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Michael DiCicco  
*Northern Kentucky University, diciccom1@nku.edu*

Ryan Alverson  
*Northern Kentucky University, alversonj1@nku.edu*

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## **Examining Teaching and Learning Environments among Kentucky Schools to Watch and Non-Schools to Watch Schools Using TELL Survey Data**

Michael DiCicco

Ryan Alverson

Northern Kentucky University

### **Introduction**

In 2017, the state of Kentucky distributed the Teaching, Empowerment, Leading, and Learning (TELL) survey to gain an understating of the learning environments in Kentucky schools. Many of the items on the TELL survey were similar to the Schools to Watch (STW) criteria and rubric. Researchers were interested in the teaching and learning conditions in Kentucky middle schools that contributed to successful school environments as defined by the Schools to Watch criteria and to use results from the TELL survey to see what high scoring schools were doing well according to the teachers and principals that completed the survey. Researchers compared the 12 STW schools in Kentucky to other top scoring schools using TELL survey and STW report data. Findings suggest Kentucky STW schools are performing slightly above average compared to all other middle schools in all areas of the TELL survey. However, only two STW schools scored in the top 10 of the survey and the top scoring schools performed much better on the survey. Researchers discuss the implications of these results and suggest areas for future research.

Schools to Watch (STW) is a program developed by The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform to highlight middle schools that are highly successful in educating and developing young adolescents. STW schools are meant to be exemplars of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and middle grades organizational structures and processes (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2016). Middle schools who wish to be named STW go through a rigorous process including an in-depth self-study, an application review, and a site visit from their state STW team. From 2016-2018, twelve schools in the state of Kentucky were named and/or re-designated as Schools to Watch. Also, in 2017, Kentucky launched the Teaching, Empowerment, Leading, and Learning (TELL) survey, developed by the New Teacher Center (2020) which focused on the teaching and learning conditions in Kentucky schools. The survey was distributed to all administrators and teachers across Kentucky and collected data across several categories, including Time Management, Facilities and Resources, Community Support and Involvement, Managing Student Conduct, Teacher Leadership, School Leadership, Professional Learning, and Instructional Practices and Support (New Teacher Center, 2020).

Many of the items on the TELL survey focused on concepts and practices featured on the STW criteria and rubric. As such, researchers expected schools that performed well according to STW criteria to have also scored well on the TELL survey. The purpose of our study was to examine the teaching and learning conditions in Kentucky middle schools that contributed to successful school environments as defined by the Schools to Watch criteria, and to use results from the TELL survey to see what high scoring schools were doing well according to the teachers and principals that completed the survey.

## **Literature Review**

### **Highly Successful Middle Schools**

Research over the last several decades has shown successful middle schools adopt practices that are developmentally responsive to adolescent students and their needs. (Alexander, 1968; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; McEwin & Greene, 2010; NMSA 2010a, 2010b). These practices are fundamental to the middle school concept. Additionally, concerning middle school leadership, principals must be informed of the programs and practices associated with the middle school concept, and make developmentally appropriate practices that support adolescent development integral in their approaches to creating positive learning environments within their schools (Clark & Clark, 2007). School leaders can foster learning environments associated with high performing and successful schools through embracing the middle school concept, promoting a culture that supports developmentally responsive practices, making learning a top priority, and being committed to high expectations and success for all students (2007). Furthermore, principals who value collaboration and shared decision making, support their teachers, and foster relationships among all stakeholders, are helping to create the type of positive learning environments that are important for students' learning and success (2007). Finally, highly successful schools have a culture that focus on high teacher quality, use data to drive decision making, and implement programs that complement the core curriculum (Perez & Socias, 2008).

### **TELL Survey**

Developed by the New Teacher Center (2020), the Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) survey is an anonymous, online survey designed to collect information from educators in elementary, middle, and secondary schools concerning a variety of factors in the learning environment and working conditions in their schools. Many states have utilized this survey to assess their school's learning environments including Kentucky, Ohio, Oregon, and Massachusetts. The survey has 8 major sections (See Table 1).

