

**INTEROFFICE CORRESPONDENCE**  
Los Angeles Unified School District  
Independent Analysis Unit

**INFORMATIVE**

**TO:** Members, Board of Education  
Vivian Ekchian, Acting Superintendent

**DATE:** December 11, 2017

**FROM:** Glenn Daley, Director, Independent Analysis Unit  
Analyst: Q. Tien Le, Ph.D.

**SUBJECT: IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES IN THE MIDDLE GRADES**

**SUMMARY**

The purpose of this informative is to review the recent research on effective practices in the middle grades and to provide examples of innovative middle grade reforms.

**REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH ON THE MIDDLE GRADES**

Success in the middle grades is a strong predictor of success in high school and beyond. Many students who are at risk of high school failure could be identified during the middle grades by their grades, attendance, behavior, and test scores.<sup>1</sup> As such, several middle grade reform efforts in the past few decades have focused on identifying these students and creating programs that are developmentally responsive and academically rigorous.

Recently, researchers conducted three large studies of the middle grades. “Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades” is a large-scale study of 303 middle grade schools in California.<sup>2</sup> Researchers surveyed 303 principals, 3,752 English Language Arts and math teachers in grades 6-8, and 157 superintendents of districts and charter management organizations that oversee the schools. Three separate surveys explored 10 broad domains of effective middle grades practice and included over 900 items. The research team found that higher-achieving middle-grade schools shared the following policies and practices:

- Intense schoolwide focus on improving academic outcomes
- Curriculum and instruction that is closely aligned with academic standards
- Use of assessment and other student data to improve student learning
- Early identification and proactive intervention
- Strong leadership from superintendent and district
- Teachers with strong competencies

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<sup>1</sup> Kurlaender, M., Reardon, S., & Jackson, J. (2008). Middle school predictors of high school achievement in three California school districts. *California Dropout Research Project*. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California, Santa Barbara.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, T., Kirst, M., & Haertel, E. (2010). *Gaining ground in the middle grades: Why some schools do better*. Mountain View, CA: EdSource.

The second study is a nationwide evaluation of an Investing in Innovation development grant.<sup>3</sup> The Schools to Watch: School Transformation Network Project (STW Project) received \$5 million from the U.S. Department of Education in 2010 to implement a whole school reform model in 18 middle-grade schools in California, Illinois, and North Carolina. The project provided a multi-layered system of support for these schools that consisted of, but not limited to, focused professional development, a coach from the STW Project, and tools for assessment and planning. School transformation revolved around the following four criteria:

- Academic excellence
- Developmental responsiveness
- Organizational structure
- Social equity

Researchers used a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the impact of the STW reform model on student achievement. Though statistical analyses showed *no overall intervention effects on English or math student achievement*, it should be noted that significant *positive results were found for schools with higher implementation scores*. Though improvements in student achievement at the intervention schools were minimal, there were positive improvements in other areas. Specifically, schools that participated in the intervention *improved their culture and climate, collaboration practices, leadership practices, and instructional practices*.

Third, the Talent Development Middle Grades Program<sup>4</sup> is a comprehensive school reform model that consists of small learning communities, an evidence-based curriculum tied to standards, the use of teacher teams, professional development and support for teachers, and school-family-community connections. Using 29 urban middle schools in the Northeast, researchers found that “Student Team Literature,” the literacy component of this reform, has *potentially positive effects on comprehension* for adolescent readers.

## **EXAMPLES OF INNOVATIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL REFORMS**

The STW Project led to the creation of similar middle school reforms like the similarly-named Schools to Watch- Taking Center Stage program (STW-TCS). Implemented by the California Department of Education and California League of Middle Schools, STW-TCS identifies model middle grades schools in California that are academically excellent, developmentally responsive, socially equitable, and structured for success. The STW-TCS program is affiliated with and based on criteria established by the STW Project.

Although numerous schools in California meet the minimum eligibility criteria, not all schools that apply will be selected for visitation or designation as STW-TCS schools. Successful schools are announced by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and are honored at the National School to Watch Conference in Washington, D.C.

Table 1 highlights a few of the California middle schools that have earned the title of “School to Watch.” Though the STW-TCS title is considered to be an honor, it is important to keep in mind that STW-TCS

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<sup>3</sup> <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED564016>

<sup>4</sup> [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc\\_tdmg\\_011513.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc_tdmg_011513.pdf)

schools, which should not be confused with the original STW Project schools, were not evaluated using rigorous statistical analyses. Table 1 attempts to parse out innovative middle school practices from typical practices such as after school homework help and teacher collaboration meetings. A more comprehensive list of STW-TCS school practices can be found online.<sup>5</sup> The innovative practices listed below are just one part of the school’s comprehensive reform model.

