

**Integrating Districts in Comprehensive School Reform
in the Middle-Grades:
Lessons from Middle Start CSR**

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Introduction

Comprehensive school reform (CSR) is widely regarded as a promising approach to improving high-poverty, low-performing schools (Slavin & Fashola, 1998; Herman, Aladjam, McMahon, Masem, Mulligan, Smith, O'Malley, Quinones, Reeve, & Woodruff, 1999; Borman, Hewes, Overman & Brown, 2002). Increasingly, schools have opportunities to partner with CSR programs and engage in a multi-year process of structural and instructional changes aimed at improving teaching and learning (Borman et al., 2003). Interestingly, CSR presents a paradox vis-à-vis the district's role in school level improvement. Recent policy and funding initiatives have typically focused CSR programs on one-on-one partnerships with schools rather than districts (Marsh, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.; National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, n.d.). However, schools require significant district financial and political support to launch and sustain the extensive structural and instructional improvements that initiatives such as CSR require (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Spillane, 2000).

Schools with middle-grades undertaking CSR are especially affected by this paradox because they rely on districts to hire teachers with middle-grades certification and need district support to implement small learning communities and adopt interdisciplinary instruction and equitable modes of student assignment—keystones of the middle-grades educational reform movement in the United States (Lipsitz, Mizell, Jackson & Austin, 1997; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, n.d.). In this report I compare district leaders' perspectives on changes in school capacity, student outcomes and district policy over three years of implementation of Middle Start CSR, a comprehensive school reform program, to demonstrate the potential for improving the effectiveness and sustainability of CSR at the school level through integrating districts more effectively into the school-CSR program partnership.

Middle Start CSR is a school improvement program focused on improving teaching and learning in the middle-grades. Developed by the Academy for Educational Development in partnership with, and under the sponsorship of, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Foundation

for the Mid South, Middle Start CSR seeks to foster academic excellence, developmental responsiveness and social equity in schools with middle-grades through the implementation of four core principles:

- 1) Reflective Review and Self-Study
- 2) Effective Small Learning Communities
- 3) Rigorous Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment
- 4) Distributed Leadership and Sustainable Partnerships

Schools typically receive state or foundation grants to undertake Middle Start CSR and collaborate with a Middle Start coach to implement the program. Teams, consisting of teachers and the principal, also participate in a variety of Middle Start professional development and leadership development opportunities to build their capacity in interdisciplinary teaming, data-based inquiry for school improvement, age-appropriate instructional strategies, and inclusive approaches to student assignment, instruction and assessment. Middle Start coaches guide and support schools in on-site implementation and typically spend two days a month at the school. Coaches also work with their school teams during leadership seminars and other professional development activities (Academy for Educational Development, n.d.).¹

The design of the CSR grant requires program staff from CSR programs to work intensively with schools, with minimal provisions for contact with and services to districts. This paper ends with a call for greater district-CSR program collaboration because the sustainability of CSR program-initiated improvements in schools will depend on district support in the post-grant period (Center for Policy Research in Education, 1998; Massell, 2000).

Design of the Study

This study was sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation as part of a larger three-year qualitative study of 19 rural and urban high-poverty schools in 13 Michigan districts from 1999 to 2002. AED regularly conducts qualitative studies of coaching and school-level implementation as part of a program of formative research on Middle Start CSR. I worked with a team of researchers to document coaching strategies, school-based planning and implementation, changes in school structures and leadership, instructional approaches, social supports for

¹ For more on Middle Start see www.middlestart.org

students, and social and academic outcomes in all 19 schools, and conducted intensive case studies of four of these schools over the three years.

This study was conducted with district respondents from 13 districts representing 19 schools that received Middle Start CSR grants from 1999 to 2002. They participated in three annual phone interviews (spring 2000, 2001, and 2002) to discuss the role of Middle Start CSR in grantee schools and districts. District respondents included superintendents, assistant superintendents, school improvement coordinators, and coordinators of state and federal programs. The sample included rural and urban districts in Michigan. Ten rural and mid-sized urban districts had one Middle Start CSR grantee school each. Three larger urban districts had two to four Middle Start CSR grantee schools.

