

Middle School

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EduGuide

Your roadmap to student success

Is your child ready for middle school writing?

Taking the fear out of algebra

5 ways your kids get hurt

Teach your child homework discipline

Plus: Michigan's new graduation requirements; after-school programs; the MEAP

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But what's a parent to do?

Middle school teachers often tell me how sad it is. They watch parents of middle schoolers drift away — just when their children need new help on the bumpy road of adolescence. As attendance at parent meetings goes down, student problems go up.

The fact is, it's not just students who are anxious about fitting into middle school. Parents are, too. We wonder if we're ready for the flood of new issues; if our children really want us around; and what we're supposed to do now, since our kids have begun managing their own school work — or they should be, at least.

Teachers say there's a lot we can do to boost our kids' success. But the most important they say — even more than reading with our children — is to teach them good work habits, like taking responsibility for their homework. Chastity Pratt knows how difficult that can be. On page 4, she tells us what she learned the hard way about helping her 5th grade cousin lick laziness.

Teachers also say that Michigan's rigorous, new high school graduation requirements, and the growing competition to get into college and careers, mean that parents need to take more leadership in helping their children get up to speed. The middle school years, once a parking lot for puberty, have become the on-ramp for accelerated learning. Michigan high school students, for instance, now must take four years of English and math, including Algebra II.

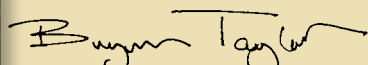
That's why we've dedicated more of the *EduGuide* to helping you tune up your child's core skills in subjects such as writing and math. Without them, your child may fall behind.

The good news is that in many places, parents and educators are working together to create new ways for middle school students to get part of their Algebra or foreign language requirements out of the way by 8th grade. That gives them a head start on graduation and confidence for the transition into high school. Students who have done so are about twice as likely to make it to college.

So while the road ahead may be bumpy, we can find our way together. The *EduGuide* is your roadmap to student success. Enjoy the ride.



Cheers,


Bryan Taylor, President



Middle School
EduGuide
Your roadmap to student success

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WHAT'S ONLINE

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What we learned the hard way

Saving for the future

Does "D" mean dummy?



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7 STEPS TO STAY AHEAD

By Bryan Taylor

Most people think middle school doesn't really count. The big failures and successes — dropping out, pregnancy, graduating with honors or a good job — usually show up in high school. But education experts say you can predict high school success by what students do in middle school. Here are leading tips to improve your child's odds.

1. Stop assuming and start planning.

By the end of eighth grade, nine out of 10 students say they want to go to some type of college. After all, a college degree can mean an extra \$1 million in lifetime earnings and a ticket out of the unemployment line. But about half of those students never reach their dreams because they fail to take the right steps along the way. Those steps begin in middle school.

That's why you shouldn't assume that schools will do everything. They can't. The students who stay ahead have parents who get engaged planning their education and choosing challenging classes, such as algebra and a foreign language in eighth grade. My parents missed getting me into eighth grade Algebra. In college, that put me behind for pursuing a wide range of technical and medical careers.

2. Get an inside source. During middle school, your child may have more than a dozen teachers. Sooner or later, you're going to run into questions or problems. So build a relationship now with someone — a teacher, counselor, principal or active parent — who can help you work through the school system to get what you need.

3. Back up your child's teachers.

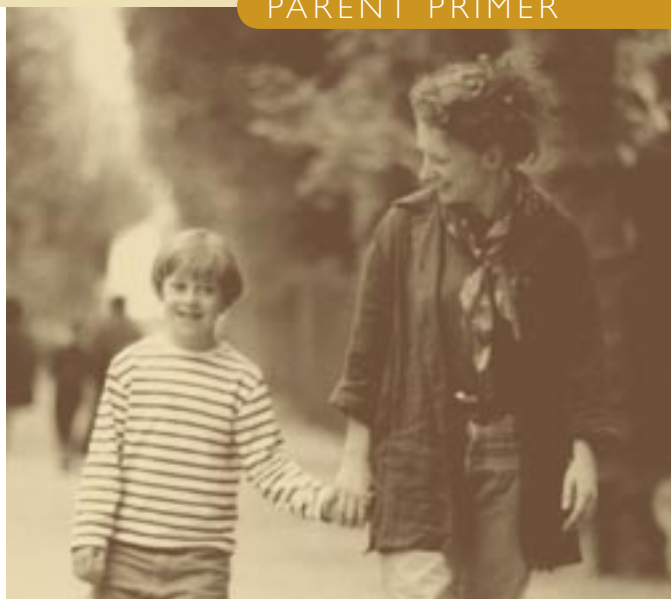
Teachers want to treat all kids the same. But many teachers admit they're more likely to go out on a limb for a child when they know her parents will support them. That's because bad experiences with other parents have

made many teachers back off. You don't have to agree with teachers on everything, but it's a good idea to let them know you will support them. To build the relationship, get five minutes face-to-face with them in the first three weeks of school. Then put three dates on your calendar when you'll email or call them during the year to see how things are going.

4. Refocus your child's time. You know about sex and drugs. But did you know that spending too much time in front of the tube also puts your child's success at risk? Kids who spend too much time in front of TVs and computers don't do as well on tests; they may have a harder time staying focused on school work. Doctors say your children should not spend more than one to two hours a day in front of screens. So pull the plug on TV and video games. And help your child use a calendar and daily schedule to manage her time. Learning to pay attention now will help her hold down a good job later.

5. Choose a dream career and college.

Career paths begin in middle school, when students learn how the classes they're taking will affect what they can do later in the real world. Don't worry now about picking the right two- or four-year college program; just give them something to aim for. Most kids who make it to college are told early and often that they are going. Even better, have your child take a college course. Many colleges offer special summer and evening classes geared to middle students, or they let them participate in adult learning programs.



6. Consider the SAT test in middle school. It's not just failing kids who fall behind. One study found that gifted kids were almost as likely to drop out after eighth grade. But teachers and parents often don't recognize when a child is gifted. One solution is taking the SAT, a college entrance exam also used to identify gifted students in seventh or eighth grade. High scores on the exam can help them qualify for Talent Search and other special programs that will keep them using all those smarts in useful ways. But few middle school students take the SAT, so you'll need ask someone at school if you want your child to take it.

