Beginning in the Middle: Critical Steps in Secondary School Reform

The Report of the NASBE Study Group on Early Secondary Education
Study Group on Early Secondary Education: A Precursor to High School Reform

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Every day, 20 million students who can only be described as diverse, changing, and reactive 10- to 15-year-olds walk through the doors of our nation’s middle schools. Whether the configuration is grade 4 to 6, 5 to 8, or some other iteration, these students are making critical and complex life choices that will affect their academic and social options for the remainder of their lives. Of equal if not greater importance is the reality that for nearly a quarter of these students, the seeds of withdrawal from school and the life-long consequences of under-employment, limited income, and involvement with the justice system are planted in these early secondary years.

These critical life-choices, coupled with a tug-of-war over the “best” configuration for all students, the need to ensure that students enter upper secondary school with the skills to succeed, and the knowledge that the majority of the critical “transition” points occur in the early secondary years led the NASBE Board of Directors to create the Study Group on Early Secondary Education. For the past several years, America has worked to re-design its high schools. We have invested in curricular reform, raised standards and graduation requirements, and pushed our high schools to assume a global perspective. Yet the “critical middle” has often been ignored, both financially and programatically. As the research on achievement and dropouts shows, this “benign neglect” is a practice that spells trouble not only for early secondary education, but especially for the high schools we are trying to reform.

**Issues for Middle Schools**

According to the National Middle Schools Association, in 2000 there were 8,371 middle schools in the United States with a grade 6 to 8 configuration. Including all possible grade configurations would bring the total to 14,107 middle schools. Results from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams show some modest achievement gains for middle school students: though reading levels have been relatively flat, the percentage of 8th grade students scoring at or above basic in math has increased by 10 points over the last decade.

But looking a bit deeper provides a more troubling picture of what these achievement levels and a host of other issues mean in a broader context—and helps lay out a framework for the challenges facing middle school educators and policymakers alike.

It is in the early secondary years, for example, “that students’ progress slows, performance declines, and gaps persist,” as one state’s middle schools report puts it. This is particularly true in math. On the 2007 NAEP math exam, 38 percent of 4th grade students scored at the proficient level or above. But for 8th graders, only 32 percent achieved proficiency or above. The same
The study showed that the white-minority achievement gaps also widened between 4th and 8th grade.*

Looking at the 2007 NAEP data cited above in a slightly different way reveals another looming problem for middle school students. If 32 percent of 8th graders reached proficiency or better on the math exam, that means 68 percent were at basic or below (39 percent were at basic and 29 percent were below basic). In reading, 69 percent were at basic or below (43 percent basic and 26 percent below basic), numbers which have barely budged in nearly 10 years. The challenge with so many students transitioning into 9th grade with just basic or below basic skills is that the rigor of the high school curriculum, as well as graduation requirements, has been increasing significantly over the past 10 to 15 years, and the pace of this increase is continuing as states work to ensure that all students leave school with 21st century skills. In 1980, for example, students in many states could graduate from high school with only one credit in math. Nowhere is that the case in 2008. High schools are awakening to the fact that all students must be ready for post-secondary education, either immediately following graduation or within a few years. This change has had a profound impact on the early secondary experience, as the entrance needs for the high school have changed.

One clear example of this impact is the move by the California State Board of Education in July 2008 to require all 8th grade students to take Algebra I within the next three years. Similarly, a Middle School Steering Committee report to the Maryland State Board of Education in June 2008 recommended that “all students take a significant course in algebra by the end of grade 8.” While some question the costs and feasibility of raising this particular standard, few dispute the need for increased rigor in the middle school curriculum. Quite simply, if students do not enter the 9th grade with a sufficient skill set, they will not graduate—which brings us back to the large majority of students achieving at the basic or below basic levels.

* It should be noted that these performance declines are evident on many state assessments as well as on NAEP exams. The state report cited above, for example, found there was an 18 percentage point drop in reading proficiency and a 29 point drop in math proficiency between 3rd grade and 8th grade, using state assessments.
Another cause for concern is that for far too many students, academic and social problems begin to manifest themselves during the middle years and become significant contributing factors to dropping out in high school. Lack of success in middle school is also a major risk factor for students’ later involvement with the juvenile justice system and for teen pregnancy, both conditions highly associated with dropping out. In all, half or more of those who eventually drop out begin to lose their way in middle school.5 This makes student engagement with school a key issue for the early secondary years. Disengagement often begins with the 6th grade and, as will be shown, is the strongest factor in producing a dropout in the 10th grade.

Finally, there is one more hopeful—but at the same time cautionary—theme concerning young teenagers that makes these years critically important for educators. That is, most middle school students remain optimistic, resilient, and open. A 2007 survey of middle school students found that 93 percent said there was no chance they would drop out of high school.6 And those students who are wavering in terms of making good life choices are still relatively “reachable.” But such resiliency and openness to healthy influences do not last forever. Schools must work strategically to ensure that students are accepted and engaged. Positive relationships with teachers and other adults are critical. The cautionary part of this theme is that for many students, the middle school years are their last, best chance for staying on or returning to a pathway for success.

These challenges and opportunities provide the backdrop for the work and recommendations of the Study Group. The remainder of this report will examine a number of issues that are specific to young adolescents and their schools, and that are key to meeting the challenges delineated above. Nearly all are concerned with the dual impacts of social-emotional development and cognitive growth during this period, and the manner in which these factors play a role in school success. We will also discuss the controversy of grade configuration. Next, we will discuss issues in teacher preparation, before we turn our attention to the critical, and perhaps determinative topic of student engagement. Finally, the report will examine the role of transition periods in the student experience of secondary education.

Why Are Middle Schools So Important for State Boards of Education?

- For too many students, the early secondary years mark a time when academic growth slows, performance levels drop, and achievement gaps persist.

- High school academics are becoming more rigorous and graduation standards are increasing. Students exiting middle school must have the literacy (both reading and mathematical) to enable them to meet the challenges of high school.

- The nation has a huge dropout problem, and half or more of those who eventually drop out begin to lose their way in middle school.

- Middle school students who are wavering in terms of making good life choices are still relatively “reachable,” but such openness to healthy influences does not last forever. For many students, the middle school years are their last, best chance for staying on or returning to a pathway for success.
The original concept of the early secondary experience was to separate stages of development. The idea was that this age group appeared to be experiencing a set of psychological and social changes that merited a different educational experience, and, at least in the beginning, these particular changes predominate.

While there are clear differences between a student at the elementary school and one in high school, it is in the early secondary level that social factors may begin to out-weigh other considerations. For the very first time, students find themselves with the capacity to make decisions as to their class work and their subsequent participation in school. In addition, they have significantly elevated competition for their time and attention—precisely at a time when that attention is becoming the basis of learning. The social, psychological, and learning factors all converge to make the early secondary student a unique individual.

Social–Emotional Issues

Ask many educators about working in the early secondary classroom, and they may be quick to expound of the horrors of dealing with raging hormones, disaffection, and unruly behavior. Conversely, those who choose to work with young adolescents talk about their passion, curiosity, and enthusiasm. Stepping back to examine the primary social-emotional issues of early teenagers as they impact schools, four general themes emerge.

Grade drop

The national assessments discussed in the Introduction above—and the experiences of teachers and parents—reveals that as a group, early secondary students simply do not achieve at the same proficiency levels as elementary school students, nor do they secure the grades they achieved in elementary school. Multiple investigators have come to the conclusion that much of this decline in performance is based on the changing relationship between the school and the student. A student’s perception of a caring classroom teacher accounts for much of student success on standard measures of achievement, and the more impersonal world of early secondary schools is often far removed from the individual attention young students receive in elementary school.

