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ABSTRACT

The Massachusetts Middle Grade Regional Alliance Network, a program that provides collaborative professional-development opportunities to middle-grade educators, is summarized in this document. The goal of the regional alliance is to increase the collaboration between all institutions working with early adolescents in order to improve school success for middle-grade students. The rationale for and the purpose of middle-grade regional alliances are outlined, as well as a description of network activities, conditions for success, budgeting, organization, and state support. Appendices include a timeline for forming a regional alliance for the fiscal year 1992-93 and a list of Massachusetts Turning Points Advisory Committee recommendations. (LMI)

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THE MASSACHUSETTS MIDDLE GRADE REGIONAL ALLIANCE NETWORK
IMPROVING THE MIDDLE GRADES
THROUGH COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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I. A NEW AGENDA FOR COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVING THE MIDDLE GRADES

The Middle Grades As Critical Years

The middle grades is a critical time of cognitive, social, emotional and physical growth for early adolescents. It is the transition period between childhood and becoming an adolescent; and is a time that is associated with turbulence, self-examination, curiosity, questioning, and exploration.

The middle grades are a time when schooling experiences change for most students. Many move from an elementary school to a middle or junior high school. Other changes may include increases in departmentalization, whole class instruction, increased uses of between-class ability grouping, fragmented scheduling of the school day, and increased use of competitive and motivational instruction.

The match between a student's developmental needs and the middle grade school has been found to greatly determine a student's future success in school as well as in later life. Data indicates that many middle grade schools as they are currently structured may not be meeting the needs of many students. Grade retention, suspension and truancy rates tend to rise as students enter the middle grades, while attendance, achievement and homework completion often decline. In general, middle grade students display a lack of ability to think critically and solve problems. This corresponds with findings that lower level cognitive skills are emphasized in many middle grade classrooms at a time when students' ability to use higher level cognition is increasing.

Connecting Practice to Research - We Know What Works

Research has demonstrated that early adolescents have successful school experiences when schools serving the middle grades are structured to meet students' developmental needs. These needs include structure and clear limits; diversity of opportunities for self-growth and definition; opportunities to experience competence and achievement; meaningful participation in the school and community; positive social interaction with adults and peers; and physical activity. Successful middle grade practices include clustering and staff teaming; shared decision-making forms of school governance; interdisciplinary and thematic curriculum; student-centered instruction; heterogeneous grouping; performance-based assessment; and active parent and community involvement.

Every middle grade school should be a research-based institution, where research is applied to the practical problems facing educators and in which all practices are based on careful study and assessment of what works for middle grade students. Currently, middle grade schools often operate in isolation from each other and have little opportunity to interact with higher education institutions, community agencies and other organizations which work with early adolescents. Too often, common practice does not reflect current research or the lessons learned from other schools.

Regional Alliances as Collaborative Professional Development

Today, our schools and other community institutions have the enormous challenge of preparing students to be thoughtful, productive and responsible citizens in a democratic society. This means successfully keeping students in school through high school graduation, and engaging them in learning experiences that raise academic achievement, increase their cognitive skills and address their individual social, emotional and physical needs.

To accomplish this, we need to develop structures which bring middle grade educators and other professionals together to conduct action research, study areas of common concern, and share strategies which lead to systemic change and improvement in the education of middle grade students and preparation of prospective middle grade teachers. Collaborative partnerships between schools and with other institutions serving students can significantly enhance school improvement efforts.

This paper summarizes the Massachusetts Middle Grade Regional Alliance Network as an approach to providing collaborative professional development opportunities to middle grade educators and other professionals, with the purpose of improving middle grade education for all of our students.

II. WHAT IS A MIDDLE GRADE REGIONAL ALLIANCE?

Case Study

On a Thursday afternoon 35 teachers, administrators and university faculty meet for a monthly dinner meeting at a local university that features a range of topics on middle school improvement; the featured speaker this month focuses upon strategies and structures to promote shared decision-making forms of school governance in middle grade schools. After the presentation, participants meet in small groups for an hour to share attempts to set up such structures in their own schools, and to problem-solve obstacles they have encountered. Upon closure of the session, everyone enjoyed dinner together.

