THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK / ALBANY, NY 12234

TO:	The Honorable the Members of the Board of Regents
FROM:	James A. Kadamus
COMMITTEE:	Elementary, Middle, Secondary, and Continuing Education
TITLE OF ITEM:	Draft Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education
DATE OF SUBMISSION:	January 27, 2003
PROPOSED HANDLING:	Discussion
RATIONALE FOR ITEM:	Revision of Regents Policy
STRATEGIC GOAL:	Goals 1, 2, and 3
AUTHORIZATION(S):	

SUMMARY:

At its October 2002 meeting, the Regents agreed to review and revise the 1989 Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and Schools with Middle-Level Grades and requested that Department staff prepare a report on the core topics the revised policy statement should address.

In December 2002, the Regents, after discussing the core topics that needed to be in the revised policy statement, directed the State Education Department to prepare a draft Regents policy statement on middle-level education for their review in February 2003. This draft policy statement would be a revision and update of the 1989 Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and Schools with Middle-Level Grades. As such, it would:

- be written from the perspective of the young adolescent;
- address the dual needs of young adolescents:
  - academic achievement, and
  - personal development;
- reflect the most recent research on the educational and personal needs of young adolescents;
- include the following seven core topics: Philosophy, Mission, and Vision; Educational Program; Organization and Structure; Classroom Instruction; Educational Leadership; Student Academic and Personal Support; and Professional Learning; and
- be concise but sufficiently substantive and precise so as to guide and inform the review of Commissioner's Regulations related to the middle grades.

The attached report presents:

- draft language for a revised Regents policy statement on middle-level education;
- a proposed public engagement process to solicit comment and reaction to the draft policy statement from the educational community, young adolescents, and the public at large (Attachment A); and
- research to support the revision of the 1989 Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and Schools with Middle-Level Grades (Attachment B).

The schedule for the review and revision of the Regents policy statement on middle-level education is as follows:

- **October 2002**: The Regents commented on the overall content of the proposed policy statement (i.e., what core issues should the revised policy statement address).
- **December 2002**: The Regents discussed the proposed core contents of a revised policy statement.
- **February 2003**: The Regents discuss the first draft of the revised policy statement.
- **February-April 2003**: The public comments on the draft of the revised policy statement.
- **June 2003**: The Regents review revised policy statement.
- **July 2003**: The Regents approve the final policy statement and discuss conceptual issues regarding Commissioner's Regulations that relate to the middle grades (e.g., Section 100.4) using the new policy statement as the lens.
- **September 2003**: The Regents review preliminary draft of proposed changes in Commissioner's Regulations.
- **September-November 2003**: The public comments on preliminary draft of proposed changes in Commissioner's Regulations.
- **December 2003**: The Regents review draft of proposed changes in Commissioner's Regulations.
- **February 2004**: The Regents approve proposed changes in Commissioner's Regulations. Schools must implement the changes no later than September 2005.

Draft Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education

Supporting Young Adolescents:
Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education
(proposed draft language)

Introduction

Young adolescents, typically ages 10 to 14, are undergoing personal transformations—physically, emotionally, socially, psychologically, and intellectually. They are leaving childhood and entering adolescence. They are also undergoing another transition, the transition from the self-contained classroom of the elementary school to the departmentalized structure of the high school. This is not to imply that there are not commonalties among the three levels of schooling. Rather, it means that schools should not simply impose an elementary or high school orientation and structure on middle-level students, but should look carefully at the needs of middle-level students and the organization of middle-level education.

The challenge to middle-level education is to make the transition from childhood to adolescence and from the elementary grades to the high school a positive period of intellectual and personal development. There are, however, some youngsters from all levels of society for whom emerging adolescence is a time of anguish and distress, a time when negative outcomes may include poor self-esteem, lowered expectations, difficulty in coping with peer pressures, alienation from school and society, and educational failure. These personal difficulties may be exacerbated in cases where either the home or the community in which the young person lives is economically depressed with limited opportunities for positive role models, employment, and a satisfying lifestyle. For these young people, their challenges appear overwhelming, and their will to succeed diminished.

Educators, families, and communities must recognize that they need to work together, and that they need each other, to assist students in a changing society. The need exists for educators to recognize and assume responsibility not only for their students' intellectual and educational development, but also for their students' personal and social development. This includes students with special needs, such as those who have limited English proficiency, special talents or disabilities, who require enhanced support beyond that provided through their special services and programs. The entire school community must share responsibility for all students and provide the education, support, and guidance required by each student. There is a need to assure high-quality instruction, course content, and support and other services in the middle-level grades and to promote high expectations regardless of disability, limited English proficiency, religion, sex, color, race, or national origin.

