

# MIDDLE GRADES PLAYBOOK



**Leading a  
Full-Court  
Press on  
Student  
Achievement**

Part of an Action Kit for Superintendents and Principals

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### THIS PLAYBOOK IS BASED ON THE FOLLOWING RESEARCH:

- ➔ Williams, T., Kirst, M.W., Haertel, E., et al. (2010). *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better*. Mountain View, CA: EdSource.
- ➔ Williams, T., Haertel, E., Kirst, M.W., et al. (2011). *Improving Middle Grades Math Performance: A Closer Look at District and School Policies and Practices, Course Placements, and Student Outcomes in California*. Mountain View, CA: EdSource.



This playbook and all the *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades* research reports are available for download at [www.edsource.org/MGactionkit](http://www.edsource.org/MGactionkit).

EdSource extends a special thanks to **Reed Hastings**, CEO of Netflix, who asked, "Why do some schools do better than others with similar students?" To help answer that question, he provided major funding for the *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades* study released in February 2010 and encouraged us to turn our research findings into a guide and toolkit for district and school leaders.

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## STUART FOUNDATION

INVESTING IN CHILDREN & YOUTH TO CREATE LIFELONG IMPACT

EdSource also acknowledges:

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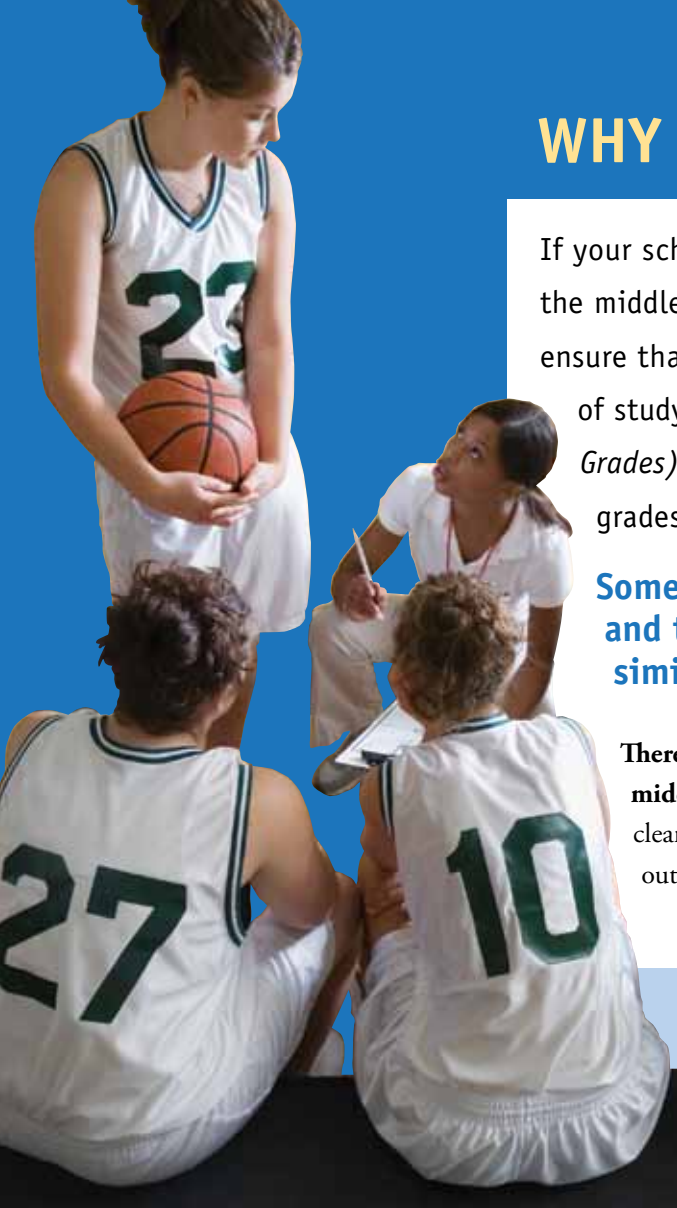
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#### THIS PLAYBOOK IS PART OF A LARGER ACTION KIT THAT ALSO INCLUDES:

- 1 **Principal and teacher survey tools** designed to help you take stock of how well the effective practices in this playbook are being implemented across your school or district.
- 2 **Nine school profiles** that provide a window into how selected schools from the *Gaining Ground* study are thinking about, undertaking, and improving their practice in support of student achievement.



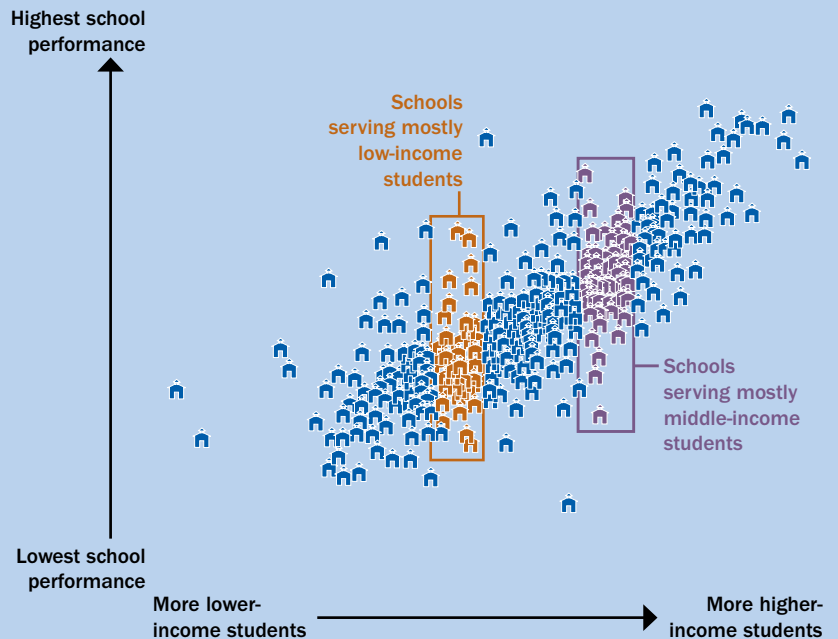
## WHY THIS PLAYBOOK?

If your school system’s goal is to prepare students for college or careers, the middle grades are crucial. In fact, they are the last best chance to ensure that students stay engaged and can undertake a rigorous course of study in high school. Our research (*Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades*) pinpoints specific practices that set higher-performing middle grades schools apart from others serving similar students.

**Some middle grades schools do things differently, and these schools outperform their peers serving similar students.**

**There can be a world of difference in students’ academic outcomes among middle grades schools serving students of similar backgrounds,** as this chart clearly shows. The *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades* study was designed to find out what higher-performing schools do differently.

### Middle Grades Schools with Similar Students Vary Widely in Student Achievement



Includes the 303 schools from the *Gaining Ground* study

**Schools serving students with similar low- or middle-income backgrounds show wide differences in academic performance. School practices and policies can help make the difference.**

Note: To see and read more about the detailed scatterplot of California middle grades schools on which this rendering is based, see *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades* at [www.edsource.org/MGactionkit](http://www.edsource.org/MGactionkit). The scatterplot shows schools’ average 8th grade test scores in English language arts in 2008.

The result is a compelling set of **specific, actionable practices** that set higher-performing schools apart—**regardless of student background or grade configuration.**

#### HIGHER-PERFORMING MIDDLE GRADES SCHOOLS:

- ➔ Keep their eye on the ball through a relentless focus on student achievement. They ...
  - Accept and share accountability for results;
  - Make students' academic success—and their future—job one; and
  - Set measurable achievement objectives for every student.
- ➔ Move the ball down court through practices that support improved student achievement. They ...
  - Implement coherent, consistent standards and curricula;
  - Make data-driven decision-making the norm;
  - Set up a system to track and act on early warning signals;
  - Address students' learning challenges quickly; and
  - Ensure a positive climate for student learning.

