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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the difficulties encountered during the middle-school years in America and what can be done to elevate the level of middle-schoolers' academic achievement is provided. The report illustrates what students should be expected to know and to do when they complete eighth grade. It details the consequences of students not being ready for high school and explains why students are not ready to do challenging work. One of the key recommendations for having effective middle schools is to create small, personalized communities for learning. Likewise, team teaching across subject areas and providing students with guidance and advice are also seen as important components of teaching. The benefits of block scheduling are analyzed, along with the strategy of fitting the instruction to the standards rather than fitting the standards to the student. Criticisms of the current structure of education, which includes large classes and too many subjects, are given. The importance of leadership, the use of time, the problems with sorting and labeling, and changing the focus to student achievement are detailed. Suggestions for changing old patterns and learning to ask the right questions are included. (RJM)

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SREB

Raising the Bar in the Middle Grades: Readiness for Success

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Southern
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In the first of a series of reports on middle grades education, the middle grades were characterized as the "weak link" in the educational system. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress were used to support the conclusion that SREB states should raise standards and expectations for student performance in the middle grades. This report will suggest ways that schools and classrooms in SREB states can use standards to improve achievement.

Recent international, national and regional reports paint a picture of an American educational system in which students get a jump-start through early childhood programs, begin lagging behind in the middle grades and finish high school near the back of the pack. Almost 50 percent of eighth-graders in SREB states are below the basic (partial mastery) level in math, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Students in rural, small-town locations score significantly below students in rural areas nationwide. How can we raise our students' achievement and close this gap?

States and districts have set content standards and goals for learning at specific grades in an effort to define what must be achieved to be ready for success. But the standards and goals often are not clear and concise and are not easily understood by parents and students. Schools and teachers have not taken the next step: converting middle grades standards into clear examples of quality work that indicate students' readiness for challenging work in high school.

The examples in Figure 1, gathered by the SREB from teachers, administrators, parents and students, illustrate what students might be expected to know and to do when they complete eighth grade. In simple, straightforward language, they describe achievement goals that too few students can meet today. Have your school districts, high schools and middle schools discussed and identified what readiness for challenging work in high school means for students completing eighth grade? Are middle grades students in your community ready for challenging work in high school? How do you know?

On Expectations

"There is something very important we are not sharing with our students: Not everything is going to be pizza; some things will be spinach. Students need to know how to determine what is important and get through it."

A Tennessee educator

Figure 1
Readiness for High School

Readiness Indicators	Current Performance	Questions To Ask
• completed pre-algebra or Algebra I with a proficiency score on an end-of-course test • apply appropriate mathematical strategies to solve multi-step problems	• In SREB states 25 percent of eighth-grade students complete an algebra course and 34 percent complete pre-algebra.	• Have changes been made in mathematics instruction to ensure that all fifth-grade students will complete Algebra I or pre-algebra by eighth grade? Are teachers asking all students to solve a variety of real-world and complex mathematical problems?
• read widely — a standard of 30 books over the course of a year — on an eighth-grade level	• Thirty-five percent of SREB eighth-graders report that they read five or fewer pages daily, compared with 25 percent of eighth-graders nationally. • At least 70 percent of students nationally are below the National Assessment proficient level in reading — a level indicating mastery of challenging work and readiness for the next level of schooling.	• Do all teachers know how to engage students in reading complex material? For example, do science teachers help students learn how to read scientific texts and materials?
• find, organize and present information in writing as a response to a problem or question	• Forty-six percent of SREB eighth-graders report that they never have done a written report in science, and 30 percent of math and science teachers say that they never ask students to write a report.	• Are students asked to produce frequent, short-term writing responses in all classes? Are all students expected to do intensive, in-depth research and writing?
• design, conduct, analyze and report on a science investigation	• Forty percent of teachers in SREB states report that they never ask students to do an extended report on a science project, and two-thirds of students say they never have designed and carried out their own science investigation.	• Are students expected to learn and use laboratory and research procedures in science? Are students required to develop and complete at least three science investigations each year?