Philosophy, Mission, and Vision

Every young adolescent deserves a school that values academic achievement and personal development and provides an environment free from violence, bullying and other negative behaviors. Students in the middle grades are in transition, intellectually, personally, and educationally. They need a learning experience that is academically challenging, developmentally appropriate, and personally supportive. Young adolescents need schools that are safe and inviting. Schools with middle-level grades that are most successful capitalize on the unique characteristics and needs of middle-level students, view academic achievement and personal development as equally critical, and accommodate the transitional needs of young adolescents. The philosophy, mission, and vision of middle-level education stress the development of the individual and affirm the school's responsibility to assist the student in making a successful transition from the elementary grades to high school and from childhood to adolescence.

Educational Program

Every young adolescent needs a course of study that is comprehensive, challenging, purposeful, integrated, and standards-based. Young adolescents need a challenging, purposeful, and relevant learning experience. Further, they need an educational program that is comprehensive, integrated and fully aligned with the State's 28 learning standards. The educational program should emphasize and promote the requisite academic knowledge and skills needed to succeed in school—both middle-level and high school—and in later life. Reading, writing and mathematics should be emphasized across the subject areas with consistent expectations for performance. They need to develop the skills to explore new subject areas; understand and apply technology; learn to examine alternatives, pursue personal interests, and investigate potential futures and careers; and develop useful social, interpersonal, and life skills needed to live a full and productive life. They need access to up-to-date textbooks, instructional materials, and instructional technology that support their educational program. When students begin to fall behind, they need to receive academic intervention services immediately. Such extra help and support are critical in the middle grades to ensure that all students achieve the State's learning standards and eventually graduate from high school.

Organization and Structure

Young adolescents learn and develop best in a school that is organized and structured to promote both academic achievement and personal development. Young adolescents need a school that is organized and structured to meet their dual needs – academic achievement and personal development. They need schools that establish within staff and students a feeling of belonging and personal identification with the school and with its purposes. Each student and each staff member needs to feel valued, safe, and a productive part of the organization.

Organizational effectiveness and school success are not contingent upon a particular grade or school configuration. No single grade organization ensures that the dual needs of young adolescents will be met. Rather, what is critical is that school is organized and structured to help young adolescents make the transition from the elementary to the high school grades, from childhood to adolescence. They need a school that is organizationally and structurally responsive to their needs and characteristics. Students in the middle grades need maximum opportunities to engage challenging curricula to learn and grow academically and personally.

Classroom Instruction

Every young adolescent requires skilled teachers who have a thorough understanding of their subject(s) and of the students they teach. Young adolescents, if they are to achieve at high levels and develop as individuals, need teachers who recognize and understand the changes that are occurring within their students and who design and deliver a challenging curriculum based on the State's learning standards. Young adolescents learn and develop best when they are treated with respect, involved in their learning and engaged with challenging content that has meaning and connections for them.

Middle-level classroom teachers use a variety of successful instructional techniques and processes that capitalize on the unique characteristics and individual needs of early adolescents. Their instruction is purposeful, challenging, integrated, and standards-based. They use student data, both personal and achievement, to make curricular and instructional decisions. Classroom interactions are caring and respectful. Successful middle-level teachers use flexible grouping based upon pupil needs and interests and interdisciplinary approaches to help students integrate their studies. They consult with each other and with other school personnel, and they inform and involve parents of middle-level students in their children's education by helping them understand the instructional program, their children's progress, and how to help their children at home with schoolwork, school decisions, and successful development through early adolescence.

Educational Leadership

Every young adolescent should be educated in schools that have knowledgeable and effective leaders. Students in the middle grades learn and develop best when the adults in the school have high expectations for students and staff, share and support a common vision and work together to achieve common purposes. The personnel in effective middle-level schools share leadership responsibilities and work to create, promote, and sustain a school culture of mutual support and collective responsibility for the educational and personal development of every young adolescent. The district and building administration encourages, facilitates, and sustains involvement, participation, and partnerships that enhance student learning and development.

Student Academic and Personal Support

Every young adolescent needs access to a support system that targets both academic achievement and personal development. Schools must engage families and the community as partners in the educational process. Caring adults are a significant positive influence for young adolescents. Middle-level schools need to ensure that all students and their families have access to counseling and guidance services to assist in making life, career, and educational choices; a network of trained professionals, special programs, and community resources available to assist those who have extraordinary needs and require additional services to cope with the changes of early adolescence and/or the academic demands of middle-level education; and adult mentors and positive role models.

Professional Learning

Every young adolescent deserves an educational setting that values continuous improvement and ongoing professional learning. Young adolescents need highly qualified, well-trained, knowledgeable teachers and administrators if they are to succeed. Middle-level schools need to be professional learning communities where the adults in the school engage in a program of growth and development that is ongoing, planned, purposeful, and collaboratively developed.

