



ESEA Reauthorization Recommendations to Improve Middle Level Education

ACT

Academy for Educational Development

Alliance for Excellent Education

The College Board

International Reading Association

Knowledge Alliance

National Association of Secondary School Principals

National Council of Teachers of English

National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform

National Middle School Association

ESTABLISHING A MIDDLE LEVEL POLICY TO ADDRESS THE DROPOUT CRISIS

“The middle grades will play a pivotal role in enabling the nation to reach President Obama’s goal of graduating all students from high school prepared for college or advanced career training. In high poverty neighborhoods, in particular, our research and school improvement work indicate that students’ middle grades experiences have tremendous impact on the extent to which they will close achievement gaps, graduate from high school, and be prepared for college.”

Putting Middle Grade Students on the Graduation Path (Balfanz, 2009)

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESEA) presents an opportunity to establish a national middle grades policy to help raise student achievement, performance in high school, and graduation rates. Each of the national organizations signed on to this statement has joined forces around a common set of policy goals to support students in grades five through eight and ensure that every eighth grader is on the path to graduate high school college and career ready.

The 8th Grade Crisis

Far too many of our middle grade students are being left behind. Consider some statistics on the current state of our middle grade education:

- Only 11 % of 8th grade students are on track to succeed in first-year college English, algebra, biology, and social science courses;
- Less than 10% of 6th grade students who do not attend school regularly, who receive poor behavior marks, or who fail math or English graduate high school on time;
- 22% of all middle schools are likely to be identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring versus only 13% of elementary schools;
- 50 % of our eighth graders are reading at “below basic” levels in many of our urban school districts.

According to ACT, the level of academic achievement that students attain by eighth grade has a larger impact on the students’ college and career readiness than anything that happens academically in high school. If we do not address this problem from the Federal level we will never have a chance to solve the nation’s dropout crisis.

On behalf of middle grades school leaders, teachers, and researchers across the country we urge you to take action on the following middle grade education policy priorities.

Success in the Middle

The Middle Grades Coalition recommends the reauthorization of ESEA include a comprehensive national middle grade policy, such as that articulated in the Success in the Middle Act (H.R. 3006/S.1362). This policy includes legislation to:

- Provide formula grants to States to implement a middle grades school improvement plan and provide grants to local school districts to implement comprehensive school reform in their lowest-performing schools serving students in grades 5 through 8.
- Require States to create a plan that describes what students should know to successfully complete the middle grades and make the transition to succeed in an academically rigorous high school that prepares students for postsecondary education and the workplace.
- Require the State plan to include the development of early warning data systems to identify those students most at-risk of dropping out and intervene appropriately to help them succeed. States are also required to enlist an outside entity to prepare a needs analysis and set forth a plan to strengthen middle grades policies and practices.
- Require States and districts to invest in proven strategies, such as:
 - ⇒ Providing professional development and coaching to school leaders, teachers, and other school personnel in addressing the needs of diverse learners and in using challenging and relevant research-based best practices and curriculum;
 - ⇒ Developing and implementing comprehensive, school-wide improvement efforts in eligible schools; and
 - ⇒ Implementing student supports, such as extended learning time and personal academic plans that enable all students to stay on the path to graduation.

Funding a comprehensive middle grades policy and supporting our secondary schools is essential to transforming the nation's lowest-achieving schools.

Comprehensive Literacy

In the last 30 years eighth grade reading scores have remained flat, and twelfth graders on average have shown no reading improvement. To address this issue the Middle Grades Coalition recommends including a comprehensive literacy program in the reauthorization of ESEA. This program would include policy articulated in the LEARN Act (S.2740/H.R.4037), a comprehensive national literacy bill introduced this session in the House and Senate. The legislation includes:

- Authorizing \$2.35 billion for comprehensive literacy programs, to support local school-based literacy programs (birth to grade twelve).
- Enhancing states' capacities to improve literacy instruction through the creation of state literacy leadership teams.
- Providing high-quality, research-based professional development opportunities and support for literacy coaches, school leaders, and teachers.
- Supporting promising and innovative practices to improve literacy and writing, especially for students reading and writing below grade level.
- Identifying students in need of literacy interventions or other support services and providing appropriate scientifically valid instructional interventions or other support services, which may include extended learning time for struggling students.

Secondary School Innovation

Innovative strategies are necessary to improve our middle schools. This year, Representative Loeb sack and Senator Reid introduced the Secondary School Innovation Fund (H.R. 2239/S. 968) to allow eligible partnerships to compete for grants to implement innovative strategies for improving student achievement. The goal of this fund is to create evidence-based, replicable models of innovation in secondary schools.

The Secondary School Innovation Fund would provide specific funding for innovative strategies to improve the middle grades by:

- Ensuring student engagement and accelerating student achievement.
- Responding to early warning signs that students are at risk of dropping out of school, such as poor attendance, poor behavior, or course failure, through the use of an early warning indicator system and interventions.
- Providing for the sharing of data between high schools and feeder middle schools and establishing summer and ninth-grade transition programs for students transitioning from middle school to high school to ensure the students' connection to their new high school and to orient the students to the study skills and social skills necessary for success in the high school.
- Increasing the level of student supports, including academic and nonacademic supports that meet the comprehensive needs of struggling students and accelerate the learning and achievement of all students.
- Aligning academic standards, curricula, and assessments between middle and high schools.

Embracing competitive and innovative approaches to school reform will ensure funding for the high-quality programs necessary to improve our middle grade education and turnaround our lowest performing schools.

Transforming the Nation's Education System

As the Secretary articulated, the first step in transforming the nation's education system is turning around the lowest-achieving schools. Strong professional development for school leaders and teachers and evidence-based interventions for students most at risk are crucial steps in this process. By using effective early warning systems to intervene in the middle grades and preemptively addressing the needs of struggling students, we will be able to increase all students' learning and achievement, raise graduation rates, and prepare students for success in college and the workforce. We must also substantively prepare students to compete in a global economy where skills in science, technology, engineering, and math are prerequisites for success. To cultivate these skills we must ensure students have strong fundamental and continual literacy training. It is our firm belief that by using smart, innovative strategies to address the needs of all students across all grades and in all subject matters we can transform our nation's education system.