**Table 1***TELL Survey Categories and Descriptions*

TELL Survey Categories	Category Descriptions
1. Time	Schools protect teachers' time to plan, collaborate, and provide effective instruction
2. Facilities and Resources	Facilities and resources are provided for teachers to deliver quality instruction.
3. Community Support and Involvement	Parents, guardians, and community members are engaged in substantive ways to support and influence the school.
4. Managing Student Conduct	Schools implement policies and practices to address student conduct issues and to ensure a safe school environment.
5. Teacher Leadership	Teachers are involved in decisions that impact classroom and school practices.
6. School Leadership	School leaders maintain trusting, supportive environments that advance teaching and learning.
7. Professional Learning	Quality learning opportunities are available for teachers to enhance teaching and learning.
8. Instructional Practices and Support	Schools provide support for data analysis and teachers' collaboration to improve teaching and learning.

*Note.* Categories and descriptions were accessed from New Teacher Center (2020).

Within each section, participants were asked several questions using a Likert-type scale and simple “yes” or “no” responses. For example, in the Time category of the survey, participants were asked to respond to the following prompt, “class sizes are reasonable such that teachers have the time available to meet the needs of all students.” Participants were asked to rank the items on a five-point scale, which included “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” “strongly agree,” or “don’t know.” Examples of items that required “yes” or “no” responses included, “teachers have sufficient access to appropriate instructional materials,” in Facilities and Resources category, and “parents/guardians are influential decision makers in this school,” in the Community Support and Involvement category.

There is a positive association between teaching conditions and student achievement, as well as teacher retention (New Teacher Center, 2020). The New Teacher Center argues that in order to teach well, “educators need supportive school environments where they feel valued, trusted and empowered to collaborate, in order to improve instruction” (New Teacher Center, 2021, The Case for TELL section, para. 4). Their research also suggests being aware of teaching conditions allows for schools to improve student learning and teacher retention. By gathering data regarding teaching conditions within schools, school personnel will be able to make better informed decisions in these areas.

### **Schools to Watch**

Schools to Watch (STW) is a national program created by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (the Forum) to identify and celebrate highly successful middle schools. These are schools who show they are able to meet the unique needs of young adolescents. Any state that desires can enroll with the Forum so it may form a team to recognize and name middle schools in their state. Middle schools in states enrolled in the STW program, who support the mission and vision of the Forum, and believe they can show evidence in the four pillars of the STW criteria can apply to become a STW. Prospective schools first complete a self-study using the STW rubric. An anonymous survey is sent out to all staff asking teachers to rate their school based on components on the STW rubric. The report is then sent to administrators. Once a school feels they are implementing the criteria at a high level they submit an application to the state’s STW team. The application is reviewed and if it is scored high enough, a site visit is conducted by the state STW team. Once named, schools can re-designate every three years. The re-designation process is the same except schools are asked to address how they have made progress in previously noted areas for improvement. Currently there are 17 states with STW teams and over 560 middle schools that have been named STW schools.

The STW rubric is centered on four pillars: Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and Organizational Structures. Academic Excellence involves holding high expectations for students to meet high academic standards, aligning curriculum and instruction with those high academic standards, and a curriculum emphasizing a deep

understanding of important concepts (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2016). For example, “teachers provide instructional strategies and include a variety of challenging and engaging activities related to skills being taught.” These may include direct instruction, cooperative learning, project-based learning, and hands-on learning, among others. Teachers also use a variety of methods for assessment and monitoring of students learning, including formative assessments to check for understanding of key concepts. Additionally, “students are provided support have multiple opportunities to succeed,” including collaborative resource models and support and intervention classes (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2018, p. 2-4).

Highly successful schools are developmentally responsive and thus sensitive to the unique intellectual, ethical, social, and physical developmental challenges of young adolescents (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2016). One example from the rubric is that the “curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents.” This would include students that are “routinely provided opportunities in classes to talk about issues in their own lives, their community and their world, and students are provided opportunities to participate in decisions about topics of study” (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2018, p. 5-6).

Social Equity involves fairness and respect and lays the foundation for equal access to educational experiences. In this sense, equity means that the educational system is fair for all students. Middle schools should be places in which all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender can achieve and have equal chances at success in life beyond school (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Educators must be knowledgeable about the inequities that exist among students in school (Swalwell, 2013). One example from the rubric would be that “faculty and administrators are committed to helping each student produce proficient work.” Another example is that “teachers differentiate instruction in order to give each student equal opportunity to comprehend the standards-based curriculum” (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2018, p. 8).

