

Middle Start Snapshots

Improving Middle-Grades Schools



**Middle Start National Center
at the
Academy for Educational Development
100 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10011
2005**



Bendle Middle School Burton, Michigan

Our ultimate goal is to eliminate student failure at Bendle Middle School
(Sue Kenkel, Principal)

Bendle Middle School publicly stated this goal in its fall 2004 letter to parents. In this way the school communicated its continuing intent to help *each* student learn and achieve academically at the school. Bendle teachers previously had recognized a need for increased student achievement, but they had never before confidently stated that they expected and felt empowered to eliminate student failure. Their experiences in the first year of their Middle Start implementation led them to assert this goal.

Awarded a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) grant from the Michigan Department of Education in June 2003, the Bendle staff teamed with Michigan Middle Start, a middle-grades comprehensive school improvement initiative, to increase student success. Michigan Middle Start provides a range of services to each Middle Start school, including on-site coaching and monthly leadership seminars. The 2004-05 school year was Bendle's second year of partnership with Middle Start.

The School

Bendle Middle School, the only middle school in the Bendle-Burton School District, enrolls approximately 310 students in grades 6-8. The Bendle-Burton district, sandwiched between two large urban districts, is less than four square miles in area. Although neighboring districts are racially diverse, Bendle is not—its population is 97% Caucasian. Located in an economically depressed area, approximately 60% of Bendle's students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and 17% of students have been identified as needing special education services.

Principal Sue Kenkel leads a teaching staff of 20 teachers, who work in teams. In 1997 Bendle established interdisciplinary teams at each grade level and one team of exploratory teachers. Each grade-level team consists of the four core content-area teachers and one special education teacher. Teachers, in addition to their individual planning time, have a 45-minute common team planning time each day.

The Middle Start coach, Mr. David Nizinski, visits Bendle one day per week and uses this time to meet with the principal and individual teachers and attend meetings of grade-level teams, the leadership team, various committees, and the whole staff. In addition he attends professional development sessions so that he is able to follow up with teachers on the strategies presented in these sessions.

Mr. Nizinski began his work at Bendle by gaining an understanding of the school's intentions in securing the grant; becoming familiar with the leadership team, teachers, and students; and building relationships throughout the school. These relationships have provided the basis for conversations regarding various issues related to the implementation of Middle Start. The principal described Mr. Nizinski's role as a "key link" to the school's reform work:

Having a coach on site has allowed us to move forward at the pace we have. Personally I think we're making some extraordinary strides and it's because [our coach] serves as that link. He can process with staff in a different way than I can. He's viewed as a neutral party and does a terrific job conducting reflections. I think that his weekly visits have been a key link for our success here at Bendle Middle School.

Major Achievements of Bendle's Middle Start Implementation

In its first year of partnership with Middle Start, Bendle staff implemented various academic and organizational initiatives aimed at increasing student learning and achievement. With the support of the Middle Start coach, the school implemented the Middle Start-recommended ABCI grading strategy, engaged in professional development aligned with specific areas of concern, and empowered the school leadership team. These efforts were grounded in the Middle Start Principles and Practices, which emphasize ongoing inquiry into teaching and learning, the cultivation of effective small learning communities, continual improvement of student learning and achievement, and distributing leadership throughout the school community.

The school's hard work has paid off. Student scores on the state assessment test increased in reading, English/language arts, mathematics, and science. In addition, students are dealt with more equitably, teachers are engaging in collegial dialogues about teacher practice and changing their instructional approaches, and parents are becoming more involved.

Academic Initiatives

ABCI Strategy

Bendle Middle School has implemented various strategies to increase student achievement, but the most encompassing of these has been adoption of the ABCI approach (A, B, C, and Incomplete). With ABCI, students must complete all their work to a C level. Students receive an incomplete (I) if their work is either not turned in or not completed to a C level, and students must redo their work until it reaches a C level or higher, even if it takes them the entire year to do so. Students cannot receive a failing (D or E) grade and thus, student failure is not an option. Teachers diversify their instruction

and commit to monitoring students' progress and working with them until work is completed to at least a C level. Under ABCI teachers make significant connections with students, commit to success for all students, help students become internally accountable, and influence students to make outside choices that will help them succeed in school.

