# *A WEB OF SUPPORT*

# THE ROLE OF DISTRICTS IN URBAN MIDDLE-GRADES REFORM

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**ACADEMY FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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# FOREWORD

This report presents information and strategies for implementing reform efforts in middle-grades schools. In particular, it draws on the perspectives and experiences of district administrators who participated in the Urban Middle-Grades Reform Network. First convened in 1995 and coordinated by the Academy for Educational Development (AED), the Reform Network's goal is to strengthen and extend middle-grades reform efforts in participating districts so that they are comprehensive, systemwide, and focused on the positive development and high academic achievement of all students.

Over 50 district administrators from 35 urban districts have participated in the network, which was supported by these districts and by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation as part of the foundation's ongoing support of systemic middle-grades reform. The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation provided additional support.

In particular, this report describes the challenges of reform efforts, as well as strategies for addressing these challenges. We believe this information will prove helpful to district administrators implementing reform in their districts.

Michelle Feist and I directed the work of the Urban Middle-Grades Reform Network. Ms. Feist is the primary author of this report, which she wrote with the cooperation and support of many network participants and our funders. Several AED colleagues provided advice and suggestions for the report, particularly Elayne Archer, its editor, and AED consultant Elizabeth Cassity, who helped with interviews and the literature review.

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# INTRODUCTION

The Urban Middle-Grades Reform Network is a working group of district administrators responsible for middle-grades reform. The network's goal is to strengthen and extend middle-grades reform efforts in participating districts so that they are comprehensive, systemwide, and focused on the positive development and high academic achievement of all students. The network also seeks to disseminate information about effective, districtwide middle-grades policies and practices, and advocate for systemic urban middle-grades reform, both locally and nationally.

First convened in 1995 and coordinated by the Academy for Educational Development (AED), the Urban Middle-Grades Reform Network provides a forum for district administrators to support and advance one another's middle-grades reform efforts. Over 50 district administrators from 35 urban districts have participated in the network, which has been supported by these districts and by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation as part of the foundation's ongoing support of systemic middle-grades reform. The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation provided additional support.

AED convened the group throughout the year, usually during another national conference and communicated with participants by telephone and through an e-mail listserve and website. District administrators found their colleagues from other districts extremely helpful in providing advice and assistance in areas such as leadership development, content and performance standards, professional development, use of data to support reforms, systemic reform, change management, marketing and communication, and assessment and accountability.

The following report presents information collected through these group meetings and interviews with members of the Urban Middle-Grades Reform Network, focusing on the implementation of districtwide middle-grades reform. It begins with a summary of the latest research on district-led reform efforts; summarizes what interviewed district administrators said about the change process in their districts; and ends with a summary of lessons learned and major challenges. The appendices summarize what network participants said about particular issues relevant to school reform.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON DISTRICT SUPPORT OF SCHOOL REFORM

The body of literature on systemic, districtwide school reform has grown significantly since AED first convened the Reform Network in 1995. Over this period, there has been an increased realization of the importance of the district in implementing and supporting reform, both within schools and across the district. The following section discusses this research, beginning with the research on the potential limitations of district-led reform and following with an examination of the district infrastructure needed for successful systemic reform and the roles the district can play in supporting this.

### Limitations of District-Led Reform

In the school-reform literature, there has been a great deal of focus on the limitations of the district structure in implementing and supporting reforms. In many cases, the literature has omitted the district altogether or viewed it as an impediment rather than a partner in the change effort. Spillane (1996) discusses the tendency of reform efforts to disregard the district's role in the change process as they focus more significantly on the top (national or state levels) and the bottom (schools and classrooms). In general, according to Spillane, reformers do not define the district role, and the district does not figure prominently in decentralized approaches to reform that encourage individual schools to select state-approved curriculum, models, or other schoolwide efforts.

Addressing the same point, Elmore (1999) discusses the inherent difficulty of changing schools from within the existing institutional structure. He states that standards-based reform actually undermines a basic premise of local educational governance that schools, not school districts, are the primary unit of accountability in virtually all state accountability systems. In such a system, Elmore sees districts as struggling to find a productive accountability role while a more direct relationship forms between states and schools.

Another aspect of school districts that make them potentially less effective in leading reform efforts is their complicated internal structure. Spillane (1998) describes the central office structure as "fragmented" and "segmented" and sees these traits as impediments to school reform efforts. According to Meyer and Scott (1983), the fragmented organization of the district entails the division of the central office into organizational subunits, and Kantor (1983) describes "segmentalism" as the condition where each person/department is only working with part of a problem.

Spillane cites several conditions that contribute to fragmentation and "segmentalism" in the district office. One condition is the absence of consensus on the overarching district mission; another is that school communities are very different from one another. An additional factor causing district office fragmentation is the diverse professional specializations and affiliations of district staff. This may cause administrators to pursue missions influenced by their professional ties, making them more reluctant to engage in a reform outside their expertise and more prone to implementing familiar, rather than novel, ideas.

In addition to segmentalism and fragmentation, Brewer (1996) suggests that districts are inefficient for two additional reasons: 1) there are too many administrators and noninstructional resources; and 2), the office is too centralized, hierarchical, and rule-bound. According to Spillane (1998), the district office is a "sprawling nonsystem," which lacks the organizational

coherence that Elmore (1999) describes as a precondition for effective leadership and instructional improvement. According to Spillane, the challenge for policymakers and school reformers is to develop acceptance and understanding of a new reform in the existing schemata (Spillane,1998).

Balfanz and MacIver (2000) suggest that school reform can be undone in the central office. Large school districts are multilayered but thinly staffed in sections (curriculum and instruction, assessment, best practices, equity, etc.). They also suggest that this lack of supportive infrastructure may push central office departments into a compliance role because they have to make do with the resources at hand to monitor the extent to which a reform is in accordance with other district mandates and goals. For this reason, Balfanz and MacIver believe that reform (discussed in the context of whole-school reform models) needs to be integrated into the fabric of the school district. They conclude, however, that few school districts are creating the infrastructure needed to support such districtwide whole-school reforms.

Based on the challenges described above, it becomes clear why districts may have difficulty implementing and supporting systemic school reform efforts. However, more researchers (even while acknowledging the challenges of making the district effective) believe that "without it [the district], it will be impossible to move beyond isolated islands of excellence at the classroom and school level towards the creation of powerful school systems which educate all their students" (Balfanz and MacIver 2000; 1998).

The next section discusses research on how districts can restructure their organizations and redefine staff roles to make their reform efforts more effective.

## District Infrastructure Needed to Implement and Support Reforms

Most recent literature sees the appropriate role of central office not as a "dictator" of reform efforts but as a "facilitator" and "mediator" between levels of the districtwide structure, and as a "partner" working closely with communities and schools. Many researchers, including Spillane (1996), David (2001), and Elmore (1999), believe that district administrators are crucial in mobilizing local support for policy implementation, a key component of school reform. Spillane (1996) emphasizes the important district role as a mediator between state policies and school implementation, stressing that districts have more power in this role than they often use. He sees districts as poised to take a more active policymaking stance, defining their own problems and developing their own instructional policies.