Schools are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2016). One specific example of this from the rating rubric is that a shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does, drives every facet of school change, and the shared vision drives constant improvement” (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2018, p. 11). Other examples are the “school staff holds itself accountable for student success,” and the “school collects, analyzes, and uses data (e.g., attendance, academics, behavior, parent surveys, etc.) as a basis for making decisions” (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2018, p. 12). Interdisciplinary teaming, flexible scheduling, and advisory programs are other examples of middle school organizational structures. Interdisciplinary teaming involves the physical space in which students learn, as well as the grouping of students, and the scheduling of instruction (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). It usually involves “two or more teachers working with a common group of students for a shared block of time, ideally in a proximate space. Effective teams serve as the foundation for a strong learning community” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p.51). Common planning is an associated feature of teaming and helps teachers communicate and establish effective practices for their teams (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Having flexible schedules, which provides teachers with the ability to adjust daily schedules based on student needs, is another integral feature of successful middle schools

(2021). With flexible scheduling, schools can optimize resources and be more efficient in meeting the needs of their students (Daniel, 2007). Furthermore, flexible scheduling allows teachers to be more creative with the use of their time (2007). Additionally, advisory programs allow for students to form connections with teachers and focus on things, including social and emotional skills and those areas outside of traditional academic subjects (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Research on STW schools and programs has been sparse. Some studies have found a slight increase in academic achievement of STW schools compared to a random sample of non-STW schools. (Cook et al., 2009; Falbe, 2014; Flowers et al., 2017; Mertens & Falbe, 2021; Tracy, 2018). Other studies have focused on characteristics of STW programs such as implementation of practices (Cook & Faulkner, 2010; Kehoe, 2016), perceptions of grading practices (Coates, 2013), ESL programs (Walker, 2017), and social equity and developmental responsiveness (Parke et al., 2017).

McEwin and Greene (2010, 2011) conducted a national survey to middle school principals on the implementation of practices and structures of highly successful schools as compared to a random sample of public middle schools. Highly successful middle schools were identified as schools that had been designated as a STW school or a Breakthrough Middle School from the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Highly successful middle schools were found to implement more best practices such as interdisciplinary teaming, common planning time, and advisory compared to other middle schools in the sample.

Two studies have examined STW schools in the state of Kentucky. Cook and Faulkner (2010) examined common planning time for two Kentucky STW schools and found effective common planning time implementation included effective leaderships, a shared vision and clearly defined goals. Cook, Faulkner, and Kinne (2009) examined the perceived level of implementation of practices and compared academic achievement of 10 STW schools to 40 random stratified middle schools not named STW in Kentucky. Researchers found STW schools had higher academic achievement on standardized tests and educators perceived the implementation of middle grades practices such as organization structures and specialized teacher preparation were slightly higher.

### **Alignment of TELL and the Schools to Watch Rubric**

The Schools to Watch rubric and TELL survey, while different instruments, have a number of similar items (see Table 2). While the TELL survey did not have specific sections related to middle grades organizational structures, many of the categories, such as Community Support and Involvement, Professional Development and Learning, and Facilities and Resources contributed to the organizational structures and processes of the middle school. Teachers rated themselves on similar items with the STW self-study survey as they did with the TELL survey. With the two instruments having similar purposes and similar items, researchers were interested in the responses of STW schools on the TELL survey and compared them to responses from the rest of the state. Researchers were curious about what aspects of the survey that STW schools were doing to be highly successful.

**Table 2***Examples of Alignment Among Schools to Watch and TELL Survey Items*

Schools to Watch Items	TELL Survey Items
Academic Excellence: The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice.	Time: Teachers have time available to collaborate with colleagues.  Professional Learning: An appropriate amount of time is provided for professional learning; Professional learning provides ongoing opportunities for teachers to work with colleagues to refine teaching practices.
Developmental Responsiveness: The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children.	Community Support and Involvement: This school does a good job of encouraging parent/guardian involvement; The school does a good job of encouraging parent/guardian involvement.
Social Equity: The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied.	Managing Student Conduct: Students at this school understand expectations for their conduct; School administrators and teachers consistently enforce rules for student conduct.
Organizational Structures and Processes: A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does drives every facet of school change.	School Leadership: The faculty and leadership have a shared vision.

