

Nassau County Middle Level Principals' Association
Suffolk County Middle Level Principals' Association

Position Paper
Best Practice Middle-Level Approaches

The professional associations representing middle school principals across Long Island have collaborated to articulate the effective practices of middle-level education in order to continue to support the implementation of New York State Commissioner's Regulation CR 100.4 (h3). The regulation states that "...districts shall ensure that the middle-level program is aligned with the Regent policy statement on middle-level education and the State Education Department's essential elements of standards focused middle-level schools and programs." Best practice middle-level programs meeting these guidelines, and their resultant component trends, cannot be viewed merely as a list of infrastructure changes or specific programs initiated within individual schools. Rather, exemplary middle school results from "...a gigantic web of ideas about how best to serve the needs of young adolescent learners filled with depth, breadth, and complexity (Doda & Thompson, 2002, 3)." Middle-level philosophy calls on schools to address both the academic growth of students and their affective and social-emotional development, recognizing that these two dimensions of schooling are intricately connected. Further, best-practice middle-level reform stresses the need for high expectations for all children, reflected in programs and practices that make certain every child participates in the best educational experiences a school might offer.

Middle-level philosophy demands high expectations for all students and requires school and teacher accountability for student success. The philosophy is standards-based, possessing a rich history and years of relevant research pointing to the success of its elements. This position paper presents the history of the development of the most significant high quality effective

middle school practices. It explores the research and the history of middle level philosophy and standards-based reform, demonstrating how middle level philosophy, as part of the larger school reform movement, is synonymous with high academic standards.

New York State's official regulation outlining expectations for middle-level education is the New York State Essential Elements of Standards-Based Middle-Level Schools and Programs. These elements reiterate the commitment of middle-level educators to high rigor and achievement within a developmental framework that meets the socio-emotional needs of young adolescents. In 1998, the New York State Deputy Commissioner of Education, James Kadamus, called on his staff to identify the essential elements of high quality middle schools. David Payton, the Supervisor of the Department's Middle-Level Education Program coordinated this effort with the Statewide Network of Middle-Level Education Liaisons and the New York State Middle School Association. By 2000 the New York State Education Department published the Essential Elements of Standards Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs (Essential Elements) which presently serves as the New York State Department of Education's model of best practice for middle schools. Beginning in 2003 with the Board of Regents' adoption of a revised middle-level policy statement, the Education Department continued with the development of the Essential Elements - and created implementation protocols and evaluation rubrics (New York State Middle School Association, 2006). This State-approved model incorporates both middle-level philosophy and standards-based approaches by stressing affective-domain and academic standards, while concurrently implementing yearly standardized assessment exams in Grades 6-8 English and mathematics in addition to previously existing Grade 8 exams in social studies, science and world language. (New York State Education Department's Middle-Level Education Program, 2003).

It is important to view these state-level initiatives specifically and middle-level reform in general as part of the larger trend of school reform nationwide. Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (1998) compiled the National Curriculum Reports to highlight the best-practice positions/findings of the top governmental, curriculum, teacher, and education associations for classroom experiences at all stages of academic development. They found that excellent schools have less whole-class instruction, student passivity, worksheet tasks, competition, and more interactive, democratic approaches such as cooperative learning, heterogeneous grouping of students, hands-on instructional methods and recognition of multimodal cognitive processes. They also recognized that excellent schools engaged in partnership building between the school and home, and devoted time to addressing the social-emotional needs of children. These best-practice learning elements are “student centered, experiential, holistic, authentic, expressive, reflective, social, collaborative, democratic, cognitive, developmental, constructionist, and challenging (Zemelman et al., 1998, 7-8).” Researchers have found that these overlapping themes of the middle-level and general best-practice reform movements are complementary. A high standard academic program and success in addressing students’ affective-domain needs are not mutually exclusive. In fact, addressing students’ affective needs is complementary to meeting their academic needs. This comprehensive approach makes intuitive sense; children who feel safe and valued will be better able to focus on academic achievement.

The accountability and standards-based reform movements grew in strength alongside the middle school reform movement. Standards-based reform emphasized the importance of establishing content and skill standards for students and the measurement of that achievement. A hallmark of the movement continues to be the use of standardized measurement of student achievement to allow for comparisons of data across schools and the tracking of a cohort’s

progress over time. The use of valid and reliable standardized exams, including preparatory benchmarking for each standard, was intended to inform and guide a school's instructional program, identify students who are at-risk for failure, and allow focus on specific areas of students' weaknesses (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2004). An implicit desire for school and district accountability to an academic standard accompanied the need for increased individual student performance. This urgency for raising standards was vitalized with the *Nation at Risk* report in 1983 which documented the low achievement levels of many American schools (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>). The current federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) is also reflective of the standards-based movement. Importantly, there is a clear connection between accountability and the standards movement. Schools are held responsible for meeting the new higher standards, and failure to meet the rising standards brings significant consequences to schools (Valentine et al., 2004).

