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Research Summary: Characteristics of Exemplary Schools for Young Adolescents

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CHARACTERISTICS OF EXEMPLARY SCHOOLS FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

In support of *This We Believe* characteristics:

- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches
- Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning
- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning
- Educators who value working with the age group and are prepared to do so
- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Multifaceted guidance and support services
- School-initiated family and community partnerships

Introduction and Definition

Outlining the research describing the characteristics of exemplary schools for young adolescents requires drawing on four key frameworks for high-performing middle grades schools: National Middle School Association's (NMSA) *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003); *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents for the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000); the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform's vision statement (1998), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals' (NASSP) report *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform* (2006).

All four frameworks focus on young adolescents as the starting point for any discussion of exemplary education practices. As NMSA argued, "For middle schools to be successful, their students must be successful" (2003, p. 1). *Turning Points 2000* positioned ensuring the success of every student as the overall goal for any effort to improve middle grades schooling. Success is defined as attaining the *Turning Points* vision of a 15-year-old who has been well served by middle grades schooling—a 15-year-old who has emerged from the middle grades a healthy, intellectually reflective, caring and ethical citizen, en route to a lifetime of meaningful work (Jackson & Davis, 2000). The National Forum argued that, to support student success, high-performing middle grades schools are:

- Academically excellent—challenging all students to use their minds well by providing them with curriculum, instruction, assessment, and supports they need to meet rigorous achievement standards.

- Developmentally responsive—creating small learning communities of adults and students in which stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships support all students' intellectual, ethical, and social growth.
- Socially equitable—seeking to keep students' future options open by holding high expectations for all students and helping each child produce work of high quality. (National Forum, 1998)

In keeping with the National Forum's work, NASSP's report called on middle grades principals to "break ranks" to "complete the unfinished business of creating academically excellent, developmentally appropriate, and socially equitable schools" (2006, p. xviii).

Several other organizations with connections to middle grades education have released reports, vision statements, and policy positions that outline key characteristics of successful schools for young adolescents. For example, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development published *The Middle School We Need* (1975), NASSP published *An Agenda for Excellence in Middle Level Education* (1985), and Carnegie Corporation of New York produced *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). These early efforts to describe good schools for young adolescents have been revised and updated in recent years to better reflect current realities (e.g., *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (NASSP, 2006), *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), and the National Forum's Schools to Watch criteria (2007)). Both the early and more recent reports and frameworks reflect a very consistent collection of ideas about what constitutes a successful middle grades school:

- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Instruction that connects directly to curriculum, assessment, and the students themselves
- Assessment that allows students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and allows educators to make improvements in curriculum and instruction to promote learning



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- Relationships between and among adults and students that advance both academic and affective student development, quality teaching, and a supportive school environment
- Educators who value working with young adolescents and are specifically prepared to do so
- Courageous and collaborative leadership characterized by a shared vision that guides decisions and high expectations for all
- Health and wellness policies and programs that ensure young adolescents have the structures and supports they need to thrive
- Family and community partnerships that facilitate communication and provide multiple avenues for involvement

Summary of Current Research

The following paragraphs provide a synopsis of current research on the characteristics of exemplary schools for young adolescents.

Curriculum, the knowledge and skills young adolescents are expected to learn, is at the heart of the learning agenda. Beane (1993, 1997) and Pate, Homestead, and McGinnis (1997) argued that curriculum should be relevant (i.e., based on the intersection between the interests and needs of young adolescents and larger social issues). Within relevant curriculum, teachers and students address rigorous standards for what students should know and be able to do. Federal legislation (i.e., the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) and nearly every state rely on challenging curriculum standards as the foundation for academic excellence. Curriculum standards are typically grounded in the academic disciplines (e.g., language arts, mathematics, social studies, science), though research on how people learn provides evidence that people learn best when their learning is grounded in big ideas or concepts, contrary to a “traditional” focus on learning isolated facts, figures, and names (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999).

