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ABSTRACT
        The Accelerated Schools Project is based on the
premise that all children can learn and can learn at high levels. It
provides both a philosophy and a process for schools interested in
making radical change. The philosophy is built on the following three
principles: unity of purpose, empowerment coupled with
responsibility, and building on strengths. This paper describes the
experiences of one middle school with two reform efforts. In the
first instance, reform was imposed on the school when it was
designated as a desegregation magnet school. In the second situation,
the school community chose to reform itself by deciding to
participate in the Accelerated Schools Project. The experiences of
Drayton School demonstrate that true middle school reform will occur
when schools are perceived as culture-bearing institutions. Rather
than viewing schools as resistant to change, educators must
understand how to build capacity within schools to achieve the goals
within their school culture. Reform will also occur when change is
not forced on schools. Finally, reform will flourish when it is
guided by a philosophy that makes sense to all members of the school
community and a process in which all members participate to implement
and sustain the changes. Contains 24 references. (LMI)

Becoming a True Middle School:
Cultural Transformation of Accelerated Middle Schools

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After years of being "caught in the middle," young adolescents have recently enjoyed a rekindled interest, thanks to the middle school movement. Former junior high schools are now middle schools, with the expectation that the organization, curriculum and instruction will change to better suit the particular needs of children aged 10 to 15. Educators and child development experts have called for a restructuring of schools to provide a more nurturing environment for adolescents with more sustained contact with adults and a chance to develop a sense of community with teachers and peers. These experts also recommend providing an interdisciplinary curriculum that is relevant to the interests of adolescents, and that is challenging and engaging. Instruction should allow for active, hands-on learning that engages children in higher order thinking and teaches children to be information gatherers rather than information sponges (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989, California State Department of Education 1987, Hopfenberg, Levin, Meister & Rogers 1990).

Despite name changes, most schools serving young adolescents look and feel more like junior high schools than true middle schools. Schools remain departmentalized; children change classes at the sound of a bell every 50 minutes,

and most learning is teacher centered, involving text books, worksheets and the occasional report. Even in middle schools that have made structural changes such as adoption of "teams" or "family pods" the middle school concept is often very superficial. Cuban (1992) cites several studies[1] that found that even in schools that have adopted structural features of middle schools (e.g. interdisciplinary teams, advisory or home room periods) little change in instruction has occurred.

Why have middle schools resisted the fundamental changes in structure, curriculum and instruction that are so compellingly presented by the middle school movement? The education policy literature is filled with descriptions of how and why schools resist change or why reforms are short-lived. Most of these studies blame interventions that are imposed from the outside and characterize school cultures as resistant to change (Sarason 1990; Schlechty 1990). Others lament that reforms become watered down to the point of dissolving as they are implemented (Wehlage, Smith & Lipman 1992). Historians describe the tendency for institutions to return to the familiar (Cuban 1984; Zilversmit 1993; Tyack & Tobin n.d.) Larry Cuban focuses specifically on the enduring structure of the junior high school and explains that the driving forces behind establishing junior high schools at the turn of the century were similar to arguments for the establishment of middle schools. In the case of junior high schools, these goals gave way to familiar organizational patterns and to the desire to emulate the structure of a more prestigious institution - the high school (Cuban 1992). In other words, the high school model was already deeply embedded in the nation's grammar of schooling (Tyack & Tobin n.d.).

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Despite the pessimism of these studies, we believe that the goals of the middle school movement (to create an exciting, challenging, developmentally appropriate learning environment for adolescents) can be achieved and that reform can be lasting. To create and maintain a true middle school, we feel that three factors must be considered. First, the reform must recognize that the existing school culture shapes the implementation of the reform. Second, everyone in the school community must desire the change, have a role in creating it and remain committed to it. Third, the reform must be guided and sustained by a clearly delineated philosophy and a systematic process. In this paper, we discuss each of these points and provide examples of how one middle school is becoming a true middle school through the Accelerated Schools Project.

The findings of this paper are drawn primarily from the experience of the two authors in implementing the Accelerated Schools Project in elementary and middle schools in several states. The data are drawn primarily from extensive interviews with members of the school community (teachers, support staff, parents, administrators and students) of one urban middle school, as well as from participant observation and from document review at the school.