## Priority one: An intense focus on student achievement

Beyond the specific practices described in this playbook, the top schools and districts demonstrate a dogged determination and intense focus on improving student achievement and preparing students for high school and beyond. This relentless focus drives these schools' approaches to everything: setting goals, implementing standards and curricula, using assessment data and other information to improve instruction and address students' academic needs, and creating a positive school climate that supports achievement.

**Intensity counts.** It is not that low-performing schools do not do any of these things. Most do some of them, at least some of the time. But their focus is less consistent, less coordinated, less laser-like. In other words, the *intensity* of their implementation is much lower. For higher-performing schools and districts, a full-court press—in which the whole team works proactively and together on multiple shared and measurable goals—is the norm.

## The research behind this playbook

This playbook draws from the findings of *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades*, the largest empirical study of this grade level conducted to date. During the 2008–09 school year, EdSource and our research partners from Stanford University and the American Institutes for Research surveyed:

- ➔ The **principals of 303 middle grades schools** in California;
- ➔ **3,752 English language arts and math teachers** in grades 6–8 in these schools; and
- ➔ **152 district superintendents and five charter management organization leaders** who oversee the schools.

Roughly half of the 303 schools served predominantly low-income students, and the other half served predominantly middle-income students. The schools included all major middle grades configurations—K–8,

7–8, and 6–8—and both public charter and traditional public schools.

We asked these educators about specific practices and policies in their schools, based on extensive review of middle grades research and policy literature.

We then analyzed the schools' reported practices against their achievement on the California Standards Tests in English language arts and math in grades 6, 7, and 8 during that year, controlling for student background and other school differences. We considered schools' achievement outcomes both for the single school year and in light of students' past achievement on state tests (using four years of longitudinal test data).

**Our goal was to learn which practices correlated with higher student achievement.** All materials from the *Gaining Ground* study and subsequent analyses are available from [www.edsource.org/MGactionkit](http://www.edsource.org/MGactionkit).

For many readers, the suggestions in this playbook will not be news. The research literature has discussed best practices such as these for a while. But what is new about this playbook is that it highlights *specific* practices that higher-performing schools implement *more intensely*, based on research that *validates* these common-sense recommendations.

## Leadership is key

Creating and sustaining this focus on student achievement begins with leadership. District leaders and school principals like you are key:

- ➔ Higher-performing schools in our study had **superintendents** who set high expectations and provided focused support in such areas as curriculum, assessments and data, and professional development.
- ➔ **Principals** in these schools drove student achievement gains, orchestrated school improvement efforts, and served as the linchpin between the district and the school.

## Using this playbook

If you walked into a higher-performing middle grades school, what would an intense focus on academic achievement look like? What would the principal and teachers be doing? What supports would the district provide?

- ➔ With this playbook, we hope to help you “see” your middle grades programs anew through the lens of this intense and coordinated focus on student achievement.

Because superintendents, principals, and teachers each play a vital role in this work, this playbook explicitly highlights these different roles and the ways they work together. It is designed to help you focus your action and get the most out of your time and the academic standards that are such a central part of your work. It connects the findings of our landmark *Gaining Ground* research to your work, with practical examples of how districts and schools like yours are “walking the talk.”

We hope this will:

- ➔ Enable you to imagine your own role in leading a higher-performing middle grades school.
- ➔ Make clear the alignment of goals, actions, and shared accountability among the district, the school, and the classroom that is at work in higher-performing schools.

This playbook does not cover every important aspect of a middle grades education, nor is it a detailed “how-to” manual. Rather, it supplements other leadership materials you might already be using that provide a broader perspective. In this spirit, we periodically refer to work by others that may also help you help your students gain ground in the middle grades—and, in the process, better prepare them for high school and beyond.

## And now?

- ➔ Take the brief assessments to learn how practices in your school and district compare with those in higher-performing middle grades schools.

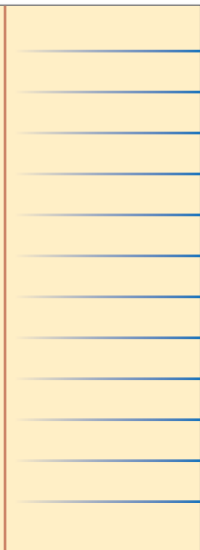
# What happens in the middle grades really matters

**What middle grades educators do matters—tremendously.** The middle grades are heir to a longstanding tradition that emphasizes engaging and responding to the developmental needs of young adolescents. The middle grades also build on a second tradition, more recent in policy emphasis, that focuses on academic standards and standards-based curricula as the foundation for evaluating and improving instruction and student achievement.

These traditions aspire to a common goal: that students will leave the middle grades equipped for a rigorous

and successful high school experience. Researchers, policymakers, and school reformers alike are taking a new look at the middle grades as the last best chance to ensure students remain on such a path.

Taken individually, the recommended actions in this playbook may seem like common sense. But they fit together in a larger whole: a professional culture that is coordinated and focused intently on improving student achievement and that makes the most out of every minute educators have with their students.



# ANALYZE YOUR GAME:

*Are you doing all  
it takes?*



## An assessment of current practice for superintendents and principals

Use the assessments on the next few pages to compare what you're doing with some key practices that distinguish higher-performing middle grades schools.

**First**, take a few minutes to rate the extent to which each of the following actors in your district and middle grades school(s) are implementing the described practices:

- **District leaders** (or charter management organization leaders, if applicable);
- **The principal;** and
- **Middle grades teachers.**

Remember, the question isn't just whether you *do* these things—it's also a matter of how *intensely and consistently* you do them.

Rate **how intensely** each actor implements the listed practices on a scale from 1 to 5:

1. **Not At All.** No one talks about the practice or takes action.
2. **To a Small Extent.** A few undertake the practice on occasion, largely of their own accord.
3. **To Some Extent.** Some undertake the practice some of the time, and discussion is taking place; but implementation is uncoordinated and lacks a shared vision.
4. **To a Considerable Extent.** The practice is an explicit, shared topic for improvement, and most are taking steps to implement it.
5. **To a Great Extent.** The practice is fundamental to the culture, and action is well coordinated.

**Next**, take some time to provide evidence for your ratings. How do you know? What are educators in your district and school(s) *doing*—or *not* doing?

**Then**, as you read the rest of this Middle Grades Playbook, keep your notes in mind. Use them to compare your strengths and areas for growth against the practices identified in the *Gaining Ground* study. The playbook will prompt new ideas for gaining leverage in key areas or for deepening ongoing reforms. It may also validate things you are already doing.

**How *intensely* do DISTRICT LEADERS *do* the following?  
If you are a district leader, how intensely do *you* do these things?**

PRACTICE	RATING* 1 → 5	HOW DO YOU KNOW?
Evaluate the superintendent, in part, on academic outcomes in the middle grades, such as improvements in preparing students for college-prep courses in high school.		
Evaluate middle grades principals, in part, on academic outcomes, such as improvements in student performance on state and district tests.		
Negotiate teacher contracts that place a priority on improved student achievement.		
Provide teachers with professional development that both principals and teachers find useful.		
Set explicit, measurable objectives annually for improving student achievement on state standards tests—across all performance levels and by grade level and subject.		
Play a central role in adopting standards-aligned curriculum programs in grades 6–8.		
Ensure that middle grades curricula and instruction are explicitly designed to prepare students to be “high school ready” (e.g., ready to take college-prep courses).		
Expect all middle grades schools to administer standards-based benchmark tests in each grade and subject.		
Provide a user-friendly, computer-based system to enable school staff to access and review student data—and adequate training to use the data effectively.		
Emphasize early identification of students needing academic support.		