7. Monitor motivation. Ask your kids every week what they like and don't like about school. It will give you an idea early on when something — a bully, bad grades or worse — is going wrong. Don't accept a one-word answer; get your child to talk about all of these things. Remember, kids who like learning keep learning.

Want to help your child stay ahead? Circle one of the steps above and do it this week. Then keep reading to find more first-hand advice on how to follow these tips.

Bryan Taylor, publisher of *EduGuide*, is a speaker for parents, students and educators. He addresses more than 1 million people annually through his writing, speaking and media work.



Discipline **THAT WORKS**

By Chastity Pratt

For most of his life, my cousin Dion has been a witty cutie-pie in school. He charmed elementary school teachers with his large, puppy-dog eyes. He always did enough work to get decent grades.

But Dion is 11 now and spending many school nights at my house. He has shown me how difficult it is to motivate a child who is going through puberty.

Fifth-grade Dion always had a smile and a knock-knock joke. Sixth-grade Dion thinks he knows everything. So far, he has not done well in middle school. His teacher says he doesn't turn in homework even on days I have helped him to do it. That's baffling.

I recently asked Dion when his book report was due. He shrugged and said, "I dunno."

"Well, where are the instructions on how to do it?" I asked. "Uh, uh..." he answered.

"Who is this kid?" I asked myself, "and how do I get him to be a self-motivated worker before it's too late?"

Teachers repeatedly say that their number one priority for families is to

teach good work habits. They even rank it higher than reading with your child every day.

And the middle school years are where the rubber meets the road when it comes to self-discipline, as children take on more responsibility, work in groups, participate in multiple classrooms and tackle bigger projects. Parents can't expect children in middle school to totally outgrow the carefree attitude of the elementary years. But now is the time to develop a healthy attitude about work that will help them hold good jobs in the future.

Yet before anyone can get them to do all of that, parents have to understand their kids.

TALK, TALK, TALK

"Their bodies are changing so much, they're developing as a human being and trying to understand their role in the family and community," said Dorothy Rich, founder and president of MegaSkills Education Center, a family-oriented nonprofit group that operates in 4,000 schools nationwide.

Don't be surprised if your little darling becomes a back-talking, know-it-all in middle school. At this age, that's how

children assert their independence, Rich said. The more you talk to them, the more open they will be to your guidance. "I cannot overestimate the value of talking. Talk with children a lot, a lot, a lot — not nagging — but talk with them," Rich said. That openness will come in handy when parents have to pressure children to get to work.

Middle school children also say they don't want parents to butt into their lives so much. That's a myth.

"They will say they don't want parents to butt in, but if you don't give them attention, they will do something to get your attention," said Patrick Montesano, vice president and director of the national Middle Start center.

Once parents have opened the lines of communication, the first step to building children's work ethic is to get them to understand the big picture. When children don't understand why work is important or relevant, they don't want to do it. That goes for everything from fractions to chores.

Al Summers, who taught middle school science for 28 years in Ohio before going on staff with the National Middle School Association, shared the following

example. “Once in class, we were talking about mixing things and what happens when they dissolve. One girl said she was sure that the experiment wouldn’t work at her house because their water was orange. So I told her to bring in some of her water.

“She did,” said Summers, “and then we talked about how iron in the ground mixes with well water to make it orange. She learned the concept because she could see how it worked in her own life.”

LICKING LAZINESS

After a few weeks with Dion, we’d been through the whole conversation about why his lessons were important. He said he understood, yet he did not work harder. I decided that he was smart, but lazy.

The best weapon to lick laziness is patience. Create a good routine and stick with it.

The second weapon is to make the consequences clear, Summers said. Punishment should fit the child. Consequences should fit the crime. Not putting in enough time on homework should mean less time for TV and video games.

Parents should also be careful not to mistake a child’s fear of failure for laziness. As the demands of middle school get more and more complex, children often feel like they’re being pushed out of their comfort zone; that’s part of growth. The problem gets worse, though, when children find that the skills that got them through elementary school aren’t cutting it anymore.

In *The Myth of Laziness*, author and pediatrician Mel Levine writes about children who suffer from different forms of what he calls “output failure.” They may be smart in other ways, but when it comes to projects that require certain skills that their brains haven’t learned how to process — like writing or creating new ideas or organizing

tasks — their output level gets choked off. The dread that children come to associate with such tasks often gets confused with laziness.

Helping children to understand what part of a process they struggle with is often the first step in turning them around. They need to be reminded of what they are good at. They need help finding new strategies to deal with their weak areas. Small rewards for small steps of progress can help, too.

“For children who are afraid to fail, punishment may not work; it may make matters worse,” Summers said. “When you reward them for accomplishments, it gives that good feeling that when you do something right, someone will notice. With children who struggle, you need a reward system.”

OOPS!

Remember what it was like to be in middle school? All of the mistakes and troubles? Remember how those problems with a late research paper or disastrous science project worked out? Don’t just remember it. Tell the kids. Children may be more likely to accept hard work after hearing adults’ horror stories. It lets them know that they can learn from mistakes — and survive.

It may sound simple, but parents also have to make sure they set a good example. Work and don’t grumble.

“Don’t complain about not wanting to work,” Rich said. “Parents themselves have to demonstrate the attitudes and skills they want their children to have.” 🍎

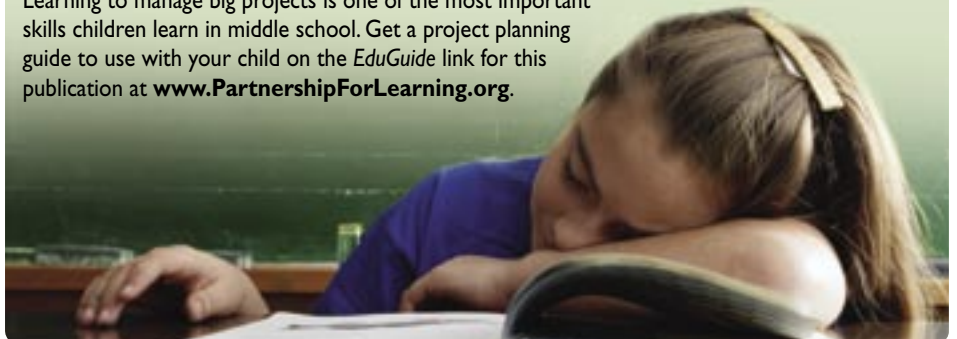
Chastity Pratt has two young children and covers education for the *Detroit Free Press*.