The Accelerated Schools Project[2]

The Accelerated Schools Project is based on the premise that all children can learn and can learn at high levels. It focuses primarily on schools serving students caught in at-risk situations and is designed to bring them into the educational mainstream so that they will be academically able and capable of benefitting from a high quality and high content school experience (Hopfenberg & Levin 1993). The

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Accelerated Schools Project launched pilot elementary schools in 1987 and its first pilot middle school in 1990. By the Fall of 1993, 500 elementary and middle schools in 33 states had begun the process of transformation to accelerated schools.

The Accelerated Schools Project provides both a philosophy and a process to schools interested in making radical change. The philosophy is built on three principles. The first principle is unity of purpose. Unity of purpose ensures that all members of the school community - teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, students, and the community - work together to achieve commonly agreed upon goals. Unity of purpose can be observed by the ways people at a school site interact. Colleagiality, a clear and shared vision, and a focus on the children are all illustrative of unity of purpose. The project holds that if everyone in the school community is committed to a shared vision, the fragmentation that characterizes most schools will disappear, and the energy of all members of the community will be channeled toward shared goals.

The second principle is empowerment coupled with responsibility. It is based on the belief that the people who are in the position to make the best decisions for children are those who work with them daily - parents, teachers, support staff, building administrators, community members and students themselves. Although well meaning, many of the decisions made at the federal, state and district level do not meet the specific needs of a particular school. Teachers feel powerless and either follow mandates that do not always make sense, or close their doors and do what they want to do despite the mandates. Principals become compliance monitors, and parents are typically out of the decision-making loop altogether.

The third principle, building on strengths, is crucial to acceleration. Accelerated schools build on the strengths of *all* members of the school community. The project holds that schools seriously under-value and under-utilize the strengths that exist in their school communities and need to change their focus from looking for weaknesses in children and each other to building programs based on strengths.

The Accelerated Schools Project guides participating schools in a pursuit of what is referred to as powerful learning. Powerful learning embodies constructivist principles and involves learners actively in all educational endeavors. The Accelerated Schools Project does not provide a kit with manuals for "how to do powerful learning;" it provides a process that helps a school community determine for themselves what is best for their children. The project encourages schools to think carefully about how they teach, what they teach and the context in which learning occurs. Rather than focus all energy on changing one aspect of learning - say, the curriculum - schools examine how changes in curriculum will require changes in instruction and the organization of the school or the classroom. The Accelerated Schools Project works with schools to make systemic, not superficial change.

The Accelerated Schools Project provides schools with a systematic decision-making process. The process is a slow one, designed to produce effective, long lasting results and avoid the tendency many schools have to jump at any interesting idea. It emphasizes the importance of creating a thorough baseline understanding of the school as it embarks on change, and a shared vision of what the school should be like in the future. These two goals are accomplished in the first phase of the

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project through the taking stock activities and the vision creation. It is through the taking stock process that school communities begin to make their school culture more explicit, and it is through the vision creation process that the school community articulates the dreams that are also a part of the school culture. This phase of the project is usually accomplished in several months.

Once a school has completed this phase, the community compares its taking stock data to its vision and determines priorities. The priorities become the focus of cadres which utilize an Inquiry process for decisionmaking. The second phase of the project, the Inquiry phase, is a time for on-going problem definition, hypothesis development and testing, solution seeking, and assessment. The Inquiry process allows small cadres (composed of teachers, support staff, parents, students, administrators, community members) to thoroughly examine issues and design solutions that are appropriate to the school. The governance structure that is initiated as a part of Inquiry encourages democratic decision-making since many of the decisions related to curriculum, instruction, and organization of the school, student activities, and parental outreach are proposed by the Inquiry cadres, refined and approved by the steering committee (composed of representatives of all cadres and others as determined by the school), and agreed upon by the school-as-a-whole. The Inquiry phase of the project becomes a permanent feature of an accelerated school. The school community will always use the Inquiry process to identify, understand, and solve problems.

