

MIDDLE START SCHOOLS STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE
Steadily Improving High-Poverty Schools in the Mid South Delta



Middle Start National Center
at the
Academy for Educational Development

Middle Start Schools Striving for Excellence

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Introduction

Mid South Middle Start is a comprehensive school improvement initiative for schools with middle grades (grades 5, 6, 7, and/or 8).¹ It was established by the Foundation for the Mid South (FMS) in collaboration with the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and with the support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. As part of a national Middle Start initiative led by AED, Mid South Middle Start is committed to working with high-poverty schools in the Mid South Delta region to build their capacity to foster students' academic excellence, support the development of young adolescents, and achieve social equity in schools with middle grades. The initiative is based on a set of guidelines commonly referred to as 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 distribution of leadership throughout the school and community to support students' high-level learning and development (see appendix).

The five schools featured in this study received state or foundation grants to participate in Mid South Middle Start and collaborate with a Middle Start coach to implement the Middle Start comprehensive school improvement program. School leadership teams, consisting of teachers and the principal, participated in professional development and leadership training facilitated by AED Middle Start coaches and professional development organizations. These opportunities enabled school staff to build their capacity in data-based inquiry for school improvement, teaming, content knowledge, innovative instructional strategies, and new approaches to scheduling.

This report contains four major sections:

- Essential elements of effective schoolwide reform efforts
- AED's role
- Middle Start schools featured in this study
- Status of Middle Start implementation in study schools

¹ Schools with middle grades are schools that have grade 7 and at least one more contiguous grade (grade 6 or 8). Such grades may be in K-8 schools, 6-8 schools, 6-12 schools, or schools of other configurations.

Essential Elements of Effective Schoolwide Reform Efforts

According to various experts on school improvement, including Joan Lipsitz, M. Hayes Mizell, Anthony Jackson and Leah Meyer Austin, the primary goal of any educational reform effort must be to create an environment in which students can achieve to their highest academic potential while at the same time developing themselves socially and emotionally. Equally important to school improvement efforts is the commitment to creating a socially equitable school that supports all students and operates with the understanding that disadvantaged students can perform at high levels (Lipsitz et al., 1997a & b).

While recent years have seen a growing concern about middle-grades education, many reform efforts have fallen short of their goals of creating “excellent and equitable” (Lipsitz et al., 1997a) educational environments. According to Dickinson and Butler (2001), the primary reason is that many reform efforts begin at a structural and organizational level, addressing school climate and environment issues, without addressing the deeper issues of teaching and learning. In addition, many reform movements often suffer under the weight of heated debates among educators about the “right” curriculum and pedagogical standards. Teachers may also favor differing teaching styles and resist improvement efforts that require them to abandon their preferred mode of instruction. Many reform efforts, which began enthusiastically, may also suffer in terms of energy and focus as time goes on, often because of leadership changes, staff turnover, and the expiration of the primary foundation’s investment (Lipsitz et al., 1997). Lastly, many reform efforts lack a common vision, developed and understood by all members of the school community to guide the reform. As Ferrero (2005) has maintained, to achieve such a vision, instead of focusing on the resistance and debate, teachers and administrators should focus on achieving fundamental “common ends” out of “diverse pathways.”

Like all schools, middle schools have undergone many changes in the past 30 years. Accountability and high-stakes testing have affected curriculum and teaching practices; schools are competing for more resources (financial and professional development assistance); and technology is present in many classrooms but not necessarily present in every student’s home, etc. (George, 2000). In addition, student populations are increasingly diverse and present schools with different challenges in terms of learning styles, abilities, and language. And lastly, the middle grades are increasingly seen as a crucial time in terms of students’ educational outcomes: students in these grades are in the midst of a critical transitional period that requires highly

focused and effective education to address their developmental, relational, and academic selves (Dickinson & Butler, 2001).

To address these and other challenges, the literature suggests that several characteristics are essential for a school reform movement to be effective. They are a common vision of school improvement and supportive leadership; the “interconnectedness” and web of supports made possible by connections between schools, districts, families, and the community as a whole; personalized education fostered by small learning communities; and the evidence of impact made possible by the use of data-based inquiry to guide ongoing improvement.

A Common Vision and Leadership

Research shows schools that are high-performing learning communities share a common vision of excellence (Northwest Regional Education Lab, 2001). Successful school reform relies on establishing clear, measurable goals and benchmarks for achieving those goals (Hansel, 2000). Schools that hold on to their vision, despite any challenges or setbacks, and maintain qualities of persistence also contribute to their long-term success (Johnson & Asera, 1999). Studies on leadership in schools indicate that effective leadership is critical and specifically that the principal is a key factor in successful implementation of comprehensive school improvement efforts (Housman, 2001; Levine and Lezotte, 1995). Strong leaders are visible, accessible and knowledgeable about instruction; and they are able to build capacity for leadership and share responsibility among staff (Housman, 2001).

Interconnectedness and Webs of Support

Perhaps the key term for describing a successful middle-grades reform effort is “interconnectedness.” This term implies a need to connect and coordinate efforts between the microlevel of individual schools and professional development programs and the macro—or district, community, and state levels—by developing collaborations among schools, communities, districts, universities, and state leadership. Middle-grades programs with proven efficacy often take a fluid view of the lives and needs of middle-grades students. Administrators and teachers in these programs realize the need to ease the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school (McElroy, 2000). In addition to developing a solid, innovative curriculum with flexible scheduling, schools that exhibit excellence are able to capitalize on the unique transitional period of the middle grades and build bridges between students, teachers, parents, the community, and postsecondary institutions) to provide the ample supports that foster excellent pedagogy and high-level student learning (McElroy, 2000).

Interconnectedness is similar to what Lipsitz et al. (1997a) calls the need for “webs of support” to address the gaps between schools and the community, schools and district/state leadership, and schools and universities. For example, communities are often very powerful allies (Lipsitz et al., 1997a), and educational improvement is commonly viewed as a top priority of many community constituents. Successful reform efforts foster a relationship between the school and families and the community at large to encourage family involvement and overall community support for the school’s reform efforts.² Lastly, enduring school improvement cannot occur if the “system” is not helping. All people, at all levels, need to work on building effective learning organizations (Fullan, 2002).

A Personal Environment and Small Learning Communities

Small learning communities are emerging as the most effective way of creating an equitable, rich learning environment that allows for the increased focus and attention necessary for student success (The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2004; hereafter cited as National Forum). According to Deborah Kasak (2004):

Small learning communities are critical to rapid improvement in the middle grades. They foster learning at every age, teachers included, and allow students to learn in an environment where the adults actually know them.

These environments are often created as small learning communities within a single school (National Forum, 2004). These types of learning environments counteract the impersonal educational atmospheres of larger schools, which often result in students being unable to develop meaningful relationships with teachers and feeling alienated from school life (National Forum, 2004).