A study group of 20 teachers, parents, administrators and university faculty meet in the afternoon every other week at a local middle school to discuss strategies to facilitate heterogeneous grouping in mathematics. Another group of teachers and university faculty travel to a model middle school in Maine to spend the day observing classes, talking to teachers, and meeting with the principal about transforming the curriculum to an interdisciplinary approach.

A local university sponsors a weekly seminar series on cooperative learning, that offers college credits to participating teachers. Teachers then organize themselves into cross-school teams, and set up a schedule for peer observation and feedback as well as monthly meetings to assist each other in classroom implementation of the concepts learned.

A day-long conference brings 75 teachers, administrators and university faculty together for a program of a keynote speaker, small group workshops, and an ending plenary session to examine how to integrate performance-based assessment of student learning while phasing out reliance upon standardized testing. On another day, a middle school and human service agencies within its student support network sponsor an afternoon for other middle school staff to learn about their successes and how the network and referral processes were set up.

These are all activities within a Middle Grade Regional Alliance network of ten middle grade schools, several human service agencies and businesses, two universities, and a non-profit educational organization that are allied together for purposes of joint professional development activity. The non-profit educational organization acts as the facilitating institution for the network and a designated staffperson coordinates an annual calendar of professional development activities based on the needs of participating agencies. A Steering Committee, composed of representatives from each member institution, meets monthly to plan future activities, assess the success of activities already conducted, and design strategies to determine future professional development needs within each of their organizations. All of the scheduled activities are voluntary and easily accessible.

The Alliance has produced some exciting results. Exposure to innovative ideas has spurred change in most Alliance schools. Study groups have reduced isolation between schools and encouraged teachers to propose and implement new ideas in the classroom. Pooled resources have allowed institutions to bring in outside speakers they could not otherwise afford. University faculty have joined with teachers for the first time in conducting action research in innovative practices in the classroom; human service agencies have gained an increased voice in assisting schools to access their resources to provide additional on-site services to students; and a group of businesses are now helping several schools create mentoring programs for students.

Definition of a Middle Grade Regional Alliance

This case study represents a synthesis of several examples of joint professional development between middle grade schools, universities, businesses and non-profit organizations. It is an example of the types of collaborative activities that result in a more unified mission, positive change and expanded resources when different institutions work together to improve education and services to early adolescents.

A Middle Grade Regional Alliance is a network of middle grade schools, colleges/universities, non-profit organizations, and businesses that are in close geographic proximity and have joined together for purposes of conducting joint professional development activities. These activities are intended to result in systemic change which restructures middle grade schools, reforms middle grade teacher preparation institutions, and integrates community services into middle grade schools. The end goal of each Regional Alliance is to increase the collaboration between all institutions working with early adolescents in order to increase school success for middle grade students.

III. WHY CREATE MIDDLE GRADE REGIONAL ALLIANCES?

Rationale

The notion of Regional Alliances is built upon the learnings gained from research and the experiences of practitioners in assisting middle grade improvement efforts.

- **Practitioners need multiple opportunities for exposure to information, research and innovation outside of their background of experience.** Exposure to educational research and innovation often spurs individual growth, and is usually the precursor to institutional change. Conversely, isolation stifles innovation and growth. Innovation is more difficult to implement and sustain when staff are divorced from what research says is sound educational practice, when staff do not have opportunities to observe innovations in other settings, and when staff are not able to collaborate with others.
- **Practitioners often learn best from other practitioners.** It is often easier to imagine, plan and implement change when there are opportunities to interact with other practitioners about their successes and failures in implementing innovative practices.
- **Practitioners need time to meet and talk in order to make informed decisions about trying an innovation.** Innovations usually occur when staff are allotted significant planning and staff development time. Yet, teachers and school administrators rarely have extended time to share, discuss, reflect and plan. Rarely do staff from other institutions that work with early adolescents have time to meet together to work on common goals and strategies.
- **Collaboration can expand exposure to and opportunities for growth and innovation.** When people of varied backgrounds and areas of expertise are brought together to study a problem, the richness of diverse perspectives and enhanced resources can lead to more fruitful discussion and problem-solving.

