

Mid South Middle Start

*Studies of Three Middle Start Schools
in the Mid South Delta*



**Middle Start National Center
at the
Academy for Educational Development**

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Mid South Middle Start	1
Development of Case Studies	2
Appleton Middle School	4
Context for School Improvement.....	4
Middle Start Implementation and Impact	5
Addressing Middle Start Goals.....	8
Challenges.....	10
Final Thoughts	11
Jeyson Middle School	12
Context for School Improvement.....	12
Middle Start Implementation and Impact	13
Addressing Middle Start Goals.....	15
Challenges.....	17
Final Thoughts	18
Mt. Olive Middle School.....	20
Context for School Improvement.....	20
Middle Start Implementation and Impact	21
Addressing Middle Start Goals.....	24
Challenges.....	26
Final Thoughts	27
Conclusion	27

Introduction

As proposed in the Academy for Educational Development's (AED) plan to conduct research and evaluation in Mid South Middle Start, these case studies describe the school improvement process in three Mid South Middle Start grantee schools. The case studies are based on a qualitative inquiry that is more concentrated than evaluation efforts in other schools participating in Mid South Middle Start.

Mid South Middle Start

Mid South Middle Start is a comprehensive school improvement initiative for schools with middle grades. As part of a larger national initiative, Mid South Middle Start, was developed by the Academy for Educational Development in collaboration with the Foundation for the Mid South (FMS). The goals of the Mid South Middle Start initiative are to build the capacity for academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity in schools with middle grades. Mid South Middle Start is based on a set of guidelines commonly referred to as the Middle Start Principles and Practices, which emphasize ongoing inquiry into teaching and learning, the cultivation of effective small learning communities, continual improvement of student learning and achievement, and distribution of leadership throughout the school. Mid South Middle Start is committed to working with high-poverty schools in the Mid South Delta region.

Middle Start's services are delivered locally and are customized to support district initiatives, build upon the strengths of schools, and take advantage of their investments in complementary reforms. A Middle Start coach works with a school leadership team to guide the school through the improvement process, which is supported by regional Middle Start partners skilled in providing technical assistance and professional development to middle-grades schools. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, Middle Start helps schools build the capacity for continuous improvement by providing both a process for change and the tools to support both this process and the resulting changes in school structure and approaches to teaching and learning.

In focusing on the school improvement process, these three case studies highlight the implementation and impact of Mid South Middle Start. The case studies will help FMS, AED and other partners plan and manage the Middle Start initiative and provide information to key stakeholders who are involved in the sustainability and expansion of Middle Start in rural and underserved communities. More specifically they:

- contribute toward an in-depth understanding of what it means to be a school implementing Middle Start;
- describe a holistic portrait of the schools' participation in Mid South Middle Start; and
- assist AED in giving formative feedback to FMS.

Development of Case Studies

AED and FMS collaborated on the selection of three schools to be case-study subjects. Factors important to the selection process were:

- location of the school (seeking even distribution among the Mid South states of Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi);
- type of grantee school;
- types of reforms planned;
- school history in terms of academic performance and stability of administrator and faculty turnover; and
- the school's availability and willingness to be studied in detail.

These three case studies of Appleton, Jeyson, and Mt. Olive Middle Schools¹ are based on two years (SY 2002-03 and 2003-04) of qualitative data collection by a team of AED researchers. The research findings from this time period are presented in this case study. The three case-study schools are a subset of the 26 schools receiving Middle Start FMS funding. In each school, the research team examined:

- 1) the context of implementation of Middle Start;
- 2) the role of Middle Start in school improvement efforts;
- 3) the accomplishments and challenges that the school encountered; and
- 4) the impact of Middle Start in promoting academic achievement, developmental responsiveness and equity in the school.

In addition to gathering data specifically for these questions, the case-study research also included more general inquiries into the school's background, physical setting, and historical context.

The design of the research was consistent across each of the three schools. The case-study research included one-day site visits in both the fall and spring of each of the case-study years (2002-03 and 2003-04), as well as other site visits and interviews with the Middle Start director of school improvement services. During the site visits, the research team conducted interviews with the following school staff:

- principal and/or assistant principal;
- teachers, particularly members of school leadership and grade-level teams;
- counselors and librarians; and
- Mid South Middle Start coaches.

¹ The names of all schools, staff, and locations have been changed throughout these case studies.

In addition to interviews, the research team observed numerous classes, including special education and specialized classes, as well as classes of core academic subjects. The research team also documented coaches' meetings and conference calls with members of the school improvement team. Research team members also attended the Middle Start summer learning institutes, as well as professional development workshops and team meetings with school staff. The lead researcher made a second site visit to each school, using a different instrument to obtain feedback about Middle Start from school staff.

Taken together, these three case-studies offer a realistic view of the challenges of implementing a comprehensive reform effort, given existing educational improvement initiatives and external pressures and circumstances. Each of the three schools presents a different stage of improvement and a different set of circumstances, with Middle Start differently realized in all three for a variety of reasons.

Jeyson Middle School presents the most positive view, a school that has been transformed, both in name and practice, from a junior high school to a middle-grades school, with the implementation of Middle Start. Appleton is at the other end of the spectrum. Despite support for Middle Start and ongoing efforts to make the school more supportive of young adolescents, it has been plagued by external forces—including budget pressures and lack of community support—that have negatively affected reform efforts. In between is Mt. Olive, a small, poor school with some of the same pressures as Appleton but with much greater community support.

These three case studies illustrate that school improvement is an ongoing process demanding constant reflection on the part of staff, as well as adjustments and mid-course changes to school improvement plans. Schools may move ahead in one area, only to slide back in subsequent years, with changes in leadership, staff, or external supports for school improvement.

These three case studies also show, above all, that school improvement does not happen in a vacuum. It is affected by conditions already existing in the school, such as size of faculty, tensions among old and new faculty, the pressures of existing mandates, budget constraints, and lack of resources. It is also affected by external factors such as economic conditions in the wider community, the existence or nonexistence of community groups to act as partners in school reform efforts, and support or nonsupport among families and the community at large.

Ultimately, these case studies provide a basis for considering the role of a comprehensive reform initiative, such as Middle Start, in schools and districts with multiple challenges and a paucity of resources. Specifically, does such an initiative help a school maintain a focus on improvement despite its myriad challenges?

Appleton Middle School

Middle Start has broadened my horizons and has given my teachers more exposure to middle-level education and more skills to do their work better. Middle Start has enabled the school to become more student-centered, and staff members have been able to do more for their students. (Principal, Appleton Middle School)

Context for School Improvement

Appleton, a K-8 school, is located in Perry, Louisiana, a rural community of 5,344 residents, where nearly 37 percent of families live in poverty.² The town is largely a farming community, with an extremely low tax base. Over the past several years, families have been leaving the area for better employment opportunities. Thus, student enrollment throughout the parish has been decreasing. Financial discord has beleaguered the community for many years, and as a result, community and school relationships have been strained. The district has threatened the school and other nearby schools with teacher layoffs, which has resulted in teacher attrition through retirement or relocation.

Currently, the starting salary for an Appleton School teacher with a bachelor's degree is \$17,000 per year, and teachers can easily go to a more prosperous district nearby and earn twice as much money. Yet, there is minimal staff turnover at Appleton because of teachers' strong loyalty to the school—the majority have taught at Appleton for many years and are deeply committed to the school. The present principal has served in this capacity since 2001-02 and was previously the assistant principal.