To examine the alignment among the STW rubric and categories and items included on the TELL survey, researchers examined principals' and teachers' perceptions of the context of the learning environment for their respective schools to see what similarities or differences, if any, there were between STW schools and all other middle schools in Kentucky.



## Methodology

After receiving IRB approval for data collection, the researchers obtained a publicly available list of schools that were designated or re-designated as Schools to Watch in the state of Kentucky within the three-year period of 2016-2018. Included with the list of schools were school profiles and descriptions with respect to the STW criteria and STW rubric. Researchers requested and received 2017 TELL survey data from the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) which was the most recent administration of the survey. The data set contained TELL survey scores for all schools in Kentucky. The survey was administered online during the 2017 academic year, and participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Although school names were listed in the data set, individual scores were not identifiable. The response rate was 91% for all educators in the state with an  $N$  of 41502. Finally, researchers also obtained demographic and academic test score data from the KDE database, which is publicly available.

For comparison purposes, researchers filtered the list of all Kentucky schools in the data set to include only schools with grades 5-9 including, K-8, 6-8, and 6-12 grade configurations. Then, the data for the participants of the twelve STW schools ( $n=407$ ) were pulled and listed for easy comparison to all other participants in middle schools in the state ( $n=9115$ ), as well as the participants from the top 12 scoring schools ( $n=242$ ) on the TELL survey, excluding STW schools. The mean scores were calculated for agreement on individual items, as well as the overall composite scores for each category of items (e.g., time issues, school leadership, community support). Included in the data was an overall composite score, which could be considered the overall average score of agreement for any school that was listed on the data set. Higher scores were better and indicated better learning environments and working conditions for schools.

Finally, researchers accessed standardized test scores and demographic data from the 12 schools on the STW list and the top 12 scoring schools in Kentucky. Researchers accessed the publicly available data from the KDE database website, containing school report card data comprised of demographic statistics, test scores, and other data required by the state. Researchers wanted to examine the data among the twelve STW schools, as well as the overall state averages for middle schools to see if meaningful similarities or differences existed among the twelve STW schools and other middle schools in Kentucky that had not received the same designation. For analysis, researchers conducted a Two Proportion Z-Test on the composite scores for each of the main variables, as well as the overall composite score.

## Context

### *Kentucky Schools to Watch*

Twelve schools were selected as Kentucky Schools to Watch between the years of 2016-2018. Of those, six were newly designated in 2017 or 2018 and six were re-designated in 2016 or 2017. As such, 2017 represented a time when the 12 schools were either named or re-designated that year or named or re-designated in 2016 or 2018. Five of the schools were housed with elementary schools encompassing grades K-8 while seven schools were stand-alone buildings housing grades 6-8. No schools had a 6-12 configuration. Five schools were from one county while the rest represented separate counties from across the state.

### ***Academics***

Researchers used the Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress (K-PREP) scores to examine academic success in the areas of Reading, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Writing, and Language Mechanics. K-PREP is a state-wide assessment used to evaluate academic progress and identify areas of need. These scores are also used as part of the STW assessment of academic progress.

Schools to Watch schools scored 3.24% higher overall than all other state middle schools across the academic areas assessed. Language Mechanics was the highest scoring area with 4.3% higher than the average, and Reading was the lowest scoring with 1.83% above average. The largest positive individual school score was Writing with 30.4% higher than state average. The largest negative individual school score was also Writing with 26.8% below the state average.

The top 12 schools on the TELL survey on average scored 25.46% higher than the state average and 22.22% higher than STW schools. The largest difference between top scoring schools and other middle schools in the state was Writing (31.5% above average) and the smallest difference was Social Studies (23.1% above average). The largest individual school difference was Language Mechanics with the school scoring 52% higher than the state average. The largest individual school negative difference was Reading with 1.1% below average.

### ***Demographic Information***

On average, STW schools had student populations that are 86% White/Non-Hispanic with eight of the 12 reporting White/Non-Hispanic populations of 90% or higher and one school reporting less than 50% of the school population as White/Non-Hispanic. The top 12 scoring schools on the TELL survey had school populations that were on average 96.6% White/Non-Hispanic with five of the 12 schools reporting 98% or higher and two schools reporting 99% White/Non-Hispanic populations. The Kentucky middle school average population was 10.5% African American, 0.01% American Indian and Alaskan Native, 1.8% Asian, 6.7% Latino/Hispanic, 3.8% two or more races, and 76.8% White/Non-Hispanic.

