



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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A Middle School Orientation Program for Parents, Students, and Teachers

Curriculum Unit 84.05.08
by Richard Canalori

“Adolescence is widely recognized as a period of social, religious, political, and vocational adjustments as well as a period of striving for increasing emotional and financial independence from parents.” ¹

Children are asked on the one hand to make many adjustments and at the same time seek a greater degree of independence. If in the years before these changes a solid foundation for change has not been developed, adolescence can be both a traumatic and an unproductive period of growth. Students that don't feel they can make it very often don't even try.

To build confidence, it is imperative that parents, teachers, and students develop together a plan to insure a good beginning. The goal of this unit is to establish an orientation program for students entering middle school that will insure a positive atmosphere for learning as well as cooperation between parents, teachers, and students. All parties must work together from the very beginning of the school year (or even earlier). You cannot wait until there is a problem to become involved. If you wait for a crisis, it may already be too late.

The first question I asked myself in preparing this unit was, “How can I best, as a teacher, help to facilitate communication in the home?” As a sixth grade teacher of students entering a new school and soon to be teenagers, I was aware that there are a great number of adjustments which must be made by both students and parents. If I could help provide common objectives and goals for parents and children to make these adjustments less difficult it would help. A good beginning might be the difference needed to insure future success.

Adolescence is a very difficult period to define. There are amazing differences between adolescents. Each child is unique. What is universal is that adolescence is a problem solving activity. Families that communicate are more adaptable and better able to adjust. The picture presented by the media of the typical adolescent is indeed unfair. There is no typical adolescent and parents must be willing to take the time to know their own child. The adolescent is making vital decisions and parents not only have a right to help but an obligation.

In early school years many parents are regularly present on visitation nights, but this is not the case with older children as parent involvement drops off. While it is certainly not a good idea for parents to be involved in every decision a child must make, there is a need for support. Many parents would like to help but are not sure of the right amount of involvement or the proper approach to take. Parents must be encouraged to come to school. There is a great deal that any parent can do to help. Teachers and parents must be willing to lend

support and open lines of communication. Children want role models and they need discipline. The truth is that while children appear to want total freedom, they do in fact want family structure, support, and *love* .

The format for the unit is very simple. An initial letter will be sent to each parent on the first day of school asking that parents and students participate in the unit. A parent meeting at which goals and objectives are described follows soon after. The unit activities begin at this point. There are options available for some activities but the majority of the activities are required. Finally, certificates are awarded to participants that have completed the required number of objectives. A second meeting or awards ceremony is optional.

The following letter, or one like it, may be used to help parents and children better understand the program and to elicit their support.

Dear _____,

We are very anxious to help your child begin the school year in a positive manner. For this, we need your help.

Beginning middle school requires students to make a great many changes and adjustments, both socially and academically. Students need the help and support of parents and teachers to insure that these changes are met. Therefore, we are having a meeting for parents and children on _____ at _____ in _____.

At this meeting, we will be describing a new orientation program about which we are very excited. The program will help us to help your child get off to the best possible start. Thank you.

Sincerely

Please tear off and return

- - - - -

Circle one

I will/will not be at _____ the meeting on _____ at _____ in _____

Parent's signature

For those parents who respond that they are unable to attend the meeting a personal call should be made to elicit support. If there are children who still need an adult to participate with them in the unit after all efforts fail then community resources should be solicited. Big Brother and Big Sister programs, university students, as well as other adult family members are resources available for children without a parent sponsor. While you cannot require parents to attend meetings, and it may in fact be impossible, every effort should be made for maximum participation. A positive conference with parent, child, and teacher at the beginning of a school year can make the difference between a good school year and one filled with confusion and failure.

At the conference with parents and students, the actual unit activities are described. This is a four week unit and all activities run concurrently. Hopefully, the ideas introduced will lead to positive objectives that will

continue much longer. A strong foundation in middle school will very likely continue throughout high school and college.

Teachers are encouraged to adapt the following list of activities to suit their own classes. All five activities from List A are required as well as four of the six activities from List B. Explanations for each activity are essential and must be complete. If directions are not clear the chances for success will diminish greatly.