Approximately 460 students in grades K-8 attend Appleton School. The school's enrollment held steady for the duration of the two years of case-study data collection. The middle school, grades 5-8, has approximately 230 students. Student demographics have changed over the past five years. There is now greater racial/ethnic diversity and an increase of students from other parts of the community. For example, a number of African American students are bused from another part of Perry, a high-poverty area that is isolated from the rest of the town, and a handful of white students have crossed district lines. However, the majority of Appleton students (60 percent) are white and come from the town of Perry; 71 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Appleton Middle School³ currently has 14 core teachers, a librarian, an alternative/detention teacher, a computer lab teacher, an agriculture/administrative assistant teacher, a long-term substitute resource/special education teacher, and a gifted-education teacher. The school also has a Title I aide but no counselor. (The principal maintains that she and her assistant principal serve as school counselors.) According to the principal, none of the teachers has national board

² <http://factfinder.census.gov/>—(U.S. Census 2000).

³ For the rest of this case study, we will refer to the middle grades at Appleton as Appleton Middle School.

certification, but all are qualified in her eyes. Appleton Middle School shares a band director with another middle school in the parish.

The school is housed in a single-story building, with a separate wing for grades 6, 7, and 8; fifth-grade classes are located in portable classrooms. The school uses grade 5 as a transitional period between elementary and middle school. Although Appleton School is an old building, it is well cared for. The school is very clean, with fresh paint and a new sign and mural on the front of the school. Student work is prominently displayed throughout the school. Recent changes to the school's physical appearance and climate include making the front office more welcoming by having an open-door policy, cultivating an outdoor garden, and adding a gazebo to enhance the school grounds.

The rest of this case study describes the implementation and impact of Middle Start; how the school addressed the Middle Start goals of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity; and the many challenges the school faced during this process.

Middle Start Implementation and Impact

Appleton Middle School has been actively implementing Middle Start over the past three years. This section describes the changes that have taken place at the school with the implementation of Middle Start in instruction and climate and the support for the initiative among school leadership. (The impact of Middle Start is also described in the next section, "Addressing Middle Start Goals.") Unfortunately, many of the efforts described below have been negatively affected by budget cuts, lack of community support, and other external factors, as described in the Challenges section of this case study.

Instruction

One of the main impacts of Middle Start at Appleton Middle School has been on classroom practice. Teachers described themselves as teaching differently, and classroom observations showed evidence of many strategies to engage students of different ability levels, including increased use of technology and on-line projects (such as Accelerated Reader), as well as of manipulatives, cooperative learning, individualized instruction, problem solving, student planners, and parent folders (described below). Some teachers have incorporated learning centers into the classroom, with students spending several minutes at each center doing specific tasks, such as responding to a writing prompt and then moving on to the next task.

Teachers at Appleton also use data to inform their instruction. For example, they examine test-score trends to see in what particular skills or areas of knowledge students need more help. Teachers work with colleagues, planning cross-curricular activities about current events; they also compile student portfolios to help them reflect on teaching strategies and student performance across the year.

Staff in the school credited Middle Start with giving them much-needed exposure to new ideas and approaches in middle-grades education. They have attended conferences of educational organizations, such as the National Middle School Association and the Louisiana Middle School Association, and have been exposed to new research and fresh ideas. One teacher said:

Personally, Middle Start has given me more exposure. Middle Start funds have enabled me to buy more books on middle-level teaching and to participate in meetings like the summer learning institute.

Teachers described Middle Start as making them more aware of the needs of young adolescents. One teacher of grades 7-8 described the use of television programming in her classroom as fostering relationship-building between the teacher and students—the students know the teacher’s favorite shows, and they have something to talk about at the beginning of class. This teacher also applies business practices in her seventh- and eighth-grade classes—students work on a stock-market project, buying stock, managing their portfolios and operating a mock pizza parlor. Another teacher stated:

Middle Start has made me more aware about middle-level practices. When I first started, middle school concepts were new to me. Now I look at kids as their own entity—on different levels—emotionally, intellectually, and physically.

Several teachers described the value of teaming in fostering a common understanding of middle-level concepts and providing a forum of support, where teachers can discuss and solve problems, as well as plan. When Middle Start began, the school’s grade-level teams met weekly. However, in subsequent years, teams met less frequently—every other week and now even less regularly because of lack of funds to hire substitutes during common planning time. Now, when teachers meet in teams, five teachers are assigned to watch the students in the gymnasium on a rotating basis while the rest of the teachers work together in their teams. One teacher expressed concern about this situation, stressing the great value of teaming:

It seems like some of our organizational changes are becoming untied—teaming is slipping backwards, yet teaming is such an important aspect of our work. This is affecting the school climate and culture somewhat, and this is manifested in the kids’ behavior.

Climate

Despite the above quote, several staff commented on improved school climate, partially as a result of the new approaches in the classroom, as well as of the displays of student work in the school. Two teachers stated:

Students—even eighth graders—like to see their work on the walls.

I came from Oxford Jr. High School where . . . teachers were not encouraged to put homework on walls—students were thought of as nearly grown—they’re “BIG people.” It wasn’t necessary to put up student work—it would be childlike. Well, I like seeing students’ projects on the wall, and the students like it, too.

The librarian described improved school climate and student behavior in the library:

Before Middle Start it was hard to keep up with the middle-grades kids. I couldn’t hold them accountable and at least 60 books were lost. Now things are more organized. Kids are held accountable. I know more of the students. I have more contact with the teacher, and they want to be more involved

Even with the decreased organizational support for teaming, teachers remain highly committed to the school and share a common vision for school improvement. While teachers miss regular teaming and the formal communication it fostered, they still manage to communicate informally. Middle Start has helped the school climate and staff morale stay strong. As one teacher put it:

The bottom line is that we're still here to teach, so we're going to get the job done no matter what's going on with the budget.

Leadership

On the whole, school leadership is highly supportive of Middle Start. The principal is an advocate of middle-grades improvement, championing Middle Start not only with her words, but also in her actions. She was very involved in Middle Start from the beginning. She pulls the leadership team together, attends all workshops, brings lunches, and serves as an active part of the team. The principal is a believer in distributed leadership; she has empowered her teachers, and they appear willing to accept leadership and responsibility. The principal is very supportive of students and encourages hands-on work, as well as the prominent display of student work throughout the school. The principal's strong involvement helps steer the school toward school improvement.

The school leadership team functions as a planning and motivating group, as well as a distributor of information in the school. During the first year of Middle Start implementation, the team's work led to the introduction of several programs to address the needs of young adolescents. These included:

- a character-building program;
- a daily assembly for grades 2-8 led by the eighth graders;
- Encore classes (electives such as gardening, quilting, and remediation), which replaced morning recess;
- student planners—logs of student work, indicating assignments, grades and teacher comments; and
- band, made possible by sharing a band director with another nearby middle school.

In the second year, 2002-03, the team introduced the use of parent folders. A parent folder is a log of student homework sent home weekly, which parents are asked to review and sign. The school leadership team also used team meetings to assess the use of student planners, review Middle Start rubrics, and study the incorporation of technology into the classroom.

The composition of the leadership changed slightly over the years. Initially, the team did not regularly include non-core staff, such as the librarian and the special education and gifted teacher. Now these positions are represented on the team on a rotating basis.

