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New Middle Schools for New Futures

* *This We Believe* characteristics:

- A shared vision that guides decisions
- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning

*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper, *This We Believe*, for this article.

Anthony Jackson

In 2000, Gayle Andrews and I published *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), in which we summarized our analysis of the conditions of middle grades education at the turn of the century.

Significant progress has been made in the journey to provide young adolescents with a developmentally responsive education. ... Structural changes in middle grades education—how students and teachers are organized for learning—have been fairly widespread and have produced good results. ... However, our observations suggest that relatively little has changed at the core of most students' school experience: curriculum, assessment, and instruction. (p. 5)

Now, nearly a decade later, what is the state of middle grades education? On the one hand, federal mandates under No Child Left Behind, flawed as the legislation may be, have stimulated a significant and needed emphasis on improving instruction and outcomes for students who historically had, indeed, been left behind: poor students, students of color, and students with handicapping conditions.

On balance, though, no sea change in the status of middle grades education has occurred. Data from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show improvement in eighth grade scores in recent years for virtually all groups, but significant problems remain. In mathematics, for example, 30% of our nation's eighth graders are categorized as below basic in their achievement levels, and 27% are below basic in reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007a, 2007b). The data also show continuing gaps in achievement between racial and ethnic groups in reading and math. These data suggest that the core of what students do every day in school—what they learn, how they learn, and how they demonstrate what they have learned—remains much the same as it was a decade ago and decades before that.

Enter the global era

While the heart of middle grades education may not have drastically changed in the past decades, the world has. The forces of globalization have and will continue to create a vastly different set of challenges and opportunities for today's middle grades students compared to previous generations.

We now live in a truly global economy, where goods and services move seamlessly back and forth across national borders. The wiring of the world has made it possible for people to do increasing amounts of work anywhere, anytime (Friedman, 2005). So, too, do we live in a multicultural society. New immigrants from regions in Asia, Central and South America, and Africa are transforming the cultures of local communities and workplaces. American life increasingly involves interaction and working with individuals from vastly different backgrounds and cultures, requiring new sensitivities, perspectives, and communication skills (Asia Society, 2008).



New middle schools for new futures

How should middle schools address the "old" problem of poor academic achievement and the new demands of globalization? What students need is a new skill set that includes but goes beyond reading, math, and science to include international knowledge and skills. Deep knowledge about other cultures, sophisticated communication skills including the ability to speak at least one language in addition to English, expert thinking skills required in a knowledge-driven global economy, and the disposition to positively interact with individuals from varied backgrounds—these are the foundations of work and citizenship in the 21st century (Jackson, 2008).

In 2008, Asia Society, a non-partisan, non-profit education organization, published a report entitled *Going Global: Preparing Our Students for An Interconnected World* (Asia Society, 2008). I co-authored the report, with my colleagues Shari Albright, Vivien Stewart, and Heather Singmaster. Like *Turning Points 2000* nearly a decade ago, *Going Global* provides a guide for the education of adolescents that draws on research and best practices from exemplary schools. Much of what follows draws heavily on *Going Global*, which responds precisely to the questions that frame this special edition of *Middle School Journal*: Now and in the future, what do adolescents need to know and be able to do, and how can middle grades schools help students develop these capacities?

Global Competencies

In our work at Asia Society to develop the International Studies School Network, a group of secondary schools that integrate international knowledge and skills within rigorous, engaging pedagogy (see www.AsiaSociety.org/education) we have defined the kind of "global competencies" all adolescents need.