Small learning communities allow teachers to work together more frequently and to focus on addressing students’ needs. In effect, students receive more attention from a specific group of teachers and are thus less likely to “fall through the cracks.” This has a ripple effect that produces a safer and more constructive school climate, gains in student performance, increased parental satisfaction, and overall greater cost efficiency (National Forum, 2004). In addition, this more personal environment creates an atmosphere of both safety and accountability, one in which teachers know many students well and where weapons and violence are thus less likely. As students increasingly perform to their potential and create a more positive environment, the

² See also, *A Web of Support: The Role of Districts in Urban Middle-Grades Reform*, AED, 2003.

level of satisfaction for parents is likely to increase. This helps to position parents as allies for the school, rather than as skeptical or disapproving eyes whose vision is often negatively affected by test scores and school grades. All these factors combine to ensure more student success, higher graduation rates, and lower drop-out rates. In addition, smaller schools are proving more cost-effective because the per-student monetary allocation is more likely to result in a diploma.

Evidence of Impact

A vital element to the success of any reform movement is evidence of its impact and effectiveness (Dickinson & Butler, 2001). For this reason, school reform efforts must incorporate an evaluation component requiring data collection to assess student progress and areas of need. However, focusing on data-driven change has often resulted in the use of state-level accountability tests to determine the success of schools, with the result that schools often become more focused on “looking good” than on “diagnosing and increasing students’ knowledge and skills” (Lipsitz et al., 1997b). Much work is needed to develop a consistent method that allows middle-grades staff to evaluate their improvement efforts and understand the ways in which they are fostering students’ development, rather than simply raising their test scores (Mizell, 2002). To foster the momentum needed for long-term gains, Schmoker (2004) suggests that schools focus on short-term goals and “experimental cycles” that allow teachers to quickly assess teaching practices and student improvement.

In summary, school reform efforts, such as AED’s Middle Start, must strive to create learning environments that are “developmentally responsive,” “academically excellent,” and that “seek social equity” (Lipsitz et al., 1997b and Montesano, 2005). Given the crucial nature of the middle grades, they offer a unique lens for viewing the successes, challenges, overall impact, and potential for sustainability of school reform efforts. This study, conducted by AED and sponsored by FMS, seeks to illuminate findings that speak to these important factors of schoolwide reform efforts.

AED's Role

In 1994-95, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation established Middle Start, a comprehensive school improvement program for middle-grade schools seeking schoolwide improvement. Middle Start began in Michigan, and over the last six years has expanded to the Mid South region (Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi), and Wisconsin. The Foundation for the Mid South launched Mid South Middle Start as a regional initiative grounded in the experience of the national program.

Mid South Middle Start has been effectively working to transform middle-grades schools, particularly those where at least 50 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch—into high-performing learning environments that, in line with the national initiative, are academically challenging, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable.

AED directs the national Middle Start initiative and conducts research and evaluation to 1) inform the Middle Start model; 2) guide school improvement efforts of schools so that they build their capacity to enhance teaching and learning; 3) promote whole-school reform in schools and districts; and 4) contribute to the field of school improvement. Over the years, AED has conducted formative and summative evaluations and produced reports that concentrate on the issues and impact of the Middle Start initiative.

AED's Middle Start initiative has undertaken a retrospective study of five middle-grades schools in the Mid South Delta. By portraying schools' stories, this study seeks to describe the range and depth of Middle Start implementation and the successes and challenges schools encountered while implementing Middle Start, as well as suggest how schools may continue to strive towards improvement after Middle Start funding has ended. The progress and challenges described in this report are not unique to Middle Start schools but are, in many ways, typical of the experiences and challenges of other schools implementing, and trying to sustain, schoolwide improvement efforts.

In order to capture the richness of data surrounding Mid South Middle Start schools, researchers collected materials during the course of four consecutive school years (2000-04). The materials included monthly coach logs and semiannual reports, case-study data and statistics from national databases, and other internal research evaluation reports. Coach logs provided descriptions of coach activities in schools, the ways and extent to which schools operationalized Middle Start goals, the challenges and concerns schools faced, and their plans to address challenges. Researchers also analyzed semiannual reports that coaches completed towards the

end of each semester. These reports provided researchers with the frequency and duration of school visits, key issues that coaches worked on with school staff members, schools’ successes and barriers, and descriptions of schools’ plans to foster Middle Start over the grant period and beyond. This study also draws upon existing case-study research and reports, which describe school site visits by AED researchers who examined the rollout of the school improvement process in various schools in the Mid South region. Finally, researchers examined existing school data, such as student achievement data and U.S. Census data for community and neighborhood contextual factors. Exhibit 1 shows the sampling and data collection points for this study.

Exhibit 1: Study Sample

Mid South Region	Number of Schools	Number of Data Points	Data Collection Years
Arkansas, Louisiana & Mississippi	5 (3 in AR, 1 LA, 1 MS)	4	SY 2000-01, SY 2001-02 SY 2002-03, SY 2003-04

Middle Start Schools Featured in This Study

Over the last six years, AED has worked closely with 24 Mid South Middle Start schools. This study features a subset of five of these steadily improving high-poverty schools.³ In January 2006, AED staff determined five sites for the study. Criteria for selecting schools included:

- Geographic representation (at least one school from each Mid South Middle Start state)
- Variety of challenges presented by schools (e.g., staff/administrative turnover, lack of financial resources, external mandates, etc.)
- School demographics (e.g., a representative sample based on student race/ethnicity, free/reduced-price lunch status, and student-teacher ratio)