In June 2003, during the initial Middle Start meeting, the Bendle leadership team learned about the ABCI grading strategy and recognized that this approach could help address the school's student achievement concerns. The team decided to move forward with immediate implementation of this strategy in fall 2003. Although implementation of ABCI has not been without struggles, Bendle staff continue to refine their processes, review teacher assignments and student work, and try various approaches to engage students in learning.

Professional Development

In its CSR application, Bendle staff listed improvement in reading and writing as two primary goals. Student scores on the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) test had been inconsistent during the previous few years and typically below the state average. Based on a review of these data, staff worked with the Middle Start coach to find providers of high-quality professional development to address their needs. A primary concern was literacy, for which they chose *Strategies in Action: Reading across the Curriculum and Writing to Learn*. Other professional development included grade-level teams working with the Middle Start coach to engage in dialogue around teaching to become "higher performing." In addition, monthly Middle Start leadership seminars included a focus on studying student work, as well as on fostering internal accountability.

Organizational Initiatives

Teams

Grade-level teams have existed at Bendle Middle School since 1997, and school staff view teaming as instrumental in addressing the social, emotional, and physical needs of students and improving the overall school climate. However, Bendle teachers recognized that similar progress had not been made in increasing student achievement and that they needed a shared vision for their students reflecting high expectations for all. Teachers also acknowledged that they were using their team planning time primarily to address student behavioral issues, talk with parents, and plan team events such as field trips, rather than discussing instruction.

The ABCI strategy has turned teachers' attention to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Since teachers must follow up on all assignments, they had to change some practices in order to increase student achievement under ABCI. As a result, with guidance from the principal and the Middle Start coach, teams have begun to study student work and teacher assignments and have become more selective about assignments, ensuring that work was meaningful and even abandoning some favorite assignments that were deemed unnecessary or inappropriate. Teachers are also grappling with how to differentiate instruction to meet the learning needs of each student. Teachers differ in their knowledge of and skill with the instructional strategies needed to accommodate different students, as well as in their views on providing additional support and resources to the minority of students who have numerous incomplete assignments.

How to help this group of students achieve mastery is a challenge that the school continues to address.

School Leadership Team

Middle Start expects each CSR school to establish a leadership team including the principal and a representative group of teachers. Middle Start encourages team members to become the primary leaders in the school and, in effect, for schools to move from top-down, principal-directed leadership to distributed leadership, with teachers sharing leadership in school matters. To assist the leadership team, Middle Start provides a two-day summer seminar; in Michigan, it also provides six one-day leadership seminars during the school year. It is the leadership team's responsibility to take what is learned at these seminars back to the building staff.

Bendle had a leadership team in place before its involvement with Middle Start. However, the primary teachers' role was to provide input to the principal. To encourage shared leadership, the Middle Start coach engaged in discussions, both collectively and individually with the principal and teachers, regarding a distributed leadership model and the roles of teachers, principal, and support staff in this model. Mr. Nizinski had numerous reflective conversations about leadership, existing structures, and possible changes to benefit students.

The principal—willing to risk sharing leadership and change her leadership style—encouraged teachers to take on leadership responsibilities. As a result, the teachers on the leadership team have become strong leaders and undertaken many leadership activities, including planning and conducting staff meetings. The leadership team also established a structure for developing other teacher leaders in order to create the leadership capacity necessary to sustain the school's improvement efforts.

Achievements

State Test Scores

The Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) tests seventh-grade students in writing, reading, and English/language arts (ELA), and eighth-grade students in science, social studies, and math. The proficiency categories are "apprentice," "at basic level," "met Michigan standards," and "exceeded Michigan standards." Highlights of the MEAP scores for Bendle students include:

- In the 7th grade the percentage of students meeting or exceeding Michigan standards increased in reading and ELA. In reading there was an increase from 28.3% (2003) to 41.2% (2004) in students meeting or exceeding Michigan standards. In ELA the increase was from 24.5% to 30.9%. However, in spite of this increase in ELA scores, the school did not meet AYP in this area for special education students.
- The percentage of students meeting or exceeding Michigan standards on the grade-8 science test increased slightly from 38.1% (2003) to 39.3% (2004).
- The largest increases came in grade-8 math scores—from 31.0% in 2003 to 62.8% in 2004; the state average is 63%. This increase is attributed to an

increased and high level of coordination between math teachers in grades 7 and 8 and the adoption of a better math series for both grades, in addition to the ABCI initiative and professional development related to literacy across the curriculum.