Originally, the study was conducted with 15 district leaders representing 21 schools. However, schools from two districts did not continue their implementation of Middle Start through all three years. One middle school was reconstituted as part of a district reorganization initiative; the other became an Edison school, as part of a district takeover. Interestingly, the sample of district respondents stayed the same over the three years in the 13 districts.

The interviews probed the extent of districts' awareness, involvement, and support of middle-grades educational reform using the strategies of comprehensive school improvement. The annual interviews tracked changes in respondents' perspectives on issues such as district involvement in Middle Start CSR grant writing, school-level implementation, technical assistance, monitoring and assessment, sustaining reform, changes in district policies, and K-12 coordination.

Findings

The findings of this study show that the majority of district leaders became highly supportive of Middle Start CSR's work in their middle-grades schools over the three years of implementation despite very little contact with CSR program staff such as Middle Start school improvement coaches. Respondents noted that CSR was an important initiative both because of the scope of improvement undertaken by schools, as well as the sustained involvement of external CSR programs in school-based improvement. District respondents reported that they encouraged schools to select Middle Start, or supported school's own decisions to do the same because of their commitment to improving middle-grades education in their district. They

reported playing close attention to school-based implementation of Middle Start because of their heightened interest in CSR and concern about improving academic outcomes in the middle-grades. In most cases, respondents reported minimal contact with Middle Start program staff and stated that they learned about Middle Start through closely observing school-based implementation through visitations and hearing ongoing reports from principals and teachers regarding professional development and implementation activities. District leaders stated that they continued to stay interested in Middle Start because of the sustained efforts of Middle Start schools to improve instructional and organizational arrangements, and encouraging trends in student performance and behavior. In districts with multiple middle-grades schools, district leaders reported elevating Middle Start schools to the position of “demonstration” schools that would guide other middle-grades schools in their reform efforts. These reports are very promising, as increased collaboration with CSR coaches and other program staff could further enhance district capacity for, and commitment to, comprehensive school reform in the middle-grades.

The majority of district respondents reported greater commitment to five areas of comprehensive middle-grades reform, including:

- 1) Addressing the academic and developmental needs of students entering early adolescence.
- 2) Supporting organizational changes such as interdisciplinary teaming in schools with middle-grades.
- 3) Supporting ongoing teacher collaboration and professional development for instructional improvement.
- 4) Encouraging partnerships with CSR program staff such as Middle Start coaches and professional development providers.
- 5) Endorsing comprehensive school reform as a vehicle for school improvement; and implementing coherent rather than piecemeal approaches to school improvement.

District respondents reported concerns with the following:

- 1) Strengthening collaboration between CSR program staff and district leaders to foster greater collaboration and alignment between their respective initiatives.
- 2) Aligning CSR program-based professional development with district-initiated professional development and improving professional development in specific areas.

Strengths of School's Participation in Middle Start CSR

Nine of the 13 respondents reported overwhelming support of the comprehensive middle-grades educational reform strategies employed by Middle Start providers and schools. In three urban districts with multiple middle schools, district leaders created opportunities for Middle Start schools to network with non-Middle Start schools in an effort to share new knowledge and skills. Specifically, district leaders reported that districts were better equipped, as a result of monitoring school's participation in Middle Start, to: 1) help schools address the needs of students entering early adolescence; 2) create or improve interdisciplinary teams; 3) support professional development for teachers; 4) encourage partnerships with externally-developed programs; and 5) endorse comprehensive school reform.

Address the needs of students in the middle-grades

All 13 district leaders discussed the importance of district-level awareness of the academic and developmental needs of students in the middle-grades. In the first year, seven of 13 leaders reported that Middle Start had helped them better understand students entering early adolescence, and make a commitment to restructuring middle-grades education to address students' needs. By the third year, 10 district leaders reported extensive efforts in Middle Start CSR schools to implement age-appropriate instructional and organizational improvements, and stated that districts would continue to support such improvement past the grant period. A superintendent stated:

We've moved from a junior high to a middle school mindset. The three-year process allows us to think differently about the education of pre-adolescents. Middle Start has given us a good foundation. The mindset has improved and staff are aware and looking for improved strategies to help students.