### *The District as Mediator and Facilitator*

Schlechty (1990) offers several practical reflections on the district's role in school reform. His model is embedded in the idea that students are "clients" of a "knowledge-work" organization managed by leaders with a shared vision. The following are appropriate characteristics of a district role in this system:

- Participatory leadership and shared decision-making between district offices and school administration and teachers;
- District responsiveness to building-level initiatives;

- Engaging the participation of teachers and principals, often left out of this level of the restructuring process;
- Engaging the public that involves the community in the school, as well as business-school partnerships, and foundation funding.

In examining the most effective ways that districts can expand their capacity to support reform at the building level, Schlechty (1997) examines 10 goals to which district leaders must attend. Some of these goals are:

- Develop a shared understanding of the nature of the problem among the leaders of the reform efforts;
- Develop a compelling vision of what schools can be and how they can be related to the community consistent with well-articulated beliefs;
- Develop a clear focus on the student as the primary customer of the work of the school and on the needs and expectations of those supporting the students;
- Develop results-oriented management system and quality-focused decision making process;
- Develop a policy environment and a management system that
  - fosters flexibility and rapid response;
  - encourages innovative used of time, technology and space; and
  - encourages novel and improved staffing patterns;
- Ensure continued support for innovative efforts after initial enthusiasm wanes, as long as the efforts continue to produce desired results.

Schlechty maintains that districts must provide systems of training, incentives, and social and political support for those committed to the above objectives.

Elmore (1999) expands on the research by introducing the idea of "distributed leadership." This entails "multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture." This type of leadership requires the cooperation of state, district, external, and school partnerships and also clear communication among these groups.

Watson, Fullan, and Kilcher (2000) describe the district challenge in facilitating change as entailing "listening to local needs, providing resources and support as required," and also "keeping some distance from the service itself." The authors list the following as "critical components of a supportive district infrastructure":

- Shared vision and common priorities;
- Expectations about professional learning and a culture that views this as a crucial part of a teacher's life in the system;
- A conducive political climate;
- Connections between teacher learning and teacher evaluation; and

- Smooth labor relations.

District administrators can help create this infrastructure by working closely and cooperatively with different internal and external groups.

Building on this leadership structure, Watson, Fullan, and Kilcher (2000) focus on the role of the district in professional development in this type of decentralized system. The authors use a model developed by Bryk et al. (1998) to highlight critical functions that must be developed in a central district with decentralized responsibilities. The following would exist in these systems:

- Support for policymaking fostering decentralization within broad system expectations;
- Focus on local capacity building;
- Commitment to rigorous accountability (tracking progress and intervening in failing situations); and
- Focus on stimulating innovation (and diffusing effective improvement efforts).

To support these changes, Watson, Fullan, and Kilcher (2000) maintain that both "local school development" and the "quality of the surrounding infrastructure" are critical for "lasting success."

**Structure of Relationship Between the District Office and Schools/Community**

To put the "ideal" district infrastructure in place, district administrators need to make significant changes in the way they relate to schools within the district. Similar to the view of the district as facilitator and mediator, Libler (1992) sees the district's role as centering around creating "clear and stable policies, expectations for improvement, and strong systems of support" to help schools become more effective. Libler provides a checklist that outlines the areas where districts have a strong role in reform.

- ***Curriculum***
  The central office provides technical assistance, materials, and resources, and establishes a curriculum framework.
- ***Personnel***
  The central office does initial screening of school staff and keeps a pool of staff for schools to hire from.
- ***Budget***
  The central office shifts decisions on spending to schools and serves to monitor budgets.
- ***Training and staff development***
  The central office provides assistance for effective school leadership, teacher improvement, and parent involvement, all in support of student achievement.
- ***Monitoring student progress***
  The central office assists schools with assessment of student progress and provides data in helpful, disaggregated format.

- ***Commitment***
  The central office is knowledgeable about effective schools and current research.

- ***Data resources***
  The central office provides money, time, and tools for collecting and using data to make good decisions.

Balfanz and MacIver (1998 and 2000) describe the district office role in maintaining high academic standards as "create[ing], support[ing], and sustain[ing] the high-performing learning environments which produce broad-based gains in academic achievement at the school and classroom level." They repeat and elaborate on some of the important district roles mentioned above in providing support and guidance in selecting curriculum, setting up and sustaining an infrastructure for professional development, and providing school staff with "multiple layers of sustained support." According to Balfanz and MacIver, the district role includes:

- ***Institutionalizing curriculum-centered staff development***
  Districts can play a large part in institutionalizing this type of staff development by examining their policies on pay, staffing, and scheduling to make sure that they are supportive of the idea.

- ***Monitoring and controlling teacher movement across the district***
  To support increased staff development, districts need to make sure that the teacher is not arbitrarily assigned to another grade, subject, or school.

- ***Creating and maintaining strong learning environments***
  Districts can demonstrate how whole schools can be effectively reformed and foster district capacity by directly involving district personnel in these efforts. This also entails identifying the district policies that must be changed to support the widespread adoption of effective practices and working with the school district to establish infrastructure (continuous professional development, in-classroom implementation support, organizational assistance, and productive use of data) for large-scale diffusion of effective practices.

- ***Supporting high-poverty schools***
  Districts can provide teachers with the tools (instructional programs) they need to move the standards movement from rhetoric to reality in high-poverty schools

- ***Providing assistance and freedom to schools in restructuring***
  Districts can help schools re-organize their scheduling, staffing, and budgeting to support school reform. They can also order and deliver materials to teachers to diagnose school climate problems (attendance, discipline problems, etc.), help them implement interventions, and assist in conceptualizing leadership roles and responsibilities.

Another important relationship that districts must maintain for effective reforms is effective public engagement. Kimpton and Considine (1999) address the issue of district-led public engagement as a means to do the following:

- Galvanize communities to ensure student success and health;

- Pass levies or bond money for school improvement;

- Provide collective responsibility and shared accountability; and
- Empower multiple leaders in the reform.

### Changing Relationships within the Central Office

Beaumont (1998) describes the structural changes necessary in the district office to make some of the changes discussed above. He focuses on the three levels of educational leadership in the district (the principal, the central office administration, and the school system superintendent) and suggests that they are often viewed as a hierarchy rather than a "leadership triad," which he deems a more useful concept in terms of describing effective district support of reform. To support the changes that come with districtwide reform, Beaumont believes this notion of the district hierarchy should be examined and an increased understanding and appreciation of political and professional relations developed.

The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL, 2001) notes that good district leadership requires three types of leadership—organizational, public, and instructional—and recommends the following district activities to foster them:

- ***Plan for recruitment and succession***
  This requires districts to "design and install fail-safe systems for recruiting, targeting, and professionally supporting top-quality leaders."
- ***Create and maintain an informed leadership base***
  This would include school board members, superintendents, and professional associations and should promote preparation programs, ongoing training, and networking opportunities to help educators update their leadership knowledge and skills on a continuing basis.
- ***Build a learning organization***
  This entails aligning districts, school board members, and the leadership team to support the goal of improved student achievement.
- ***Holding leadership accountable***
  This can be done by adopting professional standards, professional development requirements, accountability systems, and evaluation and research programs for superintendents and school board members.

Research shows that, while the district office structure makes it difficult for the district to support systemic reform efforts, the support of the district is necessary if successful reforms are to be scaled up. Several districts across the country, including members of the Urban Middle-Grades Reform Network, have taken on the challenge of implementing districtwide reform that is supported from the central office and responsive to the needs of schools. These districts have learned many lessons along the way. The remainder of this report looks at the efforts of these districts to practice what is recommended in the research.