\*(1) Not At All. (2) To a Small Extent. (3) To Some Extent. (4) To a Considerable Extent. (5) To a Great Extent.



**How *intensely* do MIDDLE GRADES PRINCIPALS *do* the following?  
If you are a middle grades principal, how intensely do *you* do these things?**

PRACTICE	RATING* 1 → 5	HOW DO YOU KNOW?
Ensure that teachers receive evaluations they find substantive and meaningful.		
Use student progress and achievement data as part of teacher evaluations.		
Ensure considerable common planning time—and hold teachers accountable for using it to focus on student achievement.		
Ensure that middle grades curricula and instruction are explicitly designed to prepare students to be “high school ready” (e.g., ready to take college-prep courses).		
Ensure that the school has well-defined plans for instructional improvement that are assessed regularly for effectiveness.		
Expect teachers to use the school’s adopted curriculum programs daily.		
Use data frequently to find opportunities for schoolwide and instructional improvement, such as to identify teachers’ professional development needs.		
Meet frequently with teachers—individually, by grade level, and by subject—to review assessment results.		
Ensure that the school provides a range of required interventions, during and/or outside the regular school day.		
Ensure that common planning time is available for teachers to coordinate regular instruction with interventions.		
Set the tone for a positive climate that supports student learning, such as by ensuring that school facilities are kept clean and operational.		

\*(1) Not At All. (2) To a Small Extent. (3) To Some Extent. (4) To a Considerable Extent. (5) To a Great Extent.

## How *intensely* do MIDDLE GRADES TEACHERS/SCHOOL STAFF *do* the following?

PRACTICE	RATING* 1 → 5	HOW DO YOU KNOW?
Communicate to parents the importance of their role in setting high expectations for student learning and behavior.		
Communicate to students and parents the importance of attendance.		
Communicate to students the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning by attending classes, doing homework, trying their best, and asking for help when needed.		
Set goals for student achievement in grade-level and subject-matter teams.		
Emphasize improving student achievement on state tests across all performance levels.		
Collaborate frequently to ensure curricular coherence, such as by discussing pacing, scope, and sequence.		
Emphasize select key standards at each grade and in each core subject.		
Use assessment data frequently to set measurable goals for individual student achievement.		
Use assessment data frequently to identify and correct gaps in their instruction.		
Look for early warning signs as students enter the middle grades, including low test scores, low grades, poor attendance, and poor behavior in prior grades.		
Meet with parents to develop intervention plans for individual students.		

\*(1) Not At All. (2) To a Small Extent. (3) To Some Extent. (4) To a Considerable Extent. (5) To a Great Extent.

# KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL:

*A relentless focus on student achievement*



## Accept and share accountability for results

A relentless focus on student outcomes is best achieved when the district, the school, and the home share a vision of student success—and hold themselves and one another accountable for their roles in achieving it.

*The Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington recently reported on how districts can organize themselves to better sustain improvements in instruction districtwide. It calls on central office administrators to focus unrelentingly on “leadership practices that support improvements in teaching and learning in schools,” with particular emphasis on strengthening the capacity of school principals.*

Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement, 2010

### Do what higher performers do

Higher-performing middle grades schools benefit not only when district leaders set high expectations, but also when their districts function well and provide support and when district leaders themselves are held accountable for the achievement of middle grades students.

Principals and teachers in higher-performing schools take personal and collective responsibility for school improvement. Principals in these schools also place strong priority on supporting the work of teachers—and teachers know it.

Finally, higher-performing middle grades schools are not islands detached from the home. These schools expect parents to be accountable for supporting their children’s achievement and provide parents with strategies for doing so.

#### SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD MEMBERS:



Evaluate the superintendent, in part, based on multiple student outcomes in the middle grades, such as ...

- Improvements in achievement on state standards tests.
- Improvements in performance on state and federal accountability measures.

- More students prepared for a college-prep high school curriculum.
- More students prepared to pass the state’s high school exit exam (if applicable).

#### DISTRICT LEADERS:



Evaluate middle grades principals, in part, based on multiple student outcomes, such as ...

- Improvements in student performance on state standards tests and district benchmark assessments.
  - Whether the school exceeds its state and federal accountability targets for student achievement.
  - The effectiveness of academic interventions.
  - Improvements in the progress of English language learners toward English proficiency.
- ➔ Negotiate teacher contracts that place a priority on improved student achievement and maintain constructive relationships with employee unions.
  - ➔ Support the principal if she or he wants to replace the school administrative and/or instructional leadership team.
  - ➔ Provide teachers with professional development that both principals and teachers find useful.
  - ➔ Provide the financial and human resources necessary for the school to achieve its goals.
  - ➔ Provide practical support to school sites, through district staff who ...
    - Are highly skilled at curriculum and instruction and at financial management.
    - Are very effective at working with middle grades school sites.
    - Visit the school at least once a year.



According to *New Leaders for New Schools*, “highly effective principals build a ‘work hard, get smart’ culture throughout the school community.” This ethic applies not only to students. School leaders insist on “adults demonstrating personal responsibility for improved student outcomes and for supporting students in reaching their goals.”

Evaluating Principals, 2010

#### PRINCIPALS:

- ➔ Ensure meaningful evaluation and professional growth that teachers rate highly. Principals ...
  - Understand and acknowledge excellent teaching.
  - Arrange for evaluation by teacher leaders.
  - Ensure that evaluations are substantive and meaningful.<sup>1</sup>
  - Ensure effective professional development to improve instruction.
  - Build strong relationships with teachers and staff.
- ➔ Ensure that teachers’ time is used well to support instruction. For example, principals ...
  - Allocate a considerable amount of time for common planning.
  - Protect instructional time in teachers’ classrooms from unnecessary interruptions.
- ➔ Expect that instruction and teachers’ time will support improved student achievement. Principals ...
  - Expect teachers’ students to meet academic achievement goals.
  - Regularly communicate to faculty the importance of high expectations for the achievement of all students.
  - Hold teachers accountable for using common planning time to focus on student achievement.
  - Assign teachers in ways that ensure students with the greatest need are served well.
- ➔ Have requirements or contracts for parent participation.

<sup>1</sup> In the *Gaining Ground* survey and analysis, the practice of using student progress and achievement data as part of teacher evaluations was also associated with higher school performance, but only among the roughly half of schools in the sample that served mostly lower-income students.

## TEACHERS:

- ➔ Take responsibility for improving the achievement of their students.
- ➔ Set goals for student achievement in grade-level and subject-matter teams.
- ➔ Clearly communicate to parents what is expected of their children academically and how they are doing. For example, teachers ...
  - Inform parents about the academic standards their students are expected to meet.
  - Send home examples of excellent student work to serve as models.
  - Review state standards test scores with students and parents.
  - Contact parents about students' academic progress.
- ➔ Actively engage parents in the work their students do. For example, teachers ...
  - Communicate to parents the importance of their role in setting high expectations for student learning and behavior.
  - Require students to have their parents sign off on homework.
  - Assign homework that requires direct parent involvement or participation.
  - Provide parents with specific activities they can do to improve their student's academic achievement.