Significant differences exist between the broad definition of standards-based education (Snow-Renner & Lauer, 2005) and a more limited definition as espoused by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The limited definition of the term identifies focused instruction as a method to higher achievement, but does not address any particular type of instruction. This definition of standards-based education incorporates the establishment of content goals, and the ongoing instruction, assessment and the measurement of student achievement based on these goals. While the limited definition states that instruction should be focused on the content strands, it does not explicitly address any one particular pedagogical approach or combination of approaches to be used in formulating focused instruction. Importantly, following the passage of NCLB, the standards-based goals have often manifested themselves in the form of content and skills strands which are measured by statewide achievement tests and national measures such as the Nation's

Report Card.

A far broader definition of standards-based education includes descriptive language outlining particular instructional approaches that espouse “. . . constructivist ideas about learning, including student-centered pedagogy, active-learning and cooperative grouping structures (Snow-Renner & Lauer, 2005, 2).” This definition mandates implementation of best-practice instructional techniques such as differentiated instruction. Over 25 years of research supports the implementation of a broader definition of standards based reform. The National Middle School Association, an authority on middle-level education since 1973, clearly advocates a position in support of more broadly defined standards-based, child-centered reform. The National Middle School Association’s position paper, “This We Believe” identified the elements of an exemplar middle school as:

A balanced curriculum based on the needs of young adolescents; a range of organizational arrangements; varied instructional strategies; a full exploratory program; comprehensive advising and counseling; continuous progress for students; evaluation procedures comparable with the nature of young adolescents; cooperative planning; and, a positive school climate (Valentine et al., 2004, 6).

Additional studies are fully supportive of the significance of educational practices in the middle that address the social-emotional development of young adolescence and maintain rigor and attention to high-standards as dictated by the standards-based reform movement. A seminal study undertaken by Lipsitz (1984) identified the characteristics of successful middle schools as schools which recognize the unique qualities of this age group and are developmentally responsive to the younger adolescent. Lipsitz did not name high standardized test results as a criterion of a successful school, but instead identified successful schools as having a structured, small, supportive environment which valued supportive and caring faculty, student, and peer-group relationships; multiple learning style preferences and areas of intelligence; and where

students were actively involved in wide ranging developmentally appropriate athletics, extracurricular and co-curricular school activities.

In 1989, the Carnegie Corporation's report *Turning Points* (Jackson, Davis, Abeel, & Bordonaro, 2000) highlighted the need to transform middle schools by addressing the academic and affective developmental needs of younger adolescents. The report called for smaller schools, individualized attention, student-centered instructional strategies, encouragement of critical thinking and enthusiasm for learning, building-level control, addressing of multiple learning styles, middle-level teacher certification, mutual respect and caring, and partnership among school, home and community. Jackson, Davis, Abeel and Bordonaro (2000) found that "... the (Turning Points) report accelerated a number of trends that were already in the making. For example...a meteoric rise of the middle school organizational pattern....and the demise of the junior high pattern (3-4)." Bay-Williams, Reys and Reys (2003) found that successful standards-based schools have quality administrative leadership, parental support, study and piloting of new curriculum, supportive teacher and administrator relationships, multiple forms of classroom assessment, clear expectations for students, support throughout the change process, ongoing staff development, and ongoing monitoring of student achievement through valid and reliable outside instruments.

The research of Schoen, Cebulla, Finn and Fi (2003) found that schools with the highest student achievement in high school mathematics had a higher correlation of both standards-based and active student-centered instructional approaches. They found that reform-based instructional approaches led to higher achievement. But dangers exist in taking an exclusively standards-based approach (Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Paredes, 2004) since unintended consequences, such as homogeneous groupings and tracking of students, may result when the

focus becomes overly centered on standardized test score improvement. Several studies have shown that multiple measures of school success are warranted even when standardized exams are used in school reform. Assessment cannot be viewed as an event, but must be an authentic, consistent part of the daily classroom experience along with student-centered instructional approaches that allow for ongoing feedback (Underwood, 2001). Importantly, research shows that classrooms where teachers used ongoing formative assessment combined with summative benchmark data to inform instruction have optimal student achievement results. These findings are congruent with other literature and proven school improvement efforts (Schoen, Cebulla, Finn and Fi, 2003).

