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Preface

While the history of middle years or intermediate education in the USA spans a century, in Australia the middle years movement has been a more recent concern. Research was only initiated in Australia in 1989 following the release of the Carnegie Council report 'Turning Points'. Although the Carnegie Council's findings were based on American youth, research indicated that many of the issues raised in the report were also relevant for Australia. Since this time there has been a growing recognition of the need for schools to respond to these concerns.

Despite the fact that there are very few 'middle schools' in Australia, students in these middle years form a discrete educational group and many aspects of the work of the National Middle School Association can be applied in Australian schools.

Following the introduction of the middle school in the United States in the 1960s, no single comprehensive statement appeared to crystallise the educational beliefs inherent in this emerging educational reform effort. Recognising the need for clarification and direction, John Swaim, the 1980 president of National Middle School Association, appointed a committee to prepare a position paper. That committee, chaired by Alfred A. Arth, included William Alexander, Charles Cherry, Donald Eichhorn, Conrad Toepfer and Gordon Vars. After a period of many months and numerous drafts, preliminary papers were submitted to John Lounsbury for refinement, editing and publication. The final board-approved document, *This We Believe*, was published in 1982.



Following its release, this paper had a far-reaching impact on education. It quickly became the most frequently cited statement about the education of young adolescents and was reprinted seven times to meet the demand for its content. In 1992, the paper was reissued in a fresh format and subsequently reprinted five more times.

The first edition of *This We Believe* more than fulfilled the need for professional guidelines, and it holds a place of importance in the literature of middle years education. However, developments in education and in the practice of middle years education in particular were so extensive that in 1994 the association recognised the need to revisit its position paper. Committee members charged with this responsibility were: John Arnold, Sherrel Bergmann, Barbara Brodhagen, Ross Burkhardt, Maria Garza-Lubeck, John Lounsbury, Marion Payne, Chris Stevenson, Sue Swaim and Gordon Vars. The second edition was not just a revision, but a re-vision of middle years education, one that more fully expressed the association's beliefs as the 21st century approached. Intensive committee discussions, and numerous drafts incorporating suggestions received from board members and other active middle years educators led to the final document that was unanimously approved by NMSA's Board of Trustees in September 1995.

The more than 350,000 copies distributed have been used by middle years teachers, parent groups, school councils and school districts, making *This We Believe* the most widely used document on middle years education ever published. Schools have employed it as criteria for school evaluations, self-studies, parent and public education initiatives and future planning. A series of position papers, research and curriculum summaries, and many research studies have been based on or derived from it.

Although only seven years passed since the second edition of *This We Believe* was revised, significant events made another rewrite



imperative. In 2002 the following committee members were charged with the task of reviewing, revising and rewriting as necessary the association's position paper: Edward Brazee, Deborah Kasak, John Lounsbury, Gert Nesin, Charles Palmer, Linda Robinson, Sue Swaim and Phyllis Toy Wong.

As before, this edition is the result of intensive discussions, the suggestions of board members and others on an early draft, the addition of new sections, many subsequent drafts and word by word refinements by a subcommittee of Sue Swaim, John Lounsbury and Edward Brazee.

The positions stated or inferred in *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* are supported by a burgeoning research base about young adolescent growth and development and successful practices in curriculum, organisation and indeed every aspect of middle level schools. *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe*, a companion document released concurrently, details this research base.

This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents was unanimously approved by the NMSA Board of Trustees in July 2003; it is offered to the profession and the public as a guide to assist in creating successful schools for young adolescents. More than ever before, it is critical that this document be read, understood and used by students, teachers, parents, policymakers and other citizens concerned about the education of young adolescents.



‘To change the world, teach a young adolescent.’

The importance of middle years education

Every day, many diverse, rapidly changing 10- to 15-year-olds enrolled in our schools are making critical and complex life choices. They are forming the attitudes, values and habits of mind that will largely direct their behaviour as adults. They deserve schools that support them fully during this key phase of life. Therefore, National Middle School Association seeks to conceptualise and promote successful middle years schools that enhance the healthy growth of young adolescents as lifelong learners, ethical and democratic citizens and increasingly competent, self-sufficient young people who are optimistic about the future.

For middle schools to be successful, their students must be successful; for students to be successful, the school’s organisation, curriculum, pedagogy and programs must be based upon the developmental readiness, needs and interests of young adolescents. This concept is at the heart of middle years education. In this document, National Middle School Association sets forth a vision to guide the decisions of those responsible for shaping educational programs that are committed to improving both learning and learners.

Contemporary society presents remarkably different challenges from those educators faced just a few decades ago. While the traditional school functions – acquiring fundamental knowledge, teaching the tools of scholarship and the workplace and promoting responsible citizenship – remain valid, achieving these functions today and meet-



ing the academic imperative and other new responsibilities require relevant curriculum and varied, engaging teaching strategies that complement contemporary students. Middle years educators, therefore, promote schools that build on effective traditional practices as they create schools where learning is both expedient and joyful and where learners are celebrated for their initiative and accomplishments.

When developing a successful middle years curriculum, educators and others must consider the intent of the various concepts, specific programs or operational features recommended. They should weigh the 'spirit' behind any proposal by asking 'What is the ultimate purpose of this program?' 'What are we trying to accomplish?' or 'How will this program affect student growth, development and achievement?'

Perhaps the most profound and enduring lesson learned in 30 years of active middle school advocacy is that the several distinct elements of successful middle years curricula work best as parts of the larger whole. In the early years of the middle school movement, educators implemented what were then seen as middle school characteristics

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such as home group programs, teams and elective subjects. While research and cumulative, empirical evidence have confirmed that these characteristics when present over time lead to higher levels of student achievement and are supportive of the middle years concept, they have limited value when implemented singly. Schools should not choose among characteristics, implementing only those that appear to be more achievable or seem more appropriate for a school or a particular situation. Rather, successful middle years schools recognise that the 14 characteristics described in *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* are interdependent and must be implemented in concert.

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