STW schools overall reported 59.5% of their populations eligible for free/reduced lunch. All but two schools reported a free/reduced lunch eligible population of 50% or higher with the largest being 79% and the lowest being 41%. Top 12 schools on the TELL survey had an overall Free/Reduced lunch eligibility rate of 68.45%. All but one school reported a free/reduced lunch population of 50% or higher with one school reporting 88.2% and one school reporting 27.5%. The Kentucky state average for all middle schools was 62.76% eligibility. With respect to geographic classifications, STW schools were comprised of nine rural schools, two suburban schools, and one urban school. The top 12 performing schools were comprised of eleven rural and one suburban school.

### **Results**

Researchers were interested in examining the similarities and/or differences, if any, between STW schools and other middle schools in the state of Kentucky on a 2017 state-wide survey on learning environments. Results indicated STW schools scored 90.1% overall with two

schools being within the top ten scoring scores on the TELL survey. STW schools had a higher-than-average score on 88 of 91 items on the survey and had overall scores of 90% compared to 85.3% for all other middle schools in the state (See Table 3). Additionally, there were statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between the composite scores for STW schools and all other middle schools for all categories, except for Facilities and Resources. Of the 12 schools, five schools were from one county. Of the top five schools in this group, three of them came from Logan County. Excluding the five Logan County schools, the STW group overall average score was 87.2% which was 1.9% higher than the state average.

The categories with the largest differences between STW schools and all other state middle schools were Managing Student Conduct, Community Support and Involvement, and Time. The largest difference was in Managing Student Conduct with STW schools scoring an average of 7.41% higher than other middle schools in the state. Example items in this category included, “students at the school understanding expectations for their conduct,” “students at this school follow rules of conduct,” and “teachers consistently enforce rules for student conduct.” The category of Community Support and Involvement was 6.03% above the average by Schools to Watch schools. Items in this category included, “parents/guardians are influential decisions makers in this school,” “the school does a good job of encouraging parent/guardian involvement,” and “community members support teachers, contributing to the success with students.” Finally, in the category of Time STW schools scored 5.7% above the average. Items in this category included, “teachers have time available to collaborate with colleagues,” “teachers are allowed to focus on educating students with minimal interruptions,” and “efforts are made to minimize the amount of routine paperwork teachers are required.” Of the eight categories, the smallest average difference was Facilities and Resources which included items such as, “teachers have sufficient access to appropriate instructional materials,” “the school environment is clean and well-maintained,” and “the physical environment of classrooms in this school supports teaching and learning.” Teachers and principals in STW schools scored items in this category an average of 1.85% higher than the average.

**Table 3**

*TELL Survey Composite Scores for Agreement on Items for STW Schools and Non-STW Middle Schools*

	KY STW Middle School Educators <i>N</i> = 407		Non-STW Middle School Educators in KY <i>N</i> = 9115		<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Time	83.18	12.65	77.20	12.70	2.83	.00*
Facilities and Resources	90.37	9.18	88.40	7.30	1.21	.22
Community Support and Involvement	90.81	7.68	85.10	11.70	3.18	.00*
Managing Student Conduct	89.54	11.49	82.10	15.00	3.83	.00*

Teacher Leadership	90.11	8.28	85.50	11.50	2.59	.00*
School Leadership	91.39	7.34	87.90	10.00	2.06	.03*
Professional Learning	91.21	6.34	85.90	9.60	3.02	.00*
Instructional Practices and Support	93.64	3.48	90.50	5.90	2.12	.03*
Overall	90.05	7.59	85.30	9.10	2.66	.00*

\*  $p < .05$

Regarding individual items on the survey, “students at this school follow rules of conduct” had the largest difference with STW schools scoring the item 13.7% higher than all other middle schools in the state. This was followed by, “teachers are allowed to focus on educating students with minimal interruptions” (10.5% higher than average) and “teachers contribute to planning, selection, and/or design of professional learning” (9% higher than average). The first two items were in the categories of Managing Student Conduct and Time. The third was from Professional Learning which was the fourth largest difference of the eight categories. Only four of the 91 items were scored lower than state average by STW schools. All four items were in the Facilities and Resources category. These items are, “teachers have sufficient access to the library and media facilities (-1.9%), “the reliability and speed of internet connections in this school are sufficient to support instructional practices” (-1.6%), “teachers have adequate space to work productively” (-1.3%), and “teachers have access to reliable communications technology including phones, faxes, and email” (-0.3%).