Less interest in school overall

Perhaps as a correlation, perhaps as a causal factor of grade drop, early adolescents report less interest in school itself, in addition to less interest in the grades they receive. As with grade drop, one factor significantly affecting this perception is the size of the school and the management of the classroom.

Smaller schools allow for greater personalization, perhaps for the last time in the individual’s experience. The process of transitioning from the elementary school to the early secondary school is one of transitioning from a smaller, safer environment to one that tends toward housing more students, more teachers, more different
classes, and more options. Size matters at this level, with students more comfortable dealing with smaller institutions.

Interest decline is not simply a function of school size, however. Students universally indicate that the classroom itself is the primary factor in their school involvement. When queried as to why they came to school, early secondary students report multiple teacher-related factors (the teacher has a good sense of humor; likes kids, etc.). Classroom management is the primary predictor of student success at all levels of secondary school, especially at the early secondary level. The ability to establish a relationship with the students while also establishing an authoritative structure within the classroom is crucial for adolescent development.

Self-confidence and self-esteem drop
Perhaps the predominate lament among parents is the fact that the older their child becomes, the more dangers they face. At the same time, parents have less impact on the decisions their child makes. For the elementary school, the influence of the parent is clearly the most important factor in the child’s life. However, the older students get, the more influence is exerted by both peers and the school itself.

It is at this juncture of increasing self-determination and decision-making that students become more dependent on external forces, apparently to their detriment in many cases. By nature oppositional, these young adolescents project much of their need for approval on those surrounding them. Psychologists note that cycles of being successful leading to self-confidence leading to more success (or lack of success leading to a drop in confidence) are common for all people. But these cycles are particularly critical for young adolescents, who are still developing and learning about their own strengths and who, at the same time, are being confronted with a host of new experiences academically, physically, emotionally, and socially. For young people in small, successful schools and/or those who have close relationships with caring adults, these experiences can be key to navigating turbulent times—and may make the difference between success and failure in later life.

Anti-social behavior
Early secondary schools are the first opportunity to make independent decisions for many students. The influence of gangs, the media, and peer groups have been well documented. On the other hand, the majority of students come to school, study, learn, and behave appropriately. As is the case with self confidence and interest in school, high-quality relationships with adults are critical when it comes to behavior. Teachers who have high-quality relationships with their students had 31 percent fewer discipline problems, rule violations, and related problems.

A supportive, caring, expectation-rich environment has been shown to decrease the problems in all areas covered. If we want to help students thrive, we have to give them the tools to “self-manage.” This skill is achieved in caring environment that, at the same time, has clear expectations for behavior. We know that higher bonding and better social-emotional skills in the 7th grade strongly predict academic achievement in the 10th grade. We also know that self-discipline, measured in the fall, is a better predictor of school performance in the year than IQ. Thus, self-discipline may be the key to success in learning.

Cognitive Development
As important as social-emotional changes are in early adolescents, the changes in their cognitive skills are
equally remarkable. These changes are reflected in both affective systems and cognitive systems.

Affective systems appear to be strongly linked to the onset of puberty (as opposed to chronological age) and are seen in pubertal changes in romantic and sexual interests, mood swings, emotional intensity, reward seeking, sensation seeking, changes in sleep/arousal regulation, increased appetite, and (for females) a risk for affective disorders.

A strong body of work suggests that cognitive development correlates with age and experience. The increase in abstract thinking and use of hypotheticals, planning, reasoning, logic, inhibitory control, problem solving, and understanding of consequences that is seen in early adolescence is not linked with the onset of puberty. Rather, these cognitive advances begin to emerge in late elementary school and continue to develop long after puberty is over.

Both affective and cognitive changes have significant implications for early secondary teachers and counselors, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Grade Configuration

The first junior high school appeared in the United States in 1909 focusing on grades 7 and 8, and by 1960 about 80 percent of the nation’s students attended a junior high school that included grades 7, 8, and 9, followed by three years of high school. By the mid-1960s, however, these schools were beginning to fall from favor, with concerns that they were simply mimicking the high school model and not paying attention to the specific developmental needs of their students. By 2000, only five percent of schools had the traditional 7-9 configuration, with 5–8 and 6–8 configurations dominating the organization of this middle period. A survey of middle school administrators indicated that the “ideal” for organization was the 6–8 formulation.

During the past decade, there has been some movement toward a K-8, 9-12 configuration, particularly in urban districts. While the debate over configuration is a robust one, both behavioral and academic outcome data suggest that the 6–8 model merits examination. Certainly, under-supported middle schools may require intervention, and replacing them with under-sup-
ported K–8 systems is not a magic bullet. But research has suggested problems with the typical configuration.

Cook, et al (2007) found that students attending middle school in the 6th grade are more than twice as likely to be disciplined, relative to their counterparts in elementary school. These significant differences lasted beyond the 6th grade year. Sixth graders in elementary school also made gains in standardized tests relative to their peers in middle school.\(^\text{13}\)

One factor in these differences appears to be the elimination of a transition point when the student leaves elementary school to attend either 5th or 6th grade at a separate middle school. There is evidence that the fewer transitions a student makes, the higher that student’s over-all achievement. Indeed, as grade span configuration increases, so does achievement. Therefore, keeping a student in a given school facility appears to enhance student performance.\(^\text{14}\)

### Teaching In Early Secondary

The Study Group explored many issues related to the practice of teaching at the early secondary level, including preparation, professional development and
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recruitment. One frequently contentious concern is teacher preparation for the middle school level. The issues in teacher preparation mirror, in many respects, those found in grade configuration. If the traditional middle school model is used, then a specialized setting is required for those students entering, at the earliest, grade 5 and exiting grade 8, then specific preparation/endorsement would seem to make sense. However, if the K-8 model is used, then the issues of specific preparation become more complex. While the traditional elementary education certificate would appear to meet a quick glance standard, the reality is that different state models using grade specific designations would dominate. In addition, as calls for increasing standards in early secondary continue (particularly in relation to algebra), certifications for advanced math teachers would come into play.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform proposes that “all states should establish mandatory requirements for licensing teachers who plan to teach at the middle level, and college graduate programs should establish programs that specifically prepare teachers to teach young adolescents.”

“Lack of specialized teacher preparation for middle-grades teachers amounts to malpractice,” said Ken McEwin of Appalachian State University, a member of the National Forum’s policy committee. “If we believe that young children need teachers with special training in early childhood education, why would we not think young adolescents need and deserve teachers trained to teach this special age group?”

In general, the Study Group endorsed the concept that all programs designed to prepare early secondary teachers should possess the following essential characteristics:

1. A comprehensive understanding of early adolescence and the needs of young adolescents;
2. A grounding in the philosophy and organization of middle grades education;
3. An understanding of the early secondary curriculum, what students should know and how teachers can teach that;
4. A grounding in middle grades planning, teaching, and assessment via structured courses;
5. Concentrated study in two broad content areas; and
6. Field experience within an early secondary facility.

The Study Group noted that one critical area of need was the provision of professional development for teachers within early secondary education. Middle grades pedagogy and curriculum are rapidly evolving fields, and given the acceleration of learning being demanded in high schools, the stakes are only getting higher. Developing a coherent, systematic approach to providing teachers with the information and skills they require for effective practice must be a priority for states and districts.

Teacher recruitment and retention issues was another area of concern to the Study Group. “The demands of teaching middle school show up in teacher retention rates,” the New York Times reported. “In New York City, the nation’s largest school system, middle school teachers account for 22 percent of the 41,291 teachers who have left the school system since 1999, even though they make up only 17 percent of the overall teaching force, according to the United Federation of Teachers. In Philadelphia, researchers found that 34.2 percent of new middle school teachers in one representative year quit after their first year, compared with 21.1 percent of elementary school teachers and 26.3 percent of high school teachers.”

