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# Changing Middle Schools

## How to Make Schools Work for Young Adolescents



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## *Chapter One*

# Personalizing Middle Schools

Walk into Sarah Scott Middle School in Terre Haute, Indiana, one day and into H. L. Harshman Middle School in Indianapolis the next, and you will be struck by the contrast. Both schools have participated in Indiana's Middle Grades Improvement Program (MGIP) over the past several years, and both have undergone enormous changes during that time. Both are, in many ways, exemplary schools. Yet superficially they look and feel very different.

Sarah Scott is a small school in a stately old building, and though Terre Haute is a fair-sized city, the feeling you get on entering is that you have walked into a small town where everyone knows everyone else. The old-fashioned high-ceilinged corridors and stairwells are swept clean and the walls are covered with neatly arrayed posters and displays. Adults and children alike smile at you, greet you, and ask if they can help you find your way.

The look and feel of the Harshman School is anything but small-town. This is the big city, and its face is harder and tougher. Indeed, Harshman is in the heart of one of the most depressed areas of Indianapolis. The low-ceilinged, blocklike 1950s style of the building contributes to the crowded, noisy feeling in the halls. More than half the students at Harshman are black, and almost all are poor. The banter and bumping in the corridors when classes are changing have a decidedly urban edge to them.

The contrast between these two schools mirrors the experience of middle school students themselves as they enter adolescence. Nothing is so striking about young adolescents as their superficial

differences from each other, even at the same chronological age and grade level.

The years from age ten to age fourteen are among the most turbulent in the human life span. Within a relatively short period, young adolescents experience profound changes in physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development. They experiment with new social roles; must deal with their rapidly changing, often unrecognizable, bodies; and face new expectations from the world around them (Mitchell, 1979). Over the past fifteen years researchers and educators have defined and described a comprehensive middle-level educational philosophy based on the unique needs of ten- to fourteen-year-olds. This philosophy, which was the foundation of the Lilly Endowment's MGIP initiative, starts with the premise that effective middle school teachers and administrators must understand and value young adolescents as human beings. Foremost among their unique needs is the need to be known, heard, and respected as an individual.

We visited a variety of urban middle schools in the midst of change and growth in our research for this book. The four schools we ultimately chose to write about in detail were superficially very different from each other, yet they were alike in one crucial way. Each had made enormous progress in transforming itself into an effective school through deeply held beliefs about the innate worth and dignity of every child, and by making a profound commitment to personalizing the experience of school for young adolescents.

What do we mean by personalizing the middle school experience? We believe that personalization

- Begins with a deep understanding of the developmental challenges of early adolescence
- Requires valuing and respecting each student, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, or disability
- Involves close adult-child relationships that facilitate the transition from childhood to adulthood

- Demands rich, developmentally appropriate curricula and instruction that are sensitive to individual differences
- Calls for a range of support services that address students' social, emotional, and physical needs as well as their academic development
- Involves building strong links among family, school, and community so that all work in harmony to support children's development

Moreover, we discovered that personalization was not only the key to effective middle schools but also the underlying theme common to each of these schools' stories of how they were able to manage the process of change itself. Just as there is no one style of teaching or learning that is appropriate for every student, there is no one template for change that fits every school. Perhaps the most valuable lesson of the MGIP story is the way in which this systemic reform initiative managed to build into its design the room for individual schools to find their own unique paths to growth and transformation, based on the particular needs of their own students and staffs.

### Understanding Young Adolescents

Joan Lipsitz argues that successful middle schools begin with an understanding of the "why" of middle-level education—the developmental challenges that young adolescents face as they move from childhood to adulthood. Without that understanding, educators cannot possibly deal with the "what" and "how" of schooling.

Many middle-level educators have now come to recognize that early adolescence is a time of dramatic and sometimes traumatic changes. The physical changes are most obvious. Young adolescents grow an average of two to four inches and gain eight to ten pounds per year during this period. As their bodies shoot upward, their feet and hands grow too big, their arms too long. Hands dangle from

suddenly too-short sleeves; socks peek out from pants that were the right length just a few weeks ago.

