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# A Shared Vision? Exploring the Perceptions of Principals and Teachers Regarding the Middle School Concept

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## A Shared Vision? Exploring the Perceptions of Principals and Teachers Regarding the Middle School Concept

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### Abstract

From decades of recommendations, middle school advocates have recommended various organizational structures and instructional practices to meet the specific educational needs of young adolescents. Several notable national studies have sought to assess and report the status of implementation of these recommended practices, though largely from the perspective of the building principal. The purpose of this study was to examine both teachers' and principals' perceptions concerning the middle school concept. Based on responses of over 1,600 teachers and principals from all 50 states, findings indicate support for components of the middle school concept related to curriculum and instruction as well as school culture; however, support for components related to middle school philosophy and organizational structures received the lowest levels of support from principals and teachers. While reported support for middle school students was encouraging, the waning support for the philosophical and organizational components often considered foundational to the middle school concept was concerning.

### Introduction

The middle school concept, as outlined by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 1982, 2010) and others (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000), provides the framework for the education of young adolescents. This framework called for holistic adoption and implementation of student-centered practices to support the development of 10- to 15-year-old students. Since its inception, middle school advocates have regularly assessed the implementation of these practices to determine the current state of the middle school with the most recent national study being conducted in 2009 by McEwin and Greene (2010, 2011). In an effort to capture a more current status of the middle school concept in United States' middle schools, the purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of principals and teachers concerning the importance and implementation of key components of the middle school concept.

### Middle Level Historical Context

For over 100 years, specific recommendations have been made on how to best educate the young adolescent. Since the inception of the

junior high school model in the early 1900s (Briggs, 1920; Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918; Gruhn & Douglas, 1947), through the emergence of the middle school concept in the late 1960s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Alexander et al., 1968; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Eichhorn, 1966; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 1982), calls for a specialized, more student-centered approach for educating the young adolescent have been consistent. The Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education proposed greater emphasis on a student-centered education with differentiated curriculum and exploratory education. Later, Briggs called for greater emphasis on instruction that addressed students' individual learning needs. Gruhn and Douglas highlighted the need for more guidance supports to address students' personal challenges. The early work to establish the junior high school initially focused on the needs of the young adolescent. While this was the initial aim of the junior high school, in reality, to some, the junior high school did not achieve its goal to meet the needs of adolescents.

During the 1960s, the focus shifted to meeting the developmental needs of students through a new approach – the middle school. Eichhorn (1966) proposed the first model tailored to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents

through an integrated and exploratory curriculum. Alexander et al. (1968) proposed organizational structures (e.g., interdisciplinary teaming, common planning time, flexible **scheduling) to help teachers meet students'** developmental needs. The NMSA (1982) introduced 10 essential characteristics focused on student needs, varied instructional strategies, cooperative planning for teachers, and a school climate and programs that would help students thrive. Later, Jackson & Davis (2000) provided additional recommendations calling for meaningful instruction, teachers who are specially prepared to teach young adolescents, and an emphasis on democratic governance where teachers have voice.

More recently, the AMLE affirmed successful middle schools share several essential attributes, including educational environments that are responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Bishop and Harrison state educators in successful middle schools value and respect young adolescents and are specifically prepared to teach them. Furthermore, students in these successful middle schools should engage with curriculum that is challenging, exploratory, integrative and diverse, and they should encounter instruction that fosters learning that is active, purposeful, and democratic. Additionally, school policies and practices in successful middle schools should be student-centered, unbiased, and fairly implemented and celebrated in an atmosphere where leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration. One **might call this type of culture, "a caring community of shared educational purpose"** (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 5).