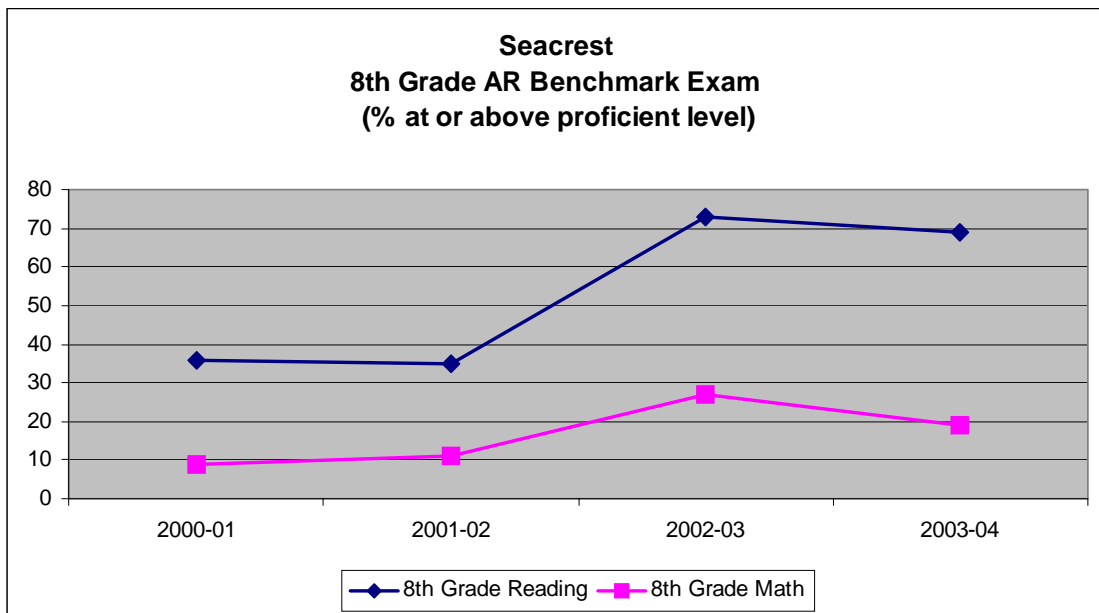
The following profiles are based on AED case-study research and data from the National Center for Education Statistics—nces.ed.gov and City Data—www.city-data.com—accessed on February 12, 2006. These profiles include three schools in Arkansas (Seacrest Junior High School in Cloverton, AR; Jeyson Middle School in Spartanning, AR; and Reddick Junior High School in Tuskett, AR) and one school each in Louisiana and Mississippi (Appleton Junior High School in Marwood, LA and Cranford Middle School in Timberline, MS).

³ The names of all schools and locations have been changed throughout this report.

Seacrest Junior High School

Seacrest Junior High School, located in the small town of Cloverton, AR, serves a population of 393 7th-9th graders, of whom 59% are White, 34.9% Black, and 6.1% Hispanic. Seacrest is a Title 1 school, with an average student-teacher ratio of 11:9. Over two-thirds of the students (69.2%) are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Over a four-year period, Seacrest has implemented instructional and organizational changes that have resulted in increased student achievement and stronger community support. The average per-capita income for residents served by the Cloverton School District was \$14,484 in 1999. Seacrest Junior High School's population reflects Cloverton's 3,000 residents (59.3% White, 33.6% Black and 6.5% Hispanic). Approximately 63.1% of Cloverton's residents have a high school diploma or higher, and 11.3% have a bachelor's degree or higher. The city is located within 80 miles of six major universities. However, the unemployment percentage is above the state average, the institutionalized population is above the state average, and the percentage of population with a bachelor's degree or higher is significantly below the state average.

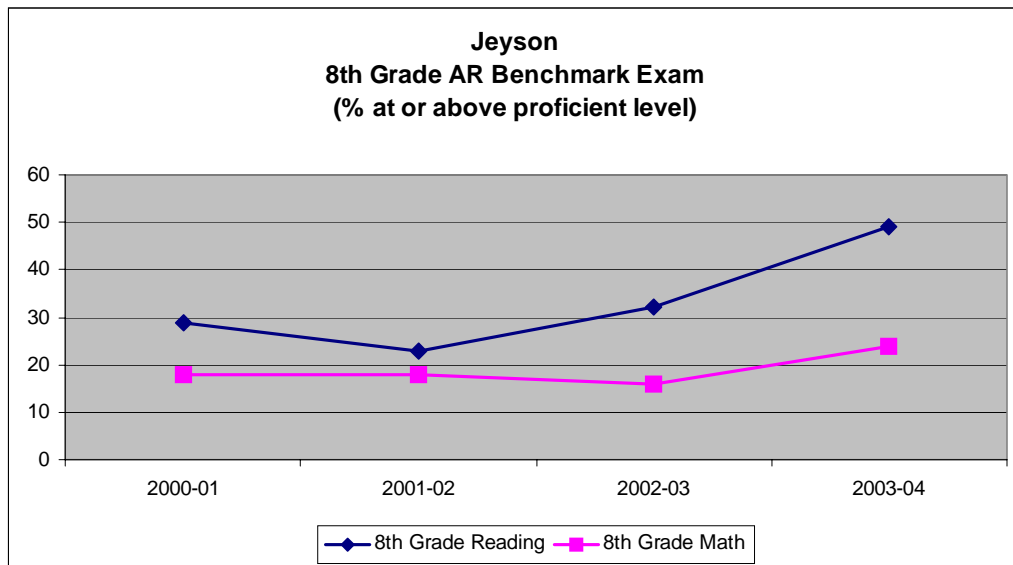
In recent years, Seacrest students have improved academically. Results from the AR benchmark exam illustrate these trends.



Jeyson Middle School

Jeyson Middle School, in Spartanning, AR, serves 539 middle-grades students (6th, 7th, and 8th grades), with an average student-teacher ratio of 14:6. This Title 1 school's population is 59.4% White, 38.8% Black, and 1.3% Hispanic. Slightly less than half (49.0%) of students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Jeyson Middle School has undergone some drastic restructuring in the past four years as it changed from a junior high school to a middle school, which resulted in a shift in faculty composition, the implementation of an integrated curriculum, and the development of small learning communities. The per-capita income for residents of Spartanning school district is \$17,471 (in 1999). Over the last 15 years, the population of the city of Spartanning has increased by 8%, and the city is somewhat diverse, with 64.4% White, 32.6% Black, and 1.3% Hispanic residents. Many Spartanning citizens have obtained a high school diploma or higher (78.1%), and the unemployment rate is approximately 9.5%. However, this Mississippi Delta community has the highest poverty level in the state, and many of the businesses and jobs are moving away from the community.

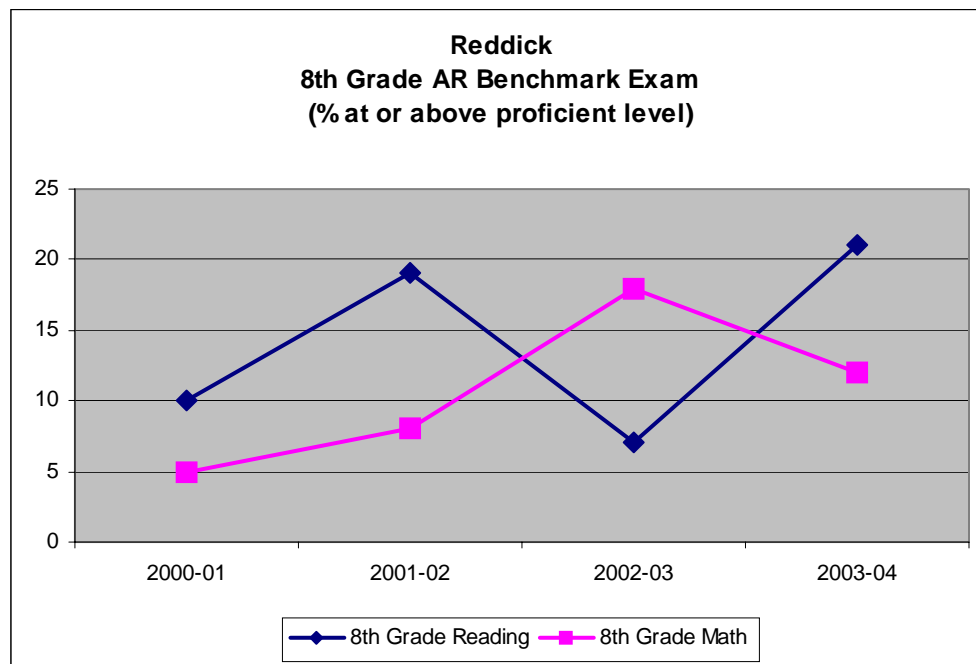
Jeyson students have made steady increases in both the grade 8 mathematics and reading AR benchmark exams, as the following chart illustrates.