Addressing Middle Start Goals

Academic Excellence

Academic excellence is reflected in the school's mission statement—"to help every child achieve to his potential and maximum ability, whatever that may be. The staff works not only to instill textbook information, but also to teach important habits such as hard work and study skills that support classroom instruction."

In addition to the innovative middle-grades approaches described above, Appleton Middle School has several strategies in place to support its students' academic achievement. Students can participate in the honor society (Beta Club) and academic enrichment activities such as the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) tutoring, math and English labs, Encore classes (before they were cancelled), honor roll parties, and field trips. Journals and planners allow students to take ownership and responsibility for their learning. Recently, the school implemented a quiet reading time for all students arriving at school early. Since Appleton Middle School shares a bus with a neighboring school, about 90 percent of students arrive at school by 7:30 A.M.—15 minutes before school starts. Silent reading lasts for 10 minutes, followed by five minutes of talk and then the morning assembly.

Developmental Responsiveness

As described above, Middle Start has helped Appleton staff become aware of the unique needs and characteristics of the middle-school child. Teachers state that a main priority in their classrooms is being compassionate to students, providing students what they need when they need it, and making school more enjoyable and engaging. Teachers believe that being developmentally responsive means putting more emphasis on the students, being more child-oriented in teaching, and helping students take responsibility for their own education. Teachers also strive to increase parent involvement—in particular through the use of the parent folders—so that parents are aware of their children's assignments and their progress on a more regular basis. The school is more student-centered than previously and more unified, with a common vision focused on addressing the needs of young adolescents and helping them achieve at higher levels.

Social Equity

Most classes at Appleton have students of varying levels of achievement. In one math class, for example, students work everyday in a small-group setting with students of mixed ability. They also work with their peers on homework and in-class assignments. A key to ensuring equity at Appleton is scheduling that provides equal access to extracurricular activities. Participation of all students regardless of race/ethnicity, ability level, or economic status is encouraged in programs and at assemblies to ensure a balanced representation of the student body.

However, the school's financial woes have lessened access to resources for some students, particularly access to afterschool programs. For instance, Appleton staff have found that many students from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds do poorly academically (evident in the low Iowa Test of Basic Skills —ITBS— test scores). The school's Title I funding helps such students by providing afterschool and LEAP tutoring (open to all Appleton students). However, most students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who perform poorly academically are bused from an isolated, predominately African American community, and students need transportation to

participate in afterschool programs. Appleton Middle School cannot provide bus transportation after school hours because of budget constraints, and it then becomes the parents' responsibility to provide transportation, which is often not possible.

Test scores from the school show that students achieved passing grades in all subcategories of the state LEAP test, and Appleton has made annual yearly progress (AYP) every year. However, if groups of students within the school are compared, it shows that more African American students are behind in math. The use of Accelerated Math allows for individualized math instruction for at-risk students. Additionally, the Accelerated Reader program fosters positive competition among students and contributes to a positive school climate. Students from mixed-ability levels excel in Accelerated Reader, and there are recognition programs for students who have reached their Accelerated Reader point goal.

Student Achievement

The eighth grade is academically strong. Students have high aspirations, and many of them want to attend college. An increasing number of students have been designated as "student of the year" in eighth grade—that is, they attained a 3.5 G.P.A. Fifteen students had at least a 3.5 G.P.A., and six students earned a 4.0 G.P.A. Appleton Middle School's student achievement scores are increasing. For example, school performance scores⁴ (SPSs) have increased. Before Middle Start (1998-99), SPS was 64.8%, and it has increased each year of Middle Start implementation until it reached 81.9% in 2002-03. ITBS scores have remained stagnant, but the school is very close to reaching its target growth rate of 83.3% (for LEAP). In fact, LEAP scores in science and math have increased for fourth and eighth graders.

The following classroom "snapshot" provides a glimpse within the classroom walls at Appleton.

⁴ SPS scores are based on four indices: CST (LEAP) test scores of students in grades 3, 5, 6, and 7; ITBS test scores of students in grades 4 and 8; and attendance and dropout rates.

Inside a Sixth-Grade Language Arts Class

Demographics: 15 students: 7 males (2 African-American, 5 white), 8 females (1 African-American, 7 white)

The classroom was located in a trailer on the side of the main school building. The classroom was decorated with student work, as well as class objectives and learning tools. Students sat attentively at their desks. Ms. Taylor started the class by taking attendance and introducing the class lesson. Then she played a tape cassette, and students sang along with the music. The song covered nouns, pronouns, prepositions, and verbs. After the singing, Ms. Taylor introduced a writing assignment and explained that students would be required to edit their stories at least three times by replacing certain words with a synonym or antonym, using a thesaurus. She also mentioned that students' assignments would be based on a rubric and that students would be asked to correct sentence structure according to the rubric used in class. Once everyone had a common understanding of the assignment, students moved their desks into four groups to begin their next assignment, diagramming sentences. Students separated themselves along gender lines and proximity. Ms. Taylor walked around the classroom to help students, giving extra instruction where needed. When all students had finished their sentences, Ms. Taylor asked for volunteers to write their sentences on the board and to identify different parts of the sentences. Students were eager to volunteer.

General observations: This observation is typical of what case-study researchers saw at Appleton Middle School. The teacher used a variety of teaching modes in the classroom to engage students with various skill levels. The teacher was creative, drawing on and fostering students' verbal, listening, and musical skills. The teacher created a welcoming and nurturing environment by encouraging students and giving them individualized attention. The students felt free to ask questions. The teacher also created opportunities for students to learn in groups. There were small-group exercises and students practiced cooperative learning.

Challenges

The Perry school board and Appleton Middle School have been challenged in recent years with financial problems. Currently, the school parish is about \$600,000 in debt, and an April 2004 vote to increase the millage rate was unsuccessful, continuing a trend of the community rejecting millage rate increases. This has negatively affected Appleton's budget, the school's ability to hire substitute teachers, and tutoring for students, as described above.

In addition to budget problems, the school board is floundering in an atmosphere of mistrust because of allegations of fiscal irresponsibility on the part of district staff. There is an ongoing investigation by the state police and representatives of a legislative auditor to verify if teacher paychecks were being distributed improperly. There was also an allegation that the school board president had been issued two reimbursement checks for the same request. Given these problems, school staff wonder if the school will remain open—and if it does, if it can pay its next electric bill. In fact, in March 2004, the electric company paid the school's bill.

In spring 2004, the principal described the budget crisis:

The school doesn't have funds for anything. We can't even buy library books this year. I haven't told the librarian yet. We can't get subs, so our staff will have to cover for each other. One of our copying machines was taken away. Now we have

one copier, and we're restricted on the number of copies we can make. If the tax proposals don't pass, then more teachers will eventually be laid off.

Understandably, these financial problems and investigations are affecting school climate and staff morale. Students are exhibiting more behavioral problems, and parents are disgruntled and unhappy. The principal stated:

All of these things affect school climate. We are trying our best to stay positive, but it's hard. We are trying to maintain a healthy school spirit. During the first half of the school year, we had very few problems with discipline. But we've seen more disciplinary problems. So we're slipping in school climate.

Added to this are tentative district reorganization plans to have all middle-grades students attending one school in school year 2004-05. These challenges have made it difficult for the school members to remain focused on teaching. Several mentioned that because of budget problems, district decisions are no longer based on what is best for the students—keeping the school open has become the sole priority.