Figure 1 (continued)

Readiness Indicators	Current Performance	Questions To Ask
• present an oral report that is interesting and logically developed with scientific accuracy	• Sixty-one percent of SREB eighth-graders never have given an oral report in science, and 56 percent of teachers report they never ask students to give oral reports in science.	• Are students required to present and defend ideas through oral presentations developed for different audiences?
• demonstrate writing competence	• Nationally, NAEP trend data show that in 1996 fewer 13-year-olds (66 percent) could write clear, focused responses to different writing tasks than in 1984 (72 percent).	• Are students asked to create, critique and summarize literary works? Are they required to use various writing strategies, such as comparison and cause-and-effect?

Teachers, parents and students often do not have clear examples of what quality work is or how to reach high standards. Without clear expectations for performance, they cannot judge the quality of assignments or real academic progress. And the expectations must be set at a level high enough to ensure that any student meeting them is ready to do challenging work in high school and then be prepared to learn after high school, either in postsecondary education or on the job. Once standards are in place and accompanied by examples of quality work, schools must be asked, "What are you doing to help all students perform at the highest achievement levels and be ready for success in high school?"

What are the consequences of not "being ready"?

Data from about 20,000 *High Schools That Work* students underscore the importance of being ready to do challenging work in high school. Ninth-graders in English/language arts courses described as basic or remedial have a 20 percent chance of attaining the *HSTW* proficiency goal for reading by their senior year. To attain the goal, students must meet a predetermined performance score on a test similar to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The reading proficiency goal requires students to know how to analyze situations; organize and synthesize written information; and make written and oral reports. Only 42 percent of *HSTW* students who enroll in ninth-grade-level English courses achieve the reading proficiency goal, while 72 percent of students in accelerated or college preparatory ninth-grade English reach the *HSTW* proficiency goal. (Figure 2)

A similar pattern is evident in mathematics. Of high school students who do not complete an algebra course equivalent to college preparatory algebra, fewer than 25 percent meet the mathematics performance goal set by *High Schools That Work*. Students who meet the goal are able to use concepts from algebra, statistics and geometry to reason and solve problems. Half of the students who complete a college preparatory course in algebra or its equivalent meet the *HSTW* performance goal by graduation. About 86 percent of those who complete Algebra II or geometry in high school meet the mathematics performance goal. (Figure 3)

When *High Schools That Work* followed 6,000 students a year after graduation, it found that taking challenging academic courses and meeting proficiency goals gave students an edge in further education and employment. For example:

- Students who met *HSTW* performance goals and were working full time or part time earned more per hour than students who did not meet the goals.
- Only 15 percent of graduates who met *HSTW* performance goals had to take remedial courses in college, compared with 31 percent of those who did not meet performance goals.
- Only 17 percent of graduates who met *HSTW* performance goals were unemployed at some time during the year after graduation, compared with 25 percent of those who did not meet the goals.
- Students who met the *HSTW* performance goals were much more likely (83 percent) to enroll in further study after high school than those who did not meet the performance goals (56 percent).

> Getting students ready to take a high-level English course and a solid algebra course taught to college preparatory standards is the best way to ensure that they will be ready for the challenges of high school and further learning.

Why aren't students ready to do challenging work?

How did we get into a pattern of lagging performance in the middle grades? There is no simple answer. There is, however, a pattern of practices in schools with lagging performance. That pattern can be altered by getting the right focus for middle grades education. When districts began establishing middle schools in the '70s and '80s, the focus was on a list of recommended practices and policies that would provide students appropriate experiences for their ages and grade levels. The recommendations became a checklist of characteristics that "defined" a middle school; among them were teams, advisory homerooms and longer blocks of time to do hands-on activities.

