

NASSP Policy Recommendations for Middle Level Reform

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Introduction

The debate over education reform has focused primarily on elementary and high schools in recent years, but middle level reform must be included as part of this conversation. It is time for all of us—policymakers, practitioners, parents, and others—to view education as a continuum and to provide the full range of support required to meet the needs of students at all levels of learning.

Middle level schools face a number of unique challenges that are often overlooked in this debate:

Young adolescent development. The middle years can be an insecure and uncertain developmental period for young adolescents that is marked by new and evolving expectations for academic performance, individual responsibility, social roles and relationships, independence from family, and decision making concerning future academic and career goals. Not surprisingly, research associates the middle years with declines in motivation, self-perception, and academic achievement (Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2002).

Organizational structures and practices. Elementary classrooms are largely self-contained and staffed by one to two teachers; the middle level represents the first time that students take separate content-area courses and move from classroom to classroom, from teacher to teacher, and from peer group to peer group on a daily basis. Designing and implementing schoolwide organizational structures, instructional practices, and classroom learning environments that help students successfully adapt to these new experiences as well as excel intellectually are not simple tasks. According to the 2005 national report cards for reading and mathematics, fewer than one-third of the students in eighth grade can read and write with proficiency (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005); in math, only 30% of students in eighth grade perform at the proficient level and nearly a third score below the basic level (Perie, Grigg, & Dion, 2005).

Transitions. In the space of two or three years, students must make the transition from elementary school to the middle level and from the middle level to high school. These transitions are often complicated by poor vertical curriculum alignment, inadequate guidance counseling to help students make decisions about coursework and cocurricular activities, and unsatisfactory sharing of student performance data between schools. As a result, student achievement can lag.

Teacher and school leader competencies. The demands of teaching young children and older adolescents are different from teaching young adolescents. Elementary teachers typically have insufficient subject-matter and pedagogical content knowledge to teach middle school students effectively, and high school teachers are typically familiar with instructional practices and content that are not adapted to middle level learners. Principals and

other school leaders require special knowledge and skills related to adolescent issues, instructional strategies, community engagement, and alignment and transition. States do not uniformly promote specialized middle school licensure and endorsement qualifications. In addition, the availability of and access to specialized preservice training and inservice professional development are limited. Consequently, teachers and principals—particularly new teachers and principals—frequently have inadequate preparation to serve the unique needs of middle level students.

The costs of these oversights are clear, and the success of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) rests largely on the shoulders of middle level leaders, teachers, and students. Students in grades 5 through 8 represent 57% (14 million) of the nation's annual test takers (Education Development Center, 2005). Students are leaving middle school underprepared to take on the more rigorous academic and social demands of successful high school participation and completion. Across the nation, high numbers of students are tracked into “remedial” or “developmental” coursework upon entering high school; truancy and drop-out rates are particularly high between grades 9 and 10; graduation rates remain flat at 71%; and of those graduates, only 34% are college-ready (Greene and Winters, 2005). Middle level improvement will lead to higher achievement in high schools, lower dropout rates, higher graduation rates, and higher first-year college enrollment rates. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is fully committed to secondary school reform that systemically improves both the middle level and high school through collaborative, inclusive leadership; the strategic use of data; personalized learning that focuses on the individual academic needs of students; and increased academic rigor that reflects the integration of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Critics of the middle school concept commonly argue that middle schools promote “touchy-feely” practices in lieu of academic rigor, school discipline, and accountability for student achievement. With the recent release of *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform* (2006), NASSP reemphasized its commitment to a vision of middle schools articulated by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform that is contrary to those misconceptions. Effective middle schools:

are academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable. They are academically excellent, meaning they challenge all students to use their minds well and meet rigorous academic standards. They are developmentally responsive, meaning they create small learning communities in which stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships support all students' intellectual, ethical, and social growth. They are socially equitable, meaning they have high expectations for all their students and are committed to helping each child produce work of high quality in academically rigorous classes staffed by experienced and expertly prepared teachers. High performing schools also establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements that initiate, invigorate, and sustain their positive trajectory toward excellence. (Lipsitz, 1999)

A Policy Response

The lack of consensus about what middle level teaching and learning should look like has resulted in troubling inconsistencies in middle level learning opportunities from school to school, from district to district, and from state to state. We look to policymakers to make high-quality educational opportunities accessible to all middle level students and to remedy obstacles to improved academic achievement in the middle grades with targeted support for:

- Academic rigor and support
- Adolescent literacy
- Personalized learning
- Assessment
- Low-performing students
- Middle schools identified as “in need of improvement”
- High-quality school leadership
- Highly qualified teachers.