Conclusion

The Regents believe that the middle-level grades are a vital link in the education of youth, a critical period of human growth and development, and an educational priority. Unless and until schools with middle-level grades attend to the twin purposes of academic preparation and individual self-development for all students in these grades, the full potential – short- and long-term – of young adolescents will not be realized.

Attachment A

**Plan for Public Engagement Related to the Review and Critique of the
Draft Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education**

The Board of Regents has directed the State Education Department to develop an extensive and inclusive process for public review of the draft Regents policy statement on middle-level education. The Department proposes to engage in this review process not only the educational community but also other relevant constituencies using a variety of approaches.

Target Groups	Process
Local School District Teams	Each BOCES will convene local school district teams composed of the superintendent, board of education, teacher representatives, middle-level administrator, and, if feasible, parents, community, and agency representatives.
Students	The Department's Student Support Services Unit, working closely with the Coordinated School Health Centers and the Regional School Support Centers, will conduct a series of regional forums involving middle-level and high school students in which they react to the draft policy.
Organizations, Agencies, and other Groups	The Department, working closely with its partners and networks (e.g., the Task Force on School-Community Collaboration, Partners for Children, State Health Infrastructure Team), will provide opportunities for organizations, agencies, and other groups that are outside the educational community (health and social service groups, parent groups, etc.) to provide commentary on the draft policy statement.
Big Four City School Districts	The Department will use the Urban Forum structure to solicit reactions to and insights about the draft policy statement from school and parent representatives from the Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers City School Districts.
New York City	The Department will solicit reactions and comments from the Chancellor of the New York City Public Schools and staff of the New York City Department of Education. In addition, the Department, working closely with the leadership and membership of the New York City Parent Advisory Council, will solicit parental reactions to the draft policy statement.
Middle-Level Teachers	The Department will convene two teacher-focused, structured engagement sessions: one to meet with representatives from the professional organizations that represent teachers who teach those disciplines for which there are intermediate State assessments; and one to meet with representatives from the professional organizations that represent teachers who teach those disciplines for which there are no intermediate State assessments.
Statewide Educational Groups/Organizations	The Department will solicit public testimony via a structured statewide hearing in Albany.

The public engagement period will begin in mid-February 2003 and continue through April 2003. The Department will provide the Regents with a summary of the public review and a revised draft policy statement on middle-level education at their June 2003 meeting. The Regents are scheduled to approve the final policy statement in July 2003. Following the adoption of the Regents policy statement on middle-level education, similar public engagement will occur to solicit comments on the draft regulations.

Research Supporting
the Draft Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education

Introduction

Young adolescents, typically ages 10 to 14, are undergoing profound personal transformations – physically, emotionally, socially, morally, psychologically, and intellectually. They are leaving childhood and entering adolescence. They are also undergoing another transition, the transition from the self-contained classroom of the elementary school to the departmentalized structure of the high school. This is not to imply that there are not commonalties and similarities among the three levels of schooling. Instead, it means that, rather than imposing an elementary or high school orientation and structure on middle-level students, districts must look carefully at the needs of middle-level students and the organization of their middle-level education program.

The challenge to middle-level education is to make the transition from childhood to adolescence and from the elementary grades to the high school a positive period of intellectual and personal development for young adolescents, one from which they emerge with high hopes and the will to achieve to the best of their abilities.

The following research, in support of the draft Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education, is organized consistently with the order of the draft Policy Statement.

The "Face" of Today's Young Adolescent

The 1989 Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and Schools with Middle-Level Grades described the young adolescent as follows:

> All students experience the transition from child to adolescent as a natural and predictable life phase. What makes the transformation unique for each individual is the diversity in the onset of changes, the rate of changes, and the ability to cope with changes. No two people experience the transition in exactly the same way. The changes that emerging adolescents experience and the resulting behaviors include:
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> - Accelerated physical growth marked by the development of secondary sex characteristics, by hormonal changes, and by increases in weight, height, and muscular strength.
> - Increasing importance of the peer group.
> - Need for frequent affirmation and heightened sensitivity to comments about personal attributes.
> - Desire and need for direction and regulation as well as for independence and autonomy, exemplified by testing limits of acceptable behavior.
> - Array of intellectual skills and abilities ranging from concrete through to more complex and abstract thinking processes.

- Preference for active in contrast to passive learning activities.
- Inconsistency in behavior.
- Desire to explore, to try new things, to experiment, to learn, to grow.