Retention rates in middle school are also critical because of findings showing that far more middle school students than high school students are in classes with teachers who lack certification for that subject.
The National Center for Educational Achievement Best Practice Framework

The Framework for Best Practice below, developed by the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA), uses state standards-based goals as the foundation for student expectations and has been informed by the study of more than 500 consistently higher performing schools. According to NCEA, “only activities that were found to distinguish consistently higher performing schools from average-performing schools are included in The Framework.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment</th>
<th>Recognize, intervene, or adjust based on school performance</th>
<th>Recognize, intervene, or adjust based on teacher performance</th>
<th>Recognize, intervene, or adjust based on student performance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring, Compilation, Analysis, and the Use of Data</td>
<td>Develop student assessment and data monitoring systems to monitor school performance</td>
<td>Monitor teacher performance and student learning</td>
<td>Monitor student learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements</td>
<td>Provide evidence-based instructional practices</td>
<td>Ensure the use of evidence-based programs, practices, and arrangements in every classroom</td>
<td>Use evidence-based programs, practices, and arrangements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building</td>
<td>Provide strong leaders, highly qualified teachers, and aligned professional development</td>
<td>Select, develop, and allocate staff based on student learning needs</td>
<td>Collaborate in grade level/subject teams focused on student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Learning: Expectations and Goals</td>
<td>Provide clear, prioritized academic objectives by grade and subject that all students are expected to master</td>
<td>Implement the district’s written curriculum and ensure that all students achieve specific academic goals</td>
<td>Ensure the district’s written curriculum is taught to and mastered by all students</td>
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3. The Critical Roles of Engagement and Transition

The Study Group received two strong messages from the experts who addressed the members. The first of these concerned the overwhelming need to engage students in their class work. The second message was that successfully moving through school transitions is a key to student success, and that the transition from elementary to early secondary is as significant as that from early to upper secondary education. If policymakers and educators can successfully address these two issues, the Study Group members believe, schools will have moved a long way toward addressing the challenges laid out in the first part of this report.

Engagement

A few short years ago, the primary role for early secondary education was to sort students for tracks in high school. Now, as a nation, we have come to accept that all students must be ready for post-secondary education. This change has placed middle schools in the position of preparing students not just for upper-secondary schooling, but for adulthood. In addition, as we have seen, increasing graduation requirements mean that the consequences for failure in any class have become enormous, so much so that a five-year graduation cohort may become more common.

Motivated by a desire to please, and possessing boundless curiosity, elementary students are, as a whole, accepting of direction, focused on task completion, and largely non-confrontational.

Early secondary students, for the first time, find the capacity to question—and to say “No.” While retaining much of the curiosity of their elementary years, they become much more obsessed with peers and much less tolerant of work for work’s sake.

According to Jack Berckemeyer of the National Middle School Association, when early secondary students are queried as to why they come to school, they respond with comments like “my teacher has a good sense of humor”; “my teacher likes working with kids”; or “it’s a creative classroom.” The students see a teacher that engages them as the primary motivating factor in their participation in classroom work.

Mr. Berckemeyer went on to note that teacher caring, flexibility, and humor, were clearly the critical ingredients in engaging students. To be successful at the early secondary level, he said,

You cannot forget the art of teaching. The human element is important in that kids have to be important as people first. Adolescents will engage when they know the teacher cares about them and can relate to them. Knowledge is power. If we have teachers and administrators that are
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knowledgeable about early adolescence, about cognitive and emotional development, and about learning issues, then the early secondary schools will be a place for learning for all students.

Other research reviewed by the Study Group highlighted the fact that teacher expectations are also key in student mastery. Some critics have voiced concern that over the last several decades, the middle school experience has all too often been characterized by an emphasis on emotional and social support, to the detriment of academic exposure. However, as expectations for high school performance have increased, middle schools have had to increase their focus on achievement. And, it is important to remember, social/emotional support and high expectations are not mutually exclusive when it comes to student success.

Work by Fives and Manning suggests that two separate factors may contribute to student effort and engagement within the classroom. Students’ belief in themselves has been shown to be a strong determinate of effort, with students clearly showing persistence in tasks wherein they feel they have an ability to succeed. On the other hand, correlational research has also shown that students perceiving teachers to have high expectations report greater interest in class, a stronger mastery orientation, and higher grades.

Work by the National Academies demonstrates that educational conditions directly impact academic engagement. Summarized by the graphic below, the Academies first note that the context of education is critical. While students do enter early secondary with beliefs and predispositions, all of these are developed, at least partly, by the educational environments they have experienced. All teachers have had the experience of viewing an adolescent unable to pay attention in one classroom while persevering on a demanding task in another. In addition, focused efforts exerted by students in after-school programs (think athletics) are often substantially ahead of those seen during the school day.

Size as it relates to the context of school has been extensively studied and many reformers have come to the conclusion that size matters. Large, impersonal schools housing a thousand or more students simply do not have the capacity to focus on the individual, to the detriment of both. To this end, many districts have moved to limit class size, although more have done so in elementary schools than at the secondary level.

**Encouraging student success**

Students will not exert effort if they feel they lack the capacity to succeed. They need to know what it takes to succeed, and to believe they can succeed. Research has shown that a significant number of “dropouts” do so because they cannot keep up with the work.

Even students with prior academic success may not put much effort into school if they believe that their work will not be recognized. Some students may simply not understand what it takes to succeed and require help in understanding what is, and is not, acceptable.

If students do believe they can do well in school, they will not necessarily exert effort unless there is a reason to do so. Summarized as “I want to,” these behaviors relate to the fluctuations in effort that can be seen in the competing forces operating on young adolescents.

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**Educational Conditions that Promote Engagement**

- **Educational Context** includes school climate, organization, composition, size, and instruction
- **Beliefs about competence and control**
- **Values and Goals**
- **Social Connectedness**
- **Academic Engagement**

Extrinsic rewards, often touted as a means of investing young adolescents in their learning, may be useful, but carry large caveats. First, they must be believed to be genuinely available. Students with a history of limited success or those living in economically disadvantaged environments may not perceive some of the rewards (well-paying jobs, scholarships) as genuinely available. In addition, there is evidence that extrinsic rewards may only promote superficial compliance. When tasks become difficult, or if rewards are too abstract, the student may withdraw involvement.

In sum, the Study Group believes that in order successfully engage young people in their coursework and raise achievement, early secondary school students should have it both ways: there should be high academic expectations and a high level of social and emotional support as part of their educational context.
Transitions: Points of Change Point to Problems

The second strong message received by the Study Group centered on the importance of transition points. The early secondary years encompass two of the three significant transition points in a student’s tenure.

Transition refers not just to the act of going from one grade to the next. It encompasses the totality of the changes the student will encounter: differing interventions by differing people; pedagogical changes altering the classroom experience; changes in expectations for personal control and performance. In this context, these transitions encompass those periods of time when the student is most likely to lose his or her way. Given the consequences of failure, it is these points that must be effectively managed for the good of all students—and ultimately, for the good of society as a whole.

Most researchers and policymakers regard the end of the 3rd grade as marking the first transition period in a student’s life, albeit one without a change in setting. This is the transition period marked by leaving a focus on learning to read by entering a period of reading to learn. Literacy concerns have been well documented, and there is no doubt that learning the fundamentals of reading and writing is essential for nearly all student achievement in later years. However, it is within this critical period that using literacy skills emerge. Acquiring robust comprehension abilities sets the stage for success in middle school and, by extension, high school and post-secondary endeavors. This initial transition point, and its importance, cannot be over-emphasized.

Transitioning from elementary to early secondary

While it’s been a concern for some time, more researchers have been turning their attention to the transition from elementary school to the early secondary school. For the majority of students, this transition is marked by a change in setting, new relationships, and new expectations. It is a transition that often sets the stage for academic struggles to emerge in the near and far term, and it is a transition that deserves the attention of educators and policymakers alike.