Physical growth occurs unevenly, and thus certain parts of the body—notably hands, feet, ears, and noses—often develop earlier and more rapidly. Clumsy and not yet comfortable with their new bodies, boys especially are apt to trip over their own feet, bump into things, and knock things over at the kitchen table or in the lunchroom. These physical changes significantly alter the way young adolescents see and think about themselves. Insecure about their relationships with peers and their worth as individuals, they worry incessantly about their appearance and spend endless hours peering into mirrors, arranging their hair, and applying acne medicines.

The hormones that play havoc with complexions during this period are also bringing on confusing physical changes and powerful sexual feelings for both girls and boys. Since the age of onset of puberty varies tremendously among both girls and boys, it is entirely normal for one thirteen-year-old to appear completely physically mature, while another still looks like a young child. Newly discovered sexual feelings engender greater interest in and anxiety about the opposite sex. Some girls welcome the changes in their bodies and are eager to show off their new adult figures by wearing tight sweaters and miniskirts. Others wear baggy sweaters and loose-fitting pants in an attempt to hide all outward signs of their emerging sexuality. Although some boys carry their new manhood proudly, others are ashamed of their gangly appearance, hirsute faces, and cracking voices. Hunched over, hands in pockets, they avoid looking you in the eye and may seem unable to speak.

Yet these physical and sexual developments are just the most obvious of the changes youngsters experience at this stage of life. Young adolescents are also changing cognitively, socially, and emotionally. They know that they must soon put away “childish things” (as adults are apt to advise them), and yet a great many young adolescents are not quite ready to give up the safety and relative serenity of childhood. They are eager to loosen the bonds to parents, but

they have not yet developed new, more mature patterns of relationship. And they have neither the skills nor the confidence to become fully autonomous.

It is not surprising, then, for young adolescents to feel waves of anger, excitement, anxiety, depression, and other emotions as they experiment with more adult behaviors. Caught between childhood and adulthood, they seem to change from one moment to the next—alternately independent, immature, energized, lethargic, sensitive, oblivious, eager, confused, responsible, and disorganized.

The traditional junior high school, as many other observers have pointed out, is ill equipped to deal with the challenge of working with young adolescents. Many such schools were designed to imitate the impersonal structure and atmosphere of senior high schools, with students moving from class to class, teacher to teacher, in forty- or forty-five-minute periods. This approach drastically reduces the possibility that any one adult would come to know an individual student well enough to understand or have time to think about that student’s inner turmoil and doubt.

Moreover, since junior high schools were traditionally classified as secondary rather than elementary schools, most junior high teachers were trained to teach high school, with a primary emphasis on their subject specialty—English, math, biology, social studies, and so on—rather than on the developmental needs of children. Many of these teachers viewed assignment to junior high classrooms as a second choice, or even as a punishment, and thus approached their work with a preconceived attitude of negativity and resentment. Some saw their time at the junior high level as something to be endured until they could get the job they really wanted and were trained to perform: teaching high school. Faced with young adolescents’ chameleon-like behavior, it was not uncommon for such teachers to shake their heads in frustration or despair: “I don’t know what to do with these kids.” “They’re so moody.” “All they care about is the opposite sex.” “They just can’t keep still.” “They’ll be the death of me.”

Enlightened educators, like those described in this book, now take a much more positive view of the middle school child. They see the child at the point of transition to adulthood as a source of wonder and meaning. Like Benson, Williams, and Johnson, they view early adolescence as a time when “one begins to catch a glimpse of the emerging adult side by side with the child, when leadership begins to make itself visible, when the capacity for abstract thought develops, and when, perhaps for the first time, a parent or teacher can hold a conversation with the young person that has the tone of adult to adult communication” (1987, p. 4).