Grades

Under the previous grading system, students could receive Ds or Es in two out of four core classes and still move to the next grade. In 2002-03, five students (1.5%), who had failed more than two classes, were retained. Under the ABCI program (initiated in 2003-04), students who did not complete work to a C level received an incomplete rather than Ds or Es, and any student who had not completed all his/her work to a C level was retained. In 2003-04, seven students (2.3%) were retained. Although this was a slightly higher percentage of retentions than in the previous year, students who were promoted moved on having learned the material to at least a C level and without the gaps in learning allowed under the previous process.

Equity

As described above, the ABCI strategy has “raised the bar” for every Bendle student and helped foster equity in the school. All students must meet the specified minimum of all work being completed to a C level, and failing grades are no longer possible for any student. This reflects a significant change in teachers’ understanding of their role. Bendle teachers recognize their responsibility to help each student be successful and can no longer tolerate underachievement—for example, because of a student’s difficult family circumstances.

School-Community Relations

Bendle Middle School continues to work toward further engagement of families in students’ education. The ABCI strategy is credited with increasing parents’ contacts with the school—with many parents now coming to the school, not to complain but to find out about their children’s work and any incompletes they might have. As a result, parents are taking an increased role in monitoring their children’s homework, and teachers are enthusiastic about the role of families in fostering their children’s education.

Summary

Middle Start services, grounded in the Middle Start Principles and Practices, are tailored to a school’s specific needs. At Bendle Middle School, a primary approach was the implementation of the ABCI strategy, adopted by Middle Start as a way to increase student learning. Undertaking such a strategy requires the cooperation and collaboration of the entire staff. The ABCI approach led teachers to examine their own practice, to see how it impacts student learning and achievement, and to assume responsibility for helping all students learn. Teachers continue to reflect on the nature of their assignments and the extent to which their assignments deepen student learning. Such reflection on teacher practice is supported by sessions in Middle Start leadership seminars on studying student work and collegial reviews.

The increasingly empowered leadership team, the principal, and other teacher leaders have facilitated the implementation of various initiatives at Bendle Middle School. This

growing leadership capacity, combined with the continuing focus on teacher practice, provides Bendle staff with many of the tools needed to expand and sustain their comprehensive school improvement efforts through the remainder of their CSR grant period and beyond.

Throughout all these efforts, the Middle Start coach played a key role in addressing staff concerns individually and collectively. He listened skillfully, asked powerful questions, and guided Bendle staff members toward consensus building and a focus on teaching and learning.

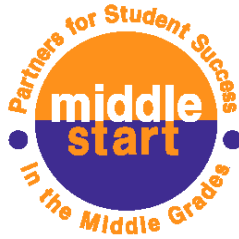
This snapshot describes Bendle Middle School's implementation of the Middle Start Principles and Practices, which provide a comprehensive and rigorous framework for middle-grades improvement. For more information, see the contact information below.



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Hamburg Junior High School Hamburg, Arkansas

Hamburg Junior High School is moving forward through its four-year partnership with Mid South Middle Start. Instructional and organizational changes, tailored to this specific school, have led to high teacher expectations for all students, increased student achievement, and stronger community support. Hamburg Junior High is now one of the best schools in the state. It is ranked tenth in the state of Arkansas and first in its region (Bob Davis, Principal)

The School

Hamburg Junior High School is located in rural southeastern Arkansas. Principal Bob Davis oversees the education of 460 students in grades 7-9. In fall 2004, student enrollment at Hamburg jumped by about 75-80 students when the state closed a neighboring low-performing district and merged its students into the Hamburg school district. A staff of 32 teachers work with the diverse student population, which is approximately 70% White and 30% African American or of mixed heritage. The school is located in an economically depressed area of the state, with about 70% of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

To become more effective in reaching all students, Hamburg staff applied to the Foundation for the Mid South for an opportunity to participate in the Mid South Middle Start school improvement initiative. Following a planning year in 2000-01, the school received a Middle Start Comprehensive School Improvement (CSI) grant from the Foundation. In 2004-05, the school was in the fourth year of its partnership with Middle Start.