Embracing the Middle Schools Concept in a School's Culture

The Accelerated Schools Project provides an opportunity for a school serving

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middle grades students to make the middle school concept a part of its school culture. The Accelerated Schools Project builds the capacity of a school community to make the changes its members want to make in their school's culture. By working within the framework of the existing school culture, concepts associated with the middle schools movement are internalized and become part of the essence of the school. The school highlighted in this paper provides an example of how its school culture shaped the success and failure of two reform efforts. Before providing these examples, we want to clarify our definition of school culture.

School Culture Defined. The concept of school culture is not new in educational literature. Most examinations of the daily life in schools explicitly or implicitly describe school culture (for example, Peshkin 1978, 1986; Page 1987; Sizer 1992; Fine 1991; Goodlad 1984). The school culture provides a web of meaning to all members of the school community (Geertz 1973). It shapes how members of a school community use resources, structure experiences, and relate to the wider world. School culture includes the values, traditions, attitudes, and interpretations that are understood by members of the school community. As Sarason writes, it is the "interlocking ideas, practices, values, and expectations that are 'givens' not requiring thought or deliberation (1982, 228)."

The term "culture" has several meanings in the English language. The one presented above - the one associated with societal or school culture was introduced by Edward Tylor in 1873 and has guided anthropological discussions of culture since. Another meaning of culture involves what a person does to assist the growth of an organism, as in culturing a plant or a lab specimen (Wax 1993). We find the second

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definition of culture useful because it implies change. Too often when we think of culture, we think of something static and self contained. A culture is actually dynamic and ever changing. It absorbs influences from outside; it accommodates changes imposed upon it, and it creates opportunities for change in itself.

Schools in the United States are culturing mediums because they are not homogeneous and static. They are made up of people who bring to the school culture perspectives that are shaped by the race, ethnicity, class, family structure, and social, occupational, and spiritual experiences and interests of its members. The school culture serves as a veil of cultural interpretation that binds these disparate people together; it allows subcultures that appear to have divergent goals and attitudes to coexist. Through a school culture, people with strong commitments to certain ideals can work side by side with others who have no interest in such ideals. No two people share the same interpretation of the school culture, but their interpretations are within an accepted framework that helps all members of the culture make sense of the school together. George and Louise Spindler (1987, 1990) describe this process of creating meaning as a "cultural dialogue[3]." Through this cultural dialogue the school culture evolves.

To say that school cultures resist change misplaces the blame for failure of school reform. School communities deal constantly with change. Budgets are cut, administrators are moved, student populations change, laws and policies change. School communities accommodate all of these changes, but they do so within the context of their school culture. They appear to resist change when changes are imposed from outside with little or no effort to ensure ownership by the members

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of the school community. This is particularly true when interventions are designed at the federal, state, school district or university level.

There is general agreement that interventions fail because they ignore the implementation process (Berman & McLaughlin 1977; Bardach 1980); they offer inservice training with no follow up (Joyce, Wolf & Calhoun 1993; Little 1993), and they ignore the influence school culture has in shaping the intervention (Joyce, Wolf & Calhoun 1993; Wehlage, Smith & _ipman 1992). In essence, most interventions fail to create ownership in the concept and in the implementation process.

Reform Meets School Culture. The following discussion is drawn from the experiences of one school before and after it became involved in the Accelerated Schools Project. When we look back a few years, we can see that Drayton Middle School provides examples of how middle school culture can both resist and embrace reform efforts. Drayton Middle School had a frontal assault on its culture in 1986 when it was closed by the district and reopened with a different principal, many new teachers, a slightly different student body, considerable money for state-of-the-art equipment and the designation as a technology magnet school. These changes did not come from within Drayton, but from the district in response to a court ordered desegregation plan.

With all of these changes, the school culture undoubtedly changed, but it did not change to embrace the mission given by the district. Despite district efforts to transform the school into a technology magnet school and attract more White students, technology did not permeate the curriculum and desegregation had not

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occurred in a real sense. The school had trouble meeting its desegregation quota[4] and within the school, White and Hispanic children were segregated through ability grouping. Drayton resembled a traditional junior high school with several well equipped computer labs. The school day was divided into six periods, 50 minutes long. Most classes were ability grouped; twenty percent of the students were identified as gifted and talented and sixty to seventy percent were eligible for compensatory programs. Hispanic children fell disproportionately in the lower track classes, and White children in the upper level classes. Teachers were represented through seven departments, and they rarely interacted with colleagues outside of their departments. Despite a sense of a new beginning, the new beginning did not take root, and very quickly, old patterns of teaching, of scheduling classes and of grouping students returned, and the magnet middle school became an under-enrolled, internally segregated, departmentalized school.