# SUPPORTING DISTRICTWIDE SCHOOL REFORM: INTERVIEWS WITH NETWORK PARTICIPANTS

## Introduction

AED conducted a series of interviews with 14 representatives from 12 districts that have actively participated in the Urban Middle-Grades Reform Network. Those interviewed reflected the larger Reform Network in their diversity. They included representatives from a variety of geographic locations, from Anchorage, Alaska to Charlotte, North Carolina. While the districts were all urban, they ranged in size in terms of number of middle-grades schools, from two to over 80 and were in very different stages of their school improvement process. The districts had middle-grade configurations in their schools that included traditional grades 6-8 middle schools as well as schools with grades K-12, K-8, 7-8 and 7-12.

The interviews focused on the following areas:

- Managing districtwide reform and the change process;
- Supporting specific school-level changes, including improvements in student achievement; and
- Engaging the community in middle-grades reform.

Through the interviews, district administrators discussed the various roles they played in supporting reform, addressed many themes discussed in the above literature, and also elaborated on themes that came out in Reform Network meetings. Administrators from the following districts participated in the interviews and contributed ideas for this report: Albuquerque, New Mexico; Anchorage, Alaska; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina; Corpus Christi, Texas; Detroit, Michigan; Jackson, Mississippi; Jefferson County, Kentucky; Little Rock, Arkansas; Memphis, Tennessee; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Plainfield, New Jersey.

## Background of Interviewees

The district administrators interviewed came from diverse roles and backgrounds. Participants included deputy and associate superintendents; directors of curriculum and instruction; directors of education and school services; coordinators of middle-level education; and heads of district offices of school reform. All interviewees had oversight of middle-grades instructional and structural improvements as part of their work, but not all focused exclusively on the middle grades; several had work that centered on secondary education or K-12 education.

Although their duties varied, all interviewees were responsible for implementing reforms designed to improve teaching and learning in the middle grades, arranging and conducting professional development activities for principals and teachers, developing and assessing curriculum and instruction, and supporting media and publicity for middle schools. Some were also responsible for managing grants supporting their reform work; working with developers of whole-school-reform models in the schools; supervising groups of teachers; managing middle school budgets; and facilitating networks of schools and personnel across the district.

The district administrators in the sample, and in the Reform Network as a whole, are representative of urban district administrators across the country in their roles and job descriptions, although they may not be representative in the way they approach reform. All active districts administrators in the Reform Network made significant efforts to join national networks, attend numerous conferences and meetings on middle-grades reform, seek the advice of experts in the field, and stay informed about the latest research. Furthermore, many districts in the Reform Network have had significant financial and other support from intermediary organizations, foundations, and consultants in helping them improve middle-grades education.

Even with this knowledge and support, these districts have dealt with numerous problems when implementing their reforms and have learned some valuable lessons about the reform process. In Reform Network meetings and in interviews, district administrators were often asked to reflect on their vision of an ideal system, in terms of the district's support of school reform efforts. Their reflections on this question are included in the next section of this report. All interviewees maintained that they had not achieved this ideal in their district.

Reform Network administrators' discussions about the change process are presented below in the following areas: the initial push for change; goals and vision; pace and introduction of reforms; resistance to reform; easing the transition when implementing reforms; cultural change in the district; institutionalizing reforms; and managing turnover and change in the district office.

### The Initial Push for Change

A majority of interviewed administrators started their middle-grades reforms in the early 1990s. The reforms in these districts were almost all modeled after the recommendations in the first *Turning Points* publication released in 1989. These reforms had a strong emphasis on changing schools structurally and making them more developmentally responsive to young adolescents.

Most of the remaining districts implemented reform during another wave of middle-grades reforms in the mid-1990s. This coincided with the introduction of a significant amount of money and interest from foundations in reforming the middle grades and included a stronger focus on standards and academic achievement. Districts that started their reforms early re-examined these reforms years later in light of the new focus on academic rigor and standards, the end of social promotion, high-stakes standardized testing, and the recent emphasis on equity. In all but the smallest districts, structural reforms were phased in over a number of years.

**Focus and Priority Over Money**

One district received a significant grant from a foundation to carry out strong, research-based reforms. Because there was no backing from the superintendent, the reforms did not progress, and very few changes came about as a result of them. In subsequent years, the foundation pulled funding from the district and an energetic reform-minded superintendent replaced the previous one. The new superintendent placed a priority on reforming the middle grades. With little outside money, the district has seen years of steady improvement in its middle-grades schools. In this case, while support for the changes existed on many levels and funding was in place, change and improvement did not occur until a superintendent came in who could support and lead the effort.

The initial impetus for change in the districts came from a variety of different sources. For some, it came from a major foundation such as the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, which, through its direct work and the networks it created, pushed for a cultural change in districts and schools. In other districts, the push for change came from a strong, dynamic superintendent. In a few

districts, the parents and community lobbied for change in the middle schools and pushed the district and the schools in this direction. Finally, in a couple of districts, changes in district regulations such as desegregation laws, increases in district funding, and other policy changes freed up funds or opened a window for widespread change in the middle schools.

Districts supported reforms in a variety of different ways, including local and national foundation grants, redeployed district funds, and funds from district and statewide programs, as well as community organizations and businesses. Districts with the greatest amount of money dedicated to the middle grades also had aggressive grant-seeking campaigns that often included a dedicated staff member responsible for identifying and applying for funds. Interviewees agreed that the amount of money dedicated to reforms was an important factor in their success or failure. However, while district administrators believed strongly that the availability of funds could strengthen a push for reform efforts and provide a means to implement them, they also maintained emphatically that, without a strong advocate inside the school district, funding alone could never foster effective reform. Further, they also acknowledged that, when striving toward districtwide reform, the *alignment* and *focus* of district resources around a strong, visible set of goals could be as important as the amount of money and other resources available.

Lastly, while interviewees acknowledged the importance of their own advocacy and of funding, they all agreed that if the superintendent was not a strong and vocal advocate for change in the district, reform would not be effective. The superintendent not only had to speak out in favor of changes but also had to be willing to allocate resources, time, and attention to the problems faced by students in the middle-grades. In short, interviewees suggested that the continuous and strong support of the superintendent was the key to creating ongoing, effective, and systemic middle-grades reforms.

### Goals and Vision

When discussing the goals and vision of their reforms, interviewees listed three basic types of reform: 1) *Turning Points*-based reform; 2) standards-based reform; and 3) reforms addressing the creation of "high-performing middle schools" and issues of equity.

All interviewed district administrators said that the initial goal of their reform efforts was to change their intermediate schools from junior high schools to middle schools based on the principles outlined in *Turning Points.* This included creating a system for looking at the "whole child" by establishing caring, supportive environments that value adolescents. In many cases, this involved introducing elements such as smaller learning communities, interdisciplinary teaching, and teaming into the schools.

Ultimately, and in some cases simultaneously, this structural and developmental goal was combined with a stress on rigorous academic content and standards and eventually an increased focus on instruction. Although this standards movement has become national in scope and affects all levels of schooling, many district administrators interviewed said that their middle schools started to focus on standards before other schools in the district and have been used as examples. They attributed this in great measure to a strong emphasis on standards by funders such as the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

Another impetus for district-level reforms came as reform-minded districts increased their focus on equity issues and achievement gaps, both within schools and across the district. Interviewees who mentioned this as a central or growing priority in their reforms tended to come from districts that had been implementing middle-grades changes for several years. These districts had stayed closely connected to various networks and research on middle-grades reform (particularly the work of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform) or had state policies or outside public/private funding requiring schools to examine and close equity gaps. Administrators in these districts described creating "high-performing middle schools" based on a vision that encompassed academic excellence, developmental appropriateness and social equity.

