



Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades

By Trish Williams, Matthew Rosin, and Michael W. Kirst

Educators and policymakers have debated in recent years how best to improve academic performance in the middle grades. In the absence of outcomes-based research about what works, school districts have reshuffled grade configurations, bolstered their focus on “academic rigor,” and worked to ensure that students are engaged in school as they go through the turbulence of puberty. To find out what district and school policies and practices are linked to higher student performance in the middle grades, a team of researchers from EdSource, Stanford University, and American Institutes for Research spent eighteen months conducting the most extensive empirical study of this grade level to date. The study, Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades, was released in 2010. This Outlook highlights what policymakers can do to support the middle grades.

As expectations for a highly educated American citizenry rise, what happens in the middle grades matters now more than ever. Success at this level is a prerequisite for entering high school prepared for a college- and career-ready path. The middle grades are the last best chance to identify students at risk of academic failure and get them back on track for high school success.

Educators widely accept that much of the difference in student outcomes among schools is directly related to student background. Less widely acknowledged is the great variation in student performance even among schools serving similar student populations.

Indeed, some schools do much better than others at raising the academic achievement of middle grades students, including among schools serving high numbers of minority, English language learner (ELL), and low-income students. In California,

schools serving similar middle grades students vary widely on the state’s Academic Performance Index and in student outcomes on standards-based exams. This variation is striking—and offers a reason for hope. It suggests that policies and practices matter.

Our report, *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades*, was designed to identify school and

Key points in this Outlook:

- High-performing middle schools align instruction with state standards and use student data to improve student learning.
- States should align education spending with clear priorities to make the best use of scarce resources.
- Competitive grant initiatives sponsored by the US Department of Education should emphasize the importance of rigorous standards and quality assessments and the use of student data to improve teaching and learning.

Trish Williams (twilliams@edsourcesource.org) is the executive director of EdSource. Matthew Rosin (mrosin@edsourcesource.org) is a senior research associate at EdSource. Michael W. Kirst (mwk@stanford.edu) is a professor emeritus of education and business administration at Stanford University.

district practices and policies that set apart higher-performing schools from lower-performing ones, as measured by standards-based tests in English language arts and math. During the 2008–2009 school year, we surveyed the principals of 303 middle grades schools in California, 3,752 English language arts and math teachers in grades six through eight in these schools, and 157 district superintendents and charter management organization leaders who oversee them. The schools included one group serving predominantly low-income students and another serving predominantly middle-income students. The schools also included all major middle grades configurations—K–8, 7–8, and 6–8—and both charter and traditional public schools.

We asked these educators about concrete practices and policies in their schools, based on extensive review of middle grades research and policy literature. We then analyzed the schools' reported practices against their achievement on the California Standards Tests in English language arts and math in grades six, seven, and eight during that year, controlling for student background and other school differences. We considered schools' achievement outcomes both for the single school year and in light of students' past achievement on state tests.

What We Learned

The major contribution of our study is a set of specific practices that middle grades educators and leaders can implement. Taken together, these form a coherent and compelling picture of higher-performing middle grades schools.

Foremost, an intense, schoolwide focus on improving students' academic outcomes distinguished higher-performing schools. Educators reported that they prioritized and set measurable goals for improved student outcomes on standards-based tests and benchmarks, informed by clear district priorities for student achievement. They saw improving student outcomes as their personal and shared responsibility, and they expected students and parents to share in this mission.

As part of this mission, a strong focus on the future set apart higher-performing schools. Principals and teachers in these schools saw their curriculum and instruction as explicitly designed to enable students to leave the middle grades "high school–ready"—with strong foundational skills, on track to pass California's high school exit exam, and ready to enter college-preparatory courses. Educators also took steps to help

students (and their parents) see how the middle grades relate to their future in high school and beyond.

Evaluation of superintendents and principals based, in part, on students' academic outcomes also distinguished schools with higher performance. Achievement was higher in schools where teachers saw their evaluations as substantive and helpful to their practice—and in schools where evaluation of teachers was based, in part, on student progress and achievement data (among schools serving predominantly lower-income students).

Principals and teachers in higher-performing schools saw their curriculum and instruction as explicitly designed to enable students to leave the middle grades "high school–ready."