To accomplish its designed purpose, a successful middle school should have a shared vision developed by all stakeholders that guides every decision (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; NMSA, 2010; Sanzo et al., 2011), and school leaders must be committed to and knowledgeable about young adolescents, equitable practices, and educational research (Bishop & Harrison). Effective school leaders must work to produce a common vision for their schools and develop a common understanding among faculty members regarding key components of the school organizational structures and beliefs concerning ways of improving school components and practices (Bishop & Harrison). It is a school culture in which lines of communication are open, sharing of ideas occurs, and everyone is

working together towards the same goal (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Moreover, teachers, in addition to principals, serve as leaders by sharing their voices, knowledge, and expertise with others within the school and greater community (Paulu & Winters, 1998).

### Middle Level Implementation Studies

Since the inception of the middle school concept in the 1960s, the middle school movement matured and schools endeavored to incorporate the recommended organizational structures and instructional practices, and several large-scale, national studies sought to assess and report the status of the implementation of recommended middle school practices. Most notable of these studies were sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (Valentine et al., 2002; Valentine et al., 1993; Valentine et al., 1981) and a series of studies sanctioned by the NMSA (Alexander, 1968; Alexander & McEwin, 1989; McEwin et al., 1996, 2003; McEwin & Greene, 2010, 2011). These studies were based on the reporting of building principals only.

While early implementation studies showed a steady increase in the level of implementation of key middle level organizational and instructional practices, more recent studies have reported a stagnation or decline in several signature organizational structures of the middle school concept. For example, in the results and recommendations from their 2009 study, McEwin and Greene (2010) reported a slight decline in the percentage of middle schools organized with interdisciplinary teams with common planning time. They also found a decrease in the implementation of flexible block scheduling. Though McEwin and Greene reported an increased implementation of advisory programs, the percentage of schools meeting daily for advisory decreased. More recently, in their national survey of principals and teachers, Alverson et al. (2021) claimed stagnated progress in the implementation of key middle school practices.

Rheaume (2023) echoed the conclusions of Alverson et al. (2021) in a case study of 43 principals and vice principals in Alberta, Canada. While Rheaume reported on perceived importance and compared it to the findings of Alverson et al., Rheaume concluded there is a lack of full implementation of the middle school concept. While all three studies (Alverson

et al., 2021; McEwin & Greene, 2009; Rheaume, 2023) showed stagnant or decreasing support for organizational structures (e.g., interdisciplinary teaming, flexible scheduling, common planning time, advisory), support for middle level students and effective pedagogy remained strong.

### Multiple Perspectives

Ramsey et al. (2016) reported the majority of school climate research has focused on a single perspective. Others noted the value of multiple perspectives to provide a more accurate view of school environment (Park & Ham, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013). Principals tended to rate their leadership and their school climate more strongly than teachers do. For example, in a recent study of perceptions of school leadership by Tosh and Doss (2020), principals and teachers who were surveyed were asked to rate **the principal's ability to communicate a clear vision, set high standards for teaching, and make clear staff expectations for meeting instructional goals.** In each area, principals almost universally agreed (98%) that they achieved these three leadership tasks compared to 77-84% of teachers responding to the same survey items regarding the principals' leadership skills.

Similarly, in an international study of *school climate*, defined as "shared perceptions regarding beliefs, rules, trust, and encouragement of new initiatives" (Veletic et al. (2023, p.1), Veletic et al. (2023) reported principals and teachers from 37 countries **"consistently rate their environment in the same direction, albeit in differing magnitudes.** In the majority of countries, principals rate school climate as better than the teacher average in the **same schools"** (p. 21). Different individuals rate aspects of school climate differently due to their position within the organization, experience, knowledge, or whether they are asked to rate themselves or others (Atwater et al., 1998; Braddy et al., 2014; Fisher & Katz, 2000). Acknowledging this gap reinforces the importance of examining phenomena in schools from multiple perspectives in order to gain a more complete picture of what is occurring. Gaps in perceptions may not be problematic and may lead to enhanced communication, collaboration, and organizational quality when the gaps are identified (Veletic et al.); however, these gaps do suggest room for improvement (Tosh & Doss).