Accommodating versus expecting

Every middle school visited by the SREB staff sorted students. For one group of students, the focus was on academic achievement and accelerated learning. For the rest, the focus was on textbook coverage, special short-term instructional programs and self-esteem improvement. In class after class, students were relearning content covered in earlier grades. High standards for all

Figure 2

Percent of Students Meeting *HSTW* English Performance Goal

Ninth-Grade Course Assignment

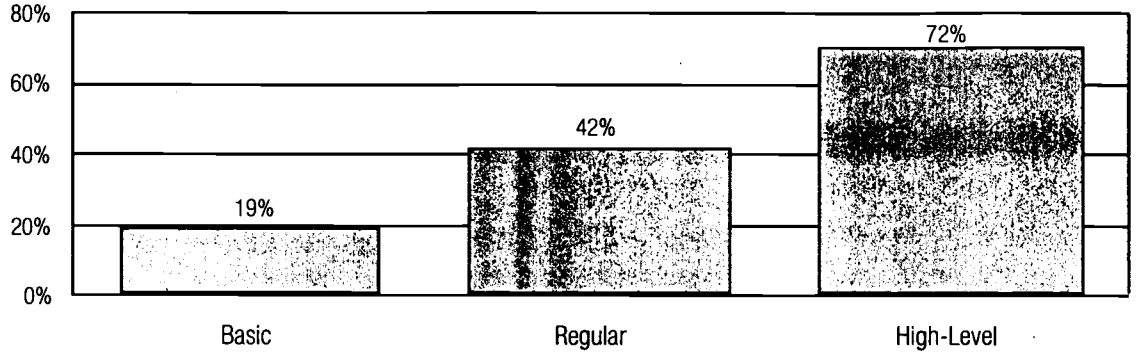
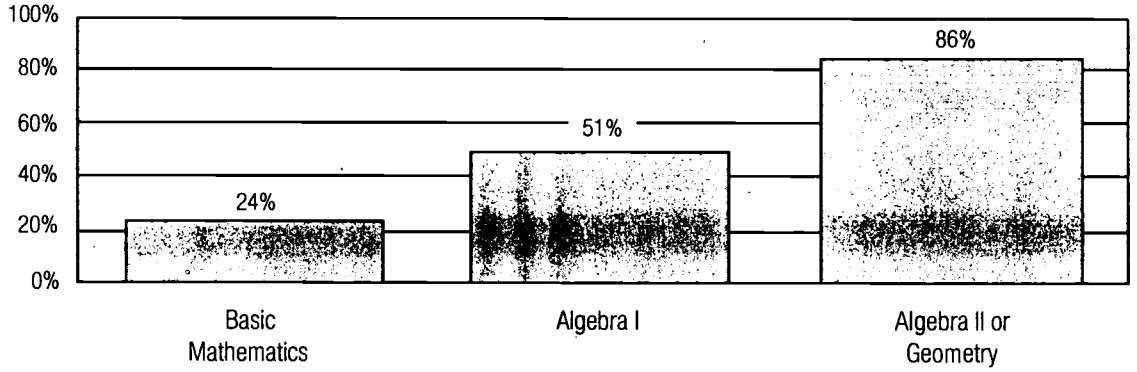


Figure 3

Percent of Students Meeting *HSTW* Mathematics Performance Goal

Courses Completed in High School



students became "reading a novel on the same theme," but honors students were expected to demonstrate deeper comprehension by doing more literary research and writing.

Data from both the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Third International Mathematics and Science Study report that sorting students leads to different expectations and lower achievement; what is taught (curriculum) and what is expected (standards) make a difference in student achievement.

> Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that more eighth-grade students (50 percent) in SREB states are assigned to English courses according to their ability than are students across the country (33 percent).

Schools that accommodate students by sorting them into different levels limit their access to further opportunities; students who are accommodated through lower expectations are given a license to "hide" from more challenging work.