Major Achievements of Middle Start Implementation at Hamburg

Hamburg Junior High, with the assistance and support of its Middle Start coach, set goals related to the specific needs of this school. Goals focused on improvements in student literacy and math achievement and in school-community relations. Activities undertaken to reach these goals included reviewing data, aligning the curriculum to state standards and across the grade levels, and strengthening teacher practice. In addition, the school

implemented organizational changes to support these instructional activities, such as restructuring into teams and developing a distributed leadership approach. There has also been considerable effort to engage the support of parents and the community at large.

These efforts were grounded in the Middle Start Principles and Practices, which emphasize ongoing inquiry into teaching and learning, effective small learning communities, continual improvement of student learning and achievement, and distributing leadership throughout the school community.

Academic Initiatives

Increased Use of Data to Change Practice

The Middle Start coach worked intensively with Hamburg staff members on the use of data to identify areas in need of improvement in student performance and teacher practice. During the past three summers, Hamburg teachers participated in a three-day retreat with the Middle Start coach, Dr. Wayne McLeod. In the first of these, Dr. McLeod provided two days of training in which he helped teachers analyze the school's Arkansas Benchmark exam scores and understand the connection between classroom instruction, literacy and math benchmarks and test items, and student scores in literacy and math.

As a result of data review, teachers recognized the need to focus on curriculum alignment and authentic assessment. In response, Dr. McLeod helped the school identify a professional development partner to work with grade-level teams and content-area teachers to align their curriculum and instruction across the three grade levels.

Teachers also studied student work to inform and improve their instructional and assessment practices for all students. At the summer retreats, a group of teachers, with the Middle Start coach as facilitator, modeled a protocol for studying student work to prepare teachers for this type of collegial review. As teachers observed the process, many of their concerns were eased, and team members have used the protocol back in the school.

Each year Hamburg teachers and students/parents participated in a survey, developed and administered by the Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois, about instruction, safety, and other aspects of the school. Data from this survey provided another source of information about student and parent attitudes and about changes in these attitudes over time.

Changes in Practices Arising from Data Review

Based on the information from these sources of data, the school instituted changes in instructional strategies and student supports. Teachers participated in professional development, and as a result, began using differentiated teaching strategies, hands-on instruction and group work, open-ended assignments, and activities fostering higher order and critical thinking skills. Teachers hold high expectations for all students and provide additional help in the form of before- and after-school tutoring and targeted special classes, and actively attempt to connect with all students. For example, after identifying the students on the line between passing and failing the state exam, teachers provide them additional support, with each teacher mentoring two or three individually. Similarly when students transferred in from the neighboring district in fall 2004, teachers arranged to

provide additional instruction for those who were significantly behind in their achievement.

Organizational Changes

Teams

The summer retreats have been used as a vehicle for increasing teachers' knowledge of Middle Start Principles and Practices and strengthening their bonds with one another. By studying student work and evaluating their progress on the Middle Start Principles and Practices and Rubrics, teachers reached a common understanding of Middle Start and their role in school improvement. For example, an art and technology teacher recognized how the school could support the curriculum and instruction of core-content teachers. The common bond built during the retreats also strengthened the teams.

Restructuring into teams was a major organizational change at Hamburg. Staff on all three grades have formed teams during the school's participation in Middle Start. The seventh grade was the only grade to restructure during the first year, and it was such a positive experience that teaming expanded to grade 8, and then, at teachers' request, to grade 9. The Middle Start coach worked with grade-level team members to help them understand young adolescents, provide a safe environment for students, and collaborate more effectively on improving instruction.

All core teachers currently participate on teams. In addition, the seventh-grade team includes elective teachers, and the eighth-grade team includes the computer technology teacher. Most students identified as needing special education services are included in regular education classes. The special education teachers are included in the grade-level teams with the most special education students. Consequently, and consistent with Middle Start's emphasis on social equity, students are grouped heterogeneously.

The grade-level teams integrate curricular activities, plan thematic units, and undertake other activities for their grades and teams—for example, competitions, recognitions, and awards to boost student morale. Teams also set common expectations, identify and address student issues, and communicate concerns to the principal. In addition, teaming has eliminated tracking and ability grouping, and student morale has improved tremendously, as students are more engaged in learning and are more successful.

