

Addressing the Middle Grades Gap

By DAN FRENCH

The middle grades have been called the “weak link” of education, the time when academics lose focus and standards decline.

In the middle grades, student discipline problems increase, homework completion decreases, course failures rise, attendance suffers, and academic achievement declines. Why is it so hard to create excellent middle schools, particularly in urban districts? Why do so many middle schools fall short in their implementation of effective middle grades practices, resulting in disappointing student academic performance? In this article, I discuss why middle schools struggle for academic excellence, and offer a framework for thinking about successful middle schools of the future.

Structures trump principles and practices

When we think of the “middle school model” we think of teacher teams, advisories, interdisciplinary curriculum, flexible schedules. Unfortunately, the middle grades have become too fixated on these structures of middle schools, rather than focused on the underlying principles that spawned them and on the professional practices that will lead to real improvement in teaching and learning.

Ronald Williamson and Howard Johnston write, “As the middle level school matured, it misplaced its focus on meeting the needs of early adolescent learners and instead became enveloped by a shroud of orthodoxy — the need to conform to an established doctrine that dictated programs, procedures, and organizational structure.”

For example, many middle schools create interdisciplinary teaching teams by scheduling math, science, social studies, and language arts teachers to share the same group of students. But schools often neglect to support these teams in becoming intentional learning communities that make “substantive changes in the relationships of adults and students,” Williamson and Johnston say. These relationships should challenge teachers to reflect on and examine their practice, and students to excel academically,

Many interdisciplinary teaching teams spend little time in their teams talking about powerful teaching and learning practices that engage the middle grades student. Consequently, teaching practices in many middle school classrooms continue to look much the same as those found in a traditional junior high school. The ultimate purpose of the teaching team structure—personalized relationships that lead to a more meaningful curriculum and increased student learning—is lost.

In another example, middle schools create advisory programs by assigning every teacher a small group of students that meets regularly to engage in academic support and personal development. These programs frequently become “a series of sanitized activities that are of little real importance to anyone,” that occur within a twenty to thirty minute period.

Often, these advisories take place in schools in which there is an absence of meaningful discourse during most of the day. Rather, Williamson and Johnston argue, middle schools should recognize that caring, nurturing, and guiding adult-student relationships are most likely to be fostered during everyday interactions and conversation among adults and students, in the classroom and hallways, as well as in advisory.

Researchers further describe this phe-

nomenon of implementing the formulaic structures of middle schools as opposed to focusing on the principles of effective middle grades reform, “One of the clearest patterns that has emerged...is the difference between a ‘checklist’-based implementation of structural changes and implementation that is ‘idea-driven,’ that attempts to reflect the underlying constructs and issues” of the Turning Points principles. “Unfortunately, being able to ‘check off’ these practices [such as teacher teaming] becomes an end unto itself, with little regard to why these practices should be implemented or in what forms and levels they need to be present to contribute to a more effective teach-



EFFECTIVE TEACHING TEAMS DISCUSS POWERFUL TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES THAT ENGAGE THE MIDDLE GRADES STUDENT.

ing and learning process.”

For example, having an interdisciplinary teaching team that serves 140 students will not result in the personalized, caring relationships for which teaming was intended. Having one faculty common planning period per week for 30 minutes will not produce the quality con-

This trend is exacerbated in schools serving high percentages of low-income students and students of color, where lectures and practice drills are found more often than in other schools. One study concludes, “The data on course offerings and instructional approaches reveal that in many schools many students are not offered real challenges in academic courses and have few opportunities to develop higher level skills. Schoolwork may be too easy for many, if not most, students in the middle grades.”

As a result, the 1992 study, conducted by Joyce Epstein and Douglas MacIver, found that U.S. middle grade students are often bored in school, resulting in low-

ered motivation and a lack of persistence “in courses that they consider uninteresting or irrelevant.”

Rather, we should be aiming to create a curriculum framed around what researchers describe as authentic academic achievement, that is, an integrated curriculum in which students produce

Turning Points 2000 study (see main article in this issue).

To truly engage with such principles requires a deep and close look at current classroom practice and a willingness, on the part of individual teachers and teams, to change. I offer the following four lenses for viewing the principles of effective middle grades reform that speak most closely to the heart of teaching and learning: Rigor, Relevance, Relationships, and Responsibility. They are adapted in part from an Education Week essay by Tony Wagner in 2002.

I. Rigor, or academic challenge which is personalized, that builds upon the relationships and experiences of young adolescents, and that prepares students to be literate, participating members of a democratic society.

When I speak about academic rigor, I diverge from the historical dictionary definition of the word, which uses such descriptors for rigor as “harsh,” “strict,” and “rigid.” In this definition, rigor, or academic challenge, starts with our expectations of our students. Each of our middle schools needs to ask questions such as:

- Are all students capable of high achievement?
- Does intelligence and high achievement come from innate ability or from hard work and effort?
- Why is it that Black, Latino, and low-income students continue to lag behind their white, middle class peers in achievement? What will it take to truly achieve educational equity and excellence?

Principal John Ritchie wrote to his staff in 1990 the following on expectations:

My own sense in traveling about the school, is not that we have low expectations, but that we have unexamined ones.... And, truthfully, when you don't think about what you expect and how you convey it and hold to it, your expectations can tend to get a little cloudy and vague.... The main symptom is to meet students where they are, rather than demand that they grow and change; to give in to the fact that they don't read, write, compute, arrive on time, behave as well, act as thoughtfully, think as independently as they should. The real problem is that holding to high expectations is hard work that incurs the risk of constant disappointment.