### Purpose

The findings from decades of implementation studies demonstrate the need for continued monitoring of middle school practices, and more importantly, studies should be inclusive of both **principals' and teachers' perceptions.** As such, the purpose of this study was to examine both **teachers' and principals' perceptions concerning** the middle school concept and similarities and differences among teachers and principals regarding the middle school concept. To that end, we sought to address the following research questions through our inquiry:

RQ1: How do principals and teachers perceive the importance and implementation of key components of the middle school concept?

RQ2: What similarities and differences exist **between principals' and teachers'** perceptions of importance and implementation of key components of the middle school concept?

This study examines the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the importance and implementation of middle school components through the lens of the middle school concept as outlined in several seminal documents: *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021); *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (CCAD, 1989); *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000); and *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (NMSA, 2010). While the recommendations in each document vary slightly, each maintains young adolescents deserve an educational experience that is specifically tailored to meet their developmental needs. In general, these experiences should be responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging (Bishop & Harrison); thus, organizational structures, schedules, and instructional strategies should be utilized that will support this type of educational environment (Bishop & Harrison; CCAD; Jackson & Davis; NMSA).

## Methods

Protocols for this study were reviewed and received an exemption approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the participating researchers. We collected data on the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding components of the middle school concept using an online survey adapted from a previous large-scale, national survey of middle schools conducted by McEwin and Green (2011).

## Participants

Previous large-scale surveys of middle school practices reported the responses of principals **regarding their schools' practices** (Alexander, 1968; Alexander & McEwin, 1989; McEwin et al., 1996, 2003; McEwin & Greene, 2010, 2011; Valentine et al., 2002; Valentine, et al., 1993; Valentine, 1981). For our study, we solicited responses from both principals and teachers in order to allow for comparison of perceptions between the two groups of respondents. We made every effort to encourage participation from all areas of the US for the purpose of gathering a representational picture of middle grades education across the entire country. To address these goals, participants were recruited using a stratified random sample of middle schools in all 50 states. We used this method in an effort to provide proportional representation. First, we created a listing of all middle schools in each state using publicly accessible websites (e.g., departments of education). We filtered the lists to include all possible middle school grade configurations. Finally, we generated a simple randomized sample of 25% from the total number of schools in each state. For each school in our sample, we selected up to three administrators and five randomly-selected teachers to receive an invitation to participate in the online survey. We intentionally selected multiple administrators and teachers from each school to increase the likelihood of receiving at least one administrator and one teacher response from each school in the sample. In addition, the random selection of five teachers in each building allowed for the possibility of greater representation across content teaching specializations. In total, there were 22,966 potential participants (administrators and teachers) who received an email invitation to participate in the study. Follow up reminders were sent to encourage participation. At the conclusion of data collection, we received a total of 1,650 survey responses. Of those responses,

five participants did not indicate if they were a principal or teacher, so their survey responses were deleted from the data. The remaining survey participants (survey respondents) included 1,645 middle school educators, consisting of 469 principals and 1,176 teachers (see Appendix).

## Survey Instrument

The survey was developed using Qualtrics, an online survey development tool. The survey was created to be completed anonymously by respondents using a link that was embedded within the invitation email sent to potential participating principals and teachers. We adapted our online survey from McEwin and **Greene's (2011) national survey of randomly selected and highly successful middle level schools**. We chose this survey for adaptation because the items provided a good starting point for an overall picture of middle schools. Originally, the McEwin and Green survey was sent out in a paper format. We received the survey in a Word document file and transferred the items to Qualtrics while making several minor modifications to the survey, including the deletion of several items related to technology and global education. We also added an item that asked about the biggest challenges in middle schools today, while removing a similar item about the effects of high-stakes testing. Finally, we modified the Likert-type items to a three-point scale.