School Leadership

There has been a significant change in school leadership at Hamburg. Principal Davis has made the transition to giving the school leadership team a fairly free hand to make critical decisions related to the effective implementation of school improvement goals. The leadership team initially involved only a few people appointed by the principal. It is now open to anyone willing to make the time commitment and includes teachers from all three grade levels and the counselor. The principal and assistant principal primarily serve as facilitators. However, while there is parental and community input, no parent or community member is on the leadership team.

Leadership team members, with the support of the Middle Start coach, plan and direct the grant goals and activities, listen to their colleagues, communicate with staff and seek their feedback, and share data to support recommended decisions. In addition, team members

help organize summer staff retreats, and visit other schools and attend conferences in search of additional effective strategies to further the school’s work. The leadership team has also planned teacher and student recognition programs and initiated transition activities with the fifth- and sixth-grade teachers at Hamburg’s five feeder elementary schools.

Middle Start emphasizes distributed leadership, and at Hamburg, the principal recognized the benefits of sharing leadership with teachers. In response, teachers have stepped into leadership roles and feel they have input into the goals, activities, and accomplishments of the school’s Middle Start implementation.

Achievements

As a result of these and other efforts, student literacy and math scores have increased at the school. Student scores on the Arkansas Benchmark exam, with the exception of the 2002-03 grade-8 mathematics scores, have risen consistently from the 2000-01 to the 2002-03 school years. With 85% of students at or above the proficient level, Hamburg has one of the highest eighth-grade writing scores in the state, well above the state average. Math scores have not increased as dramatically but are now at the state average. The table below shows these scores along with the district and state averages for 2002-03.

Percent at or above Proficient Level	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	District 2002-03	State 2002-03
<i>General Population</i>					
8 th -grade reading and writing literacy	47	73	85	85	49
8 th -grade mathematics	16	27	26	26	26

Although the school did not meet its Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) targets for low income, special education, and minority students, the school scored close to its targets and improved to such a degree that the school is now considered a “safe space.” In response, teachers revised their action plan for 2004-05 to add specific activities targeted to students in these groups.

School-Community Relations

It was critically important that Hamburg Junior High School build community and parental support. For two years in a row, the district attempted to pass a bond issue to expand and improve the school, and it failed each time. Various activities were organized to address this issue. For example, the principal, counselor, and a teacher from each grade went to the five feeder elementary schools to meet with parents of students entering grade 7 at Hamburg. They talked about the school’s curriculum and expectations of students, answered questions, and encouraged parents to become involved at Hamburg.

These meetings helped foster parental involvement, especially among parents from the outlying schools. To further encourage new parents to become involved, the school

simultaneously held a beginning-of-the-year student dance and parent meeting, with admission to the dance based on the student's parent attending the meeting. Since many students wanted to attend the dance, their parents attended the meeting, including some who had not participated in the meetings at the feeder schools. Later in the year, the eighth grade sponsored a chili supper where parents could work math problems from the Arkansas Benchmark exam. Students helped their parents, who came to understand the level of work expected on the exam.

Through these various activities, as well as improvements in student attitudes and achievement, parents and community members gained an increased understanding of the changes occurring in the school. Relations between the school and community improved. Consequently, not only are more parents attending meetings and volunteering at the school but the community also passed the bond issue in 2004.

Summary

For four years, Middle Start has provided coaching and other support to Hamburg Junior High School. Middle Start services were tailored to the specific situation of this school but grounded in the Middle Start Principles and Practices. These emphasize ongoing inquiry into teaching and learning, effective small learning communities, continual improvement of student learning and achievement, and distributing leadership throughout the school community. The work at Hamburg has touched on all these areas. Through analysis of the Benchmark exam scores and the study of student work, school staff monitored students' academic progress, established teams, and implemented instructional changes to help address identified concerns. With the support of the principal, teachers took on leadership responsibilities, became more directly involved in decision making, and assumed ownership of the challenges and accomplishments of their work.

Student achievement has increased, as evidenced by the Arkansas Benchmark scores. In addition, student morale has improved and parent volunteering increased. Lastly, community support of the school has improved, as seen in the passage of the bond issue. Currently, Hamburg Junior High School is considered one of the best schools in Arkansas, ranked tenth in the state and first in its region. Clearly the partnership between Mid South Middle Start and Hamburg Junior High School has helped to move this school forward and provide a stronger learning environment for all its students.