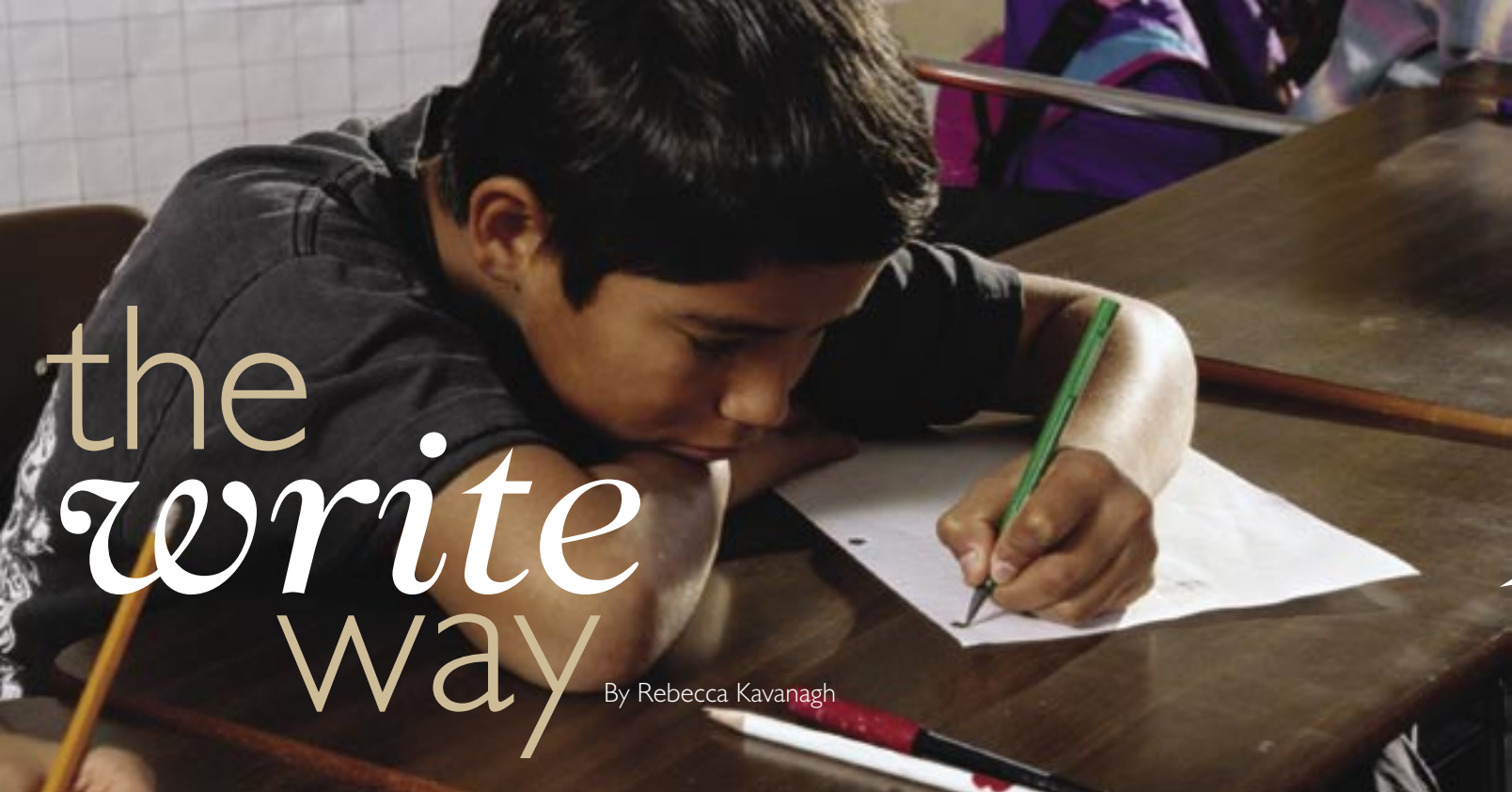
5 Secrets to tackling big projects

Never do your child’s project or research for her. The work ethic she learns from doing it herself will have far more impact than how well she does on the project itself. Good help keeps the ball in her court while leading her through key project management steps:

1. Help her see the big picture. If she doesn’t understand what she’s doing and why, she’ll have less energy and focus to get it done. Talk about how the project relates to something she’ll need to be able to do when she’s older or have her ask her teacher what she’s expected to learn from the project.
2. Clarify the required outcomes for the project: When it’s due, what it needs to look like and what ingredients are needed for “A” quality work. Send her back to the teacher to fill in any missing information.
3. Ask her questions about what she already knows about the subject. Ask how and where she might find answers for what she doesn’t know.
4. Ask what major steps she’ll need to take to complete the project. Then help her break down each phase into smaller “to do” steps. Make a schedule with her for completing the project bit by bit. (If your child is working on the project with other students, help her sort out how her part of the project connects with her teammates’ parts.)
5. Take her to the library and let her lead the way. Help her write down some questions she can ask the librarian about where she might find information on her subject. Sit with her as she searches the Internet and talk about what sites provide better information than others.

Learning to manage big projects is one of the most important skills children learn in middle school. Get a project planning guide to use with your child on the [EduGuide](#) link for this publication at www.PartnershipForLearning.org.





the write way

By Rebecca Kavanagh

Students who write well almost always do better in school than those who don't, says Dr. Raymond J. Huntington of the Huntington Learning Center, which specializes in writing instruction and standardized test preparation.

"In life, writing skills have a tremendous impact on the way we present ourselves," he says. "From letters to possible employers to office correspondence to communications with friends and family, the ability to use written language has a remarkable impact on our professional and personal success."

Kids start learning to write in kindergarten, when they're often given a series of story cards to arrange in order. In early elementary, the focus is on teaching mechanics and the writing process. By middle school, kids are expected to know how to write, and write well. If they don't have these tools, their schoolwork suffers. For instance, homework in subjects such as science and history require students to first interpret what they read. Then they often are asked to write on-the-

spot essays. This skill is also required for many standardized tests, such as the MEAP and, later, the ACT and SAT.

