Academic, Social, and Emotional Needs in a Middle Grades Reform Initiative

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Abstract

During an evaluation of a new middle grades reform initiative, the program participants (i.e., teachers, coaches, and principals) reported they perceived that students' social and emotional needs interfaced with implementation of the reform. In particular, participants perceived that students' need for a safe, supportive, and engaging environment affected implementation of the initiative and that components of it did not meet students' needs. Ultimately, program participants desired both permanent, full-time mental health professionals to work with students and professional development on the middle school model. The complex relationships between students' multiple needs and the initiative demonstrate the importance of providing comprehensive support and guidance to middle grades students in the context of a reform.

Introduction

The middle school years are a turbulent time for young adolescents. In the middle school years, many students possess increasingly negative attitudes toward school, in general, and about specific subjects such as math and language arts (for a review see Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kearn, 2006). A substantial portion of middle grades students face decreased motivation and are more likely to engage in behavioral misconduct (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Although developmental changes contribute to age-related declines in student motivation, characteristics of the school environment and the instructional practices of classroom teachers can further contradict adolescents' developmental needs (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). For example, the large, impersonal design of some middle and junior high schools may not meet adolescents' relational

needs (Osterman, 2000; Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). Although many adolescents successfully manage the challenges they encounter in middle school, others struggle with balancing academic, social, and emotional needs during this difficult transition (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000).

Urban settings further compound the incompatibility between schooling practices and the needs of middle graders. Urban students often attend crowded schools with high teacher-student ratios, characterized by inadequate funding, facilities, and resources (Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996). Students living in large cities are twice as likely to drop out of school as students in non-urban environments; in more than 20 large cities, dropout rates are 40% or higher (Bridgeland, DiIulio, Jr., & Burke Morison, 2006). These students may be in greater need of supportive teacher relationships in middle school (Wentzel, 2002).

The Association for Middle Level Education (http://www.amle.org/) has proposed guidelines for middle school reform. These guidelines include establishing challenging, standards-based curricula and engaging instruction; a school culture of high expectations; and ongoing family and community partnerships. Comprehensive school reform initiatives have attempted to address academic, social, and emotional issues in the middle grades. In the recently updated position statement *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (AMLE, 2010), comprehensive guidance and support services is one of the characteristics middle schools that meet the needs of young adolescents. Although most middle school initiatives highlight the importance of addressing academic, social, and emotional issues, the national focus on accountability and standards has impacted the nature of school reform efforts.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 has significantly shaped school reform in the United States. NCLB has especially challenged middle level education (see Marx & Harris, 2006, for a discussion of science education; Hill, 2007, for math education). In particular, NCLB's requirement for teachers to be highly qualified has significant implications for middle school teachers. Many middle school teachers teach multiple content areas, and NCLB requires certification in all subjects they teach. For NCLB's expectations to be fulfilled, however, students' social, emotional, and academic needs must be met (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004).

The national attention towards accountability and standards has led reformers to re-examine middle school philosophies and practices (Belair & Freeman, 2000). For example, Jackson and Davis (2000) asserted that relationships are essential to promoting young adolescent intellectual development. Pressley and colleagues found that the most engaging and effective schools and teachers provide high-quality academics in a supportive environment (Pressley, Dolezal, Raphael, Mohan, & Roehrig, 2003; Pressley, Raphael, Gallagher, & DiBella, 2004; Raphael, Pressley, Mohan, 2008). Given the implications of NCLB and the current discussions in the middle level reform movement, it is important to look at the current middle school context. For this study, the research questions were: (1) How did components of the reform affect the social and emotional needs of the students? (2) Within the context of the reform, how did program participants meet students' social and emotional needs? and (3) What resources and supports were needed to meet students' social and emotional needs?

Method

The Loundsfield School District (pseudonym) implemented the Middle Grades Initiative in 24 schools in 2006. The name of the district and the initiative titles have been changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The district's math and science department leaders developed the Middle Grades Initiative to assist the district with meeting NCLB's requirement of highly qualified teachers. Ownership or buy-in for the initiative was largely centralized at the district department level, and funding came from the district and two foundations. As external evaluators, our role was to document the first year of implementation of the Middle Grades Initiative, including patterns of implementation across the schools. At the end of the data collection, social and emotional needs were systematically examined.