The transition from elementary to middle school is a challenge for many young adolescents. The comfort of the familiar has been replaced (often) by a new setting marked by increased size and anonymity. For nearly all students, peer relations become more difficult as they are melded into “teams,” making interaction with friends from the elementary school more difficult. Teacher and parent expectations appear to differ. Finally, there is the inescapable reality of briefer contact with many more adults.

The potential negative effects of this transition are well known among educators. Following their move into middle school, many students feel less positive about their skills and tend to down-grade the overall importance of school. As a result, they put in less effort and withdraw from tasks perceived to be too difficult, leading to a potential for grade drop. The grade drop, unfortunately, occurs at precisely the time that academic expectations are increasing, with more end-of-course assessments, high-stakes testing (some states now make passing 8th grade tests a requirement for being promoted to 9th grade), and increased graduation requirements being imposed across the country. Finally, many students perceive a decrease in support from teachers that is accompanied by an increase in engagement with peer groups. Taken together, these factors make it imperative that schools—and policymakers—work to ensure that transition plans and associated activities are in place.

The reality that this transition often results in degradation in academic performance is an important piece of the planning process. Education researcher John Alspaugh has shown a statistically significant achievement loss associated with transitioning from elementary to middle school, when compared to students in K-8 schools who did not have that transition. He went on to note that students from both middle and K-8 schools experienced achievement loss in the 9th grade, but this loss was larger for students in a separate early secondary structure.

Regardless of the specific activities involved, transition plans must provide adolescents with repeated exposure to those with whom they will form relationships. This serves to impart the sense of someone “looking out for me.” While the middle school model strongly advocates advisory programs that can serve this function, implementation of these programs has often been problematic. According to the report Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century, “When well implemented and sustained, advisory programs potentially allow educators and students to develop strong relationships that support student learning.
The Critical Middle: A Reason for Hope  
The Report of the Maryland Middle School Steering Committee

In June 2008, the Maryland Middle School Committee released the report on its study of middle schooling in the state of Maryland. This Committee was convened by the State Superintendent of Schools, Nancy Grasmick, as a response to the decline in student academic performance. On the Maryland School Assessment, 86 percent of 4th graders scored as proficient in both reading and math. However, upon reaching the 8th grade, reading proficiency had dropped by 19 percentage points and math by 29 percentage points to 57 percent. The Report noted that ninth-grade teachers report up to one-third of their time being spent on re-teaching skills and content that should have already been learned. Poor attendance, poor behavior, a failing grade in math, and a failing grade in English are all risk predictors. A 6th grade student exhibiting only one of these risk indicators has a 10 percent chance of graduating on time and a 20 percent chance of graduating a year late.

To respond to this challenge, the Committee developed the following recommendations designed to help educators re-think the middle school to support student achievement.

1: Instructional Time — Extend the middle school day and school year as dictated by the needs of the learner.
2: Algebra — Prepare students to complete algebra by the end of the 8th grade.
3: Integrated STEM Instruction — Provide students integrated math, science, and technology instruction with a focus on problem-solving and real-world application.
4: World Language — Enroll every student in a sequential world-language course in the 6th grade.
5: Disciplinary Literacy — Stress the reading, writing, and thinking skills in each discipline as an integral component of the subject.
6: Fine Arts — Provide all students fine-arts instruction that develops their literacy in music, dance, theater, and visual arts.
7: Technology and information Literacy — Teach information literacy and use technology in all subjects.
8: Skills for Lifelong Success — Teach those skills that, in addition to content mastery, are essential for school success.
9: Advanced Learners — Provide accelerated and enriched instructional pathways for advanced learners.

10: Teacher Preparation — Ensure that teachers are prepared to work specifically with the middle-level learner.
11: Professional Development — Provide all middle school teachers high-quality professional development.
12: School Leadership — Establish a leadership team in every middle school, led by a principal who is an instructional leader.
13: Assessment and Feedback — Regularly assess student learning and use assessment results to guide instructional, course-taking, and organizational decisions.
14: Skill Mastery — Emphasize students’ mastery of essential skills
15: Parent and Student Partnerships — Partner with students and parents, using student data to guide educational decisions.
16: Organizational Structures — Develop flexible schedules that provide adequate time for students to master concepts and skills and for teachers to collaborate.

The full report is available from the Maryland Department of Education website at [www.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/0000430a/nkjeqaqerynbvdvsmhrkgbxzvwtw/Middle_School_Task_Force_Report_6_4_08](http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/0000430a/nkjeqaqerynbvdvsmhrkgbxzvwtw/Middle_School_Task_Force_Report_6_4_08).
Too frequently, though, advisory programs have been implemented in a perfunctory fashion with the potential for little, if any positive effect. Fortunately, there are other practices that can also ease transition issues and help students maintain a closer contact with teachers, including grouping students with a team of two or three teachers for a full year, or "looping" to keep students with the same teachers over two years.

Finally, it is important to note that since the transition to middle school often involves a change in physical location, repeated exposure to the geography of the building and the opportunity to practice managing that geography is important for students entering the new school.

**Transitioning to upper secondary education: ensuring high school success**

The bottom line is that far too many students enter the 9th grade academically unprepared, leaving them at risk for failing or dropping out of high school. As noted by Robert Balfanz, a secondary school researcher at Johns Hopkins, students leave the middle grades with decent elementary skills, but they are lacking the intermediate skills necessary for secondary success. The research backing this statement is unmistakable. On average, students experience a decrease in academic achievement as they progress from early secondary to the high school. In addition, behavior problems in the form of suspensions and expulsions increase in the 9th grade. Both of these factors yield far too many high school freshmen who fail each year, as well as a large number who repeat the grade. While we know that the seeds for dropping out begin around the 6th grade, it is during the 9th-grade period that these problems come to fruition.

A number of researchers and organizations have studied the specific issues around the transition from middle school, and their conclusions are particularly relevant for policymakers struggling to stem the number of dropouts in the first years of high school. For example, work conducted by the Southern Regional Education Board suggests:

- Many students are simply not ready for the work in secondary school. NAEP data indicates that the basic level of proficiency is the lowest level of skills necessary to complete work at the high school level;

- Students have not been challenged in the right courses. The Virginia Algebra Readiness Project documents the need to complete Algebra I by the end of the 8th year. Without this course, students simply cannot finish all the course requirements for a high school diploma within four years;

- Parents and students have not received the needed advice to help them succeed. Knowledge about the different expectations now present in high school is often not imparted to either the student or the parent;

- Students with learning gaps are not being identified at an early age. It is critical that 5th and 6th grade students with achievement gaps be targeted and receive intensive intervention. Without such help, the gap will never close;

- Males and females are undergoing significant maturation changes. Females are developing far more rapidly than males. This has an impact on retention systems. Older males attending classes with more quickly developing, younger females creates a recipe for additional problems; and

- Students not connected to an adult are less likely to finish high school than those who maintain such a relationship. Extra-curricular activities and goals beyond high school are also critical factors in maintaining effort in school.

What, then, are the factors that make for a successful transition? Not surprisingly, they appear to center around the dual themes of academic emphasis and personal support and engagement.

A rigorous core curriculum at the early secondary level is the necessary ingredient for successful transition to upper secondary education. Students must have the opportunity, working with guidance counselors and their parents, to plan ahead for five or six years of course work, not just for one year at a time. This serves the dual purpose of ensuring the student is “on track” for graduation at all segments of secondary education. In addition, it serves to stretch students’ sense of time into the future, embedding current course work into a plan for graduation. This goes a long way toward making class work in the 8th and 9th grade relevant.