II. Relevance, in that the curriculum, instruction, and assessment has meaning, is developmentally responsive, and makes connections to students' lives and the world around them.

We need relevance in how we learn. According to William Glasser, we learn 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 30% of what we see, 50% of what we both see and hear, 70% of what is discussed with others, 80% of what we experience, and 95% of what we apply or teach to someone else. We need to remember that it is the 70-95% learning zones that every teacher should be striving to attain. Students need ample opportunities to engage in different modes of learning and expression—talking together and with a teacher, listening, writing, drawing, designing and carrying out projects.

We also need relevance in what we learn. More and more, our curriculum needs to help students make sense of, and prepare them to participate in, this often baffling and contradictory world that we live in. John Arnold writes that

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versation focused on improving instructional practice that results in raised student achievement, according to a 1996 study of Turning Points networks.

The impact on teaching and learning

The most significant casualty of the structures over principles and practices approach to reform is the lack of focus on high quality teaching and learning in many middle schools. Studies have found that the middle school curriculum is often redundant and lacking in challenge, and the instruction that accompanies it uninspiring. The Third International Mathematics and Science Study, released in 1996, found that “while U.S. elementary students scored above average, middle and high school students' scores lagged. The study faulted the American middle school curriculum for being ‘a mile wide and an inch deep,’” according to Education Week.

knowledge rather than merely receive it, in which they engage in disciplined inquiry, and in which there is value in the learning beyond school.

It is clear that implementing the basic structures of middle schools — faculty teaming, interdisciplinary curriculum, advisory, common planning time — has very little impact on improving middle schools and raising academic achievement, if these changes are not founded upon the basic principles of effective middle level instruction and accompanied by thoughtful, continuously improving, professional practice.

Returning principles to their proper place

Excellent middle schools eschew the structures-only approach to middle school reform and tackle the hard work of building professional practice around principles such as the ones framed in the

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the middle school curriculum needs to emphasize the following principles of empowerment:

- The curriculum is grounded in a positive view of young adolescents, which respects their abilities and potentials.
- The curriculum enables young adolescents to increasingly assume control over their own learning.
- The curriculum helps young adolescents make sense of themselves and their world.
- The curriculum encourages young adolescents to contribute to the well being of others.
- The curriculum helps young adolescents understand and counter the forces that exploit them and hinder their development.

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III. Relationships, in which middle schools are small and personalized enough so that every student is known well by at least one caring, nurturing adult in the school, and in which positive student relationships are fostered and valued within the classroom.

Nel Noddings, an educator, wrote:

At a time when the traditional structures of caring have deteriorated, schools must become places where teachers and students live together, talk with each other, take delight in each other's company. My guess is that when schools focus on what really matters in life, the cognitive ends we now pursue so painfully and artificially will be achieved somewhat more naturally...It is obvious that children will work harder and do things — even odd things like adding fractions — for people they love and trust.

Schools will become successful at teaching all students only when care is taken to build strong relationships with every child. Every child must have at least one adult who knows her well—how and what she is learning, who her friends are, the shape of her home life. Every classroom must have a core foundation

of trust and respect among peers as well as between teacher and students.

IV. Responsibility, in which middle schools hold themselves accountable for the success of each and every student.

No longer should it be the responsibility of just the English language arts teacher to teach reading and writing. No longer should learning disabilities be the sole province of the special educator, nor second language acquisition assigned exclusively to the bilingual educator. We, as middle school educators, are responsible as a collective whole for each and every student who walks through the school doors each and every day. We should all take it as a personal injury when even one student falls through the cracks, or is labeled a failure.

Building a strong, professional collaborative culture

Innovation that creates vibrant communities of learning for young adolescents requires building a sense of collective professional accountability. This collective accountability starts first by creating a professional collaborative culture that is doggedly focused on improving learning and the craft and art of teaching.

Quite simply, this work is too difficult to do alone. We need to have in our sights that there is a direct correlation between structured and focused teacher talk about teaching and learning, and improved teacher instruction. We need to break down the egg-crate isolation of teaching, and make it a public practice in which colleagues are sharing and learning from one another. This is a challenge in many of our schools.

Yet, as Carl Glickman has noted, teachers in the most successful schools, those schools that improve and sustain student achievement, are less satisfied about their teaching than teachers in less successful schools, and spend significant time collaborating with their peers to improve their practice.

The Turning Points middle school reform model has identified school-based practices and strategies that build and sustain this kind of professional culture. When teacher teams engage thoughtfully in practices such as looking collaboratively at student and teacher work, examining data about student learning and using

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it to inform decisions about teaching and learning, and designing rigorous and relevant curriculum and assessments, they can see the impact on their instruction and on students' learning.

Any effective collaborative practice is built around a cycle of inquiry—What do we know about how our students are learning? What action can we take to help them learn better? What did we learn from that action and what should we try next?

To be sure, changes in structures will be necessary to support these communities of learning—from longer blocks of learning and team planning time, to school governance that engages faculty, student, family, and community voices. But structures in successful middle schools will always be implemented in the service of powerful teaching and learning.

Getting started and staying the course

The work of creating academically challenging, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable middle schools that

serve a diverse range of students is complex and messy. What will it take to make such schools the norm rather than the exception?

Rick DuFour writes in a recent article, "I am more convinced than ever that leaders of effective professional learning communities are action-oriented. They turn aspirations into action and visions into reality...They recognize that learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and experience as the most effective of teachers."

If guided by clear principles and engaged in collaborative professional practice that is always focused on what is happening in the classroom, every middle school can become a vibrant place of learning and teaching.

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