Loundsfield is located in a state that requires teachers to be certified to teach middle grades (6–8) by taking the Middle Grades Praxis exam or to have certification in a specific content area. The purpose of the initiative was to have teachers become highly qualified in specific content areas and then to teach in departmentalized settings. Although the middle level teachers in Loundsfield had middle school certification, most of the middle school teachers did not have endorsements in specific content areas.

Description of Schools Participating in the Middle Grades Initiative

Twenty-four schools in the Loundsfield district (a district consisting of more than 250,000 students) participated in the Middle Grades Initiative. The participating schools were spread across the city. In 2007, the district student population consisted of 47.7% African American, 38.3% Latino/a, and 14% Other. At 19 of the schools, more than 90% of the students were either African American or Latino/a. At 23 of the schools, 95% of the students were from low-income families. In Loundsfield, nearly 86% of the students received free/reduced-price lunches.

Description of Reform Initiative

The Middle Grades Initiative aimed to improve middle grades instruction in mathematics, science, and language arts through teacher professional development, departmentalized school structures, and leadership training and development. Through the reform, each middle grades teacher was expected to have: (1) an endorsement in their subject area; (2) sufficient time to teach the subject; and (3) access to and professional development on a high-quality curriculum. The project provided district curriculum coaches to support the implementation of standards-based reform curriculum and to facilitate the departmentalization process in the participating schools. The district arranged for principals in participating schools to receive 100 hours of leadership development to foster meaningful dialogue and community among the principals. In addition, middle school teachers were expected to meet and discuss instruction during 60-minute long weekly grade level meetings. The primary supports for the reform were teacher participation in university endorsement courses in content areas; professional development in language arts, math, science, and leadership; support from district level curriculum coaches; and middle grades level meetings for teachers to discuss instruction.

Description of Departmentalization in Reform Initiative

The schools were categorized by four primary forms of departmentalization (see Table 1). Five schools were departmentalized *within* sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, meaning there was a content-area teacher for every subject for every middle school grade level, and each teacher taught content to one grade level. In 15 schools, content area teachers were departmentalized *across* seventh and eighth grade, so teachers taught a content area to both of these grade levels. Almost all of these schools had some departmentalization with variations in how Grade 6 classes were structured compared to Grades 7 and 8. Another variation was whether departmentalization took place within a single grade or across grade levels; other schools were departmentalized in seventh and eighth grade only and self-contained in sixth grade. Of the schools that were departmentalized, none had departmental (i.e., math, science) meetings to discuss subject-area instruction and assessment.

Data Collection

Interviews and focus groups. Interviews were conducted with four district curriculum coaches, 10 middle school principals, and two school level specialists where we did not have access to the

Table 1
Middle Grades Configurations and Schedules

Sixth Grade	Seventh Grade	Eighth Grade	Number of Schools (% of 24 schools)	
Self-Contained	Self-Contained	Self-Contained	1	(4.2%)
Self-Contained	Within Grade Departmentalized	Within Grade Departmentalized	3	(12.5%)
Within Grade Departmentalized	Within Grade Departmentalized	Within Grade Departmentalized	5	(20.8%)
Self-Contained	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized	7	(29.2%)
Within Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized	3	(12.5%)
Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized	5	(20.8%)

principal or assistant principal. All of the coaches and principals involved in the initiative were asked to participate in interviews. Focus groups were conducted with 33 middle school teachers enrolled in university endorsement courses. Interviews and focus groups ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Observations of middle school team meetings.
Six schools were purposively selected for observation based on the following criteria: size (ranging from two small, two medium, and two large schools), location (proportionally representing Loundsfield), and school configuration having varied departmentalization structures (see Table 2). Researchers observed a sampling of 16 team meetings with six of the 24 participating schools. Each team was observed at least twice. The team meetings included six to 10 teachers, specialists, and/or coordinators. With the exception of one eighth grade meeting, the meetings included teachers from multiple grade levels. Meetings varied in duration from 25 minutes to two hours.

For each team meeting observed, researchers recorded the number of attendees, a description of the meeting site, and a description of the conversation that took place during the meeting. Some of the descriptions included verbatim quotes, but most of the conversations were paraphrased or summarized, since the meetings were not audio-recorded.