The survey instrument consisted of four sections. In Section 1, participants provided descriptive details about themselves and their schools, such as teacher certification, school size, location, grade configuration, and curricular offerings. Subsequent sections of the survey measured **respondents'** perceived importance and implementation of middle school components and instructional strategies, as well as their beliefs about key challenges in middle school. There were 11 items concerning instructional strategies. Examples included direct instruction, cooperative learning, and inquiry teaching. There were 19 items concerning middle school components, including advisory programs, interdisciplinary teaming, and flexible scheduling and grouping. Items regarding instructional strategies and middle school components consisted of ordinal, 3-point Likert-type items. Additionally, the survey asked participants to indicate the type of instructional grouping at their schools, remedial

arrangements, type of scheduling, and the number of sessions and the purpose of those sessions. Finally, participants were asked about challenges and were given an opportunity to give advice about what makes middle school successful in an open-ended item.

### Data Analysis

For the purposes of this current study, we only focused on the quantitative data from the section of the survey that corresponded to the middle school components. Furthermore, we grouped the middle school components into three different categories for purposes of organizing and reporting the results. These three categories were *middle school philosophy and organizational structures, curriculum and instruction, and culture*. Responses were sorted by position (principal or teacher) for comparison. We used a descriptive analysis and a two-proportion z-test to complete the data analysis.

To address RQ1 (How do principals and teachers perceive the importance and implementation of key components of the middle school concept?), we specifically examined responses to section 2 of the survey related to 19 components of the middle school concept. Participants responded to two sets of corresponding Likert-type items. The first set asked respondents to identify the perceived level of importance by stating if each component was “very important,” “somewhat important,” or “not important.”

For analysis, the responses of “somewhat important” and “not important” were combined, and percentage of responses were calculated for principal and teacher respondents. The second, corresponding set of items asked respondents to identify the perceived level of implementation at their schools by stating if the component was “regularly implemented,” “occasionally implemented,” or “rarely or never

implemented.” For analysis, the responses of “occasionally implemented” and “rarely or never implemented” were combined, and percentage of responses were calculated for principal and teacher respondents.

Similar to RQ1, to address RQ2 (What similarities and differences exist between principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of importance and implementation of middle school components?), we analyzed responses from principals and teachers, using a two-proportion z-test, to look for statistically significant differences among the responses of principals and teachers.

### Findings

#### Middle School Philosophy and Organizational Structures

The components in the middle school philosophy and organizational structures category, as a whole, received the lowest levels of support among both principals and teachers (see **Table 1**). Principals’ percentages of importance were higher than teachers in regards to “advisory programs,” “interdisciplinary team organization,” and “flexible scheduling and grouping.” “Advisory programs” received the highest levels of support from principals (63.4%), but the lowest levels of support from teachers (38.4%). “Advisory programs” were also the component with the greatest difference between the two groups, with a 25% difference. Principals also reported a higher level of importance with “interdisciplinary team organization” (61.5% of principals and 50.2% of teachers) and “flexible scheduling and grouping” (49.4% of principals and 41.4% of teachers). Teachers reported a higher level of importance in regards to “teachers holding middle level licensure” with 66.3% of teachers and 59.6% of principals believing it is very important.

Table 1

*Middle School Philosophy and Organizational Structures*

Middle School Component	Very Important		z	p	Regularly Implemented		z	p
	% Principals (n=469)	% Teachers (n=1176)			% Principals (n=469)	% Teachers (n=1176)		
Advisory programs	63.4	38.4	9.19	<.001***	55.0	42.4	4.62	<.001***
Interdisciplinary team organization	61.5	50.2	4.14	<.001***	51.1	31.4	7.47	<.001***
Flexible scheduling and grouping	49.4	41.4	2.95	.003**	29.6	22.6	2.97	.002**
Teachers who hold middle school/level teacher certification/licensure	59.6	66.3	2.56	<.010*	68.0	65.7	0.89	.373

\* p < 0.05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

*Note.* Levels of significance correspond to differences in beliefs among principals and teachers. The first comparison looks at beliefs regarding importance, and the second comparison looks at beliefs regarding level of implementation.

