

Balancing Act:



Best Practices in the Middle Grades

*A report on findings from the California Best Practices Study.
Conducted by Springboard Schools.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Spring 2007



181 FREMONT STREET, 2ND FLOOR, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94105
INFO@SPRINGBOARDSCHOOLS.ORG, WWW.SPRINGBOARDSCHOOLS.ORG

About this Report

The current focus on standardized testing has created a new opportunity: to identify schools getting strong results with challenging populations of students and to investigate what lies behind high performance. In response, Springboard Schools has spent three years conducting the California Best Practices Study, an ambitious effort to explore the practices that lie behind strong performance in California schools.

What follows is a summary of findings from year three: an in-depth study of ten high-performing and five average-performing schools serving middle grades students. The schools we studied were selected after an extensive review of data from all middle grades schools in California. After controlling for the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (a measure of poverty) and the percentage of students classified as English language learners, the ten high-performing schools we selected were among the highest-performing middle grades schools in the state. The five “average performers” serve a similar demographic profile, but are not getting the same strong results as the high-performing group. The study aimed to identify what the high performers had in common and what set them apart from average-performing middle grades schools.

Despite shared challenges and similar results, the schools we studied were

remarkably diverse. A key reason is structural. Most middle grades schools in California serve grades K-8, 6-8 or 7-8. All of these grade configurations appeared in the group of high performers we identified as candidates for this study, and we studied schools of all types. Not surprisingly, these structures both constrain and enable the responses that are possible to the challenges these schools face.

What do these remarkably diverse schools have in common? We found a lot, despite their differences. We begin our summary of findings with a discussion of the “what” of standards-based reform in the middle grades: what are the issues, approaches, and strategies that characterize the work of high performing middle grades schools? Questions like, “What should we be working on?” and “What makes a difference for students?” are never far from the lips of the adults who work in schools, and for this reason we’ve summarized what we saw and learned even when it confirms things we thought we already knew. Yet much of what distinguishes the high from the average performers was as much *how* they went about their work as what they were working on. The second section of the report explores the *how*. Of course, it all comes together in real schools. Case studies of the schools we studied will be available on our website: www.SpringboardSchools.org.

News from the Front Lines

Standards-Based Reform in the Middle Grades

The call to action for schools serving middle grades students is to ensure that all students attain levels of learning that will help them prepare for high school and beyond. In the world of standards-based reform, middle grades are at the center of the system. Yet middle grades have not been the center of attention. Instead, the focus has been on elementary schools, on reading and on high school reform. All of these are important – but if our goal is the creation of a high-performing K-12 system, we cannot afford to ignore the middle grades.

This section provides a snapshot of the work underway in middle grades schools today.

✓ **Action Principle: Align Curriculum**

Key finding: Both average- and high-performing middle schools are working to align curriculum and instruction in three ways: 1) with standards, 2) between classrooms and 3) from grade level to grade level. High performers have made more progress on alignment than have average performers. This is especially true in the latter two areas. The next challenge facing even the high performers is increasing alignment with feeder and destination schools.

Alignment with standards ensures rigor, alignment between classrooms ensures access for all students to the same rigorous curriculum, and alignment with feeder and destination schools supports students to make smooth transitions between levels. All three are widely accepted among the middle grades educators we inter-

viewed as essential elements in creating a high-performing school system. A decade after California first adopted standards, the level of agreement with this basic approach was striking.

Alignment with standards: Alignment of curriculum with standards has been part of the rhetoric of school reform for many years, and this is the area in which the most progress has been made. The middle grades teachers in both groups of schools we studied use standards-aligned instructional materials and routinely plan their curriculum with state standards in mind. Average-performing sites were more narrowly focused on teaching state standards than high performers, who appeared to be more resourceful in thinking beyond state standards and also devoted more thought to alignment with destination high schools. For the most part, both high- and average-performing schools use district-adopted instructional programs. Where these are seen as too limited, as is often the case when it comes to supporting English learners, high-performing schools were more likely to go beyond textbooks and adopt common supplemental materials for all teachers. In average-performing sites, teachers were more likely left on their own to create necessary supplements.