Reddick Junior High School

Reddick Junior High was formed when the middle grades of Tuskett Elementary merged with Reddick High School. Approximately 317 students in grades 6-8 from Tuskett Elementary School, a Title 1 school located in Tuskett, AR, made this transition. The school's population consists of 69.6% White, 27.4% Black, and 2.7% Hispanic students, and approximately 75.3% of these students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The average student-teacher ratio at Reddick is 14:4. Despite the leadership changes in the school and the lack of overall vision for school improvement, there has been an interest among some school staff to manage their school improvement efforts. Most recent statistics concerning the school district had approximately 22.8% of households living below the poverty level and the per-capita income averaged \$12,181. Tuskett is located 30 miles southeast of Longmeadow, Tennessee, and over the last 15 years, its population has decreased by 17.8%. Tuskett's unemployed percentage is below the state average, and the median house value is significantly below the state average. In addition, despite being less than 50 miles from two major universities, the number of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher is significantly below the state average.

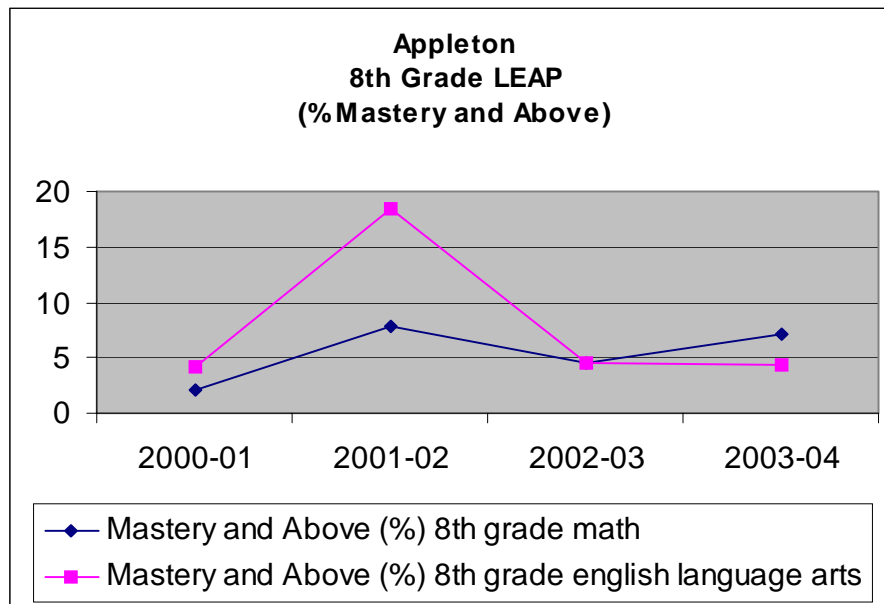
Over the years, Reddick students made a steady increase on the grade 8 math benchmark exam but experienced a drop off in 2002-03. There has been much fluctuation in the grade 8 English benchmark exam.



Appleton Junior High School

Appleton Junior High School (formerly known as Castle Hill Middle School) is located in the Taylor Parish school district in Marwood, LA. This is a K-8 Title 1 school serving approximately 227 students in grades 5 to 8 (out of a total 504 students), of which 66.5% are White and 32.3% are Black. Out of the total student population, 69.6% are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Although the school has struggled with community support and financial constraints imposed by the community, Appleton teachers and administrators remain loyal to the school and have been instrumental in improving school climate by implementing new instructional approaches in the classroom. The per-capita income for residents served by this school district was \$12,675 in 1999. The population of Marwood, which totals around 5,500, is 58.5% Black and 39.8% White. At Appleton, the average student-teacher ratio is 13:4. Marwood is approximately 35 miles southeast of Royale, LA. There has been some discord in the community over the past few years as residents have moved out of the area for better employment, and economic problems in the community have increased.

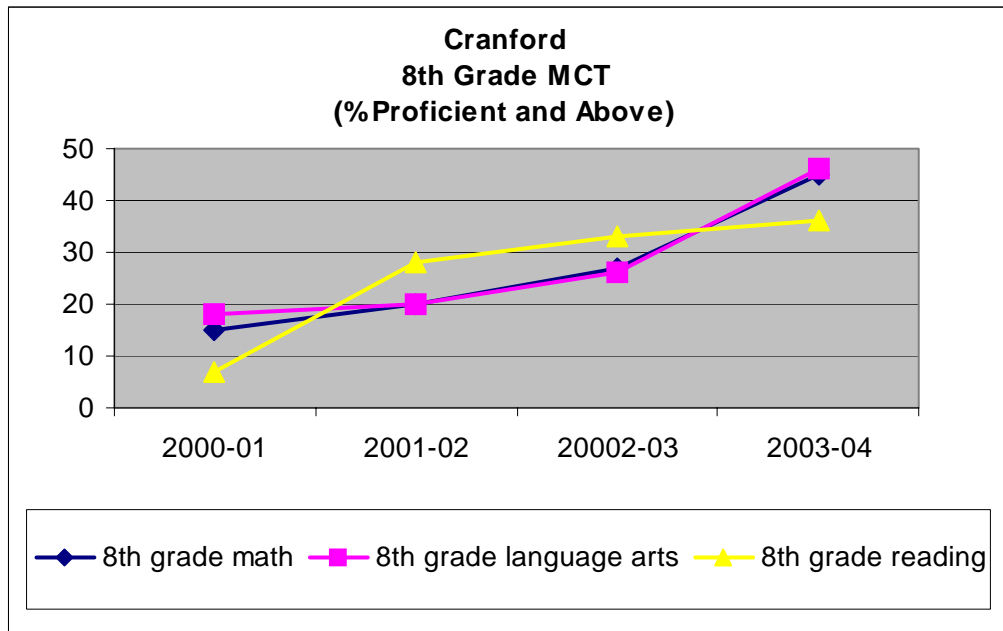
The academic progress of Appleton is encouraging in math, with students making slow but steady progress. However, further progress is needed in language arts, given that student test scores experienced a striking decrease in 2002-03, as evident in the following chart.