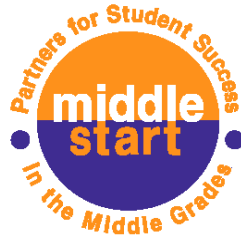
This snapshot describes the four-year partnership between Mid South Middle Start and Hamburg Junior High School to implement Middle Start Principles and Practices, which provide a comprehensive and rigorous framework for middle-grades improvement. For more information, see the following contact information.



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Northeast Middle School Meridian, Mississippi

Now in its third grant year, Northeast is seeing improvement in student achievement and learning, as a result of ongoing examination of data, provision of targeted professional development, and implementation of a variety of instructional strategies to meet the needs of all of its students. The continuing development of the school leadership team and grade-level teams bodes well for the sustaining of Northeast's school improvement efforts. (Richard Kelly, Principal)

The School

Northeast Middle School, located in east central Mississippi, enrolls approximately 714 students in grades 5-8. Approximately 47% of the student body is African American, 51% white, and 2% Hispanic or Asian. About 60% of students live in poverty, as indicated by their eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch, and nearly 13% of students have been identified as needing special education services. With a U.S. Naval Air Station in the area, there is a high turnover of students: an estimated 50% of students entering grade 5 are not enrolled in grade 8. Principal Richard Kelly heads up a staff of 54 teachers.

Northeast Middle School received a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) grant from the Mississippi Department of Education in 2002. The school selected Middle Start as its school improvement partner because of its individualized approach to helping each school address the school's specific needs within the framework of the Middle Start Principles and Practices. These Principles and Practices emphasize ongoing inquiry into teaching and learning, effective small learning communities, continual improvement of student learning and achievement, and distributing leadership throughout the school community. Currently in its third and final CSR grant year, Northeast has moved forward in all these areas. Student scores on the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT) have improved, and the school has maintained a level four (five is highest) on the state's school-based accreditation scale.

Major Achievements of Northeast’s Middle Start Implementation

Academic Initiatives

Using Data to Drive Professional Development

Northeast’s initial focus on data analysis was consistent with the Middle Start Principle and Practice addressing reflective review and ongoing inquiry into teaching and learning. Collecting and examining data in order to set teaching goals can lead to improved student learning when teachers integrate new content and strategies into curriculum and instruction.

The Northeast staff, guided by Middle Start coach John Hunt, began their Middle Start/CSR work by analyzing MCT scores at each grade level and identifying all areas in which student achievement was below 70% as areas for additional professional development. Based on this analysis, the school leadership team developed a professional development action plan for all teachers. The team and the Middle Start coach then selected qualified professional development providers. For example, the data analysis revealed that student understanding of geometric concepts was a problem at all grade levels, and a Meridian High School geometry teacher was hired to present Math Activities for Geometry Integration into the Curriculum (MAGIC) to the entire staff.

Another area of concern was measurement for fifth and seventh graders. Coach Hunt brought in a professor from Mississippi College who demonstrated the relationship of measurement to every subject area, including all electives. Similarly professional development providers addressed other identified areas such as editing and word problems. Throughout the process, the Middle Start coach worked with the leadership team to ensure that the professional development was aligned with the identified areas of need and with the action plan.

To support the implementation of the new strategies across curricular areas, the Middle Start coach observed classes to see if and how training was being implemented throughout the curriculum. During his monthly visits to Northeast, he also met with grade-level teams and individual teachers to address questions and concerns. The principal and assistant principal attended the professional development sessions so that they too could support teachers’ implementation efforts.

Throughout the professional development, Northeast teachers were encouraged to implement what they were learning in their classrooms, and teachers supported one another in the ongoing implementation of new approaches. In addition to using new content and instructional strategies, teachers also focused on students with the lowest achievement scores, with many teachers giving up their preparation time in order to work individually with students.

Organizational Changes

Northeast Middle School made two organizational changes—interdisciplinary grade-level teams and a school leadership team—to support instructional change, foster a caring learning environment for students, and develop teacher leaders to sustain improvement efforts.