Social development versus academic performance

What was missing from the checklist was the ultimate purpose of the middle school: academic achievement that would prepare students for challenging, rigorous work in high school. When parents and educators are asked about their vision for the middle grades, they frequently say that students should "feel good about themselves," "reach their full potential" or "enjoy coming to school." All of these are important, but where is the focus on learning? It is no accident that schools that focus on academic improvement have students who perform at a higher level.

No common expectations for performance

Observations and conversations with students, teachers, administrators and parents in the SREB states confirm that too few students are ready for the challenges of high school. Eighth-grade students in schools visited by SREB staff reported that they "read one or two books on their own during the year." Teachers of pre-algebra and general math estimate that at least half of their students are not ready for algebra. Eighth-grade promotion policies in some states require that students must pass only two or three of the four core subjects; parents believe that passing grades are sufficient evidence that a student is ready for high school work.

In most school systems, there are no common expectations for the content knowledge and skills needed by all students to be ready for high school work. States may have set grade-by-grade standards, but the accompanying examples of quality student work have not been set by local districts and schools. As a result, far too many students trip and fall in ninth grade as they begin the last lap of secondary education.

Doing the right things with the wrong focus

One of the key recommendations for having effective middle schools is to create small, personalized communities for learning. Many middle grades sites organize teachers and students into teams to obtain smaller learning units within the school. These sites also may set aside advisory periods so that students and teachers can develop closer and more supportive relationships.

Vision and Purpose

"We want all our students to have choices when they leave this middle school. If they want to take accelerated courses, we want them to be prepared by knowing the content that they need."

A Memphis, Tennessee lead teacher

Unfortunately, *having* key practices becomes more important in some schools than *using* the key practices to improve teaching and learning.

Team teaching across subject areas

In a 1993 study by the National Middle School Association, 45 percent of schools reported organizing teachers into teams in core academic areas. About 75 percent of schools with such teams provided two planning periods for teachers to work together. However, according to logs of team meetings, the focus of the team is likely to be managing student behavior, filling out paperwork and planning events such as field trips and assemblies. In rare cases, teams focus on examining student achievement data and student work samples; on planning and reviewing lesson strategies; and on analyzing student responses. Yet it is that focus on student learning and performance that accelerates academic achievement.

Guiding and advising students

Likewise, the National Middle School Association study reported that in 1993 nearly half (47 percent) of all middle schools had teacher-based guidance programs, compared with 39 percent in 1988. Two-thirds of these advisory programs meet daily for 15 to 30 minutes.

Advisory periods are supposed to provide early adolescents with social and emotional support necessary for academic success in school. However, they are more likely to consist of roll call, school announcements and unstructured social time for students.

If a school believes that teacher guidance is important, it will develop or adapt a guidance curriculum that focuses on academic counseling in addition to issues of concern to adolescents. Daily 15- or 20-minute periods are not long enough to implement an effective guidance curriculum. For that, schools should schedule longer periods once a week or twice a month; teachers should work together to plan a series of topics with well-developed lesson plans. For instance, one topic for an

Dr. James Stigler

"I once asked a group of American teachers to create a lesson plan. They took 15 minutes to do it. . . . The American plans always say what the teacher is going to do. The Japanese plans ask what the students are going to think if the teacher does this. . . . Then I asked one of the American teachers to teach the lesson . . . It was a complete disaster; everything went wrong. . . . American teachers don't have any experience jointly talking about instruction. When they get together, they don't talk about lessons. They talk about all manner of other professional and personal issues but almost never discuss how they actually teach their students."

"Lessons in Perspective: How Culture Shapes
Math Instruction in Japan, Germany, and the United States"
The California State University Institute for School Reform

eighth-grade advisory curriculum might be "What is high school really like?" Former students might come back to talk about their experiences and what it takes to achieve in academic courses.

Block scheduling

A quote from a recent Third International Mathematics and Science Study summarizes the dilemma over time in schools: "It's not just how long you make it but how you make it long." The study found that longer classes meant more repetition and boredom if the extra time was not used effectively with specific goals in mind.