Final Thoughts

Despite the struggles with finances and academic pressures from the state and federal Departments of Education, the principal, assistant principal, leadership team, and faculty demonstrate commitment and enthusiasm for reform at Appleton. The staff enjoy what they are doing, and the school's improvement in student performance has been recognized by the Louisiana Department of Education. The principal also understands that the bar is continuously being raised in terms of national and state expectations of student performance, and she is committed to meeting those expectations.

Appleton School has a reputation of being one of the better schools in the parish. The middle school has made great strides in its middle-grades reform efforts, organizationally and instructionally, and teachers remain united and stand behind the principal. Many teachers live in the area and plan to stay, and maintain that "Appleton Middle School is still a good place to work."

Yet, many school members see the political and financial situation of the parish as an enormous barrier to the success of Middle Start at Appleton. It is unclear if these external and financial pressures will ultimately lead to negative results for the school, or whether the school will survive and continue to thrive, given the strong foundation of its committed leadership and staff. If the school were given the necessary financial support, the door to possibilities would be wide open.

Jeyson Middle School

Middle Start is seen as a flexible model of school improvement and reform. No one school is exactly like another. Middle Start models the best practices of effective schools by providing a set of core beliefs with the flexibility to meet local demands. Jeyson has embraced Middle Start as a set of guidelines for what makes a good school—"tried and true" concepts of what effective middle schools are doing. (Principal of Jeyson Middle School)

Context for School Improvement

Jeyson Middle School is located in the rural, almost suburban, town of Spartanning, Arkansas, which is home to nearly 9,146 residents.⁵ The school is located on a sprawling, well-kept, and highly secure campus that encompasses the elementary (K-2), intermediate (3-5), middle (6-8), and high schools. On the surface, Spartanning looks like a flourishing community. There is a large retail sector, and the housing stock appears solid. However, a number of businesses have closed and jobs are moving away from the area. The principal described Spartanning, a community on the edge of the Mississippi Delta region in southeast Arkansas, as facing hard economic times, with the highest poverty level in the state. On the other hand, the principal maintained, Spartanning is a true community since Jeyson Middle School graduates tend to stay—and they stay because they want to, not because they feel they have no other choice.

Jeyson Middle School has 540 students in grades 6 to 8; 60 percent of them are white, 39 percent are African American; and one percent are Hispanic. Eleven percent are designated as IEP/special education, and 52 percent of the students have free/reduced-price lunch. According to the principal, the 2003-04 school year had the largest student enrollment during his tenure. As described above, Jeyson Middle School is part of a K-12 campus, and each grade level has its own hallway, which facilitates teaming. The school also has portable units, but these are used for meetings, conferences, and an Accelerated Reader lab.

Jeyson has 25 core faculty members for the middle grades, plus an assistant principal, two office staff, a counselor, a counselor's aid, a librarian, and special education and computer lab paraprofessionals. Approximately 91 percent of teachers are certified in the area in which they teach, and one teacher is in the process of national board certification.

The 2001-02 school year was a big transition year for Jeyson Middle School as it changed from a junior high to a middle school, facilitated by a Middle Start coach. Originally the school had grades 7-9; it now has grades 6-8. The entire faculty composition changed: many of the junior high school teachers transferred to the high school; elementary teachers joined the middle school; and some teachers were recruited from other districts. During the first year of transition, the school created a one-year plan that included four major components: integrated curriculum, high expectations for all students, small communities for learning, and parental involvement. These changes were in line with key Middle Start practices. Since then a number of changes have occurred, as mentioned throughout this case study.

⁵ <http://factfinder.census.gov/>—(U.S. Census 2000).

The rest of this case study describes the implementation and impact of Middle Start; how the school addressed the Middle Start goals of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity; and the many challenges the school faced during this process.

Middle Start Implementation and Impact

This section describes the changes in instruction and climate that have taken place at the school with the implementation of Middle Start, as well as the support for the initiative among school leadership. (The impact of Middle Start is also described in the next section, “Addressing Middle Start Goals.”)

Instruction

Block scheduling was implemented in the first year of the transition to a middle-grades school to foster flexibility in teaching and, as one teacher put it, to “force you out of the lecture mode.” In general, there is a great effort in the school to get students involved in hands-on activities, and there are numerous activities fostering students’ higher-order thinking skills. Classrooms throughout the building have more cooperative group work and teaming, and activities are geared towards different learning styles and ability levels. One teacher described Middle Start as impacting her classroom “to the fullest extent!”

Teachers also work together to ensure that instruction is standards-oriented and based on the school’s aligned curriculum. Staff are very aware of the need for curriculum alignment and use team time to coordinate efforts and learn from one another. As an example, the math teachers have common homework assignments, testing, rules, etc. In addition, grade-level department teams meet three times a week to review materials to be covered in class and provide support and assistance to one another.

In addition, the sixth grade, with significant teaming, was structured differently from grades 7 and 8 to respond to the needs of young adolescents and ease their transition to the middle grades. Grade 6 is broken into three teams of three teachers, and students move from one classroom to the next. Students work in four content-area classes; they also take an exploratory course for nine weeks to gain exposure to physical education, health, music, and art and take an ENCORE (extracurricular) class. The team meets regularly, and the three members act as a support network for one another.

Given state mandates about increased achievement for all students, the principal saw a need for more academic rigor and instruction in the school, particularly for students who had scored below proficient on the state test in literacy or math. Subsequently, the schedule was revamped to include more academic courses and fewer electives for struggling students. These students were scheduled into the math or literacy academy classes to receive additional support to help them achieve mastery of benchmarks in these areas.

Climate

The school is a positive place, supported by parents and the community, and the structural changes have helped the school better address the needs of young adolescents. Teachers repeatedly commented that since Jeyson became a middle school, it has become more “kid-friendly” and “student-centered.” As Micah, a student, stated, “[Teachers] encourage me to do well, and tell me I can do it.” A teacher commented:

The school is striving to improve student achievement in comparison with the state average, and this community atmosphere will hopefully affect student achievement positively.

Teachers throughout the building talked positively about the team approach at Jeyson, describing teaming as “at the core of the reform effort.” According to several staff, teaming has added a “new dimension to the way teachers work” and “fostered a positive change in staff spirit.” One teacher said:

In the past, teachers have felt isolated and overwhelmed, but now, by working as a team, teachers work together in a united manner.

Further, since the beginning of the school improvement effort, the teaming sessions have evolved from “gripe sessions” to an “honest time to work on curriculum, alignment, and student learning.” One teacher commented:

Teaming has encouraged more learning about adolescents and ways to improve teaching. Teachers are committed to the academic success and healthy development of their students.

There is considerable parental involvement at the school. Many Jeyson parents are involved in the leadership team and the summer learning institutes. Parents and community members also help with various celebratory events.

Leadership

Principal. Although the principal originally did not have a full understanding of the middle school concept, after reading the research and visiting other schools, he “bought in” and has been a catalyst for change in the school and key to the school’s successful transition from a junior high to a middle school. Organized, upbeat, and optimistic about school improvement at Jeyson Middle School, the principal is a true academic leader, keeping the school focused on instruction. In 2002, he was the district’s educator of the year, nominated in secret by his staff. During the course of an early visit to Jeyson, an AED researcher overheard a parent telling the principal, “We were scared to death at the beginning of the year, but because of you, [changes toward school improvement] worked.”