For example, we know that students tend to be successful (defined by both graduation rate and college entrance) when they have taken Algebra I no later than the
9th grade. This makes algebra an early secondary course and it becomes a benchmark of successful transition programming, in that it allows for more options, as well as being an indicator of success.

An additional factor that leads to successful transition is developing a system of interventions and consequences for failure. Far too many students have learned that failure is, essentially, without consequence. As noted below, there are multiple interventions that can enhance student success that must be a part of student programming. The bottom line, however, is that successful transitioning is based on a student’s capacity to succeed. Therefore, each student must continue working to perform to a standard, until that standard is met. The cost of failure for the individual student and society is too high.

If students are not ready for the 9th grade, educators and policymakers must change from thinking that it is the “student’s fault,” to thinking in terms of redesigning the early secondary experience.

While redesign has obvious implications for the 9th grade, ensuring that students are on track is an effort that must begin in the 6th grade. In his work, Balfanz has noted that one-half of all dropouts start that process in the middle grades. He notes that disengagement begins in the 6th and 7th grades and is a process that can be monitored, with subsequent intervention. His research has found that students in the 6th grade who exhibited the following characteristics had only a 25 percent chance of graduating:

- Attended school less than 80 percent of the time;
- Received poor behavior-related grades;
- Failed math;
- Failed English.

Intervention, therefore, must begin at the 6th grade and must be tailored according to the student’s needs, not the school’s capacity. Below is one model of a systemic, tiered intervention.
Transition Programs

Students failing in early secondary require intensive intervention in (or prior to) the 9th grade. Following are some of these programs that have shown success:

I. Ninth grade academies

Small learning communities, housed within the high school facility, have been noted for their capacity to provide intensive intervention in those areas considered critical for success in high school, namely English and mathematics. Most models call for a double-dose approach, often for both subject areas. All models call for using grade-level standards within the academies.

The most successful academies are built around a coherent theme such as the arts or technology to give it an identity. One critical facet of smaller learning communities is the opportunity to personalize the high school experience. As noted earlier, the transition from elementary to early secondary is often accompanied by a transition into a significantly larger, and thus confusing and often intimidating, environment. Stepping into today’s high school is exponentially greater in this regard.

Academies provide a rich opportunity to connect with students and provide them with the personal support many need for success.

II. Summer bridge programs

These exist as one of two models. The first serves as a “catch-up” experience for students, usually extending from six to eight weeks. This model is highly focused, usually around literacy needs, and is designed to gain ground toward grade level expectations.

The second bridge program model is one that serves as an introduction to courses at the high school level. This experience is set as a “prep” model for the higher expectations found within today’s high school. As Dr. Balfanz noted, “You really have to struggle to fail in the 6th grade. It is much, much easier to fail in high school.”

III. Orientation programs

As noted earlier, expectations at the high school level have changed markedly, just within the past few years. Structured orientation programs involving both the student and the parent (both together and separately)

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Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)

The GEAR UP program, which operates under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education, is specifically directed toward students in the early middle grades.

Program Description

This discretionary grant program is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP provides six-year grants to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools. GEAR UP grantees serve an entire cohort of students beginning no later than the seventh grade and follow the cohort through high school. GEAR UP funds are also used to provide college scholarships to low-income students.

Types of Projects

GEAR UP offers state and partnership grants. State grants are competitive six-year matching grants that must include an early intervention component designed to increase college attendance and success and raise the expectations of low-income students, as well as a scholarship component. Partnership grants are competitive six-year matching grants that must support an early intervention component, and may also support a scholarship component designed to increase college attendance and success and raise the expectations of low-income students.

More information is available online at www.ed.gov/programs/gearup/index.html.
provide the opportunity to explain these changes and plan a course of study for the student. These programs require leadership teams from both the middle grade and high school levels with dedicated time for such programs.

IV. Advisory programs

Students with a career choice perform at a higher level in high school. Work by Camblin suggests that most 9th graders have developed preferences in terms of both occupations and education. Advisory programs that link student interests with adults guiding them through course selection, navigating a new building, and building relationships with teachers can significantly enhance success.

V. Credit recovery

When a student knows in October that there is no way to pass a course, why should that student continue to come to school? Successful intervention is critical in assisting students in regaining the credits necessary for graduation. All credit recovery programs require policies that allow an individual to substitute a later grade. Without such a policy in place, there is no point in taking the subsequent class, regardless of how it is delivered.

It should be noted that technology solutions can greatly enhance the capacity of credit recovery options, without posing an undue burden on local school systems.

In general, credit recovery options have the following characteristics:

- Credit recovery courses are designed to be on a flexible schedule and may not necessarily be facilitated by a teacher;

- Credit recovery allows students who have completed seat time and calendar requirements to earn credit based on competency of the content standards;

- Credit recovery courses are complete courses containing all content on which the student will demonstrate mastery before receiving a new grade;

- Credit recovery programs offer core courses required for graduation.

Credit Recovery in Action

EdOptions (www.edoptions.com), a company based in Arlington, Virginia, offers technology-based solutions for school systems seeking credit recovery alternatives. Credit recovery refers to providing students with a “second chance” to successfully master course material, erasing the original failing grade and substituting it with a second.

Alachua County Schools, Florida, uses this system by purchasing 600 “slots” every school year. Each slot can be used throughout the year and, since the program is based on mastery of the material, more than one student may use a given slot. Thus, one student can begin the year working on English recovery, a second may work on math, and so on until the end of the year.

On average, approximately 3,000 semester courses are offered each year using the EdOptions system, resulting in 3,000 failures changed to a passing grade. About 1,500 students use the system each year.

The district office constantly works to ensure the option maintains credibility, as well as ensuring its validity. Students are not allowed to take the course at home, but must log into and out of the system through district-based computer labs. In addition, supervision is provided within the labs. Students may not use this system to take a course for the first time; it is for “recovery.” As it is for recovery, the initial grade is dropped and the transcript only shows the successful grade.

The curriculum supervisor for Alachua County notes, “I’m not sure what we would do without it. Each school has a waiting list. We love its flexibility and the competency-based results. Buying slots for a year gives us multiple placement options. Schools are constantly managing the program from a ‘triage’ point of view, working to get the neediest into the program first. It also works with our adult education program. We love it.”
4. Recommendations

1. Review of the Current Status of Early Secondary Education

State boards of education should undertake a review of the policies impacting early secondary education across their respective state, as well as reviewing the status of their early secondary schools (e.g., achievement levels, attendance rates, number of staff teaching outside area of endorsement).

2. Grade Configuration

State boards of education should collect data about various grade configurations and student achievement within each of those configurations used within the state. Outcomes based on the success of a single school may not reflect state-wide trends.

State boards of education may wish to use information gained from tracking academic outcomes for grade-level configurations to assist in informing school construction. Designing and building schools that facilitate student achievement should be a prime driver of construction support.

Early secondary schools should be organized around small learning communities that may use teaming, looping, advisories, and other strategies research has shown to enhance instruction.

3. Professional Development

States need to provide resources to support developmentally appropriate and job-embedded professional development for both teachers and administrators focusing on the specific issues of early secondary education.

All teachers working in early secondary education, regardless of the particular configuration of their school, should receive training in the psycho-social development of students.

4. Pre-service Education

State boards of education should review teacher preparation programs to ensure that strong content knowledge is a prime feature of all preparation programs. The content knowledge should provide both the depth and breadth necessary to fully understand, and teach, that area.

Both content preparation and training in pedagogy are equally important for early secondary education teacher preparation.

5. Recruitment and Retention

State boards of education should consider declaring early secondary education as a critical need area. In ad-
dition, each state should create a system to gather information about why early secondary educators choose to either enter or leave the field. This information should be routinely evaluated to determine whether the factors illuminated may be amenable to intervention.