The recommendations for middle level reform proposed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals are rooted in these concepts and are organized under four overarching recommendations:

1. Recognize and support the middle grades as a unique developmental stage apart from the elementary and high school grades
2. Strengthen middle level organizational structures, instructional practices, and classroom learning environments
3. Improve middle level transitions
4. Identify and promote specialized middle level teacher and school leader competencies.

These recommendations are further categorized by the specific actions that district, state, and federal policymakers can take.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation One: Recognize and Support the Middle Grades as a Unique Developmental Stage Apart From the Elementary and High School Grades.

Personalized Learning

What Can District Policymakers Do?

- Provide resource support for programs that will help middle level schools create personalized learning environments and develop Personal Academic Plans for progress toward graduation for each student when they enter the middle level and make the transition to high school.
- Align the core curriculum across grades and schools; map efforts that address the academic, developmental, social, and personal needs of students, especially at critical transition periods.
- Create more robust data systems applicable at the middle level to support the development of personalized learning plans that enable schools to outline:
 - Each student's academic strengths, interests, and needs based on diagnostic assessments when they enter the middle level
 - Indicators of success and areas in need of improvement as students move from grade 6 through the middle level and transition into grade 9
 - An up-to-date record of the support provided to the student across and within schools.
- Provide professional development for principals and teachers to help them implement personalized learning communities and use data and tracking systems to improve personalized teaching and learning.

What Can State Policymakers Do?

- Align the core curriculum across grades and schools; map efforts that address the academic, developmental, social, and personal needs of students, especially at critical transition periods.
- Create more robust data systems applicable at the middle level to support the development of personalized learning plans that enable schools to outline:
 - Each student's academic strengths, interests, and needs based on diagnostic assessments when he or she enters the middle level
 - Indicators of success and areas in need of improvement as students move from grade 6 through the middle level and make the transition into grade 9
 - An up-to-date record of the support provided to the student across and within schools.
- Develop models for assessing student learning in core disciplines across the K–12 continuum. These assessments—formative and summative—should measure growth and should be aligned with state standards. They should measure both what students know and what they can do.

- Provide professional development for principals and teachers to help them implement personalized learning communities and use data and tracking systems to improve personalized teaching and learning.

What Can Federal Policymakers Do?

- Provide funding to develop models for assessing student learning in core disciplines across the K–12 continuum.
- Provide funding for middle level counseling programs that support the use of personalized learning plans.
- Increase funding for the federal Smaller Learning Communities program so that additional middle level schools can create more-personalized learning environments.

Rationale

If high achievement for all students is the goal of reform, then personalization is the key. Creating a supportive environment that cultivates a student's sense of belonging, ownership of learning, and recognition of and ability to make good choices is crucial to the learning experience. Personalized learning environments have:

- Small units within a school in which anonymity is banished.
- Each full-time teacher responsible for contact time with no more than 90 students.
- A Personal Academic Plan for completion of middle school and progress toward graduation for each student that will be reviewed often to ensure that the school takes individual needs into consideration and to allow students to design their own methods for learning, within reasonable parameters, in an effort to meet high standards. A central part of this plan is making assessment data available to students to provide them with the achievement feedback and enable them to assume greater ownership in their own learning.
- A personal adult advocate (developed through teacher advisory programs and other methods) for each student to help him or her personalize the education experience.
- Teachers who convey a sense of caring so students know that teachers have a stake in their learning.
- Flexible scheduling and student grouping patterns to meet the individual needs of students and to ensure academic success.
- Students' families participating as partners in the students' education.
- The school community, which cannot be value-neutral, advocating and modeling a set of core values that are essential in a democratic and civil society.
- Schools working in conjunction with agencies in the community to help coordinate the delivery of physical and mental health services as well as social services.

