeting the physical developmental needs of young adolescents, not all schools in Manitoba follow recommended time allotments for physical education and health education.
- As a result of the Manitoba Healthy Schools initiative, all schools have created nutrition policies to promote healthy eating and living, yet few Middle Years schools in the province offer nutrition or exercise breaks for their learners that might better address the high energy needs of young adolescents. For additional information, refer to *Manitoba School Nutrition Handbook* (Healthy Child Manitoba) and *Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures: Task Force Report* (Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures All-Party Task Force).
- Middle Years schools in Manitoba are increasingly recognizing the importance of providing a full range of arts to young adolescents, but time allocations for the arts and for other non-compulsory subjects vary widely from school to school.
- Career development activities targeted for young adolescents are being introduced in more Middle Years schools in Manitoba to help adolescents identify their strengths, interests, and abilities, and to help them gain a better understanding of the connection between their learning inside the classroom and the application of the learning in the world outside the classroom.
- Manitoba Middle Years schools are recognizing the need for literacy across the curricula, yet in many schools literacy skill development is still viewed as the responsibility of the language arts teacher.

Learning Relationships

Effective Middle Years education provides strong learning relationships for young adolescents:

- Many Manitoba teachers and administrators are implementing Middle Years team models in which students are taught by fewer teachers in classrooms that are in closer proximity to each other, in recognition of the importance of learning relationships to young adolescents.
- Homeroom teacher models or teacher advisor models are being implemented in some schools to strengthen students' sense of comfort, trust, and belonging.
- A few Manitoba Middle Years schools are implementing a "looping" model in which teachers "loop" up to the next grade level with the same group of students for two or more years in order to build on the learning relationships established in the first year the teacher and class are together.
- Some Middle Years schools in Manitoba have adopted "family" groupings through multi-age or multi-level structures to focus more attention on learning relationships.

Student Voice and Choice

Effective Middle Years education offers students opportunities for voice, choice, and responsibility:

- An increasing number of Middle Years schools in Manitoba have adopted the recommendations identified in *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind: Assessment for Learning, Assessment as Learning, Assessment of Learning* (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth), and are including students as part of the assessment and reporting process, as recommended in *Communicating Student Learning: Guidelines for Schools* (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth).
- An inquiry stance in teaching and learning, which empowers students to plan, process, create, evaluate, and share their learning, is being explored and implemented in some Middle Years classrooms.
- Student-led conferences are being offered in addition to or in place of parent-teacher interviews in many Manitoba Middle Years schools.
- Student councils in many Manitoba schools give students opportunities to make important decisions and to exercise leadership.
- Many Middle Years schools are responding to adolescents' need and desire to make the world a better place by including opportunities for active citizenship in the community. Numerous examples exist of Middle Years students in Manitoba who have made a difference in their local or global communities and in the lives of others through school-based active citizenship initiatives.

Community Involvement

Effective Middle Years schools have strong community involvement:

- Many schools in Manitoba create learning environments that welcome families and community members as visitors, volunteers, mentors, and presenters.
- Parent Councils in Manitoba provide parents with formal channels to participate in the life, learning, and governance of their children's Middle Years schools.
- Middle Years schools with large immigrant populations provide translations of school communiqués and the services of translators to encourage parents who do not speak either of Canada's official languages to be included in their children's schooling.