*Table 1. Innovative Practices of Middle Schools Designated as a “School to Watch”*

School and District	Innovative Practices
Luther Burbank Middle School (Los Angeles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Block schedule</li> <li>• Students grouped into heterogeneous cohorts served by the same set of teachers</li> <li>• Kagan Cooperative Learning strategies</li> <li>• Parent center</li> <li>• Carol Dweck’s Growth Mindset</li> </ul>
Curtis Middle School (San Bernardino)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports</li> <li>• Restorative justice</li> </ul>
Lake Center Middle School (Santa Fe Springs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School utilizes a modified referral system that sends students to a counselor first</li> </ul>
Ross Academy of Creative and Media Arts (ABC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students remain with the same teacher for two years in a daily homeroom class</li> </ul>
Serrano Middle School (San Bernardino)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saturday home visit program</li> <li>• Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports</li> <li>• Restorative justice</li> <li>• All 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in algebra</li> </ul>
South Pointe Middle School (Walnet Valley)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6<sup>th</sup> grade students are housed in teams and share the same four teachers</li> </ul>
Vista Heights Middle School (Moreno Valley)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Open Your Door Week” encourages teachers to open their doors and invite their colleagues to observe best practices and gain insight into instructional improvement.</li> </ul>
De Anza Middle School (Ontario-Montclair)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of La Verne invites students to visit college campus yearly</li> <li>• Students engage in self-analysis activities that culminate with student-led conferences</li> <li>• Wraparound services (counseling, medical, financial)</li> </ul>
Fedde International Studies Academy (ABC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-site community resource center with pediatric clinic, mental health services, parenting and GED classes</li> </ul>
Hawthorne School (Beverly Hills)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• STEM is required for all 6th-grade students and is an elective for 7th-grade students</li> </ul>
La Cañada (La Cañada)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small schools</li> <li>• Principal conducts weekly visits</li> <li>• Stanford University “Challenge Success” program</li> <li>• 1:1 Chromebooks</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.clms.net/stw/schools.htm>

Landmark Middle School (Moreno Valley)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MESA program</li> <li>• lunch time “Counselor in the Quad” program</li> <li>• Junior Black Achievers Program</li> <li>• Parent resource center</li> </ul>
Leona Jackson School (Paramount)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weekly Parent Connection workshops on Fridays</li> <li>• All 6-8 students participate in the UCLA “Get Your A’s Up: Literacy Academy”</li> </ul>
Tetzlaff Accelerated Learning Academy (ABC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance Task Tuesdays</li> <li>• PeaceBuilders program</li> <li>• Wellness Coordinator offers workshops on social emotional learning</li> <li>• Shadow your Student Day</li> </ul>
Colton Middle School (Colton Joint)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent Institute</li> <li>• Teachers are given 6 hours per month to meet with various teams</li> </ul>
Medea Creek Middle School (Oak Park)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No tracking of students; teachers differentiate instruction in each classroom</li> </ul>
Millikan Middle School (Los Angeles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily Advisory Class</li> <li>• Small Learning Communities in the form of specialized academies</li> <li>• Career Week</li> </ul>
Torch Middle School (City of Industry)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carol Dweck’s Growth Mindset</li> <li>• “Torch Time” offered four days per week for 45 minutes at the end of the day provides opportunities for intervention, acceleration and enrichment, and opportunities to explore careers.</li> </ul>
Vista Verde Middle School (Val Verde)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PSAT for every 8<sup>th</sup> grader</li> <li>• School-wide STEAM focus</li> </ul>
Sinaloa Middle School (Simi Valley)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CHAMPS behavior management program</li> <li>• Carol Dweck’s Growth Mindset</li> </ul>
Zamboni Middle School (Paramount)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progressive discipline plan based on Safe and Civil Schools Model</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

There are several commonalities across middle grade reform efforts. First, several reform efforts such as the Talent Development Middle Grades Program advocate for *small learning communities* so that students receive more individualized attention from staff. Small learning communities have manifested in different ways across middle schools in California. At South Pointe Middle School, 6<sup>th</sup> grade students are housed in teams and share the same four teachers. Similarly, Students at Luther Burbank Middle School in L.A. Unified are grouped into heterogeneous cohorts served by the same set of teachers.

Second, a strong focus on *early identification* is a common element of middle grade reforms. Specifically, researchers find that, at high-performing middle schools, records of entering students are reviewed thoroughly for possible warning signs of need for additional support. Schools such as Torch Middle School have allocated multiple opportunities during the week for students to attend intervention or enrichment periods.

Finally, at high-performing middle schools, *improving academic outcomes* is a strong focus. The principal at La Cañada conducts weekly classroom observations so that teachers have ample opportunities to improve classroom practices. Similarly, Vista Heights Middle School hosts “Open Your Door Week” to encourage teachers to open their doors and invite their colleagues to observe best practices and gain insight into instructional improvement. Tetzlaff Accelerated Learning Academy is piloting “Performance Task Tuesdays,” whereby students take a common assessment based on a common rubric.

In sum, the middle grades are the last best chance for schools to identify students who are academically behind and are at risk of dropping out. Middle schools reforms that are holistic in scope have the potential to improve student outcomes.

The Independent Analysis Unit is considering a future study about the relationship between middle school programs and student outcomes—both cognitive and non-cognitive. It is important to consider non-cognitive outcomes, such as students’ feelings of belonging, as they are often overlooked in evaluation studies though they play a crucial role in student outcomes. It is also important to consider the implementation of programs as a key factor in making an impact.