...Middle-level educators need to realize that these natural changes are inevitable and are often influenced by societal factors, and they need to provide educational experiences consistent with the needs and characteristics of the student in transition.[1]

Key characteristics further help to define the task of serving young adolescents by more specifically describing who and what they are:

In the area of *intellectual development*, young adolescents are transitioning from concrete to abstract thinking; prefer active over passive learning experiences; prefer interaction with peers during learning activities; respond positively to real life situations; have a strong need for approval and may be easily discouraged.

In the area of *physical development*, young adolescents undergo bodily changes that may cause awkward, uncoordinated movements; may be at a disadvantage because of varied rates of maturity that may require the understanding of caring adults; experience restlessness and fatigue due to hormonal changes; are concerned with bodily changes that accompany sexual maturation; and are physically vulnerable because of poor health habits or risky experimentation with drugs and sex.

In the area of *emotional/psychological development*, young adolescents experience mood swings often with peaks of intensity and unpredictability; are increasingly concerned about peer acceptance; tend to be self-conscious, lacking in self-esteem, and highly sensitive to personal criticism; and believe that personal problems, feelings, and experiences are unique to themselves.

In the area of *social development*, young adolescents have a strong need to belong to a group, with peer approval becoming more important as adult approval decreases in importance. In their search for self, they model behavior after older, esteemed students or non-parent adults; may exhibit immature behavior because their social skills frequently lag behind their mental and physical maturity; are dependent on parental beliefs and values but seek to make their own decisions; desire recognition for their efforts and achievements; and often overreact to ridicule, embarrassment, and rejection.[2]

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development came to similar conclusions about the needs and characteristics of young adolescents:

Early adolescence is characterized by significant growth and change. For most, the period is initiated by puberty, a period of development more rapid than in any other phase of life except infancy. Cognitive growth is equally dramatic for many youth, bringing the new capacity to think in more abstract and complex ways than they could as children...The conditions of adolescence have changed dramatically from previous generations...In these changed times, when young people face unprecedented choices

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[1] *Regents Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and Schools with Middle-Level Grades* (Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, March 1989), p. 3.

[2] Adapted from *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools,* National Middle School Association, 1995.

and pressures, all too often the guidance they needed as children and need no less as adults is withdrawn....[3]

Jackson and Davis, in TURNING POINTS 2000, make the following observations:

[E]arly adolescence [i]s a fascinating period of rapid physical, intellectual, and social change. It is a time, too, of emotional peaks and valleys... Yet within the trials and tribulations of early adolescence are the opportunities to forge one's own identity, to learn new social roles, and to develop a personal code of ethics to guide one's own behavior.

Early adolescence is a time of discovery, when young people have significantly greater capacity for complex thinking. They are more able to be out in the world, to participate in a wider universe of activities. They are better equipped to make important decisions affecting themselves and others, but their lack of experience leaves them vulnerable. They are better able to fend for themselves, yet they are caught up almost daily in a vortex of new risks...

Amid the stresses of early adolescence, entry into middle level school can itself be troubling. For many young adolescents, the transition from elementary school to a less supportive middle level school environment is associated with a decline in self-esteem... These changes and other shifts in attitudes about school subjects that can dampen students' motivation to learn reflect a poor "fit" between the learning environment of a typical middle grades school and the intellectual and social needs of young adolescents.

Clearly, early adolescence is a period of both enormous opportunity and enormous risks. Although many young people reach late adolescence healthy and ready for the challenges of high school and adult life, early adolescence for many others is the beginning of a downward spiral... The trajectory of a young adolescent's life is not wholly determined by social and economic circumstances. The soundness of choices he or she makes and the guidance available to make good decisions are critically important. But many young people have few viable choices because the social institutions that are supposed to provide real and equal opportunities to them are woefully inadequate.[4]

The Board on Children, Youth and Families at the National Research Council has identified a range of *"assets"* that help promote the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development of young adolescents (positive youth development[5]).

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[3] *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York, June 1989), p. 8.

[4] Anthony W. Jackson and Gayle A. Davis, *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2000), pgs. 6-8.

[5] Youth development is the support of the natural unfolding of the potential inherent in children and youth in relation to the challenges of their physical and social environment. Youth development encourages individuals to actively shape their own development through their choices and perceptions. Throughout, they gain the competencies to earn a living, to nurture self and others, to engage in civic activities, and to participate in social relations and cultural activities. The key principles of youth development are: 1) vision is required, not just coordination; 2) the process is enduring, comprehensive, and engages youth; 3) strategies (treatments, interventions, services or programs) go beyond the basics; 4) youth development happens everywhere; 5) all youth are developing; all youth have strengths; all youth are respected (Excerpted from "Youth Development: An Operational Definition". SED staff. August 2002).