If you're worried that your child may be falling behind, now is the best time to help him boost his writing skills. But how do you know whether your child is on the right track? Here are some suggestions:

Keep tabs on her grades and teachers' remarks. Look at book reports and other essays. Look especially closely at any assignment that requires the stringing together of thoughts in a way that makes sense. If you see low grades or needs-improvement type of comments from teachers, talk to those teachers about what was expected and how she could have done better. Then, next time, have her show you her work before she hands it in.

Remember the teacher's expectations, and make sure those elements are in your child's work. Easier said than done? Here's how to help:

- Print it. Word processing programs can make the writing process quicker

and easier. But students shouldn't make the mistake of only printing out their papers when they are done. Reviewing text on-screen isn't as good as reading it on paper. Once your child has a draft, have her print and read it with a pencil in hand — preferably in another part of the house, away from the computer. She'll probably see things she wouldn't have otherwise.

- Read it aloud. Your child can either read out loud to you or, if he's shy about it, to himself in the privacy of his own room. Either way, have him read from a print-out so he can mark changes as he goes.
- Revise it. Remind your child that writing is a marathon, not a sprint. Scientists conduct many experiments before reaching a conclusion. Artists sketch before they paint. Writers are no different. They expect to go through several drafts before they finish a piece of writing.
- Look for help. There is a wealth of information online, including

grammar help, research resources and writing tips — all geared toward kids. For example, FactMonster.com is a comprehensive site offering facts, figures and homework help. Go to www.factmonster.com/homework/writingskills1 for advice on writing book reports, research papers and more. And check out the box below for other Web sites worth visiting.

- Get involved. Experts agree that the best way to become a better writer is to write. Practice may not make perfect, but it helps make the process less scary, so that kids won't freeze when they have to write a paper.

TURN OFF THE TV

Mary Leyman, who's been teaching Language Arts at Warner Middle School in Farmington Hills, Mich., for 14 years, says one of the best ways kids can improve their writing is by reading.

"They should spend less time on the computer and with video games and more time with a book," she says. Reading good books expands a student's vocabulary and shows him how much can be done with the written word. In addition to novels, encourage your child to read newspapers and magazines.

Much of what it takes to turn a mediocre writer into a magnificent one is pretty simple. The rewards will show in ways beyond the report card. Above all, Leyman says, talking with your children instead of to them will do wonders for their writing skills.

"Conversation is an excellent way to build good writing skills," she says. Children need more adults to spend more time giving them attention in a positive way. It makes a huge difference. 🍌

— Rebecca Kavanagh is a freelance writer from Farmington Hills, Mich.

Web Resources

www.glencoe.com/sites/michigan/student/languageart

Teaching Today is an online learning center presented by textbook company Glencoe Publishing (a McGraw Hill company). Click on the "Annotated Writing Models" in the Classroom Tools section to see examples of average, above average and below average writing, organized by grade level. This can give you an idea of how student writing is judged and how your own child's efforts compare. Also in the Classroom Tools section, check out the Letter to Parents and Writing Web Links.

www.nytimes.com/learning/index

New York Times Learning Network offers a wide range of student-focused information. To focus on the writing, click on Language Arts in the "Explore by Subject" box. You'll find the vocab-building feature "Word of the Day," which includes an example taken from the pages of *The New York Times*, as well as "Ask a Reporter," with archived questions from students and answers from some of the country's most respected journalists — a fascinating read especially for enthusiastic young authors.

www.factmonster.com

This is a great first stop when students are researching term papers. FactMonster.com's reference desk overflows with encyclopedias, a dictionary, timelines, almanacs and an atlas. The site's Homework Center offers a wealth of information on writing, among other subjects.

school.familyeducation.com/

If you're looking for activities and printables, click on Language Arts in the Skill Building section of the home page. You'll find a wide variety of options targeted especially to 7th and 8th graders.

www.epals.com

The ePALS Classroom Exchange web site connects students across the globe who are interested in writing to pen pals. Safeguards are in place to protect identity.

Everyday Writing

The best way to become a better writer is to practice. Here are a few places to start.

- Keep a journal. These can be found for around \$5 in bookstores and business supply shops. Buy a special pen. Encourage her to write each night before bed.
- Find a pen pal. Who doesn't love getting mail? Kids may be doing a lot of IMing and emailing to school friends, but they can discover the lost art of writing letters through a pen pal. Pen pals can take the form of a long-lost friend, a cousin in a distant city or someone found through

ePALS.com (see Web Resources at left). Grandparents, especially, would be delighted to receive handwritten notes, and can be counted on to respond in kind — perhaps even with a \$5 bill tucked in.

- Start a travel log. Have your child keep track of adventures during family vacations. When you return home, you can work together to combine the stories with snapshots to create a coffee table keepsake.
- Have them defend their case. Does your child want a later curfew or a boost in allowance? Make them write a proposal. This will help your child set up an objective, reinforce that objective with facts and logic, and state a desired resolution.

10 Steps to a Great Essay Test

Source: Glencoe Publishing's Teaching Today web site

1. Use your time well. A 20-minute test should give you ample time to plan, write and review your essay. Decide now that you will take the time to plan your writing. Give yourself two or three minutes at the end of the time to check what you have written.
2. Present a clear thesis statement. This will show you understand the assigned topic.
3. Avoid repeating the assignment.
4. Don't spend too much time on the introduction.
5. Create at least two statements that support your thesis.
6. Choose the evidence that best develops each support.
7. Keep to the topic. If your finished essay strays from the assigned topic, your score will drop.
8. Organize your ideas logically and connect them smoothly. Make the progression of your thoughts easy to follow. Allow each sentence to flow naturally from the one before it.
9. Give yourself time to stop. Rather than having to end abruptly, allow enough time to write a paragraph that wraps up your argument.
10. Leave your readers with something to think about. Use your conclusion to restate your thesis statement but don't repeat the words you used to introduce it. One way to make your conclusion memorable is to show readers that they have a personal stake in the topic. Review why you care about the topic, and why they should too.

A NEW WAY TO HELP KIDS TAKE RESPONSIBILITY



How do you keep kids pointed in the right direction during the middle school years? We asked dozens of parents and experts. A lot of the talk focused on discipline. Richard Schalter, father of three, talked about building on children's strengths.

Schalter is a first generation college graduate who now serves as president of manufacturer Spartan Chassis of Charlotte, Michigan. He told *EduGuide* publisher Bryan Taylor that he realized the same tool that helped his company make better choices could help his own kids do the same: branding.