**A Late-Reform School**

One large district in the Reform Network started to change from junior high schools to middle schools in the in the mid-1990s. The initial changes were mostly structural but quickly expanded, partly in response to policies and practices promoted by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. The district started to spread the idea of "high-performing middle schools," with ambitious academic benchmarks, and networked with other districts that had been implementing reforms for a number of years. District representatives were also able to visit schools that had integrated new approaches to academics, adolescent development, structure, and equity into their schools. To see the vision manifested in similar schools allowed the district to roll out reforms in a way that was much more strategic than the earlier efforts, and it has started to see positive academic improvements among students.

### Pace and Introduction of Reforms

The districts that started their reforms more recently developed a vision that addressed the three types of reforms listed above (a supportive environment, academic standards, and equity) at once, while others addressed these three issues more gradually. District administrators discussed positive and negative aspects of each approach. Administrators from the "late-reform" districts (those starting their middle-grades reforms more recently) said that they felt overwhelmed as they simultaneously introduced the middle school concept, increased academic standards, focused on equity, and dealt with new accountability and a shift in roles of teachers and principals to become leaders in reform efforts. This approach tended to overwhelm school staff and also was a challenge for the district to support, especially as the district saw itself having to change internally to support the schools.

The "early-reform" districts spoke of the advantages of rolling out their reforms gradually over time. However, some mentioned that each time something new was introduced into the middle schools, the staff saw it as a "new" effort, and the district had to find effective ways to integrate it into what was already happening in the schools. Generally, districts emphasized that the process of reform on all levels needed to be ongoing and continuously assessed, regardless of the length of time or the approach to implementation. They also emphasized the need to introduce new efforts in a way that integrated them into what was already going on in the schools and monitoring the schools so that all new money and programs coming in fed into their existing reform efforts.

### Resistance to Reform

In general, district administrators described the start of a change process as extremely challenging, with much initial resistance from the schools and the community-at-large to dramatic change. District administrators asserted that the type of resistance from each of these

groups was different and had to be addressed accordingly. The resistance also differed, depending on the nature and stage of the reforms being implemented. In addressing this resistance, district administrators maintained that it was important to develop a clear, consistent message about middle-grades reform and to communicate that message repeatedly with key people in the school and community.

***Resistance from School Staff***

Interviewees said that school staff were concerned about the new ways they had to operate (working in teams, teaching interdisciplinary units, etc.) and also about teaching a new group of students whom they considered of elementary-school age. Because teachers were trained in either primary or secondary education, they often had little understanding of teaching middle-grades students. In many districts, the introduction of reforms led a number of teachers trained for secondary schools to transfer out of middle schools to the high schools, and, often, elementary school teachers came into the middle schools to replace them. These new staff members tended to bring a greater developmental focus than teachers trained in secondary education but were not as skilled in the content areas. Districts eventually had to examine and restructure the way they offered professional development in order for changes to be effective. In many cases, this meant making professional development more site-based and responsive to the individual needs of schools. Many of these early changes also increased tension with the unions.

Once standards were introduced into the reforms, staff needed increased professional development in both content and pedagogy to increase their effectiveness. District administrators coordinated these efforts across schools. The introduction of standards also changed the ways that school leaders operated. In support of the academic changes in schools, districts started to rethink the ways leaders were trained and introduced new leadership academies and leadership development programs.

In general, districts felt that they could introduce standards into the schools and provide professional development to improve the academics and increase rigor, but if student outcomes did not change *significantly*, their efforts were not deemed successful. Therefore, many schools saw resistance to the academic reforms not at the beginning but after a period of implementation with limited results.

***Resistance from the Community***

Community concerns focused on the fact that the district was creating schools that were structurally very different from those most community members had attended as adolescents and feared that these new schools would have negative effects on their children's education.

**Examples of Programs Addressing Community Concerns**

**An academic-standards hotline** for teachers and parents to answer questions about standards and take recommendations from callers.

**A middle school advocacy group,** independent of the district, to organize parents and community members around schools and standards

**Parent participation** on site-based decision-making teams.

**Community task force** to study the academic situation and provide recommendations in developing the district strategic plan.

**Community forums** planned around issues of interest to parents, such as retention and promotion policy, student achievement, and whole-school reform.

**School-based town meetings** on school report cards.

Administrators noted that reforms often met with angry letters, protests, parents' picketing middle school events, and people's spreading negative information about middle schools (much

collected from the Internet and other districts). Administrators addressed these concerns by providing information on why the schools were changing, as well as basic research on the positive aspects of the middle-grades structure. District administrators learned to be "armed with information" in a clear, readable form and to be very vocal and assertive in their campaign for middle schools.

### Easing the Transition When Implementing Reforms

Districts used a number of approaches to ease the transition entailed in implementing reform. Resistance was always greater from school staff and unions when schools perceived the reforms as being "top-down." These feelings did not necessarily go away with time and, in some instances, increased if not addressed. All interviewees described disenfranchised school staff who tried to sabotage reforms in the schools, and all districts had teachers leave the schools when reforms were implemented. District administrators felt that it was important for the superintendent to make it clear that reforms were permanent and were a priority so that teachers knew that it was not possible to "wait them out" as a passing fad in the schools.

Because the goal of reform efforts in the districts was to implement systemic and districtwide change, it was necessary to have some coordination and guidance from the central office. However, district staff had to find ways to give the schools a greater voice in the reforms. Interviewees felt that superintendents had to be more open, address comments from the schools, provide support, and put some time into making school staff comfortable with the new system. The following list includes strategies that districts used to ease the reform transition in schools:

- ***Hire a vocal advocate for change to attend to reforms in the middle grades***
  Many districts appointed a person dedicated specifically to middle schools to work closely with schools either in reaction to, or anticipation of, school-based transition problems. Many district administrators interviewed were selected to play this role. District administrators felt it was very important that district staff be visible in the schools during the transition to bridge the gap between the central office and the schools. They also felt that it was important to have someone who could explain to a large, diverse group of people across the district why change was necessary.

- ***Create a strategic "phase-in" of reforms***
  Districts were able to address some transition issues by phasing their reforms in cohorts of schools. This caused less strain on central office resources and allowed cohorts to improve their efforts by sharing lessons and learning from one another. This also potentially allowed schools with high levels of readiness to change first while others were given more time to prepare. Districts that provided schools with a year of planning also reported having an easier time during the transition period.

- ***Arm yourself with research***
  Research proved to be a powerful tool in the face of "transition adversity." Interviewees mentioned that the national research allowed districts to see themselves in the context of a larger movement—as doing something that many other districts across the country were doing or had already done—rather than as undertaking reforms in isolation. This made the transition easier. Interviewees also stated that it proved useful to "saturate" the community

and schools with research and "success" stories of districts where reforms had been fully implemented.