Coding and Analysis
Thematic coding was used across all the data to categorize social and emotional needs based on

the educational psychology literature (e.g., Brophy, 2004; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2007). As it was not known which factors would affect participants' perceptions of the reform, an inductive approach was used for the data analysis (Patton, 2002). As such, the researchers used data-driven analyses, relying on open-ended responses from and direct observations of the participants to understand the various social and emotional factors that affected the implementation of the reform.

Two researchers first independently read the interview/focus group transcripts and descriptions of the team meetings for any information that related to participants' discussion of students' social and emotional issues or needs. This included use of the following words: socio-emotional, social, emotion, issue, and need. In this first coding, participants described social and emotional issues; the researchers did not categorize or label these issues. Consequently, for an issue to be described as a socio-emotional issue and included in these initial analyses, the participant would have to refer to the issue as socio-emotional, social, emotional, or mental health.

Throughout this first coding, the researchers independently generated themes or categories and subcategories that represented the quotes and descriptions. Researchers compared the themes across the different data sources until they were confident that the themes represented the data.

The researchers then independently reread all of the data sources and looked for other types of information pertinent to social and emotional needs that were not necessarily described as such by the

Table 2
School Configurations in Which Team Meetings Were Observed

School	Sixth Grade	Seventh Grade	Eighth Grade
School #1	Self-Contained	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized
School #2	Self-Contained	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized
School #3	Self-Contained	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized
School #4	Within Grade Departmentalized	Within Grade Departmentalized	Within Grade Departmentalized
School #5	Within Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized
School #6	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized	Across Grade Departmentalized

participants. Researchers searched for information pertaining to social and emotional needs, based on the research literature (e.g., AMLE, 2010; Roeser, Strobel, & Quihuis, 2002; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Researchers came to this coding with a conception of social and emotional needs as consisting of two primary categories: (1) relationships (e.g., peer, adult, romantic) and (2) emotional (e.g., esteem, sadness, anger). Researchers checked the themes they had already generated to see if any new themes emerged and if any themes contradicted the previous analyses. Researchers completed this coding when they were confident that their themes fit all of the data analyzed and no new themes emerged. Researchers then compared their coding and made finalized the themes.

Member Checking
Member checking occurred throughout the data analysis. First, researchers shared their emerging themes with other researchers on the project, who provided additional comments. Researchers also received feedback from the leaders of the Middle Grades Initiative on several interim evaluation reports which provided some data to support further investigation.

Findings

Program participants repeatedly talked about the social and emotional needs of their students. Such concerns emerged in interviews with all four coaches; three of the four teacher focus groups; eight observations of 16 middle grades meetings (at five of the six schools); and 11 of the 12 interviews with principals, assistant principals, or school level specialists. In 15 of the 24 schools, a teacher, coach, or principal mentioned the social and emotional needs of middle grades students.

The social and emotional needs of students influenced and were influenced by the Middle Grades Initiative. Participants described a variety of social and emotional needs present among middle school students and the ways in which the reform interacted with these needs. Specifically, participants talked about the social and emotional needs of their students and the Middle Grades Initiative in three ways:

- The limited human resources and support to meet the social and emotional needs of students.
- The strategies made by program participants to meet the social and emotional needs of students within the context of the Middle Grades Initiative.
- The supports that participants felt they needed to meet the social and emotional needs of students.

Limited Resources and Support to Address Social and Emotional Needs
Teachers, coaches, and principals stressed the relational needs of middle grades students. They perceived that students needed supportive relationships with adults. Teachers counseled students, addressed students' changing physical needs, and managed student behavior. Limited human resources (e.g., challenges with departmentalization and teacher shortages), however, challenged their capacity to meet the social and emotional needs of students; in particular, it hindered their ability to cultivate supportive teacher-student relationships. Further, the high teacher turnover hindered the coaches' role to support teachers and students in fully participating in the reform.

Departmentalized and self-contained: Effects upon relationships. The Middle Grades Initiative aimed for subject experts to teach content areas within a departmentalized structure. Teachers, principals, and coach informants, however, suggested that departmentalization created fewer opportunities for teachers to cultivate relationships with students. For example, at one school, the math specialist shared that she felt it was difficult for new students to adjust to the middle school environment, since students were used to learning most subjects in self-contained elementary schools. The specialist noted:

> The kids think we are from the moon because it is so different. I think the hardest thing for our parents is that we have two feeder schools for our building, and because they are coming from self-contained classrooms, the challenge is having five to 10 different teachers and personalities. The kids tend to academically fall off … until they get their feet wet and figure out how to play the game with the different teachers.