The principal and assistant principal believe in the Middle Start Principles and Practices and work diligently to implement them. The principal’s strength and commitment are known and appreciated throughout the school. The principal and assistant principal are highly visible in the school—in classrooms, at recess, at physical education classes, and in the cafeteria. The principal stated that his approach to school improvement is to set an example: “If it doesn’t start at the top, it is not going to happen.”

The principal described himself as having become less “autocratic” because of Middle Start. He solicits input from the staff and looks at data and research rather than simply doing what a few individuals want to do. He is also trying to be “results-oriented.” With high-stakes test scores, he believes that, “If it’s important enough to keep score, it’s important enough to win.” The principal initiates informal discussions with teachers before introducing new ideas or strategies and “puts out fires before they get started.”

School leadership team. The school leadership team fosters distributed leadership and true sharing of power in the school and works with teachers in all decision making. For example, all staff were asked to read and comment on the team's action plan and provide one suggestion for improvement. Additionally, the principal has given the team power to make decisions on the use of Middle Start funds for professional development purposes. The team worked extremely hard the first year mapping the entire curriculum for faculty use during planning in subsequent years. In addition, the team studies the school's student achievement data to help staff maintain a focus on improving student achievement. Team members also attend conferences to learn about what other schools are doing and generate new ideas. Team members also participate on the school's teacher teams, which fosters good communication between school staff and the team.

District. The superintendent and assistant superintendent support the school's reform efforts, as do school board members. The assistant superintendent, who retired at the end of SY 2001-02, was particularly supportive in leading the board decision to transition Jeyson from a junior high to a middle school. (The original restructuring of Jeyson was a local board decision, based on building-level input.) The principal stated that the district has been very supportive of the school in general and responsive to particular needs. For example, the district has a literacy coach in place and is hiring a math coach to provide intensive professional development in line with the school's overall professional development plan.

Staff. In addition to strong administrative leadership at the school level, as well as district support, a high level of commitment and buy-in from teachers are what led to the school's largely successful transition to a middle school. With the transition, only seven of the original 40 teachers in grades 7 to 9 remained, and the principal was able to build his staff, bringing in open-minded individuals supportive of the reform effort. The staff has seen minimal turnover in the past two years, and the teachers who have left have either moved or changed professions. No staff have left because of dissatisfaction or dissent with the school administration or the Middle Start process. In 2003, Jeyson added two staff members for the Benchmark Academy⁶ classes in literacy and math. Other staff additions include a new band instructor and new instructors for algebra 1 in grades 6 and 8.

Addressing Middle Start Goals

Academic Excellence

To achieve academic excellence, Jeyson has worked to ensure that teachers are prepared to engage students in meaningful learning. The curriculum has been aligned with the district and state frameworks to determine that no gaps exist. Excellent student work is posted in the building and in classrooms to show the level of work expected from students. The staff works hard to maintain high expectations for all students, and they teach high-quality lessons using best instructional practices to help students meet these high expectations. There is also an afterschool program in which teachers and nearby college students provide tutoring.

Developmental Responsiveness

The principal stated that the school's approach to developmental responsiveness is "more about how we're structured than what we do." In particular, the team structure of the

⁶ Intensive literacy and math classes for students not meeting the state benchmarks.

sixth grade, the nurturing environment, and the engaging, hands-on approach to teaching were designed to ease students' transition into middle grades, as described above. Because of Middle Start, staff have been well trained in the characteristics of the young adolescent, and the school has become more student-centered, moving away from subject-specific and lecture-based presentations to cross-curricular, hands-on lessons. Teachers appreciate the unique energy of the age group and its need for support and patience.

Social Equity

As with the overall Middle Start effort, the principal and assistant principal set the tone and expectations for social equity. The principal was emphatic about providing equitable opportunities for all students. He stated:

Once you are on top of it, you have less to deal with. You have to treat kids equal and fair, or they will call you on it.

Since a large number of African-American students and students from low socioeconomic families failed to meet the proficient level on the state benchmarks before the 2003-04 school year, the principal introduced the Benchmark Academy. The Benchmark Academy was introduced for math and literacy to address these inequities in outcomes and help students reach the benchmarks. Everyone who needs these classes participates. Afterschool tutoring is also available, and students are mentored in class and referred to a counselor if necessary.

Student Achievement

The students of Jeyson are making steady gains in their performance levels. From SY 2000-01 to SY 2002-03, the seventh grade standardized test scores for the combined student population increased from 46 to 54, tying those of the district average and rising above the state average. On the Arkansas Benchmark Examination for literacy and mathematics for grades 6 and 8, the percentage of students scoring at or above proficient level was tied with the district average on all measures and was above the state average on all measures but one (grade 6 literacy). Additionally, the school's attendance rate held steady at approximately 95 percent, nearly even with the district rate and above the state rate.

The following classroom snapshot provides a glimpse within the school walls at Jeyson.

Inside a Sixth-Grade Math Class

Demographics: 22 students: 15 males (7 African American, 8 white) and 7 females (3 African-American, 1 white)

Ms. George's class was already in progress with students working on a math assignment. Once students completed their assignments, they stood quietly and proudly by their desks. A few students were struggling with the assignment, and other students were encouraged to help them finish it. The teacher then wrote word problems on the board and asked students to solve problems in front of the class. Students eagerly volunteered to work on the problems. As one student worked on a problem, the rest attentively sat in their seats, watching and listening. The students got a preview of algebraic equations; however, the next few math problems were more challenging than the fractions, and students got a bit restless. The teacher captured the attention of students by giving them practical, real-life examples of metric equivalencies to reinforce understanding. Then some students asked to come to the front of the class to pick up materials for the next exercise. Once students returned to their desks, the teacher asked students to identify the animals she named and classify them as vertebrate or invertebrate. Then the students determined how best to weigh the animals using the metric system.

General observations: This class was the ideal high-performance classroom where a teacher used a motivational approach to engage students. She moved fluidly from one exercise to another, using scaffolding to foster students' higher order thinking skills. The teacher also used peer teaching and interdisciplinary teaching methods. All students were animated and actively engaged in learning.

Challenges

Although Jeyson Middle School has made much progress toward school improvement over the past four years, the school faces a number of challenges. Chief among these, according to the principal, are state and federal mandates. The principal maintained that addressing these mandates restricts the direction of the school and negatively affects his leadership and staff morale. He attributed these mandates to a "huge disconnect" on the part of legislators and the governor with public schools. Major mandates include the new Arkansas accountability legislation, which is tied to NCLB; the Lakeview Court Ruling, which found the Arkansas School Funding System inequitable; and the Arkansas Benchmarks. All these mandates have been rolled into one act, Act 35, currently in the state legislature.⁷

As a result of the Lakeview ruling, three areas—facilities, course offerings, and teacher salaries—must be addressed across the entire state and all grades, K-12. Act 35 may affect Jeyson Middle School in the following ways:

1. A new mandatory attendance requirement for high schools may require scheduling changes and affect the middle school because of shared staff. In effect, Jeyson Middle School may become a junior high school once again and everything that the school has worked toward—common planning time, teaming planning time, and many other components to support the middle school concept—may come to an end.

⁷ Passed in fall 2004, after the initial research for this case study.

