

The article is taken from the National Middle School Association's *Middle E-Connections newsletter*.

Are Your Students Prepared for the Organizational Demands of Middle School?

Susan Mulcaire

Middle school moves at a fast pace. Students have many different teachers, each with his or her own homework, test schedules, and due dates. Add to the mix the after-school clubs and sports that students participate in, and it is a challenge to get organized.

Good work management and organizational skills are *essential* for balancing the load and minimizing the stress. For some students, organizational skills come naturally, but for most, they must be learned. While there is little classroom time to assess and train students in work management skills, here are some ideas for how you can help your students be prepared.

Help students make the connection

Getting students to *value* good organizational skills is the first step. Teachers can help by connecting the benefits of good organizational skills to the things this age group values most—more independence, less stress, more free time, better grades, and more self-confidence.

Organized binders are key

A binder is like a compact file cabinet that a student carries around all day to file and retrieve papers, homework, and information. Students must be able to access materials quickly and keep papers neatly stored by subject. Be sure to give students time in class to file papers in the correct place in their binders—no shoving loose papers into backpacks!

Planners are essential

No matter how good a student's memory is, he or she must have a central place for recording activities. A student's planner should contain important dates and events such as bell schedule changes, holiday breaks, exams, homework assignments, and project due dates. It's a good idea for students to include personal items scheduled during school days such as medical appointments, vacations, and after-school activities.

Have a study bud

Students should identify a classmate in each class who can be contacted in the event of a forgotten homework assignment or lost worksheet. The study bud can also help when a fellow student is absent and needs a handout or class notes. Study buds should exchange home contact information.

A homework space that rocks

Encourage students to locate, design, and stock a work space at home. This will help them do their best work in the least amount of time. The space should be quiet and free from distractions such as people talking, TV, and video games. They can deck it out with posters, pictures of friends, or team photos to make it a place they won't mind hanging out. Make it a "Designer's Challenge" classroom activity in which students design and photograph their work spaces and vote on the work space "most likely to succeed."

Be proactive!

Most students, particularly those fresh out of elementary school, have no idea that a typical middle school teacher works with 100 or more students each day. Unaware of the many demands on a teacher's time, students continue to believe that, as in elementary school, their teachers will track them down to provide a missing assignment. Encourage students to take personal responsibility for following up. You can role-play various student dilemmas in a "What Would You Do?" classroom activity to help students learn to recognize and follow up on matters that affect their grades.

Without basic organizational skills, middle school students can become overwhelmed. In some cases it begins a downward spiral of underachievement that can last into the high school years and beyond. Take some time to help students recognize and appreciate the benefits of good basic organizational skills.

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