Many middle schools have lengthened their classes. In education lingo, they have adopted "block scheduling." There is much debate over how long the blocks should be, which courses should be taught every day and what happens to students who miss these longer classes. Teachers often say that their preparation for the change to block scheduling included one or two workshops but that they learned mostly from experience. What did they learn? Teachers say they do more projects, but the projects are often add-ons or time fillers and not an integral part of instruction. "The kids like them" is a common comment. And block schedules are often just as rigid as the traditional 45- to 50-minute period — just longer.

Schools that use block scheduling to improve student performance have changed instruction in significant ways. Teachers work with students to study fewer topics in greater depth and to demonstrate greater understanding of content through comparing, analyzing, summarizing and reporting. Lesson plans focus on what students will do rather than what the teacher will do. Students are challenged with problems and issues that have more than one solution or perspective; they are encouraged to find several solutions, decide which is best and defend their choice both orally and in writing.

Teachers and administrators who see longer blocks of time as essential to learning also emphasize the need for flexible scheduling based on academic purpose. For instance, English/language arts teachers often say to truly make connections among reading, writing, speaking, research and grammar requires more time than is available even in 90-minute blocks. Schools that are focused on students and academics are more likely to allow teams to schedule learning time based on purpose rather than organizational need.

At one middle school in Louisville, Ky., teams are free to create their own schedules based on their judgment of academic needs. For example, math classes may be shorter (but more frequent) than social studies classes. Science classes may be longer on "lab days." This level of flexibility is too rare in schools today.

A Kentucky Educator

"The most dramatic change due to state testing has been that classroom practice has been more content-driven, more focused on what students need to know, because we required students to do something with what they learned — make a graph, summarize what they read in their own words, organize results into a table."

A Tennessee Eighth-Grader

"My science teacher teaches real science, things that you can do, and it's a lot more interesting. She really tries to teach us. Some teachers haven't really tried to teach us; they teach the book. Good teachers want you to learn and find any way they can to help you."

Getting it backward: Finding the standards that fit rather than fitting instruction to standards

States and districts have set content and student achievement standards at specific grades. But setting standards is only the first step. All schools need to convert standards into descriptions of work expected of all students preparing for college and employment. When teachers have examples of the quality of work expected to meet the standards, they will use standards in planning instruction and assessing achievement. Without examples of quality work, teachers will continue to plan and teach as they always have and, when asked, will find a standard that fits the lesson. One teacher said, "In a middle school classroom, I can find a standard that will fit anything I plan to teach."

States have developed standards based on higher-level thinking and skills, but they may continue to use tests that measure lower-level skills, such as the ability to recall isolated facts. And in classrooms in every district and every state, teachers drill students on sample test items of isolated facts.

In a school visited by an SREB staff member, one English teacher designed a lesson on the state standards relating to vocabulary development, writing and poetry in a way that was creative, engaged students and resulted in an original poem. In the other English classrooms, teachers assigned worksheets with vocabulary lists and drilled students on sample items from the state assessment test. While one teacher focused on having students actually use new words to create a poem, the others emphasized isolated bits of information that may be forgotten quickly.

Effective teaching balances the need to know and remember with the ability to apply knowledge to real-world problems. When students who are achieving at high levels talk about what is different about their classes, they often say they are doing "real science" or using numbers that "mean something." In other words, they are thinking for themselves and finding new ways to use the knowledge they are acquiring.

When there are no concrete indicators or examples of quality student work, the textbook or the latest program becomes the curriculum and the instruction. Educators talk about the importance of aligning curriculum, instruction and assessment. They say that they want to determine content topics, plan experiences necessary to learn the content and check to see whether students know the content and how to use it. Eight very different middle schools in five states visited by SREB staff all have the same commercial reading program — a "quick fix" to low reading scores. None of the schools visited could share models of exemplary student work that educators used to judge acceptable student performance. If there are no specific learning goals and no examples of work that meets the goals, how can schools determine what content students need to learn and whether they have learned it?