2. Academic Improvement Plans (AIPs) will be used to direct intense remediation, yet these AIPs must differ from previous program plans. These plans must be individualized to indicate areas of weakness and strategies used to address the weaknesses. Legislators also want the AIP to include parents, so that parents (and their children) will become more accountable. Administrators and teachers believe that including parents will be beneficial for the students, teachers, and community. However, including parents into the AIP process and the large number of AIPs required present an entirely new set of issues and challenges.
3. Jeyson may lose funding because the money will follow the students, based on a formula that involves a ration of the student population and the number of low SES (free/reduced-price lunch) students.
4. Non-free/reduced-price lunch students who performed below the basic level and require remediation may slip through the cracks because of funding restrictions—i.e., certain funding may no longer be directed towards all students.
5. Inevitably, there will be a change in teacher compensation/contracts. For example, the proposed “step” raise is different from what is currently in place in the district. It includes pay differences based on bachelor’s and master’s degrees, which currently Jeyson does not have.

The principal summed up the adverse impact of this “mandate” situation:

All of these mandates, AIPs, paperwork, testing, etc. will beat us down. We will no longer be able to focus on learning/instruction. There will be no time, no energy, and no incentive to do anything creative in the classroom. The state is dictating to us—here’s the legislation and this is the law. It’s top-down management.

Teachers also commented on a number of other challenges, such as more children with learning disabilities, more disciplinary problems in the school and more parents who are not involved in their children’s education. Lastly, there is the challenge of hiring a diverse faculty, given the diverse nature of the student body. Currently, there are two minority staff members, the librarian and one teacher. The principal said he would like to attract more minority faculty, but this is difficult. He alluded to the fact that the community of Spartanning is mostly white, and the best African-American teachers may be attracted to a larger and more culturally diverse city, where teacher salaries are greater.

Final Thoughts

Although the school has made academic progress over the years, the school leadership team expresses its concerns about staying at pace with NCLB requirements. School staff want to see a continued rise in student test scores and think it is important to revisit the core middle school concepts, especially teaming, so that new teachers have a solid understanding of what it means to be a middle school. The principal agrees by saying the faculty needs a “refresher” to get back to the basics of teaming, which he views as critical to the success of the school. He declared:

We have to guard against the momentum of the institution trying to shift itself back to what it wants to be—teacher-centered—teachers have the knowledge vs. kids being the actively engaged learners and trying to empower the kids.

On the one hand, the great concern about addressing the academic needs of students living in poverty, coupled with the number and magnitude of the legislative mandates being imposed on this school are almost overwhelming staff and testing their commitment to teaching. However, despite these challenges, the Middle Start coach is enthusiastic about the potential of the school: “The question [at Jeyson] is, ‘How far can we go?’” The principal is also enthusiastic about the school and the important role of Middle Start in improving the school:

Middle Start was a shared vision—there’s no doubt about it! This was a real commitment. That’s the only way to buy into the Middle Start philosophy and do it the way it is supposed to work. We are better off now than we were three years ago. We would love to sustain Middle Start and get even better. But a lot of things are out of our control.

Mt. Olive Middle School

At first teachers wanted to do their own thing. Now they are coming around and working together more. Communication between veteran and newer teachers has gotten better. Middle Start has also raised our level of communication. (Principal of Mt. Olive Middle School)

Context for School Improvement

Mt. Olive Middle School, located in Manchester, Mississippi, is an extremely rural and isolated school. Manchester is home to approximately 129 families, nearly one-half of them living below the poverty line.⁸ Mt. Olive plays multiple roles in the community. It is a landowner of the homes where many students live, as well as a community center after school hours and the site of many family events and dinners for community members. The school's multiple roles are not unusual in small, rural towns in the Delta.

According to the principal, Ms. Thompson, Mt. Olive Middle School is more isolated than the district's elementary and high schools, which share the same campus. Mt. Olive Middle School draws students from Dexter (seven miles down the road) and Capersville (15 miles down the road). Due to this isolation, the principal said, "We feel like we are by ourselves, in a small town."

Mt. Olive has approximately 160 students in grades 7-8. The student body reflects the extreme poverty of the area. About 98 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch. The vast majority (99 percent) are African American; 51 percent are female, and 49 percent are male. The school has 12 teachers—three male and nine female—all of whom are African-American. In addition to classroom teaching, these individuals juggle multiple roles ranging from coach to administrative support. Mt. Olive lost three teachers from year one to year two of Middle Start implementation and added a part-time National Board-certified counselor, a new math teacher, and a new language arts/history teacher. In year three, the special education teacher retired and currently works part-time at the school. The vice principal became the district technology coordinator, although he is still housed at Mt. Olive, and the science teacher now serves as the vice principal. The current principal has held her position for three years and previously was the district curriculum coordinator.

Mt. Olive is housed in an older one-story building. Classrooms are located in the main building and in portable trailers. Before AED's case-study research, there were some school renovations, such as painting and landscaping. While most common areas of the school display student photos, awards, and class projects, a few areas are in substandard condition, such as the teachers' lounge, the lounge restroom, and a storage area for student books. However, the school continues to be resourceful in its use of space. For example, a former storage room located in the back of the school was recently converted to a science lab, with microscopes and dissecting materials. A small gym, slightly larger than a basketball court was built three years ago. A planning oversight

⁸ <http://factfinder.census.gov/>—(U.S. Census, 2000): 129 families live in Manchester, 59 of them below the poverty line.

left out room for bleachers, but the room is used for gym classes and as a venue for school events.

The rest of this case study describes the implementation and impact of Middle Start, how the school addressed the Middle Start goals of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity, and the many challenges the school faced during this process.

Middle Start Implementation and Impact

Mt. Olive Middle School has been involved with Middle Start since its planning year, SY 2000-01. During the initial stages of Middle Start, Mt. Olive Middle School learned about the Middle Start program and the middle school concept. In its first implementation year, SY 2001-02, teachers at Mt. Olive began forming teams and participating in professional development. During the second year of implementation, SY 2002-03, the school dropped teaming and deepened its focus on parental involvement. In its final year of implementation, SY 2003-04, Mt. Olive began to reevaluate its capacity to do teaming.

This section describes the changes at the school in instruction and climate and the support for Middle Start among school leadership. (The impact of Middle Start is also described in the next section, “Addressing Middle Start Goals.”)

Instruction

Several staff exhibit innovative instructional practices. For instance, some classes had interdisciplinary themes (e.g., language arts/history), small-group work assignments, and exercises with rubrics. However, these practices have not been applied schoolwide. According to the Middle Start coach, some teachers still rely heavily upon “directive” teaching practices that foster rote learning. Classes taught by teachers who fully embrace Middle Start have more creative instruction. For instance, one assignment in a language arts class included a portfolio report on a book (see classroom snapshot below). This assignment was multidimensional and comprehensive since it included structure, content, layout, analysis, and scoring. Teachers who use innovative instructional practices report a number of changes among their students, including increased student participation and engagement in class and reduced arguments and fights.

Algebra is now offered for credit, and the new science lab provides students with in-depth, hands-on experiences in the life sciences and some pre-chemistry. The science lab allows for teaching to different levels of comprehension and styles of learning. The school also has two honors English classes, in which students are developing academic portfolios. Technology is infused in nearly every classroom with the use of computers, smart boards, and other technological equipment. Teachers are working on curriculum alignment and examining student achievement data for gaps in learning.

