

Eric Neal:

Welcome to the State Support Team 11 podcast, I'm your host Eric Neal. Today we are joined by Hadley Bachman. Hadley is the program manager of community development at the Statewide Family Engagement Center at the Ohio State University. Welcome Hadley. How are you?

Hadley Bachman:

I'm happy to be here. Thank you for having me.

Eric Neal:

Oh, absolutely. Thanks for coming on. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and the work you do at the Statewide Family Engagement Center?

Hadley Bachman:

Sure. So as you said, I'm the program manager of community development and really what that means is that I help lead our professional learning opportunities that we have, and I also do a lot of work sharing research and guidance through our various publications that we put out. And I'm also part of the middle ground research team, and that's where we study family engagement in middle school. Before joining the team at OSU, I was a middle school educator for over a decade. And then in my free time, I'm also a PhD student and I'm married with a middle school aged daughter of my own.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, we have a lot of things in common. I also was a middle school educator and I also have a middle school student at home. Being the parent of a middle school student myself, I am keenly aware of how challenging of a time it can be. What are some of the things that students and families face as they move on from elementary school?

Hadley Bachman:

Yeah. Well, right off the bat, I think about how the context of school itself is just really different. So in middle school you have more teachers, you're changing classes. There's not the single point person for the concerns of either the kids or the parents. Also, both kids and their parents and caregivers have to keep track of lots of different expectations, the assignments and materials. And then on the teachers' side, they also have more students in a day. So they don't know each child and their family as well as an elementary teacher would, who maybe would only have 25 or so in a classroom. So this makes it harder for parents and caregivers to fully understand the school world that middle school kids are experiencing because there's just more for everyone to keep track of.

Hadley Bachman:

And then also middle school kids themselves are different in some critical ways. So they're getting older, they want more independence. While they may be used to mom looking over their shoulder while they did their homework, now they want to be more in charge of themselves. So they may not share as much with their parents and caregivers about school, or they may share a lot, but they may not want parents and caregivers to try to take over and solve things when there are challenges. So they want a chance to kind of try things out on their own. And this makes it harder sometimes for parents and caregivers to know quite how to help. To support their middle schoolers in a way that builds them up and helps them grow into these independent young adults that they're becoming.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, I've had some of these experiences that you're talking about. My son is in seventh grade, accelerated math, and he needs some extra support. He has ADHD and his teacher is doing a great job of working with me, but still putting the responsibility onto him. And I've had to learn kind of how to support and encourage, but also back off and let him figure some of the things out for himself. And it is a big change from that elementary school mentality where I want to hold his hand and help him get all the stuff done.

Hadley Bachman:

Yeah. I think it's challenging for parents because they want to do the best for their kids, but what worked in the past when their children were younger, doesn't work as well as their kid wants more independence. And so you're left with almost like a hopeless or helpless feeling. What can I do here? How can I make the situation better? Particularly if you encounter challenges, whether those are academic or social challenges, parents are often left thinking like, what do I have to do? And that can be a source of conflict between families and the school. And some of the work we're doing at OSU, we're just really trying to figure out how we can minimize that kind of conflict or confusion and maximize the support that comes from parents and schools working well together.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. Another thing is, like you said, there's so much variability. It feels like there are kind of a lot more standard ways that you can support in elementary school and say, we're just going to holistically do this, and it's going to meet the needs of a lot of people. It's almost like even within a school building, a large middle school building, you may have lots of different strategies that you may have to think about even just in one school, let alone across all the different types of schools you can find in a district.

Hadley Bachman:

Yeah, absolutely. And for families that are large families, they have multiple kids, it's really hard for them to keep track of all of those different expectations and different methods of communication. And if their kids are in sports or in music or something extracurricular, there's all of that to keep track of too. So it can be really overwhelming for parents.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. I think that's why it's great to have places where you can reach out. And you guys are specializing over there, you are in middle school. And I think a lot of times it's really an underserved area as well. People put a lot of stuff into elementary school and then it's almost like you've got this weird middle ground and then you jump into high school. There's lots of other supports and things like that focused on graduation and career training and all of that. What got you into thinking about focusing on middle school?