For purposes of comparison, researchers compared STW school scores to the top 12 scoring schools on the Kentucky TELL survey excluding STW schools (See Table 4). The average overall score for the top 12 schools, excluding STW schools, was 97.6%, which was 7.6% higher than the STW average. There were statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between STW schools and the top 12 TELL schools among all categories on the survey. Managing Student Conduct (99.2%), School Leadership (98.4%), and Professional Development (98.1%) were the highest scoring categories for the top 12 schools. The lowest scoring category was Time (94.3%). Top scoring schools scored above average on all 91 items, including 11 individual items with averages of 100% on the survey. These items included, “students at this school understand expectations for their conduct,” “teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about educational issues,” “teachers are effective leaders in the school,” and “teachers are encouraged to reflect on their own practice.”

**Table 4**

*TELL Survey Composite Scores for Agreement on Items for STW Schools and Top 12 Scoring Middle Schools*

	Educators from KY STW Middle Schools <i>N</i> = 407		Educators from Top 12 Middle Schools on TELL Survey <i>N</i> = 242		<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Time	83.18	12.65	94.30	3.00	-4.11	.00*
Facilities and Resources	90.37	9.18	96.90	2.88	-3.11	.00*
Community Support and Involvement	90.81	7.68	97.70	1.87	-3.41	.00*
Managing Student Conduct	89.54	11.49	99.20	1.26	-4.7	.00*
Teacher Leadership	90.11	8.28	98.00	2.09	-3.82	.00*
School Leadership	91.39	7.34	98.40	1.28	-3.63	.00*
Professional Learning	91.21	6.34	98.10	2.72	-3.51	.00*
Instructional Practices and Support	93.64	3.48	97.60	1.62	-2.26	.02*
Overall	90.05	7.59	97.55	0.93	-3.58	.00*

\*  $p < .05$

Comparing the averages of specific items among the top twelve schools and STW schools, the largest differences were the items, “efforts are made to minimize the amount of routine paperwork teachers are required to do,” (-16.5%) and “school administration consistently enforce rules for student conduct” (-16.2%) with top 12 schools having the higher scores. The smallest differences were the items, “the curriculum taught in this school is aligned to the Kentucky Academic Standards” (-.2%) and “overall my school is a good place to work” (-.5).

### Discussion

Researchers were interested in examining how STW schools differ from other middle schools in the state of Kentucky based on a survey focused on the learning environment. Our findings suggest overall, STW schools did not seem to differ greatly from average middle schools in the state. STW schools performed slightly above average as compared to all other middle schools in the state with two schools existing in the top ten scoring schools on the survey. These results suggest STW schools are performing well compared to other middle schools in the

state. However, researchers feel these results are underwhelming, especially when compared to the top scoring schools. The top scoring schools on the survey averaged 12.5% above the state average overall while STW schools averaged 5% above average. Of the 12 STW schools, five came from one district. Averaging STW schools without that district, STW schools scored just 1.9% above average. STW schools' overall scores did not seem to stand out as being highly successful despite this survey focusing on similar concepts and items found on the STW rubric.

Managing Student Conduct was the category with the largest positive difference for both the STW schools and the top scoring schools in the survey. Further, Managing Student Conduct, was the lowest scoring category for the lowest overall scoring schools. Nine of the ten lowest scoring schools had the Managing Student Conduct category as the lowest score. The item with the largest positive difference for STW was “students at this school follow rules of conduct” which was in this category. This item was also one of the 11 items scored as 100% by the top scoring schools. These results suggest highly successful middle schools focus on managing student conduct, particularly with having students following school rules. Clear, fair, and consistent rules are an important part of the STW criteria and necessary for building a climate of social equity where all young adolescents are treated fairly in a socially equitable environment. The items “teachers are allowed to focus on educating students with minimal interruptions” and “teachers contribute to planning, selection, and/or design of professional learning” suggest STW schools focus on allowing teachers to teach and value their professional knowledge and decisions.