6. Transitions

Various transition models have been developed with support for each gained via appropriate research. The Study Group recommends that state boards of education consider the following:

- Flexible scheduling;
- Linkage and virtual integration of pre-k to 20 education;
- Use of virtual or hybrid school models, including, for example, virtual charter schools;
- Focus on ensuring that students complete courses to standards;
- Better data reporting at all transition levels;
- Student and family involvement at all transition points;
- Use of peer connections in orientations; and
- Vertical teaming

7. Curriculum and Assessment

Rigorous curriculum in all content areas that is developmentally appropriate should be available to all students. A state curriculum that is aligned both horizontally (so that instruction matches the content standards which matches the assessments) and vertically (so that the curriculum is appropriately sequential across grade levels) is a prime factor in student success in that it helps organize the student experience.

The Study Group recommends that state boards of education consider moving Algebra I to the early secondary school level.

Assessment systems that are focused and aligned and that allow for formative, interim, and summative information result in enhanced student achievement.

8. Intervention

Intervention must begin early, by the 6th grade as a general rule, and must focus on the specific needs of the student. The Study Group notes that when it comes to student interventions, “one size does not fit all.” Research has established a number of indicators that can guide interventions, and policymakers and educators should promote and use these to help determine where and when interventions need to take place.

The use of technology templates for student tracking and intervention support has been shown to be highly effective.

9. Engagement

Engagement, based on student involvement across many dimensions, may be the single most critical element in student achievement. Engagement at the classroom level is critical and is a function of the teacher and the educational context within which the student works.

There must also be a relationship between understanding what each student needs to know, in order to function within a social and cultural environment, and students’ investment in their education. Not all subjects can be clearly related to every student’s goals, yet, each student must clearly understand the importance of what is being taught. The school, the district, and the state bear the responsibility for clearly articulating the relevance of the curriculum as a means of enhancing engagement.

Research has articulated six critical pedagogical approaches that may engage students in their learning. Based on work conducted by the National Research Council, schools modeled around the following approaches stimulate student involvement:

- **Optimal challenge**—Tasks that are challenging, but achievable. Students cannot achieve a sense of competence when tasks are too easy, and they will not when tasks are too difficult.
- **High expectations**—Demanding curricula and high expectations for learning, without pressuring performance, is a powerful predictor of outcome.
Emphasis on higher order thinking—Students become engaged when they are asked “why” or have to defend their conclusions.

Active participation—Students learn more by doing.

Collaborative activities—Individual accountability, coupled with the opportunity for collaboration in an activity, may be the most powerful instigators of engagement.

Meaningful connections—Students work harder and learn more when activities are personally and culturally, relevant. This is a key component of the impact of Career and Technical Education (CTE), and the Study Group noted the positive effect CTE can have on student engagement and the relevance of classroom activities to student aspirations. (For more information, see the findings and recommendations from NASBE’s 2008 Study Group on Career and Technical Education, Learning to Work, Working to Learn: Transforming Career and Technical Education.)
Endnotes

1. Ron Banks, Middle School, online at ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/poptopics/middle.html.
8. Robert William Blum, Clea McNeely, and Peggy Mann Rinehart, Improving the Odds: The Untapped Power of Schools to Improve the Health of Teens (Minneapolis: Department of Pediatrics, University of Minnesota, 2002), online at www.sfu.ca/cfrj/fulltext/blum.pdf.
13. Philip J. Cook et al., Should Sixth Grade be in Elementary or Middle School? An Analysis of Grade Configuration and Student Behavior, Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2007), online at www.pubpol.duke.edu/research/papers/SAN07-01.pdf.
15. More information is available online at www.mgforum.org/.
27. Balfanz, NASBE presentation.
31. Sharon J. Camblin, The Middle Grades: Putting All Students on Track for College, online at www.prel.org/products/pn_/middle-grades.pdf.
32. Committee on Increasing High School Students Engagement and Motivation to Learn, Engaging Schools.
National Middle School Association (NMSA) has identified two key lessons about providing quality learning experiences for students in grades five through eight. The first lesson is that the 14 characteristics of effective middle level schools, identified in *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, are interdependent and must be implemented in concert. Successful schools do not adopt them selectively or haphazardly. Primary responsibility for integrating the recommended practices rests with schools and school districts, and NMSA will continue dedicating resources to support their reform efforts.

However, the second lesson—that government policies at all levels profoundly affect the ability of educators to incorporate best practices—reminds us that ensuring success for every student is a shared responsibility requiring a deeper and broader partnership. Middle level schools do not operate in a vacuum. They reflect the aspirations of their local communities and are part of a system of education that determines their organizational structure, their funding, and their ability to hire and develop exemplary staffs. Middle level schools also must respond to state goals and directives ranging from testing targets to teacher licensure standards. Likewise, federal policy affects all aspects of middle level education and can strengthen or hinder state and local efforts to improve schools.

As David Hamburg, former chairman of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, reflected in *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century*: “It takes a social support system … to raise children effectively and to successfully foster the adolescent’s transition from childhood to adulthood. It is the task not only of the federal government but also of other levels of government; not only of business but also of labor; not only of the public sector but also of the private sector, both nonprofit and for profit. … If there is any mission more important, I wonder what it can be.”

The policy matrix on the following pages shows the steps necessary to implement a coordinated and strategic plan to raise academic achievement and support 10- to 15-year-olds as they move through the exciting but challenging transitions of early adolescence.

### The Administration and Congress

#### Goal #1
Ensure that all middle level students participate in challenging, standards-based curricula and engaging instruction, and that their progress is measured by appropriate assessments, resulting in continual learning and high achievement.

1. Expand federal programs to eliminate the achievement gaps in math, science, and literacy for middle level students.
2. Provide adequate financial resources to states to help them develop engaging, challenging, and relevant middle level curricula and appropriate assessments aligned to national and international standards.
3. Provide support to states and school districts to broaden and strengthen assessments of individual students, and use the results to inform instruction and measure each student’s progress over time.
4. Establish an office within the U.S. Department of Education to track middle level students’ progress nationally, disseminate research and appropriate best practices, and serve as a liaison to policymakers and related professional organizations.

#### Goal #2
Support the recruitment and hiring of teachers and administrators who have strong content knowledge and the ability to use research-based instructional strategies and assessment practices appropriate for middle level students.

1. Ensure that every middle level student, including those in our highest-need schools and school districts, is taught by highly qualified teachers.
2. Provide incentives to highly qualified teachers and administrators in our highest-need schools and school districts to encourage them to become actively engaged in middle level reform.
3. Strengthen the definition of highly qualified middle level teachers by requiring a strong content background in two subject areas and a solid understanding of instructional strategies and assessment practices appropriate for young adolescents.
4. Require states to provide professional development opportunities for administrators and teachers to improve the effectiveness of math, science, and literacy instruction across the middle level curriculum.
5. Provide the needed resources and incentives to ensure that both new and experienced middle level educators receive the mentoring and sustained support necessary to teach effectively.

#### Goal #3
Support organizational structures and a school culture of high expectations that enable both middle level students and educators to succeed.

1. Support states and school districts to ensure that all middle level students have personalized learning plans and adult advocates to help them succeed.
2. Provide incentives to states and school districts to create small learning communities within middle level schools through practices that include—but are not limited to—teacher and student teams, looping, multitage grouping, schools-within-a-school, and learning academies.
3. Encourage and support principal and teacher leadership that builds a culture of high expectations and healthy, respectful, and mutually supportive relationships between students and adults as a condition for maximum learning.
4. Provide the necessary resources and support for students who need to accelerate their academic learning through practices that include—but are not limited to—extended time during the regular school day and after-school programs with highly qualified and knowledgeable educators.
5. Ensure that academic standards for middle level education have the needed breadth so that every student has curriculum choices that include the arts, world languages, technology, careers, health, and service learning.