Purpose of Middle Grade Regional Alliances

Regional Alliances are networks of middle grade schools, higher education institutions and other institutions working with middle grade students who come together for the purpose of joint professional development. Through each Regional Alliance, it is hoped that an increased focus upon collaborative professional development will spawn an increase in innovative practices, policies and structures within each member institution.

Regional Alliances achieve this purpose through the following activities:

- **Joint Professional Development.** These activities are voluntary and decided upon jointly by all participating institutions.
- **In-depth Inquiry.** In-depth inquiry into a range of issues can lead directly to improvement in middle grade education, human services delivery and teacher preparation. Opportunities to participate in study groups, extended seminar series, visits, observations, and peer coaching are enhanced when institutions share a common purpose.
- **Communication and Collaboration.** Regional Alliances create a structure that increases communication and collaboration between all institutions that work with early adolescents. Creating a formal network of participating institutions fosters the development of mutual goals and activities, and reduces activities that overlap or are at cross-purposes.
- **Connecting Research to Practice.** Often, because of lack of time and opportunities, educators are divorced from what educational research has found to work and not work. An Alliance encourages the use of current research to resolve the practical challenges facing educators today.
- **Sharing Resources.** In these tight fiscal times, professional development funds and opportunities are limited. By pooling resources between institutions, the opportunities available for all staff increase multifold. Knowledge about the successes, obstacles and challenges of reform can be shared between institutions, thereby enhancing the prospects of successful innovation.
- **Developing a Common Mission.** Through joint planning and participation in shared professional development, institutions begin to discuss and come to agreement on shared goals for educating early adolescents. This can often lead to a more deliberate process of arriving at common mission statements shared by collaborating institutions.
- **Action Research.** Alliances provide opportunities for conducting joint action research on innovative ideas that respond to identified problems. For example, college/university faculty can assist middle grade teachers in setting up a research model to assess the impact of a new instructional strategy.
- **Increased Use of Educational Technology.** Alliances create natural opportunities to increase the use of educational technology through telecommunication and interactive networking.

When Does Collaboration Work Best?

Collaboration between institutions is not always easy. However, lessons have been learned about how to make collaborative partnerships effective. The following characteristics have been identified in productive collaborations:

- There is commitment to a shared mission between the institutions
- There are identified annual objectives that guide the partnership's activities
- There is a clear governance structure of shared decision-making that ensures input from all member institutions
- Resources are shared, with each member institution contributing to the pool
- Lines of fiscal responsibility are established
- There is an environment of support and collegiality.

IV. WHAT WILL THE REGIONAL ALLIANCES LOOK LIKE?

Framework for Establishing Middle Grade Regional Alliances

Five Middle Grade Regional Alliances will be established that bring together middle grade schools, higher education institutions, non-profit organizations and businesses for purposes of joint professional development. The end goal of each Alliance will be to promote systemic change in all institutions to increase school success of early adolescents. The Massachusetts Department of Education will assist in the planning, design and implementation of each Alliance. Each Alliance will be composed of 10-20 institutions. Alliances will be geographically located in the Northeast, Southeast, Greater Boston, Central Massachusetts and Western Massachusetts regions of the state.

Applying for Membership to a Regional Alliance

Middle grade schools and other institutions serving middle grade students will be invited to apply to become a member of one of the Middle Grade Regional Alliances by submitting a completed application to the Department of Education. Criteria for selection will include commitment to middle grade restructuring and/or teacher preparation reform as evidenced by current planning, policies and practices; a commitment to collaborative professional development activities; and ensuring a balance of geographical location and a diversity in kinds of communities and student population.

The Department of Education will select the Middle Grade Regional Alliance member organizations, and cluster them geographically into five Alliances. Each Alliance will contain approximately 10 middle grade schools, representing a diversity in kind of community, and a small number of colleges/universities, non-profit organizations and businesses.

Alliance members will be notified of their selection in March of 1992, and will be asked to send a team to a full day of training the following month. The training will include an in-depth orientation on the purpose and process of creating Middle Grade Regional Alliances, and provide time for member organizations to cluster into their respective Alliances to meet and conduct initial planning.

