

Success

FOCUS ON

A comprehensive study and follow-up interviews expose the strategies that successful middle grades principals share.

Successful middle schools do not happen by accident – they happen through leadership. Principals promote a shared vision that empowers school staffs to set high standards and continuously improve student achievement. And these middle grade educators also try to help their adolescent students see the connection between their work in school and their futures.

Those are among the findings of “Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades,” a landmark study by EdSource, published in 2010. EdSource interviewed nine of the 303 principals who participated in the study to learn more about how successful schools’ leaders are implementing these strategies and what they’ve learned along the way. Each of the nine schools serves low-income students and is notable for its students’ academic success (see sidebar on next page).

A collaborative culture

The interviews revealed that despite the tough economic times they face, the leaders and teachers in these schools continue to work hard to create a collaborative culture.

They provide adequate time for teachers to plan lessons and work together to develop more effective approaches.

Take La Merced Intermediate School, which is east of Los Angeles in the San Gabriel Valley. This school of about 1,400 mostly Latino middle graders sets aside time on Monday afternoons so teachers can converse with each other, sharing strategies that have worked as well as approaches that have not worked so well, based on data.

“Everything is out in the open,” says Principal Eugene C. Kerr. “In the old days, it used to be: ‘I’m going great, but I’m not going to share with anybody because I want to be the shining star.’ That’s a cultural change we’ve been able to implement.” The change at La Merced was intentional and took effort. Kerr and his assistant principal met with teachers to encourage the team approach.

Similarly, teachers at Vina Danks in San Bernardino County work in teams based on subject and grade level, says Principal Ellen Ransons. The school of about 1,000 mostly

By Susan Frey

Latino seventh- and eighth-graders has an accelerated magnet school within it that serves grade six as well. If data from school benchmark tests show that one teacher's students did not understand a concept while another teacher's students showed that they had a good grasp of the academic standard, Ransons expects the first teacher to seek help from the second.

The school has also set aside a period in the day that can be used for interventions. Students from any class who tested poorly on a particular standard have an opportunity to learn the material from the teacher whose students best grasped the standard the first time it was taught. Teachers get together, look at the data, and then decide who would be the best one to reteach the material in a special class session to the group of students who tested poorly.

Schools in Los Angeles Unified School District, such as Stephen M. White Middle School in Carson, collaborate in developing common lessons through the Japanese educational practice of Lesson Study. Teachers take apart and examine all elements of a lesson, then discuss strategies for teaching each element effectively. They then implement the lesson, come back and debrief, and tweak it based on their experience with it as a group.

"It's a laborious process, but it has paid dividends for kids," Principal James Noble says. "We wound up with some 'polished stones' – some actual lessons that teachers can share." Noble says the math teachers in particular have embraced this approach. They met diligently, he says, and developed common end-of-unit tasks, assessments and agendas. That way, "any student at any given week can talk with any other student at the same grade level and discipline, and they are all on the same page."

Focusing on the standards

The principals interviewed also emphasized their schools' commitment to focus on key standards selected from the full set of state standards – what is most important for students to know and be able to do in core academic subjects (such as English, math, science, social studies and the arts) at each grade level.

Administrators and teachers at Woodrow

Gaining ground: Nine notable schools



EdSource interviewed principals from the following nine schools to try to understand the practices and experiences of successful leaders. To see full profiles of the nine schools, go to EdSource's Middle Grades Playbook at www.edsource.org/pub11-mgkit-profiles.html.