Alignment between classrooms: Alignment between classrooms is still a challenge, and many teachers, even in the high-performing schools we studied, are still struggling to reconcile a standards-based approach with the long tradition of teacher autonomy. Yet despite questions about the value of what has been lost, the teachers and principals in all the schools we studied generally agreed that working from standards

has led to an increasing degree of consistency from classroom to classroom. In the high-performing middle grades schools we studied, teachers use not only common textbooks, but also work from common course outlines and, often, from “pacing guides” that specify which standards, chapters, units, or even lessons teachers will cover, in what order, and at what pace. Some of the high performers we studied extended the goal of “alignment” beyond curriculum to also include the school-wide use of common instructional strategies. In each case, the use of common school-wide instructional strategies created a more coherent student experience. The choice made by school leaders to begin with a focus on aligning subject matter or on aligning instruction seems to reflect both school or district culture and local politics. Both kinds of tools work to create a common vocabulary and set of expectations for teachers and to foster new levels of teacher collaboration.

Alignment between schools: One of the greatest alignment challenges for many of the schools we studied was aligning the curriculum with feeder and/or destination schools. State standards and district curricula provided an important framework for the conversation between middle grades teachers and those at feeder elementary and destination high schools. These tools made it possible for teams of teachers to work on alignment, but they did not make this work unnecessary. Teachers reported that they needed to spend time far beyond that allocated in the past to careful and thoughtful work with teachers from other grade levels and other schools. The high performers we studied seemed more likely than the average performers to have built time for this alignment work into teachers’ regular schedules.

District roles: High performing middle grades schools in California tend to be clustered in particular school districts, and the district’s role in alignment appears to be an important reason for this fact. Districts can play a key role in creating the structures that support greater K-12 articulation and alignment in general. This is especially important in systems with the less well-defined feeder patterns that result from multiple magnet programs or middle grades schools whose students feed into multiple high schools. But even in districts in which alignment can happen within well-defined feeder patterns, districts can further support alignment through identification of “power standards,” adoption of common curriculum, assessments and pacing guides. District data systems help schools understand student strengths and needs, and district programs provide help for students in making transitions to and from the middle grades. Districts appear to be an important variable that distinguishes high- from average-performing middle grades schools.

Relations between schools and districts and the use of district tools appear to be an important difference between high- and average-performing middle grades schools. High performers were engaged in developing or using district strategies and resources as much as possible. In strong districts, the schools were aware of their district’s strengths and focused teachers on linking to those strengths while encouraging school and teacher innovation in areas where the district was less helpful. Average performers were less likely to take full advantage of district resources.

✓ **Action Principle: Design Structures that Make High Standards Real**

Key Finding: High-performing middle grades schools create systems and structures, including a master schedule, that successfully balance the aims of access, rigor and flexibility.

One of the critical issues facing middle grades schools is how to help students with diverse skills and needs master important content. While both groups of middle grades schools embraced the goal of supporting all students to succeed, the high performers appeared to have done a better job of making strategic choices about when to group students heterogeneously and how to keep homogenous groupings flexible so that students may move out of targeted assistance settings and into accelerated settings as they are ready to do so. Maximizing opportunities to succeed at both goals was essential: as one administrator put it, “Invariably, when you have classes only for English learners, the content suffers. We want our English learners to have access to the same content and get the support they need to access it. We don’t want them off some place just studying the language while others master content.”

Algebra – and the imperative to teach algebra in eighth grade to as many students as possible – drives the master schedule to a surprising degree in many schools. Though California has established Algebra I as the standard 8th grade curriculum, our high performers did not all make the same choice concerning how to move toward the goal of algebra for all: some placed all students in Algebra I, while others provided a pre-algebra option as well. However, it was notable that in many situations an unintended consequence of the focus

on algebra is often some level of de facto tracking – even when the explicit policy is in favor of heterogeneous grouping. Algebra I is not the only cause of tracking: students learning English are often scheduled into a support class and then end up traveling together all day. In the high-performing schools we studied, school leaders did not sweep these kinds of issues under the rug but instead were aware of this effect and did their best to ensure that each group of students had access to both challenging curriculum and the support they needed to succeed. However, policymakers need to be aware that pressure to teach advanced mathematics to students who are younger and younger will lead to tracking and that this effect extends beyond mathematics.