Overall, in regards to the perceived levels of implementation of the middle school philosophy and organizational structures, components were not regularly implemented. “Flexible scheduling and grouping” was the least implemented with 29.6% of principals and 22.6 % of teachers believing it was regularly implemented. “Interdisciplinary team organization” was the second lowest implemented component with 51.1% of principals and 31.4% of teachers believing it was regularly implemented. “Advisory programs” was next with 55.0% of principals and 42.4% of teachers believing it was regularly implemented. “Teachers who hold middle level licensure” was the highest implemented component with 68.0% of principals and 65.7% of teachers indicating it was regularly implemented.

### Curriculum and Instruction

The category of curriculum and instruction received the greatest levels of support with at least 72.3% or more of all participants indicating the components were very important (see Table 2). “Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory” received the highest percentages from both principals (92.4%) and teachers (90.5%). “Multiple teaching and learning approaches” (91.6% of principals and 87.7% of teachers), “evidence-based decision making” (83.3% of principals and 72.3% of teachers), and “assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning” (81.9% and 72.6%) were also identified as very important to both principals and teachers. Though still identified as very important, a “strong focus on the basic subjects (language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science)” was identified as the lowest in this

category among principals and one of the lowest among teachers (77.8% of principals and 76.7% of teachers).

Table 2

*Curriculum and Instruction*

Middle School Component	Very Important		z	p	Regularly Implemented		z	p
	% Principals (n=469)	% Teachers (n=1176)			% Principals (n=469)	% Teachers (n=1176)		
Strong focus on basic subjects (language arts, social studies, mathematics, science)	77.8	76.7	.47	.631	87.6	77.4	4.69	<.001***
Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory	92.4	90.5	1.21	.222	62.2	51.4	3.97	<.001***
Multiple learning and teaching approaches	91.6	87.7	2.26	.023*	55.7	55.0	0.25	.794
Evidence-based decision making	83.3	72.3	4.67	<.001***	53.2	17.8	14.45	<.001***
Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning	81.9	72.6	3.94	<.001***	55.3	43.7	4.25	<.001***

\* p < 0.05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

*Note.* Levels of significance correspond to differences in beliefs among principals and teachers. The first comparison looks at beliefs regarding importance, and the second comparison looks at beliefs regarding level of implementation.

In regards to implementation of these components, a “strong focus on the basic subjects” has the highest level of agreement and

implementation with 87.6% of principals and 77.4% of teachers indicating it was regularly implemented. “Curriculum that is relevant,



challenging, integrative, and exploratory” (62.2% of principals and 51.4% of teachers), “multiple learning and teaching approaches” (55.7% of principals and 55.0% of teachers), and “assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning” (55.3% of principals and 43.7% of teachers) were reported as regularly implemented by slightly more than half of all participants. The use of “evidence-based decision making” was the least implemented component among both principals and teachers, with only 53.2% of principals and 17.8% of teachers indicating it is a regularly implemented. This component also had the greatest difference between the two groups at 35.4%.

Culture

The category of culture also had the majority of the components be identified as very important among participants. In fact, the three highest percentages from the survey occurred under this category (see Table 3) --an “inviting, supportive,

and safe environment” (98.6% of principals and 94.3% of teachers), “educators who value working with young adolescents” (97.6% of principals and 94.4% of teachers), and “trusting and respectful relationships among administrators, teachers, students, and parents” (97.3% of principals and 91.6% of teachers). “A shared vision of mission and goals” was also identified by 91.0% of principals as very important, but only 76.8% of teachers. “Rules are clearly and consistently applied” (88.5% of principals and 87.5% of teachers), “school-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety” (81.1% of principals and 77.2% of teachers), “all students are well known” (88.4% of principals and 74.8% of teachers) were the next highest components in regards to being very important. Finally, “school initiated family and community partnerships” (58.3% of principals and 62.8% of teachers) and “student voice in decision making” (55.2% of principals and 46.1% of teachers) received the lowest percentages in regards to being very important.