Consistent with this specialist, the principal at this school expressed concern with the middle school structure: "Teachers aren't able to make connections with students because it's too many students; the school is too big, and it's [only] middle school."

During the middle grades team meetings, teachers discussed their concerns about departmentalization hindering teacher-student relationships. In one team meeting, several teachers discussed how difficult it was for students to adjust to more than one teacher. In another team meeting, teachers talked about the challenges of creating personal relationships with their students in a departmentalized schedule. One teacher discussed how students needed courage to

talk to all of their teachers, since they were used to discussing their issues with one teacher.

In comparison, teachers in self-contained classrooms found it easier to bond with their students. One principal explained:

> When we returned to the self-contained model, our students were more on task, felt more connected, were able to bond better to their single teacher, and behavioral issues such as skipping class (and) tardiness were minimized. … The security of the same group with the same teacher helped them do better, succeed more, interact, and engage socially.

Program participants also perceived that the structure of the self-contained classroom made it easier for students to share personal information with their teachers. For example, in a school with self-contained middle school classes, one principal shared a story about a middle grades student who was recently raped. The principal explained that the student told her teacher before telling anyone else. Such stories of sharing personal information with the teacher were common. The principal concluded his story, stating, "In general, teachers try to address students' needs. Students open up to teachers. Students feel comfortable discussing personal issues with teachers." By departmentalizing, the students had less time to cultivate relationships with teachers. This hindered the development of successful teacher-student relationships within the context of the reform.

Shortages affect departmentalization and teacher-Student relationships. Another challenge was the shortages of teachers who met the definition of highly qualified. One principal talked about how teacher shortages made it difficult to departmentalize:

> We also know at our school we're potentially going to lose two teachers because of numbers. Teachers are given to you based on numbers: [one teacher] per 30 kids. It's up to that principal to find a science teacher, a reading teacher, a math teacher … if you're going to be able to block and run departmentalized middle grades. If you lose that one … if you lose a science teacher, like we have the possibility of losing, then you have to teach science in a regular class. Well now they can't go out for science, so bam! You go right back to self-contained eighth graders in one classroom where they never get to all of the subjects.

Coaches also recognized the negative effects of teacher shortages on teacher-student relationships. For example, one coach discussed the problems created by teacher turnover:

> The eighth grade math teacher. … Well, the first one moved out and left the school. The students went two months without a math person. The assistant principal was in the class. Now they have someone who … is not math endorsed. The eighth grade students were crying for a permanent teacher. … Since she left, the eighth grade class is still in the first math book they started in. The eighth grade class was closest to the original teacher who left, so we cannot underestimate the personal connection between them and that teacher. They would have rolled with it one time but not repeated times.

Need for highly qualified teachers who address social and emotional needs. Understanding and addressing the unique social and emotional needs of middle grades students was an additional prerequisite for middle grades teachers. Principals and administrators found it difficult to find teachers who could teach and support the social and emotional needs of students. The shortage of such teachers caused difficulty when they were trying to recruit, hire, and retain middle grades teachers. One principal talked about the challenges of finding middle grades teachers who understood and accepted the issues unique to their students:

> Our challenges are always finding teachers who like kids who maybe don't like you everyday. I think that is a huge challenge. I've had a teacher leave for the last three years. They just can't handle the kids … it's just that middle school psyche and deciding that "I like this age group, and I can deal with this." So I think that is a challenge, but it is ongoing, it's every year. … I think for middle schools it takes a special kind of person. … There is always one person who is not feeling the kids at this point. So maintaining a staff that understands middle school [is difficult].

Similarly, a school specialist explained the necessity of addressing the social and emotional issues of the students:

> The school does need somebody maybe once a week during social studies time or something for conflict resolution. I'll tell you, at my school, … there are social issues that are endemic in the community. You see this wave of kids coming

at you, and God forbid that they take a problem from the outside and decide to settle it right there and then.

Teachers who met the social and emotional needs of their students achieved success in the classroom. For example, one principal explained how student learning benefited from the teachers who addressed the social and emotional needs of their students: "Our teachers are always being called upon to go beyond the teaching of the content. If they don't deal with the social and emotional issues, then learning can't take place."