Hadley Bachman:

I think that actually started before I joined the team at OSU, but I believe we had feedback from parents on our advisory council and also our partners around the state just mentioning that this was an area where they wanted someone to kind of step into this and really kind of figure it out. We have a faculty partner, Dr. Eric Anderman, his specialty is really around motivation and adolescence. And so he's been a really big part of helping to shape this work.

Hadley Bachman:

And then I just have this passion for middle school as a professional, but then also it was very timely to have my own daughter transitioning into middle school just as we were doing our research work and looking into what prior studies had said about this. So I think for all of us on the team, the middle ground team, we all just really have a passion for middle schoolers. They think that they're cool people and want to help their teachers and their families work well together.

Eric Neal:

That's great. So how have things changed for middle school educators? It's been quite a few years since I've been in the classroom and it seems like things are changing exponentially every single year with social media and technology and all sorts of things. What do you think are some of the big changes in the past maybe 10 years or something like that?

Hadley Bachman:

Yeah, sure. Well, I think one fun fact here is that actually the concept of middle schools is not really that old. The country's first junior high school opened in Columbus, Ohio in 1909. And not many people know that. So this middle school movement is actually really quite young. But looking more recently in the last 10 years or within my career in middle school, as you mentioned, social media and internet, that's a huge change from when you and I were in middle school. There's this open portal [inaudible 00:07:59] endless information and also potential concerns. It's a distraction from some of the other things that we want our kids to be doing. And so this has made the job of both parents and caregivers and teachers more challenging in many ways.

Hadley Bachman:

So young people want to be independent and they want to make these social connections and they want to explore the world. So it's like, how do we allow them that space while also giving them some parameters and some direction? So that's one of the things that I think has made middle school more challenging.

Hadley Bachman:

Also for teachers, the standards and expectations for teaching and learning, those have just become much more rigorous and more visible. So the results of your classroom, they're out there and people see it, and they can look up your data and things like that. So as a result, I think that that's mean a lot more pressure on teachers to pack in a lot of learning into a short time. Sometimes that comes with a price. There's less time to spend transitioning their students and their families into this new stage, getting to know each and everyone, because sometimes that can lead to this just frantic nature of trying to cover all the content.

Hadley Bachman:

And then, the COVID-19 pandemic in some ways has given both parents and educators a better sense of and respect for what each of them does, but it's also worn us all out, right? It's worn out teachers and parents and just about everybody else. And so I think that that's highlighted how important it is that we are gentle and kind with each other, that we assume best intentions in each other's work and in each of our contributions. We respect those, so that teachers and parents can keep working together as partners to support middle school kids.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. I've noticed those conversations for me have been so challenging because as the adult, you know the pitfalls and you know the warning signs and the things that you need to look out for. But, like you said, as a middle school student, someone who's finding their place in the world, you want to learn and know everything, but you don't know what's out there. So you think, I can handle it, but you don't know what you might run across, and that does make it challenging. The first instinct is, I just want to turn it all off. Like you just can't have social media. But then you put yourself in that person who's trying to build relationships and fit in and do this, and it's like, oh, I'm sorry. I'm an elementary school student, I can't have social media. Have you noticed some of those challenges in your own child?

Hadley Bachman:

Yeah. Oh, absolutely. My daughter started walking herself home from the bus stop a couple of years ago, and so we got her her very first phone because I wanted her to be able to reach us if she needed us. And we realized we were just opening up this Pandora's box. We've been able to protect what she's exposed to and all of a sudden there's this thing she has that opens the world to everything. So I think there parents can really benefit from hearing how teachers, because teachers have been setting rules in their middle school classrooms for a really long time, and really great middle school educators know that building rules together with students and setting kind of our norms and consequences for breaking those that that works better than just saying, "Here's the rule, you're in trouble," because then the kids get a sense of ownership of it.