Cranford Middle School

Located in Timberline, MS, Cranford Middle School serves 151 students in grades 7 and 8 in the Fredonia School District. The student population is 100% Black, and 98% of students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. The student-teacher ratio is better than most other schools and averages seven students per teacher. Overall relations (teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-student) have improved at Cranford. In 1999, 33.6% of the households served by Fredonia School District were below the poverty level, and the average per-capita income was \$10,253. Timberline is a small town (land area of 0.2 square miles) that is located 14 miles southeast of Capersville, Mississippi. The residents are 95.5% Black and 4.8% White, and 54.5% of those 25 years or older hold a high school diploma or higher. The manufacturing industry provides approximately 25% of the employment for residents. The middle school, which is somewhat isolated from other schools in the area, also serves as a community center, and the district serves as the landlord of many homes in the area.

In recent years, Cranford students have improved academically. Standardized achievement scores on the MCT illustrate these trends.



School Successes in Implementing Middle Start

To support the implementation of the Middle Start school improvement program, the Middle Start National Center at AED undertakes the following:

- Provides professional development and coaching⁴ to participating middle-grades schools.
- Refines and develops materials, training, and support strategies to meet specific school, network, and regional challenges.
- Continuously assesses its impact on student achievement.

Complementary activities undertaken by the FMS include:

- Creating a web of support and accountability for middle-grades improvement by collaborating and partnering not only with schools and regions, but also with other organizations concerned with improving middle grades.
- Maintaining policy networks, such as contacts with stakeholders with a vested interest in middle-grades improvement in the Mid South region.

With support from the Middle Start National Center at AED and FMS, the five Middle Start schools in this study addressed all three Middle Start goals, although to varying degrees. Overall, the most noticeable changes for schools was in addressing the developmental responsiveness goal, followed by changes resulting from efforts to address academic excellence and social equity, as discussed below.

Developmental Responsiveness

School staff worked to make schools responsive to students' needs, including being more sensitive to students' individual needs; working to foster positive teacher-student relations, as well as a general sense of respect among students and between teachers and students; establishing a reward system to honor students of different levels of academic progress; and promoting an appreciation of cultural diversity. Schools also worked to involve students' families—encouraging family members to visit the schools, and/or developing ways for family members to become more actively involved in their children's learning at home. In addition,

⁴ The Middle Start coach serves as a conduit between the school and the Middle Start program. Middle Start coaches work closely with school staff in facilitating workshops geared to improving teaching and learning, providing guidance in school structural/organizational issues, and advising schools on how to incorporate data-driven decision making into ongoing school planning. Coaches also help organize networks of schools, districts, higher education institutions, and policy/advocacy organizations to create a web of support and accountability in each region where Middle Start works. All the schools featured in this study have worked closely with Middle Start coaches.

school administrators and counselors provided more mentoring opportunities for young adolescents.

A teacher at Seacrest Middle School described addressing developmental responsiveness by rewarding all students for improvement: “I reward the ‘C’ kids who show improvement as well as the ‘A’ ones.” A Middle Start coach from Seacrest stressed the developmental relevance of the curriculum:

The curriculum is relevant to young adolescents. Students explore a wide range of interests and reflect on their own growth and development by using rubrics, and cooperative learning strategies are stressed. Teachers also encourage students to participate in co-curricular activities.

In another case, a local minister had an active role in afterschool programming at Jeyson Middle School. The minister tutored and mentored a group of African American boys who were initially disengaged from school but later became more motivated. A coach at Cranford Middle school described the principals and some teachers as promoting positive teacher-to-student relationships and as recognizing students more for their achievements. He also maintained that student participation in staff-sponsored co-curricular activities had increased.

Overall, these Middle Start schools are becoming more developmentally responsive by improving relationships between teachers and students and by creating more age-appropriate instruction for young adolescents.

Academic Excellence

Staff at two schools (Appleton and Cranford) cited an increase in student achievement test scores as evidence of academic excellence. Staff at other schools described “using a rigorous curriculum” as a way to promote academic excellence. Examples of this rigorous curriculum include:

- Using real life and relevant examples in the classroom (and in homework assignments)
- Using interdisciplinary units (e.g., language arts and history)
- Using self-assessment guides and rubrics
- Providing samples of high-quality student work
- Having students demonstrate their work before an audience (e.g., portfolios, presentations, student work displays/fairs, etc.)
- Increasing hands-on activities and group work

- Aligning curriculum with standards

School staff also equated academic excellence with developing a new orientation to work, as demonstrated by the following changes:

- An overall change in teacher attitudes exemplified by a change in instructional practices and more active participation in team meetings
- Teachers’ participating in professional development workshops and applying what they learned to the classroom
- Use of more schoolwide self-assessment tools, such as rubrics
- Increased staff understanding of the needs of adolescents
- Increased parent and community involvement in school improvement efforts

In sum, the case-study Middle Start schools are making strides towards academic excellence by implementing new instructional strategies that engage more students in the classroom; however, aggregate student achievement scores, as indicated in school snapshots, pp. 8-12, are mixed.

Social Equity

Most school staff participating in this study believed their students were treated equitably and maintained that the school had high expectations for all students. These beliefs and statements are being put to the test by NCLB, which has required schools to focus more on student subgroups, and this has prompted the schools to provide more academic resources (e.g., tutoring and afterschool programming, specialized classes for low-performing students) to assist students in need. AED internal research illuminated the schools’ responses to Middle Start’s social equity goal. A sample of responses are as follows.

We treat all students equally. (Appleton)

The main goal is to identify students—“bubble students”—on the borderline of passing or failing. We really to help all students, but we try to identify the most needy. We then use different strategies for teaching different kids. (Seacrest)

Teaming at Seacrest has eliminated tracking and ability grouping, and student morale has improved tremendously, as students are more engaged in learning and are more successful. (Seacrest)

We promote appreciation of cultural diversity. (Jeyson)

We ensure that resources are made available to all students. (Cranford)

In summary, AED researchers documented numerous school efforts to address social equity issues; however, at Reddick, there was not as great an emphasis on social equity because the school was still struggling to cultivate a culture of shared values and a common vision—the first step on the path of school improvement.

Challenges Schools Face in Addressing Three Middle Start Goals

Generally Middle Start schools addressed all three goals, but some goals were more difficult to address than others. Overall, AED found academic excellence to be the hardest goal to achieve on a schoolwide basis. School staff members in most schools defined academic excellence as implementing innovative teaching practices in the classroom in order to motivate all students to learn. Research indicates it takes time for teachers to implement such practices as cooperative learning, application of real-life experiences, and interdisciplinary teaching. It also takes time and effort for schools to adopt more participatory instruction and classroom assessments (e.g., small-group instruction, peer teaching/learning, using rubrics and conducting self- and peer evaluations) of these new approaches.

