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## **THE CRITICAL YEARS**

### **Middle School Manages Distractions of Adolescence**

By [WINNIE HU](#)

BRIARCLIFF MANOR, N.Y. — At Briarcliff Middle School, almost any minute of any day can become a lesson in weathering the turmoil of adolescence.

Take the large blue and white sign outside the cafeteria urging students to control their impulses. It didn't stop Daniel Levine, a sixth grader, from slapping a Groucho Marx moustache on his upper lip and strutting around. But he did hesitate and think about it.

"I just wanted people to laugh," said Daniel, an energetic 11-year-old. "I fool around, but I know you have to stop sometimes, and I'm still trying to learn that."

Across New York State and the nation, educators are struggling with performance slumps in middle schools and debating how best to teach students at a transitional, volatile age. Just this week New York City put in place a new budget formula that directs extra money to middle schools.

Briarcliff has emerged as a nationally recognized model of a middle school that gets things right, a place that goes beyond textbooks to focus on social and emotional development.

There is no question that the Briarcliff school starts out with many advantages. It is part of a district in Westchester County that spends \$24,738 per student, or more than one and a half times the New York State average, and can afford to buy extra sets of classroom textbooks so that students can leave their own copies at home. Its student body is relatively homogenous — 91.8 percent are white — and so well off that less than 1 percent qualify for free or reduced lunches. In contrast, in nearby New York City, 72 percent of the population qualifies.

But even affluent districts generally see a drop in student achievement in grades six through eight. Briarcliff has not; it is at the upper end of about 50 middle schools — out of more than 600 — in New York State where test scores have held steady and in some cases even increased slightly from the elementary level, according to state education data.

The 390 students here have consistently outperformed their peers on state tests. Last year the number of students passing state reading and math tests at each grade level ranged from 89 percent to 97 percent.

"We'd like high-performing middle grades schools to be the norm in our country, but right now they are more the exception," said Deborah Kasak, executive director of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, an Illinois-based group.

Briarcliff school officials have made a conscious decision to cultivate the middle school, instead of looking for ways to make middle schools disappear, as other districts have done by stretching elementary schools to cover eighth grade.

In 2003, it was the middle school that moved into a new \$24 million red-brick-and-glass building with panoramic views of the countryside while the high school took over its old space next door.

The middle school also hires only teachers who express a clear interest in working with sixth, seventh and eighth graders, and trains them to reach the age group better.

The school takes particular pride in its focus on how adolescents think and develop. Susan Howard, the Briarcliff principal, emphasized during a recent orientation for fifth-grade parents that a good middle school had to recognize and respond to the stages of adolescence as well as to fulfill their students' intellectual promise. "If you think about a recipe, if you leave out a key ingredient, you're not going to get the same outcome," she said.

So the school strives to develop critical thinking, teach organizational skills, and instill social and moral values. This is most visible in its adherence to Habits of Mind, a system developed by two educators, Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick, and now used in about 300 schools worldwide.

Since 2004, Briarcliff Middle School has exhorted students to live by the 16 traits that are at the core of Habits of Mind, traits that its supporters contend are common to highly successful people. From "thinking flexibly" and "taking responsible risks" to "managing impulsivity," these traits are posted on signs around the school and serve as a constant reminder of how students are expected to behave.

Briarcliff is hardly alone in emphasizing social and emotional learning. For instance, more than 4,000 schools worldwide have embraced an alternative program, Tribes Learning Communities, which teaches students to work well together in a group by using skills such as listening, reflecting and problem-solving.

Lions Club International, the service organization, sponsors a program used in more than 1,500 middle schools nationally, called Skills for Adolescence, that teaches them to cope with peer pressure, resist drugs, and build self-esteem. And the 52 schools in the Knowledge Is Power Program, a nationwide network primarily of charter middle schools, rely on extensive team-building activities.

Mr. Costa, a former middle school teacher, said the Habits of Mind system worked particularly well with middle school students because it creates a shared culture of learning that helps them through the transition to adolescence. "They're very conscious of their peers at that age, and they don't want to be out of step," he said. "The Habits of Mind is kind of a club that you belong to. You have a common language."

Here in Briarcliff Manor, Nadine McDermott, the assistant principal who brought Habits of Mind to the school, said she viewed herself as a life coach for the students.

She said that when students are sent to her office for disciplinary problems, she asks them to reflect on how they failed to follow one or more of the Habits of Mind. She frequently visits classes to grill students on what critical thinking skills they are using, or not using.

"We're really trying to cultivate intelligent behavior, and the whole school is my classroom," she said.

Mrs. McDermott, who was observing an eighth-grade class on a recent morning, interrupted after several hands shot up in the air before the teacher had even finished asking the question. "Take five," she said, asking the students to literally count off the seconds with their fingers. "I want you to be thinking about what you're thinking."

Although the Habits of Mind can seem cultlike at times, its language has become a common bond between teachers and students, even creating its own shorthand. "M.I.," for "managing

impulsivity," is often heard in the hallways. Even students who said they were annoyed by the constant repetition acknowledged that the mental habits had probably kept them out of trouble.

Harry Zimmerman, 13, a seventh-grade student, said that managing his impulsivity during a social studies discussion stopped him from blurting out that he did not like Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), who lives in nearby Chappaqua. "I realized that there might be people in the room who might be offended by that, and I didn't say it," he said.

Beyond Habits of Mind, many of Briarcliff's 46 teachers have come up with creative if somewhat unconventional ways to keep their students focused. For instance, the sixth-grade students in Eileen Gallagher's health and community class were whispering and interrupting her again on a recent afternoon, so she held up a white rubber ball decorated with world flags. "I have the ball, I have speaker power," she announced. "All eyes here and all mouths closed."

Borrowing the idea and the ball from another teacher, Ms. Gallagher laid down the new ground rules for her class: only one person would speak at a time, while everyone else had to pay attention. She then tossed the ball to a student, inviting him to speak, and that student in turn tossed it on to someone else. No one else interrupted. Lesson learned.

"You have to work with the group," said Sean Glanville, 11, who admitted to calling out a lot in class. He has been trying to listen more, he said, even when his mother gives him chores to do. Now when she tells him to fetch six logs of firewood, he no longer comes back with just two, he said.

The school embraces team-building activities in and out of the classroom to encourage students to achieve as a group. Every year, the entire seventh grade embarks on a three-day outdoor trip to the Catskills for bonding activities such as a ropes course.

Briarcliff students are required to carry a spiral-bound organizer that includes a section to record homework assignments. Sixth graders are assigned a notebook color for each subject — red for science, green for social studies — so that they are less likely to mix them up. Students who need extra help can take a class in organization.

In one eighth-grade social studies class, the 15 students were preparing for a test on the Roaring Twenties by brainstorming about how to best study for it. As the teacher listed their ideas on a board, the old fallbacks like practice quizzes and flashcards gave way to more creative approaches: grouping notes by similar content, guessing at test questions, and even putting dates and facts into song.

In the back of the classroom, Matt Schwartz listened carefully as his classmate, Noah Safieh, said that, starting a week before a test, he writes down notes and quizzes himself on the material so that he would be less likely to forget it.

"It was very helpful because now when I study, I'll try his method," Matt said. "If it works, I'll keep doing it."

The emphasis on social development has also helped ease the transition for sixth-grade students like Mark Moretto, a slightly built 12-year-old who said that he had worried about bullying and peer pressure when he started in September. He has not had any problems yet.

"There's a lot of help with problems," he said. "So people don't have a lot of anger, and they don't feel like they want to just pound someone into the ground."