Integrated curriculum, which crosses subject boundaries, connects school learning to the real world, and allows for student voice in what is learned and how it is learned (Pate et al., 1997), has particular value for young adolescents, given their need for authentic learning experiences and participation in decisions. Researchers and practitioners describe examples of integrated curriculum done well, including its significant power for student learning (Bergstrom, 1998; Caskey, 2002; Daniels & Bizar, 1998; Five & Dionisio, 1996; Pate, 2001; Stevenson & Carr, 1993; Vars, 1997; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998).

Exploratory curriculum allows students “to explore new arenas of interest, both as specific courses and as methodology within courses” (Bergman, 1992, p. 179). Exploratory curriculum responds to the developmental needs of young adolescents

(Compton & Hawn, 1993; George & Lawrence, 1982), provides an extension of the curriculum students typically encounter (Curtis & Bidwell, 1977; George & Lawrence, 1982), and lets students try out various areas of interest (Briggs, 1920).

Instruction should connect directly to curriculum, what students are learning; assessment, how students will demonstrate what they have learned; and the students themselves, who they are and how they learn best (Bransford et al., 1999; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 1999; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). Instruction should build on what students already know (Bransford et al., 1999). It should prepare students specifically for demonstrating the knowledge and skills they have gained (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Moreover, instruction must respond to the developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents, who are best served by instruction that accounts for their cultural, experiential, and personal backgrounds (NMSA, 2003). Variety is critical to successful instruction for young adolescents, given their varied learning styles, strengths, and differences (Andrews, 2005; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Tomlinson, 2003, 2005).

Assessment should provide “ongoing, useful feedback, to both students and teachers, on what students have learned” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 54). That feedback should guide instruction so that it addresses any gaps in learning that assessment results reveal (Sterbinsky & Ross, 2005). Students should be actively involved in assessing their own progress, working “with their teachers to make critical decisions at all stages of the learning enterprise, especially goal-setting, establishing evaluation criteria, demonstrating, learning, self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and reporting” (Vars, 2001, p. 79). Teachers need to use a range of classroom assessments (Stiggins, 2001; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) as well as a variety of assessment methods, “ranging from informal to formal, in the same way a court of law accepts evidence ranging from circumstantial to concrete” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 55). Such assessments should be targeted to the nature of the learning to be demonstrated, such that more traditional paper-and-pencil assessments are used to demonstrate factual knowledge and open-ended, complex, and authentic performance tasks and projects are used to assess conceptual knowledge—the “enduring understandings” that educators want students to remember long after the course has ended (Wiggins & McTighe).

Relationships make or break the quality of education and the quality of everyday life in a school. *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2003), *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), and the National Forum (1998) point out the benefits of small communities for learning as the foundation for positive relationships between and among students and teachers. Those relationships, and students’ accompanying sense of belonging, strengthen students’ capacity for learning and



support teachers' efforts to target curriculum, instruction, and assessment appropriately given individual students' needs and interests (Goodenow, 1993; Tomlinson, 2003; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997). Organizational structures, particularly teams of teachers and students, are critical to establishing and maintaining positive relationships within learning communities (Dickinson & Erb, 1997; George & Lounsbury, 2000). In their research on the effects of teaming, Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall (1999) found that teaming improves school climate, increases contact with parents and families, improves job satisfaction, and has a positive effect on student achievement.

In addition to teaming, advisory programs also contribute to the creation of positive relationships between teachers and students. While research highlights the positive results of advisory programs (e.g., reducing drop out rates, contributing to a positive school climate, improving student self-concept) (Connors, 1991; Mac Iver, 1990), such programs remain difficult to implement. Numerous purposes for establishing advisories include promoting opportunities for social development; assisting students with academic problems; facilitating positive involvement among teachers, administrators, and students; providing an adult advocate for every student; and promoting a positive school climate (Clark & Clark, 1994; Galassi, Gullledge, & Cox, 1998).