It is anticipated that each Alliance will set aside at least one additional full day of planning before the end of the school year to discuss membership criteria, fees and benefits; creating a governance structure; selecting the Coordinating Institution; and developing and conducting a professional development needs assessment survey within each member organization.

Regional Alliance Budgets

In applying for membership, each member institution within each Alliance will be asked to annually contribute a small amount of funds, generally \$1,000, to the Alliance (while this is the recommended amount for the 1992-1993 school year, individual Alliances may choose to change this amount for future years). These funds will be contributed at the beginning of each fiscal year to a special account set up by each Alliance's Coordinating Institution (see below). In addition, the Department of Education will contribute \$2,000 to each Alliance for the first two years, and assist each Alliance to access an annual \$3,000 Commonwealth In-Service Institute grant.

Schools or organizations should not be discouraged from joining a Regional Alliance because of lack of finances. Alliances and interested organizations should think creatively about how to raise funds for the Alliance. For example, corporate sponsorship is one avenue to pursue. Some districts may be willing to contribute the annual Alliance membership fee from the central administration budget.

The pooled funds will be used as the Alliance operating budget, with finance decisions made by each Alliance's governing body (see below). Membership within each Alliance should entitle any staffperson within member organizations to free or reduced cost access to all Alliance professional development activities.

Role of the Coordinating Institution

After the orientation training and at one of the spring planning meetings, each Alliance will select a Coordinating Institution. This organization can be any of an Alliance's member organizations, and is responsible for the following:

- Facilitating the governance body
- Coordinating annual professional development assessment surveys
- Assisting in the development of annual professional development objectives and a calendar of activities
- Collaborating with member institutions to plan, organize, recruit for and conduct professional development activities at various member sites
- Acting as the Alliance fiscal conduit
- Documenting Alliance activities and outcomes, and
- Publicizing the Alliance.

Much of this work is a shared responsibility with the Alliance Steering Committee (see below). In general, the agency head, assistant, or another staff is designated to take on the responsibilities of Alliance coordination (e.g., middle grade school principal, vice-principal or designated teacher).

The selection process will be by consensus, with Alliance members discussing (a) the role and responsibilities of the Coordinating Institution, (b) criteria for

selection, (c) ascertaining interest among Alliance members, and (d) determining the best match. Criteria for selection of coordinating institutions should include staffing, space, time and resource capacity to coordinate professional development activities, and commitment to middle grade restructuring and teacher preparation reform. The Coordinating Institution could be a rotating responsibility from year to year or a long-term responsibility of one school/organization.

Alliance Governance

Each Middle Grade Regional Alliance will form a shared decision-making body of governance, or a Steering Committee, which will be composed of designated representatives of each member institution. This body will meet regularly and be responsible for making all major decisions of the Alliance, including:

- Guidelines for membership, including annual membership fees
- Development of a mission statement for the Alliance
- Design of annual professional development needs survey
- Creation of annual professional development objectives and a calendar of activities
- Monitoring the Alliance's fiscal activities, and
- Evaluation of Alliance activities.

Focus of Professional Development

While each Middle Grade Regional Alliance will have the latitude to decide upon an annual calendar of professional development activities, each Regional Alliance will be asked to match desired activities with realization of the eight principles for middle grade schools, as outlined in the Carnegie Corporation's *Turning Points* report on middle grade education (see Appendix).

Development of an Annual Professional Development Calendar

In the spring of each year, the Steering Committee of each Alliance will design and conduct a professional development needs assessment survey in all member institutions. The survey will be designed to identify the key areas of professional development that would spur systemic change in each member institution, as well as identify what would be the most appropriate forum to address each topic.

The survey results will be compiled during the late spring and summer to identify priority areas for professional development that are common to the majority of member institutions. The Steering Committee will then (a) establish three to four annual professional development objectives, (b) create an appropriate design of professional development activities for each objective, and (c) establish an annual calendar of professional development activities.

The calendar of activities will then be distributed to faculty within all Alliance member organizations. The governance body and Coordinating Institution will

assign facilitating responsibility for each professional development activity that is conducted (i.e., responsibility for facilitation of activities does not always have to lie with the Coordinating Institution).