### *Valuing and Respecting Each Student*

In addition to understanding and attending to the developmental challenges faced by young adolescents as a group, these educators value and respect individual differences. They feel a responsibility to know each child's strengths and weaknesses, family and cultural background, interests, and learning style. And they use a variety of strategies to help all students feel cherished. Linda Darling-Hammond calls this focus on individual differences a critical feature of “learner-centered” schools: “Learner-centered schools focus on students' needs, interests and talents as the basis for organizing school work and school organization, building curriculum and learning opportunities, and developing relationships between and among students, educators and parents. Such schools are by definition grounded in an appreciation and deep valuing of human diversity. They are rooted in our diverse human experiences, and they open up the infinite reaches of human possibility” (1992, p. 19).

Implicit in this description of learner-centered or personalized schools are two interrelated concepts: (1) setting high expectations and providing opportunities for success to all students, while (2) attending to the diversity among them.

Giving all students a meaningful chance to succeed is one of the basic recommendations of *Turning Points*, the Carnegie Corporation on Adolescent Development's report on middle-level education: “All young adolescents should have the opportunity to succeed in every aspect of the middle grade program, regardless of previous achievement or the pace at which they learn” (1990, p. 14). By offering *all* students the opportunity to participate in advanced courses, exploratory programs, and extracurricular activities, successful middle schools communicate to both youngsters and their parents that *all* children have value.

Despite this recommendation, tracking students by achievement level remains an almost universal practice in today's middle schools. In theory, tracking allows teachers to tailor instruction to each group's knowledge and skills and thus supports individualized instruction. In practice, lower tracks often focus on boring, repetitive basic-skills drills. There is little evidence that tracking benefits those in the lower tracks (or that heterogeneous grouping hurts those in the upper tracks). On the contrary, tracking has a negative impact on low-achieving students' aspirations and self-esteem, while denying them access to the advanced courses they need to get into college and find rewarding careers (Oakes, 1985; Wheelock, 1992).

Personalized middle schools recognize that all students can benefit greatly from participation in challenging and exciting school projects and from rich, thought-provoking curricula (Epstein, 1988; Lipsitz, 1984; Levin, 1987; Wheelock and Dorman, 1988). The strategies for making success possible for all learners include cooperative learning groups, cross-age tutors, specially designed curricula, and other support services.

Valuing and respecting young adolescents also means attending to cultural differences. The demographic map of American society is changing dramatically, because of both immigration and higher birth rates among racial and ethnic minority populations. In 1980, minority youth made up 15 percent of the school-age

population. It is expected to reach 50 percent by the year 2020. A disproportionate number of these youth live in poor urban centers, where unemployment, racial tension, and violence abound. Meanwhile, city and state budgets for public schools and youth services are stretched to the breaking point.

In 1989, the Carnegie Corporation issued the following warning: "The specter of a divided society—one affluent and the other poor—looms ominously on the American horizon. Inherent in this scenario is the potential for serious conflict between generations, among races and ethnic groups, and between the economically disenfranchised and middle- and upper-income groups. It is a disturbing scenario which must not occur" (p. 32).

One way to help avoid this scenario is for urban schools to understand and give value to children's differing cultural backgrounds. Schools must acknowledge racial and cultural tensions and face them head on. They must work hard to "provide culturally sensitive and validating experiences to students from many different cultural backgrounds" (Haynes, 1994, p. 14). They must aim to expand their students' conception of what it means to be human in a culturally diverse world and to develop cross-cultural competency (Boateng, 1990). In addition, they must be willing to examine their own policies and practices to see whether they are influenced by racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic stereotypes.

The Holmes Group summed up this imperative for personalized middle schools well: "When teachers learn more about their students they can build learning communities that embrace rather than smother cultural diversity. Students do differ. Without stereotyping or prepackaged responses, such differences can become opportunities for richer learning. . . . We speak of celebrating diversity because we believe that the hallmark of a true learning community is its inclusiveness—where teachers take the responsibility for helping each child take part to his or her fullest. The idea of a

learning community has special significance in a democracy where all must find their voice" (1990, p. 35).