Sometimes teachers are inclined to change, but the proper organizational structures (in terms of the time and effort involved) are not always in place at schools and thus it is difficult to implement innovative practices schoolwide. This proved to be the experience of many schools featured in this study. Teachers were eager to learn new strategies to motivate students and make instruction more student-centered, but staff stressed that making the time to do more participatory instruction required an ongoing commitment on behalf of school administrators and teachers, which must be supported by the proper school structure, such as small learning communities and grade-level teams.

Not all five Middle Start schools had a solid organizational structure in place to support innovative instructional practices on a consistent and schoolwide basis. For instance, Reddick lacked the leadership and focus and did not make as much progress as other schools, and Cranford's use of teaming was at risk the year after it established a teaming process, as illustrated by the following quotes:

Some new instructional practices have been implemented in some of the classes, and it makes me feel good to see positive changes that will benefit the students. However, this is not widespread because of the lack of real leadership for the school improvement process. (Reddick coach)

Teachers were not given common planning time as they were last year because of complaints about the loss of individual planning time. A schedule was devised to provide a few opportunities for teaming, but other immediate tasks such as curricular alignment and subject-area meetings often monopolized this time.
(Cranford coach)

In addition, schools experienced immense pressure from state departments of education to meet AYP, and staff believed that practices implemented early on in the Middle Start program might need to be lessened:

[Teachers] are afraid if they spend more time on some of the things they said they would do, such as looking at student work, they will not meet AYP, then the state will come down on them. (Reddick coach)

The number and magnitude of the legislative mandates being imposed on this school are almost overwhelming and will really test the staff's commitment to teaching and meeting the needs of students. (Former Jeyson principal)

Clearly a few schools were having difficulty aligning the Middle Start goal of academic excellence with state mandates because, as one Middle Start coach stated, “They cannot see how to mesh [these goals] together as one large school improvement effort.”

Fewer schools encountered challenges with respect to developmental responsiveness. Generally school staff have a good understanding of what developmental responsiveness means and how to foster it in their schools. The only apparent challenge was developing more student-centered activities in the classroom, such as cooperative learning, project teams, curriculum integration, and building upon relevant teaching on a schoolwide basis.

Schools staff members generally did not report the goal of social equity for student learning as a challenge in their respective schools. In fact, many staff members felt it was being addressed. Yet, social equity remained a challenge in other areas, such as involving all parents in schools (especially low-income parents) and hiring and retaining a more diverse faculty. For instance, one school staff member concerned about this issue stated:

Given that there is a sizable number of minority students, we would like to attract more minority faculty. Although it's difficult to attract African American teachers who can earn more money in larger districts with a more diverse population.
(Former principal at Jeyson)

While a more diverse faculty and more parental involvement are needed in these schools, none of the responses cited above focus on equity issues in ways that address achievement gaps experienced by low-income students. Also, according to other research conducted by AED, systemic barriers, such as inequitable funding of public education, remain in place, tending to

create inequities in resources and thus in instruction in these schools. This means, that while there may not be inequity issues within particular schools—given that most students are from low-income families—inequities exist within the system as a whole and affect student outcomes in these schools compared with those of the state and the nation.

School staff members experienced other challenges besides addressing the three Middle Start goals. These challenges include obtaining the appropriate levels of technical assistance from coaches and other professional development providers. All school staff members wanted more on-site time with their coaches and were eager to learn more in order to enhance the classroom/learning experience for their students, as well as improve teaching. Some school staff became discouraged by their lack of progress in implementing what they had learned. They wanted to implement new practices right away, but change often happened slowly. At times the incremental pace was accompanied by a lack of ongoing enthusiasm on the part of teachers. It was a struggle to keep the momentum going, particularly as other external pressures arose. For example, a district's change in focus and implementation of a new education initiative, combined with district financial woes, were serious external pressures for schools as they attempted to implement Middle Start.

Status of Middle Start Implementation

The five schools featured in this study fall along a spectrum of Middle Start implementation, which is measured not only by evidence of applying Middle Start principles and practices (see appendix), but also by the nature and number of supports—school culture, structures, and leadership, as well as district and community resources—for a school’s improvement efforts. Through research and analysis, the researcher (Williams Rose) developed a typology indicating the levels of Middle Start implementation and categories of support for the five schools. Tables 1 and 2 present the levels of Middle Start implementation and the categories of support are described as follows:

Table 1: Levels of Middle Start Implementation

Level one: A school is at the **emerging stage** of Middle Start implementation (e.g., a school has developed a basic understanding of Middle Start principles and practices, but has implemented them in only a few areas).

Level two: A school is **making progress** in Middle Start implementation (e.g., a school has in-depth awareness about school improvement and is addressing several Middle Start principles and practices, including some pertaining to instruction).

Level three: A school is **reaching a maturing stage** of Middle Start implementation (e.g., a school has implemented school improvement practices in some classrooms and is planning to implement practices more widely).

Level four: A school is at the **sustaining stage** of Middle Start implementation (e.g., a school has implemented Middle Start in a comprehensive manner and has the leadership and structures in place to support continuous improvement).

Table 2: Categories of Support for School Improvement

Category 1: A **schoolwide culture of shared values and mission**, supporting and reflecting Middle Start practices and principles

Category 2: **Shared leadership and responsibility** among administration and teaching staff

Category 3: **School support**—structural and organizational (e.g., block scheduling, teaming, small learning communities)

Category 4: **District support**—resources (financial support for professional development and clear indicators of embracing the Middle Start principles at a district level)

Category 5: **Networks of support** (connection to other schools involved in school improvement, professional development providers, etc.)

As table 3 below shows, there is one school each at levels one, two, and three, and two schools at level four.

Table 3: Schools and Their Levels of Middle Start Implementation

Level 1: Emerging	Level 2: Making progress	Level 3: Reaching maturing stage	Level 4: Sustaining
Reddick	Cranford	Appleton	Seacrest and Jeyson

Although schools are at different levels of Middle Start implementation, most schools have a least one type of support. The number of supports appear to coincide with the level of Middle implementation, which suggests that school improvement efforts, such as Middle Start, are most successfully implemented when they are fully supported. Table 4 shows how each school falls along the continuum of Middle Start implementation according to the five categories of support, as discussed briefly in the pages following the table.