- California Middle School in Sacramento had some of the top eighth-grade scores on the English Language Arts, General Mathematics, and Algebra I California Standards Tests for 2008-09 among the 144 schools serving mainly lower-income students that participated in EdSource's Gaining Ground study.
- East Palo Alto Charter School in 2009 had an Academic Performance Index score above 800, a statewide rank of 8 on the API, and a statewide rank of 10 on the Similar Schools Rank.
- Granger Junior High School in National City was named as a School to Watch in 2010 by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform and increased its Similar School Rank from 9 to 10 between 2009 and 2010.
- La Merced Intermediate School in Montebello had 2008-09 eighth-grade English Language Arts, General Mathematics and Algebra I CST scores that were far above the average among the 144 schools serving mainly lower-income students that participated in EdSource's study.
- Los Amigos School in Palmdale was notable for eighth-grade achievement on the English Language Arts CST for 2008-09 among the 144 schools serving mainly lower-income students that participated in EdSource's study.
- Stephen M. White Middle School in Carson showed notable increases in mean scale score on the Grade 8 English Language Arts and Algebra I CSTs from 2007 to 2010, even as the percentage of eighth-graders taking the Algebra I test increased from 82 percent to 99 percent.
- View Park Preparatory Accelerated Charter Middle School in Los Angeles had an API score above 800 and, between 2008 and 2009, increased its statewide rank from 7 to 8 and maintained its Similar School Rank of 10.
- Vina Danks Middle School in Ontario had some of the top eighth-grade scores on the English Language Arts, General Mathematics and Algebra I CSTs for 2008-09 among the 144 schools serving mainly lower-income students that participated in EdSource's study.
- Woodrow Wilson Junior High School in Hanford maintained its Similar School Rank of 9 between 2008 and 2009 and had eighth-grade English Language Arts and Algebra I CST scores in 2008-09 that were far above the average among the 144 schools serving mainly lower-income students that participated in EdSource's study.

– Susan Frey

Wilson Junior High in the San Joaquin Valley city of Hanford review the test blueprint for a standard, which explains what students need to do to show they understand the standard. (For example, seventh-grade math students should be able to use estimation to tell if their calculated results make sense.)

The faculty and administrators at the school of about 600 mostly Latino and white students also review a pacing guide, which is a timeline showing what material should be covered during the school year. In addition, teachers have a calendar based on the pacing guide that covers what teachers are expected

to do each day up until the spring California Standards Tests are given. It helps teachers stay on target.

“There’s not a lot of time to waste,” says Principal Kenneth Eggert. “Each minute is precious.”

Principal Elizabeth Vigil at California Middle School in Sacramento gets teachers to focus on the standards by emphasizing what students are learning, not what they are

doing. At this school of about 700 students, which has an ethnically mixed population of seventh- and eighth-graders, student engagement is key. When Vigil asks a student what he has learned that day, she expects a ready answer. And that answer needs to show his understanding of the subject, not just be a recitation of what he has done.

“The focus is on student learning, not teachers teaching,” she says.

Each day in every classroom at California Middle, seventh- and eighth-graders have two-part learning objectives: first, what they are going to learn that day; second, how they are going to prove that they learned it before they leave the room. These objectives are posted for everyone to see.

Many of the schools in the EdSource study had large numbers of English learners. The schools found that the best way to help those children, and the entire school, learn the standards was by focusing on literacy in English – the ability to read for knowledge and be able to write clearly and think critically about what you have read.

The story behind the test scores

At East Palo Alto Charter School, south of San Francisco, more than half of the almost 500 K-8 students come from families where English is not the primary language. Although the school’s API is well above the state’s performance target of 800, standardized test scores don’t tell the whole story, Principal Laura Ramirez says.

“When students are tested on an authentic reading assessment, particularly if they are asked to read nonfiction texts, they do not score nearly as well,” she says.

This has prompted the school to look at Developmental Reading Assessment data over time to get a handle on students’ literacy levels. This research-based test evaluates three components of reading: engagement, oral reading fluency, and comprehension. The DRA data provide “something that a standardized test can’t give you,” she says.

Granger Junior High School in National City, south of San Diego, has a similar focus. In this school of about 1,000 primarily Latino and Filipino seventh, eighth and ninth graders, teachers have to teach reading and writing as well as their subject area, says Principal Mary Rose Peralta. For example, the math department has developed math-based writing prompts that ask students to explain their thinking.

Students must also learn the academic language in each subject (such as “quotient” in math or “metaphor” in English) and use those words in their writing. Every classroom has a word wall that includes the aca-

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Books Worth Reading

By George Manthey, assistant executive director, ACSA Educational Services

Former California superintendents (and ACSA members) Mary Frances Callan and Bill Levinson have created an excellent resource for those interested in becoming superintendents as well as those new to the job. In fact, this book will be featured at the New Superintendents Workshop at ACSA's January Superintendents Symposium. Not only do the authors provide guidelines for being offered that first superintendency, they also provide an overview of the most critical aspects one will encounter during the first three years in the job. The book is a collection of practical ideas written in an engaging style.