At Decatur Middle School, described later in this book, we witnessed the effects of such inclusiveness. We saw and heard how a black student, struggling to come to terms with historical racism and his own African-American identity, was touched, held, supported, and listened to by an exemplary team of teachers. These educators were motivated not only by the conviction that cultural differences must be attended to and valued but also by simple affection for the boy as a person and sympathy for his struggles as a young adolescent. "We just love him to death," they told us, speaking of a young man poised on the verge of drugs and violence, one whom too many traditional teachers would have seen simply as trouble.

### *Developing Close Adult-Child Relationships*

Many middle school researchers and observers recognize the importance of establishing close personal connections between adults and the young adolescents in their charge. As Braddock and McPartland write, "Students must also be attached to their schools in human terms and on a personal level, with the perception that their teachers care about them as individuals and the belief that the professionals at their schools will actively support their efforts to learn" (1992, p. 160).

James Comer, director of the School Development Program at Yale University, believes that respectful, trusting personal relationships among children, teachers, principals, and parents are vital to creating an atmosphere in which children and learning thrive. "Learning isn't a mechanical process," Comer asserts. "Motivation and commitment to learning don't happen just by having somebody stand up and try to pump information into you. You have to work on making the school a place where people connect

emotionally. If you don't do that, then you're not going to succeed" (1988, p. 5).

David Hawkins, a pioneer in the area of substance abuse prevention, also speaks of the critical importance of bonding between adults and young adolescents. According to Hawkins's research, those youngsters who successfully survived a multiple-risk environment had all bonded closely with someone who took an interest in them, who held out clear standards and expectations, and with whom they felt close emotionally. In his view, what we need now is not a "war on drugs" but a "war for bonding" (Hawkins, 1993).

Personalizing urban middle schools requires establishing close relationships between adults and children. But such relationships do not just happen by chance; the structure of the school must be designed to support such bonds.

For example, adviser-advisee programs aim at bringing adults into close relationships with students. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) advises that "each young learner needs an adult who knows him or her well and is in a position to give individual attention. Therefore, the middle school should be organized so that every youngster has such an adult, one who has special responsibility for the individual's academic and personal welfare. Home-base or adviser-advisee programs which provide individuals with regular opportunities for interaction with a small group of peers and a caring environment fill this need" (1982, p. 19).

Another structure that helps promote meaningful adult-child relationships is interdisciplinary teaming, in which a team of teachers is responsible for a community of students. Creating smaller communities for teaching and learning was one of the major recommendations of *Turning Points* (Carnegie Corporation, 1989). But smaller student-teacher ratios are not enough. As Theodore Sizer (1994) points out, colleagues must work with the identical group of kids and have time each day to talk about those kids and what "knowing them" means.

### *Transforming Curriculum and Instruction*

Personalization does not end with understanding and valuing young adolescents or establishing close relationships with them. Middle school teachers must also re-examine and, if necessary, re-focus what they teach, how they teach it, and how they measure the results. "Centering schools on learners influences how we think about curriculum and its connections to students' experiences, culture and personal meaning, how we think about assessment and its capacity to illuminate the full range of students' multiple intelligences and achievement, how we think about teaching and its responsiveness to students' conceptions and understandings" (Darling-Hammond, 1992, p. 19). At the middle level, personalization means designing curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of young adolescents, while attending to the tremendous variation within and among them.

Children first develop the ability to reason abstractly in early adolescence. "They begin to think of the world around them and themselves in new ways. For the first time, young adolescents can 'think about thinking'—which often confuses them. This 'reflexive thinking' allows them to form sophisticated self-concepts that are shaped by interactions between their experiences and new powers of reasoning" (Van Hoose and Strahan, 1988, p. 13).