The lack of teachers available to provide specialized content instruction and the lack of teachers prepared to support the social and emotional needs of middle grades students hindered the success of this middle grades reform effort.

Addressing the Social and Emotional Needs of Students

Despite the challenges, as discussed above, participants tried to meet students' social and emotional needs, as well as their academic needs, within the structures of the Middle Grades Initiative. Although the reform encouraged middle grades teachers to have common planning time to discuss academic instruction, teachers primarily spent this time discussing the social and emotional needs of their students.

Concern about the emotional struggles of students. Along with teachers, principals also described the middle grades meetings as forums for teachers to share the social and emotional needs of their middle grades students and identify ways to address them. In meetings, teachers expressed concerns about their students' emotional struggles, especially how their home lives affected their emotional well-being. For example, during a team meeting, a teacher discussed how a student was dealing with her mom's recent health problems. He explained to the other teachers that he wanted to ensure everyone was aware of the situation, since the illness was adding to the student's stress and pressure. Later in the meeting, the teachers discussed the recent deaths of the parents of several students. At another school, teachers discussed the emotional stressors confronted by some of the students whose parents were in jail. The grade level meetings provided a time for teachers to discuss their concerns about the emotional struggles of their students.

One principal described the dialogue of the grade level meetings as going beyond instructional issues:

> There are other issues besides the content area, teaching, and learning. We are also talking about middle school children, [who] have a lot of social, emotional, community, and environment problems. So, the meetings are opportunities to incorporate whatever other ideas/issues we have with the children. I'm learning more about middle school children and the way they think and how their emotions are different from primary students. We need, as a school, to come up with—not per se programs—but, based on the needs of our particular children, what can we do to enhance and to really learn about how our children think. … And we have that opportunity with middle grades level meetings.

Principals and teachers alike used meeting time not only to discuss academics but also to troubleshoot the social and emotional needs of their students, especially relating to student behavior and mental health.

Behavioral problems: The focus of grade level meetings. Participants described difficulties in addressing student behavior and the subsequent ways in which behavioral issues occluded the success of the reform. Behavior commonly monopolized discussions in grade level meetings. The example below is a conversation among teachers at a grades level meeting about students' behavioral problems:

> Teacher A: Sixty-six percent of our middle grades students are consistently receiving detentions. Parents are supposed to sign the detention slips. If they don't sign, I will tell the principal, and maybe she can use her power of authority and get the students expelled. I sent another student out of the classroom today.
>
> Teacher B: We have some functional behavioral assessments going on.
>
> Teacher C: Another fight happened today.
>
> Teacher A: I heard it was because one student's "manhood was on the line." A girl was berating this boy in line, and one boy felt he had to defend his girlfriend, and a fight broke out. Boys were telling him, "You're [going to] let him put his hands on your girlfriend?" He was cornered. He can't stay here all day—they got [to] go out in the neighborhood after here. So the student should get days [suspension days].

Teacher D: We were talking about this the other day—how to deal with them.

Teacher C: We can't keep suspending them.

Teachers frequently struggled with determining the antecedents and resolutions to behavioral issues. When asked for the topic most frequently discussed at grade level meetings, a teacher responded without hesitation, "Behavior is a top recurring issue. We are talking about who is acting up in class, if he is acting up in everyone's class, and what we should do about it."

School social worker as an important resource.
The Middle Grades Initiative did not include any resources to support the emotional needs of students. Coaches, for example, were not involved in addressing the social and emotional needs of the students; their purpose was to provide advice about content-specific instruction. Teachers consulted with other teachers and social workers to work with students who struggled on multiple levels. Middle grades teachers often needed assistance in motivating their students to learn—support they did not find in the Middle Grades Initiative. Teachers relied on the social worker to help them motivate students. The following conversation, which occurred during a meeting, shows the difficulties teachers faced in motivating students and their efforts to help these students.

Teacher A: There's no reason he shouldn't be at grade level. … He's lazy. … He has the ability … the only thing he is low in is reading, not math.

Teacher B: Give me some strategies, because I'm getting zero out of him.

Teacher A: [The] social worker talked to him. … [It's] not that he can't do it … he's not motivated.