At the beginning of Middle Start implementation, the school focused on piecemeal rather than schoolwide reform. Much emphasis was placed on increasing parental and community involvement and building the school’s technological capacity, rather than improving classroom and teaching practices. As a result, only those staff members who were motivated improved their teaching practices.

In 2002-03, year two of Middle Start implementation, the school slowly started to improve teacher practice schoolwide, particularly to increase innovative teaching in order to engage

students. The implementation of new instructional practices fostered more communication among teachers, which improved climate in the school. Two staff stated:

Middle Start has also raised our communication level. Teachers are interacting and sharing lessons with each other. . . . We can learn from each other.

Middle Start has made an impact We're so focused on our own class. The Middle Start coach sees something that works well in one class and suggests trying something similar in another class. Middle Start gives us an alternate way of thinking.

Teacher teams. Establishing teacher teams has been a challenge for Mt. Olive Middle School for two reasons: early on the staff lacked collective vision, and the small staff size has been a consistent obstacle to teaming. Teachers and a Middle Start coach have expressed frustration about the lack of consistency among teacher teams. For example:

Both frequency and quality of teaming opportunities have been reduced this year. Teachers were not given common planning time as they were last year because of complaints about the loss of individual planning time. Also, the quality of meetings have suffered. Teachers spent most of their time talking about students and yielded no plans, agreed upon actions or resolutions to address problems they were experiencing. (Coach, May 2002)

The limited number of staff at Mt. Olive has made devising a schedule to allow teaming difficult—tried a teaming schedule with just seventh-grade teachers but it wasn't successful. (Coach, May 2002)

By 2003-04, Middle Start's third year of implementation at Mt. Olive Middle School, a sense of commitment among the faculty was apparent. Teachers, as a whole, were more likely to communicate with each other, and teachers were working together more on instruction. For instance, one teacher stated:

Our teachers examine school test scores together and see where the students are weak academically. We found that students were weak in vocabulary. We're strengthening instruction around vocabulary so that more vocabulary words are being taught in all classes.

However, Mt. Olive continues to struggle with teaming. Although communication has generally improved among staff, there remains a strong split between the few teachers who seem really excited and willing to do teaming and those teachers who are rather resistant to the idea of teaming. Size is also a factor. One teacher noted:

We tried to implement teaming on a regular basis, but it just doesn't work out like it should—mainly because we're a small school and staff.

Climate

At the beginning of Middle Start implementation, there was a great deal of tension between less tenured and more tenured teachers primarily due to a changeover in administration. The former principal retired and a new principal joined the school just as Middle Start got underway. Skepticism about Middle Start on the part of veteran teachers was widely apparent, and the staff

lacked a common vision for Middle Start. However, with changes in the school leadership team, communication among staff improved:

We communicate as a staff—we come together, even on weekends. We make lesson plans together—e.g., the history and language arts teachers plan together. We help each other.

The school has developed a positive school climate by creating more in-school and afterschool programs for students, such as academic fairs, assemblies, tutoring, and attendance at the National Junior Honor Society conference. Classroom hallways are lined with student projects—such as a quilt project and photos taken by students. Discipline rates in the school have decreased.

Mt. Olive Middle School has also created a solid base of family and community involvement. The school faculty often commented that Mt. Olive is like family because the faculty and students all know and look out for one another. The school houses a parent center, and draws community support from Dexter and Capersville, where many of its students live. Mt. Olive also initiated a “Back to School Night” and created more sports teams, such as a football team and a cheerleading team—the first ever at the school. The school’s sporting events have fostered much community support.

A growing number of Mt. Olive parents are becoming active in the school and participate in school meetings (including some staff meetings), and community members volunteer their services to tutor students and participate in school-community activities (especially sports and cultural events).

Leadership

Principal. Although the principal, Mrs. Thompson, embraces and supports Mid South Middle Start, she has struggled to fully implement Middle Start because of factions in the school. Mrs. Thompson has identified a number of school leaders to be part of the school leadership team and relies heavily on them for support. However, these teachers are resented by more tenured staff members because they are perceived to be favorites of the principal. This underlying resentment led to inertia early on in terms of Middle Start implementation. However, after changes on the school leadership team, communication among staff improved and moved the initiative forward. The principal declared:

I’ve learned that “school improvement” is a continuum, and Middle Start technical assistance is a continual support mechanism that provides us with information, feedback and assistance as we continue to make strides to improve ourselves.

School leadership team. Prior to working with Middle Start, the school’s leadership team helped write the Middle Start proposal and developed the school’s action plan for Middle Start implementation. The leadership team members made sure that, in the words of one team member, “everyone was doing their part of the action plan.” Team members and the principal kept staff informed. Team members also provided training at staff development meetings and, in general, set a positive tone. Since Middle Start began, there has been some turnover on the leadership team, with two new members being added in summer 2004. Most recently, the principal added a parent to the team and is considering adding a student.

Addressing Middle Start Goals

Academic Excellence

Besides the changes discussed above, there are several ongoing activities, both during and after school, that are designed to support learning for all students. The school has established a junior national honor society with 11 inductees in its initial class. The school has also invested time and resources in building its technology base. In SY 2000-01, the same year the school became involved with Middle Start, the school joined the Challenging Regional Educators to Advance Technology in Education (C.R.E.A.T.E.) program, which has facilitated the integration of technology and instruction in the school. Currently, the school has three mobile computer labs, and each classroom has five computers with access to the internet. A team of C.R.E.A.T.E. students, under the supervision of the district education technologist, have learned computer trouble-shooting skills and help train teachers and fellow students on computers. After school, there is tutoring in math and language arts; there is also a Saturday program offering consumer math and foreign language classes.

Developmental Responsiveness

Early in the implementation of Middle Start, the Middle Start coach indicated that the school needed to pay more attention to developmental responsiveness, particularly in creating positive interactions between teachers and students. The coach described teacher and student interactions as sometimes strained:

Attitudes of faculty, particularly among a few, towards students are at times very negative. Their conversations, planning, and deliberations are often not student-centered.

In particular, the Middle Start coach described an incident of a teacher not allowing a girl to enter the class because of what the teacher considered inappropriate dress (not having her shirt tucked in):

Later it was discovered that the student was very self-conscious about her size—she was taller and larger than most of the students—and felt tucking in her shirt would be too revealing. The teacher did not seem to care about the student's feelings, only that the student complied with her rules.

During the third year of Middle Start, overall relations between students and teachers improved, largely because of the school's efforts to be sensitive to student needs. The school is taking a team approach to dealing with students, working with both students and parents. Students sign behavioral contracts, and the counselor conducts one-on-one and group sessions. According to one teacher, "Most teachers also make home visits—to have a discussion with parents about their child's behaviors." As a result of these efforts, the school has become a place where teachers seem to truly care for their students, and the students know it. As Charles, an eighth grader stated:

My teachers compliment me when I do good work and when I work hard. We have interesting assignments, and that makes it easier to be a student.

Social Equity

Mt. Olive staff are trying to provide a socially equitable environment in the school. Teachers have high expectations of all students, with the principal declaring: “We’re proud of our students’ work and we hold high expectations.” Except for Individualized Education Placement (IEP) classes for approximately 21 students designated as IEP students, students in the school are in mixed-ability classes—that is, most special education students are mainstreamed, and during the 2002-03 school year, two special education students were enrolled in an honors English class. The principal stated, “Our teachers are strong in teaching students of mixed ability.”