Table 4: Levels of Middle Start Implementation

	Category 1: Schoolwide culture of shared values and mission, supporting and reflecting Middle Start practices and principles	Category 2: Shared leadership and responsibility among administration and teaching staff	Category 3: School support: structural and organizational (e.g., block scheduling, teaming, small learning communities)	Category 4: District support: resources (financial support for PD, and a direct focus for school improvement under the auspices of Middle Start)	Category 5: Network support (connection to other schools involved in school improvement, professional development providers, etc.)
Level 1	Reddick*				
Level 2	Cranford	Cranford			
Level 3	Appleton	Appleton	Appleton		Appleton
Level 4	Seacrest Jeyson	Seacrest Jeyson	Seacrest Jeyson	Seacrest Jeyson	Seacrest Jeyson

Level 1 = an emerging stage of Middle Start implementation
 Level 2 = making progress in Middle Start implementation
 Level 3 = reaching a maturing stage of Middle Start implementation
 Level 4 = at the sustaining stage of Middle Start implementation

*Reddick, a level 1 school, struggled with category 1 supports. A number of school staff members embraced Middle Start, and the school was in the process of developing a culture of shared values and mission aligned with Middle Start, but the repeated turnover of administration and staff, as well as the lack of other supports, hindered Middle Start implementation.

Level 4 Implementation: Sustaining and Fully Engaged in Continuous Improvement

“Seacrest Middle School is now one of the best schools in the state. It is ranked tenth in the state of Arkansas and first in its region”—Seacrest principal

Seacrest and Jeyson reached a sustaining level of Middle Start implementation, and both schools have taken good advantage of numerous

supports along their path to school improvement. At Seacrest, the principal gives the school leadership team a “fairly free hand to make critical decisions related to the effective implementation of school improvement goals. The leadership team is open to anyone willing to make the time commitment and includes teachers from all three grade levels and the counselor.” (Williams Rose & Cheney, 2005). In addition, the school has made major organizational changes by restructuring the school into teams. Case-study research documented the restructuring of the seventh grade as a transition year to include grade-level teams similar to the teams in the students’ elementary school during the first year of Middle Start implementation. This was such a positive experience that teaming expanded to grade 8, and then, at teachers’ request, to grade 9. Relations between the school and the community also improved throughout the years. A threat of a decreasing tax base from the community (a bond issue), resulted in numerous community-school meetings, which ultimately brought the two sides together, and “Consequently, not only are more parents attending meetings and volunteering at the school but the community also passed the bond issue in 2004.” (Williams Rose & Cheney, 2005).

At Jeyson, the teachers see the principal as an academic leader and a catalyst for change who has kept the school centered on the needs of students. The principal works well with the assistant principal, who has also been very supportive of improvement efforts, and the leadership team was also an important part of the school improvement effort. Jeyson also established grade-level teaming for grades 6 through 8. One teacher commented:

Teaming has added a dimension/dynamic to the school in terms of teacher planning, communicating and working together. Middle Start helps our school incorporate teaming into our teaching practice. It is a win-win situation and helps make everything so interconnected.

The school has effective small learning communities and benefits from a strong relationship with the superintendent, who is very supportive of the Middle Start initiative, as well as parents and other community members, who are active in the school.

Both Jeyson and Seacrest are fully engaged in continuous improvement of student learning and achievement. The coach at Jeyson commented:

This school has excelled in its quest for school improvement. “The question at Jeyson is, ‘how far can we go?’”

Level 3 Implementation: Reaching a Maturing Stage of Middle Implementation

“Middle Start has helped our school by providing the means for me and my teachers to network with other schools and teachers on methods and effective strategies which make a difference in student achievement. We have made great improvements to Appleton school over the past three years, thanks to Middle Start.”—Appleton principal

While Appleton has not reached a sustaining level of implementation, its efforts in school improvement continue to develop and mature. This is a cohesive school with a shared vision for school improvement. Leadership is exhibited by a principal who drives school improvement. According to school staff members, “She is a model advocate of Middle Start by championing Middle Start not only with her words, but with her actions” (Williams Rose & Cheney,

2005). The principal was very involved in Middle Start from early on; she participated in the school leadership team and attended all the Middle Start workshops. She has always been very empowering of teachers and supportive of students. Like the administration, the teachers are very involved with Middle Start, and the grade-level teams at the school function as planning teams and a motivational force, as well as a conduit for distributing information throughout the rest of the school. The practice of ongoing inquiry into teaching and learning and the distribution of leadership are ongoing.

Appleton also benefited from opportunities for its teachers to undertake professional development by modeling new instructional practices learned at conferences to other teachers in the school, and to network with other schools. This is very promising since research has shown that isolated school improvement efforts are rarely successful.

Level 2 Implementation: Making Progress in Middle Start Implementation

Cranford is making progress in Middle Start implementation, but has much more work to do. Cranford’s school improvement efforts initially got off to a slow start because of administrative turnover, lack of teacher buy-in, and an over-extended staff, and it took time for the school community to

Cranford is at level 2 implementation since it is steadily working towards school improvement. “No one ever said change was easy”—Teacher at Cranford

develop a collective vision. According to the coach, “Cranford established a very good comprehensive school improvement plan, but implementing the plan had its challenges.” For example, many staff members instrumental in developing the plan had become involved in other education initiatives, and the danger of losing momentum was apparent. The coach stated:

More emphasis needed to be given to changing the practices of teachers. The focus must be on the classroom and effective instructional practices, yet the school improvement effort is dependent on more than the principal and a select group of teachers.

Cranford exhibits two major supports: a culture of shared values and shared leadership and responsibility among staff. The staff has become closer and the school community has moved the school improvement initiative forward. However, the test will be to maintain the momentum. The principal realizes school improvement is a continuous process and the school needs strong district support and links to school networks to ensure that the school keeps moving forward.

Level 1 Implementation: An Emerging Stage

Reddick is at a level 1, an emerging stage of Middle Start implementation, since it has been unable to overcome a number of obstacles, mainly due to a lack of support from both the district and on the part of school leadership. Reddick began to undertake school improvement by signing on to a partnership with Middle Start. However, a number of supports were lacking. As stated above, research stresses the importance of the principal and staff developing a common vision and implementation plans to guide school improvement (Louis and Miles, 1990). For example, the principal should present his/her vision and goals and create an action plan to move towards meeting school goals. These plans need to involve a school leadership team and ultimately buy-in from the entire school staff. However, this was not fully accomplished at Reddick due to a lack of vision by those in school leadership positions. Further, while small learning communities are known to support the school vision and goals, Reddick had not created these structures. In addition, the “interconnectedness” factor—that is, the connections between the school and the district to provide support for the Middle Start program within the school building—was lacking. There was an obvious need to strengthen this relationship so that resources (e.g., focused professional development activities) could be aligned with the school’s improvement effort. And finally, the school’s attempt at school reform in isolation from the rest

of the community was unfortunate; the school did not experience the “synergy” fostered from staff visits to other schools and networking with community members.