The varied schedules and structures in use in middle grades schools have important implications not just for students, but also for teachers. Structures for teachers range from high school-style departments to a single middle grades team at smaller K-8 schools. How schools are organized inevitably structure the focus of adult work: departments provide a setting for subject matter-focused planning and reflection, while grade-level teams or other interdisciplinary teams tend to provide opportunities for collaboration around the work of individual students, coordination between subjects or a big-picture perspective.

✓ **Action Principle: Intervene and Accelerate**

Key Finding: The high performing middle grades schools we studied used data to identify students who were struggling and acted with a sense of urgency to intervene with sufficient intensity to accelerate the learning of students who have fallen behind.

Research on dropouts suggest that many of the students who will drop out of school start to show telltale signs in middle grades, and it was common for the middle grades educators that we interviewed at both high- and average-performing schools to comment that they worry about their students' fate in high school. These teachers and administrators were clear that students leaving middle school unprepared for high school either academically or emotionally are more likely to experience difficulty transitioning into the 9th grade. Already, at middle grades, students are being taught standards that will be assessed on the California High School Exit Exam, and even in areas in which this is not true, the middle grades curriculum lays the essential groundwork for high-stakes high school courses.

In response, schools implement a variety of support programs and intensive interventions to provide timely academic assistance. Intervention programs in use in the schools we studied included a mixture of state-adopted and teacher-created programs. These intervention programs ranged from in-class strategies, to support classes offered within the school day, to after-school intervention programs. After-school – and in some cases before-school – programs provide essential extra support for students who need to accelerate their learning to catch up with their peers. At both high- and average-performing schools, these after-school programs and interventions are staffed by fully certified teachers whenever possible, but this is an area in which local conditions affect what is possible. Schedules, buses, the local labor market for teachers – all of these issues matter. Site leaders in the schools we studied also look beyond school walls to meet students' needs. In many cases they initiate and manage

strategic partnerships with community-based organizations to provide vital services to students.

In this area, what sets average- and high-performing middle grades schools apart is not just the sense of urgency with which they approach the goal of intervening, but also the precision with which they are able to use data to identify student needs and track their progress in intervention settings. Intervention programs at high performers appear to be: 1) more closely linked to standards and core curriculum; 2) more focused on the goal of accelerating students learning so they can catch up; 3) more likely to use multiple avenues, such as a before-school “zero period,” after-school programs, double-blocking math, and state-adopted intervention programs; and 4) more likely to focus on addressing each student's needs when they need it. All schools have intervention programs; high performers are more likely to create and manage an interlocking system of interventions.

✓ **Action Principle: Build Systems and Structures to Support Teachers**

Key Finding: High-performing middle grades schools build in systems and structures to support teachers to do their best work.

A striking difference between high- and average-performing middle grades schools was the sophistication and comprehensiveness of capacity-building for teachers and principals to create school-level professional learning communities. In both high-performing and some average-performing schools, professional development happens on a regular schedule through a combination of “early release” days and day-long “staff development days,” and teachers have some kind of regular collaboration

time that is either built into the daily schedule or that also relies on the early release days.¹ This kind of school-based professional development seems largely to have replaced the “send a teacher to a workshop” approach that was common before No Child Left Behind (NCLB) put the focus on the school as an important unit of change. Districts take on a variety of roles in brokering or sponsoring formal training on best practices, but the hard work of implementation is led at the school level.

Professional development for teachers in both groups of schools focuses on priority areas for reaching school and district goals. For the most part, this leads to an emphasis on reading, math, and support for English learners and other students who are struggling. However, the range of professional development to some extent balances this focus on the improvement of instruction with support for meeting the unique affective and developmental needs of middle grades students. While both high and average performers were actively working to balance these competing priorities, the high performers were more able to develop a coherent school-wide focus and approach to professional development.