*Distribute handout #1 which follows.

#1

List A (Required Activities)

1. School Notebook and Related Materials
2. Study Center
3. Family Dinner or Breakfast
4. Homework Chart
5. Television Viewing

List B (Four of Six Activities are Required)

1. School and Public Library
2. Magazine Article or Novel Sharing
3. Career Exploration
4. Museum, Live Theatre, or Art Gallery Visit
5. Higher Learning Experience
6. Transfer of Learning

At the parent and student meeting, the teacher should describe each of the activities listed in handout #1. Handouts #2-#5 will also be distributed at this meeting. These additional handouts are necessary for various activities and each will be explained in the unit. Parents should be encouraged to ask questions as each activity is presented. All handouts are to be returned by the parents and children at the end of the unit along with and other required materials. Activity descriptions follow.

List A (Required Activities)

1. School Notebook and Related Materials. The child without a spiral notebook, an assignment

pad, pen, and pencil is in no way prepared to take on the responsibility of school. Specific instructions and a sample of the type of notebook that is required should be presented by the teacher. There should not be any confusion about what is expected. This will vary from teacher to teacher and no further details are necessary. What is important is that the notebook be neat. A special folder for returned papers should be required. Too often notes and tests are lost or just thrown into a desk where they do no one any good. A well organized person that takes pride in his or her work will strive to excel. Item #1 should be purchased and organized within one week of the meeting. Pens and pencils are required each and every day throughout the unit.

2. Study Center. Item #2 refers to a place to study at home. It is very important that students have an area that is used exclusively for homework and other related activities. Students are required to photograph this area and to bring the photo to school. If no camera is available, a drawing would be acceptable. The study area should include a dictionary, ruler, stapler, tape, paper, and proper lighting. Developing a study center at home gives continuity and importance to school activities. The center must be completed within one month from the meeting which is the end of the unit time span.

3. Family Dinner or Breakfast. "Education and schooling are not synonymous. Education is a process that begins at birth and lasts a lifetime. Therefore, parents are the child's first teachers."

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Much of what we now know we learned from what was said and done at the breakfast or dinner table. While the family schedule and the family itself have certainly changed, it is still vital to spend time together, to exchange stories about the day's events, and to offer encouragement.

Many mothers now work and there are many one parent homes. Despite these facts, a real effort must be made to have dinner together. If work schedules do not permit, breakfast may be used as a substitute. To complete this activity, the family must eat together at least four times per week during the one month unit. The chart on the following page should be completed by the student, signed by the parent, and returned to the teacher at the end of the orientation period. It is important that at this time together each member of the family has the chance to share his or her thoughts. Helping to prepare and clean the table should be a part of the process.

*Distribute handout #2 which follows.

#2

Family Dinner or Breakfast Chart

Check each box in which the family ate together. Specify breakfast or dinner. Topics of conversation may be listed-this is optional.

Week One Week Two Week Three Week Four
Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

Parent Signature(s) _____

Student Signature _____

4. Homework Chart. To insure a good start on the year's work, the student and parent should be aware of the homework assignments for each subject. Students are responsible for copying and completing these assignments neatly and carefully. For students in grade six, the policy is twenty minutes of homework per night in each subject. Homework is generally not given on weekends.

Long term assignments which require the student to budget his or her time over several nights are also given. If students do not do a portion of these assignments each day, the result will most likely be a sloppy project done at the last minute without any real benefit to the student. The skill of time management must be taught and teachers must be sure to include lessons regarding this important skill. This early meeting and discussion can help to clear up any misunderstandings about what is expected.

For the orientation program, two weekly charts must be completed by the student and signed by the parent and teacher. The charts list the date, subject, and nature of the assignment. After the orientation program, the use of an assignment pad is sufficient but for this unit it is recommended that the charts be completed. The assignment notebook should be kept as well. A student not completing homework is a problem which must be addressed immediately and the teacher should contact parents as soon as there is a problem in completing this objective.