- Identify, define, and solve problems using critical and creative thinking strategies.
- Understand of the complexity of global issues.
- Analyze and evaluate global issues from multiple perspectives.
- Understand how international systems are interconnected and interdependent.
- Develop "literacy for the 21st century"—proficiency in reading, writing, viewing, listening, and speaking in English and in one or more other world languages.
- Collaborate effectively in diverse cultural situations.
- Use digital media and technology to access relevant and credible information from around the world and to effectively communicate, synthesize, and create new knowledge.
- Identify, evaluate, and organize ongoing learning opportunities to live and work successfully in a global society.
- Make healthy decisions that enhance physical, mental, and emotional well-being to thrive within a global environment.
- Make ethical decisions and responsible choices that contribute to the development of a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

How do we get there from here? Four dimensions of middle grades education offer pivotal opportunities to develop these capacities: (a) the vision, mission, and culture of the school; (b)

curriculum, assessment and instruction; (c) teachers' professional development; and (d) connections to parents and community.

Vision, mission, and culture

A clear signal to students and adults, alike, that a school puts a priority on the development of international knowledge and skills is a mission statement that says so. Internationally focused vision and mission statements can serve as the foundation for creating an inclusive, globally focused school culture. The mission statement of the Denver Center for International Studies, which serves students in grades 6–12, leaves no doubt about its aspirations for students. "The Denver Center for International Studies prepares students for college by developing multilingual, interculturally competent students who are actively involved in a rapidly changing world" (Denver Center for International Studies, 2008).

The Denver Center for International Studies (www.cisdenver.org) provides a good example of a school serving middle grades students whose global culture includes the external symbols of its international focus but goes well beyond that in its day-to-day practices. There are, for example, regular morning assemblies in which speakers representing different cultural perspectives present their views on important world issues. This tradition of intercultural discourse engages students in serious discussions from multiple vantage points.

As a member of the International Studies Schools Network, the Denver Center for International Studies faculty have embraced the ISSN's Graduate Profile, which describes in detail the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that define a student's global competence. Faculty at the school use the Graduate Profile for alignment of curriculum, assessment and instruction, and the creation of learning opportunities outside the school that enable students to meet the learning outcomes that the Profile defines. The faculty has developed a portfolio system, beginning in the middle grades, to help students in their advisory program to document their personal development toward the goals of the Graduate Profile. Said principal Dan Lutz, "We want them to understand, as they learn about world cultures, how they are developing their own global competencies along the way" (Asia Society, 2008, p. 5).

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment

A school's curriculum, which outlines what students are expected to learn, is the primary vehicle for integrating international knowledge, skills, and values into students' daily learning. Infusing global content and perspectives makes learning engaging and relevant to young adolescents who are developmentally ripe for taking on the intellectual and emotional challenges the world has to offer.

The following provides a sampling of how teaching in various academic disciplines can support development of global competencies.

1. **Science.** Teaching the global history of science shows the international dimension of scientific inquiry. Moreover, by presenting global issues with scientific implications, students can better understand the interconnections between systems and forces that cross geographic boundaries and learn how to use the tools of science to solve problems. In Earth Science, for example, rather than simply memorizing facts and concepts from a textbook, students might be engaged in analyzing the causes and consequences of earthquake activity worldwide and propose solutions to minimize damage and loss of life. And because scientists often now work in global teams, middle grades schools can provide students with opportunities to connect with others around the world to share data and discuss solutions to scientific problems—to learn science by doing science as today's scientists do. The International Education and Resource Network (www.learn.org), for example, provides an online platform for middle grades students to collect and compare data with students in other parts of the world.
2. **English Language Arts.** Internationalizing English language arts requires expanding the traditional canon of literature with which middle grades students will engage to include

writing about or from different parts of the world that is available in English. Broadening the base of literature can help students understand universal themes such as how adolescents from many countries come of age and seek their identities. Literature from around the world can help break down cultural barriers within the school and provide a solid foundation for exploring the world's cultures. Students' global perspectives can also be fostered by having them write or communicate through other means with a global audience in mind.