The needs and characteristics of young adolescents today and those in 1989 are strikingly similar. What has changed are the short- and long-term consequences for young adolescents if their educational and personal needs are not met in the middle grades. Sometimes referred to as the "last best chance,"[6] middle-level schools have the challenge and opportunity to provide positive direction and support for their students, long into the future. Students who do not experience success in the middle grades are much more likely not to graduate from high school. And, without a high school diploma, their life choices, job opportunities, and career paths are severely and often irrevocably restricted.

The need exists for educators to recognize and assume responsibility not only for each student's intellectual and educational development, but also for every student's personal and social development. The entire school community must share ownership and responsibility for all students and provide the education, support, and guidance required by each student. The need is pressing to assure high-quality appropriate instruction, relevant course content, and support and other services in the middle-level grades.

Characteristics of a School Responsive to the Needs and Characteristics of Young Adolescents

Philosophy, Mission, and Vision

The research and literature on middle-level education articulate a clear philosophy, mission, and vision for the middle grades: schools charged with educating young adolescents need to pursue a dual-function agenda that is responsive both to the emotional and social needs of young adolescents (developmentally responsive) and to their intellectual development (academically excellent). The participants in the middle-level forums conducted by the Department last spring echoed this message. The priority "lesson learned" was that "there must be a clear recognition and balance in the middle-level program between strong academics and youth development."

Neither aspect of this agenda can have primacy over the other. "To primarily emphasize students' emotional and interpersonal concerns is to make a strategic mistake, lending ammunition to those who see the middle grades as a wasteland of good intentions but low standards."[7] On the other hand, focusing solely on academics, at the expense of individual social and personal needs, leaves young adolescents with limited supports as they navigate the fundamental changes associated with this crucial developmental period. What is best for young adolescents is a school that values and supports both their intellectual and personal growth. It is imperative that the philosophy and mission of schools with middle-level grades explicitly reflect this dual-function agenda.

[6] Smink, Jay, Executive Director. Personal communication. National Dropout Prevention Center. Clemson University, Clemson, North Carolina. March 2002.
[7] *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 2002), p. 3.

Educational Program

Young adolescents need and can function in an educational program that has academic challenge.

> To date, the preponderance of evidence shows that a demanding curriculum has intellectual and practical benefits for students of all backgrounds, races, and ethnicities. A substantial amount of research supports the importance of a rigorous curricula and quality teachers for all students as the means to improving students' academic achievement.[8]

Middle-level schools must deliver challenging curricula aligned with State standards and focused on clear, measurable expectations for all students.[9] However, for maximum benefit, the educational program needs to have not only academic challenge but also a strong personal support component.

> [Researchers], in what to date is the most extensive study of the middle grades climate, reported that academic press *and* social support predict student achievement, regardless of students' backgrounds and their schools' demographics... The authors concluded that in order to succeed in schools that demand academic rigor, students need strong personal support as well. Conversely, no matter how strongly a school caters to students affective and social needs, achievement depends on academic expectations and demands.[10]

Young adolescents also need an educational program that has personal relevance and connections. In cases where students' own interests were reflected in the school program, academic achievement was influenced positively as were other desirable personal attributes.

> When students reach the middle grades, they are more likely to question the value of what they are expected to learn. By connecting learning to the world outside of school, reformers believe that students can find meaning and motivation to do well in school ...[M]iddle school students who engaged in quality service-learning programs showed increases in measures of personal and social responsibility, communication, sense of educational competence, and improved problem-solving skills, as well as increased interest in academics. [Researchers] found that middle and high school students who participated in service-learning tutoring programs were not only less likely to drop out of school, but also increased their grade point average.[11]

Students in the middle grades need opportunities in their educational program to explore career, educational and personal options. In fact, research suggests that the

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[8] *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 2002), p. 4.

[9] Sondra Cooney, *Leading the Way: State Actions to Improve Student Achievement in the Middle Grades* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, June 1999), p. 4.

[10] *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 2002), p. 6.

[11] *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 2002), p. 7.

middle grades are a good time for students to learn to play a musical instrument or to speak a foreign language because of the changes occurring in the brain.[12] Such activity has the added benefit of promoting a sense of competence, belonging, and self-esteem.

> Career exploration activities designed to build self-knowledge relating to career interests and aptitudes complement a strong academic program. This exposure is particularly important in the eighth grade, when students are planning their high school course of study, but the planning should build upon and reinforce prior experiences in the sixth and seventh grades.[13]

Young adolescents need an educational experience that is more than just an academic curriculum. They need, as they refine their abilities to think abstractly and visualize possible alternative futures, opportunities to pursue their talents, to explore their interests, to investigate their career options, to develop their personal strengths, and to grow as individuals.