Educators are crucial to the success of middle grades students, and research documents the strong connection between teacher quality and student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1997, 2000; McCabe, 2004; Rice, 2003). Middle grades advocates (e.g., NMSA, NASSP, National Forum) call for teachers specifically prepared for teaching in the middle grades and committed to enhancing their knowledge and practice through ongoing professional development. The specific preparation ideally would include an intense focus on young adolescent development, academic content, and pedagogical knowledge and skills, and extensive experiences/internships in middle grades schools (McEwin & Dickinson, 1995; McEwin, Dickinson, Erb, & Scales, 1995; National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, 1994; NMSA, 1997).

Courageous and collaborative leadership "develops people, sets direction, and redesigns organizations" (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 8). Leaders in middle grades schools include administrators, teachers, students, parents and families, community members, and other stakeholders. In developing people, courageous, collaborative leaders enable educators and other school personnel to do their jobs effectively, offer intellectual support and stimulation to improve work, and provide models of practice and support (Clark & Clark, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1992; Williamson & Johnston, 1991). In setting direction for the organization,

courageous, collaborative leaders develop shared goals, monitor organizational performance, and promote effective communication (Leithwood et al., 2004; Sergiovanni, 1992). In redesigning the organization, courageous, collaborative leaders create a productive school culture, modify organizational structures to facilitate teaching and learning, and build collaborative processes (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Health and wellness is indisputably vital to student success, including policies and services that foster health, wellness, safety, and positive, respectful interactions (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Schultz, 2005). Researchers affiliated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, & Wyche, 1997; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007a) outline eight components of a coordinated school health program that supports healthy behaviors, reduces risky behaviors, and promotes a healthy learning environment:

- Health education centered on preventing common risky behaviors (e.g., drug and alcohol use, sexual behaviors) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007b)
- Physical education focused on more individualized approaches to health and fitness (rather than competitive sports)
- Health services delivery that makes health care accessible and affordable
- Nutrition services and policies that reduce the risks associated with childhood obesity (Andrews & Jackson, 2006; Kleinfeld, 2006; Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 1996)
- Mental health services including counseling, psychological, and social services
- Healthy school environment that fosters students' feelings of attachment to school (Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, Jones et al., 1997)
- Parent and community engagement
- Health promotion for faculty and staff

Family and community play a central role in the successful education and development of young adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Muir, Anfara, Andrews, Caskey, Mertens, & Hough, 2006). To capitalize on this essential role, schools need to initiate partnerships with families and communities to facilitate consistent communication and provide multiple avenues for involvement (Epstein, 1997). Effective partnerships with families and communities blur the lines between home, community, and classroom and support



young adolescents whether inside or outside the school walls (Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Forum, 1998). Such partnerships foster a sense of belonging in school that has been associated with positive outcomes for young adolescents including academic achievement (Goodenow, 1993) and academic motivation (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). A sense of family connectedness can mediate against young adolescents' high-risk behaviors (Bray, Adams, Getz, & Baer, 2001; Resnick et al., 1997). Schools can encourage multiple types of family involvement—parenting, communicating, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995). Community-connectedness also promotes constructive outcomes for young adolescents including better grades, peer relationships, leadership and conflict resolution skills (Noam, 2003). Community-based after-school programs, extracurricular activities, and apprenticeships (Nesin & Brazee, 2005) will enhance young adolescents' sense of belonging to the community in which they live.

Conclusion

Two dangers are associated with any list purporting to include *the* characteristics of exemplary schools for young adolescents. One danger is a perception that the list is exhaustive—that it includes everything that needs to be considered. In reality, a list cannot capture the subtleties and complexities of schooling. A second danger is that each component will be seen as somehow self-contained, something that can be addressed in isolation. Instead, research demonstrates that the characteristics listed above are “an interacting and interdependent group of practices that form a unified whole... [that] must be dealt with holistically, systemically, to ensure success” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 27). Research evidence points to the value of a systems approach for improving schools, an approach that intentionally and carefully considers the interactions between and among the characteristics of exemplary schools for young adolescents (Anfara, Andrews, Hough, Mertens, Mizelle, & White, 2003; Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Johns Hopkins University & Abt Associates, Inc., 1997; Lee & Smith, 2000; Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999; Mertens & Flowers, 2003; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000).