A related factor distinguishing high performers is the strategic nature of teacher collaboration time. High performers communicated clear expectations for what teachers should be doing in collaboration time and provided

support for using that time. Often this involved mentors facilitating sharing and learning about specific students or larger reflections on best practices. In this way, professional development becomes strategically aligned with district and school goals and also offers an “up-close” experience for teachers that is based in real practice. It is not surprising that teachers in high-performing schools are more likely to perceive their professional development as highly relevant to their needs.

The new focus on teacher collaboration and on school-level professional development has led to the creation of a wealth of new leadership roles for teachers. Teachers – especially in high-performing schools – serve in leadership roles as department chairs, instructional specialists, intervention coordinators, and team leaders. Teachers facilitate learning communities among teachers that create a sense of transparency, familiarity, and meaningful learning among adult professionals. They use data to facilitate collaborative inquiry, discussion of specific students, and important short-term and long-term reflections on practice.

✓ **Action Principle: Use Data for Continuous Improvement**

Key Finding: High-performing middle grades schools use data from frequent student assessments to guide a continuous improvement process.

Teachers use data from the California Standards Test (CST) in all middle grades schools, but the high-performing schools that we studied were more likely than the average performers to rely on local benchmark assessments to monitor student progress and to use data mentors to help teachers meaningfully use data. Middle grades teachers in both groups of schools generally lacked

1: The Education Code that governs California schools specifies the number of instructional minutes that are to be offered to students. To meet these requirements and still provide teachers with time to collaborate, many schools offer students a longer day four days a week and release students on the fifth day. In addition to these early release days, the state of California provides schools with funding for three “staff development days.”

the wide range of curriculum-embedded assessments that are now common in elementary schools and were not likely to employ common end-of-course assessments as more and more high school teachers now do. Teachers need data to determine where students are improving and where they could use support, either within the classroom or by placing them in intervention programs outside of the classroom, and better data appeared to be correlated with better results. Data is especially crucial for students learning English, and the high performers we studied monitor progress towards redesignation to Fluent-English-Proficient (FEP) status. It was also notable that in the high performers we studied, redesignated students also continue to be monitored so they don't fall behind.

What Else: Focusing on Students

Though critics have sometimes noted that standards-based reform focuses educators only on academic achievement and causes them to neglect students' emotional and social development, this is not what we saw in the middle grades schools we studied. Instead, we saw middle grades schools implementing a wide range of programs and strategies to foster engagement, empower students to take charge of their own learning, and support the creation of personal connections. While all the middle grades schools we studied had such strategies, high-performing middle grades schools focus on these student issues in a way that strengthens student academic success within a standards-based context.

Key Finding: High-performing middle grades schools focus explicitly on student engagement as a key ingredient for success.

Virtually every middle grades teacher we interviewed cited “student engagement” as a central challenge – and anyone who has worked with early adolescents understands that these are students with a lot on their minds other than mastering the California state standards. Middle school students are often far more focused on peers than on adults, and clever educators harness this energy in many ways: organizing activities that seem fun or interesting (e.g., clubs or sports); encouraging participation in programs that foster personal connections (e.g., peer tutoring, peer mediation, or reading to primary grades students); promoting volunteerism in the community; allowing students to pursue their interests (e.g., music, art, or other electives); and encouraging students to become partners in authentic and important work (e.g., setting standards and goals for behavior). Leaders in middle grades schools need to create a program that strikes the right balance between these kinds of essential activities and core academic courses. In the world of limited resources, this is never easy.

One notable strategy in the high performing middle grades schools we studied was to engage students in setting goals. Middle grades teachers, just like teachers we studied in high-performing elementary and high schools, work from an interlocking set of goals for improvement that often begins with district goals that are translated into school and then to classroom-level goals. Often these goals reflect state and federal accountability programs. What was unique in our high-performing middle grades schools was the effort teachers made to involve students in setting their own goals for learning and for improvement. In some cases these were tied closely to state standards and

state testing, in other cases the connection was looser. But the consistency with which teachers in high-performing middle grades schools engaged students in setting their own goals was notable.