The school social worker served as an important resource for teachers. They felt that the social worker could help their students deal with various challenges, especially students from their community. The comments from a principal illustrate the severity of mental health issues in this community:

It is a shame, but there is a stigma attached to mental health issues, and so people don't take advantage of [available services]. There are people under siege, but I don't think we are ready to deal with it. … The lower you are on this SES [socioeconomic status] spectrum, the harder it is for your mamma to cover it up and

buy your way out of it. The kids in [the suburbs] are just as crazy. They use drugs, those homes are dysfunctional, but they are able to cover it, and there are more options. These kids don't have those kinds of options. It is really hard, and working with poor communities. … I have never seen such hopelessness, such dysfunction.

Supports for Meeting the Social and Emotional Needs of Students.
Program participants discussed two ways to support the social and emotional needs of their students: (1) the assignment of permanent mental health professionals to schools and (2) the provision of professional development about the middle grades model. The emphasis on these types of supports reflected participants' concerns that the Middle Grades Initiative did not address their students' social and emotional needs.

Permanent mental health professionals to address social and emotional issues. Given the struggles of their students, principals and teachers desired full-time mental health professionals (e.g., social workers) in their schools. One principal explained that, although they currently had a part-time counselor and social worker, "A lot of our time and energy is spent helping our kids with social and emotional issues." For students to fully access and benefit from the Middle Grades Initiative, participants needed more supports to meet the social and emotional needs of the students. One principal discussed the need to bring back the full-time social worker and the nurse:

We need to have a social worker in each school five days a week. We truly do … we have a social worker that just comes three days a week, and we need one five days a week. And we're starting now, very gradually, we're bringing in more reconstructive discipline, doing more intervention and working with the families to get the families to help us let the children know they make mistakes, but it's not the end of the world.

As stated by this principal, every school needs full-time mental health professionals for children to benefit from instruction. A teacher had similar statements to the abovementioned principal with regards to meeting the social and emotional needs of middle grades students:

We don't have a full-time social worker or counselor, and I think issues that come up that need support on that level are really critical. We don't have the staff. There's no way that [the

district] is looking at the staffing and trying to create something else. I mean, we just have a part-time counselor and the social worker two days a week. We are not getting support, so something needs to be discussed and come out of that. They aren't thinking about the middle grades, … you know, they're just thinking of the academic piece that's driven by test scores. The social and emotional piece also generates something we need to support. A lot of our time and energy is spent helping our kids with social and emotional issues.

Professional development regarding middle school.
Recognizing that the middle grades years are a sensitive time, participants desired professional development training on the middle school model, approach, or philosophy. One teacher explained that her school had training on the "middle school model" and described its success, while another teacher stated her school never received training in the middle school philosophy:

> Teacher A: In the beginning, when we first became a middle school, we had many supports and lots of classes and lots of professional development for the middle grades. The whole faculty took classes in middle school philosophy and psychology and all of that. And then … the new staff [didn't] know the middle school philosophy. At one time we had a real cohesive [understanding of] "here is what we are doing, here is what middle school is," and now I am not sure. Middle school is a certain philosophy of looking at the young adolescent, and we did gobs of that when we started—that was our whole claim to fame. Now it is not being practiced. They are just kids.

> Teacher B: That is our school. Our school is a middle school in name only. We don't do any of the philosophy or any of the other stuff.

> Teacher A: Yeah, we did, and I am sorry that we lost it.

Another principal possessed similar beliefs regarding the need for professional development on the middle school model. Consistent with the earlier discussion, this principal talked about the importance of teachers who are socially and emotionally competent.

> I think we need further professional development for teachers on the middle school model. What happens here, regrettably, is teachers just want to do their content—they don't want

the responsibility of the social and emotional component of their students. When [students were in a] self-contained environment, the same seventh and eighth grade teachers [were] involved in the social and emotional content because they had more contact with the students, and they were able to bond with them and interact [with] them. The fact is, the teachers are responsible for the social and emotional component of each student, not just the content— those have to take place.

Given the challenges confronted by students, specialized support would benefit teachers and administrators. Training in the middle school approach (as encouraged by the abovementioned teachers and administrators) could provide schools with a foundation to support students' academic *and* social and emotional needs.

Discussion

As confirmed by program participants, middle grades students have social and emotional needs that influence their learning. In this study, teachers, principals, and coaches reported their struggles in dealing with the social and emotional issues of their students. These findings are consistent with the notion that interactions between developmental changes and changes in the school environment create many challenges for adolescents (see Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Reuman, Mac Iver, & Feldlaufer, 1993, for a review of stage-environment fit theory).