A Texas Middle School Principal

"We have a whole quick-fix culture that says, 'Get your test scores up if you buy this program.' When other principals ask me how I turned my school around, they really expect me to say I bought this or that. They are really disappointed when I say to them, 'We did it with a lot of hard work!' "

System structures that slow higher standards

Schools do not exist in a vacuum. They are subject to outside forces and inside pressures. Good schools are part of a larger system that allows them to focus on what is important for students. In far too many systems, the organization and policies that are designed to support successful learning often have the opposite effect. For instance, teachers know that students do not learn at the same rate. Some need more time, and some may need different teaching. Yet students are moved through the system at the same rate and in the same way.

Common sense tells us that students learn better in smaller settings, but as many as 3,000 students are housed in the same building in the name of efficiency. Students who have difficulty learning need expert teachers, yet experienced teachers use their seniority to choose schools and classes with the easiest-to-teach students. In other countries, students learn more by studying fewer topics, yet in the United States students are asked to learn a wider range of topics, making it difficult for them to achieve a deeper understanding of essential concepts.

Leadership

Developing a sense of academic purpose and a commitment to high-quality learning for all students arises out of effective leadership. Yet very few districts have administrative support programs or match new principals with formal mentors. While principals are expected to be instructional leaders, most do little or no teaching after leaving the classroom for an administrative position. Others spend little time on curricular and instructional matters. Principals admit that they need training in how to build understanding among students, parents and teachers about what students should know and be able to do.

Leaders focus attention on what needs to be done to improve student achievement, and they make sure it happens. If teachers need help planning curriculum and instruction tied to examples of high-quality performance in the classroom, good leaders find ways to provide that help. If students need more time to accomplish achievement goals, leaders find ways to add extra time.

Time

Controlling the use of time is a critical factor in focusing on academics and student achievement. Most districts use the same length of school day and year for all students. But schools can control how time is used. Too often, schools use valuable learning time to do administrative tasks

or for the school's convenience rather than to meet the real needs of students. Principals who are instructional leaders make sure there is uninterrupted learning time.

If schools are to focus on students and academic achievement, then students who are having difficulty in the middle grades must be given extra time and every opportunity to succeed. Extra time may mean before-school and after-school tutoring, Saturday school and summer school; it may require different schedules for teachers and students alike. Extra opportunity may mean constant checking on student understanding and a rethinking of how content is being taught. If students cannot reach performance expectations on the first try, teachers must have time and support to find another way to help students learn.

Sorting and labeling

All teachers say they want their students to be creative, to be critical thinkers, to be active participants and to be problem-solvers. But how they define those terms and what they think their students will achieve are often alarmingly different. Students' opportunities are limited through sorting that begins in kindergarten and continues through high school. Students labeled as "at-risk" or "disadvantaged" often carry a more subtle label of "can't be expected to do the work" or "needs to be in a lower-level class."

Sorting and labeling in SREB states have the greatest negative effect on students in classes lower than "honors" level. Students assigned to average-ability mathematics classes in SREB states scored significantly lower than similar eighth-graders across the United States. We should challenge all students to meet performance expectations similar to what is expected of students in college preparatory courses. One set of expectations and one set of criteria for quality work should be applied to all students. If we are going to group students, the groups should focus on providing extra opportunity and extra time to accomplish challenging work, not on lower standards and expectations.

A similar sorting process happens to teachers through teaching assignments. The system of seniority most often matches the newest and least experienced teachers to schools and classrooms that have students with the greatest needs.

Interrupt Class? America, Yes; Japan, No

"We measured how many times the lesson was interrupted by someone coming into the classroom or an announcement coming over the public address system. This happened during 31 percent of the American lessons, 13 percent of the German lessons and none of the Japanese lessons. . . . They couldn't believe that someone would interrupt a math lesson and disturb students like this."