Organization and Structure

Organization and structure are important considerations in the education of young adolescents. These help create the conditions for academic learning and personal development. Some researchers contend that smaller schools "tend to have better instructional practices, more parent involvement, more common planning time for teachers and other features that seem to predict higher achievement."[14] Others contend that the overall effectiveness of schools with middle-level grades is based less on the size of the school or its grade configuration and more on whether or not the organization and structure of a school create the sense of smallness with all of its perceived attendant benefits – academic and personal – for both students and staff. In short, "the overall effectiveness of middle grades schools has far more to do with the nature of their instructional programs, teachers, leadership, *organizational patterns and grouping practices* (italics added)"[15] than with the actual size of the school in and of itself.

The organization and structure of schools with middle-level grades can also have a significant impact on the transition of students from middle level school to high school. In a 1999 study, researchers found that in districts that had established an extensive transition program for students leaving the middle grades and entering high school, there were significantly lower failure and dropout rates when compared to other districts that lacked such transitional support.[16]

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[12] "Middle Grades: Feeling the Squeeze," *Education Week*, October 4, 2000, p. 20.

[13] Pamela Frome and Catherine Dunham, *Influence of School Practices on Students' Academic Choices* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, April 2002), p. 3.

[14] *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 2002), p. 7.

[15] *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 2002), p. 9.

[16] *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 2002), p. 9.

Organization and structure can also influence the type and quality of education a student in the middle grades experiences. Students assigned to higher tracks are much more likely to be exposed to a challenging and stimulating curriculum than students assigned to lower tracks. Further:

> Some researchers argue that tracking has other adverse effects. For example, tracking interferes with middle grades students' personal development; has a negative effect on lower-tracked students; motivation, opportunities to learn and life chances; and perpetuates socioeconomic and racial inequities.[17]

In the words of the Southern Regional Education Board, in one of its recent publications, "[g]iven extensive research documenting the positive effects of "detracking" and the role tracking seems to play in perpetuating achievement gaps, it seems reasonable to conclude that tracking is a disservice to students at all levels.[18]

Classroom Instruction

Instruction matters; teachers matter. Researchers who have studied the middle grades classroom have found that a focus on higher-order thinking skills, engagement in hands-on, contextualized learning, and the use of problem-solving activities are all associated with higher student achievement. Further, instruction must be purposeful and standards-based. In 2000, researchers examined standards-based teaching practices and their effectiveness for urban African-American middle grades science students and found that a standards-based curriculum had positive effects on both achievement and attitudes, especially for males. [19]

Teachers working with young adolescents need to be both caring and intellectually challenging if they are to meet the two purposes of middle-level education. According to one researcher, this "caring" is extremely important to young adolescents' personal development and conducive to student learning. In a study of student motivation, perceived caring from teachers predicted motivational outcomes of grade-eight students. Students described "caring" teachers as those who focus on the student as learner (e.g., asking if the student needs help, taking time to make sure the student understands), model a desire to learn (e.g., makes class interesting, makes a special effort), and communicate in an open, democratic manner (e.g., asks questions and listens).[20]

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[17] *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 2002), p. 6.

[18] *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 2002), p. 6.

[19] *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does Research Tell Us?* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 2002), pgs. 7-8.

[20] K.R. Wentzel, "Student Motivation in Middle School: the Role of Perceived Pedagogical Caring," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 89 (1997), p. 416.

Educational Leadership

Recent articles on the state of middle-level schools have highlighted the need for broadly-based leadership as well as its absence:

> The condition of the middle grades – lagging achievement; a lack of focus;... a scarcity of resources compared with support for other grade levels – demonstrates a lack of leadership for middle grades education. States, districts, and schools must provide leadership through policies and actions in the middle grades in order to accomplish the goal of proficiency for all students.[21]

Leadership in a school with middle-level grades is a shared responsibility as it is in other school buildings. Teachers need to demonstrate leadership. Their leadership is evident when it comes to establishing a school and classroom culture that values and promotes learning, to developing curriculum, to working with colleagues and parents, and to helping students to develop intellectually and personally.

Principals must be leaders, too. They need to articulate the school's vision, promote the dual purposes of middle-level education (academic achievement and personal development), support teachers, engage parents and community, and maintain a climate conducive to teaching and learning.

The District Office, the Board of Education, parents, and community also have a leadership role. Their leadership function is manifested in support for the middle-level school and its vision and its purposes. In their own way, they need to promote the development of young adolescents, academically and personally.

