



THE SCHOOL
OF EDUCATION

in collaboration with

The Bank Street College of Education

and the

Academy for Educational Development

Beating the Odds:

Creating Successful Middle Schools

A Report of the Forums
held at St. John's University on

April 28, May 5 and 19, 2007



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On three Saturdays in April and May, 2007, groups of educators, policy makers, community leaders and other stakeholders gathered at St. John's University's Manhattan campus to consider, in an atmosphere of calm and deliberation amidst a "sea of troubles," the issues surrounding middle level education, using examples of success both nationally and in New York City, as well as others from areas in explicit need of improvement throughout urban school systems across the United States.

The objective was not to evaluate certain middle schools, but to point the way to their success. The Forums were designed to emulate Eleanor Roosevelt's actions as described by Adlai Stevenson. He wrote, "She would rather light a candle than curse the darkness."

As suggested by this brief report these candles come in many shapes and sizes, and their collective illumination should dispel shadows and bring to life as well as light the significant work that lies ahead. Our purpose is to dispel doubt regarding our ability to succeed. Our expectation is to raise our aspirations for middle grade adolescents everywhere.

Parental and Community Participation

- Informed engagement and advocacy creates a demand for high-quality education in the middle grades and provides critical support for reforms and student services. Therefore:
 - The resources of the community need to be used to their fullest, including people, organizations, cultural facilities, community-based organizations, political, social, health, social welfare and justice groups and all those who are able to contribute to the well-being of the adolescent.
 - The tone and atmosphere of middle schools need to be welcoming to all these groups and their leaders.
- There is a compelling need for frequent public discussion and debate over school policies.
 - All meetings should serve low income families as well as the middle class. Translators need to be available as well as a variety of support services (e.g. single-parent evenings where children are attended to in the school buildings).
 - These meetings should be of substance, tackling compelling issues such as transitioning from elementary school to middle grades and then on to high school. Principals need preparation in leading such discussions with parents, community leaders and especially the media.
 - Similarly, parent, teacher and student surveys of attitudes toward their schools as well as proposals for additional changes should be produced — and in various languages.
 - Students should be given the opportunity of working with parent and community groups, following the example of how service learning takes place in higher education. This helps to make them aware that what they are learning applies throughout their lives and gives them a voice in shaping school policies.

- Middle grades should be viewed through a variety of lenses including those of researchers, practitioners, parents, community leaders and the students themselves.
- “Accountability” should address the type of progress being made at each school, especially using data to monitor and support students’ learning and the improvement of teaching.
- Sets of criteria to address accountability need to be developed that are not based on test scores alone. Too much time is being spent on remediating skills rather than increasing knowledge. Accountability means defining what outcomes are expected and how they shall be planned.
- Another set of analytics and research should be entertained, descriptive of schools that are doing well even if they are not yet “great.” These “schools to watch” are important to note, reward, and replicate, rather than punish. Along with this approach the New York City Chancellor’s intention to follow individual students rather than comparing class to class each year should be implemented as quickly as possible.
- Inquiry teams responsible for collecting data comprised of teachers and administrators need to be established within all schools, led by the principal, whose role of “lead teacher” needs to be underscored.
- Since there is a chasm between what research shows to be effective and what is implemented in the middle grades, schools of education must be intimately involved in studying what works and what does not. The result should be a constant reform of their teacher education programs. This should result in a new pathway between the schools and the schools of education that produce their teachers and leaders, stressing the power inherent in the work of schools of education to “own” their own products by following their careers over a period of time and to cooperate with school officials in effecting desired change.

This publication presents the issues and major proposed solutions. Along with some far-reaching suggested new practices it also illuminates interventions already known to work. It speaks to the potential for excitement and engagement of middle school adolescents and the need for clear and consistent expectations for their achievements in all aspects of a democratic, liberal education.

It is also designed to be user friendly, capturing the essential issues in a readable and cogent format.

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- More support for teachers in their first three years is essential. Follow-up by the schools of education from which they graduated, or by universities in their “cachement areas” (see “organization”) in collaboration with principals, is urged.

- “Buddy systems,” pairing new and senior teachers, have proved to be successful but only in instances where the senior teacher has been successful over the years.