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*The National Middle School Association underscores that schools should reach out to parents as partners. It advises that schools “communicate an expectation that families will take advantage of opportunities provided to support student learning” and that they will actively demonstrate “their belief in the importance of school success.”*

This We Believe, 2010

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## See it in action

- 1 At Vina Danks Middle School, teachers meet individually with students to set goals based on the prior year's state standards test scores. They discuss where students want to go this year and what they have to do to get there. Students fill out a pledge sheet, often in the presence of the principal or assistant principal. Students then take the pledge sheet to their parents or an important adult in their lives and say, “I'm dedicating this to you. This is the score I want to get.” This shows respect and appreciation, and it makes students feel accountable for their academic achievement to someone outside the school. About two weeks before state testing, the principal walks up to students and asks what their goal is; if students don't know, the principal asks their teacher why.
- 2 At East Palo Alto Charter School, the last middle school team meeting of each quarter is held without any administrators so the team can have an open conversation and provide honest feedback. Teachers and support staff discuss what went well, difficulties, and where they need help. The lead teacher then lets the administration know what worked, what did not, and what support is needed.
- 3 Over time, California Middle School has developed a trusting environment in which faculty are willing to learn from one another in the spirit of wanting to improve. Teachers needed to see that if they shared problems they were having, they would get help, not be punished. According to the principal, having conversations and building relationships are part of creating trust, but so is getting results. Teachers could see that developing a team-oriented approach that focused on student learning and engagement boosted test scores and the school's reputation.

How does your school or district compare?

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

## KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL:

*A relentless focus on student achievement*

# Make students' academic success—and their future—job one

The middle grades are the last best chance to ensure that all students are “high school ready” and on track to graduate prepared for postsecondary education and work. One of the biggest findings from the *Gaining Ground* study is that higher-performing middle grades schools design instruction explicitly to set the stage for students' future prospects and make clear to students and parents how much academic success in the middle grades matters.

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*When advising state education leaders on the middle grades, the **Southern Regional Education Board** insists: “Get the mission right. Set out to prepare students for challenging work in high school.” It also counsels that states should monitor progress toward this goal and ensure that middle grades teachers have the content knowledge to achieve it.*

Improving the Middle Grades: Actions That Can Be Taken Now, 2003

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## Do what higher performers do

For higher-performing schools, the middle grades are one step on a path that leads students through high school and, ideally, through some form of postsecondary education.

### PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS ALIKE REPORT THAT, AT THEIR SCHOOL, THEY:

- ➔ Explicitly design curriculum and instruction to prepare students to leave the middle grades “high school ready.” They intend for students to leave ...
  - With strong foundational academic and study skills.
  - Ready to take college-prep coursework.
  - On track to pass the state high school exit exam (if applicable).

### TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF:

- ➔ Emphasize to students the importance of doing well in school. For example, they ...
  - Communicate to students how important middle grades achievement is for doing well in high school and fulfilling future college goals.
  - Communicate to students the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning by attending classes, doing homework, trying their best, and asking for help when needed.
  - Tell all students they can do well in school if they work hard.
  - Provide classroom or schoolwide recognition for improved or high student achievement.

## See it in action

- 1 At View Park Preparatory Accelerated Charter Middle School, daily study hall periods are an opportunity to help students take ownership of their learning. Students are expected to complete two assignments in 60 minutes, and study hall teachers track students' productivity with a spreadsheet. They check on students' grades and whether students complete their homework and write assignments and due dates in their planners. The goal: to teach students how to stay organized, stay focused, and become self-driven. The effect, says the principal, is that "kids become more involved in how they are doing at school. They become the ones who are driving it."
- 2 Los Amigos School is taking steps to ensure its students leave the middle grades well prepared. This year, the nearby high school principal will walk the Los Amigos campus with a couple of teachers and give them feedback, and 7th and 8th grade teachers will take a trip to the high school to see what is expected. Spanish teachers at the dual language immersion school are particularly eager to find out what will be expected of their students in more advanced Spanish classes.

How does your school or district compare?

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**



# Set measurable achievement objectives for every student

Ensuring that students are ready for high school and beyond means setting clear, shared goals for measuring progress. This calls for strong district and principal leadership.

## Do what higher performers do

In higher-performing middle grades schools, educators have clear ideas about what they want to achieve and how they will measure it. This begins with district leaders placing high value on student achievement when setting priorities for middle grades improvement.

### DISTRICT LEADERS:

- ➔ Expect the school to meet or exceed state and federal accountability targets—and teachers in the school know it.
- ➔ Prioritize raising student achievement in multiple ways, such as ...
  - Improving achievement of all students regardless of performance level.
  - Getting as many students to the Proficient level as possible.
  - Raising achievement of low-income, African American, and/or Latino students.
  - Closing achievement gaps on state standards tests between different student groups.
- ➔ Set explicit, measurable objectives annually for improving student achievement on state standards tests in the middle grades—across all performance levels and by grade and subject area.

### SCHOOL LEADERS AND STAFF:

- ➔ Have well-defined plans for instructional improvement and regularly assess their effectiveness.
- ➔ Prioritize meeting their school's state accountability targets and their federal accountability targets for student subgroups.
- ➔ Set measurable goals for ...
  - Improving district benchmark test scores.
  - Raising state standards test scores, by grade level and subject area.
  - Exceeding the state accountability target.
- ➔ Emphasize improving student achievement on state standards tests across all performance levels.

**How does your school or district compare?**

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

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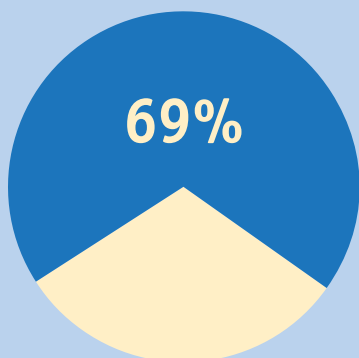
*According to the **Council of Chief State School Officers State Consortium on Education Leadership**, school leadership that is consistent with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards involves communicating and acting from a “shared vision, mission, and goals so educators and the community understand, support, and act on them consistently.” Leaders also ensure these goals are aligned with “school, district, state, and federal policies (such as content standards and achievement targets).”*

Performance Expectations and Indicators for Education Leaders, 2008

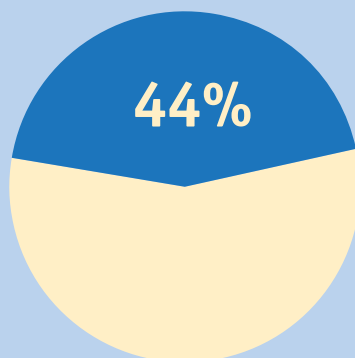


## Room for Improvement: Statistics from the *Gaining Ground* Study

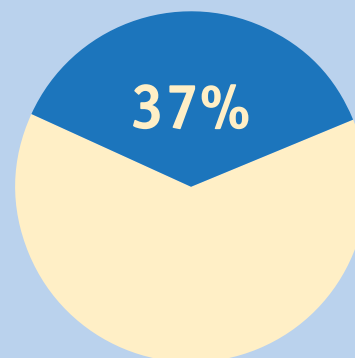
Articulating and following up on clear goals for student achievement is vital but hard work. Many schools in the *Gaining Ground* survey can go further:



Percentage of principals who strongly agreed that their schools emphasize improving student achievement on state standards tests **across all performance levels.**



Percentage of principals who strongly agreed that their schools set measurable goals for state test scores **by grade level and subject area.**



Percentage of principals who strongly agreed that their schools set measurable goals for improving **district benchmark test scores.**

### Quality teachers are key

The *Gaining Ground* survey asked principals to estimate the proportion of their middle grades English language arts and mathematics teachers who have a wide range of characteristics.

