

# Beyond **make it fun**: Four principles of true engagement in middle school ELA

Deb Sabin, Chief Academic Officer



We know you can't just add good curriculum to a class and stir.



# Introduction

Middle school is a time when students are deeply and constantly engaged...in their own emotions, relationships, and social media accounts. Problem is, it's also a time when engagement in academics is critical to future success in school and beyond. In fact, at least half of eventual dropouts show clear warning signs as early as sixth grade.<sup>1</sup>

Teachers are well aware of these stakes—and of the challenge of competing with immense internal and external distractions, especially when it comes to keeping students engaged in academically challenging content.

So are we. Research confirms that getting middle schoolers on the path to college and career readiness requires a truly engaging curriculum—and ELA is no exception. That's why we designed our middle school ELA curriculum around the unique needs of middle schoolers. **And it's also why we created four actionable principles of middle school ELA engagement.** These principles will help you support students in meeting key developmental needs and becoming confident, active learners. In other words, these principles won't just help your students get through middle school—they'll help you get through to middle schoolers.

But we know you can't just add good curriculum to a class and stir. Your curriculum, and your students, need you. And in the middle grades, teachers have the strongest impact on whether students close or widen achievement gaps,<sup>2</sup> so you need clear instructions and instructional tools to support you in your efforts.

We know that reaching kids during this time requires going beyond making the learning “fun.” In middle school, it's crucial to create a nurturing academic environment that holds kids to high standards while also addressing some of their basic developmental needs. As young people are forging their identities in the world, they need to be encouraged to question what they encounter, to get plenty of regular feedback, and to be taken seriously as thinkers.

Taken together, all this means you've got your work cut out for you. Your middle school students bring a unique and complex set of needs into your classroom. If you want to do more than just get their attention for five minutes, more than just entertain them—that is, if you want to deliver the deep engagement that leads to deep learning—you've got to provide both content and pedagogy that speak to those needs. We're here to help!

---

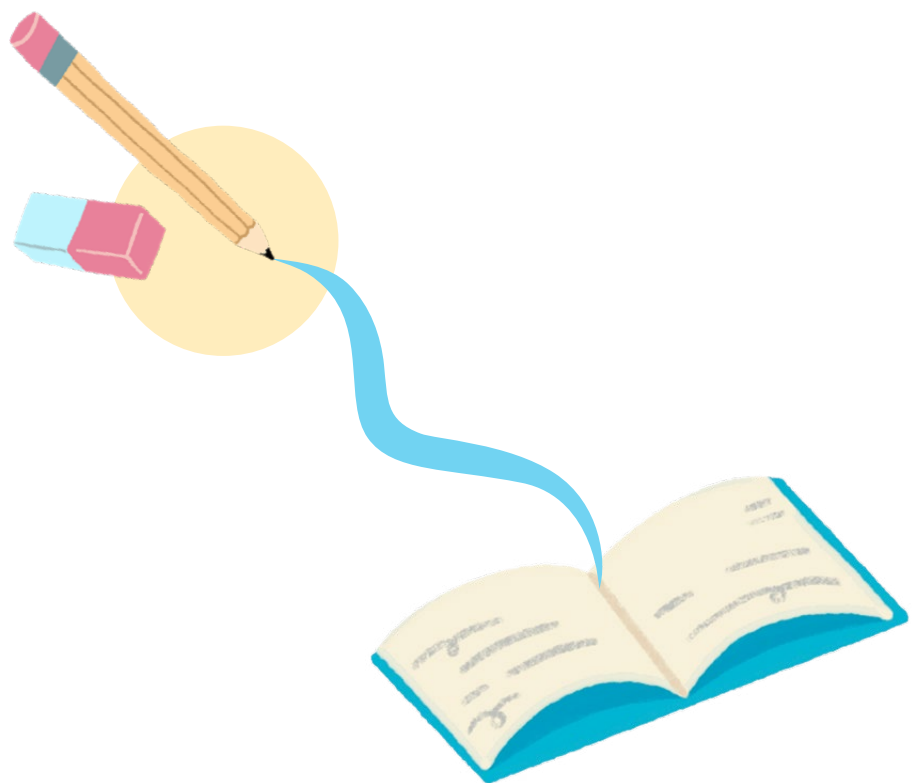
1 Balfanz & Fox, 2011, p. 3; Balfanz, 2009, p. 4