Jean Piaget's stage theory of mental development describes early adolescence as roughly the age when youngsters move from "concrete operations" to "formal operations" (1977). Students in the concrete-operations stage, says Piaget, can solve mathematical or logical problems when faced with concrete situations in which they can see, touch, or manipulate objects. As they enter the formal-operations stage, they develop the ability to reason logically in the absence of concrete objects. They begin to understand and apply advanced mathematical and scientific concepts, and they reason on the basis of possibilities instead of being limited by their own direct experiences.

And yet, as with other characteristics of early adolescence, intellectual development varies tremendously from child to child. Even in eighth grade, only about one-third of the students can consistently demonstrate formal operations—that is, the ability to reason abstractly. Since many young adolescents are still at the concrete-operational stage of development, opportunities for experiential, hands-on learning are especially important to them. Giving young adolescents materials like mathematics manipulatives and hands-on science materials can facilitate their learning of important concepts and skills. It is also important for teachers to help young adolescents develop the “capacity to interpret symbols and deal with verbal ideas without having to manipulate physical objects” (National Middle School Association, 1982, p. 19). Thus, effective middle-level teachers pose challenging questions: “What if?” “What do you think will happen?” “Are you sure?” “How do you know?” “Why?”

Another way that teachers can attend to the wide variability among young adolescents is to identify the ways in which each student learns most effectively and to plan instruction accordingly. Yet the multiplicity of dimensions on which young adolescents differ makes tailoring instruction to their individual needs difficult at best. As Steven Levy, a former Massachusetts Teacher of the Year, told the Association of Experiential Education in October 1993: “When I think about meeting the needs of each child, I feel overwhelmed. Since these needs are virtually bottomless, I cannot hope to address them all.” Instead, Levy tries to create an environment so rich that it brings out the “genius” in each child. He points out that, when we use the word *genius*, we usually think only of the most common definition: “extraordinary intellectual power.” But this definition limits genius to a very few. By providing a rich classroom environment, Levy allows children to pursue their natural talents and inclinations, develop their own distinctive character, and build on their unique capacities and aptitudes—all equally valid, though less common, definitions of *genius*.

At the same time that young adolescents are learning to think more abstractly, they are searching for greater autonomy and independence. Thus, adapting curriculum and instruction to their needs also means helping them take responsibility for their own learning. By asking students to predict, draw conclusions, make inferences, and justify their answers, teachers can encourage students to move beyond the passive acquisition of information (National Middle School Association, 1982) to active learning. Good teachers foster students’ independence by giving them opportunities to pose their own problems, choose their own topics of inquiry, and select their own reading materials.

To promote this kind of self-directed learning, teachers must change the traditional definition of their role. They must see themselves not as information-giver but as diagnostician, coach, resource person, facilitator, and evaluator. As TheodoreSizer put it in one of his nine principles of “essential” schools, “The governing metaphor of the school should be student as worker, rather than the more familiar metaphor of teacher as deliverer of instructional services” (1992, p. 208).

Early adolescence is also a time when friendship, social acceptance by peers, and a sense of belonging grow in importance. Thus cooperative learning methods are especially appropriate for middle school classrooms. “When students learn in small, carefully structured learning groups (with group goals, equal opportunity for success, and individual accountability) they help one another learn, gain in self-esteem and feelings of individual responsibility for their learning, and increase in respect and liking for their classmates” (George and Alexander, 1993, p. 160). Balancing such teams by race, gender, and academic ability also breaks down barriers among subgroups and fosters sensitivity to cultural diversity.

Still another characteristic of early adolescence is youngsters’ growing interest in the larger world and increased capacity for empathy and role taking. It is not uncommon for young adolescents to become involved in heated discussions about justice and other



ideals and to form their own opinions on important social issues. They are also struggling to make personal meaning out of their school experience. Personalizing curriculum and instruction means integrating themes that help students to see systems rather than disconnected facts (Carnegie Corporation, 1990, p. 13). These themes should be both socially significant and personally relevant (Beane, 1990).