Standards-based reform has demonstrated a great deal of success in improving student achievement. Wheelock (1997) explained the benefits as (a) formalization of the higher academic standards; (b) establishment of criteria for more challenging classrooms at the middle school level; (c) stimulation of more challenging instruction and learning; (d) provision of a framework for authentic pedagogy as teachers are empowered through testing to better provide direct attention to students' needs; (e) clarification of the purpose of restructuring by focusing on student achievement; (f) amplification of middle-level structures when standards address both the affective and academic domains; and (g) stimulation of students to achieve their own aspirations as they gain better insight and improve performance levels. Effective middle-level reform stresses that it is imperative for all children to experience these benefits of standards-based reform. This is no more clearly evidenced than through the movement's emphasis on the heterogeneous grouping of students in instructional settings.

The emphasis on heterogeneity at the middle level is articulated by Wheelock (1992, 6-10) as reflecting, "a belief that all students can learn; a belief that change is a process; high

expectations for all; a partnership of leaders and teachers; the value of parent involvement; a hospitable policy context; a multi-year plan; purposeful professional development; and, phase in implementation.”

Many schools have demonstrated success for all students through a fully inclusive, heterogeneous model of instruction. Still others are engaged in active reform that propels them closer to the shared goals of middle-level philosophy and standards-based education. As schools consider restructuring and moving toward heterogeneously grouped classrooms, a common contention is that the achievement levels of academically stronger students wane if they are placed in classrooms with academically weaker students. An important study by Wheelock (1992) found that heterogeneously grouped schools have in fact improved achievement for average and underachieving students while enhancing school discipline, school climate and morale. Furthermore, the study found neutral to positive effects but no decrease in achievement for stronger academic students.

Steinberg and Wheelock (1993) further substantiated the benefits of de-tracking by outlining its goals as including high curricular expectations for all children, a phased-in implementation period, and a variety of organizational, curricular and instructional innovations to support the change. Success also centered on having teachers learn how to implement best-practice instruction, organize curriculum in new and provocative ways, and better engage all students in mixed ability classrooms through differentiation of instruction. Importantly, Steinberg and Wheelock’s (1993) research demonstrates that student achievement in the heterogeneous setting continues past middle school, resulting in higher achievement for students from mixed-ability classrooms in high-school and college. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, established in 1997 to advocate for high achieving middle schools

within a student-centered atmosphere supports Steinberg and Wheelock's research. Its vision statement (2006b) affirmed that excellent middle schools emphasize high academic achievement through age-appropriate programs and caring social relationships (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2006a). In heterogeneous classrooms where instruction is guided by the compatible principles of standards-based education and middle-level philosophy, the end results are clear. Good teaching in general, not teaching to any one particular standardized test, will result in higher levels of student achievement. Gentilucci (2004) found that student learning is maximized when the curricula is challenging, instruction is of top quality, teachers are focused on their tasks, there is a balance and variety of approaches to instruction and assessment.

Russell (1994) reinforced these findings through an objective-oriented study of ten middle and junior high schools with varying levels of middle-level philosophy implementation. The study examined whether the implementation of middle-level pedagogical techniques translates naturally into higher student achievement levels. Russell's study found that five of six elements of middle-level schooling had positive correlations with student achievement, with only advisor-advisee programs not found to correlate. The five programs with positive correlations included (a) interdisciplinary teaming with block scheduling; (b) exploratory curriculum; (c) developmentally appropriate teaching approaches; (d) transition and articulation services programs; and (e) appropriate required curriculum learning skills. Based on the extensive growing body of research, Russell recommended that middle schools implement heterogeneous-grouped classes by eliminating ability-based tracking and emphasizing developmentally appropriate instructional approaches.

In conclusion, high quality middle school programs have balanced instructional approaches which meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of students. Because secure and

cared for children achieve at higher levels (McKenzie 2004), schools that ensure a nurturing affective environment by emphasizing values, character, and ethics while teaching effective social skills are the most likely to succeed in meeting the goal of enhanced academic performance. Additionally, effective middle level approaches hold that all children can learn and that school leaders must be accountable for their students' level of success. Through high expectations and the partnership of school and home we are able to improve students' achievement. The principals of Long Island stand ready to assist with this process.

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