Table 3

Culture

Middle School Component	Very Important		z	p	Regularly Implemented		z	p
	% Principals (n=469)	% Teachers (n=1176)			% Principals (n=469)	% Teachers (n=1176)		
Educators who value working with young adolescents	97.6	94.4	2.77	.005**	78.8	67.4	4.58	<.001***
Inviting, supportive, and safe environments	98.6	94.3	3.80	<.001***	83.4	68.9	5.98	<.001***
School initiated family and community partnerships	58.3	62.8	1.68	.091	25.6	33.1	-2.97	.002**

School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety	81.1	77.2	1.73	.083	58.7	49.0	3.55	<.001***
Trusting and respectful relationships among administrators, teachers, students, and parents	97.3	91.6	4.15	<.001***	75.9	48.1	10.25	<.001***
A shared vision of mission and goals	91.0	76.8	6.60	<.001***	65.4	44.3	7.72	<.001***
Student voice in decision making	55.2	46.1	3.33	<.001***	24.6	17.8	3.12	.001**
All students are well known	88.4	74.8	6.08	<.001***	53.4	44.3	3.33	<.001***
Rules are clearly and consistently applied	88.5	87.5	0.55	.575	67.1	36.5	11.25	<.001***

\* p < 0.05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

*Note.* Levels of significance correspond to differences in beliefs among principals and teachers. The first comparison looks at beliefs regarding importance, and the second comparison looks at beliefs regarding level of implementation.

In regards to level of implementation, the category of culture as a whole showed mixed results. “An inviting, supportive, and safe environment” (83.4% of principals and 68.9% of teachers) and “educators who value working with young adolescents” (78.8% of principals and 67.4% of teachers) were reported as the two highest components being regularly implemented. “Trusting and respectful relationships among administrators, teachers, students, and parents” (75.9% of principals and 48.1% of teachers), “school-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety” (58.7% of principals and 49.0% of teachers), “a shared vision of mission and goals” (65.4% of principals and 44.3% of teachers), “all students are well known” (53.4% of principals and 44.3% of teachers), and the “rules are clearly and consistently applied” (67.1% of principals and

36.5% of teachers) were components that approximately half of the participants believed were regularly implemented. The two lowest implemented components in this category were “school initiated family and community partnerships” (25.6% of principals and 33.1% of teachers) and “student voice in decision making” (24.6% of principals and 17.8% teachers).

Of note, three components had a much larger difference between principals and teachers in regards to perceived level of implementation. Principals reported a greater level of implementation on the “rules being clearly and consistently applied” (30.6% difference), “trusting and respectful relationships among stakeholders” (27.8% difference), and “a shared vision of mission and goals” (21.1% difference).

## Discussion

One thing is clear when examining the findings of this study—participants, both principals and teachers, offer a promising snapshot of the dedication and passion educators have for working in middle level education. It is evident participants believe the young adolescent is critically important which provides the foundation for middle grades schools. It is also interesting that principals and teachers, for the most part, had similar perceptions on both the level of importance and level of implementation of many middle school components. While the results highlight an overall positive outlook on the beliefs of middle grades principals and teachers, they also highlight some disconnects between level of importance and level of implementation, as well as waning support for the middle school concept that warrant further discussion and examination.

While the students are valued, in examining the category of middle school philosophy and organizational structures, the specific middle school organizational structures (e.g., advisory, interdisciplinary teams, flexible scheduling) **intended to support students' needs are not** necessarily viewed as integral and some are sporadically implemented at best. This is somewhat concerning given the five lowest items —“**advisory programs,**” “**interdisciplinary team organization,**” “**flexible scheduling and grouping,**” “**student voice in decision making,**” and “**teachers who hold middle school/level teacher certification/licensure**”—are all key structures and components central to the middle school model (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; NMSA, 2010). In comparing the results from this study to the McEwin and Greene (2009) results, interdisciplinary teaming and flexible scheduling show a large decrease in implementation. McEwin and Greene highlight a reported implementation of 72% for interdisciplinary teaming and 55% for flexible scheduling, in comparison to about 51% and 30% for this study. Also, advisory programs continue to reveal only average implementation with 46% from McEwin & Greene to 55% for this study.