"Lessons in Perspective: How Culture Shapes"
Math Instruction in Japan, Germany, and the United States

A South Carolina High School Principal

"I got my better teachers to teach 'other' [not honors] students, and amazingly these 'other' students passed Algebra and Algebra II. They could do it. If teachers believe they are good and students know they have good teachers, the changes are remarkable. I would change middle schools and mix students and teachers."

One Texas middle school principal reassigned teachers and students as one of his first acts as principal. Teachers who had taught the "best" students were assigned to "other" students, and test scores began to rise. The best teachers had higher expectations and a broader range of teaching strategies, and students began to meet the higher expectations. When students began to experience success, attendance went up and the climate for learning improved throughout the school.

Likewise, the teachers in that Texas middle school who began to teach "honors" students for the first time began to believe they were "good" teachers. Faculty morale went up, and teacher expectations were raised.

Changing the focus to student achievement

Recently, a representative from a large urban district spoke out in frustration: "Too many teachers and administrators just don't get it! They think that when they open the doors to the school, the kids will come whether they are doing a wonderful job or not. With choice and charter schools, that may not be the case. I ask them, 'Do you want the kids to say "I love coming to this school," or do you want to hear "I hate this school"?' Many teachers don't understand that we could be like the dinosaurs." **What they don't get is the importance of putting student academic performance at the center of education.**

Discussions about poor performance often provoke discomfort, blame, finger-pointing and fear. By providing time and help in coming to agreements on the quality and quantity of student work that is acceptable, leaders can allay fear and confusion and develop cooperation and focus. Developing, refining and updating curriculum and changing the focus to student achievement require time, expertise and resources, information and financial support. National, state and local standards can guide schools, but teachers, school leaders and parents can come together to examine student performance. What all students are expected to know and do should be described by per-

An Eighth-Grade Language Arts Teacher

"I teach eighth-grade reading improvement. I had 40 students on the first day of school; some had passed the state test, and some had not. I can tell you right now that passing the test does not mean the student can read on an eighth-grade level."

formance criteria and supported with examples of quality student work that provide evidence that students are ready to tackle challenging work in high school.

Every middle grades teacher should know what is to be done at every grade level to ensure that all students who complete eighth grade have attained eighth-grade standards and show readiness for a challenging ninth-grade program. Meeting high expectations and challenging standards requires continuous, coherent effort and progress through the middle grades. Passing a test does not guarantee that students can do challenging work. By agreeing on examples of work expected at every grade level that correspond to expectations in "honors" courses, teachers can align instruction and assessment with the standards.

Research Paper Assignment

All students will express a strong opinion or assertion and support it through research to be presented in oral and written forms.

Performance Criteria

Students will:

- use at least three research sources and one interview;
- complete a narrative using all standard English conventions of grammar, punctuation, spelling and word usage, as well as logical organization and coherent writing;
- use a variety of thinking and writing strategies — for example, comparison and facts and details;
- include a summary of their research that explains how it supports or rejects the study questions or opinions;
- explain how the researched information is connected to the reader and author through explicit examples of the relationship — usefulness, interest, relevance.

Sample Scoring Guide

Advanced: The student has located exceptional information from a wide range of resources. The method of organizing and summarizing is effective and comprehensive. There are no English usage errors in the final product.

Proficient: The student has used at least four sources for information, including an interview, that are clearly relevant to the chosen topic. The information is organized so that it is retrieved easily and can be connected to main ideas or questions under study. References are noted properly, and English usage errors are minimal.

Performance criteria not met: The student has relied upon one or two resources. The information is not well organized, and the paper lacks focusing questions or main ideas. References are not noted properly, and the report contains numerous English usage errors.

No attempt or off-task: The student did not do the assignment or did not use the performance criteria guidelines.

Changing old patterns

What happens in classrooms in which students are challenged to do high-level work? What happens to students who are judged to "need lower-level classes"? There are practices that distinguish challenging, high-level classrooms from classrooms in which students struggle to achieve. Some of those practices are outlined in Figure 4.