Another superintendent noted:

The achievement of Middle Start is that it has won seasoned staff over. There is a greater awareness of kids in the middle grades. There is a significant change in how we are taking into account CSR and Middle Start when planning district middle level programs.

Create or improve interdisciplinary teams

Eleven of the 13 district leaders emphasized the contributions of interdisciplinary teams to improved teacher collaboration and instructional improvement and stated that they would

continue to support the staffing requirements of teaming and common planning time for teams despite financial constraints. Middle Start's second principle is *Effective Small Learning Communities*. As part of implementing this principle, schools create interdisciplinary teams, ideally including subject-area, special education and elective teachers, as well as counselors and other staff, to develop age-appropriate instructional and organizational practices fostering a rich and engaging learning environment for students. District leaders noted that interdisciplinary teams were initiated early in the first year of Middle Start CSR and that they had made substantial strides in improving school climate and instructional practices by the third year. A district coordinator of federal and state programs stated:

Based on conversations with kids, parents and teachers, I feel classrooms are more sensitive to students. Teachers are better aware of the issues that impact their learning and interactions, and handle situations more effectively by working as a team. There is greater understanding of the changes in developmental stages of the child in sixth, seventh and eighth grade...The district will sustain this approach. It's a matter of continuing and facilitating initiatives.

A superintendent stated:

Teaming has led to student achievement. Collaboration and communication among teachers is key as collegiality capitalizes on teachers' strengths. Students benefit from teaming.

Support professional development for teachers

When discussing implementation of Middle Start at the school level, all 13 respondents highlighted the importance of professional development in bringing about structural and instructional improvements at the school level. The majority of respondents stated that professional development in teaming and instructional areas such as thematic instruction, curriculum alignment, differentiated instruction, and cooperative learning had helped teachers develop a broader repertoire. Overall, district leaders reported high levels of satisfaction with professional development facilitated by Middle Start providers and supported teacher participation in professional development. A coordinator of state and federal programs noted:

Instructionally the culture is changing from "I taught it they didn't get it" to "I taught it, why didn't they get it?" This word [why] changes the culture of education. Teachers are looking at data and asking why. Middle Start has facilitated changes at the middle level.

A superintendent stated:

Teachers doing a bad job are being shown up by teaming. Teams have worked to create a good learning environment—a family—instead of piecemeal, individual classrooms. Staff reactions are positive about what is happening in classrooms with their kids. These are indicators to me that student learning is improving. Teachers have had professional development in developmental responsiveness and are more aware of it.

Respondents also expressed commitment to sustaining professional development for middle-grades teachers at high levels after the period of the CSR grant through drawing from other funding streams. They stated that districts would reallocate funds, align initiatives and raise funds through grant-writing to sustain professional development at the higher levels supported by schools' CSR grants. A superintendent stated:

We will maintain and sustain professional development through combining our Title I, Eisenhower and Title 6 funds. Our district has made a strong commitment.

A district coordinator for school improvement said:

We are working with the school to use CSR and district money to institutionalize and sustain professional development. It [Middle Start CSR] has brought to our attention that for the core of a building to change it takes 5 years. A building that qualifies for CSR is not a building on the verge of excellence. People need to identify the concerns, build dialogue, plan, and take ownership. It takes more than three years.

Encourage partnerships with externally-developed programs

The majority of district leaders also reported higher levels of satisfaction with Middle Start coaches and professional development providers over the three years of implementation and stated that their experience with Middle Start had disposed them favorably to outside experts collaborating with their schools as they saw them as bringing “new blood” into the system. Nine of 13 respondents were very positive in their assessment of Middle Start program staff and stated that they would encourage schools to develop long-term partnerships with external experts. Two district leaders mentioned efforts to identify district funds to pay for an additional year of coaching from Middle Start after the three-year CSR grant. A coordinator of state and federal programs stated:

External people who come in to look and say “Hey this is what I see” are very important. __[Middle Start coach] provides good services Every building knows who he is and what he does. He is a part of it We need outside funding sources and outside expertise on how to move forward.