2 Balfanz, 2009, p. 7

# Engagement Principle #1: Empower students to become critical thinkers.

To be fully engaged, middle school students need a sense of self-determination and efficacy—to know that the work they’re doing will matter, be recognized, and be relevant to their lives and their budding senses of self. They need to be able to rely on consistency in the classroom and know that arbitrary rules or standardized tests won’t govern their learning. But consistency doesn’t mean there’s always one right answer—in fact, a truly engaging curriculum accepts a multitude of possible correct answers, giving students a sense of control over their own learning and the opportunity to become critical, independent, even audacious thinkers.

How does a curriculum do that? It’s all in the text. Students can dive into complex texts and make observations, grapple with ideas, and make meaning for themselves, bringing personal relevance and previous knowledge to the table as well—especially given the freedom of thought that comes with knowing there’s no one right answer.



## Strategies to support a culture of critical thinking:

- **Be clear that the text, not the teacher, has all the answers.** Center questioning on expressing interest and assert that there are many ways in which students can develop their own critical ideas from the text. This means asking things like:
  - How did you get to that response?
  - What might change if you considered a different point of view?
  - Could you rephrase your response in a different way?

Students develop their responses by following one simple rule: If you can justify it in the text, you can hold on to your interpretation.

- **Teach students to develop theories they refine with time, versus focusing on right or wrong answers.** Students struggle when they think learning is only about getting it right. Seymour Papert theorized that students are able to become better thinkers when they're not attached to one outcome—not afraid to be “wrong.” Of course, sometimes there is a correct answer, but it's the process of seeking it that counts. So, for example, when students consider the narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's “The Tell-Tale Heart,” it's helpful to detach them from the goal of skipping right to one correct character analysis, and instead help them explore and problem-solve (asking, for example, “*Why doesn't this make sense?*”). Have them refine their theories as they discuss and collaborate. Focusing on refinement of thought—rather than arrival at results—will support them not only in understanding the text at hand, but in also in taking risks with their ideas and theories.
- **Channel Socrates.** A Socratic seminar—which emphasizes inquiry and discussion over definitive responses—brings home the importance and power of open-ended questions. Students are active participants from the get-go, preparing by establishing protocol and rules for speaking, and working together to brainstorm guidelines for questions. During the seminar, you act as the facilitator of conversation rather than the deliverer of knowledge, posing questions, guiding the discussion, and prompting students to contribute.

# Engagement Principle #2: Provide opportunities and supports for all students to work up.

When it comes to emotional, physical, social, and academic development, middle schoolers are all over the place. Add in the diversity of backgrounds and school experiences that students bring with them into the classroom, and you know how important it is for an ELA curriculum to be adaptive and flexible enough to be accessible to everyone.

No matter how diverse your student body, and in how many different ways, they will all be developing their sense of themselves and their role in the world. And in order for them to feel glimmers of power and possibility, it's vital that they feel confident about asking questions, searching for answers, and making decisions based on their authentic thoughts and feelings. That's why teachers need to set goals for all students that are both challenging and achievable<sup>3</sup>—and that build in sequence, presenting students with content only when they're ready for it and tapping into prior knowledge and experience to help them tackle text they may have struggled with at first.

At Amplify, we believe that it's all about low floors and high ceilings—in other words, about providing multiple entry points and the right scaffolding opportunities so that every student can engage deeply with a rigorous curriculum. The challenge is to meet all students where they are, enabling access from any learning level, and also allow room for maximal growth to prepare students for grade-level expectations and year-end testing.