- ***Measure and report short-term outcomes***
  Although few districts of interviewed administrators did this, many interviewees talked about the importance of doing formative evaluation of reforms and constantly monitoring changes. They also mentioned the importance of setting a variety of benchmarks for the short and long term. Doing this allowed them to track, report, and celebrate preliminary outcomes and assess the extent to which schools were implementing the reforms as planned.

- ***Work with unions from the beginning***
  Interviewees whose districts worked from the onset to include the union in discussions and collaborated with them to develop "win-win" strategies, maintained that this made the transition smoother. In general, district administrators said that open lines of communication were important between the district office and the schools, community, and union. This in itself entailed a culture change in most places.

- ***Develop a plan for communicating with schools and the community***
  Interviewed district administrators emphasized the importance of explaining both the purpose and content of reforms to ensure that different "publics" understood the reason for, and the nature of, proposed changes. Interviewees in districts that gave staff and community members an opportunity to express opinions, feelings and concerns about reforms, maintained that this helped ease the transition. Interviewees also maintained that it was important that district staff attend school team meetings and meet regularly with principals so that "reform is not seen as ending with principals and teacher leaders."

### Cultural Change in the District

District representatives all agreed that it took one to two years to develop a critical level of buy-for reform efforts, both in schools and communities, and one to two years more to start to see the changes that would allow reforms to become embedded in the school system. However, interviewees also agreed that it was difficult to get people to buy into the reforms until they started to see positive effects on students in the district.

The most common change that district administrators cited was schools' and districts' acceptance of academically rigorous middle schools as the most effective way to teach young adolescents. Changes came in other forms as well. As a result of the reforms, districts started to decentralize power and allow schools more autonomy; school leaders communicated frequently with one another and district staff; and, just as important, principals and teachers started to see themselves as instructional leaders. The district office restructured to support these changes by focusing more on content and instruction in the middle grades. These were all significant changes in previous district norms.

### Institutionalizing Reforms

After years of reforming middle-grades education, many districts in the Reform Network consolidated and institutionalized their reforms. A few districts have been successful in developing or lobbying for middle-grades teacher certification at local universities. Many

districts created permanent central office positions dedicated to the middle grades, and some created offices for middle school reform with a large dedicated staff working on these issues. Some districts have seen years of sustained improvements in the performance of middle-grades schools, and this has given them the confidence to make their changes permanent. However, interviewees stressed that there would always be resistance, even after cultural changes and improvements are realized. They believed it was important to engage the community throughout the reform process and to continue to get out key messages about both why change is needed and why the changes being implemented are the most appropriate.

### Managing Turnover and Change in the District Office

Transition periods in the district office (in particular, at the level of superintendent) can pose problems. One obvious problem is that of a new leader coming in with a different agenda and drastically changing reforms already underway. Related to this are the financial problems that this turnover may provoke. Interviewees spoke about new leaders who promoted their own agendas and gave substantially more money to their preferred areas, taking away money that was set aside for middle-grades reform. For instance, one district administrator described a transition period when a new superintendent wanted to focus on elementary school reading and took all reading teachers out of the middle schools, moving them into the elementary schools. This negatively affected the middle school teams and the literacy levels in the middle schools, and caused overcrowding in the classrooms.

District representative agreed that, in an ideal system, someone in the district would ensure that reforms stayed on track and that this individual would be in the position long enough for a transformation to occur. However, given the high rate of turnover in the district office, administrators felt that it was important to work towards becoming less vulnerable to personnel changes. In particular, interviewed administrators discussed ways to keep changes in district superintendents from negatively affecting middle-grades reforms. To ease these periods of transition, district administrators suggested the following:

- ***Create advocates on the school board who support middle-grades reform***
  Interviewees maintained that it was important for the school board to understand and support the reforms and to advocate for high-achieving middle schools. This required a more conscious attempt to keep the board informed about changes in middle-grades education. In districts that kept the school board abreast of middle-grades issues, it paid off: the boards replaced a departing superintendent with another reform-minded person who supported middle schools. However, given that board members are always changing, district administrators maintained that keeping board members abreast of reform was an ongoing effort.

- ***Focus reforms on state or local standards***
  Some district administrators believed that their reforms remained steady during transition because the professional development and structure of the reforms were aligned with state and local standards and the district's accountability system. This not only provided a focus on accountability and results for student performance but also gave the reforms a structure embedded in the district that made it difficult to change in times of transition.

- ***Use large grants from outside foundations/initiatives as leverage***
  Foundation grants often provided focus during transition, with the foundation keeping reforms on track. However, districts that experienced a change in leadership that was not fully supportive of the middle-grades reform were in danger of having the foundations pull out, losing a large sum of money and risking severe disruptions in their middle schools.

- ***Institutionalize the position of a district middle-grades staff person within the district office***
  According to interviewed district administrators, transition was smooth when the individual in charge of the middle grades remained consistent throughout leadership changes. Unfortunately, many interviewees (including some who have recently left their districts) were not confident that their position would remain when they left and maintained that superintendents supportive of middle-grades reform should try to make the position as permanent as possible in the district office.

- ***Work closely with outside community organizations***
  In districts with strong community support for reforms, community members and groups have advocated for reforms during periods of transition. In effect, these groups functioned as a strong external accountability system to keep subsequent administrations on task.

- ***Increase leadership development activities at the school level and support schools in developing these leaders***
  These leaders can help keep individual schools on track during changes. If schools have strong leaders and advocates for reform, they will work to keep any significant changes in the district from affecting their reform effort.

- ***Link middle-grades school reform with reform on other levels***
  This ensures that reform efforts are not isolated but part of a system of change.

- ***Fund changes in the schools through reallocation of existing funds***
  Interviewees felt that, when faced with district budget cuts, it was an advantage that middle-grades reform efforts not be seen as special programs supported exclusively by external funding. Administrators in districts that developed their reforms as homegrown "middle school" models supported mainly by redeployed funding believed that their reforms were safer during times of transition.

## MAJOR CHALLENGES IN SUPPORTING AND IMPLEMENTING REFORMS

District administrators were asked to discuss the challenges they faced in supporting systemic reform at the district level. One theme that all interviewed district administrators expressed was their vision of themselves as "lone crusaders" who often single-handedly had to keep the issue of middle-grades improvement a high priority in the district, the community, and even in the schools. Administrators were also challenged by their position as mediators in the system between the schools implementing reforms and the superintendent who had the ultimate say over the direction of the reforms.

Interviewees also spoke of the following challenges:

- ***Keeping schools behind the reforms, especially when they become increasingly demanding***
  District administrators often felt as if they were constantly pushing schools to move forward, with staff feeling overburdened and "burned out."

- ***Prioritizing time and energy, given the sheer scope of reforms***
  As district administrators started to move into a greater support/facilitator role, they felt frustrated because they could not spend a significant amount of time with each school and often had to prioritize their time based on the need of the school. In some cases, this left schools feeling that they needed more support to implement reforms effectively and that the district was not providing this support.

- ***Fostering a positive relationship between schools and the district***
  Some district administrators described the challenge or working with those schools that perceived the district as operating in a top-down way and tended to hide things from the central office. It was difficult to convince these schools that districts wanted to work with them differently and encourage them to call the district with problems, instead of hiding them.

- ***Planning strategically and building in time for reflection and planning***
  District administrators needed reflection time built into to their jobs to allow them to review reforms, learn from mistakes, and change course if necessary. They felt that the district structure did not support this.