STW schools also did not seem to stand out when examining state assessment data. STW schools scored slightly above average on K-PREP, the state's academic assessment, scoring four percentage points above average. The top scoring schools on the TELL survey scored 20 percentage points above the state average. While researchers believe standardized testing scores should not be the sole measure of academic success for middle schools, STW schools are performing near average comparatively. As exemplars of highly successful schools and academic excellence and with recent research showing some academic advantages (Falbe, 2014; Mertens & Falbe 2021) researchers were expecting STW schools to perform higher than average.

The STW program is designed to help middle schools improve so they can provide the best education for young adolescents. Schools who have been named STW are meant to be exemplars of the middle school model and highly successful on multiple measures. The STW process is rigorous, in-depth, and on-going. Many evaluative measures often focus on standardized testing scores. While STW does take these into consideration, they are only one of many measures of academic excellence considered. This is an example of the thoroughness of the STW process. It is, therefore, surprising STW schools are not showing this excellence on outside measures. The TELL survey focuses on the learning environment only and is generalized for all grade levels. As such, the survey does not explicitly address key middle grades components and concepts. As a survey with no open-response items, the TELL survey does not provide qualitative data thus lacking depth and detail that are present in STW applications and reports. Additionally, the TELL survey is only one instrument and one point of comparison. Therefore, it is difficult to make exact one-to-one comparisons among items since the two instruments have different components. However, there were enough similarities in the items on the survey to allow for comparison between the TELL Survey and STW reports. Researchers

believed the TELL survey would be an outside measure on which STW schools would excel. If not these measures, then on which measures would they excel? This is a particularly salient question in the current educational environment where outside measures (primarily standardized testing) are seen by policy makers, administrators, and parents as the sole ways to evaluate a school. In what ways does the STW process manifest itself outside of its own evaluation system?

With so many schools with high scores on the TELL survey and the state academic assessment, it seems there may be several middle schools in the state that have a lot of potential for being named STW schools. It raises the question of why are so many seemingly highly successful middle schools, as indicated on the TELL survey and on the state assessment, not named STW schools? With over 200 middle schools in the state, researchers would hope there are more than 12 that are highly successful. It may be the case that many of the state's middle schools are just not aware of the STW program. The authors can anecdotally lend support to this claim as many of the middle schools in the area in which they work are not aware of STW, with some of them having STW potential. Marketing the STW program and its benefits may help more schools become aware of the program so more schools could improve, and highly successful schools can be recognized.

### **Future Considerations and Conclusion**

Examining this data, the researchers were left with a number of questions for further research. Of the STW schools, five of the schools were K-8 schools and of those five, two were the top scoring schools on the survey. Further, of the top 12 scoring schools on TELL, seven were K-8 schools. No STW schools or top scoring schools had grade configurations of 6-12. This raises questions about how the mission and vision of middle grades is being adapted in the 6-12 setting in Kentucky. What is it about the K-8 setting that is beneficial for students and schools? Is this a trend nationally or just in Kentucky? Future research should examine the effects of housing middle schools in K-8 and 6-12 environments with regards to learning environments and academic achievement.

Researchers were also interested in the demographics of STW schools. With diversity and equity being a key component on the rubric, researchers hoped to see more schools with diverse populations recognized by Schools to Watch. STW schools, however, were less diverse overall than the state average by four percentage points. However, only one school reported a school population with less than 50% population of White/Non-Hispanic students. If that school is removed from the average, then STW schools are less diverse by eight percentage points. This is still less than the top 12 scoring schools on the TELL survey who were less diverse by over 14 percentage points. These data suggest STW schools in Kentucky were less economically disadvantaged than other schools across the state, including those schools that scored high on the TELL survey. Researchers are interested in STW programs in diverse schools and the number of diverse schools nation-wide that have been named STW. Why is there so little diversity in STW schools in Kentucky? Is this a function of marketing, the time and effort to go through the STW process, the STW criteria or rubric, or some other issue? Researchers are interested in whether this diversity issue for STW schools in Kentucky is also a national issue with STW schools.

The STW program was formed to help create and recognize highly successful middle schools. Our goal here was to examine one outside measure of these schools to see what differences, if any, STW schools have regarding learning environment. This is just one of many outside measures to examine highly successful middle schools. Our hope is future research will examine other measures to help inform and improve the STW program.

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