3. **Social Studies.** In middle grades social studies, geography and history offer prime opportunities for students to deepen their knowledge of the world. Geography enables students to examine the physical patterns and processes that shape human use of the earth. In turn, students can examine how human presence on earth can have significant environmental consequences. Students' global awareness is strengthened, for example, through study of how human factors like population growth, migration, and urbanization have depleted water, soil, energy, and other resources. History courses are enriched for middle grades students by understanding that the history of the world and of the United States are histories of global interactions. History courses also provide the opportunity to view current world events through different international perspectives and to connect current events to historical events in different parts of the world to illustrate themes and recurring patterns that cut across geographical boundaries.
4. **World Languages.** Proficiency in one or more world languages in addition to one's own native language is a critical global competency. Ideally begun in elementary school, beginning or continuing language study in the middle grades is essential. Language study enables students to communicate with people from other cultures, especially when they have frequent opportunities for authentic conversations. Moreover, language study can be a vehicle for gaining insight into world cultures. New technologies provide opportunities for students to immerse themselves in language, for example, through conversations with native language speakers over Skype and reading target language newspapers and Web sites.

Furthering the development of students' international competencies requires innovations in assessment well beyond traditional standardized tests. Students need authentic and reliable ways of demonstrating their learning compared to valid benchmarks. One example is the work Asia Society's International Studies Schools Network is conducting with the Stanford School Redesign Network. A set of rubrics are being designed for each academic content area to outline standards for "college-ready" student work as well as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions representing global competence. Once completed, these rubrics will be used as part of a high school graduation portfolio system and, beginning in the middle grades, a system to drive the instructional planning of schools. The aim is to clearly articulate what student work that demonstrates college readiness and global competence "looks like" and to use this information to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment to these criteria from the middle grades through high school.

Professional development

To develop global competencies, middle grades students need teachers prepared to thoughtfully infuse a global focus into powerful, engaging pedagogy. Teachers need opportunities to deepen their own international content knowledge and time to plan and review their work as individuals and as members of interdisciplinary teams. To do so, links need to be created between schools and an array of resources for adult learning.

Universities, colleges, and community colleges often have faculty members with deep international knowledge with whom middle grades teachers can connect. In fact, Title VI area studies centers that receive federal funding specifically to promote the study of Asia, Africa, Canada, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and other world regions are expected to offer professional development for teachers as part of their mandate. Numerous education and international affairs organizations offer conferences and workshops to develop teachers' international knowledge and skills. For example, the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia

offers seminars in 46 states to encourage teaching and learning about Asia in world history, geography, social studies, and literature courses.

Perhaps the most potent way for teachers to develop a more global focus is through international travel. Travel provides opportunities to bring back cultural, linguistic, and historical knowledge that teachers can weave into curriculum and instruction and share with colleagues. Fulbright programs, Rotary Clubs, and other organizations offer funding opportunities to support teacher travel.

Parent and community connections

Connecting middle grades classrooms to international resources within the community creates opportunities for students to both learn about the world and take action on important world issues through service learning. A vital and often overlooked asset in every school community is the cultural background of students and their families. As a nation of immigrants, be it recently arrived or in the distant past, parents and other community residents bring a rich tapestry of knowledge and experience that can enhance classroom learning. The diversity of families' heritages and experiences is an enormous asset waiting to be tapped.

Middle grades schools, with students in leadership roles, can identify key cultural and international resources within the community—from museums and cultural organizations to restaurants and social organizations—and create an "international asset map." Once identified, students can be a part of the outreach effort to bring the community into the school.

As middle grades students learn more about the world and its challenges, they need to learn firsthand that with knowledge comes the power to effect change for the better. Service learning provides the opportunity to connect local action to global issues. Eastside Middle School in White Plains, New York, created the Global Run Project in 2005 (www.asiasociety.org/education/pgl/article-middleschool.htm), in which students choose humanitarian projects, research all aspects of the global issues that they involve, conduct video-conferences with students in other countries, and then take action through fundraising and community awareness. The project now involves at least 20 schools in 10 countries.

How can educators start the journey toward new middle schools for new futures? One way is to join other like-minded educators and decision makers in a new national network called the Partnership for Global Learning (www.AsiaSociety.org/education). Transforming schools to meet the demands of a global era will require collective action by practitioners and policymakers. The Partnership provides a forum for doing just that.

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