Achieving Success for New and Aspiring Superintendents: A Practical Guide. By Mary Frances Callan and William J. Levinson. Corwin Books, 2011.

In "Schools Cannot Do it Alone," which is both a defense of public educators and a call to do things very differently, Jamie Vollmer argues that the American system of education has been designed to leave some students behind. He writes that leaders must push for "greater public accountability for student success: a shared sense of ownership for local schools, combined with a communitywide willingness to accept partial responsibility for their results." Vollmer says leaders must convince the public that schools must be re-designed to be fundamentally different than they are today.

Schools Cannot Do it Alone. By Jamie Vollmer. Enlightenment Press, 2010.

democratic language and concepts the students are expected to understand and use.

Teachers regularly question students and expect them to answer in complete sentences using academic language. When they frame the questions, teachers are careful to provide initial assistance (often referred to as "scaffolding") to students who need language support. Teachers also make sure that they challenge the more advanced students.

A future-oriented mission

At Los Amigos School in northern Los Angeles County – a K-8 Spanish/English immersion school that serves about 900 primarily Latino students – teachers meet individually with students to discuss their test scores, set academic goals, and talk about their future. Every time a student reaches a goal, the teacher and student together set a new one, keeping in mind a broader, overall objective. Teachers also talk with students about high school and college.

Principal Elena Esquer also works with the principal of the high school located
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Focus on success: Gaining ground

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next door to ensure that Los Amigos students enter ninth grade well prepared. The high school principal walks the Los Amigos campus with some teachers and gives them feedback. And the seventh and eighth grade teachers take a trip to the high school campus to see what is expected there.

Talking with students about their goals

At View Park Preparatory Accelerated Charter Middle School in Los Angeles, Principal Nikolas Howard and the teachers talk about college all the time with their students. This small charter school serves about 350 primarily African American students. Howard makes an effort to talk with students one-on-one about setting goals. He asks students what colleges they are considering. Then he asks them to go on that college's website to find out the average GPA for acceptance. Then he has another conversation. "I'll say, 'Let's start shooting for that kind of GPA right now. This is what that would mean.'"

View Park uses a school information system that is web-based, so Howard carries his laptop into study halls, picks kids at random, pulls up their grades, and discusses their progress with them. "I'll say, 'Remember we talked about such and such a college. What was their minimum GPA? Are you there? What's holding you back?'"

What adds to this strategy's effectiveness, Howard says, is that he is not the only one doing that. Their study hall teachers also have access to that information.

Responding to the school community

Although the nine principals all follow many of the same practices, as described above, they also have some unique approaches that make sense in their particular school environment. For example:

- View Park relies on study halls to keep students on track. Students are expected to complete two assignments in 60 minutes. Study hall teachers track student productivity with a spreadsheet. As students finish

an assignment, they check it off. One of the primary goals of middle school is to develop good academic habits that will allow students to be successful in high school and college, Howard says. Through study hall, "we teach them organization and how to plan time."

- At East Palo Alto Charter School, every Friday a lead teacher facilitates middle school team meetings that include teachers, special education support, aides and teaching residents. The lead teacher is intimately involved with each teacher's work because she regularly observes and helps teach in other classrooms. At the end of each quarter, the middle school team goes out to dinner off-campus to discuss any difficulties and where they need help. Administrators do not attend to allow for more open discussions. "The lead teacher facilitates the conversation and is the liaison for the administration, really communicating what the teachers need," Ramirez says.

- At Vina Danks, the adults are open with students about test results and the impact of those tests on their futures. Teachers meet individually with their students and set goals based on the prior year's California Standards Test scores. They discuss where the students want to go this year and what they have to do to get there. Then they ask the students to fill out a pledge sheet, often in the presence of the principal and/or assistant principal. The students take the pledge sheet to their parents or an important adult in their lives and say: "I'm dedicating this to you. This is the score I want to get."

Some common strategies

There's no doubt that successful principals respond to the particular needs of their staff, students and community. But what EdSource's study has found – and what these nine middle grades principals have shared – are some common strategies for success:

- Creating a collaborative culture;
- Focusing on student improvement by setting clear goals for student learning and measuring progress toward those goals; and
- Helping students link their academic work to their futures. ■

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