Increasing student learning relies on knowing the strengths of each student and tailoring instruction accordingly. Establishing relationships is the platform upon which improved instruction and performance can be built. Each student should have frequent and meaningful opportunities to plan and assess his or her academic, personal, and social development

with an adult, such as a principal, teacher, or counselor. A robust data system that supports personalized academic and graduation plans will provide school staff members with the information necessary to ensure that each student is on track toward middle level completion and a seamless transition to high school.

Misconceptions about how students learn have led to poorly crafted tools and systems for assessing student knowledge and diagnosing learning needs. A growing body of research about the science and design of education assessment argues that the key to improving learning is not simply the reporting and analysis of disaggregated data on student achievement and teacher effectiveness, but improving the means by which educators can determine what students know and do not know. Assessments serve three broad purposes: to assist learning, to measure individual achievement, and to evaluate programs. However, a single assessment cannot serve all three purposes simultaneously without compromising the integrity of the data. State accountability data helps schools evaluate the effectiveness of their overall teaching and learning programs but cannot necessarily be used to help teachers tailor their instructional strategies to meet the unique needs of individual students. Assessment is a process of reasoning from evidence that rests on models of student learning in a given subject matter, tasks that allow student performance to be observed, and a method of interpreting student performance data to make inferences about academic ability and competence. Improving the means by which we assess student learning over time can vastly improve teachers' ability to diagnose and address learning needs and, therefore, ensure that fewer students fall through the cracks as they make the transition to high school. (Pellegrino, Chudowsky, & Glaser, 2001).

Each student should have frequent and meaningful opportunities to plan and assess his or her academic, personal, and social development with an adult, such as a principal, teacher, or counselor.

Counselors and well-structured advisory programs can play a key role in personalizing the high school environment for students. However, the current number of counselors and advisory programs in our nation's middle level schools does not correspond to the number and needs of students at the middle and high school levels. The social and academic issues and challenges that adolescent students face are significant and thus require significant attention from trained counselors. More trained counselors would enable schools to lower the counselor to student ratio to roughly 1:250, which is recommended by the American Counseling Association (2006) and the American School Counselors Association. The 2003–04 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) data collected through the Common Core of Data indicates that the current ratio is 1:488 (NCES, October 2004). Advisory programs can potentially further reduce the adult to student ratio to as low as 1:10.

Recommendation Two: Strengthen Middle Level Organizational Structures, Instructional Practices, and Classroom Learning Environments.

Adolescent Literacy

What Can District Policymakers Do?

- Create a district literacy plan that defines a clear vision of effective literacy instruction in the middle grades, and develop a long-term fiscal and resource allocation plan to bring it to fruition.
- Support schoolwide literacy initiatives that promote reading across the curriculum; build literacy leadership in all core-curriculum faculty members, provide teachers with the time and human and financial resources to take on their new literacy roles, and plan professional development opportunities on interdisciplinary reading strategies.
- Provide the resources and time for schools to conduct semiannual individual reading inventories and deliver intensive high-quality interventions to students who read far below grade level as indicated by those inventories.

What Can State Policymakers Do?

- Create a state literacy plan that defines a clear vision of effective literacy instruction in the middle grades, and develop a long-term fiscal and resource allocation plan to bring it to fruition.
- Adopt clear, coherent, and rigorous literacy curricula that are linked to state standards and accountability systems for every content area.
- Incorporate training in adolescent literacy. Accelerate the inclusion of knowledge of adolescent literacy instruction as a component of middle school teaching licensure and endorsement qualifications for all content areas and include it in state-approved competency examinations.

What Can Federal Policymakers Do?

- Fund research on effective literacy teaching and learning practices and intervention models in the middle grades for every content area.
- Provide resources for adolescent literacy initiatives, such as the Striving Readers program, that highlight low literacy rates as a national priority, provide direct services to students and professional development to teachers, and identify effective literacy strategies to be replicated throughout the nation.

Rationale

In Fiscal Year 2006, the federal Reading First and Early Reading First programs were funded at \$1.132 billion to address literacy issues in the preK–3 levels. But there are more than 8 million middle level and high school students who are not currently able to read or write at grade level, and only a handful of states have implemented adolescent literacy programs (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). NASSP strongly supports the priority given to literacy programs at the preK–3 levels, but it is imperative that this priority be extended beyond the early years to ensure that all students are reading and writing at grade level in grades 4–12. For the most part, literacy instruction currently ends at the third-grade level.