#### Goal #4
Develop ongoing family and community partnerships to provide a supportive and enriched learning environment for every middle level student.

1. Support collaborations among school, family, and other stakeholder groups (such as service agencies, faith-based communities, and businesses) to strengthen learning opportunities for every middle level student.
2. Provide adequate funding to support service learning initiatives that enable young adolescents to learn, serve, and develop as citizens in their communities.
3. Establish policy permitting federal employees to regularly volunteer in schools as tutors, career guest speakers, and resource persons for classroom projects, or provide other services that will enrich students’ learning and enhance home-school-community partnerships.

#### Goal #5
Facilitate the generation, dissemination, and application of research needed to identify and implement effective practices that lead to continual student learning and high academic achievement at the middle level.

1. Recognize middle level schools, in statutes and regulations, as distinct from elementary or secondary schools to ensure the recognition, attention, and funding needed to be successful.
2. Create a national middle level database accessible to education researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to spur middle grades school reform.
3. Promote collaborative research initiatives that examine and respond to the most critical middle level education issues, such as improving adolescent literacy, increasing math and science proficiency, and closing achievement gaps among groups of students.
4. Support the dissemination of research about middle level education to practitioners and policymakers.
### Governors, Legislatures, State Boards, or Departments of Education

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal #1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Help school districts develop middle level curricula that adequately prepare students to take challenging high school courses and successfully engage in postsecondary education as well as achieve success in the workplace.</td>
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<td>2. Ensure that the curricula and assessments for middle level education are consistent with national and international academic standards.</td>
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<td>3. Provide professional development that will help middle level administrators and teachers use data to inform instruction and refine their practices.</td>
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<td>4. Provide professional development that specifically helps middle level teachers strengthen the core curriculum and integrate curricula.</td>
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<td>5. Designate a qualified middle level liaison at the state department of education to help develop state middle level policy and professional development for teachers and administrators, and ensure that school reform activities reflect an understanding of the distinct needs of young adolescents.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Goal #2</th>
<th>Support the recruitment and hiring of teachers and administrators who have strong content knowledge and the ability to use research-based instructional strategies and assessment practices appropriate for middle level students.</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Establish specific middle level licensure and certification requirements—separate from elementary and high school requirements—for teachers and administrators.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Adopt the Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards written by National Middle School Association and approved by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education to ensure that graduates of teacher preparation programs have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively teach young adolescents.</td>
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<td>3. Develop methods to assess the effectiveness of middle level teachers’ practices.</td>
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<td>4. Collaborate with colleges and universities to align administrator preparation programs with research-based leadership and instructional practices that have been shown to increase the academic performance and healthy development of young adolescents.</td>
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<td>5. Provide local school systems with resources and technical support to engage middle level educators in ongoing professional learning as part of their daily work.</td>
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<th>Goal #3</th>
<th>Support organizational structures and a school culture of high expectations that enable both middle level students and educators to succeed.</th>
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<td>1. Develop policies to ensure safety, dignity, mutual respect, health, and high expectations for middle level students and educators.</td>
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<td>2. Support the development of school programs outside the traditional schedule to ensure that every student has access to quality learning opportunities.</td>
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<td>3. Develop cross-agency relationships and coordinated programs and services to ensure that schools can maximize students’ learning by addressing their physical, social, and emotional needs.</td>
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<td>4. Provide funding and ongoing professional development that will enable middle level educators to meet the diverse and evolving needs of young adolescents and their families.</td>
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<th>Goal #4</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Support initiatives that bring parents, adult caregivers, and community members together to improve educational opportunities for all middle level students.</td>
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<td>2. Support service learning and career exploration initiatives for all middle level students.</td>
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<td>3. Formally declare October of each year Month of the Young Adolescent to raise public awareness about the importance of improving the education, health, and well-being of young adolescents.</td>
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<td>4. Establish policy permitting state employees to regularly volunteer in schools as tutors, career guest speakers, and resource persons for classroom projects, or provide other services that will enrich students’ learning and enhance home-school-community partnerships.</td>
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<th>Facilitate the generation, dissemination, and application of research needed to identify and implement effective practices that lead to continual student learning and high academic achievement at the middle level.</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Develop a strong and resilient connection among researchers at state departments of education and educational service districts to expand the use of effective practices in middle level schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Encourage and support collaborations among researchers at public and private colleges and universities to improve middle level education.</td>
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<td>3. Encourage districts to support middle level practices, such as teaming and integrated curricula, that have a sufficient research base demonstrating improved student achievement.</td>
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<td>4. Create and sustain networks to disseminate and discuss current research that relates to middle level education.</td>
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### Local School Districts

**Goal #1**  
Ensure that all middle level students participate in challenging, standards-based curricula and engaging instruction, and that their progress is measured by appropriate assessments, resulting in continual learning and high achievement.

1. Engage boards of education, superintendents, district office personnel, and parents in learning experiences that increase their knowledge of the academic and developmental needs of middle level students.

2. Develop school district policy that recognizes the middle grades as a distinct level within the K-12 education continuum.

3. Provide and adequately fund ongoing professional development for all middle level administrators, enabling them to be knowledgeable and collaborative instructional leaders.

4. Provide and adequately fund ongoing professional development for all middle level teachers that will expand their content knowledge and enable them to use research-based instructional strategies and varied means of assessing students’ progress, while addressing the needs of diverse learners.

5. Enable students to move successfully through the K-12 continuum by requiring vertical alignment of curricula among elementary, middle, and high schools.

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**Goal #2**  
Support the recruitment and hiring of teachers and administrators who have strong content knowledge and the ability to use research-based instructional strategies and assessment practices appropriate for middle level students.

1. Employ educators who have deep knowledge of the subjects they teach and are specifically prepared to work with middle level students.

2. Adequately fund professional development that addresses the identified specific needs and challenges of middle level teachers and administrators.

3. Ensure the equitable distribution of highly effective teachers throughout the school district so that all students will benefit from their knowledge and skills.

4. Establish strong partnerships with colleges and universities to form professional learning communities consisting of prospective teachers and experienced middle level classroom teachers.

5. Collaborate with colleges and universities to help middle level administrators implement research-based practices that significantly increase the academic performance and healthy development of young adolescents.

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**Goal #3**  
Support organizational structures and a school culture of high expectations that enable both middle level students and educators to succeed.

1. Ensure that every middle level student is in a safe, disciplined, and healthy learning environment that respects all members of the learning community and promotes high achievement.

2. Require every school to develop a vision and mission statement that is aligned to district policy, sets a clear course for school growth, and supports effective teaching practices and high achievement.

3. Provide middle level educators with ongoing professional development and resources to ensure their broad implementation.

4. Support the implementation of flexible schedules and small learning communities within each school to provide a comprehensive education program.

5. Collaborate with colleges and universities to help middle level administrators implement research-based practices that significantly increase the academic performance and healthy development of young adolescents.

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**Goal #4**  
Develop ongoing family and community partnerships to provide a supportive and enriched learning environment for every middle level student.

1. Extend family and community collaborations in support of students’ academic achievement and healthy development by providing middle level educators with professional development that specifically helps them build such partnerships.

2. Provide training in advocacy, school decision making, and young adolescent development so that all families can become effective partners in their children’s education.

3. Mobilize communities to ensure that all students and their families have access to essential technology for 21st century communications and commerce; develop school system policies and procedures to enable electronic home-school connections.

4. Establish school and community partnerships to provide quality after-school activities for middle level students.

5. Ensure consistent and well-developed initiatives to assist young adolescents and their families as they transition from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school.

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**Goal #5**  
Facilitate the generation, dissemination, and application of research needed to identify and implement effective practices that lead to continual student learning and high academic achievement at the middle level.

1. Support the dissemination and discussion of education research related to young adolescent learning at both district and school levels.