Leadership also involves establishing and maintaining trust. Trust helps lubricate much of a school's routine functioning and is critical to school reform. According to researchers, "without trusting relationships among teachers, principals, parents, and students, such efforts are likely doomed to fail." This "relational" trust is based upon four principles: respect, competence, integrity, and personal regard for others. Each is an attribute of effective leadership. Schools that demonstrated high achievement were more often schools with high levels of trust; conversely, schools that demonstrated lower achievement tended to evidence lower levels of trust.[22]

Student Academic and Personal Support

The most current information on student achievement in the middle grades for English language arts and mathematics shows that, in New York State, middle-level schools are making significant progress in addressing the educational needs of the students most at risk of not meeting the State's English language arts and mathematics learning standards (Level 1 students). However, to date, they have had limited

[21] Sondra Cooney, *Leading the Way: State Actions to Improve Student Achievement in the Middle Grades* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, June 1999), p. 12.
[22] Catherine Gewertz, "'Trusting' School Community Linked to Student Gains," *Education Week*, October 16, 2002, p. 8.

success, especially in English language arts, in moving students from Level 2 to Level 3 and from Level 3 to Level 4. The results of the State assessments indicate that more needs to be done to help all students in the middle grades achieve at higher levels. Additional and extended academic support is needed to ensure that all middle-level students achieve proficiency.

"[H]ealthy development is essential to learning. Students thrive academically when there is support for their development as human beings."[23] Young adolescents need an extensive and comprehensive system of academic and personal support if they are to prosper academically and personally.

Many middle-level students are also personally at risk and need additional support and assistance that is more than academic. Recent research indicates that students are likely to thrive in schools when their social and emotional needs are met.

> [Researchers report that] adolescents feeling of attachment to school are related to levels of school engagement, including persistent effort in schoolwork, as well as increased academic motivation and interest. Student identification with school is related to attendance, preparedness for class, disciplined behavior, and attentiveness in class. Students perform better academically if they feel an attachment to teachers and when the curriculum is relevant to their lives, issues, and concerns.
>
> In contrast, truancy, absenteeism, and eventual withdrawal from school have been found to be associated with lack of belonging to school and not valuing school. This is of particular concern for at-risk students, who often demonstrate behaviors that include poor attendance, a low value toward schoolwork, and a lack of participation, effort, motivation, and expectations for success. For these students, membership and sense of belonging to school are crucial to avoiding their dropping out.[24]

Unfortunately, data collected in 2002 in three urban school districts in New York State suggest that schools with middle-level grades may not be connecting with large numbers of young adolescents. When asked the question, "How often do you feel like you can go to or talk to a teacher or other staff member in your school to help you in dealing with personal or family problems?," more than half of the students responded either "never" or "hardly ever" (the actual percentages ranged from 60 percent in one district to 76 percent in another). When asked, "How often do you feel like you can go to or talk to a teacher or other staff member in your school to help you in dealing with academic problems or issues?," the responses were less striking, but still significant with the percentages of students answering "never" and "hardly ever" ranging from 20 percent in one district to 54 percent in another.[25]

The Forum for Youth Investment reassures schools that they are not alone in dealing with this responsibility for connecting youth with schools and learning:

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[23] Valerie Maholmes, "What School is All About...Restoring the Heart and Soul of Education," *Education Week,* October 23, 2002, p. 30.

[24] Valerie Maholmes, "What School is All About...Restoring the Heart and Soul of Education," *Education Week,* October 23, 2002, pgs. 30, 32.

[25] Middle-Level Education Program (New York State Education Department) analysis of data collected in three urban school districts in New York State in 2001-02.

> If all young people are to be problem-free, fully prepared, and fully engaged, we need more time, more people, and more places. Schools do not have the capacity, on their own, to ensure that all young people are prepared for the transition to careers, citizenship and family and community life. They cannot and should not be the only learning organization in young people's lives. From a time perspective, schools fill at best a quarter of young people's annual waking hours. From a mandate perspective, schools have a primary responsibility for young people's academic learning, not for the full range of areas in which young people need to be learning and engaged. They simply cannot go it alone.[26]

Implicit in this statement is the reality that academic and personal supports work best when they are delivered in an integrated, cohesive manner.

Middle-level schools need to consider the idea of "support" in a broader sense, not just in the context of the classroom. Child Trends, a Washington think tank on issues related to child health and welfare, partnered with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to identify factors that can positively influence the educational achievement of youth. This research revealed that programs that focus on academic outcomes and programs that focus on youth development achieve positive results in BOTH areas, suggesting that there is a strong synergy between academic and personal support programs.[27]

Professional Learning

The middle grades, like the elementary and high school grades, are in transition. The No Child Left Behind federal legislation can only hasten change. Teachers and administrators, if they are to maintain pace, provide leadership, and serve young adolescents well both academically and personally, will need continuous, ongoing opportunities to acquire new knowledge and to develop and refine their instructional and leadership skills.