Staff from each Alliance member school or organization will receive the annual professional development calendar and have the opportunity to sign up for activities or groups of interest. Member schools and organizations will make the commitment to provide the necessary release time for participation in Alliance events.

State Support of Alliances

The Massachusetts Department of Education will provide support to each Alliance through the following:

- A two-year commitment of \$2,000 to each Alliance
- Assistance in accessing an annual \$3,000 Commonwealth In-Service Institute grant for each Alliance
- An annual one-day training for governing teams from each Alliance member school or organization
- Technical assistance in setting up governance structures, conducting needs assessments and developing annual professional development calendars
- Assistance in locating and accessing professional development resources.

V. CONCLUSION

Successful school experiences for middle grade students result from the creation of a shared vision among many institutions - middle grade schools, higher education institutions, non-profit organizations, and businesses. In a time of declining resources, there need to be opportunities for staff from all institutions working with early adolescents to learn, share and experiment together with new approaches to teaching and learning. The Massachusetts Middle Grade Regional Alliance Network seeks to bring all of these institutions together to realize the common goal of improving school experiences for early adolescents.

TIMELINE FOR FY 1992-1993 FOR REGIONAL ALLIANCE FORMATION

January, 1992	Middle Grade Regional Alliance Concept Paper and Application released
February 14, 1992	Applications for Alliance membership due into the Department of Education
March 13-20, 1992	Announcement of the selection of members of the Massachusetts Middle Grade Regional Alliance Network
April, 1992	Full-day training for teams from all Alliance member organizations
May - June, 1992	Planning period for each Alliance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set membership criteria and benefits • Create governance structure • Select a Coordinating Institution • Develop and conduct a professional development needs assessment survey
Summer - September, 1992	Results of professional development needs assessment surveys are compiled, tabulated and translated into objectives and a calendar of joint professional development activities, reflecting the needs of each member institution
September, 1992 - June, 1993	Calendar of professional development activities is implemented
April - May, 1993	The professional development needs assessment survey is revised and conducted to identify needs for the 1992-1993 school year
June - September 1993	The annual calendar of professional development activities is established

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TURNING POINTS REPORT

1. **School should be a place where close, trusting relationships with adults and peers create a climate for personal growth and intellectual development.** This is accomplished by:
 - Creating smaller learning environments or clusters
 - Forming teachers and students into teams
 - Assigning an adult advisor to each student.

2. **Every student in the middle grades should learn to think critically through mastery of an appropriate body of knowledge, lead a healthy life, behave ethically, and assume the responsibilities of citizenship in a pluralistic society.** This is accomplished by:
 - Teaching young adolescents to think critically
 - Teaching young adolescents to develop healthful lifestyles
 - Teaching young adolescents to be active citizens
 - Integrating subject matter across disciplines
 - Teaching students to learn successfully.

3. **All young adolescents should have the opportunity to succeed in every aspect of the middle grade program, regardless of previous achievement or the pace at which they learn.** This is accomplished by:
 - Employing heterogeneous grouping
 - Using flexible and block scheduling to maximize learning
 - Expanding opportunities for learning.

4. **Decisions concerning the experiences of middle grade students should be made by the adults who know them best.** This is accomplished by:
 - Giving teachers greater influence in the classroom
 - Establishing building governance structures where decision-making is shared
 - Designating leaders for the teaching process.

5. **Teachers in middle grade schools should be selected and specially educated to teach young adolescents.** This is accomplished by:
 - Developing expert teachers of young adolescents.

6. **Young adolescents must be healthy in order to learn.** This is accomplished by:
- Ensuring student access to health services
 - Establishing the school as a health-promoting environment.
7. **Families and middle grade schools must be allied through trust and respect if young adolescents are to succeed in school.** This is accomplished by:
- Offering parents meaningful roles in school governance
 - Keeping parents informed and involved
 - Offering families opportunities to support the learning process at home and at school.
8. **School and community organizations should share responsibility for each middle grade student's success.** This is accomplished by:
- Placing students in youth service
 - Ensuring student access to health and social services
 - Community organizations supporting the middle grade education program
 - Community organizations augmenting resources for teachers and students
 - Expanding career guidance for students.