A district coordinator of school improvement said:

Our [Middle Start] coaches are very approachable, professional, expert in best practices, connected to other schools and districts, and bring valuable information with them.

Endorse comprehensive school reform

All 13 respondents stated that Middle Start schools' experiments with comprehensive school reform demonstrated that systematic and well-coordinated reform efforts could bring about meaningful improvements for students in a few years. Several respondents said that previous district initiatives had used "one-shot interventions" or "piecemeal approaches" that required a significant investment of funds and effort but had not benefited students. They also emphasized that school improvement is a process requiring at least a few years of sustained work, and that previous initiatives had failed because they had not considered the complexity of school reform. A superintendent said:

Comprehensive school reform is about different strands that have a common purpose—the success of each student. It takes a school 3-5 years to transform. I always knew that school improvement is a complex phenomenon but this [Middle Start] school gives you a living example. There was targeted and meaningful staff development, so it's no surprise to me. We have to put a new system into place.

A coordinator of federal and state programs stated:

CSR forced the issue for districts of how to coordinate resources. We're looking at comprehensive school reform to help students by considering how different strands of effort can come together as a coherent whole focused on the students who need them most. Middle Start has brought greater cohesiveness to our efforts through addressing teaming, block schedule, using data...I really believe that CSR has been a catalyst for our buildings.

Concerns with School's Participation in Middle Start CSR

Some district respondents expressed an interest in strengthening the collaboration between program staff and district representatives to ease barriers to school improvement at the building level, as well as in aligning program-based and district-initiated professional development and improving professional development in the area of inclusion. In general, they recommended that Middle Start develop a stronger relationship with the district so that it could better guide and support school-level efforts in the long term.

Strengthen program-district collaboration

The majority of district respondents stated that they had minimal contact with Middle Start program staff because coaches and professional development providers were contracted to work primarily at the school level. They emphasized the importance of improved communication and collaboration between districts and CSR program staff, as it would fall on the district to support ongoing capacity building and school improvement at the school level. Three of 13 district providers stated that they were in close communication with principals and school leadership teams and did not need regular meeting with coaches. For example, a superintendent said: “I don’t need direct contact with service providers. The principal keeps me informed, and I’ve been in the school when providers are there and know what the school is doing.” However, the majority pushed for greater integration of districts in building-level CSR efforts. A district coordinator of school improvement stated:

Overall Middle Start provided a good model, played a critical friend’s role and was there to meet the needs of staff. Middle Start is more involved at the school level – the TA’s time is theirs [the school’s]. But the structure of the model must be tightly knit with districts. The building administration makes requests and asks questions at the district level and I have to then explore the issue because I don’t receive the information from Middle Start. There has been a disconnect.

An assistant superintendent stated:

We try to eliminate barriers that only a district can. But CSR coaches are not interfacing with us. Interaction with central office is key as principals are talking with us and asking for things. But central office is not fully in the loop as CSR is focused on the building level.

Three respondents also emphasized the district’s important role in hiring and retaining administrators and teachers at the school level and the need for CSR program-district collaboration on minimizing the effects of staff turnover on program implementation and school improvement. They referred to “school readiness” or “school context” as a critical issue influencing the implementation of Middle Start in schools and stated that turnover issues affecting schools and districts often disrupted school improvement.

Align and improve professional development

Three district respondents stated that Middle Start professional development needed to be better aligned with district requirements and initiatives. In one case, a superintendent stated that the school implementing Middle Start also had to pay attention to implementing the district

curriculum and participating in a district technology initiative. Another superintendent was concerned that Middle Start providers planned professional development during the school day instead of after school and stated that Middle Start should pay attention to district limitations on teacher release time when scheduling professional development. A coordinator of school improvement pointed out that literacy across the curriculum was a common goal for the district as well as Middle Start, but that the district literacy initiative endorsed a different program from the one recommended by the Middle Start coach. She noted that Middle Start, the school and the district needed to discuss both options in more detail to promote greater alignment between program-initiated and district-initiated efforts.