Many middle-grade teachers lack the subject-matter expertise and the knowledge about young adolescents they need if their students are to meet the State's achievement expectations.[28]

> Concerns over whether middle-grades teachers know enough about their subjects to teach to higher standards are widespread. Nationally, only 72 percent of math teachers in grades 7 and 8 are certified to teach that subject, according to a 1999 report from the Council of Chief State School Officers.[29]

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[26] *Learning Opportunities for Children and Youth: Expanding Commitments, Blurring the Lines.* Forum for Youth Investment. Washington, DC April 2002. p. 5.

[27] Brooks, Redd Z. and McGarvey, A. *Background for community-level work on educational adjustment in adolescence: Review the literature on contributing factors.* Report prepared for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Washington, DC. Child Trends. August 2002.

[28] "Middle Grades: Feeling the Squeeze," *Education Week*, October 4, 2001, p. 9.

[29] "Middle Grades: Feeling the Squeeze," *Education Week*, October 4, 2001, p. 11.

Because many middle-grades teachers hold elementary licenses, they may not have the depth of preparation necessary to teach the increasingly complex academic content required in many states' standards...larger numbers are teaching courses for which they have no formal academic preparation than at any other level of schooling.[30]

But, content expertise, while necessary, is not enough. Middle-level teachers also must know how to teach young adolescents using techniques and learning strategies that are matched to their developmental characteristics. The consequences of not addressing the twin competencies of content expertise and pedagogical skills are significant: "Requiring more academic content for prospective teachers will not be effective if they are not taught teaching strategies that will work with different learners."[31]

The issues of preparation and knowledge are not limited to middle-grades teachers. Principals responsible for schools with young adolescents are often ill-prepared to assume a leadership role. In 2002, the State Education Department conducted a survey of middle-level principals. Two hundred and twenty-two school administrators responded. The results of the survey revealed a significant lack of graduate-level preparation in the area of middle-level education:

- Fifty percent of principals responding to the survey reported having no courses dealing specifically with middle-level education; and
- Only five percent reported taking more than five courses related to middle-level education.

In addition to new requirements for professional development, the No Child Left Behind legislation provides significant funding for "out-of-school-time" programs, involving families and community members and organizations. This component is critical since it acknowledges the reality that neither schools nor families can be all things to all children, that partnership will yield a synergy that achieves the best possible outcome for all. The Forum for Youth Investment, a leader in the field of youth development, has identified several themes that are evident in effective youth-centered school reform at the middle and high school levels. The following theme is of particular relevance to the conjunction of professional development and positive youth development:

"The instructional encounter – the interaction between student, teacher and content – is at the heart of all school reform efforts. If the instructional encounter does not change as a result of a reform initiative, it is hard to claim that it has been successful. If, on the other hand, the way that teachers, students and content relate to each other has shifted in a way that supports better learning, then reform has genuinely occurred. A real test of a youth-centered approach to reform is, then, the extent to which it points the way to better instruction...

... Teachers communicate and demonstrate high standards. It is through particular instructional techniques – active learning, inquiry-based teaching, project-based learning

[30] "Middle Grades: Feeling the Squeeze," *Education Week*, October 4, 2001, p. 11.
[31] Sondra Cooney, *Improving Teaching in the Middle Grades: Higher Standards for Students Aren't Enough* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, December 1998), p. 9.

approaches, for instance – that students access challenging, relevant, engaging experiences. The actions of teachers and the mode of instruction determine whether young people's learning experiences are personalized and rooted in relationships....

As one practitioner and advocate says, "youth development is good pedagogy." Putting young people at the center of school reform taps into a range of effective instructional strategies and aligns them into a common picture of what young people need in order to achieve.[32]

Conclusion

Students in the middle grades are at a critical period of their development, academically and personally. Unless the middle-level school, working closely with families and the greater school community, addresses both the intellectual and personal needs of young adolescents successfully, these students may well fail to realize their full potential. Research provides insight into the most effective practices related to the education and development of young adolescents. The task now facing educators – if all students in the middle grades are to be well served – is to identify and implement, fully and with fidelity, these practices. The implementation of middle level education reform, based on academic standards and youth development, requires shared responsibility among and between school, family, and community. The educational system cannot, indeed must not, function alone and in isolation.

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[32] Pittman, Karen and Tolman, Joel. *New Directions In School Reform Youth-Focused Strategies Versus Youth-Centered Reform – a working paper.* Forum for Youth Investment; Washington, D.C. November 2002 (adapted with permission for New York State Education Department Middle Level Policy discussions – January 03).