#### In higher-performing schools, principals reported that a greater proportion of teachers:

- Fit well into the school culture.
- Have strong subject-area knowledge.
- Have expertise in working with English language learner students.
- Know the state's academic content standards.
- Can map standards to instruction.

- Can use student assessment data to improve learning.
- Can raise student achievement.
- Can collaborate effectively with peers.
- Can make personal connections with students.
- Understand adolescent developmental issues.
- Enjoy teaching in the middle grades.
- Will likely remain in the teaching field.
- Taught at the school last year.
- Were well prepared by their teacher credential programs (regarding new teachers).

How does your school or district compare?

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

# MOVE THE BALL DOWN COURT:

*Practices that support  
improved student  
achievement*



## Implement coherent, consistent standards and curricula

Getting everyone on the same page takes a coherent system. Academic content standards, curricula, and other resources that are aligned with each other provide a common infrastructure through which districts, principals, and teachers can reflect on progress and evaluate what works.

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*“Academic content standards serve as the foundation of state and district education systems,” notes **Achieve**, a national organization whose mission is to help states improve the rigor of their standards and accountability systems. Standards provide “the underpinning for decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment.”*

*Closing the Expectations Gap, 2011*

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### Do what higher performers do

In higher-performing middle grades schools, district officials and principals take the lead in instilling a focus on their state’s academic content standards and in adopting curricula and maintaining expectations for frequent use. These shared resources provide the basis for a coherent instructional program.

In turn, teachers work together using standards and curricula to coordinate and evaluate their instruction. They also make sure that instructional materials meet the needs of their particular students.

#### DISTRICT LEADERS:

- ➔ Communicate high expectations that instruction will closely align with state standards.
- ➔ Play a central role in adopting curriculum programs for grades 6–8.

#### PRINCIPALS:

- ➔ Expect teachers to use the school’s adopted curriculum programs daily.

#### TEACHERS:

- ➔ Collaborate frequently to ensure curricular coherence. For example, teachers ...
  - Discuss curriculum pacing, scope, and sequence.
  - Develop common benchmarks and assessments.
  - Discuss how common benchmarks and assessments relate to instruction.
  - Work together to “break down” the state content standards, such as to identify prerequisite student skills.

- ➔ Emphasize select key standards at each grade and in each core subject.
- ➔ Closely align instruction with state academic standards, adopted curriculum programs based on those standards, and state standards tests.
- ➔ Take into account state standards for English language development.
- ➔ Collaborate frequently to share and discuss student work and to discuss particular lessons that were or were not successful.
- ➔ Adapt the curriculum when needed. For example, teachers ...
  - Modify lesson plans provided in the school’s curriculum program to better fit the needs of students.
  - Augment the curriculum program with additional instructional materials, whether of their own choosing or provided by the school or district.

*The California Collaborative on District Reform highlights the efforts of some California districts to turn around low-performing schools. Standards and curricula provide key infrastructure for these efforts. For example, one higher-performing district identified essential content standards at each grade level to provide greater focus for instruction and professional collaboration and developed periodic district benchmark assessments based on these.*

Beyond the School: Exploring a Systemic Approach to School Turnaround, 2011



## Literacy in the middle grades: Go beyond English language arts class

In the middle grades, students read and write to learn new things. And each subject area introduces special vocabulary and forms of argument that students must master.

Little wonder, then, that **Carnegie Corporation of New York’s** recent *Time to Act* report counsels leaders that their schools should be “intentionally designed to focus on literacy outcomes of students” and that leaders should “involve everyone and hold them accountable to *jointly-constructed literacy goals*.” The new Common Core State Standards in English language arts reinforce this idea through standards for literacy in history and social studies, science, and technical subjects.

### Do what higher performers do

In the *Gaining Ground* study, higher-performing middle grades schools took intentional steps to develop student literacy, both across disciplines *and* in English language arts.

#### SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS:

- ➔ Promote literacy across the curriculum through a structured program.

#### ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHERS:

- ➔ Hold students accountable for reading done outside of class (e.g., through discussion, grades) and explicitly teach students strategies for planning, evaluating, and revising their writing.

#### See it in action

- 1 To work at Granger Junior High, teachers must focus on reading and writing as well as their subject areas. Students are expected to learn the academic language in each subject and use those words in their writing. Each classroom has a word wall that includes the academic language and concepts that the students are expected to understand and use, and teachers regularly question students and expect them to answer in complete sentences using academic language. The school arranges chairs in its classrooms so that pairs of students discuss what is being taught. Over time, the discussions have grown from simply explaining concepts to critical thinking—asking “why” and “how” questions of each other.

How does your school or district compare?

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

## See it in action

1 All middle schools in View Park Preparatory Accelerated Charter Middle School’s charter management organization have cadres focused on specific content, such as English or math. Together, teachers from each subject worked to make sure that the teaching of courses was consistent across the organization. Teachers identified what they wanted to focus on using the state’s test frameworks and academic content standards. This work resulted in common assessments in each grade and subject that students at View Park take four times throughout the year. These assessments drive student interventions. The cadres continue to meet monthly to share lesson plans and other resources.

2 Teachers at Stephen M. White Middle School participate in the Japanese practice of Lesson Study. Teachers take apart and examine all the elements of a lesson and put it back together. They then implement the lesson, come back and debrief, and tweak the lesson based on their experience with it as a group. The principal says this work has produced “‘polished stones’—some actual lessons that teachers can share.” Math teachers, in particular, have embraced the approach and developed common end-of-unit tasks, assessments, and agendas.

How does your school or district compare?

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

## Middle grades mathematics: A foundation for college-prep coursework

A mathematics program that positions middle grades students for college-prep study is vital to student success in high school and beyond and is one goal of the Common Core State Standards adopted by most states.

EdSource’s *Preparation, Placement, Proficiency brief (2011)* draws from a *Gaining Ground* follow-up analysis to explore how California schools in our sample placed 8th graders into Algebra I. It shows that students who scored at low levels on standards-based tests in grade 7 had little chance of scoring highly in Algebra I in grade 8 and often still struggled with grade 7 math content as 8th graders.

Readiness is critical for students to successfully undertake courses such as Algebra I, whether in grade 8 or grade 9. Therefore, middle grades schools must think carefully about course placements and how math skills and concepts build from one grade to the next.

### Do what higher performers do

Our 2011 brief and the original *Gaining Ground* study both make clear that higher-performing schools have explicit goals for advanced math coursework in the middle grades. They also take care in placing students into appropriate math courses.

### SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS:

- ➔ Set measurable goals to increase the number of students prepared to succeed in Algebra I and to increase the proportion of students who score Proficient or higher in the course.
- ➔ Have explicit written criteria and consider multiple factors when placing students into mathematics classes in grades 7 and 8, such as:

- State standards test scores.
  - Prior academic performance.
  - Teacher recommendation.
  - A placement or basic skills test.
  - Parent request or perspective.
  - Student request or perspective.
- ➔ Review placements for academic appropriateness and to ensure wide access to a rigorous math curriculum.

### Big implications

These practices are consistent with those highlighted elsewhere in this playbook. For example, schools cannot evaluate student readiness for different course placements without clearly understanding how skills and concepts—key standards—build from one grade level to the next. District leaders also have an important role. For example, districts can develop shared frameworks for benchmarking performance on key standards and for making student placements, and they can help schools evaluate the results of placements.

How does your school or district compare?