There is a hidden curriculum in low-expectation classrooms for students who are thought to be less able. The hidden curriculum is built on a base of repetition and monotony, and it sends a message to students that they can't do challenging work. We can change this message to one that says, "This is what is acceptable eighth-grade work, and this is what you need to do to achieve it." What will it take to change all classrooms into high-expectation classrooms?

Figure 4
Classroom Practices

High-Expectation Classrooms	Low-Expectation Classrooms
• spend more time on learning	• allocate more time to discipline and classroom management
• clearly state goals and performance criteria for all students	• go from chapter to chapter or activity to activity without goals tied to standards
• aim for clarity and understanding of content and factual knowledge appropriate for the grade level	• emphasize working quietly, following directions and using only teacher-demonstrated strategies
• believe all students can do tasks and solve problems successfully	• have fewer opportunities for students to try different learning strategies
• require students to think and reflect, analyze, synthesize and evaluate	• ask students only to recall facts and follow one- or two-step procedures
• use a variety of methods and materials and communicate a joy for learning and doing	• substitute low-level tasks such as fill-in-the-blanks for written analyses, discussion and in-depth study
• provide time for students to cooperate and try out various learning strategies	• lack enthusiasm and optimism about learning and doing among both teachers and students
• support and encourage a sense of teamwork and challenge all students to participate	• focus on those students who are easiest to engage
• connect learning to student lives	• focus on isolated skills disconnected from any meaning to students

Successful schools focus on students and learning rather than on sorting and labeling. Learning is based on challenging standards for all students, and quality is upheld consistently through descriptions of acceptable performance. Teachers know their subject and how to teach it in many ways so that all students can learn. There are successful schools and classrooms in each of the SREB states. The challenge is to make sure that every school in every state is successful with every student.

Asking the right questions

Many educators believe that the most important part of teaching and learning is helping students know what questions to ask to get the information they need. Ensuring readiness for high school means asking schools the right questions about the middle grades.

- What evidence of readiness for high school is required of every student by the end of eighth grade?
- Do performance criteria describe the skills and qualities needed to do challenging work in high school?
- How has the school changed what is taught, how teachers teach and how student performance is measured to better prepare all students for high school?
- Are there samples of student work to show parents and students what is expected for every standard?
- Is student work evaluated consistently according to known criteria across classrooms and subjects? Do all teachers expect essentially the same quality of work?
- How do the standards at this school compare with those in the rest of the state? Nation? World?
- How does the school make sure that all parents and community members know what the standards are?
- How does the school help students who are having difficulty achieving the standards?
- Does the school publish information on how many students achieve performance standards? For example, how many students complete Algebra I by the end of eighth grade or enroll in Algebra I in the ninth grade?
- Does the school report information on how different groups of students perform in different subjects? For example, how many male students complete the reading and writing requirements? How many female students design, conduct, analyze and report on science experiments?
- How is the school helping teachers learn to use standards and performance criteria in planning their instruction?

Looking ahead

If we want students to be focused on academic achievement, we also need teachers who believe in academic achievement and are prepared to teach content and to guide students toward high-quality work. Without adequate preparation and continued learning for teachers, agreement on standards is a hollow exercise. A recent Public Agenda survey identified some stumbling blocks to raising expectations and improving student achievement:

- Teachers generally support the call for higher standards, but they do not view low standards as a widespread or urgent problem;
- Teachers seem more concerned about students' social skills and values than about high-level academic skills.

Despite these discouraging findings, some middle schools are "reinventing" themselves and making the changes necessary to prepare every student for rigorous work in high school. Without exception, the teachers in these schools are involved in professional development programs that encourage them to delve deeply into their teaching and to accept responsibility for student success.

Dr. James Stigler, who led the videotape studies of American, German and Japanese classrooms for the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, says the key to improving teaching in the United States is for teachers "to ask the question over and over: Can you think of a way to make students learn more?" The SREB's next report on middle grades education will examine what teachers should know and be able to do to help students get ready for challenging studies in high school.

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