Hadley Bachman:

And so I try to apply that same standard with my daughter with this phone and how can we set some rules together? And we've had to keep talking about and negotiating those. I think schools can really help families see those options, especially if it's a family's first middle school student, middle school age child. We're still learning how to parent as we parent, right? And so the school has seen a lot of kids in this stage and when they can share with parents, here's some ways that you can set boundaries without getting as much pushback. Or even, here's a new trend or app we see coming up with kids that you might not know about yet. The teachers and counselors are just exposed to so many more kids than could possibly live in one home. You just see more variety of different things.

Hadley Bachman:

And so having been a principal before, I knew some things that I wanted to make sure to shield my daughter from or some protections I wanted to build into place and things maybe she wouldn't have known about. But if the schools can share that with all families, I think that equips parents to really do their job well. And then I think they can also keep the school informed about when bullying happens or when there's text message threads. That's enormously helpful for the school to know about when some of those are going to disrupt the learning time at the school. So it's really this two-way conversation to make us both each be better at our jobs of supporting kids to their best potential.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. I think it's been a challenge for everyone because almost the way that if you're the first time middle school parent, schools had to figure some of this stuff out on the fly as well. Social media beefs, some things that would carry over into school when they didn't even really know what was going on at the time. So yeah, I think it's been a big learning curve for everybody. So what are some of the things that schools can do to engage the families of middle school students specifically?

Hadley Bachman:

Yeah. I mean, when I hear that word, engage family, that idea of family engagement, I think before I really started digging into this research about middle school family engagement, I really thought about family engagement as events at the school. You know, how could we get more families to attend events at the school? But I think that we need to step back and really define first what it means to engage families. And so school-based engagement is for sure like one realm, and it's a very important part of it. It helps parents picture the school and things like that.

Hadley Bachman:

But for the middle school age in particular, there's other even more valuable family engagement practices, because when you think about it, kids want that independence. They don't want their parents showing up at the school all the time. That can't be the go-to family engagement strategy for middle school kids. And so the school knowing about, and families also knowing about these other ways that families can be engaged.

Hadley Bachman:

For example, one of them which I didn't really realize was so impactful before I heard this, is this idea of home-based involvement. Home-based engagement. So helping with all the things parents do to help with homework strategies, with organization. Do you have your lunchbox? Did you bring home your coat? Talking with kids about what they're learning and experiencing at school. So all that really helps set the kid up to look good when they get to school because they're prepared, they're organized. They haven't lost something. They're not feeling stressed. And so that's a really important part of that partnership where families can set the kids up to be ready. These adults that are working together for them.

Hadley Bachman:

So then another one is something that, this is like a very academic term, but researchers call it academic socialization. So really all that that means is talking about the value and usefulness of school. Linking school learning to the real world, to future goals, helping to build hopes and dreams for future education and career. So that all sounds nice, but it's hard to do when you don't know what the kid is learning at school or how it does connect to the real world or future goals.

Hadley Bachman:

So research in family engagement has demonstrated that this home-based and academically supportive family engagement is really the most impactful for middle schoolers. It occurs in their private space in their lives and it sets them up to be successful independently in the public spaces that they go into. So schools can support those types of family engagement by helping to share to families that they see their efforts at home and that those are valuable. Families just feeling that gratitude is important.

Hadley Bachman:

And then another thing that I would suggest is that families, and I talked about this a little earlier, but families just helping, I mean, schools helping families understand the middle school context. So going beyond just one back to school night. So this means communicating early and often about all those things families need to know about the structures, the norms, the routines. Those should come from school level and a classroom level. There should be a point person in the school, so they don't have that

classroom teacher anymore, but homeroom teacher or the counselor that's assigned to them. But who can the middle schooler go to during the day for help if they need someone who's on their side? Who can the parent reach out to if they have questions or if they want to give some feedback? And then as much as possible just streamlining communications and keeping families in the loop about what's being learned in school.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. It sounds like it's more about helping families to engage in their middle school experience more than it is maybe showing up and being at the middle school. Like no more class moms, no more baking cookies for everybody, all that stuff. Yeah, helping them to get the most out of their middle school experience.