Additionally, principals and teachers also noted these structures were implemented less often than the other components on the survey. We wonder if the structures were valued less because they are not used often, or they are not used often because they are valued less? Within

the current educational environment, it is easy to see that there are a number of factors that could make it more difficult to implement organizational structures such as advisory, teaming, and flexible scheduling. For example, principals and teachers may not have been specifically prepared to work in middle grades schools, schools may not have the appropriate funding to carry out teaming or could be struggling with flexible scheduling because of advanced and remedial academic courses. There are numerous barriers for implementing these structures, and for the history of the middle grades model, barriers such as these have been in place. With all of these components being important to educating young adolescents and key foundational elements in the middle school movement, it is surprising these structures were identified by principals and teachers as being less-important. Future research should examine why this is the case.

The category of curriculum and instruction certainly offers a positive outlook on the educational experiences provided to students. It is clear participants believe students should **experience a “curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory,”** and **teachers should use “multiple learning and teaching approaches”** and **“assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning.”** **Though it is exciting to see** overwhelming support for these types of teaching and learning practices, there is a large disconnect between what participants believe is important and the actual implementation of these practices. With responses highlighting levels of importance ranging from 72.6% to 92.4% and levels of implementation ranging from 43.7% to 62.2%, actually providing these curricular and instructional experiences is not happening at a level that matches survey **participants' beliefs. It is also important to note** that for each question in this category principals believed there was a greater level of implementation than teachers. Given the greater responsibility and daily stress connected to delivering this instruction, it is not surprising teachers believe the instruction is not implemented at higher levels and certainly raises some questions that need further explanation. What specifically is interfering with the ability to implement these quality curricular experiences? How are teachers supported in designing curricular experiences for students? Are teachers provided the resources and appropriate time to develop meaningful curricular experiences for

students? This certainly is an issue that warrants further examination.

The category of culture provides some of the most positive findings, but also some of the greatest contradictions and disconnects between level of support and implementation. It is clear **providing students “an inviting, supportive, and safe environment” where “educators value working with young adolescents” and form “trusting and respectful relationships among administrators, teachers, students, and parents”** is valued by the majority of all participants. While these values are positive and offer a promising snapshot on school environments overall, there are also a few examples that conflict with these ideas. For example, having **“student voice in decision making” was only very important** to half of the participants and was implemented at a very minimal level, with less than a quarter of the respondents indicating it was regularly implemented. In addition, the majority of participants indicated it is very **important that “all students are well known”** (88.4% and 74.8%), but report an implementation level of this at 53.4% and 44.3%. This certainly raises the question of whether an inviting and supportive environment with trusting relationships can be established if student voice is not included in decision making and students are not known well.

While we as middle grades researchers and advocates take comfort in knowing our findings show an overwhelming level of support for middle grades students, it is also evident that effective pedagogy and practice are not consistently implemented, and support for many of the middle school philosophical and organizational components is waning, as reported by both principals and teachers. It does beg the question of whether these components of the middle school model are still relevant and feasible considering the political, economic, and social pressures faced by the modern middle school.

### Limitations

While this study captured the perceptions of over 1,600 middle grades educators representing all 50 states, several limitations should be noted. Capturing the perceptions of both principals and teachers about middle grades teaching and learning and the middle school concept is critically important when attempting to understand the current climate in middle

grades schools. Previous large-scale, national studies that reported on the status of implementation of middle school practices focused on the perceptions of building **principals. While the principals’ perceptions are important**, their perceptions are often more positive than those of teachers (Veletic et al., 2023). Therefore, we believed it was important to include the perceptions of both principals and teachers in this study in order to have a more accurate view of the school environment as recommended by others (Park & Ham, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013). To enhance the likelihood of gathering multiple perspectives from each school in the stratified, random sample, we made the decision to survey up to three administrators and five random teachers in each building. Doing so means each survey response does not necessarily represent a unique school in the sample since it is possible there are multiple responses from an individual school.