Finally, personalizing curriculum and instruction means helping young adolescents find constructive ways to express their deep feelings. Effective middle-level teachers use art, poetry, music, drama, and other forms of creative expression to help their students share their thoughts, hopes, and fears with others.

### *Providing Comprehensive Support Services*

Many educators feel that helping youngsters with their personal problems is not within the school's domain or the capacity of today's hard-pressed public school teacher. Yet it is impossible to meet many young adolescents' academic needs without addressing their social, emotional, and physical needs as well. This is especially true in poor, urban neighborhoods, where many children lack adequate nutrition and health care, and the problems associated with poverty, racism, and violence add to the normal developmental challenges of early adolescence.

Of vital importance, then, are comprehensive health services, including education, prevention, and treatment. As the Carnegie Corporation notes, "Good health does not guarantee that students will be interested in learning, but ample evidence suggests that poor health lowers students' academic performance" (1990, p. 20). Young adolescents need health education and preventive guidance to help protect themselves and others from unhealthy choices about smoking, eating, drugs, and sex. They also need access to appropriate mental health services—services that only 20 to 30 percent of those who need them now get. "Because of the link between health and school success, middle grade schools must

ensure the accessibility of health and counseling services and function as health-promoting environments" (Carnegie Corporation, 1990, p. 20).

The Carnegie Corporation recommends that every school have a health coordinator to provide limited screening and treatment, make and monitor referrals to health services outside the school, and coordinate school health education and related activities. James Comer's School Development Program goes even further. It calls for a mental health team composed of all the health and mental health staff in the school, along with classroom teachers, to help establish schoolwide health policies, deal with overall health and climate issues, and tackle individual cases.

Middle school educators are quietly pioneering such efforts in Indiana and across the country. All the schools featured in this book have made a major commitment to providing comprehensive student assistance programs. They provide individual and group counseling, arrange for peer support groups, and design and implement classroom activities dealing with a range of health-related topics. In addition to working directly with youth, team members provide parent and teacher consultations; help identify individual differences, needs, and problems; and work with teachers, specialists, and administrators to develop schoolwide programs and solve specific problems. To serve those students whose needs exceed the school's in-house resources, they have developed links to health and mental health providers in local hospitals, community health centers, counseling centers, and youth-serving agencies.

School-based health clinics are another promising vehicle for providing comprehensive health services, especially because they make such services immediately accessible to students. Yet for a variety of reasons (not the least of which is cost) few middle schools have actually created such clinics. Harshman School in Indianapolis, which we describe in Chapter Three, is an outstanding exception. Its story provides a compelling example of the need for in-school health screening of young adolescents.

### *Linking Family, School, and Community*

Generally, peers provide much needed support as young adolescents move from childhood to adulthood, from social conformity to personal autonomy. Yet the intense desire to fit in can have negative consequences for youngsters. Afraid of looking, sounding, or acting “different,” they are often extremely self-conscious. They may be reluctant to pursue their own educational, cultural, or recreational interests if they deviate too far from those of their pals. The peer group can also exert powerful pressure to experiment with tobacco, alcohol, other drugs, sex, and other risky behaviors.

Parents and educators are sometimes tempted to back away during early adolescence, feeling powerless in the face of peer pressure. Nevertheless, most young adolescents still respect their parents’ opinions and ideas, despite myths to the contrary (Sorenson, 1973). And they continue to look to their parents for affection, identification, values, and help in solving problems (Kandel and Lesser, 1972). As Ianni points out, “Adolescents do generate their own norms and rules, but this process does not and cannot develop in isolation from the institutional context of the communities in which they live and learn” (Ianni, 1989, p. 679).

Neither the home nor the school can afford to step aside. As Gayle Dorman writes, “Young people need adults to maintain the direction and momentum when they cannot. Above all, they need adults who care about them as they mature” (1987, p. 4). Personalizing middle schools means providing young adolescents with adult guidance and support. It also means aligning home and school, so that students receive a consistent message in both and are not attached to one at the expense of the other.