Taylor: What does branding have to do with raising kids?

Schalter: Kids get really attached to brands like Nike or Coke or Disney. They know that these brands are more than just a product. Each has its own attitude and makes us feel a certain way.

As kids wrestle with who they are in the world, creating their own brand is a way for them to make positive choices rather than just letting life happen to them. They choose expectations for themselves, so they're more motivated to live up to them. And those expectations get reinforced by friends

and adults who come to see them as a certain kind of kid.

Taylor: How does it work?

Schalter: I ask each of our kids to answer the same three questions our company asks itself: Who am I? What do I do? Why does that matter?

Next I ask them to pick four words that describe their personalities. These words create the focus for who they are and what other people can expect from them. For example, what do people count on my ninth grade son Adam for when he's in band: a hard-worker, comedian or leader? What's their emotional response: respect, laughter, appreciation? What does Adam want their response to be?

I help them think through and write down their answers. I also give them time to sleep on their decisions and revisit them periodically.

Taylor: What do they do with this list?

Schalter: Bring their brand to life. First, I help them use it as a filter to make decisions about what fits into their brand and what doesn't. For instance, my fifth grader Kellen is creative so I talked with her about

where her creativity might show up, whether it's being imaginative, flexible, or by solving problems. And I try to help her develop her own agenda to build her brand. Does she want to take after-school art classes, try out for a community play or put together the family photo album?

As a parent, it's fun to nurture their plans with special Christmas gifts and other activities. My daughter Lindsay is a dancer, so taking her to a ballet was a chance to see those skills in real life.

Second, I use it to help them get in the habit of evaluating their own choices. I ask the kids questions like, 'How did you live out your brand today? Is your behavior consistent with who you've said you want to be? If you want to be a peacemaker like Jesus, is it enough to ignore gossip or do you need to confront it in some way?' I ask the questions and let them work through the answers themselves.

Taylor: How has personal branding changed your kids?

Schalter: They've changed their responses to different situations. It makes them more proactive and gives them ownership of their identity.

My son Adam made a difficult decision to be in the high school musical instead of playing lacrosse. He said, 'I see myself now as not just an athlete, but also as a singer.' Having a personal brand helps kids choose what is important to them and stick with it.

Taylor: How does this relate to school?

Schalter: I always point out to my kids that the classes they take and the grades they earn are just a way for them to create opportunities for themselves. The lower the grades, the fewer the doors that will be open to them and the harder they'll have to work later to get where they want to be.



Be your child's academic advisor

The courses your child takes in middle and high school are more important than ever.

Now that Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm has signed into law improved high school graduation requirements, parents should know there is no better time to prepare their children for high school than during middle school.

In fact, the new law, called the “Michigan Merit Curriculum” requires schools to work with middle school students to develop an Educational Development Plan (EDP) beginning in 7th grade. This plan will help guide their scheduling choices in middle and high school, as well as explore various career paths.

For students who want to get a jump start on high school, the new law allows middle school students taking required courses like Algebra I, Biology or others to earn high school graduation credit. Check with your school to find out more.

The new Michigan Merit Curriculum requires students entering 7th grade in the fall of 2007 to complete 16 specific credits for graduation, plus an online learning course or experience. In addition, students entering 3rd grade in 2006 or later will need two world language credits while in elementary, middle or high school or have an equivalent learning experience.

These requirements, for the first time in Michigan history, will provide students with a common set of graduation requirements and will provide educators with a common understanding of what students should know and be able to do for credit.

Prior to these new requirements, each school district had their own graduation requirements, but the number and type of credits varied widely throughout the state. The only state requirement was one semester of Civics.

The Michigan Merit Curriculum will:

- Increase students’ opportunity of getting scholarships, going to college and getting better jobs, pay and promotions.
- Provide students the flexibility to select additional electives like arts or career training while in high school.
- Allow students to earn high school credits before entering high school through courses; by testing-out of classes; through Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, Career and Technical Education programs, summer school, and other local elective options.

- Allow school districts to continue to set additional graduation requirements, make all staffing and scheduling decisions, award diplomas, etc.

Michigan’s new high school requirements mean your middle school child’s education and the courses he or she takes are more important than ever. As a parent, you play the most important role in guiding your middle school student’s courses, credits — and future.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Talk to your child’s teachers, counselor or principal about creating an Educational Development Plan.
- Have confidence that your child can achieve at high levels and encourage him or her to work hard and study.
- Seek immediate assistance from teachers if your child is struggling or falling behind.

Michigan Merit Curriculum High School Graduation Requirements (Effective Beginning with Students Entering 8 th Grade in 2006)	
MATHEMATICS - 4 Credits	
Algebra I	Geometry
Algebra II	One math or math-related course in final year of high school
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS - 4 Credits	
English Language Arts 9	English Language Arts 11
English Language Arts 10	English Language Arts 12
SCIENCE - 3 Credits	
Biology	One additional science credit
Physics or Chemistry	
SOCIAL STUDIES - 3 Credits	
.5 credit in Civics	.5 credit in Economics
U.S. History and Geography	World History and Geography
PHYSICAL EDUCATION & HEALTH - 1 Credit	
VISUAL, PERFORMING AND APPLIED ARTS - 1 Credit	
ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCE Course, Learning Experience or Integrated Learning Experience	
LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH - 2 Credits In grades 9-12; OR an equivalent learning experience in grades K-12 beginning with students entering 3 rd grade in 2006.	



How after-school programs can help middle schoolers

By Lorraine Thoreson and John Taylor

The transition from elementary to middle school can be frightening for parents and students. Adolescents between 10 and 15 want to be independent, but they still need nurturing and adult guidance. They also need to earn respect, establish a sense of belonging in a valued group, and build a sense of personal worth by developing their talents. At the same time, they're looking for things to do, places to go, people to talk to and a choice of academic and recreational activities.

A good after-school program can help accomplish all of these goals. But according to a 2003 survey *America After 3 PM*, conducted by the Afterschool Alliance, 14.3 million children care for themselves after school — including nearly 4 million middle school students. Only 6.5 million — 11 percent — of children in kindergarten through 12th grade are in after-school programs; in Michigan the figure is just 8 percent. Research shows that middle school students who participate regularly in after-school or other out-of-school programs get better grades and display positive emotional health. The following information can

help parents select appropriate, safe and high quality after-school programs for their middle school children.