---

3 NMSA, 2010

## Strategies to differentiate and drive learning:

- **Incorporate multimedia strategically.** Often a video dramatization or audio recording can help students find their way into a complex text. It's important, though, for teachers to treat these opportunities as both common instructional experiences for all students and as opportunities to differentiate instruction for students reading below grade level who require fluency practice. For the latter, it will be important to ensure those students in need of fluency training can follow along, word by word, when listening to a professional actor read. These students should also continue to practice the same piece of text until they can read it with appropriate expression.
- **Scaffold with sentence frames and modified prompts.** All people, whether using their native language or otherwise, can comprehend more language than they can produce. Middle school students are no different: They may know exactly what's being asked of them, but not know how to convey their response—especially at the time when their opinions are becoming more individualized and their sense of identity is growing. Sentence frames and modified prompts (e.g., “*Tom convinces his friends to whitewash the fence by saying...*”) can help with that. They reduce linguistic barriers, enabling students to produce writing and speech more complex than what they could have done on their own—and giving you a better sense of where their true understanding is. The rigor of the assignment stays the same for students reading at or above grade level, with some students just getting an extra linguistic leg up.
- **Aptitude, brackish, circumference!** Daily vocab practice will make a huge difference, with each student completing assignments specifically engineered to challenge them at their level of proficiency.

# Engagement Principle #3: Support feedback systems that develop strengths.

Achievement gaps in middle school quickly become achievement chasms,<sup>4</sup> and once students start to slide, it gets harder and harder to bring them back up. That's why integrated, timely, and detailed feedback provides an essential guardrail, helping you spot and catch slipping students while they're still in reach.

Of course, there's feedback, and there's good feedback. Feedback that's vague, not actionable, given in a vacuum or way after the task? Not helpful. Effective feedback, especially for middle schoolers, is timely, clear, specific, purposeful, actionable, and compatible with students' prior knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Well-delivered feedback can be useful for anyone, but it's particularly potent for middle schoolers, who are totally aware of learning differences among students, extremely vulnerable to ego blows, and frequently unwilling to ask for help when they're floundering. For them, true engagement moments are born from a teacher's ability to provide feedback in a way that clicks and helps them see opportunity rather than hear failure.



---

4 Balfanz, 2009, p. 6

5 Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 104; Balfanz, 2009, p. 10



## Strategies to deliver feedback that drives learning:

- **Shoulder responsibility.** Over-the-shoulder conferences (OTSCs) during class give you the chance to give individual students unobtrusive, bite-size, encouraging, customized, and immediately actionable feedback.<sup>6</sup> Because OTSCs are meant to be quick (less than a minute!) you can reach 10–12 students during a single in-class writing period, and all students every week.
- **Build a classroom culture of feedback.** Fact of school/life: It's scary to share your work. But when you encourage your students to provide supportive, targeted responses and specific skill-related comments—not to mention eye contact and smiles—you bring out the best in everyone. More students will share when they anticipate concrete, encouraging feedback— and those providing the feedback get practice with sharp listening (which, after all, is really just live, out-loud text analysis and close reading).
- **Focus rewrites on key skills.** Revision assignments are a great way to get students to put feedback to immediate use. The written feedback you provide here should be manageable, and should target one or two specific places where a student needs help—say, with citing evidence to support a claim or combining sentences grammatically to better illustrate an idea.
  - *Bonus:* Students practice a particular skill at the same time as they practice the skill of revising itself.

---

6 Nadler, 1979, as cited in Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 92

## Engagement Principle #4: Engage multiple modalities, with particular attention to collaboration.

Middle school students are bursting to interact with the world in all sorts of new ways...and their timing is excellent. Our brains—particularly the developing brain—learn better when a given learning process engages multiple senses. What does this mean for ELA? Memorizing and speaking the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* engages a different part of your brain than reading it. All students need to “read” text in all sorts of ways: hearing it, speaking it, writing about it, “seeing” it, performing it. By providing multiple ways for students to interact with text, you are allowing their brains to process the language through distinct pathways. The use of technology to provide more options in a multimodal classroom is designed not to shrink the classroom experience onto the screen, but rather to expand what is possible for teachers and students to experience.

All students benefit from experiencing text in a variety of ways, and certain students also respond particularly strongly to one or another modality. That’s the great thing about multimodal teaching strategies: Everybody wins. Multimodal strategies also pair a middle schooler’s interest in variety to the challenge of working with complex text. Amplify’s research has also shown that students are more likely to continue reading beyond the assigned text once they’ve experienced that text in a different medium, such as through digital exposure or a dramatic performance in class.