- ***Keeping a focus on middle-grades reforms in the absence of improvements in student achievement***
  Districts found it increasingly difficult to maintain the focus on reform, especially in years two and three when people did not see significant improvements in student outcomes. Interviewees said that frustrations started to build when people felt that efforts were wasted and reforms were not working. When districts did not see changes in subsequent years, they felt pressure to change the course of the work and, in some cases, to place a greater focus on elementary or high schools or to back off from the research-based reform efforts they were implementing.

- ***Viewing setbacks not as reflections of reform models but as reflections of faulty implementation and low school capacity***
  Interviewees said they were constantly dealing with critics in the district who, faced with failure in the schools, wanted to stop changes in the middle schools and introduce something

completely new. On the other hand, interviewees often wanted to deal with school failures by increasing capacity through professional development and assessing reforms that may have not been fully implemented.

- ***Figuring out how to move an organization as large as a district in any one direction*** District administrators said that they ultimately realized that they only had limited control over the changes in the district. They came to believe that their goal was to manage the existing change in a way that made sense and to point everyone in the same direction.

## SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED

Many lessons learned by the district administrators have been described above in their accounts of their districts' implementation of reforms. The lessons summarized in this section focus on the importance of creating widespread commitment, changing the culture of the schools and district, and being realistic about the time it takes to implement reforms (several years of hard work, with constant reinforcement). Interviewees found that they had to change attitudes, school climate and district culture before they could attempt to make deep changes in the schools. All described the necessity of a proper and focused planning time. Finally, for changes to be effective, district administrators emphasized that middle-grades reform had to remain a priority in the district, in terms of the resources (money, time, etc.) allocated to the schools and also the amount of attention given by the superintendent to middle-grades reform.

Interviewees presented the following additional lessons learned when rolling out reforms:

- ***Set priorities.***
  Interviewees said that they ran into problems when they tried to target everything at once. Interviewees spoke about being pushed to address many areas at once and said that one of the biggest problems in systemic change was developing a focus.

- ***Determine an appropriate district structure for reforms***
  This structure should be based on the size of the district and build on the existing organization as much as possible. It should also take into account how the superintendent and other staff can operate most efficiently.

- ***Start with a clear vision.***
  This vision should be articulated and promoted by staff on all levels. District administrators agreed that the ups and downs of supporting school change could be substantial but asserted that it was vital to choose goals that the district could "rally around, stick to, and never abandon."

- ***Place people with middle-grades students as their primary concern in the district office.***
  This could be an office of middle or secondary school reform in the district office, a district administrator in charge of middle-grades reform, or a specialist in curriculum and instruction with middle-grades education as a priority. These individuals should keep up on the latest research on the middle grades and ensure that the changes in the schools remain on track. They should also play the role of "the cheerleader downtown," advocating for middle-grades education to the school board, local government, the community, and the schools. Interviewees said that this person should have complete support from the leadership in the district.

- ***Do not implement reforms in isolation.***
  Interviewees spoke of the importance of external organizations and networks that could provide information for district administrators, creating internal networks of staff across schools to allow them to discuss reforms, and communicating with elementary and high schools to align reforms. Districts also discussed the importance of external networks and consultants who put them in touch with others across the country doing similar work.

- ***Be aware of the different levels of readiness across schools.***
  District administrators said that when they pushed changes on schools that were not ready, reforms backfired. They asserted that some schools needed extra support and attention, staff had to be given time to do the work of implementing the reforms, and the district needed to be cognizant of school readiness and capacity.

- ***Provide site-based professional development to schools.***
  Interviewees agreed that, in addition to centralized professional development, there needed to be more decentralized opportunities as well. They saw these as being job-embedded, on site, and followed up with a site-based staff member to coach during implementation. Site-based coaches should be monitored to ensure that their skills are up to date and that their roles are aligned with, and supportive of, overall school plans.

- ***Move beyond single-district positions that support middle-grades reform.***
  Interviewees talked about the need to have school-based professionals (coaches, reform facilitators, etc.) to support instructional changes in the schools and provide support that central office staff could not provide. They found it necessary, however, to monitor these positions to make sure that the school did not usurp them by replacing their instructional function with other administrative tasks.

- ***Use data to inform school and district decisions to measure success and make improvements.***
  Interviewees maintained that using data about student outcomes in the district was vital, both to ensure that reform efforts were addressing student needs and to convince parents and community members of their importance.

- ***Work together across district departments to support reform.***
  District administrators maintained that the change process was more successful when the district staff in different offices worked well with one another. Thus, it was necessary to foster new relationships between staff in the offices of curriculum and instruction, research, personnel, assessment, school reform, and others.

- ***View professional development as an ongoing series of activities focused on high student achievement instead of one-shot events.***
  Districts need to be more realistic about the amount of time required to make deep changes and should see professional development as a long-term strategy and as an integral part of the daily routine of every school.

Interviewed district administrators also discussed the lessons learned as they tried to move from theory to practice. While they all agreed that the research on school reform was not only useful—even crucial in implementing their reforms—they acknowledged that they encountered several problems finding the right balance in customizing the changes to their specific situations, as described below.

- ***Balance between autonomy and supervision***
  Interviewees acknowledged that schools needed the freedom to take risks, while districts needed to find ways to evaluate and supervise school efforts to provide appropriate leadership and guidance.

- ***Balance between top-down and bottom-up***
  While interviewees felt that people in the schools should be included in developing school-based plans and reforms, they also felt that the district needed to create a framework and provide direction in order for a group of schools to succeed.

- ***Balance between support and pressure***
  Interviewees found that their efforts were smoother when people in the schools felt appreciated. Therefore, they tried to find the right balance between demanding compliance and providing assistance.

- ***Balance between speed of reform and buy-in***
  Interviewees warned against trying to implement reforms too quickly and said that reaching a critical level of buy-in was just as important as speed. Resistance is something that interviewees came to expect, but they found that building relationships and opening lines of communication fostered buy-in for reform efforts among school staff.

- ***Balance between schools' learning from one another and competing and/or holding each other back***
  Administrators in districts with established networks of teachers and principals across schools said that these networks had to be monitored closely, and that district administrators had to help schools overcome competition and see the value of networking and working closely with other schools. Interviewees discussed the many challenges of creating effective networks, while continuously "folding in" new members. Some districts found that more veteran members of networks tended to lose momentum and wanted to "split off."

In summary, interviewees described their positions as evolving over their years in the central office. Most started out spending much of their time educating people about school reform, doing public relations and advocacy, and gathering resources and best practices to inform and support reform efforts. Eventually, they started to focus more on academics and standards, and on connecting schools with appropriate professional and leadership development. Finally, interviewed district administrators described a shift in their roles to a greater focus on improving instruction, creating networks and sustaining the changes in the district. However, this work was not a linear progression, and interviewees maintained that they were continuously involved in activities on all levels. In general, district administrators have become more service-oriented in their jobs, seeing themselves as putting schools in touch with valuable resources and information and providing the services school staff need to implement reforms more effectively. Many of the changes in their roles described by interviewed district administrators parallel changes described in the literature on middle-grades reform.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A:
## RECRUITING, TRAINING AND RETAINING LEADERS TO MANAGE REFORM

District administrators identified a number of challenges in recruiting and training teachers that they believed are specific to the middle grades. All felt that the middle schools in these districts were prone to becoming dumping grounds for teachers who could not get jobs in the elementary or high schools. Interviewees also stated that many teachers coming into the middle grades did not realize that the students in this age group were different from those at other levels and needed training to meet the needs of these students. Many districts in the Reform Network face a high rate of teacher turnover across all school levels, but this problem is often more severe in middle schools. As with teachers of all levels, middle-grades teachers leave the profession because of retirement and/or disillusionment; however, middle-grades teachers also leave more frequently to teach in schools on other levels. This ensures a transient staff in many districts that is often young and may not be as skilled in content knowledge or knowledge of adolescent development as needed to teach effectively.