It is this lack of grade-level-appropriate literacy programs across the curriculum in middle school that causes so many students to fall behind in high school. Middle level schools lack the resources and the professional training (i.e., literacy coaches and faculty members trained to teach reading across the curriculum) necessary to implement literacy programs. Literacy instruction must not stop as students enter the middle level but rather must be a vital component of a student’s educational experience from kindergarten to graduation. Literacy skills—reading, writing and comprehension—are the foundation of academic success for every student in every school. Although there are no easy solutions for improving adolescent literacy, research suggests that the following key components can increase a student’s opportunity for success:

- Access to a variety of reading materials
- Skill-building instruction that creates an interest in more complex reading material
- High-quality assessments that indicate reading weaknesses and strengths of students as well as the professional learning needs of teachers
- Highly skilled teachers who model and explicitly teach reading comprehension strategies and study skills across the content areas
- Access to reading specialists who can work one-on-one with struggling readers.

All middle level teachers must be trained to embed literacy strategies into instruction. Students who read below grade level should be provided with intensive interventions and accelerated reading programs that are designed to help them catch up, not drop out. In addition, leadership is key to establishing a successful literacy program. A study released by the Wallace Foundation found that school leadership is “second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning” (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Literacy instruction must not stop as students enter the middle level but rather must be a vital component of a student’s educational experience from kindergarten to graduation.

Low-Performing Students

What Can District Policymakers Do?

- Focus resources to help low-performing students achieve grade-level proficiency on challenging academic achievement standards that have been established by the local school districts and states.
- Allow schools the flexibility to implement research-proven organizational structures, instructional practices, and learning environments to meet the varied learning needs of their low-performing students.
- Provide fiscal support and other resources for extended school-based instructional time through after-school and summer school programs.
- Provide high-quality summer bridge programs, supplemental support, and after-school instruction from state-approved providers.
- Focus data-driven decision-making efforts and guidance resources to identify struggling students and assist them as they transition from elementary school to the middle level.

What Can State Policymakers Do?

- Focus resources to help low-performing students achieve grade-level proficiency on challenging academic achievement standards that have been established by the local school districts and states.
- Allow schools the flexibility to implement research-proven instructional activities to meet the varied learning needs of their low-performing students.
- Allow school districts to develop and use criterion-referenced diagnostic assessments to provide data about low-performing students' academic strengths and weaknesses.
- Work with school districts to provide support services, such as guidance, health, nutrition, and social services, so struggling students can focus on their academic performance.

What Can Federal Policymakers Do?

- Fund research on organizational structures, instructional practices, and learning environment designs that effectively meet the varied learning needs of low-performing students in the middle grades in specific content areas.

Rationale

Providing support to children who are not achieving is crucial to engaging them in the learning process and keeping them in school. Research conducted in Philadelphia, for example, showed that sixth-grade students who do not attend school regularly, who receive poor behavior marks, or who fail math or English have no more than a 10% chance of graduating on time and a 20% chance of graduating one year late (Balfanz & Herzog, in press).

To meet the needs of young adolescents, resources must be provided at the local, state, and federal levels to help schools meet the unique academic and developmental needs of

their students. Although federal Title I funds may be used for children from preschool age to high school, 65% of the students served are in grades 1 through 6, and another 12% are in preschool and kindergarten programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The remaining 23% of Title I funds must be spread out to serve more than 20 million students in grades 7–12—more than 50% of the total student population. The reality is that the challenges faced by the children whom Title I was meant to help do not fade away as they make the transition from elementary to middle level to high school.

If Title I was distributed on the basis of student populations, middle level schools (representing 23% of the nation's student population) would receive approximately \$2.92 billion of the current Title I allocation. Yet of the \$12.7 billion dollars appropriated in FY 2005, only approximately \$1.27 billion (representing 10% of funds) is allocated to middle level schools by the states.

The reality is that the challenges faced by the children whom Title I was meant to help do not fade away as they make the transition from elementary to middle level to high school.

Middle Schools Identified as “In Need of Improvement”

What Can District Policymakers Do?