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

*“We must establish the right goals and pursue sound strategies for achieving them,” writes Tom Loveless of the Brown Center for Education Policy. “The goal must not be for students to take an algebra course by eighth grade; it must be for more students to learn algebra.”*

The Misplaced Math Student, 2008

## MOVE THE BALL DOWN THE COURT:

Practices that support  
improved student  
achievement

# Make data-driven decision-making the norm

Higher-performing school systems are learning organizations. Frequent assessments of student learning enable district leaders, principals, and teachers to reflect on and hold themselves accountable for progress toward common goals. Timely access to data and clear understanding of how to use it help educators evaluate student progress. They also enable educators to analyze what is working and what is not and discuss how and when to adjust or change course.

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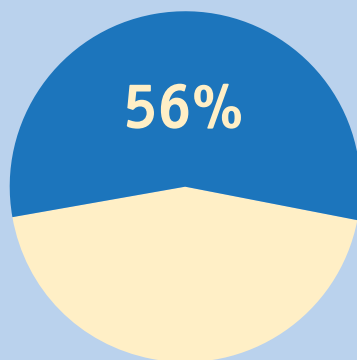
*“Investing in a user-friendly data management system is among the most important actions a school system can take in becoming more data-driven,” counsels a report commissioned by **NewSchools Venture Fund**. Such systems establish the clear expectation that “data use is non-negotiable.”*

Achieving with Data, 2007

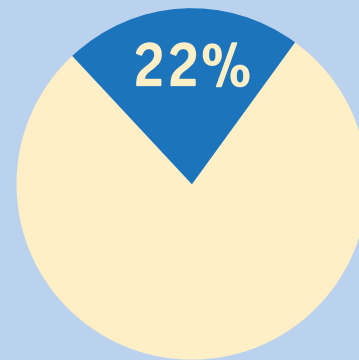
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## Room for Improvement: Statistics from the *Gaining Ground* Study

Despite the importance of a user-friendly data system, many principals in the *Gaining Ground* survey said their districts could do more in this area—especially when it came to support for using such systems:



Percentage of principals who strongly agreed that their districts provide a **computer-based system** to enable school staff to access and review student data.



Percentage of principals who strongly agreed that their districts provide **adequate training** to school staff to enable effective use of it.

## Do what higher performers do

Higher-performing middle grades schools often are in districts that provide the technology infrastructure and training that make data accessible and useful at the school level. Their districts also use data actively to improve the instructional capacity of schools. At the school site, principals and teachers use assessment data extensively to improve student learning and teacher practice.

### DISTRICT LEADERS:

- ➔ Communicate clear expectations that instructional decisions will be data-driven.
- ➔ Expect middle grades schools to use student data to inform instructional improvement. For example, district leaders ...
  - Have standards-based benchmark tests in each grade and subject that all schools must administer.
  - Emphasize regular teacher use of benchmark and/or diagnostic assessments.
  - Allow staff to take an active role in developing, determining the need for, and analyzing the results of standards-based diagnostic assessments.
- ➔ Provide a user-friendly, computer-based system to enable school staff to access and review student data—and provide adequate training so schools can use the data effectively.

- ➔ Provide timely student data to the school, such as ...
  - State standards test data for all students.
  - English language proficiency data for English language learners.
  - Analyses of benchmark test data.
- ➔ Use data at the district level to identify needs for improved teacher practice and recognize exemplary teacher practices.

### PRINCIPALS:

- ➔ Use data frequently to follow individual students, such as to ...
  - Set goals for the achievement of selected students.
  - Develop strategies to help selected students reach achievement goals.
  - Follow up on the progress of selected students.
- ➔ Use data frequently to find opportunities for schoolwide and instructional improvement. For example, principals ...
  - Examine teacher practice and content knowledge.
  - Determine the professional development needs of individual teachers or of all teachers in a subject area.



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*The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, through its Schools to Watch program, describes an effective middle grades school as one where “all teachers use frequent assessments to benchmark key concepts and the achievement of their students” and adults collaboratively analyze student data and make decisions about “effective instructional methods” and “evaluation of student work.”*

Schools to Watch Criteria, accessed 2011

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- ➔ Work with staff to review student data. Principals ...
  - Meet frequently with teachers—individually, by grade level, and by subject—to review state and benchmark test results, including for student subgroups.
  - Review such data with other school administrators and the entire school staff.

#### PRINCIPALS AND SCHOOL STAFF:

- ➔ Use state standards test scores to inform student placement, promotion, and/or intervention.
- ➔ Dedicate time at staff meetings to analyze the achievement of different student groups.

#### TEACHERS:

- ➔ Receive state standards test scores for all students they teach, disaggregated by skill or academic content and subgroup and summarized across the grade levels they teach.
- ➔ Frequently administer benchmark, diagnostic, and classroom-based assessments of student learning to inform their teaching.
- ➔ Use assessment data frequently to understand and support the learning of individual students. For example, teachers ...
  - Evaluate individual student achievement.
  - Set measurable goals for individual student achievement.
  - Help students see steady and measurable progress in their learning.
  - Rapidly identify students for any needed intervention.

- ➔ Set measurable goals for student achievement by subgroup.
- ➔ Use assessment data frequently to identify and correct gaps in their instruction and to collaboratively identify effective instructional practices.

### See it in action

- 1 At Vina Danks Middle School, teachers use data when they work in teams based on subject and grade level. If the data show that one teacher’s students did not understand a concept while another teacher’s students showed a good grasp of the academic standard, the principal expects the first teacher to seek help from the second. In addition, the school sets aside a period during the day so that students from any class who tested poorly on a particular standard can learn the material from the teacher whose students best grasped the standard the first time it was taught. Teachers look at the data and decide who among them would be the best one to reteach the material.
- 2 At Woodrow Wilson Junior High, the principal reviews not only his own school’s benchmark test results, but also the results of the other junior high in his district. If Wilson students are not performing well compared with the other junior high, then Wilson’s principal talks with his peer principal to find out what the other school is doing differently and vice versa.
- 3 At East Palo Alto Charter School, middle grades students take a leadership role in parent/teacher conferences by presenting a self-evaluation. To prepare, students review their test grades, homework, and other work with an adviser. They use this information to write a reflection page for each subject, based on a template provided by the school. They list their strengths, what they are particularly proud of, what they didn’t do well, and their plan for the upcoming quarter. And at their conferences, students let their parents know where they need their help.

**How does your school or district compare?**

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

# Set up a system to track and act on early warning signals

Research shows that many students at the greatest risk of dropping out or struggling in high school can be identified in the middle grades—or even earlier. And they can be identified using information that districts and schools already collect.

*Even as early as 6th grade, middle grades students who attend school no more than 80% to 90% of the time face “greatly diminished graduation odds,” writes **Robert Balfanz** of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University. “Middle schools must monitor attendance more carefully,” he writes, and “every absence needs to elicit a response.”*

Putting Middle Grades Students  
on the Graduation Path, 2009

*In a 2008 study, **Andrew C. Zau** and **Julian R. Betts** were able to predict which students would successfully pass California’s high school exit exam “by grade 4 almost as well as [by] grade 9.” They write that “there is nothing stopping middle or even elementary school administrators” from paying attention to academic and behavior data on their students to quickly provide support to those at risk.*

Predicting Success, Preventing Failure, 2008

## Do what higher performers do

Higher-performing schools leave little to chance when students enter the middle grades. They pay attention not only to students’ academic records, but also to behavior and attendance.

### DISTRICT LEADERS:

- ➔ Emphasize early identification of students needing academic support and address the needs of students who are two or more years below grade level.

### ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF AND TEACHERS:

- ➔ Look for early warning signs as students enter the middle grades and communicate with elementary teachers about any students who raise concerns. Key indicators include ...
  - Scores on state standards tests;
  - Language arts and math grades;

- English language development test scores and other English proficiency information;
- Attendance records; and
- Behavior reports.
- ➔ Implement classroom and intervention strategies to address academic weaknesses among incoming students.
  - Practices for academic support and intervention take many forms, depending in part on the time that schools set aside for this purpose. See the “Address students’ learning challenges quickly” section on page 24 for more details.



*“Staff members need to learn everything they can about new students,” according to the **National Association of Secondary School Principals**. The association recommends a comprehensive database for information gathered about students—such as grades, test scores, teacher and parent insights, and any special talents—to inform the decisions schools make about how to serve students.*

Breaking Ranks in the Middle, 2006

## See it in action

1 At Stephen M. White Middle School, returning students and incoming 6th graders receive summer packets in English and math to help prevent “slippage” in learning during the summer months. But the packets also help reveal which students need help and which ones would benefit from enrichment activities. For example, in English, students read a book and respond in writing to questions about it. If students make a strong case for that book, teachers and administrators can see they are literate and provide enrichment opportunities. If students do not make a strong case, the school can place them in a core class with extra support. And if students are very weak, the school can provide intervention.

2 Before students enter La Merced Intermediate School, their elementary teachers fill out information sheets for each student giving their academic history. Teachers also share challenges that students may face; special needs they may have; and their interests, such as drama or music. These sheets are used to inform teachers and counselors and to recruit students for drama and music classes. Feeder elementary school teachers also accompany their students on a visit to La Merced.

**How does your school or district compare?**

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**



## MOVE THE BALL DOWN THE COURT:

Practices that support improved student achievement

# Address students' learning challenges quickly

Using all the data at your disposal to identify students who need extra support is the first step in ensuring these students are successful in school. Schools then must act quickly to keep students' future academic opportunities open. This requires time—for extra help and for teachers to coordinate extra help with the regular classroom.

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*"Failure for struggling students is not an option, and teachers do not allow students to avoid getting the help they need." The California Department of Education's **Taking Center Stage, Act II (TCSII)** web portal calls attention to the many forms that additional help can take, including progressively more intensive interventions, before- and after-school programs, tutoring and homework centers, and Saturday and summer classes—and points out that scheduling is key to making room for both extra help and other priorities such as electives. Likewise, careful use of time is vital for educators themselves to stay on the same page and coordinate instruction. (Accessed 2011)*

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## Do what higher performers do

Higher-performing middle grades schools find time to help students master content, whether during, before, or after the school day. It is little wonder, then, that exceeding the minimum amount of instructional time required by the state was associated with higher school performance in the *Gaining Ground* survey and analysis.

In these schools, regular instruction is an opportunity to address students' academic needs before challenges warrant intervention. And what happens during intervention is coordinated with the goals and pace of regular instruction.

Some supports may be voluntary, but higher-performing schools do not leave extra help to chance. They require it when needed—and they get parents involved in setting academic goals for their children. And for these schools, taking a proactive stance toward student support is not just about academics: it's also about attendance and behavior.



### SCHOOL LEADERS AND STAFF:

- ➔ Provide a range of required interventions—and the more the better—such as ...
  - Extra instructional time during the regular school day, perhaps in place of an elective.
  - Short-term interventions that run concurrently with class.
  - Intervention time outside the regular school day.
  - Intersession or summer courses.

- ➔ Provide one or more additional forms of voluntary academic support, such as ...
  - Support offered during nonclassroom time (e.g., lunch, after school).
  - Tutorials or classes as part of AVID, GEAR UP, and similar programs.
  - An online tutorial or intervention program.

#### TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND SCHOOL STAFF:

- ➔ Meet to develop intervention plans for individual students.

#### SUBJECT-AREA TEACHERS:

- ➔ Pay attention to and take proactive steps to address students' academic needs. For example, they ...
  - Preteach lessons (e.g., lead some students through a lesson the day before).
  - Differentiate their teaching for individuals or groups of students during regular instruction.
  - Use flexible student groupings.
- ➔ Meet extensively with intervention teachers to coordinate instruction.

## English language learners in the middle grades: Meeting the double challenge

English language learners in the middle grades must do “double the work” to master both the English language and academic content, notes a 2007 report of the same name. And a 2010 report by **Aida Walqui** and her colleagues found that, in California, even middle grades schools within the same district sometimes provide these students with varying access to grade-level academic content.

The *Gaining Ground* study did not examine the outcomes of English language learners specifically. However, some practices that set higher-performing schools apart overall pertained directly to these students. These findings provide limited but valuable insight into how these middle grades schools, guided by strong district expectations, make decisions on behalf of English language learners.

#### Do what higher performers do

The districts of higher-performing schools underscore the importance of understanding who English language learners are and what they need, and they expect these students to develop English language proficiency *and* learn subject-matter content. The actions of higher-performing middle grades schools are consistent with this emphasis.

#### DISTRICT LEADERS:

- ➔ Ensure that policies and resources are in place to serve English language learners.
- ➔ Emphasize the importance of English language development and subject-matter learning by English language learners and address the needs of those who are new immigrants.

➔ Expect middle grades schools to consider a range of factors when placing non-newcomer English language learners into English language arts and mathematics classes, such as ...

- Amount of time in a U.S. school.
- Language proficiency in English.
- Language proficiency in native language.
- Knowledge of academic subjects.
- Previous academic performance as demonstrated by class grades.
- Recommendations from a prior school or teacher.
- State standards test scores.
- District assessments.
- Input from parents.

#### PRINCIPALS:

- ➔ Are trained in the evaluation of instruction for English language learners and understand the principles of second-language acquisition.

#### ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF AND/OR TEACHERS:

- ➔ Review prior English language proficiency information for English language learners entering the middle grades.
- ➔ Evaluate English language learner students' English language proficiency.
- ➔ Ensure that more fluent English language learners receive more exposure to the school's full curriculum.

**How does your school or district compare?**

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

#### PRINCIPALS:

- ➔ Ensure that common planning time is available for this coordination to take place.

#### FINALLY, SCHOOL STAFF:

- ➔ Watch out for and respond to student attendance and behavior problems if they arise. For example, they ...
  - Review student data and devise solutions as attendance and behavior teams.
  - Analyze suspension data to ensure criteria are fairly applied to all students.



#### See it in action

- ➊ At Granger Junior High, students who need more than an occasional support class—particularly those who fail a quiz—go to required after-school tutoring. At first, parents were skeptical about having to change their pick-up schedules for their children. But the former principal took time to explain the educational research behind the school’s approach and its goals for their children. “It’s not because your kids are being punished,” she told the parents. “It’s because sometimes they just need more time.” Parents began seeing the results in their children’s progress and now tell their children the importance of attending, behaving, and getting help when needed, the current principal says.
- ➋ At Los Amigos School, students who need extra help typically get that assistance during the school day instead of before and after school because so many students arrive and leave in buses. Each day, one period is set aside to reteach material to flexible groupings of students who have similar needs. Based on data, these intervention sessions are taught by the teachers who were the most successful in teaching the material initially. Students who do not need additional help take part in “extension” activities, such as a robotics club. The school also provides one-on-one tutoring during lunch.
- ➌ La Merced Intermediate School redefined the counselor role in support of academic achievement. An administrator handles discipline so that counselors can focus on supporting students and their families. Counselors are assigned a group of students that they stay with through their entire three years at the school. That way, counselors get to know their students and their families and build on that relationship from year to year. Teachers and counselors together identify individual students who need additional help.