## Strategies that use a multimodal approach to stimulate learning:

- **Invite drama.** In our testing, we found that most students struggled to interpret the 19th-century eloquence of Frederick Douglass. That changed when they watched Chadwick Boseman perform the first few pages of the text. They got super engaged and went on to read much more of the text, even parts we had not assigned. Dramatic readings also contribute to speaking and listening skills by giving students models of excellent oral performances and helping them learn to listen for subtle differences in delivery among different performers.
- **Create great debate.** Often classroom debates seem contrived because students are arbitrarily placed on a side that they may not actually agree with, and they haven't gathered adequate evidence to make a convincing case. Amplify ELA invites students to develop their own opinion, gather evidence, and choose their position. The teacher can then assemble debate teams that are genuinely arguing what they believe. Why this works: A debate that students are motivated to engage in vividly demonstrates the importance of evidence—including the way that one piece of evidence may be used to support two opposing arguments. Students also get to work on their skills in listening and impromptu speaking.
- **Get them to perform.** Performing challenges students to bring a text to life by making distinct choices about the meaning and purpose of every word. *How will I perform "A plague on both your houses" the first time the phrase is uttered? What about the second time? What clues can I find in the text to determine the gestures and emphasis I should use?* Performance decisions are an exercise in text analysis. For this reason, the standards emphasize the importance of helping students see the different ways that a text might be performed or an argument might be expressed, and how it changes as it moves from one format (on the page) to another format (on the stage).

# Conclusion

Middle school ELA instruction needs to be keyed into the unique needs, challenges, and strengths of middle school students. When you catch struggling students at this moment in their academic careers, it's not too late to help turn them around. What's essential is an ELA curriculum with a strong, forward-thinking, middle-school-specific pedagogy. Middle school students need differentiated and rigorous coursework that interests and involves them in what they're learning and challenges each of them to think deeply, no matter their level of fluency or ability. Teachers, for their part, need the support of tools and strategies that free up their time, maximize engagement in class, and make it easy to give meaningful and timely feedback. At Amplify ELA, we believe that a multimodal curriculum that embodies these principles of engagement will bring out the best in your middle school students and make your classroom a challenging, lively place to learn.

**For more information on Amplify ELA, contact us at:**

 [amplify.com/ela](https://amplify.com/ela)

 (800) 823-1969



# References

- Balfanz, R. (2009, June). *Putting middle grades students on the graduation path*. Everyone Graduates Center and Talent Development Middle Grades Program at Johns Hopkins University; National Middle School Association; Johns Hopkins University.
- Balfanz, R., DePaoli, J. L., Ingram, E. S., Bridgeland, J. M., & Hornig Fox, J. (2016). *Closing the college gap: A roadmap to postsecondary readiness and attainment*. Civic Enterprises; Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University.
- Balfanz, R., & Fox, J. (2011). *Early warning systems-Foundational research and lessons from the field*. National Governors Association, Philadelphia, PA, October 2011. Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University.
- Hattie, J., & Jaeger, R. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning: A deductive approach. *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 111–122.
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>
- Bishop, P. A., & Pflaum, S. W. Student perceptions of action, relevance, and pace. *Middle School Journal*, 55(4), 4–12.
- Erb, T. O. (Ed.). (2012). *This we believe in action: Implementing successful middle level schools*. Westerville, OH. Association for Middle Level Education.
- Kulhavy, R. W. (1977). Feedback in written instruction. *Review of Educational Research*, 47(1), 211–232.
- Nadler, D. (1979). The effects of feedback on task group behavior: A review of the experimental research. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 23, 309–338.
- National Middle School Association. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Westerville, Ohio: National Middle School Association.
- Valentine, J. W., & Collins, J. A. (2011). *Student engagement and achievement on high-stakes tests: A HLM analysis across 68 middle schools*. American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA, April 11, 2011.

What's essential is an ELA curriculum with a strong, forward-thinking, middle-school-specific pedagogy.





Contact us today to learn more!

 [amplify.com/ela](https://amplify.com/ela)

 (800) 823-1969

Amplify.