Why did this mission for Drayton not take hold? One would think that with major staffing changes, the infusion of money, and district support, the school should have flourished. We believe that it did not take hold because there was no recognition on the part of the school district that the mission had to become integrated into the school culture. They assumed that by providing a strong staff, state of the art equipment, and incentives to White families to enroll their children in a desegregation magnet, a school culture would develop that would foster growth as a technology magnet school. They did not anticipate that a school culture survived the radical changes and that the school community did not have adequate commitment to the mission to make it a part of the new school's culture.

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Drayton's experience with the Accelerated Schools Project has been very different. By empowering the members of the school community to determine the changes *they* wanted to make, the Accelerated Schools Project has allowed changes to grow organically within the existing school culture. Changes are now taking hold at Drayton because the members of the school community decide how they want their school culture to change. All members of the school community have the opportunity to work toward goals that they set for themselves, not toward a mission set by people outside of the school. For example, in the fall of 1990, Drayton developed a vision of what all members of the school community want Drayton to become. The vision has many components, but one component states "All students can succeed, and celebrate their own and others' successes." The curriculum and instruction cadre began looking at the entire vision and at the data they collected during the taking stock process, and they determined that they will never achieve this goal if they continue to track students by ability level. Through the Inquiry process, they were able to create a new schedule that eliminated ability grouping and offered a more stimulating set of educational offerings. Now, four years after developing their vision, the staff at Drayton would not consider grouping children by ability. Providing all children an opportunity to succeed has become part of their school culture.

School Community Desire for Change, Role in Creating It, and Commitment to the Change

The preceding briefly describes Drayton's experiences with two reform efforts. In one instance reform was imposed on the school, and in the other, the school

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community chose to reform itself. This is a critical distinction. As the literature on school change shows, school cultures are frequently resistant to reforms brought in from outside (Sarason 1990; Berman & McLaughlin 1977). This is true because the school community often does not want the change; they have little or no role in creating or designing the change, and they have no commitment to making sure that it is implemented and maintained.

Let's return to Drayton's experience as a desegregation magnet school. The district's mission was to offer exciting opportunities to all students to work with state-of-the-art technology, and to experience a rich and exciting curriculum. It appears that they did try to create a situation where staff and parents bought into the concept of the magnet school. The school was closed, and theoretically only faculty interested in working in the magnet school were rehired. Theoretically, children and their parents chose the school because of its focus on technology or in hopes of attending an integrated school. In fact, staff members wanted a job, and, with the exception of some computer experts, they did not exhibit a deep commitment to working in a technology magnet school. Many of staff members had worked at Drayton before it was closed, and they wanted to keep their jobs. Several others came to Drayton because they wanted to work with the new principal. When he was transferred out of Drayton several years later, these teachers lost their reason for working at Drayton. White children may have chosen the school because of its focus on technology, but the Hispanic children who had always gone to Drayton, were only confused and, in some cases, resentful that the school spent so much money only to attract white children to their school. This resentment grew when

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Hispanic children were denied access to Drayton because the school was not able to attract numbers of White children sufficient to maintain the ethnic balance stipulated in the desegregation order. In sum, most of the school community members did not desire the change, have a role in creating it and were not committed to implementing it.

The situation was different when the school decided to engage in the Accelerated Schools Project. The project requires that everyone on the staff be committed to changing the school and to implementing the Accelerated Schools philosophy and process. No school begins the process without at least 90% of the full time staff agreeing to participate. At Drayton, the Accelerated Schools Project coaches made a presentation to the entire staff about the project. There were many questions and a great deal of discussion, and when a vote was taken, 100% of the staff agreed that they wanted to change their school through the Accelerated Schools process. Once that decision was made, everyone realized that they were responsible for determining how to change their school and their school culture. As described below, the Accelerated Schools philosophy and process guide and sustain the changes that the school community chooses to make. Even when key school community members leave, the vision remains in place and the school community continues to work toward it.