- Require school improvement plans to include the following components:
 - Collaborative leadership.** Institute structural leadership changes that allow for meaningful involvement in decision making by teachers, students, family members, and the community and that support effective communication with these groups.
 - Core knowledge.** Establish what a student is required to know to successfully complete middle school and make the transition to high school, and adjust the curriculum and teaching strategies to realize that goal.
 - Connections with students.** Increase the quantity and improve the quality of interactions between students, teachers, and other school personnel by reducing the number of students for which any adult or group of adults is responsible.
 - Personalized planning.** Implement a comprehensive advisory program to ensure that each student has frequent and meaningful opportunities to plan and assess his or her academic and social progress with a faculty member.
 - Differentiated instruction.** Ensure that teachers use a variety of instructional strategies and assessments to accommodate individualized learning styles.
 - Flexible use of time.** Implement schedules flexible enough to accommodate teaching strategies consistent with the ways students learn most effectively and to allow for effective teacher teaming and lesson planning.

Continuous professional development. Align comprehensive ongoing professional development programs and individualized professional development plans of staff members with the content knowledge and instructional strategies required to prepare students for a successful transition to high school.

Connections with parents and community members. Help schools create positive relationships with parents and community members that will allow for consensus building and shared decision making about governance that will promote school improvement.

What Can State Policymakers Do?

- Provide technical assistance to all middle schools identified as “in need of improvement” under NCLB. This technical assistance should consist of:
 - Analyzing and defining the problems a school is facing
 - Establishing a school leadership team to develop a long-term improvement plan with measurable outcomes
 - Working with the school leadership team to implement the strategies
 - Gathering data to determine the success of the strategies.

What Can Federal Policymakers Do?

- Provide adequate funding and support for ongoing, state-administered technical assistance programs for all middle level schools identified as “in need of improvement” under NCLB.

Rationale

Leveraging support and resources to reach all middle level schools identified as “in need of improvement” is necessary to assess strengths and weaknesses and implement research-proven improvement strategies.

Building the leadership and capacity of low-performing schools is essential to their improvement. Technical assistance, similar to the work performed by some regional educational laboratories, is considered to be the best route to providing support to low-performing schools. Some labs dedicate a professional who works with the school on a long-term basis and becomes a member of the leadership team, a mentor, and a “critical friend.” Such support helps schools assess their strengths and weaknesses, provide leadership development, and implement improvement strategies that show measurable outcomes.

Engaging parents and community members in an ongoing and reflective conversation is necessary for middle level schools to meet the various needs of their students.

Recommendation Three: Improve Middle Level Transitions

Academic Rigor and Support

What Can District Policymakers Do?

- Encourage schools to teach a rigorous and developmentally responsive curriculum with instructional strategies that reflect current research about how students learn and best practices in middle level education. Provide districtwide, ongoing, embedded professional development opportunities that promote deep understanding of key concepts, critical thinking skills, and reflection and explicitly teach problem-solving strategies.
- Facilitate discussions between elementary, middle level, and high school faculty members and district curriculum specialists about curriculum alignment issues to ensure seamless student transitions.

What Can State Policymakers Do?

- Develop rigorous academic standards and end-of-course assessments for foreign languages and the arts to validate their inclusion in the core curriculum.
- Facilitate discussions about curriculum alignment issues among elementary, middle level, and high school curriculum specialists at the state and district level. Include representatives from teacher preparation programs to ensure seamless student transitions.

What Can Federal Policymakers Do?

- Provide incentives to encourage schools to better address student performance in subjects other than mathematics, science, and language arts.
- Increase access to funding streams such as AVID and GEAR UP—programs aimed at helping more low-income and minority students achieve in a rigorous academic environment—in middle level schools; develop additional funding streams that are specific to middle level instructional and curricular reform.

Rationale

Test data show the middle grades as the point when average student achievement begins to lag. Consider the following: The national average grade 4 reading score was one point higher in 2005 than in 2003. But the national average grade 8 reading score was one point lower in 2005 than in 2003 (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). The national average mathematics score at grade 4 increased by three points from 2003 to 2005. But the national average mathematics score at grade 8 showed only a one-point increase between 2003 and 2005 (Perie, Grigg, & Dion, 2005).

In a five-year study of urban middle schools, Balfanz and MacIver (2000) found that poor educational experiences in many of these schools contribute to the inability of nearly half of these students to make a successful transition into high school. Although many

external factors affect student performance, one that is often overlooked is inattention to “the technical core of schooling”—that is curriculum, instructional materials, academic learning time, and professional development.