Conclusion

The five schools featured in this study share a common feature—they are all high-poverty schools in the Mid South Delta. The majority of schools are striving towards school improvement. The four levels of Middle Start implementation (level 1=emerging, level 2=making progress, level 3=reaching a maturing stage, and level 4=sustaining stage) are clearly evident in the schools’ improvement efforts. Some schools have made more progress than others, and the underlying reason is primarily due to supports available to schools. The school at level 1 lacked support and was struggling with the basic factor—developing a culture of shared values. Schools at the other end of the spectrum, level 4, had a broad range of supports at their disposal. The schools in the middle (levels 2 and 3) are on their way to school improvement. The level 2 school has developed a common schoolwide culture and shared vision, and staff members are starting to demonstrate leadership; however, other supports such as organizational structure, district support and school networks need to be available so that the school continues to progress. The school at level 3 has made great strides but needs more district-level support before it can reach a sustaining level of maturation.

The box on the next page summarizes the major factors and conditions that research suggests may lead to school improvement, as illustrated by the schools described in this report.

Factors and Conditions Promoting School Improvement

- **A collaborative culture of reflection and improvement** and use of a school's strengths to promote school change
- **Participatory leadership and practice of broad-based decision making** among teachers, notability the school leadership team
- **Block scheduling, teaming, small learning communities**, and other structures to support effective teaching and learning
- **District and community support** for education initiatives to promote communitywide understanding about goals of reform efforts and provide funding for professional development and support for school activities
- **Strategic alliances**, including establishing partnerships and collaborations with schools and districts, professional development partners, policy makers and the like in order to expand a school's resource base, increase its visibility, and ultimately build a sustainable infrastructure for school improvement
- **Ongoing technical assistance from coaches** who provide on-site support in organizational planning, classroom instruction, and ongoing inquiry and self assessment
- **Ongoing documentation of progress and ongoing use of data in school improvement efforts**

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Appendix

Middle Start Principles and Practices

Principle 1. Reflective Review And Self-Assessment

A Middle Start school engages in ongoing inquiry into teaching and learning, using both internal and external reviews of student work, curriculum, instruction, and teacher assignment. Reflection and inquiry are central to the school's approach to continuous improvement of learning for all students and to the cultivation of a collaborative professional culture of leaders and learners.

- The school devotes resources and time to continuing and deepening schoolwide inquiry and reflection into teaching and learning, making it a central aspect of school culture. A democratically elected and representative school leadership team leads these efforts.
- The school collects and examines data and evidence, including a school self-assessment, to focus the staff on identifying and setting teaching and learning goals.
- The school examines evidence to identify academic progress as well as gaps in achievement related to income, gender, race/ethnicity, and special status (ELL and special education).
- The school makes inquiries into student learning through a regular and formal process of reviewing student work.
- The school conducts formal and periodic external reviews of its teaching and learning practices and uses the results to improve practice.

Principle 2. Effective Small Learning Communities

A Middle Start school has small learning communities with interdisciplinary teams at each grade level. Teams of teachers meet during common planning time to set instructional priorities for their team, develop interdisciplinary units, conduct reviews of student work to assess the team's direction and needs, and communicate with parents. Such small learning communities are important to the healthy development of young adolescents as they foster a caring and supportive learning environment.

- School teams use common planning time to coordinate the curriculum, instruction, and assessment for all students and identify an instructional focus that crosses all content areas. Teams regularly review student work to assess progress toward their teaching and learning goals, and set future directions.
- School teams are involved in making decisions about school policies, practices, and procedures in collaboration with the school leadership team.
- School teams cultivate meaningful, two-way, and regular communication between home and school that builds families' understanding of the academic and developmental needs of young adolescents. Teams also involve families and community agencies in classroom and school activities and invite their perspectives on future directions for the school.
- School teams promote the intellectual, physical, emotional, moral, and social development of every student.
- Students are flexibly grouped within small learning communities so that every child has access to rigorous curriculum, effective instruction, and appropriate level of support.

Principle 3. Rigorous Curriculum, Instruction, and Student Assessment

A Middle Start school explicitly focuses on improving student learning and achievement. The school matches rich curriculum with best instructional practices and exemplary assessment to realize the full potential of each student.

- The school uses best instructional practices and a curriculum that emphasizes deep understanding, higher order thinking, and experiential learning.
- The school aligns curriculum, instruction, and assessment with each other and with district, state, and national standards.
- The school researches, selects, and uses multicultural curricula and teachers use a variety of teaching modalities to meet the needs of all students.
- The school assesses student progress in a variety of ways, including performance-based and project-based assessments, which provide all students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery and understanding.
- Teachers use standards and rubrics when evaluating student work; students have opportunities to learn about, develop, and use rubrics.
- The school engages in standards-based professional development that builds on teachers' knowledge and creates opportunities for reflection.

Principle 4. Distributed Leadership and Sustainable Partnerships

A Middle Start school cultivates sustainable partnerships with families, the district, the school board, local businesses, universities, and other community groups for the purpose of enhancing student learning. The school fosters high levels of awareness and support for middle-grades education among its partners. Leadership is shared and distributed throughout the school and through all levels of the school community; all members of the staff hold themselves accountable for student learning and achievement.

- The leadership team involves families, school staff, and community partners in school governance and in making decisions about policies and practices for the improvement of teaching and learning.
- Teachers, administrators, and counselors regularly communicate with families, and welcome families and community members into classrooms, team meetings, and school events.
- The school leadership team provides space and resources to families in order to extend their knowledge about the needs of young adolescents and approaches to supporting students academically and developmentally. The school leadership team also provides access to community agencies, services, and resources.
- The leadership team facilitates the schoolwide collection of data to assess the concerns and perceptions of families regarding the school, and uses this evidence to make related changes in policies and practices.
- The leadership team is collaborative and inclusive in its efforts to attain the school's teaching and learning goals. Additionally, the school's emphasis on reflective review facilitates the development of internal accountability for the improvement of teaching and learning.

- The leadership team participates in the Middle Start network and leadership seminars, and shares information from these meetings with staff. To facilitate professional development, staff from the school visit other schools to study their efforts to improve teaching and learning, and are visited by their fellow Middle Start schools for this purpose.
- The school views students as central to its purpose, and seeks their ideas on new initiatives as well as their feedback on progress in teaching and learning. The school regularly reviews students' work in teams and as a whole school, using internal and external reviewers, to gauge its progress toward its teaching and learning goals.

The Academy for Educational Development (AED) is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to addressing human development needs in the United States and throughout the world. As one of the world's foremost human and social development organizations, AED works in five major program areas: U.S. Education and Workforce Development; Global Learning; Global Health, Population and Nutrition; Leadership and Institutional Development; and Social Change. At the heart of all our programs is an emphasis on building skills and knowledge to improve people's lives.

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In 2005, the Educational Equity Center at AED (EEC) was formed. The Center is an outgrowth of Educational Equity Concepts, a national nonprofit organization with a 22-year history of addressing educational excellence for all children regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, disability, or level of family income. EEC's goal is to ensure that equity is a key focus within national reform efforts to ensure equality of opportunity on in schools and afterschool settings, starting in early childhood.

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