Change Guided and Sustained by a Philosophy and Process

The Accelerated Schools Project is unique among restructuring initiatives because it provides both a philosophy and a process to guide school based change. The project does not offer a school restructuring kit, but rather, a philosophical

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framework and a process that guide change so that momentum is maintained and activities lead to the school's vision.

Drayton's experience with the desegregation magnet school illustrates why a clearly delineated philosophy and a systematic process are needed to guide school change. Looking back on the design of the magnet program, a true philosophy of education did not guide the decision to create magnet schools. Their creation was a pragmatic response to pressure from the federal court to desegregate the district. Like other districts around the nation, subject area "hooks" such as technology and math/science or performing arts become the focus of a magnet school. Now, eight years later, it is not clear that the technology theme derived from or led to a set of beliefs about how children best learn and how integration is best acheived. It came instead from a belief that children should have an opportunity to pursue special subject area interests. A subject area focus, such as technology and performing arts, is not the same as a philosophy. A philosophy encompasses beliefs, cherished values and principles upon which we make decisions about how, what and in what context children learn. The staff who came to Drayton in 1986 had individual philosophies about children and education, but they never stated their philosophies explicitly, and they did not reach consensus on a unified philosophy.

The magnet program also did not offer a process for implementing and sustaining change. During the summer before the magnet school opened, a team of teachers had the opportunity to meet together and plan a new curriculum for the magnet school. Teachers involved in this planning were very proud of what they planned, and excitement for the concept was evident, at least initially. As one

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teacher said:

> ... one of the things that [the new principal] was able to do because they closed it down and returned it to a magnet, she was able to hire a whole new staff... She picked people who wanted to make a difference, people that wanted to make a change and to build a program. So she got a really high caliber group.... We put together a fabulous program. I was so excited about our magnet program, and the three years that we had it, it was wonderful. The level of academics here - the whole atmosphere of the place changed. It really was positive. We had parents who were excited about sending their kids here, and it was really successful.

Despite her excitement, the curriculum must not have taken hold throughout the faculty, because at the onset of the Accelerated Schools Project began, test scores were very low, morale was poor, and internal segregation was evident. As is the case with so many initiatives, there was no process built into the magnet concept to sustain and develop the initial efforts of the planning team.

In direct contrast to the top-down magnet program, the Accelerated Schools Project is a philosophy and process. When the philosophy was first presented at Drayton, some faculty immediately resonated to it. One teacher explained why she became involved in the project:

> Nothing in my philosophy has changed-not one thing. This is the thing that attracted me to the program, was that it was so consistent with my philosophy. My own personal philosophy of the way things should be done. And I said, "Hear! Hear! Finally I have somebody [the Accelerated Schools coach] who knows what's supposed to happen.

Not all staff members embraced the philosophy immediately. Many took a "wait and see" attitude toward the project, and began to embrace it as they interacted with colleagues, experimented with new ways to teach, and succeeded at reaching some of their most challenging students. They realized that the philosophy made sense - that it is possible to have high expectations for all children and to reach even the

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most resistant learner through powerful curriculum and instruction. Even today, degrees of internalization of the philosophy vary among the Drayton school community, but they all know that the philosophy is part of the school culture.

The Drayton school community has found that the Accelerated Schools philosophy and process has led them to create more appropriate changes, to implement the changes and to sustain the changes. The process involves everyone in the school so the commitment to plans is universal rather than isolated to a committee of enthusiasts. They have had sufficient time with the process to learn that although it is slow, the outcomes are effective and uniquely appropriate for Drayton. In the four years that Drayton has been involved with Accelerated Schools, the cadres have used the Inquiry process to set the following changes in motion: creation of a humanities core; interdisciplinary instruction; creation of a parent room; schoolwide training in Complex Instruction[5]; increased powerful learning in most classrooms; cultural celebrations and infusion of cultural concepts into the curriculum; all eighth graders taking algebra; and the total elimination of ability grouping. As a result of these changes, test scores have risen.

Discussion

It is noteworthy that many of the changes the Drayton Middle School community has made using the accelerated schools philosophy and process overlap with those suggested by the middle school movement. Subject matter is integrated and based on relevant curricula, staff have high expectations for all students, the school is heterogeneously grouped, instruction is engaging and involves projects and higher order thinking skills, all students take algebra, parents are involved, ...