Dorman adds that during this period “children emerge from the world of here-and-now into a wider world of novel and panoramic possibilities. Their sense of personal achievement, competence, and commitment deepens; their understanding of life and of their future

begins to take on new breadth and depth. They seek a new definition of themselves in the context of the larger world, and they bring great energy to their search” (1987, pp. 2–3).

As young adolescents struggle to discover themselves, they are beset by questions: Who am I? What does the future hold for me? What values are important to me? How can I make a difference in my community? Where do I fit in society at large? These questions are especially poignant for poor, urban youth who often have no clear vision of what is possible beyond high school or even middle school graduation.

Personalized middle schools help young adolescents undertake this search by extending learning beyond the school walls. They encourage community support for the school, while at the same time encouraging youth to explore their surrounding community and the world around them. Through career exploration programs, like the one created and managed by Mary Ley at Sarah Scott Middle School, they provide students with an expanded vision of the future.

Personalized middle schools also give young people an opportunity to build self-esteem and a sense of civic responsibility through community service. As Stevenson points out, “Young adolescents working together to do something that directly benefits others are able to see themselves in a new and developmentally valuable light” (1992, p. 130). Service projects promote social interaction with peers, younger children, older adolescents, and adult community members including each others’ parents and grandparents. They provide opportunities for young adolescents to try out more adult roles and to learn firsthand about themselves, their peers, and those whom they serve. Through community service, students also discover the possibility that they can make a difference in the world around them. While the primary motivation for doing service is helping others, young adolescents often get more than they give—personal satisfaction, recognition, respect, and a deep appreciation for the value of serving others.

### *Responding to a Moral Imperative*

The stories of the four middle schools in this book illustrate the great strides that are possible when educators share a vision of personalizing their educational program and are supported in that vision by critical friends and knowledgeable advisers. The administrators, teachers, counselors, nurses, and parents of these schools have all committed themselves to service—to serving poor, urban youth. Their stories give the lie to the gloomy predictions of those who say that our urban schools cannot change and should simply be abandoned.

Jonathan Kozol (1991) and other advocates play an important role in the fight to achieve better, more equitable public schools. By pointing out the dire plight of many of our urban schools, they generate outrage and garner public support for reform. Yet they often paint such negative portraits that the situation seems hopeless.

It is true that many urban young people are at risk from poor nutrition; inadequate health care; racism; unemployment; community disintegration; and the easy availability of drugs, alcohol, and guns. These conditions make schooling especially difficult. And the best efforts of educators are often hampered by deteriorating buildings, out-of-date materials and equipment, inadequate resources, and rigid bureaucracies.

Despite their many problems, however, urban youth are resilient, and so are their schools. The four schools you are about to meet teach us that the situation is serious but by no means hopeless. Their stories suggest that in poor, urban schools fundamental transformation is possible—and without large infusions of money. What it requires, at a minimum, is that we as a society respond to the moral imperative of caring for and educating *all* of our children. What it requires is a vision of effective middle schools and a belief that change is possible.

“How can teachers know the students,” asks TheodoreSizer in *Horace’s School*, “know them well enough to understand how their

minds work, know where they come from, what pressures buffet them, what they are and are not disposed to do? A teacher cannot stimulate a child to learn without knowing that child’s mind—the course of action necessary for an individual requires an understanding of the particulars” (1992, p. 40). Implicit in this statement is the added requirement that teachers know children’s hearts as well as their minds and that they know the families and communities of which they are a part.

What can middle schools do to know their students well? How can they help each youngster grow and develop to his or her full potential? How can they attend to the particular needs of poor children in poor communities, coming from a staggering array of different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds? And how can school administrators, school systems, policy makers, governments, and private funding agencies effectively support the kind of fundamental change that is so urgently needed?

The answer, in our view, is in personalizing urban middle-level education. The answer is in developing a coherent, systemic, and yet highly individualized approach to the process of school change. The stories in the chapters that follow will, we hope, make the abstract concept of personalization come to life.