- Additional course work, preferably structured as summer institutes run by the National Endowment of the Humanities, should be organized and offered. These would present the latest content of their respective fields to teachers, coupled with examples of the best research-based, pedagogical practices to carry this knowledge forward to their students.

- Differential pay for teachers in difficult to staff middle grades is one of several incentives essential to stem the tide of those hired with far less experience than their peers. This results in much higher turnover rates and ultimately, school failures.

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Assessment and Accountability

- Both of these terms and practices are currently more “faith-based” than founded on valid and reliable research. The efforts of school systems, to produce “research-based best practices,” sometimes contracted outside the systems, has yielded no significant findings.

- “Assessment” must look at more than just the current status of middle level grades, focusing instead on the progress each school is making. It is particularly essential that a large part of the definition of “progress” needs to address bringing Black and Latino adolescents to scale.

- Sufficient programming skills of school leaders, including scheduling classes and planning time in blocks either by subject area or by grade level, should be a top priority of principals who need to find creative ways to ensure adequate time in the school day for essential learnings to take place.
- Middle level schools should become the setting for learning clinics, in coordination with neighboring graduate teacher training institutions.
- Public Health Clinics within middle-level school should be open during evenings and weekends. Social workers, psychologists and counselors, using prevention models, should be available to those adolescents with multiple risk factors. A stimulating variety of after-school programs should be offered as well. These are critical to improving the schools, whatever the organizational structure. Schools should become the true center of their communities.

How can we support our teachers?

- A revised credentialing system for middle level teachers must be adopted at a state and federal level. The current gerrymandered use of “extensions” from childhood up or 7-12 down are unsatisfactory.
- Within these programs there needs to be focused and concentrated preparation in adolescent development, as well as classroom management, test achievement and management of tests and test taking.
- As indicated under “curriculum,” teaching teams should be created that set goals and have sufficient time for planning. This school-based, teacher-driven professional development model, must be imbedded in the world of individual teachers and throughout the teacher teams.

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What are today's adolescents like?

- In most of our nation's school systems, and particularly in large urban and smaller rural areas "...the onset of adolescence combined with concentrated, intergenerational poverty... and family dysfunction...creates its own set of challenges."
- In too many of these schools behavior was found to be a powerful co-variate of course failure. A proactive approach to negative behavior, with adequate counseling staff, needs to supplant much of the highly visible police and other quasi-military presence which is viewed negatively by students and actually becomes more punitive than supportive.
- Problems beset minority groups, particularly Black male students, many of whom are no longer in school by eighth grade. Intervention must be comprehensive. Presently it is nowhere near sufficient in high poverty areas.
- Beyond this, since a large number of middle school students do not aspire to go on to college (and some not even to high school) responses to the following issues and practices are critical:
 - Since the nature of the adolescent is to want love, acceptance and success, schools need to develop a holistic conception of their students. Teachers, administrators, parents and others involved in the middle grades must participate in such study.
 - It should be noted that the strengths of early adolescence, including growing independence, capacity for more abstract thinking and interest in making choices should be factors in how the schools build on the positive characteristics of this age level. The choices available to them should be many and responsive to societal needs.

attention is paid by the school system's central administration.

- Middle schools should have their own choice of organization. It is a "leap of faith," as yet unproved by any research, to expect that teachers will know or care about their students more in small settings. Organizing larger schools into "academies" or "small learning communities" is more likely to produce a setting in which a well-rounded education can take place since all the services of critical fields such as the arts and physical education are available to all adolescents.
- The current "lethal combination" of inexperienced principals and teachers must end. Powerful incentives should be offered to experienced teachers and school leaders to work at this level.
- Each school must then be assessed for system organization, staff training, staff experiences in and out of school, best utilization of resources to accomplish these ends, and technological support to make it happen. Engaged principals, drawn from the ranks of superior teachers, able to adapt out of experiences (no one should be appointed principal without at least three to five years of teaching), technologically proficient, need to be ready to become middle grade leaders no matter what the school organization.
- Appropriate budgeting, with clearly allocated amounts to principals, and with appropriate published guidelines, must accompany every effort to restructure schools or retain their current organization.
- Equitable class size, not privileging one age group over another (e.g. small elementary classes vs. overly large middle level classes) must serve as the basis for creating and sustaining middle level grades.

contributing to their communities in a way that is linked to their curriculum.