The following areas of practice and policy also distinguished higher-performing schools and provided the framework and tools through which this intense focus on student outcomes was achieved:

Close Alignment of Curricula and Instruction with State Academic Content Standards. The district played a lead role in curriculum adoption and emphasized alignment with standards. Teachers used the adopted curriculum daily and emphasized key standards in each grade and subject. They also reported collaborating frequently around common pacing and benchmarks and "breaking down" the state content standards to identify prerequisite student skills. Principals allocated a considerable amount of time for common planning.

Extensive Use of Assessment and Other Student Data to Improve Student Learning and Teacher Practice. The district played a strong leadership role by providing timely student data, an accessible and user-friendly data system, and the training needed to use the system effectively at the school site. Principals met frequently with teachers to review student data and used these data to examine teacher practice and content knowledge and determine professional development needs. Teachers reported using data routinely to improve their own instruction and set measurable goals for student achievement.

Early Identification of Students Needing Additional Support and Proactive Intervention. Educators reported

that the district emphasized the early identification of such students, addressed the needs of students two or more years behind grade level, and developed policies and resources to serve ELL students, with an emphasis on English language development and subject-matter learning. A comprehensive range of required and voluntary strategies for intervening on behalf of students far below grade level or at risk of failing also set apart higher-performing schools, including meetings in which school staff and parents developed individual intervention plans. Schools made time for interventions and academic support during or outside the school day.

Evaluating superintendents, principals, and teachers *in part* on improvements in student outcomes was associated with higher school performance on standards-based exams.

Extensive Review of the Incoming Records of Students Entering the Middle Grades. This finding resonates with recent research and policy discussion regarding early predictors of student success or failure. In addition to reviewing data on students' past achievement on state standards-based exams, grades in English language arts and math, and English language proficiency, middle grades educators also reviewed students' attendance and behavior records and communicated with elementary teachers about any students whose data raised concerns.

One area of practice not as strongly correlated with higher school achievement was a positive, safe, and engaging school environment. This important middle grades focus may be a necessary foundation for effective schools, rather than an area of practice that always relates directly to improved academic outcomes. That said, some practices related to a safe and engaging school environment set apart higher-performing schools. For example, educators reported that the principal ensured a clean, safe, and disciplined school environment and that the school publicly recognized positive behavior and attendance and communicated the importance of attendance to students and parents. In addition, a high proportion of students participated in electives and extracurricular activities.

Finally, neither school grade configuration nor the organization of classroom instruction (for example, self-contained versus departmentalized) was clearly associated

with higher school performance on standards-based tests. Although there may be many good reasons for a district to decide on a particular grade configuration (such as enrollment trends or availability of facilities), no single grade configuration was consistently associated with higher school achievement after accounting for other practices. Moreover, the practices that *did* distinguish higher performance can be implemented with any grade configuration or organization of instruction.

Implications for Districts and Schools

Local educators can use the findings of this study to learn more about what is working in some higher-performing schools and for staff discussions about ways to improve student outcomes in their own schools.

Superintendents and district boards should pay explicit attention to academic improvement in the middle grades. This study underscores the important leadership role of district superintendents and boards in communicating the importance of middle grades student outcomes. So important are these outcomes that some districts make them a consideration in superintendent and principal evaluations.

Districts should examine the extent to which their middle grades curricula and assessments provide a clear framework for aligning instruction and common planning with state academic standards. Questions include: Does teacher professional development help teachers map key state standards by grade and subject to instruction? Does the district provide standards-based benchmark tests for the middle grades and return results quickly? Do teachers work collectively and know how to respond to test results? Do teachers use diagnostic tests and assessment data to determine why a student is struggling? Is there support to help teachers address students' instructional needs?

Districts and schools should consider making improvements in middle grades student outcomes a part of educator performance evaluations. Consistent with much of the national conversation around educator effectiveness, this study found that evaluating superintendents, principals, and teachers *in part* on improvements in student outcomes was associated with higher school performance on standards-based exams. This practice should be part of a comprehensive strategy that includes ready

availability of timely student data, meaningful professional development for teachers and principals, and a complete portfolio of student intervention strategies.

Principals should engage their staff and teachers in conversations about their mission for the middle grades. Educators in the middle grades have long believed that responsiveness to early adolescent developmental issues and strong adult-student relationships are a central part of the middle grades imperative. They are, but so is academic learning. Educators from higher-performing schools in this study did provide a safe and positive environment, report wide participation in extra-curricular activities, and frequently reach out to students and parents. But they also focused their collective time and energy on strategies—such as extensive review and use of data, proactive student interventions, and standards-based instruction—that can most directly drive improvement in student learning.