Districts have had to develop innovative ways to recruit qualified teachers and principals to work in the middle schools. They have done this by changing teacher education programs, fostering teacher leadership, and providing training to create a crop of "home-grown" principals. The following are some programs that Reform Network districts have developed:

- ***Middle school certification for incoming teachers***
  Some districts that had been working on middle-grades reform for a number of years established a relationship with local colleges and universities and worked with them to change the teacher preparation program for middle school teachers. Districts have worked with local colleges and universities to create middle school certifications and have then set up special recruitment programs to place graduating teachers in district schools.

- ***Training programs for teachers and assistant principals interested in becoming principals***
  Some districts have developed training programs aimed at improving the readiness of incoming principals. These programs target those who have applied for principal jobs or are interested in applying. These programs (usually lasting several months) can include internships, site visits, mentoring, and leadership training.

- ***Graduate classes at local colleges in areas related to the middle school***
  Some districts were able to negotiate deals with local universities to offer classes and degrees in middle school education for teachers and principals already in the system. These included graduate courses offered by local colleges, given on site in the district, as well as traditional courses offered at universities. Some districts offered tuition reimbursement for teachers who completed these programs.

- ***Comprehensive profiles that help assess teacher leadership potential and ability***
  Many districts have developed leadership training and educational activities for principals, similar to leadership training offered by corporations. Some districts also used leadership profiles developed to measure movement toward more effective leadership characteristics in principals and other staff. Districts also considered establishing principal profiles outlining the skills associated with successful school leadership (scholarship, moral compass,

transformative leadership, team- and consensus-building skills, communication and marketing skills, vision, and "systems thinking").

**Ongoing Leadership and Professional Development**

Interviewees emphasized the need to keep teachers and principals updated on the new skills required to do their evolving job. Interviewees felt that they needed to explore assumptions about what teachers needed in terms of professional development and communicate with them regularly to make sure the district was meeting these needs. Interviewees also felt that principals must provide real support—more than lip-service—in terms of professional development and training. This means that principals should encourage teachers to attend relevant professional development sessions and offer uninterrupted, dedicated time for teachers to plan to use what they have learned, as well as flexibility to implement changes in the schools.

The following lists the ongoing structures used for leadership and professional development in the schools.

- ***Summer academies***
  Many districts have developed principal and leadership academies that meet over the summer where school leaders hear speakers, share information, and engage in leadership development before the beginning of each school year.

- ***Teaching and learning centers and principal institutes***
  Districts have developed teaching and learning centers and principal institutes that do only professional development activities. Many centers offer on-site professional development sessions, speakers, and seminars. Interviewees said that the centers were funded by community organizations, the business community, and the district.

- ***Ongoing leadership meetings***
  District administrators have helped maintain principal inquiry by facilitating monthly meetings with principals to focus on leadership skills. Sometimes outside leaders conduct the meetings, and often the principals are asked to train each other. These meetings are focused on standards, curriculum, and instructional practices, not on administrative issues.

- ***Principal internship programs***
  Several districts have developed principal internship programs. Many of these entail collaborations between the district and state departments of education, local colleges and universities, and community and business partners. Most programs last from one-to-two years and are designed for newly appointed first-and second-year principals.

- ***Ongoing leadership training***
  Districts developed partnerships with local universities that provided ongoing leadership training for veteran principals. In one district, the university handpicks exemplary principals and offers them a special leadership-certificate program where they attend sessions on the weekends.

- ***On-site, job-embedded professional development***
  Districts created programs designed to bring staff developers on site to help teachers implement changes in the classrooms and provide ongoing site assistance to school staff.

Some districts have site-based professional development teams that include overall reform and design coordinators, as well as literacy and math coordinators. Some districts with a significant amount of on-site development created innovative programs for teaching staff and others, such as conflict resolution courses for custodial staff and literacy training for math and science teachers.

- ***Networks among schools in the district and between districts***
  Some districts created professional networks of teachers and principals across the district to meet regularly to address issues related to their school reform. Some of these worked as "critical friends" groups to enhance changes in the schools. Interviewed district administrators also mentioned collaborations with outside organizations and other school districts that allowed them to visit their peers in other districts; attend workshops, and conferences; share best practices; and shadow other staff members.

**Creating Time for Professional Development**

Districts developed some very comprehensive development opportunities, and, to allow staff to take full advantage of these opportunities, created "dedicated" time. One of the greatest challenges that districts cited in creating and expanding development opportunities was a lack of time. District administrators were sensitive to the fact that teachers had only a limited amount of time after the end of the school day and did not want to take too much time away from instruction during the day. District administrators conducted professional development during the summer, after school, and on the weekends as well as during the school day, both on site and off. When these hours were not sufficient, they created more time as described below:

- ***Adding school time for extra calendar days for teacher release***
  Some districts petitioned the state to gain extra days for professional development. In most districts, these are days where teachers come to the school (and students do not) to participate in in-house professional development and revisit the instructional agenda. Districts have also created time by adding additional minutes to the school day (5-10 minutes).

- ***Adding days to year and restructuring school calendar***
  One district expanded its school calendar by two weeks; it used this time to add two breaks during the year when teachers were required to participate in professional development.

- ***Providing incentives for extra professional development time.***
  Because teachers and school leaders are often overburdened by the task of implementing school reform, districts have developed incentive systems to help encourage staff to dedicate more hours to their own development. In addition to stipends, districts provided teachers with extra vacation time and increased flexibility in their schedules.

**Managing Teacher/Principal Turnover**

All district administrators interviewed had invested a great deal of time and money in developing a comprehensive staff development program. In most cases, this required an initial investment in new teachers and principals followed by ongoing development throughout the year. Interviewees discussed the challenge of getting people to remain in the district and in the middle

schools once they were trained and the negative effects on their districtwide reform efforts when the school staff turned over.

District administrators had experienced a significant amount of turnover in the middle grades since they implemented the reforms. Middle-grades principals were often lured away by higher pay in other school levels and by suburban schools, and sometimes left because of the increased pressure of implementing reforms. All districts were facing an increase in retirements for both teachers and principals. One district administrator said that the district had lost over half its principals in two years, and that this turnover had slowed down the rollout of reforms. In another district, over three-quarters of principals were eligible for retirement in the current school year. Interviewees described the challenge of finding high-quality people to fill these positions and the potential effect of the changes on reforms. Districts were concerned that school leaders often come with their own agenda and may move schools "off track," and that too many new school leaders could negatively affect districtwide efforts.

District administrators discussed the burden placed on veteran principals as turnover increased in the districts. Networking helped to some degree, but even these networks started to become burdensome for veteran principals as they consistently spent more time coaching and mentoring new principals and less time finding solutions to problems in their schools. The turnover often made them feel as if they were starting from scratch. Lastly, interviewees noted that districts that had made an effort to provide new teachers with extensive professional development around the middle-grades model found that the cost of turnover and retraining new teachers was very substantial, although the transition could be easier if the new teachers came through a graduate program that focused on the middle grades.