WHY IS A QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM IMPORTANT FOR MY CHILD?

- Kids are likely to spend as many hours in after-school programs as in school.
- Quality programs help children grow socially, emotionally, and physically.
- Middle school students in after-school programs tend to do better in school and are less likely to engage in inappropriate behavior.
- Youth in quality after-school programs are less likely to smoke, drink alcohol, and use drugs.
- Parents will be more productive at work when they know their children are safe after school, during school vacations and in the summer.

Parents can guide and support their children by providing them with access to after-school activities that challenge and support their interests. After-school programs exist in a variety of settings throughout most

communities. Schools may sponsor programs such as learning centers, clubs, enrichment classes, and athletic or academic teams. Community and faith-based organizations may offer many comprehensive or single-purpose programs. These opportunities may be available during out-of-school time or on weekends, holidays and school breaks.

HOW DO I SELECT A QUALITY PROGRAM FOR MY CHILD?

- Consider programs that will fit your child and meet the needs of your family. Are they open when you need them? Are they located nearby? Do they offer gymnastics for Susie, who has been taking lessons for years, or just chess, which she hates?
- Ask friends, family members, and school employees for recommendations.
- Look for local programs that are dedicated to continuous improvement and are accredited by the National Afterschool Association or other reputable organizations.
- After you have a few possible programs on your list, make appointments to visit the programs and to interview the staff.

- Resources in your community for quality after-school programs may include:

1. Your neighborhood school
2. Community education programs
3. YMCA or YWCA
4. Boys and Girls Clubs
5. Faith-based centers
6. City parks and recreation departments
7. Community centers
8. Cooperative extension programs
9. Local United Way agencies
10. The Salvation Army

Contact the Michigan 4C Association, a statewide resource and referral agency, at (800) 950-4171, or the Michigan Department of Education, 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, at (517) 373-8483. They can provide help to guide your search for quality programs.

Lorraine Thoreson and John Taylor are consultants for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Michigan Department of Education.

IS THIS THE BEST AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM FOR MY CHILD?

How do you figure out if an after-school program meets your child's needs? Here's a three step process.

1. Plan. Decide the top three things you want your child to get out of the program: Just a safe place to hang out? Thirty minutes of aerobic exercise? Or an academic challenge? Ask your child's teachers what skills he needs help with.
2. Search. Check with the agencies listed at the top of this page. Then ask people you know about programs they have used and why they like or dislike them.
3. Read program websites. Always visit programs before enrolling. And use this checklist to measure how reliable, effective and safe programs are.

RELIABILITY: CAN I TRUST THIS PROGRAM?

Good programs have clear goals and welcome parent participation; are licensed or accredited; and model positive values such as service, compassion and cooperation.

ASK PROGRAM DIRECTORS:

- Is your program licensed or accredited?
- What is your mission and philosophy?
- What are the top three things you expect children to gain from this program?
- Can I have a contact list of people who have brought their children here? (Avoid getting a few hand-picked references of people who love the program.)
- Can I get a copy of your policies, schedules and fees?
- How are families involved here?
- What kinds of financial aid do you provide?
- About what percentage of children stay with the program?
- What is your discipline policy?

EFFECTIVENESS: HOW EXACTLY WILL THIS PROGRAM HELP MY CHILD?

The best programs have caring, well-trained teachers and children who are happy to be there. Activities should have specific goals and outcomes based on sound research.

ASK PROGRAM DIRECTORS:

- What training do you require or offer staff?
- How do you measure results of your program?
- What happens in a typical program period?
- Can children get help with homework?

ASK CHILDREN:

- What do you like about coming here? What don't you like?
- Do you want to come back next year?
- How often do you help plan or choose activities?
- How safe do you feel?
- How many friends do you have here?

ASK STAFF WORKING DIRECTLY WITH YOUTH:

- How long have you worked here?
- How do you keep track of youth?
- How have you handled emergencies?
- How do you deal with sick children?
- Can you tell me about a recent fight or argument you dealt with? How often does that happen?

SAFETY: CAN I REST ASSURED MY CHILD IS SAFE?

Good programs should be clean, orderly, cheerful and proactively address safety and bullying issues.

ASK PROGRAM DIRECTORS:

- What specific steps have you taken to deal with bullies recently?
- How many employees are trained in CPR and first aid?
- Do you run background criminal checks on staff?
- Are dangerous cleaning chemicals, art materials or cooking utensils out of sight and reach?
- Is the playground fenced in and does it have cushioning material beneath swings, slides and monkey bars?

DURING YOUR OBSERVATIONS, DETERMINE:

- Are the building, bathrooms and food preparation areas clean and organized?
- Is there a place for quiet time and study?
- How large and attractive are activity areas?
- Are play structures and toys in good condition?

Information from KidSource.Com and the National Afterschool Alliance (www.naaweb.org) contributed to this report.

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Middle school students and the MEAP

Your middle school student is going through a lot right now. During their middle school years, children are growing physically, psychologically, mentally and socially. Sometimes, those changes can be challenging. The middle school years are an especially important time to make sure your child is keeping up with increasingly demanding school work. In order to track that, the state of Michigan administers an annual statewide test called the Michigan Educational Assessment Plan (MEAP).

All 6th through 8th grade students are tested in reading, writing and math. Sixth graders are also tested in social studies, and all 8th graders are tested in science.

WHY IS THE MEAP GIVEN?

The MEAP test is given to all Michigan students. It provides a way to measure in the same way, at the same time, how all Michigan students are doing on the same skills and knowledge. The test provides valuable information to parents on their student's academic progress. It also allows teachers and schools to determine whether improvement programs and policies are having the desired effect and to target academic help where it is needed.

In fall 2007, the MEAP will release a more detailed parent report for the first time. It will allow parents to compare two years of their child's progress in English language arts and in math.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

MEAP is just one snapshot among many that can reveal a student's overall ability and progress. It is also important to consider other assessment tests, progress reports, report cards, class work, class participation, homework habits and teacher comments.

WHAT THE MEAP TEST IS BASED ON

Michigan's MEAP tests are based on state standards and Grade Level Content Expectations that outline what a student should know and be able to do by subject, at the end of each grade. You can find the expectations by visiting www.mi.gov/glee.