In particular, middle grades educators are key to enabling more students to become high school-ready—and later, college- and career-ready. Student achievement in the middle grades—such as on state and district standards-based exams in English language arts and math—is only one step along a path that later includes a state high school exit exam and, ideally, a rigorous high school curriculum that prepares students for further study and the world of work. If the school views improved student achievement as a priority because students benefit beyond the middle grades, then the school's mission and instructional practices will reflect that belief.

Implications for State Policy

States that wish to strengthen the kind of instructional improvement described above must plan accordingly to ensure that the necessary resources are available. The fiscal forecast continues to be bleak for schools, so district and school leaders will need to find existing dollars to fund improvement, which will require schools to set clear priorities.

Despite California having fewer resources than many other states, many middle grades schools there are improving student outcomes. Key practices associated with higher-performing schools—for example, frequent and adequate time for common planning, a comprehensive array of student intervention strategies and extracurricular classes, access to timely assessment data, and the computer software and training to effectively use it—

each require resources that are increasingly difficult to find. State policymakers can examine the extent to which current policies strengthen or inhibit local educators' abilities to carry out the practices this study found to be significant. The study findings can also help inform the process of setting state priorities and aligning expenditures with them.

States should be thoughtful when implementing Common Core State Standards. The study underscores the importance of state policy for schools' abilities to improve student outcomes effectively. More than a decade after the state's initial adoption of state academic content standards, California's standards-based reforms are taking hold and are reflected in higher-performing schools regardless of the socioeconomic background of their students. These schools and their districts leveraged the state's standards and adopted curriculum programs to support their efforts to improve student outcomes and prepare students for high school.

As most states move to implement the Common Core State Standards, including the development of new curriculum frameworks and assessments, state leaders will need to make sure that appropriate professional development and student-data systems are in place so middle grades schools can effectively implement and teach to the new standards. Local educators will also need to understand the timeline and steps required for implementing them.

Student-data systems—and support to help districts effectively access and use data to benefit schools—must remain a high priority for states. Effective use of data can make a difference in student outcomes, but the ability to access and use data varies widely. For example, although California and its school districts have been developing data capacity for years, criticism lingers that the state has not invested enough to make this a reality for its nearly one thousand school districts.

Implications for Federal Policy

The ability of middle grades schools to get more students high school-ready is an essential step in ensuring that students graduate from high school college- and work-ready.

Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act should emphasize the need to strengthen the nation's middle grades student achievement. The

findings from this study can help inform the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. New legislation should take into account the following:

- The term “college ready” does not apply only to what happens in high schools. This study makes clear that higher-performing middle grades schools think about and plan for a rigorous high school curriculum as a foundation for later college- and career-readiness.
- The early identification of struggling students and appropriate interventions are clear priorities for higher-performing middle grades schools.

Future competitive grant initiatives sponsored by the Department of Education should heed these study findings. In particular, attention should be given to the importance of rigorous standards and quality assessments and the use of student data to improve teaching and learning.

- The higher-performing middle grades schools in our study exemplify the importance of quality standards and assessments as the foundation for a continually improving instructional program, guided by a strong future orientation.
- These schools are also using data and data systems to guide instruction, identify student needs, and improve teacher practices as envisioned by these competitive grant programs.

The study findings also highlight potential leverage points and key considerations related to two other priorities of these competitive grant programs: turning around low-performing schools and distributing high-quality

teachers and leaders in equitable ways. For example, higher school performance was associated with districts that provided useful professional development to teachers and gave principals the opportunity to reconstitute leadership teams, and with principals who assigned teachers so that students with the greatest need were served well.

Key practices associated with higher-performing schools require resources that are increasingly difficult to find.

Looking Ahead

In California and across the country, some schools are doing much better than others at raising the academic success of middle grades students. We believe that *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades* makes an important contribution by identifying concrete policies and practices that set apart higher-performing schools from lower-performing ones serving similar students.

This study’s findings can help local, state, and federal policymakers craft policies that strengthen and mutually reinforce the work of middle grades educators to improve student outcomes. Educators and policymakers can use this rich collection of findings to evaluate their own practices and inform discussions about school reform.

The *Gaining Ground* research team continues to analyze the study’s data. Over the past year, we have conducted follow-up analyses related to student achievement in math, including analyses of students’ grade-eight course placements. The findings from this closer look at middle grades math practice and policy will be released in early 2011 and will, we hope, further inform educators and policymakers as they consider ways to improve student achievement.