**How does your school or district compare?**

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

## MOVE THE BALL DOWN THE COURT:

Practices that support  
improved student  
achievement

# Ensure a positive climate for student learning

A positive climate is necessary for an intense, schoolwide focus on improving academic achievement to take root and flourish. Students are the beneficiaries when school is a good place to work and learn.

*According to the **Council of Chief State School Officers State Consortium on Education Leadership**, school leadership that is consistent with the **Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards** involves addressing any challenges to “the physical and emotional safety and security of students and staff that interfere with teaching and learning.” For example, leaders get everyone from the school to the home involved in “developing, implementing, and monitoring guidelines and norms for accountable behavior.”*

Performance Expectations and Indicators for Education Leaders, 2008

## Do what higher performers do

In higher-performing schools, middle grades students have opportunities to explore their talents beyond core academic subjects. In these schools, a higher proportion of students:

- ➔ Participates in extracurricular activities and electives, including the arts and exploratory courses or mini-courses.

A climate in which attendance and positive behavior are the norm is not an accident. It is purposeful and something for which school staff hold themselves and students accountable. Perhaps because of this, teachers in higher-performing schools report spending less time in class managing student behavior.

### PRINCIPALS:

- ➔ Set the tone for a positive climate for academic achievement. For example, principals ...
  - Ensure that school facilities are kept clean and operational.
  - Ensure a safe campus environment.
  - Provide support for classroom discipline and management.
  - Ensure that all passing and lunch periods are supervised.

### SCHOOL STAFF:

- ➔ Set and enforce clear rules for student behavior and attendance, such as ...

- Minimum standards (e.g., behavior, academic, participation) that students must maintain to remain at the school.
- A clearly defined dress code.
- A zero-tolerance policy for drugs and weapons on campus and for any type of bullying.
- Required detention time for tardy students.
- ➔ Send a clear message to students and parents about the importance and value of attendance and behavior. For example, school staff ...

- Communicate the consequences of frequent absenteeism, such as academic failure.
- Communicate to students and parents the school's rules and policies on student behavior.
- Recognize excellent student behavior and attendance publicly.
- Provide incentives—such as front-of-line passes, parties, or special events—to reward positive behavior.

#### TEACHERS:

- ➔ Take personal and collective responsibility for attendance and behavior. For example, they ...
  - Accept, with administrative staff, shared responsibility for improving student attendance.
  - Collaborate to develop strategies to address student behavior and/or attendance issues.
  - Personally contact students who cut their classes.

#### See it in action

- 1 At California Middle School, student engagement is key not only to learning, but also to encouraging students to come to school. Four in five students arrive on buses from other parts of the city, and many transfer

from a light rail train along the way. The principal says attendance is best handled by making school a positive place where students feel they are part of a big family. This means “personalizing the learning environment” on a day-to-day basis. Teachers interact with students in the hallways between classes and greet them as they come into their classrooms. And administrators visit classrooms regularly, making themselves visible as instructional leaders.

- 2 An important role at Woodrow Wilson Junior High is the student advocate, who acts as a liaison between the school and the community. One key part of the advocate's job is student attendance. Both the advocate and Wilson's principal emphasize to parents that if students don't come to school or come late, they can fall behind. The district supports this work by offering a reward of \$1,000 for every month that Woodrow Wilson Junior High has 96% or better attendance. The school uses this money to provide incentives, such as school rallies and rewards for students with good attendance and behavior.

**How does your school or district compare?**

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**



## NEXT STEP: Put together your own game plan

Throughout the United States, some schools are doing much better than their peers at improving the academic success of middle grades students. These schools and their districts have made this improvement their top priority, with student outcomes as the measuring stick. These educators understand that students' success or failure in the middle grades has the potential to make or break what happens for them as they enter high school and continue down the path toward adulthood.

Improved student achievement in the middle grades is more likely when the professional culture at **all levels** is intensely focused and well coordinated around student learning and when there is commitment and leadership over time. **This is true regardless of the background of your school's students and regardless of its grade configuration or classroom organization.**

District leaders and school principals like you are key.

- ➔ **Superintendents and districts** can set clear goals and hold themselves and others accountable for meeting them, supported by a well-coordinated infrastructure of standards-aligned curricula, assessments, data, professional development, and other resources.
- ➔ **Principals** can drive a clear vision for the school in which a strong future orientation, measurable goals, regular assessment and reflection on data, time for common planning, and mutual accountability for improvement are non-negotiable and fundamental to the professional culture.

### And now?

Go back and review the assessments you took at the beginning of this playbook.

- ➔ How does what you wrote compare with the practices that set higher-performing middle grades schools apart? What opportunities do you see for improving your game plan? Can existing strengths and ongoing reforms be deepened or leveraged?

- ➔ Start the conversation in your district or school about your mission and game plan for the middle grades.

The other materials in this Action Kit provide additional resources to further your conversation.

- ➔ Need to know more about how extensively the practices in this playbook are being implemented in your school or district? The **principal and teacher survey tools** will help you take stock of your existing foundation for improvement and get people talking.
- ➔ Need to see the practices in action? The **school profiles** provide a window into how selected schools from the *Gaining Ground* study are thinking about, undertaking, and improving their practices.
- ➔ Interested in digging deeper into the research? You can find **all the *Gaining Ground* study materials** at [www.edsource.org/MGactionkit](http://www.edsource.org/MGactionkit).

*EdSource will keep updating our website with additional materials and tools as they become available. And if you have ideas for tools that would be particularly helpful for your work, please let us know.*



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: People and Organizations

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  - **Elena Esquer**, Los Amigos School (Palmdale Elementary School District).
  - **Nikolas Howard**, View Park Preparatory Accelerated Charter Middle School (ICEF Public Schools).
  - **Eugene Kerr**, La Merced Intermediate School (Montebello Unified School District).
  - **James Noble**, Stephen M. White Middle School (Los Angeles Unified School District).
  - **Mary Rose Peralta**, Granger Junior High School (Sweetwater Union High School District).
  - **Laura Ramirez**, East Palo Alto Charter School (Aspire Public Schools).
  - **Ellen Ransons**, Vina Danks Middle School (Ontario-Montclair Elementary School District).
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## **Middle Grades Action Kit**

### **How are *you* using the Action Kit?**

Dear middle grades leader,

**Thank you** for making EdSource's *Middle Grades Action Kit* a part of your work. Our goal is that this suite of tools will help you drive important conversations about intensifying your district's or school's focus on improving student learning and outcomes in the middle grades.

**We hope you will take a few minutes to let us know how your district or school is using the Action Kit.**

This information will help EdSource better understand how the Kit is being used and report to our funder, the Stuart Foundation, about the importance of their support.

Very sincerely,

Mary Perry  
EdSource Deputy Director

Matthew Rosin  
EdSource Senior Research Associate

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*Your name:*

*Your email:*

*Your school district or organization:*

*Your school (if applicable):*

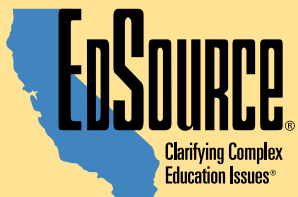
*City/State:*

*1. How are you using the Action Kit?*

*2. How has the Action Kit had an impact on your work?  
(Please continue on additional sheet if needed.)*

*Yes, EdSource can contact me with any follow-up questions.*

Please return this form by fax to (650) 917-9482; by email to [edsource@edsource.org](mailto:edsource@edsource.org); or by mail to EdSource / 520 San Antonio Road, Suite 200 / Mountain View, CA 94040.



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