2. Use sound research when making decisions that affect middle level education.

3. Adopt research-based middle level practices and provide adequate resources to ensure their broad implementation.

4. Establish the expectation that valid research will guide decisions in schools; support the efforts of middle level educators to conduct and widely disseminate action research to improve their practices and strengthen curricula, instruction, and assessments.
Improving Literacy Instruction: Moving from State Policy to Classroom Practice

A central theme of NASBE’s work in adolescent literacy is that for state literacy policies and programs to be effective, they must lead to actual instructional changes in the classroom. To accomplish this, leaders must be very conscious of how each policy and action ultimately works to improve teaching. The chart beginning below details the actions that must be taken at all the key levels—state, district, school, and classroom—in order to impact instructional practices and help students improve their reading skills. It is organized around five action areas: Planning, Quality of Teaching, Use of Data, Instructional Infrastructure, and Accountability.

More information and resources about this key issue in improving student achievement is available through the NASBE Adolescent Literacy State Network, online at www.nasbe.org/adolescentliteracy, or by contacting project director Dr. Mariana Haynes at marianah@nasbe.org.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Classroom</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Lead a collaborative process to build knowledge base and set vision to improve literacy as part of district and school improvement.</td>
<td>- Design a comprehensive literacy plan to provide research-based reading and writing instruction throughout the curriculum beginning in the early grades and continuing through high school.</td>
<td>- Implement school-wide literacy initiatives as part of school improvement planning that includes content area literacy instruction and a continuum of support for all students.</td>
<td>- Provide effective, research-based interventions to infuse reading and writing instruction across the curriculum.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Design a state literacy plan that builds instructional capacity to improve adolescent literacy while providing flexibility to localize the initiative.</td>
<td>- Develop coordinated K-12 continuum of literacy development, setting goals and standards and ensuring alignment with curricula and assessments.</td>
<td>- Diagnose problems early and provide timely, differentiated levels of research-based literacy instruction for struggling readers.</td>
<td>- Use methods for providing content area literacy instruction and intensifying interventions as needed for struggling readers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Dedicate staff within the state education agency to focus on adolescent literacy.</td>
<td>- Ensure that all students have access to highly trained teachers, resources, and organizational supports to advance literacy throughout the curriculum.</td>
<td>- Dedicate staff within the local education agency to focus on adolescent literacy.</td>
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<td>- Build public awareness and advocacy for literacy initiative.</td>
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### Quality of Teaching

- Fully articulate literacy standards that embed literacy instruction within content area learning.
- Invest in teachers by ensuring that preparation and professional development provide teachers with knowledge and skills to improve adolescent literacy.
- Examine design of preparation programs to ensure teachers receive training in content area literacy and methods to intervene with struggling readers.
- Provide guidance on ongoing training, instructional tools, and supports for teachers.
- Ensure that teachers have the preparation and professional development to provide effective, content-based literacy instruction.
- Outline the elements of high-quality professional development to provide all staff with research-based curriculum and opportunities to practice specific literacy instruction skills.
- Ensure that leadership teams, support personnel, coaches, curriculum specialists, and teachers have ongoing training in literacy instruction.
- Provide intensive (including embedded) training that provides teachers with clear direction on how to use research-based practices within their different content areas.
- Create opportunities for peer observation, demonstration lessons, curriculum and lesson planning, dialogue, and coaching to improve literacy instruction.
- Organize training and coaching resources around teams of teachers in the same content area.
- Explicitly link reading and writing instruction with content instruction.
- Emphasize deep conceptual understanding through reading instruction.
- Provide explicit instruction in vocabulary and in the application of reading comprehension strategies.
- Continuously and systematically engage students in whole class and small group discussions of challenging content and literature.
- Create connections within and across lessons, reinforcing vocabulary and conceptual development across multiple texts and contexts.
- Design robust longitudinal data systems to track individual student performance.
- Strategically use data to identify areas of need, design cohesive policies, and evaluate the impact of the literacy initiative on students’ performance.
- Equip districts and schools with the data systems and tools to implement literacy programs and supports.
- Use a data-management system that provides high utility for multiple purposes, including:
  - Generating frequent, timely data to track improvement over time and adjust instruction for individual students;
  - Providing detailed performance data on student strengths and weaknesses;
  - Identifying at-risk students;
  - Linking information about the instruction, services, and resources students receive and their outcomes; and
  - Providing timely evaluation data to inform school and district decisions.
- Evaluate quality of implementation and impact of district programs on students’ literacy performance and content learning.
- Identify the data that will be collected to achieve ongoing progress monitoring of schools.
- Administer screening, progress monitoring, outcome assessments, and diagnostic testing frequently.
- Use diagnostic and formative assessments to provide supports and interventions to accelerate the progress of struggling readers.
- Measure and analyze student literacy performance and content area achievement to inform instruction and identify struggling readers.
- Use assessment data regularly to monitor progress and guide reading instruction and professional development.

### Use of Data

- Design robust longitudinal data systems to track individual student performance.
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### Instructional Infrastructure

- **Design instructional infrastructure** to support coordinated literacy instruction in all grades in collaboration with practitioners and higher education.
- **Articulate rigorous student literacy standards and curriculum frameworks for content area literacy instruction.**
- **Develop a K-12 continuum for reading development with recommended materials, planning guides, and model lessons.**
- **Provide guidance and tools that include aligned diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments, curriculum frameworks, and tools to support research-based instructional practice.**
- **Ensure committed leadership to implementing school wide literacy initiatives.**
- **Be creative in the use of local monies to provide the resources, training, and supports to achieve targeted literacy goals.**
- **Develop anchor standards and aligned core curriculum and assessments to support instruction grounded in research on effective practice.**
- **Ensure that schools have the flexibility and incentives to design organizational structures and schedules to differentiate literacy instruction in accord with individual students’ needs.**
- **Ensure that schools have the range of instructional materials, multimedia materials, diverse texts, and resources needed to improve students’ literacy skills.**
- **Provide schools with funding, supports, and resources needed to achieve literacy goals for all students.**
- **Provide extended blocks of time for reading instruction and for weekly professional development opportunities.**
- **Form reading leadership teams to design literacy instruction in content areas and for struggling readers.**
- **Promote teacher leadership in designing, evaluating, and improving instructional tools and practices.**
- **Provide teachers and schools with consistent support from dedicated, specialized staff who provide support at the school level.**
- **Provide methods for providing classroom supports and intensifying interventions for individual students.**
- **Provide feedback, models, and tools to integrate text comprehension strategies and writing instruction across the curriculum.**
- **Train administrators in evaluating teachers on content area literacy instruction.**

### Accountability

- **Ensure ongoing oversight and monitoring to hold districts and schools accountable for improving adolescent literacy performance.**
- **Require coherent district and school literacy plans based on detailed information on students’ needs.**
- **Evaluate the impact of literacy initiatives and refine them based on multiple indicators of literacy performance.**
- **Provide sufficient guidance and oversight to ensure strong implementation of comprehensive literacy programs.**
- **Institutionalize teaching practice through summer institutes, ongoing training, access to higher education, school administrators, coaches, and regional trainings; and align the recertification process with professional development.**
- **Build networks for cross-classroom, cross-school, and cross-district learning and partner with higher education, community, and external organizations.**
- **Examine literacy performance data to refine district literacy plans.**
- **Create professional community and ongoing training and supports based on effective strategies that emphasize collective responsibility and collegiality.**
- **Link performance evaluations of principals, coaches, and teachers to instructional practice and student achievement in reading.**
- **Use school and classroom literacy performance results to improve school-wide literacy instruction and target supports for individual students.**
- **Support and monitor implementation of reading instruction, assessment expectations, and student literacy performance.**
- **Use assessment data to refine instruction and programs.**