Guiding students through the middle school years is a daunting task for educators and parents. Socially insecure and emotionally vulnerable, “tweens” are striving for social standing while possibly grappling with other issues, including poverty, child abuse and neglect, bullying, violence, obesity and eating disorders, sex and pregnancy, suicide, and drugs.

Students perceived as “different” from the social norm may become targets of their attackers’ own insecurities. And, the body and hormonal changes accompanying adolescence can make young people feel self-conscious, embarrassed and ashamed.

As educators have learned, it can’t be assumed that parents will necessarily model healthy behaviors — or give their children the tools to cope with stress, anger and hurt. In addition, parents may be unaware of current fads that are unhealthy, or even dangerous, and might be uncomfortable discussing certain topics.

Middle school health teacher and SHAPE America member Ben Leven recognizes the enormity of this challenge. For the past 18 years, he has taught students in grades 6-8 about physical, mental, emotional, and social health issues, tweaking his health curriculum annually to become ever more effective.

“It’s a critical time, when the decisions students make can affect the rest of their lives,” says Leven. Knowing this, he always ensures that his 590 students at Twin Groves Middle School in Buffalo Grove, IL, have fully absorbed and mastered specific lessons before moving on to the next topic.

The Big Idea: To ensure that Twin Groves is meeting the highest health curriculum standards, Leven combines the overlapping national and state standards, using that information to drive his instruction.

“Students move at their own pace,” he says. “Some may master the material in two days, while others will take two weeks before they go on. Students may sit in the classroom and take in information, but they need to apply it to learn.”

To make sure he knows where each student is on the learning curve, Leven gives a pre-test in Google Forms at the start of each unit.

“If most students already know about a specific health standard, then I don’t have to spend much time and can move to a topic that students do not know much about,” he says. “Individual students who’ve mastered a specific learning standard are given an opportunity to further explain or go beyond the requirements to demonstrate their knowledge of a subject or topic. If a student is not understanding the material, I can adjust it until I’m confident he or she has mastered it.”

How does Leven capture students’ interest in topics that range from first aid to drugs to sexual harassment and assault? He uses his physical education background and training in both education and technology to stage fake disasters, competitions, mock trials based on actual court cases, and other activities and games that require hands-on problem solving.

Besides presenting health knowledge in fun, engaging ways, the lessons may incorporate English, writing, public
“Every student participates — we have an 12-member jury, court reporter, judge, plaintiff, defendant, defense and prosecuting attorneys, and news reporter,” says Leven. “The students have to come up with opening and closing statements, build evidence, interview witnesses, deliberate, and decide if the defendant is guilty or innocent. The kids get all dressed up and really get into it.”

The cases and outcomes differ with each class and sometimes result in a hung jury.

Seventh-graders at Twin Groves study the effects of prescription and recreational drugs in a March Madness-style competition. “Each student chooses and researches a specific drug, which might be anything from caffeine to Ritalin to cocaine,” Leven says. “They have 45 seconds in each round to present their material, offering their conclusions about whether it is potentially dangerous or harmful and whether it has an impact on society. Students then decide in each round who moves on.” The unit concludes with students telling what they learned about each of the drugs they and their classmates researched.

The culminating activity of Leven’s sixth-grade first-aid unit is a staged accident or other disaster, where victims are assessed and “treated” by “paramedics.” “This is the age where many students start babysitting or taking care of their brothers or sisters, and this teaches them how to deal with choking, burns and other emergencies,” says Leven.

The students who rotate through Leven’s nine-week health units are pulled from the mandatory five-day-a-week PE classes five days a week for three weeks rather than quarterly, which gives them just enough time to accomplish the standards without impacting students’ fitness, says Leven.

“We experimented with different times to see what worked best,” he says. “Last year was the first year of this new system of rotating every trimester, and we found that cardiovascular fitness scores increased from previous years.”

The program gets full support and unlimited funding from the Kildeer Countryside School District 96 and its PTO.

Results: To gauge mastery, students are given a Google Forms post-test, and the results are compared to the pre-test. “The goal is for 90 percent of all students to master each learning standard,” Leven says. The program’s positive results helped earn three consecutive Health Blue Ribbon Awards from the Illinois Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.

Takeaway: Creative, hands-on activities, coupled with ensuring mastery of each topic before moving ahead, has proved to be a winning formula for Twin Groves. “Our data is overwhelmingly in favor of this model,” Leven says. “It’s much more effective than reading a textbook — and the kids love it.”