Teams

During the first CSR grant year, the Middle Start coach helped Northeast develop a team schedule and organize teams; he also provided training on team building. Teams were fully established in the second grant year. Both grades 5 and 6 have two teams of core subject-area teachers: the sixth-grade teams also include a special education and an elective teacher. Grades 7 and 8 have two teams each of core teachers and, in addition, there is one team with a mix of seventh- and eighth-grade teachers.

Teams use their weekly team meeting time to, among other things, discuss curriculum and student behavior, as well as meet with parents. In addition, one person on each team who has good rapport with parents meets regularly with parents. One team member represents the team on the school leadership team to ensure two-way communication between the grade-level and the leadership teams. According to Principal Kelly and the Middle Start coach, the benefits of teaming have included improved teacher collaboration and parent-teacher conferences.

Northeast Middle School teachers are continuing to become more “high-performing,” with a focus on improved student achievement. In particular, grade-level teams are attempting to increase their focus on curriculum rather than student behavior.

School Leadership

Middle Start encourages schools to develop a distributed leadership model in which all levels of the school community are involved in school governance. To begin to share school leadership, Northeast Middle School set up a school leadership team, consisting of the principal and assistant principal, teachers from each grade-level team and all content areas, three special education teachers, and three elective teachers. Although no parents are included on the team, some teachers on the team are parents of students at the school. The team meets monthly to discuss progress on the action plan, address concerns, and plan professional development.

Gradually the school leadership team is taking on additional responsibilities, as Mr. Kelly, principal at Northeast Middle School for close to 15 years, entrusts the leadership team with decision-making power in additional areas.

Achievement

The school’s work is beginning to pay off, as evidenced by increases in student scores on the MCT. Specifically, the seventh grade showed increases in the percentage of students in the top categories of proficient and advanced in all of the tested areas—reading, language, and mathematics.

- From 2003 to 2004, the grade 7 reading scores increased from 64.8% to 73.2.
- English Language Arts scores increased from 51.2% to 78%; and mathematics scores increased from 61.6% to 68.9%.
- Increases were also seen in fifth- and sixth-grade reading and eighth-grade mathematics.

However, Northeast did not meet its Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals for special education students. Nearly 13% of students have been identified as needing special education services, and a major concern is that 80% of special education students are African American, even though African Americans make up only 47% of the school population. This situation is typical of all schools in the district and is being reviewed by the district special education office.

School/Community Relations

Northeast included improvement in relationships with parents and the community as one of its school goals, and with the restructuring into teams, teachers have been able to increase their contact with parents. The school also has developed school newsletters, and team letters and websites to keep parents up to date about activities at Northeast. Activities for parents and the community have included music and drama productions—for example, a student production of *Macbeth* in fall 2004 and informational sessions for the community, such as a presentation on Middle Start by the leadership team. Further inclusion of parents in school governance and stronger connections to the community are goals toward which Northeast continues to work.

Summary

Northeast Middle School is in the third and final year of its CSR grant, which provided funds for professional development to support the school's reform efforts. As the comprehensive school improvement provider, Mid South Middle Start provided coaching and other support to Northeast, grounding its services in the Middle Start Principles and Practices but tailoring them to the school's needs.

At Northeast an initial and continuing focus has been inquiry into teaching and learning. In particular, Northeast examined its state test scores to identify both student progress and gaps in achievement. As a result of this review, the school leadership team developed an action plan for professional development to address teachers' understanding in areas where student scores were low. The Middle Start coach guided the team members in this process, helped them maintain an alignment between goals and activities, and supported teachers as they implemented new strategies. As a result, Northeast Middle School has seen a gradual increase in student achievement. The school continues to address student achievement and equity issues—in particular by identifying students for special education services.

Through the school leadership team, teachers are developing as leaders in the school, and administrators are increasingly entrusting teachers with decision making. Northeast also continues to strengthen its relations with parents and the community. The newly established grade-level and school leadership teams have provided support for academic initiatives, allowed for increased collaboration, and offered increased opportunities for teacher contact with parents.

In sum, Northeast Middle School has established processes and structures for continuing to examine data, implement a variety of teaching approaches, and develop teacher leaders to help sustain and extend school improvement efforts made over the past three years.

This snapshot of Northeast Middle School describes the three-year partnership between Mid South Middle Start and Northeast to implement Middle Start Principles and Practices, which provide a comprehensive and rigorous framework for middle grades improvement. For more information, see the contact information below.



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