UNDERSTANDING MEAP SCORES

A basic understanding of your child's MEAP scores is not difficult. All MEAP tests have four performance levels:

- Level 1 indicates a student has "Exceeded Michigan Standards."
- Level 2 indicates that a student has "Met Michigan Standards."
- Level 3 indicates that a student has demonstrated "Basic" knowledge and skills.
- Level 4 indicates that a student showed minimal success in meeting Michigan Standards.

HOW CAN I PREPARE MY CHILD FOR THE MEAP?

Remember, the MEAP is based on the grade level content that a student learns every day in the classroom. Helping children do well in school also helps prepare them for the MEAP. The best way to help is to make sure children get to school ready to learn. This includes:

- Getting your child to school on time each day.
- Providing a place and time at home for your child to read and do homework.
- Making sure your child gets enough sleep and a nutritious breakfast.

If your child performs at Level 3 or Level 4, don't panic! Instead, you can:

- Check for areas of strength and weakness on the MEAP report for parents. Compare the results to other

assessments of your child's learning. Remember, your student's scores represent a snapshot of his or her performance on a given day.

- Discuss the MEAP results with your student's teacher and other school professionals who know your student personally. Teachers can use MEAP results with other assessment and classroom performance information to provide a more complete plan for your student's learning.
- Perhaps most importantly, because middle school is the last stop before high school, parents need to try especially hard to regularly attend parent-teacher conferences. This face-to-face communication is the best tool of all for understanding your child's strengths, weaknesses and needs — and how you as a parent can best help.

WHAT IF MY CHILD HAS SPECIAL NEEDS?

While a majority of students with disabilities take the MEAP, it is not appropriate for some students. For that reason, the state developed MI-Access, the state's alternate assessment program.

There are three MI-Access assessments in which students with disabilities can take part in: Participation; Supported Independence; and Functional Independence. Which of the three assessments a student takes is determined by that student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), based upon their cognitive functioning level, curriculum, and instruction. For more information on MI-Access, please visit the Michigan Department of Education's web site at www.michigan.gov/mi-access. Click on "State Assessment Results for Students with Disabilities."

Additional information on the MEAP may be found at www.michigan.gov/meap. Click on MEAP Test Results. You also can call the MEAP help line at 1-877-560-TEST or email MEAP@michigan.gov.

Students can master this subject

David Coupland stood at the board in front of his math students at Kensington Woods High School in Howell, Michigan. He was explaining the concept of “solving an inequality.” On the board, he had written an algebraic equation: $50 = 23 + 5.2x$.

“We’re going to look for a value of ‘x,’” he told his students, most of whom looked at least a little confused. Coupland, who teaches math and science, is used to this kind of uncertainty. But he had a point. He had already told his students this day that he had a copy of the math placement test given by Eastern Michigan University to entering freshmen.

“Every student has to have a 17 on the ACT or pass this placement exam,” he told his students. “If you don’t pass, you go into remedial classes, then into your required (for credit) math classes.”

Oh, by the way, he added, when taking this placement test, “you’re not allowed to use a calculator.” The class groaned.

The equation Coupland had written on the board was taken from that placement test. He methodically showed

the students how to solve the equation, explaining problem-solving techniques, some as simple as elementary school-taught “guess and check,” that they could use as they progressed through subsequent equations and problems. They needed to learn these techniques, he told them, because “things get hairy in a big hurry in math.”

Coupland was helping students realize the challenges of algebra, but he also was showing them that anyone can learn algebra if they take it one step at a time — and if they work hard.

“Algebra involves symbolic reasoning,” which involves understanding how symbols such as “x” can represent something else, he explained later. But in 8th and 9th grade, when most students first encounter algebra-level math, “kids are on the cusp of moving from concrete to more abstract reasoning. We’re really challenging them. There can be a complete disconnect. But they have to make that transition sometime.”

Sure, he added, algebra seems hard, but mainly, students have to “accept the idea that it can take effort to learn. The big thing is you have to do math to learn math. It takes a lot of problems. They have to work hard and think hard. The biggest challenge students have is they don’t keep up with the work.”

Coupland and his students represent a common scene: A dedicated teacher and a lot of students intimidated by algebra, a subject that strikes fear in most students — and most adults, for that matter. But the group also represents a new era in high school math in Michigan. The state’s new high school graduation requirements, which take effect with the class of 2011, require four years of math, including Algebra I and II.

The idea of struggling through two years of algebra — no matter what your career path is — has plenty of students

A photograph of a classroom scene. A female teacher with dark hair, wearing a light green cardigan, is sitting on a desk at the front of the room, smiling warmly. In the foreground, several students' hands are raised, some holding small objects like marbles or beads. The background shows a chalkboard and classroom desks.

Gearing up for algebra

and their parents sweating. But it doesn't have to be that way.

"Algebra is not harder than anything else you have to learn in life," says Anna Raleigh, director of education for Sylvan Learning Center in Brighton, a tutoring service which has seen "an influx" of high school students who are struggling in algebra, Raleigh says.

Raleigh says certain myths contribute to algebra-phobia.

The first math myth is that people are either good or bad in math, and there isn't much they can do about that. "People don't believe that about reading," she says.

Another myth is that algebra doesn't apply to real life. Students echo the common refrain, "I'll never use algebra." But, Raleigh says, it applies beyond math and science careers. It is used in technical fields, statistics and graphs used in careers such as psychology, and more and more 21st

century careers. As they searched for "x," Coupland told his students that algebra is used in fields such as predicting weather, or in computer-centered fields.

The final myth Raleigh identifies is the common student belief that "once I don't get it, I'm bad at it." It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We're more willing to accept this thinking (in algebra) than we are in other areas such as eating or driving."

Raleigh, like Coupland, believes that most students can learn math, including algebra, if they can get over their fear. "I think it just looks scary to students. But it's a very, very psychological thing. There's no mystery to it: It's having a good foundation and not being afraid.

"Most students can learn algebra — and all the rest" of math, including subjects such as calculus, Raleigh insists. "I say to all students: 'I don't care if you don't love algebra when you're done'" with tutoring classes. "But you won't fear it."

Some things to keep in mind: Math topics build on one another, so students who don't learn their math facts in grade school will have trouble later on. But, Raleigh emphasizes, it's never too late to fill in those gaps of learning.