Another key component of engagement is relationships. Early adolescent students need opportunities to connect and build relationships both with adults and with positive peer groups, and “personalization” is an oft-cited goal among middle grades educators. K-8 schools perceive both their size and their structure as giving them an advantage in knowing their students well. In some such schools, there are opportunities for students to maintain a connection with teachers who they had in the elementary grades, or to serve as school-level leaders and role models. Other strategies in place in grades 7-8 or 6-8 schools range from working with students to develop “individual learning plans,” or creating structures that range from advisory periods to “houses” or “academies” for individual teachers to develop a connection with a particular group or cohort of students. In one middle school we studied, assistant principals “loop” with students, following each group for all three years, allowing them to get to know and understand students and their needs. Strategies like these vary from place to place but were notable in all of our high performers. There appear to be many routes available, but the goal is focused on making these essential connections for middle schools students.

What’s Next: Systems Thinking in the Middle Grades

Those working in schools that are struggling to improve often react with frustration to descriptions like those above of the strategies in place in high performers, saying “but we already did that!” Often, they are right, but our research also points out key differences in how average performers and high performers approach their work. These issues constitute the next set of challenges facing middle grades educators.

Although it may be a cliché, leadership matters in the middle grades. Of course leadership matters, but what are leaders doing? One phrase that characterizes how leaders – both teachers and administrators – in high-performing middle grades schools approach their work is “systems thinking.” The unique situation of the middle school in the center of the K-12 system puts the focus for middle school reform today on systems issues. The days when school autonomy was a possibility are long gone. In fact, many of the issues discussed above, such as curriculum alignment, scheduling, and student support, require coordinated action from people in multiple roles, often at multiple levels of the system.

Responding to these issues requires that middle grades educators ensure that the parts of the system are connected; they must think several steps ahead and anticipate consequences; and they must be pragmatists who manage trade-offs, rather than seek perfect solutions. These general approaches or ways of thinking about the work of improvement are important for both teachers and administrators.

Key Finding: Middle grades educators understand their key role in the middle of the K-12 system and see improving the system as a key strategy for success.

The middle grades do not exist in a vacuum. Middle schools take students from multiple feeder elementary schools, and high schools expect students to be prepared for rigorous course material by the end of eighth grade. Both teachers and administrators in high-performing middle schools never forget they must function as part of a larger system; they cannot succeed alone. This leads them to work on particular issues, such as curriculum alignment, as partners with other parts of the system. There was a time when the fragmentation of the education system was taken for granted and the place to look for the solution to virtually every problem was the classroom. Instead, teachers and administrators in high-performing schools spent time and energy to help create a coherent, high-functioning system that would help more students learn across all levels and classrooms, K-12. The teachers and administrators we spoke with saw value in curriculum alignment across schools and classrooms, data on their students' skills and needs, peer collaboration, master schedules, and the district as a potential partner in developing these structures and resources. Interdependence with other parts of the larger system—rather than isolation or autonomy—was a basic assumption underlying how these educators approached their work.

Key Finding: Serving diverse students as part of a complex standards-based educational system requires that leaders in the middle grades be principled in terms of their goals and commitments, but pragmatists in terms of the solutions they find and use.

Middle grades educators must be able to work effectively within a framework of constraints that range from the skills of incoming students, to scheduling; from staffing and teacher credentials, to facilities. Some of these are within the control of school leaders, but many are not. The leaders we studied were able to maximize the strengths of their particular situation (e.g., structure, community, faculty, student population, facility, etc.) and manage the downsides. This is a key finding: in the past, middle grades reform has often led educators down what appears to be a blind alley, that of looking for a better structure for the school or for the curriculum. This study suggests that there are many “right” answers to questions of structure, and that the key to success is in finding the structure that best fits a school or district context and building capacity for effective implementation of that structure.

Key Finding: High-performing middle grades schools perceive the challenge of serving students who are English learners as the job of the whole system, not the problem of individual teachers.