Guided by NCLB, current school reforms focus on academic standards and improving educational outcomes. The Middle Grades Initiative complied with NCLB requirements for highly qualified teachers, which included teachers who pursued endorsements and received professional development in content areas. Our results confirmed that principals struggled with finding and retaining highly qualified teachers for each subject area.

In urban schools, teacher shortages are especially problematic; high-poverty urban schools have a 70% higher teacher turnover rate than low-poverty schools (Council of the Great City Schools, 2007). Teachers often leave urban schools because of low salaries, lack of support from administration, and other challenges (Council of the Great City Schools, 2007). In this study, participants reported that the social and emotional issues of students served as additional challenges for students attending the urban schools in this study undergoing district reform.

In the current study, social and emotional issues interacted with the middle grades reform initiative in two ways. First, social and emotional issues influenced the implementation of the reform. Participants experienced challenges in following the reform as prescribed. For example, instead of talking solely about instruction in grade level meetings, teachers conversed about the numerous social and emotional issues faced by students. Frequent behavioral problems, which are especially problematic in the middle school years (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000), further constrained educators' efforts to implement high-quality instruction.

Second, key components of the reform also affected program participants' success in meeting the social and emotional needs of students. Participants tried to meet the needs of their students, but *felt they needed additional support not provided by the reform.* Program participants felt that teachers achieved closer relationships with their students in self-contained middle school classrooms than in departmentalized classes, as advocated by the reform. Middle grades students needed teachers with whom they could develop supportive bonds and who were responsive to their social and emotional needs. Without permanent teachers, students did not spend enough time with the different content teachers to cultivate these relationships.

In alignment with the 16 characteristics needed for successful schools for young adolescents (AMLE, 2010), it is necessary for reform initiatives to include a focus on social and emotional issues. From the data, one obvious issue is that middle grades students require unique and targeted instruction. Teachers and administrators should be trained on the middle grades approach to be used with their students so they can both address their social and emotional needs as well as provide effective, high-quality instruction. Consistent with examples of comprehensive reform initiatives that integrate academic and social and emotional issues, participants in this study felt it was important and necessary to integrate social and emotional issues in accountability and standards-based reforms.

This paper began with three questions: (1) How did components of the reform affect the social and emotional needs of the students? (2) Within the context of the reform, how did program participants meet their students' social and emotional needs? and (3) What resources and supports were needed to meet students' social and emotional needs? We return to these questions now in our conclusions. In response to the first question, the reform did not to allow teachers to better meet the social and emotional needs of their students. Because the focus of the reform was predominantly on improving academic outcomes, social and emotional issues were not addressed. In response to the second question, program participants seemed to capitalize on some parts of the reform to meet the social and emotional needs of their students. For example, instead of using meetings to discuss academic instruction, participants frequently spoke about the social and emotional needs of their students. Finally, in terms of resources and supports, relevant stakeholders, especially teachers, seemed to desire middle school concept professional development as well as mental health providers or social workers to help them better meet the needs of their students.

While this study offers important insight into the needed components of reform efforts, it had a few limitations. As discussed earlier, this study began as an evaluation intended to document a new reform initiative in the middle grades. This was not a study that focused exclusively on understanding the social and emotional issues of middle grades students and the implications of a reform effort on the these social and emotional issues. Consequently, the focus of the data collection was not strictly on social and emotional issues, which limited the responses. Although participants reported that middle school students are faced with social and emotional issues, the extent to which students at all age levels confront these issues is unknown. Additionally, without hearing directly from middle grades students, we are inferring their perceptions of the reform from the teachers. The teachers and the students may not have had similar views about the reform and whether it met their social and emotional needs. A final limitation is the lack of demographic data about educator experience level or backgrounds; without this information we cannot infer the impact of past experience.

A multitude of studies have looked at the social and emotional issues of middle grades students. With NCLB's requirement that schools have highly qualified teachers, it is necessary to understand how social, emotional, and academic needs interact in reform contexts. To improve the academic achievement of middle grades students, it seems prudent to address their social and emotional needs, which affect their learning. Questions for future exploration include: How do school districts consider academic and social and emotional issues

when planning district initiatives? What resources are allocated to meet social and emotional needs? How does resource allocation affect the functioning of other programs? Reforms need to address the academic, social, and emotional needs of middle grades students. Future research can provide practical guidance to improve the success of reform efforts.