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Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe provides research summaries, annotated references, and recommended resources related to the programmatic components (e.g., curriculum, assessment and evaluation) described in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2003). In addition, it provides an overview of major studies in middle grades education from 1990–2002, the key research related to the middle school concept as described in *This We Believe* and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), and the research documenting the need for specially prepared middle grades teachers and administrators. The annotated references point readers toward the latest and best research on each component, and the recommended resources are practitioner-friendly with direct theory-to-practice implications.



ANNOTATED REFERENCES (continued)

Anfara, V. A., Jr., Andrews, P. G., & Mertens, S. B. (Eds.). (2005). *The encyclopedia of middle grades education*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

The Encyclopedia of Middle Grades Education offers a wide-ranging overview of the latest research on topics related to schooling for young adolescents. The seven extensive anchor essays address the fundamentals of middle grades education: the history of the middle school movement; academically excellent curriculum, instruction, and assessment; developmental responsiveness; social equity; leadership; teacher and administrator preparation and professional development; and future directions for middle grades reform. The entries, arranged alphabetically and clearly indexed, address everything from advisor-advisee programs, family involvement, and inclusion to noted leaders in the field (e.g., John Lounsbury) and organizations critical to research and advocacy (e.g., NMSA, National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform). The book is intended for middle grades teachers (both preservice and inservice), parents, administrators, and other stakeholders (e.g., school board members) interested in a concise guide to the essentials of middle grades education.

Jackson, A. W., & Davis, G. A. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Turning Points 2000 bridges the gap between researchers and practitioners by “putting practitioners in touch with research in the framework of a comprehensive and comprehensible model” (p. xi). The book synthesizes the lessons learned from hundreds of schools that participated in a national effort to implement the recommendations from the original *Turning Points* report (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) through the Carnegie Corporation of New York’s Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative (MGSSPI). *Turning Points 2000* also draws on other national middle grades school improvement efforts and the latest and best research on schooling for young adolescents. The authors advance a middle grades school improvement design with ensuring success for every student as the overall goal and advocate for a systems approach that includes (a) teaching a curriculum grounded in rigorous academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to adolescents’ concerns, and based on how students learn best; (b) using instructional methods that prepare all students to achieve high standards and become lifelong learners; (c) staffing middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engaging teachers with ongoing professional development; (d) organizing relationships for learning to create an intellectual climate and caring community of shared educational purpose; (e) governing democratically by involving school staff members; (f) providing a safe and healthy school environment to improve student performance and develop caring and ethical citizens; and (g) involving parents and communities in students’ learning and healthy development. The text employs a visionary tone while offering practical suggestions for middle grades educators.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Erb, T. (Ed.). (2005). *This we believe in action: Implementing successful middle level schools*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

Muir, M., Anfara, V. A., Jr., Andrews, P. G., Caskey, M. M., Mertens, S. B., & Hough, D. (2006). *Fundamentals for student success in the middle grades*. Available from www.nmsa.org

Muir, M., Anfara, V. A., Jr., Andrews, P. G., Caskey, M. M., Mertens, S. B., & Hough, D. (2006). *Middle grades education: Fundamentals and research*. Available from www.nmsa.org

National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. (2007). *Schools to watch criteria*. Champaign, IL: Author. Retrieved July 22, 2007, from <http://www.schoolstowatch.org/what.htm>

National Middle School Association. (2006). *Success in the middle: A policymaker’s guide to achieving quality middle level education*. Westerville, OH: Author.



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CITATION

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