There is growing consensus among reformers, researchers, educators, and business and civic leaders that the K–12 grades ought to be a pipeline to postsecondary education for all students, not just a few. Working with the end in mind, the best middle level schools offer a curriculum that builds on the concepts developed in elementary schools and prepares young adolescents for high school by implementing a rigorous, challenging curriculum that incorporates the most current understanding of how early adolescents learn. Research in middle level education best practices shows that interdisciplinary teaming and common planning time are necessary to increase levels of practice and are associated with higher achievement (Mertens & Flowers 2003).

Working with the end in mind, the best middle level schools offer a curriculum that builds on the concepts developed in elementary schools and prepares young adolescents for high school by implementing a rigorous, challenging curriculum....

Assessment

What Can District Policymakers Do?

- Ensure that school leaders have access to robust school-level data systems and the professional development that will enable them to use the data to improve and personalize instruction.
- Provide professional development programs to train teachers on how to design developmentally-appropriate classroom assessments for students in the middle grades.

What Can State Policymakers Do?

- Encourage and support the use of assessments such as the ACT EXPLORE and College Board PSAT in the middle grades.
- Ensure that district leaders have access to robust school-level data systems and the professional development that will enable them to use the data to improve and personalize instruction.

What Can Federal Policymakers Do?

- Encourage states to use multiple assessments that are aligned with state standards and include performance-based measures. NASSP suggests the use of such assessments in middle school as:
 - Portfolios, performance tasks, and other examples of a student’s accomplishments



- Traditional quizzes and tests
 - Interviews, questionnaires, and conferences
 - Standardized tests, including state assessments
 - End of course exams
 - Comprehensive personal academic and graduations plans
 - Assessments aligned with high school and college entrance requirements.
- Require states and school districts to use assessments that are diagnostic in nature and provide a set of longitudinal data to support the tracking of student performance over time.

Rationale

Middle level assessments must not only be grounded in rigorous content standards but also must be relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based on how students in the middle grades learn best. Both formal and informal assessments should be incorporated into the classroom. Teaching students how to think critically, be responsible for their own learning, and assess themselves against standards is a crucial component of middle level education.

Studies have documented that external factors affect student performance on standardized tests. Multiple assessments are more likely to capture the complete picture of a student’s achievement level, and diagnostic assessments that are linked to academic standards and the curriculum are most effective in informing educators about student performance and their corresponding instructional needs. Assessments should be used to provide data to teachers and students that will reveal strengths and weaknesses and better prepare students for the transition from middle school to high school and beyond. Today’s competitive environment demands that all students be prepared for high school, postsecondary education, and the workplace.

It is important that middle level educators receive adequate preparation to conduct meaningful evaluations. Too few teacher education programs focus on the appropriate use of data with regard to instruction. The same is true of principal preparation programs, which must provide the professional development needed to build effective assessments and use them to improve instruction within the school.

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Recommendation Four: Identify and Promote Specialized Middle Level Teacher and School Leader Competencies

High-Quality School Leaders

What Can District Policymakers Do?

- Provide new principals and assistant principals with mentors for the first several years of their principalship.

What Can State Policymakers Do?

- Provide funding for school leaders—principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and others—to participate in ongoing, job-embedded professional development that supports school-based collaborative problem-solving and decision-making activities to improve student achievement (Clark & Clark, 2004).
- Build requirements into accreditation standards requiring principal preparation programs to ensure that school leaders have the skills to become instructional leaders in the middle grades.
- Develop specialized, nonoverlapping school leader certification requirements for the middle level.

What Can Federal Policymakers Do?

- Provide funding for school leaders—principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and others—to participate in ongoing, job-embedded professional development that supports school-based collaborative problem-solving and decision-making activities to improve student achievement (Clark & Clark, 2004).
- Support current programs such as the School Leadership Initiative, and develop new incentive programs such as tax credits and student loan reimbursements to attract and retain principals at the middle level in high-need school districts.

Rationale

Professional development at the middle level is critical to ensuring that principals can:

- Reculture middle schools into professional learning communities where school leaders establish the conditions and support system for sustainable change
- Redefine principal, teacher, and staff roles to reflect inclusive leadership practices
- Call for a leadership team (principals, teacher leaders, and others), led by the principal, to create a vision for the school
- Establish an action plan that includes the strategic use of data and that will result in increased student achievement and in a personalized learning environment for each student.