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Appendix A
Middle Grades Team Meetings Focus Groups Protocol

1. I've attended the last three grade level meetings you've had. In what ways have these meetings been typical for you? (In terms of time, agenda items, who has planned them—administration or teachers? How often they occur?) What aspects of these meetings have been out of the ordinary? (same probes)

2. In these last few meetings, I've noticed xxx about your discourse surrounding math. Have I made an accurate assessment of this? How would you describe your discourse around math? (probe for specific examples)

3. In these last few meetings, I've noticed xxx as issues you face related to the middle grades. Have I made an accurate assessment of this? How would you describe the issues you face as middle school teachers?

4. Is the current middle grades configuration xxx? Is this the way you'd like to see middle grades at your school (Why or why not? or What other options?)?

Appendix B
Principal Interview Protocol

1. We'd like to learn about your school's approach to middle grades instruction. Tell us about this and what your role is within this setup.

   • Generally speaking, what is your school doing to move to a "middle school" approach? How is this different than what you did last year? How do you envision next year?

   • What percentage of your middle grades are self-contained? Which ones [note this on the roster]?

   • Which classes switch (grades and subjects)? Who does the switching (teachers or students)? [Note who is teaching what subjects to which grades on the roster.] Which classes do all teachers teach (i.e., Do all teach reading, language arts, social studies?)? [Confirm categorization of our typology.]

   • Will your school offer algebra to students in eighth grade? How will you schedule this?

   • When you think of middle grades students, is there anything you do to address their needs as opposed to the needs of primary students?

2. Is there a structured school time for teachers to meet, talk, and work together on middle grades instruction?

   • How often? When? What do teachers talk about?

   • Has the nature of the conversations changed since implementing a middle grades focus? If so, how?

   • Do the PR and SP or administrative team take time to talk about middle grades instruction? If so, who and what is discussed? How does this team of people work together to support middle grades education?

3. Does your school offer supports for middle grades instruction?

   • If so, what types of support have you received from your school to support middle grades instruction?

   • Is this support effective? Why/Why not?

   • Have any challenges emerged this year regarding middle grades instruction in your school?

   • If so, what are those challenges?

   • Have you received support to address those challenges?

   • Are there other supports you need to get past these challenges you mentioned?

   • How are the challenges different than last year?

Appendix C
Teachers' Focus Groups Protocol

1. We'd like to learn about your school's approach to middle grades instruction. Tell us about this and what your role is within this setup.

   • How well does this setup and this curriculum work for you and your students?
   • The background sheet will ask, specifically:
     ○ How are science, math, language arts, etc. taught as departmentalized or self-contained?
     ○ What curriculum are you using for the science you teach?

2. Do you have a chance to talk with other teachers at your school about middle grades instruction? Does this (and, if so, *how* does this) differ from last year? Why/Why not?

   • How often? When? What do you talk about?
   • At your school, do middle grades teachers agree with your school's approach to middle grades instruction? Why/Why not?
   • Do parents agree with your school's approach to middle grade instruction? Why/Why not?

3. Does your school offer supports for middle grades instruction?

   • If so, what types of support have you received from your school to support middle grades instruction?
   • Is this support effective? Why/Why not?

4. Have any challenges emerged this year regarding middle grades instruction in your school?

   • If so, what are those challenges?
   • Have you received support to address those challenges?
   • Are there other supports you need to get past these challenges you mentioned?

Appendix D
Interviews with Coaches Protocol

1. Is this the correct list of schools that you are working with? If not, please clarify which ones you are working with.

2. For each school you work with, indicate how the teachers are organized in relation to who teaches what subjects, etc.

   • The number of teachers in the school who departmentalize
   • Subjects taught
   • Switching of classrooms (for teachers and/or students)
   • Grade level meetings

3. Is there a structured school time for teachers to work together on the implementation of this program? How is this time used? What is the nature of conversations among teachers (and with others) during those times? How and why do these conversations change because of this program?

4. What support is provided to the school to manage a shift in curricular structure and instructional philosophy and possible personnel changes? How effective is this support according to teachers?