Three respondents also expressed a need for better coaching and professional development in special education inclusion. A superintendent stated: “We are just starting to implement inclusion and have a lot to learn in this area.” Another superintendent stated: “Middle Start has made the least progress in the area of inclusion. Special education inclusion is a priority goal for this year. There are no programs that specifically address equity issues.” One respondent also noted the need for professional development for family engagement, stating: “Parent engagement is an area of weakness.”

Implications and Conclusion

The majority of district respondents in this study pushed for greater collaboration with Middle Start program staff because they observed greater capacity in participating schools for implementing comprehensive middle-grades educational reform. They stated that district capacity for meeting the academic and developmental needs of students in the middle grades had improved. They confirmed their commitment to the staffing needs of interdisciplinary teams based on the positive teacher collaboration and improved student-teacher relationships they observed in schools. District respondents expressed high levels of satisfaction with Middle Start professional development and coaching based on their observations and schools’ reports, and stated that they would try to sustain professional development for teachers past the grant period, as the instructional improvements taking place in schools attested to the effects of enhanced teacher learning (although they pushed for improved professional development in specific areas). They also stated that their experience with Middle Start led them to believe that partnerships with external programs infused the system with “new blood” and helped schools gain fresh

perspectives and ongoing support to spur improvement. Finally, district leaders discussed the influence of comprehensive school reform on district policy, stating that they were encouraged to move away from piecemeal interventions to holistic and long-term approaches.

These are a highly promising set of findings for improving collaboration of CSR programs and districts, given the major topics outlined in the literature. The literature on the districts' role in school improvement emphasizes district involvement in setting academic standards and conducting academic initiatives; assessment; financial and organizational management; ongoing professional development of teachers and administrators; and parent and community engagement (see MacIver & Balfanz, 1999). Experts identify the district as the largest provider of professional development for teachers and principals (Spillane, 2000); as the key agent responsible for "scaling up" reforms (Elmore, 1996); and as a core intermediary between state policy and teachers' practice (Spillane & Thomson, 1997). However, not all districts are successful in performing these tasks. Marsh's (2000) review of the research on district-school relations identified several critiques of districts that minimized the importance of their role in school reform. Research cited the bureaucratic and unresponsive nature of districts and their lack of understanding of and commitment to reform as critical reasons that state, federal and other initiatives bypassed the district and worked directly with schools (11-12).

Marsh also identified studies demonstrating the value-added by districts to improving teaching and learning. Some of the factors contributing to effective school-district partnerships were joint-ownership of districts and schools of teaching and learning initiatives; high levels of district knowledge of reforms undertaken; and experienced district leadership open to new learning (pp. 11-12). In this study, the majority of district respondents demonstrated great interest in understanding school-level improvements and learning more about middle-grades reform and CSR, and applying their new knowledge to crafting new district policies and initiatives. Considering critical and supportive views of the district, it is clear that there is great potential for the district to help schools undertake professional development, scale up promising reforms, and serve as interpreters and guides to state and federal guidelines, leaving the school to focus on teaching and learning by minimizing its administrative responsibilities. These functions of districts make them ideal partners for Middle Start schools and program staff in further advancing comprehensive middle-grades educational reform. There appear to be at least three opportunities for better integrating districts in the Middle Start CSR program:

- 1) Regular outreach to districts by regional coordinators and coaches through methods such as quarterly phone contacts or meetings.
- 2) Participation of district leaders in leadership seminars and regional networks that teams from their schools attend.
- 3) Special forums for district leaders convened by Middle Start to bolster districts' knowledge, skills and support for comprehensive school reform in the middle-grades, and provide districts with opportunities to raise questions about and offer suggestions for strengthening the Middle Start CSR program.

District leaders have extended a clear invitation to Middle Start to expand its partnership with schools to engage the district. It is important for Middle Start and its participating schools to seize this opportunity.

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