* Distribute handout #3 which follows

#3

HOMWORK CHART

WEEK BEGINNING ____ WEEK ENDING ____

MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY

MATH

SCIENCE

SOCIAL STUDIES

ENGLISH

OTHER

WEEK BEGINNING ____ WEEK ENDING ____

MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY

MATH

SCIENCE

SOCIAL STUDIES

ENGLISH

OTHER

Parent Signature ____ Teacher Signature ____

5. TV Viewing Limits. The beginning of the school year is a good time to develop positive habits in regard to television. While TV has made us more informed, it has also caused a great number of problems. Many children and parents waste dozens of hours each week watching programs that are not really of high quality. In this activity two points will be stressed (1) TV viewing is not “bad” but critical choices of what to watch should be made and (2) too much TV is not a good thing.

It is difficult to imagine what children did before television. Today the TV is used as a “baby-sitter” and most children by the age of three are regular consumers. Parents must be willing to spend time with children in other activities and in the selection of quality programs. Studies have shown that there is real educational benefit if parents watch TV with their children and discuss what is being shown—a great deal can be learned from watching the news and/or other educational TV. “The average high school student will have spent approximately 20,000 hours in front of the television set by the time he or she graduates from high school, compared with about 15,000 hours in the classroom.”³

What can be done? TV cannot be eliminated, but limits must be set both in time and choice of programming.

For the purpose of this unit, a school week chart is to be completed. During this selected week (any of the weeks within the four week unit period) two things are required. First, parents will help children to be critical viewers by helping to select programs, watching TV with the child, and discussing what has been presented. An evaluation of the program should be given by both parent and child. Was the subject portrayed accurately? What commercials were shown? “It is interesting that youngsters, on the average, will see 11,000 murders on TV before they’re 14 years old.”⁴ Also, “Living with television means growing up in a world of about 22,000 commercials a year, 5,000 of them for food products, more than half of which are for low-nutrition sweets and snacks.”⁵

Having discussed critically the choice of program, the second part of this activity concerns time spent watching TV. The following may seem unrealistic but is a goal toward which the child and parent should strive. “If a child watches one hour of TV, and equal amount of time should be spent on reading. Also allow time for homework and outside play. This will make for a well-rounded schedule.”⁶

The chart which follows should be duplicated and distributed at the parent-student meeting. It requires that students do in fact read for an amount of time equal to the amount of time that they watch TV. Time spent doing homework is not the same as time spent reading. An example should be done to illustrate to parents and students what it required. If for example a student watches 1 hour of TV, he or she is required to do outside reading in the amount of 1 hour. Homework might be an additional 18 hours. Outside play may be 2 hours. An additional hour might have been spent playing a board game. This is a well rounded schedule and is to be encouraged. The chart while only being kept for a week is an example of a healthy approach to learning.

* Distribute handout #4 which follows.

#4

T.V. VIEWING CHART

T.V. and Reading Times should be equal—Reading Activity is not the same as homework. Under Time list total number of hours for each activity.

(figure available in print form)

List B (Four of Six are Required)

1. School and Public Library. At the beginning of a school year the need for a library card, a copy of the library schedule, and a knowledge of what is available at the library are essential for school success. Students and parents are required in this activity to visit both the school and public libraries and to become familiar with these valuable resources. The teacher for this activity must notify librarians of this school project so that the librarians will be ready to visit these important visitors and make them welcome.
2. Magazine Article or Novel Sharing. The importance of sharing thoughts on a book or magazine

article and the importance of reading as an alternative to TV cannot be overemphasized. The idea that parents enjoy reading is a positive influence for the child. When books and magazines are available the reading habit grows. In this activity parents and children share common readings and discuss content. A brief written report by the student including parent comment is also required.

3. Career Exploration. Children at middle school age enjoy exposure to career opportunities. They may even have thoughts about jobs they might like to hold in the future. Parents and children should discuss the types of jobs available and the skills necessary for jobs in which they show interest. After discussion, parents and children in the activity are required to visit a place of work. The choice of where to visit will be easy for some families but for others the choice will be difficult. There may also be an uneasy feeling as to how to proceed. The teacher in this activity must provide a list of possible choices with phone numbers and the name of the person familiar with this project that they may contact for a visit. The Greater New Haven Chamber of Commerce is available for help in this regard. The child, after the visit, is required to write a short report describing the visit and giving plans for any possible future visits.