**Ways Districts Have Addressed Turnover and Transition**

- ***Vertical teaming***
  Districts that introduced vertical teaming and worked regularly with the high schools and elementary schools had an easier time addressing turnover. Because so many new middle-grades principals actually came from elementary and high schools with vertical teaming they came into the middle schools with an understanding of the philosophy and content of the reforms.

- ***Mentoring***
  Districts developed mentoring programs for all new staff, including "buddy systems" for new staff to pair up with a veteran staff or teacher teams at the school.

- ***Training teachers and assistant principals to become principals***
  Reform Network districts have been trying to identify good principal candidates within their existing staff pool and work with them so that they are prepared to move into leadership positions. Some districts allow interested staff to receive leadership training and "try out" a position while the principal is on leave.

- ***Pipeline programs***
  Some districts worked with local universities to create a pipeline from teacher education programs into local middle schools.

## APPENDIX B:
## WHOLE-SCHOOL REFORM MODELS

The districts that participated in the interviews had a number of different positions on using whole-school reform models. As noted in body of the report, most districts modeled their reforms after the first *Turning Points* publication. Many districts felt that this gave them the rationale and structure to begin changing their middle grades. Because many districts started their reforms before there were research-based middle-grades models to choose from, many district administrators said that they felt they were already doing much of what the models recommended and did not have to" pay someone else to do it." They also said that, after looking at various models, none really guaranteed results or had strong research to show consistent positive results. Other district administrators said that they did not consider models because they had developed "home-grown models" based on *Turning Points,* which were developed by parents, administrators, and school and district staff. They felt that these models had more legitimacy in the community.

In schools that used whole-school reform models, most models were chosen with the input of parents, principals, and teachers; most schools needed 80 percent of school staff to sign on in order to adapt the models. Administrators who deemed the models successful said that they allowed teachers to start working together more and also focus much more clearly on student achievement. While some districts had models in all schools, others had models only in their lower performing schools and found that the models gave these schools the structure and on-site assistance that the district was not always able to provide. The models that districts thought were most effective took into account the structure of middle schools, the emotional needs of the students in this age group, and the academic rigor and standards specific to each district. Models brought in expertise and allowed districts to draw on lessons that other districts had learned.

In addition, interviewed district administrators said the following about whole-school reform models:

- ***Not an instant solution or silver bullet***
  Interviewers felt that models were only valuable if schools were willing to put work into implementing them properly and making them work. Administrators felt that models were not necessary if schools had a solid, comprehensive plan and the expertise, support, and capacity to implement it. Although models brought in expertise from the outside and allowed schools to draw on lessons that other districts had learned, the same results were realized in other ways in some Reform Network districts (for example, the Clark Foundation brought in a great deal of expertise into the districts it funded).

- ***Schools should select models that fit***
  Interviewees felt that it was important for schools to be exposed to as many models as possible to determine what might work. Districts must also ensure that models provide the appropriate level of technical assistance for the schools. If schools lack capacity, they may need a model providing more technical assistance.

- ***Models that can be customized work better***
  Interviewees said that the school staff appreciated models that allowed teachers to write their own curriculum and adjust the model to the particular school. This is only true, however, in schools with a great deal of capacity on the school level.

- ***Schools should chose the models they will adopt***
  Some schools in the districts chose models because they were told to by the superintendent, and staff at the schools never fully bought into the idea of using a model.

- ***Models must be supported and monitored by the district office***
  Even if schools have a hand in choosing the models, interviewees felt that the models must be supported by the district so that district staff understand the support needs of the school. Districts also need to monitor the models they have accepted because these models are always expanding and changing.

- ***Models must be reviewed and evaluated regularly***
  If models are not effective in a particular school, sites should determine if this is due to faulty implementation or a "bad fit." This can only be done if the models are evaluated regularly.

In the last several years, organizations concerned with school improvement have developed whole-school reform models that focus specifically on the middle grades. These models include AIM; Different Ways of Knowing; Talent Development—Middle School; Turning Points; Making Schools Work; and Middle Start.

For more information about these models, consult the website of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform (www.mgforum.org), which has a brief introduction about each model and links to the models' own websites.

# APPENDIX C:
# USING DATA TO SUPPORT SCHOOL REFORM AND ADDRESSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS AND EQUITY ISSUES

## Using Data to Support School Reform

While districts have found ways to present data in useful forms to inform and support the changes in the schools, they still struggle to make data a more effective tool. Some districts have developed ways to collect data over the Internet and disaggregate and analyze existing data in new and more useful ways. Districts have also provided professional development to school staff on using data to improve school performance, although this was not an area in which most interviewed district administrators believed they were strong. Although districts spoke of new and innovative ways that they had used and collected data and discussed working with the schools around this, they all felt that this was an area of potential growth in their reforms.

Interviewees reported the following challenges:

- Principals do not always use data to their full potential, and many do not know how to use it at all. Districts have had to constantly train and retrain school staff to use data effectively and, in many cases, staff are still not using it to improve their instructional programs.
- Districts are often limited in their data collection by the state and district and often receive the data in a form that is not useful for school self-assessment. Further, schools are limited in their on-site capacity to access the data. If they want data in a different form—for example, disaggregated data by gender and race, they have to go to the district office school-by-school and request it. This process is time- consuming and keeps schools from disaggregating their data as much as needed.

## Using Other Types of Assessment

Districts felt that the increased focus on data often pushed sites to look at standardized test scores over other types of assessment. District administrators talked about other types of assessments that they used and how they tried to develop discussions around these assessments as well. In general, interviewees said that they did not use much alternative assessment in the classroom, and few had developed alternatives to standardized tests when reviewing the success of their reforms.

## Addressing Achievement Gaps and Equity Issues

All districts acknowledged that they struggled to address equity in the schools and to close the achievement gaps within schools and across the district. These equity problems are exacerbated by the fact that, in many districts, magnet and private schools have skimmed the highest-performing students out of the general school population. In general, district administrators felt that they did not know how to address the equity issues in the schools and district and felt they had not focused the necessary attention on this area.

The list below includes strategies districts have used to address equity:

- ***District or state mandate***
  One district mandated that all schools improve the achievement of all different subgroups in the schools and provide the schools with data disaggregated by race, sex, etc. If a school drops in its minority achievement for any one group during the course of a year, it will be put on probation, as well as on a list that is made public.

- ***Using existing programs***
  Districts addressed achievement gaps through their ESL program, Title I funds, Gear Up, 21st Century money, etc. Districts also developed other programs during the summer, after school, and during the school day for students needing additional help.

- ***Reconstitution***
  Some districts in the network reconstituted lower performing schools and provided additional support for them to make the necessary changes.

- ***Transition programs***
  One district developed a transition program, which students attended when they were not promoted at the end of grade 8. These students were placed in a special academy for a year where they had smaller classes and received extra help before moving into grade 9. One district developed a summer initiative for "kids in transition" who did not perform well during the year and used this as a lab for professional development for teachers who needed to learn how to address the needs of the lower performing students.

- ***Restructuring central office***
  In another district, the central office was restructured to allow it to better serve lower achieving students. The district hired additional special education specialists to work directly in the classrooms to support teachers and ensure proper delivery of the curriculum.

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