However, the school’s lack of financial resources has shortchanged some students of instructional time at the end of the day. Because of insufficient funds to pay for enough buses to take all students home at the end of the school day, bussing is done in stages and some students leave 10 minutes early, which amounts to one hour less of instruction time a week—a significant amount of time over the year.

The school also fosters student respect for and appreciation of diversity and fairness. The staff teaches about various cultures in the Delta, and the school holds a cultural fair and promotes awareness of ethnic holidays (e.g., Cinco de Mayo, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, etc.). Multicultural curricula and themes (e.g., Black history month activities) are infused in some classes, particularly in language arts, reading and social studies.

Student Achievement

Students at Mt. Olive Middle School made some improvement in their test scores from the 2001 to the 2002 spring testing, and even more progress was reflected in the spring 2003 test scores. Mean scale scores in reading, language arts, and mathematics are increasing, and the proficiency distribution of students is moving from minimal and basic into proficient and advanced. For example, from SY 2000-01 to SY 2002-03, Mt. Olive saw grade 8 mathematics scores on the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT) increase nearly 20 points (from 548.6 to 550.3 to 567.5). Student test scores on the MCT have increased on all measures (grade 7 reading, language, and mathematics and grade 8 reading, language, and mathematics) over the three-year period, with the exception of a slight dip in grade 7 reading from 2000-01 to 2001-02. The score rebounded on the 2002-03 test, however. According to the Mississippi Department of Education’s accreditation model, Mt. Olive Middle School did meet its annual yearly progress targets for math, language arts, and attendance, but failed to meet its target growth status.

Many teachers believe that Middle Start has made an impact on student achievement. One teacher stated that if the school had not made a change, she would have moved on to another school. Another teacher commented,

Middle Start is helping to show teachers that middle school is essential. It’s a booster for me, and I hope to learn more strategies to help my students.

The following classroom “snapshot” provides a glimpse within the classroom walls at Mt. Olive Middle School.

Inside an 8th Grade Language Arts/History Class

Demographics: 18 students: 10 female, 8 male; all African-American

The classroom was housed in a trailer and connected to a school library. Students were working on a nine-week portfolio assignment, which consisted of designing a mock newspaper based on *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*. As a part of the assignment, students were actively conducting research based on the book by reviewing on-line and print materials such as journals, newspapers, and encyclopedias. The students were working independently and in small groups. In this particular class, Ms. Davis was simultaneously teaching a grade 8 honors language arts course to two students. The honors class was not a distinct class; rather, it involved separate assignments incorporated in the general eighth-grade language arts class. Ms. Davis provided an example of an honors assignment, a portfolio report on a book, which asked students to create a cover page, table of contents, safety tips, welcome page, a map of the New York City boroughs, observation page, and Venn diagram of characters in the book, etc. The assignment was multidimensional and very comprehensive and included a scoring rubric on which the portfolio assignment was based.

General observations: This observation is typical of classrooms taught by teachers who fully embrace Middle Start. Ms. Davis, a member of the school leadership team and a strong supporter of Middle Start, used a variety of instructional methods in the classroom (e.g., hands-on cooperative learning, group work, independent work, portfolios and rubrics) to engage students in a mixed-ability classroom. Students exhibited a high comfort level in the classroom. There was much teacher-to-student and student-to-student interaction, and students were highly attentive.

Challenges

Mt. Olive Middle School faced a number of challenges in its implementation of Middle Start. Many of these challenges were due to internal rather than external forces and include initial teacher resistance to Middle Start, the lack of a common vision because of numerous reform initiatives, and the small size of the school, as discussed briefly below.

Initially veteran teachers resisted Middle Start. A new principal, Mrs. Thompson, joined Mt. Olive during the first year of Middle Start, 2001-02, and selected newer teachers for the school leadership team. These members were perceived to be closely aligned with Mrs. Thompson and ready to “push her agenda.” This set the stage for conflict between the newer and more tenured teachers, which made it difficult for the principal and staff to move Middle Start forward.

Mt. Olive Middle School has numerous reform initiatives, particularly district-driven initiatives (e.g., technology integration, classroom management, and parent/community involvement). As a result, the school tried to work on all initiatives to the detriment of developing a common vision articulated throughout the school. This made it difficult for the school to focus on one major initiative, such as Middle Start. For instance, the school dropped teaming in its second year of Middle Start but increased family and community involvement. While Mt. Olive made gains in student achievement and school climate, the multiple reform initiatives were not well integrated and the pace of Middle Start implementation has been slow.

Lastly, its small size has hindered the school’s reform work, as described above in the discussion of the challenges the school faced in adopting a teaming structure. The small staff are stretched thin by many roles, and resources available to the school are few. The principal stated:

One of our biggest obstacles is that we're a small school—we have a small staff. The school staff wear a lot of hats. There is not one teacher who plays just one role. The staff is stretched to its maximum capacity.

A teacher commented:

Mt. Olive's staff is so small, and all teachers need to be involved in the implementation of Middle Start. We're devoted to the Challenging Regional Educators to Advance Technology in Education (C.R.E.A.T.E.) program, and there is a lack of time and resources to devote more time to Middle Start.

Final Thoughts

Mt. Olive Middle School has had a difficult time launching Middle Start school improvement. In the beginning there was staff resistance, lack of focus, and limited resources. Initially, the principal and a few teachers seemed to drive the reform effort. Three years later, the communication among staff has improved, most classrooms reflect changing practices geared more toward the developing adolescent, and students are making academic gains.

Mt. Olive Middle School relied on its strengths to overcome challenges. These include a committed principal, dedicated staff, and an active community. The Mt. Olive principal is not afraid to fail and then try again, and teachers, for the most part, happily juggle multiple roles, ranging from classroom instructors to coaches. While the school's small size has been described as a challenge, it also provides an intimate setting for teaching and learning to flourish. The school provides a supportive climate for improvement because, according to one staff member, [after the initial tension between older and newer staff], the staff “sticks together to get the job done”—every teacher knows what every other teacher is doing.

Conclusion

These case studies describe the role of a comprehensive reform initiative in school districts with multiple challenges and few resources. Each school faced a set of challenges and responded accordingly—with varying levels of success. Generally, classroom instruction improved with implementation of Middle Start, with many teachers in the three schools using a wide variety of innovative and developmentally appropriate teaching practices. School climate also improved: schools became more student-centered by increasing support for students and celebrating their work. Buy-in among teachers, teaming, and distributed leadership were evident in the three schools and were the main drivers of change. Staff in Middle Start schools described Middle Start as providing a “shared vision” and an “alternative way of thinking,” and credited the initiative with improving staff understanding of middle-level concepts and the needs of young adolescents, fostering communication among school staff, increasing family involvement, and helping the school maintain a focus on the improvement of teaching and learning despite numerous challenges and limited resources.

However, external forces such as federal and state mandates, fiscal constraints, and lack of community support created serious challenges for the schools. The overall lesson learned from these case studies is that a common vision for school improvement can guide a school's reform efforts in the face of such challenges, but sustainability of school improvement over time must be supported by other internal and external factors, such as the principal's leadership, teachers' commitment to students' learning and their success, and the availability of technical assistance and professional development.



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