Likewise, while this study captured voices of over 1,600 principals and teachers, the response rate was less than 10% and does not necessarily provide an equal distribution from all regions across the US. Though participation was below the 10% response rate generally considered acceptable for large-scale, **“cold-call” surveys** (Dillman, 2011), we determined receiving 1,645 responses with responses representing each U.S. state provided an adequate sample to address our research questions. Though our study provides a valuable snapshot of principal and teacher perceptions from across the country, ensuring a more balanced representation and higher response rate from educators across the US would be helpful in future studies.

In addition, data collection for this study was completed just prior to the beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic. As a result, the findings from this study should be viewed in light of the changes in perceptions that may have occurred as a result of the pandemic. That being said, this study can serve as a valuable comparison for how perceptions have changed since the pandemic began. Do principals and teachers still believe many of the organizational structures and middle grades educational tenets (e.g., advisory, interdisciplinary teaming, flexible scheduling, student voice in decision making) are not as important? Has the pandemic influenced what principals and teachers believe is important in educating young adolescents? Are the same instructional strategies valued after being forced into navigating online

learning? These are important questions to address moving forward that this study helps provide the context for understanding.

### Conclusion

Overall, teachers and principals seemed to have a mostly shared vision of the importance and implementation of middle school components. However, this vision also seems to indicate a turn away from the middle grades organizational structures and having teachers specifically prepared to teach young adolescents. The middle school model and recommendations from organizations such as the NAASP and AMLE have been largely the same since 2000. These results suggest support for this model may be waning for educators. A deeper investigation into beliefs of middle school principals and teachers is needed. This study and previous research begs the question of why support, from principals and teachers, for the middle school model is deteriorating, and what needs to be done to reinforce the foundation of middle school philosophy in schools across the country. Should we look to educator preparation programs for answers, or is the issue more embedded somewhere in the structure of school systems, state departments of education, and funding sources? Additionally, the waning support and lack of updating suggests a need to **reexamine the middle school model in today's** schools. Future research should try to determine if the middle school model still has a viable place within the current state of education. Hopefully, this study provides some insight into several differences that exist among the beliefs of leadership and faculty, and highlights some points on which to focus moving forward.

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## Appendix A

*Number of Teacher and Principal Responses by State*

State	Total Responses	Teacher Responses	Principal Responses
Alabama	26	20	6
Alaska	6	4	2
Arizona	37	28	9
Arkansas	30	22	8
California	125	89	36
Colorado	27	15	12
Connecticut	18	9	9
Delaware	10	7	3
Florida	54	41	13
Georgia	61	41	20
Hawaii	4	4	0
Idaho	8	8	0
Illinois	41	28	13
Indiana	37	25	12
Iowa	36	28	8
Kansas	27	22	5
Kentucky	72	53	19
Louisiana	23	14	9
Maine	11	11	0
Maryland	11	7	4
Massachusetts	25	12	13
Michigan	46	38	8
Minnesota	21	14	7
Mississippi	17	14	3
Missouri	60	36	24



Montana	27	18	9
Nebraska	15	12	3
Nevada	14	8	6
New Hampshire	5	4	1
New Jersey	14	11	3
New Mexico	31	27	4
New York	33	21	12
North Carolina	69	51	18
Ohio	59	45	14
Oklahoma	45	33	12
Oregon	24	16	8
Pennsylvania	56	37	19
Rhode Island	2	1	1
South Carolina	28	18	10
South Dakota	17	12	5
Tennessee	34	25	9
Texas	103	70	33
Utah	27	23	4
Vermont	5	4	1
Virginia	52	39	13
Washington	47	35	12
West Virginia	6	5	1
Wisconsin	70	46	24
Wyoming	10	10	0
State Not Reported	14	12	2
Total	1,645	1,176	469