4. Museum, Live Theatre, or Art Gallery Visit. Increasing life experiences is a vital part of one's education. The opportunity to visit and to share ideas outside of the classroom with parents will increase communication at home while at the same time broadening student horizons and interest in learning. As with job visits, the teacher must provide a list of suggested choices and the name of the person to contact at each location. If parents and children feel comfortable they will return. A brief written comment by the student is required to complete this activity.

5. Higher Learning Experience. While the student is only beginning middle school, it is a good idea to begin to set goals for the future. Visiting a college, trade school, or high school can be very beneficial. Parents and students are required in this activity to visit a school beyond middle school level. Questions regarding requirements and courses of study offered should be asked and a written report is required. As with the other activities suggestions must be provided by the teacher. The parents and children will feel much more comfortable if they know their calls are expected.

6. Transfer. The child and parent in this activity are required to discuss the unit with another family. Hopefully, they will agree to try a few of the ideas discussed. It may seem unrealistic to think that the ideas presented can be easily transferred but only through real dialogue can meaningful change occur. Sharing ideas may have more value than it appears.

Having completed the required activities and four of the six optional activities, the parent and student are required to complete the following check off list. All materials should be returned in a folder to the teacher at the conclusion of the orientation program—approximately one month from the initial meeting.

*Distribute handout #5—Parent/Child check off list.

#5

Parent/Child check off list return with completed activities

Required Activities

#1—School Notebook and Materials

Requirement—Display notebook for inspection

Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

#2—Study Center

Requirement—Photo or Drawing

Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

#3—Family Dinner

Requirement—Chart

Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

#4—Homework Chart

Requirement—Chart

Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

#5—T.V. Viewing

Requirement—Chart

Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

Optional Activities (4 of 6 are required)

#1—School and Public Library -

Requirements—Signatures of librarians, schedule of hours

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Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

#2—Article Sharing

Requirements—Brief written report by student including parent comments.

Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

#3—Career Exploration

Requirements—Name and location of job explored, result of visit, and plans for future visits if any.

Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

#4—Museum, Live Theatre, or Art Gallery Visit.

Requirements—Name and location of museum, play, or gallery visited. Brief comment by student on their reaction to this experience.

Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

#5—Higher Learning Experience

Requirements—Name and location of school visited—reason for choice and brief comment regarding visit.

Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

#6—Transfer of Learning

Requirements—Name of person with whom these activities were shared as well as brief comments relating to their reaction.

Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

CONCLUSION

There is certainly no guarantee that the activities presented here will insure a successful school year. Teachers, parents, and students must be positive and enthusiastic. All teachers have ideas regarding how best to help students. This unit is only meant to bring important ideas into clear view. They are ideas so simple that they are sometimes overlooked.

Parents should be encouraged to share thoughts on the unit and to offer suggestions regarding the activities presented. Everyone, parent, child, and teacher has the same goal in mind—to help the child learn. A positive beginning can go a long way toward reaching this end. A certificate of achievement should be issued to parents and children completing the required number of activities—they are certainly deserving. CONGRATULATIONS! Keep up the good work!

Notes

1. Rolf Muuss, *Theories of Adolescence* (New York: Random House, 1962) p. 10.
2. Home Helps for Learning Prepared by the National PTA and *Highlights for Children*. (Highlights for Children Inc., Columbus, Ohio, 1980) p.5.
3. Donna Lloyd-Kolkin. *PTA Today* (Chicago, National PTA) p.14.
4. Vivian-Sue Penn. *PTA Today*. April, 1981. p.21
5. George Gerbner. *PTA Today*. April, 1981. p.4.
6. Vivian-Sue Penn. *op. cit* . p.21

Bibliography

Muuss, Rolf. *Theories of Adolescence* . New York: Random House, 1962.

(very important work dealing with the problems and changes faced during adolescence as well as a history of this subject.)

Reynolds, Pamela S. (Editor). *PTA Today* . Chicago, Illinois: National PTA. 1980-1983.

(monthly magazine which offers worthwhile suggestions for parents, teachers, and students—especially

helpful in opening lines of communication)

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