Hadley Bachman:

Right. Absolutely. It's like, and we talk at our center a lot about this, student success is like a space launch. And so if we really want the kid to be launching into their best future, we are all working together in our separate roles to make that happen, but we're not the stars of the show. The star of the show is the kid. And so it's about kind of taking ourselves a little bit out of the picture, but ensuring that we're doing things that really set up that kid for success.

Hadley Bachman:

So let's say in math class, if I'm a math teacher, if I'm teaching students how to best study for tests, for example, and we're doing that in the classroom, well, a simple way to support family engagement with that is to then also send home those tips to parents and caregivers. Either a short video clip or a quick message on something like Remind. That way, parents and caregivers know that they should be seeing that at home and they can support and prompt their kids to actually use those strategies. Otherwise, the kids just leave and then they forget or the parent tells them to study in a different way and now we have two different competing messages. So just helping families understand what they can do to help.

Hadley Bachman:

My daughter's math teacher last year, it was during the time when they were virtual, and she had explained to the kids how they could get help when they were confused about something, but she hadn't explained that to me yet. And so when I heard my daughter was confused, I was like, "Why can't you ask her?" I immediately jumped to thinking-

Eric Neal:

Defense.

Hadley Bachman:

Right. Defense. And I want her to do well. And so when your kid is struggling, it feels very personal. But then I talked with the teacher, I just sent an email and found out she actually had this whole system for kids to ask for help. So instead of my daughter getting to this panic point and then coming to see me, and then I'm like, "Uh-uh (negative), I don't know how to help you with this math." Now I knew like, "Well, did you send her a private chat? Did you ask to go to the breakout room with her?" There was this whole process and so knowing that helped me just really support her a lot better.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. A big shout out to my son's seventh grade math teacher, Ms. Alonzo at Jackson Middle School in South-Western City Schools. She has this email she sends out every week to all the parents, that has it broken down by day everything they work on in class, what the homework assignments are. You can click on examples and all of these things so that I'm able to, if he needs something, jump in and support that. Or if he says, "Hey, I don't have anything today," I'm able to quickly go and look without having to reach out to her and say, "Hey, did you guys assign homework?" It's all in one place. If quizzes are coming up, "Hey, make sure everyone's studying." And it's been really, really helpful to me to help be involved at a reasonable level, because like you said, I have all that information.

Hadley Bachman:

Yeah. Yeah. Similarly, a shout out to my daughter's school. She goes to the Metro School in Columbus. And one of the things I love that they do, and it seems so simple as a parent, but I know how much work goes into doing it, they send home a weekly grade report just automatically through their grade system. But these teachers grade things and have their grades in there and comments and feedback and also comments about when their office hours are and they can get extra help. And that comes home every single week and it's never delayed. So it's never like she turned something in a week ago and it's not graded yet. It's all right there. And so a big shout out to the schools that are doing a great job with this. And we have so many ways of connecting with each other now through all the different kinds of media platforms, that I think that makes it a little bit easier for schools.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. So what are some things that parents that we can do to support our middle schoolers while giving them the space to be self-sufficient? Because I think, like you said, we want the best for our kids and it's a challenge to step back sometimes.

Hadley Bachman:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. I mean, it really is a balance. So I like to think about parenting efforts, parenting a middle schooler, it's like an iceberg. This is a metaphor a lot of people use about a lot of different things, but so much of your support and cheerleading and reminding is happening at home and it's kind of beneath the surface. It's unseen by the school. But what that's doing is bolstering those visible results of your kid growing into this independent young adult. So even in my own parenting, I need to remind myself of this regularly.

Hadley Bachman:

So recently my daughter struggled on a quiz in her PE class. So it's tempting to get involved, right? To contact the teacher about that grade or heavily impose my way of studying on her. So instead you have to remember that it's about scaffolding the middle schooler to be able to do those things themselves. So I might ask her questions like, have you contacted your teacher about when you could retake this quiz? Or what did you do to study the first time? What didn't work? What could you change to make it more effective? And sometimes it's we've set up such a busy family schedule that she doesn't have time to study. So just that two-way conversation with her, how can we make sure that you have time to do this?