A systems approach appears to be crucial if schools are to provide high-quality support to students learning English. Implementation of high-quality programs for English learners is an achievable goal, but only if the entire system takes responsibility and works together. This approach is quite different than the traditional view, which is that teaching students learning English is about instructional strategies and materials. These are important, of course, but so are other factors: frequent use of diagnostic assessments to track student progress; flexible grouping, both within regular classrooms and in terms of how students are placed in classes; the focus and timing of support classes; and the

nature and frequency of professional development, to name a few key elements. Getting these issues right is what makes it possible for teachers to do their best work. And without these tools, the advice to teachers that they should just “differentiate instruction” to meet the needs of all students is just talk.

Schools used a variety of approaches to building a system to support students learning English. They provided English language learner (ELL) students with English Language Development (ELD) instruction either 1) as part of their English Language Arts (ELA) class with all students receiving direct ELD instruction regardless of ELD status; 2) by adding an additional period of support for students, including English learners who are struggling in their ELA class; or 3) by having students not yet proficient in English take an English Language Development class as an elective class (sometimes tied to their ELA class). In making these choices, practical considerations are paramount: the master schedule, number of qualified teachers, and number and ELL students and their proficiency levels often constrain the choices available and determine the program that is offered. Working within these constraints, high-performing middle schools construct an interconnected set of support programs to help specific groups of students progress toward proficiency in English.

The key difference between high and average performers did not seem to be the particular components they chose, but rather what we called the “coherence” of the program: how data are used to monitor student progress and the way in which ELA and ELD standards are used to connect students’ regular English classes with extra support classes for those learning English. All teachers, whether or not they are

responsible for ELD classes, consider themselves to be teachers of English language development and participate in professional development on strategies to support English learners.

Recommendations for Policymakers:

✓ Invest in the Middle Grades

Middle grades reform emerges from this study as a potentially very high-leverage policy area that is currently somewhat neglected. A strategic set of investments in middle grades education has the potential to increase the number and percentage of students who arrive in high school with the preparation they need to succeed.

High-leverage investments probably include:

- **“Catch-up” or acceleration strategies for students who are not on track for high school.** These include a longer school day and year and intensive intervention programs that are closely tied to standards and to regular school programs.
- **Engagement strategies:** Far from being “fluff,” strategies and programs that connect with students, help them to stay engaged, develop socially and emotionally, and take ownership for their own learning can pay off in important ways. Schools should not be left to fund these kinds of efforts from scarce discretionary resources or competitive grants that may fail to reach the communities most in need.
- **Research into support for English learners:** Support additional research into best practices, especially with regard to a “systems approach” to providing support for English language learners. This

means investigating best practices in school organization, scheduling, and diagnostic assessment to ensure that students learning English are placed in the learning environment that best matches their needs – and that they can move up as soon as they are ready.

- **Create structures and processes that foster school-to-school alignment:** Local policymakers in particular need to invest in and support the creation and wise use of systems and structures to help teachers do the hard, close-in work needed to align curriculum and instruction between middle grades schools and their feeder and destination schools.

✓ **Policymakers should beware of the following pitfalls:**

- **An effort to try to limit the focus in middle grades to academics alone.** Our research makes clear that academic success in the middle grades

depends on schools employing a range of non-academic strategies.

- **An effort to push high level mathematics down to younger and younger students.** When the concept of high standards is translated into a race to offer high-level mathematics sooner, the result is tracking and diminished opportunities for students who enter middle grades behind.
- **An effort to determine what is the “best” grade level configuration and convert schools to it.** In the past, school leaders have worked hard on making changes in school structure. But our research suggests that every structure has advantages and disadvantages, and that energy is better spent making the current structure work rather than shifting to a new one.



About Springboard Schools

Springboard Schools is a California-based nonprofit and non-partisan organization whose mission is to support public schools and districts to raise student achievement and narrow the achievement gap. Founded in 1995 as the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), Springboard Schools has worked with 325 schools in 74 districts in the San Francisco Bay Area, Central Valley, and Southern California.

Springboard Schools’ “research to action” approach for improving schools consists of three parts:

- Research in high-performing, high-poverty schools;
- Professional development for teachers and administrators; and
- Partnerships with school districts that include both professional development and on-site coaching to transform new ideas into practical strategies for change.

For more information, please visit Springboard Schools’ website, SpringboardSchools.org, or e-mail info@SpringboardSchools.org.