Middle level schools require leaders who are facilitators, who are visible, who model learning, who listen, and who build positive relationships with students and teachers.

Collaborative leadership strategies are the building blocks of successful school reform and are easily replicable in all types of schools—large, small, urban, suburban, and rural. Researchers recognize the significant impact that school leadership has on successful school improvement. Leaders help build and sustain a vision and serve as the catalysts of school reform. Collaborative, inclusive leadership is essential to any reform efforts and requires the development of a professional learning community, wherein leaders throughout the institution (including team and teacher leaders) refocus their work on what will successfully support all students in their middle level experience.

Of course, reform requires change. Resistance to change is often the stumbling block to successful school improvement. Using collaborative leadership strategies can significantly mitigate the efforts to fight change.

At the federal level, Title II’s “allowable use” of funds for principals’ training has not been effective in ensuring that principals and assistant principals are included in ongoing professional development. In today’s achievement-focused atmosphere, it is imperative that principals be effective instructional leaders and that staff members collaborate with their principals to establish the school’s learning goals.

Resistance to change is often the stumbling block to successful school improvement. Using collaborative leadership strategies can significantly mitigate the efforts to fight change.

Highly Qualified Teachers

What Can District Policymakers Do?

- Promote the hiring of staff members who are specifically trained to work with young adolescent learners through incentive programs.
- Provide time and resource support for ongoing, job-embedded professional development such as common planning, teaming, and interdisciplinary lesson planning.
- Develop new teacher induction programs as part of ongoing professional development for middle level teachers.

What Can State Policymakers Do?

- Require middle level teachers to be subject-matter competent by demonstrating ability with either a baccalaureate major in one or more subjects or by passing the state-approved competency exam (e.g., HOUSSE or PRAXIS) to be considered highly qualified.
- Encourage content pedagogy training in teacher preparation programs and state-approved competency examinations for middle level teachers so all teachers develop the

skills necessary to understand the art of teaching and differentiated learning and are able to apply that knowledge in their classrooms. Teacher preparation programs should be structured to ensure that teachers are specifically prepared for the middle level in both subject matter competency and pedagogy.

What Can Federal Policymakers Do?

- Require middle level teachers to be subject matter competent by demonstrating ability with either a baccalaureate major in one or more subjects or by passing the state-approved competency exam (e.g., HOUSSE or PRAXIS) to be considered highly qualified.
- Provide incentive programs to attract quality teachers to hard-to-staff fields.

Rationale

Quality teachers play a crucial role in student learning. Fewer than one in four teachers receive specialized middle level preparations prior to assuming teaching positions (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

In addition to subject-area expertise, highly qualified teachers should acquire a solid understanding of pedagogy for young adolescents. The difference between content and pedagogical knowledge lies in the teacher's comprehension of different learning styles and the ability to apply that wisdom in concert with their subject-area expertise to improve individual student achievement.

Schools should hire staff members who are specifically trained for the middle level and should provide mentors and induction activities to teachers who are new to the profession or the school to encourage their retention. Schools should also engage teachers in ongoing professional development that is driven by results, based on standards, and embedded in their daily work.

Expected Outcomes

Full implementation of these policy recommendations will result, over time, in the following:

- Improvements in closing the achievement gap between White and minority students and between high- and low-income populations
- An increase in the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level on annual district and state exams
- A decrease in the number of students who require remediation courses as they transition to high school
- An increase in the number of students who make a seamless transition to high school prepared for rigorous coursework
- An increase in the number of high school graduates
- Improvement in 8th- and 12th-grade assessment results on the NAEP and TIMSS assessments.

Closing

Measurable outcomes must be established to determine if implemented strategies to improve middle level schools are effective and efficient. We must make clear, however, that no one reform strategy will determine the success of middle level school improvement efforts. The strategies outlined in this document are an important beginning and provide a systematic policy approach to implementing the recommendations from *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform*. This approach must be supported by a solid investment and a long-term commitment on the part of local, state, and federal policymakers. The cost of such an investment may seem high to some, but it pales in comparison to the human, social, and economic costs of not investing in improving our nation's middle level and high schools. We must provide all students across the K–12 continuum with learning environments in which they can learn and grow—an outcome that eventually strengthens our nation's competitiveness, productivity, and democratic ideals.

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