- Successful curriculum models should become known to all in a systematic way, creating cohorts (especially among the 1,400 schools in New York City), so as to learn from past and current successes



How should middle level grades be organized?

- Restructuring middle schools is not the thing to occupy our time. We should be talking about academically excellent, developmentally responsive, socially equitable and organizationally supportive schools, however they are organized.
- “School choice” must not continue to serve as the basis for creating more race and class separation.
- Urban school districts should return to or create “enterprise zones” to which special attention is paid by the school system’s central administration.
- True P-16 systems, strengthening the relationship of one level to another, including the transition from elementary school to middle school, and from the middle grades to high school and high school to college, must be organized city-wide.
- Cities, using all available resources, including schools of education, must provide ongoing support to the middle grades. Urban schools should consider creating “cachement areas” built around existing colleges and universities, so as to cover schools not now able to obtain consistent academic and administrative support.
- Urban school districts should return to, or create, “enterprise zones” in which special

- Since adolescents and their schools also face developmental and neighborhood challenges (gangs, some criminal enterprises, and other anti-social incidents) and because so many adolescents have family responsibilities, low attendance is often the result. This lack of engagement needs to be reversed.
- We need developmentally appropriate practices in and outside the classroom.
- We need to involve adolescents in understanding why what they believe to be working actually works; to show them we value them and their input.
- We need to know where every student is, academically, and to assess their individual learning styles.
- We need systematically collected evidence of what happens in schools that succeed in retaining their students and to replicate these models in other middle schools.
- We need data on the composition of each school, particularly on the increase/decrease of Title I students between elementary and middle schools. Additionally we need to know the percentage of special education and English language learners in middle schools so that we may provide the same kind and quality of assistance to these students with the same commitment we demonstrate to the other students.
- As to the last two concerns we need valid and reliable studies that connect the data to patterns of immigration and subsequent enrollment of these students, all of which have tremendous instructional implications that vary from school to school.
- Above all we need studies of small groups struggling most, definitely in concert with the research faculties of schools of education.

What should a “rich, middle level curriculum” look like?



- A curriculum for middle grades should be one of high expectations designed to produce “cultured, responsible citizens.”
- It should be organized to produce learning in specific disciplines but also help integrate all areas in an interdisciplinary program for a competitive world that demands such integrated learning.
- It should prepare students to succeed in high school and aspire to enter college.
- The current “ethos of remediation” permeating the middle grades, and looking primarily at literacy and mathematics, should be supplemented or replaced entirely by sequenced, shared, “threaded” curricula, immersing students in exciting activities and increasing their knowledge particularly suited to the great cultural opportunities in urban areas. We need to ensure that we do not set children further behind in general knowledge while attempting to “catch them up.”
- These activities must include the arts, physical education, science (in which the U.S. is rapidly losing ground globally) and other undervalued fields, engaging children in what works.
- A much greater use of technology, not as an end in itself, but as a means for children to collect and analyze data, to create and design work products, and to communicate with the world, must permeate all the grade levels. Teachers desperately need professional development in order to accomplish this end.
- In addition, all teachers must know about teaching literacy across the curriculum and must pay attention to the way children read and write in their classrooms.
- Principals must be free, in consultation with teachers, to select instructional materials. Packaged programs, unsuited to the wide variety of students in middle level classes, if used at all, must be supplemented with those based on State and national learning standards, tested to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.
- These sufficiently detailed instructional standards must be supported by targeted extra help.
- Teachers need instruction in preparing student portfolios that present the best work of the students from the prior year to their teachers in the current year. We are stuck in an agrarian concept of the school year that inevitably wastes time and effort and does not enable adolescents to pick up where they left off in order to move them along more rapidly. The portfolio approach, known to educators since the 1920’s, but which requires extensive teacher involvement, can be effected electronically. However it requires additional teachers and administrative professional development through schools of education.
- Curricular and extra-curricular activities should be created to make after-school and weekend activities commensurate with those in the more affluent suburbs. This would have the effect of lengthening the school day — a sorely needed outcome of middle school organization (see also, section on “organization,” later.)
- After-school activities should take place, in much larger measure, on college campuses in order to raise the standard of the activities and to inspire adolescents to attend college.
- In addition, service learning should be introduced as part of regular class work, demonstrating to students how their education can and should be applied in everyday life. It should involve them in civic engagement,