Hadley Bachman:

So that's really, it's like giving the tools and the thinking help. It's like having that buddy talk something through with you, but still pushing towards those high expectations and having standards, parenting standards. The other part of it is that I think middle schoolers, when people think of middle schoolers they think of that eye rolled, the earbuds in, wanting to be independent.

Hadley Bachman:

But another thing to remember about them as they're growing into these independent young adults is that they do really want their parents and caregivers to be involved and help set those structures and limits. So they want you to be a little nosy about their lives. And research bears that out. It shows that caregivers who are more aware of their kids' schedule, know what their kids are worried about, their ideas, their daily life, the less likely their child is to then engage in potentially risky behaviors. So this looks like just asking about their day, which you'll almost always get fine or great or whatever. Keeping a close eye on social media usage. I try to remember my daughter's friends' names and the names of kids that are the challenges for her currently and to just ask about them regularly.

Hadley Bachman:

So I try not to just stop at, how was your day? But I kind of go through a list questions and I see what sticks. They can be random like, how's your science teacher? How is lunch going? It's incredible what kind of information that opens up because one of those questions will remind her about something that happened during the day. And then suddenly I'm hearing more about what she's really thinking about.

Hadley Bachman:

And then also picking the setting for those kinds of conversations really careful. So for us, it's on the way to or from sports practices when we're really connecting. If I'm grilling her over dinner when she first walks in the door, those aren't as successful times. So we just had to test out these different check-in times to kind of figure out where she's going to open up more and now I know. Like she comes in and seems kind of upset or moody, I know I can save that for the car ride and I'll see if I can get to the bottom of this then. But they do want involvement. It's like they want freedom, but they want to know that it's safe freedom, if that makes sense.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, no, definitely. Yeah. I think this really is something that schools could think about instead of just the traditional parent-teacher conference night or back to school night or things like that. Especially for those incoming middle schoolers, maybe a parent bootcamp or something. And it can be virtual. There's lots of ways we've learned to not have to drag people away from work to be able to do this stuff. I'm thinking of something like that to be able to help because just knowing those things... I was listening to what you were saying and I'm already thinking to myself, oh, you know what? Maybe ask in a different way or at a different time, all those kind of things. Those are really, really helpful tips and they're not hard. It doesn't take a lot to do that. You just have to think about it.

Hadley Bachman:

Yeah. Yeah. I think it's really about remembering that the kid is becoming their own person. So when you do have those events, like the parent-teacher conferences, the more that there can be student-parent-teacher conferences where the students really are getting a chance to show off what they've done and what their challenges were. I think the more that we see the student as this active participant in this relationship, I think also that helps family engagement in middle school go a little better.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. Well, if people would like to find out more about you and the work that you do, where should they go?

Hadley Bachman:

Well, first our website. So that's ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu, and we have tons of free resources there for both educators and families. Our middle school family engagement project is called middle ground, and so you find that in the dropdown menu for schools or you can search for it in the search bar. And then on the middle ground page we have a short research brief that's easy for busy professionals to read and that has more tips for engaging families in middle school.

Hadley Bachman:

And then also some things that middle schools can share with parents and caregivers, we have an infographic about here's how you can support your middle schooler as they transition into middle school and then a whole social media campaign bundle that schools can use. Then all of those resources that we created for families are translated into the different languages most commonly spoken in Ohio, so that those are just ready for schools to roll out.

Hadley Bachman:

You could also follow us on Twitter, @OhioEngage. And my Twitter is @HadleyBachman, and you can learn more about our work there, including useful resources and upcoming professional learning opportunities.

Eric Neal:

Hadley, I want to thank you again for joining us. It's been real helpful and it's been a pleasure.

Hadley Bachman:

I've really enjoyed being here. Thanks for the conversation.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. Well, that wraps up this episode of the State Support Team 11 podcast. If you'd like to know more about us and the work that we do here at SST 11, go to our website, it's sst11.org. Give us a call at 614-753-4694. Or hit us up on Twitter, we're @SSTRegion11. If you'd like to get ahold of me, I am Eric Neal, I am at eric.neal@escoco.org. Until next time, thanks for listening.