Middle school is an especially important time to make sure students have that foundation and take steps to reinforce gaps in learning. Common problem areas are fractions, decimals, integers and what most people know as "story problems." In the latter, a reading problem that may have gone unnoticed may surface. "We watch for that," Raleigh says.

Coupland recommends students develop good study skills and "the homework habit. I give daily assignments." Practice makes perfect — or at least passing grades. 📚

You know your child is struggling in math if...

- He makes negative comments, but usually won't actually say "Math is hard." More likely it will be, "I hate math," or "Math is stupid," or "I hate my teacher."
- His grades start nose-diving.
- He puts up a fight when it comes time to do math homework.
- He spends a lot more time on a math assignment than seems reasonable.

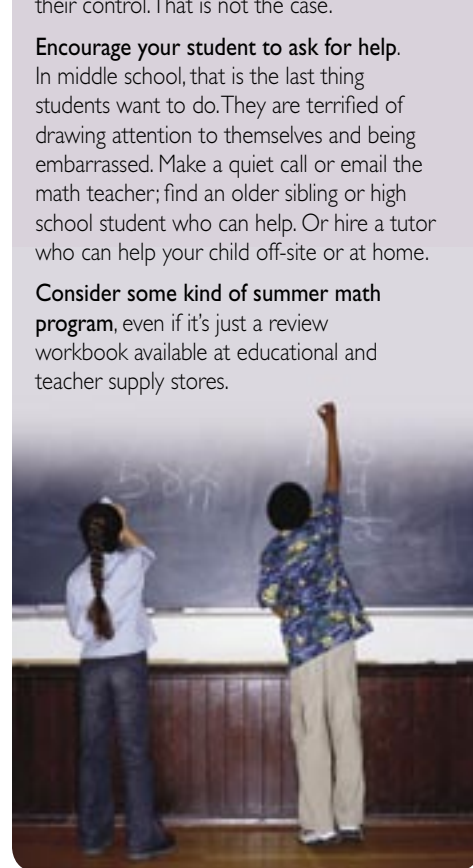
How to help your child succeed in math

Make sure your child has a good math foundation. Does he know his multiplication tables? Fractions? Division? Addition? Subtraction? You can find booklets or tests you can give your student at home if you aren't sure, and then help your student learn these basic math facts with workbooks, on websites or with tutoring.

Reinforce how important math and algebra are in life. Role model how you use math in your life at home or on your job. Point out other careers that utilize math know-how. Try not to say comments such as, "I hate algebra," or "I was never good at math, either." This encourages students to think math ability — or inability — is somehow beyond their control. That is not the case.

Encourage your student to ask for help. In middle school, that is the last thing students want to do. They are terrified of drawing attention to themselves and being embarrassed. Make a quiet call or email the math teacher; find an older sibling or high school student who can help. Or hire a tutor who can help your child off-site or at home.

Consider some kind of summer math program, even if it's just a review workbook available at educational and teacher supply stores.



HELP YOUR CHILD AVOID TROUBLE

By Jaime Millard

Kids get hurt in lots of ways during the middle years. But sometimes knowing the odds can help you be better prepared for, or even prevent, the worst. Here are some of the biggest risks based on the hard numbers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other sources. The good news: School fights and weapons have declined more than 25 percent in the last decade.

Want to improve your odds of protecting your child? Circle your biggest risk and take action.

Jaime Millard is former Program Coordinator for Partnership for Learning.

SEX



Odds: 1-in-10 kids have had sex by age 13. Kids constantly hear about sex through television, music, and video games, but they rarely hear about the bad parts: pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and emotional problems.

Antidote: *The biggest factors in stopping teen sex are you and the clock. When you can't be with your child, make sure he is with another adult. Get your son involved with a program during the after school hours, which is when kids are most likely to have sex. Have your daughter volunteer to teach elementary students.*

DRUGS



Odds: By age 13, **1-in-4** kids have had more than a few sips of alcohol and **1-in-5** have smoked tobacco. Studies have shown that use of drugs at this age greatly increases the possibility of other risky behavior and later substance abuse. Not concerned yet? Consider that 1-in-10 students have already tried marijuana before entering high school.

Antidote: *While your child deserves some privacy, if you suspect drug use, be a snoop; you may be the "bad guy" for a while, but it will pay off in the end. If you see someone abusing drugs in the media, ask your child why he thinks they're doing it. Not getting through? See if your local police department or hospital has an educational program for kids. Sometimes shock is the only way to scare a child straight.*

DEPRESSION



Odds: By ninth grade, **1-in-4** students have suffered from prolonged depression—feeling sad or helpless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row. How do you know when your child crosses the line from being in a funk to being seriously depressed? Well, that's a tough one.

Antidote: *Watch for signs. Typically the first is a lack of interest in activities she used to enjoy. Other warning signs include a change in sleep patterns, irritability, loss of appetite, significant weight gain or loss, and risky behavior like sex and drug abuse. Ask teachers if they've noticed anything different or if her work habits have changed. Still unsure? Enlist the help of a school counselor or a mental health professional.*

BOREDOM



Odds: 1-in-3 kids report that they're bored in school. So what? Well, bored kids are more likely to get into other kinds of trouble and to act out in the classroom. Some kids get bored because they're struggling with certain subjects or tasks, such as writing, and find it too painful to do the work. Other students drop out mentally because they don't feel challenged by their course work. Both types may drop out for real when they hit high school if they don't get help.

Antidote: *Talk to your kids about what being bored really means. For a struggling student, look for tutors and work with teachers and counselors to find out exactly where the struggle is; for instance, some kids have lots of great ideas but fall apart when it comes to putting those ideas on paper. For a gifted student, ask the school about changing courses and finding more challenges both during and after school.*

CHEATING



Odds: 1-in-2 kids say they have cheated on schoolwork in one form or another. If your child hasn't, one of his friends probably has. It's not surprising, given our culture of winning by any means in sports, politics and business. But cheating not only means he'll learn less now; it could lead to other forms of lying and stealing that will burn him later.

Antidote: *Lead by example; show your child how doing your own work is satisfying to you. Coach him on his homework, but keep the ball in his court. Reward him when he does well on a test or learns something new, even if he doesn't score a perfect "A." You can also point out examples in the news about what happens to cheaters who get caught.*