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The difference is that these changes originated from within the Drayton School community rather than from the district office, a reform report, a consultant, or another outside source. Because the ideas for these changes have come from those people who must ultimately implement them, ownership of the changes is great, which increases the likelihood that the innovations will be maintained over time.

Much of the credit for this success comes from the Accelerated Schools process. The process helps schools move from their current situation to their dream situation. The Accelerated Schools model recognizes that school communities are ripe with strengths, but need a systematic process to unleash those strengths. Not only does the process galvanize the talents of the entire school community, including parents, teachers, secretaries, administrators, instructional assistants and students, but it also builds their capacity to become consumers of outside information. Instead of accepting mandates from above or adopting reform reports in a checklist fashion, accelerated school communities use an inquiry process to make important educational decisions that take information from inside and outside the school into account.

There is no shortage of good ideas about what middle schools (or elementary or high schools for that matter) should look like. The challenge that the current middle school movement faces, and that is faced by most reform efforts aimed at elementary schools and high schools, is that the middle school movement offers good ideas to schools, but does not address implementation and internalization into the school culture. We have found that transforming schools is about 90 percent implementation and 10 percent "inspiration" or good ideas. Schools need a process

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to solve their problems and come up with ideas they own and to be ready to solve the problems that the future holds in new and creative ways.

Several other middle schools currently engaged in the Accelerated Schools transformation provide examples of the importance of school community ownership of innovations. These schools were previously recognized in their districts as model middle schools. They had interdisciplinary teams with common planning time, advisory periods, etc. From the outside, they seemed to be "doing it all already." However, during the taking stock process, the staff asked questions that brought to light the superficiality of these changes. These features had not been internalized in the school culture. In one school, they dismantled the teaming, advisory period and other model middle school attributes because the school community had absolutely no ownership over them. They had been implemented because the district mandated the changes. Ironically, through the Accelerated Schools process (developing a vision, setting priorities, and utilizing the Inquiry process), the schools moved to interdisciplinary grade level teams and other aspects of the middle school movement. Although the outcomes appear to be the same, staff perceptions were very different; they viewed the district-mandated team as "bad," and the school initiated teams as "great." This positive perception of the innovation results from utilizing the accelerated schools philosophy and systematic, collaborative process to internalize the changes into their school cultures.

Innovations mandated from outside a school, no matter if it is a magnet school or a model middle school, will not be sustained without ownership by the school community. This paper has outlined how schools can succeed in implementing

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lasting transformations. True middle school reform will occur when we rethink our view of schools as culture bearing instititutions. Rather than viewing them as resistant to change, we need to understand how to build capacity within schools to achieve the goals within their school culture. Reform will also occur when we learn not to force change on schools, for, we know that reforms designed and/or implemented from outside have a long history of failure. Finally, reform will flourish when it is guided by a philosophy that makes sense to all members of the school community and a process in which all members participate to implement and sustain the changes. When we are able to meet these conditions, schools serving middle grades students will become truly effective schools.

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1 see John Lounsbury and J. Howard Johnston *Life in the Three Sixth Grades* (Reston, Va: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1988), Joyce Epstein, "What Matters in the Middle Grades-Grade Span or Practices," *Kappan* 71 (February 1990): 438-444, and Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, Johns Hopkins University, "Implemention and Effects of Middle Grades Practices," CREMS Report, March, 1990, 6.

2 See *The Accelerated Schools Resource Guide* (Hopfenberg & Levin, 1993) for a more complete description of the Accelerated Schools philosophy and process

3 The Spindlers apply this concept of cultural dialogue to an intervention strategy they have developed and labelled "cultural therapy." For a description of how the Accelerated Schools Project can be seen as a form of cultural therapy see C. Finnan (1993).

4 In the fall of 1990, Burnett served 617 students of whom, 55% were Hispanic, 39% were White (of which 64% were recent immigrants from rural communities in the

Azores off the coast of Portugal), 5% were Asian/Filipino/Pacific Islanders, and 2% were Africian Americans.

5Complex Instruction is a form of cooperative learning developed by Dr. Elizabeth Cohen, Stanford University, designed to reduce status distinctions among children.