

**STRATEGIC ALLIANCES IN MID SOUTH MIDDLE START:
BUILDING CAPACITY, CREATING A MOVEMENT**

SUBMITTED TO

FOUNDATION FOR THE MID SOUTH

BY THE

ACADEMY FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

NEW YORK CITY

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Introduction

In order to fulfill its mission of middle-grades education reform, the Mid South Middle Start initiative works with schools, organizations, and institutions to improve the social and academic outcomes of students aged 10-14. A crucial part of this endeavor is the creation of linkages by the core group of organizational partners with relevant people and groups to promote and sustain middle-grades reform. In time, these linkages become strategic alliances and form an infrastructure that includes all the appropriate sectors, resources, processes, and relationships that can help the initiative become a regional school reform movement.

A key element of alliance-building is the intentional and strategic manner with which affiliations are made. For Mid South Middle Start, this means creating linkages with people, organizations, institutions, and agencies that can, or have the potential to, enhance the implementation and impact of the initiative. These alliances are strategic if they advance the goals and/or image of Middle Start in ways that increase its success. They are also strategic if the initiative, in turn, enhances the mission and goals of the “allied” people, organizations, and institutions in ways that increase their chances of success. In other words, the alliances must be mutually beneficial for all concerned.

The act of building strategic alliances borrows ideas from the best practices of successful collaborations and partnerships: it brings together people and institutions around a set of needs and goals that are addressed with resources, activities, events, and products. Alliance members show a willingness to be part of a group and to blur the boundaries that, in the past, have identified their “turf.” They concentrate on developing highly functioning, yet caring, relationships focused on common goals that help all alliance members in some way. Given a shared understanding of the mission and sufficient diffusion of knowledge, skills, contacts, and resources, alliances can perform the following functions for their members:

- Enlarge the mission to make it a more collective one,
- Foster a spirit of camaraderie,
- Enlarge the pool of thinkers and doers,
- Expand the resource base,
- Broaden the base of ideas, knowledge, resources, and supports,
- Increase publicity, as well as accessibility to school reform services, and
- Build the infrastructure for implementation and sustainability.

As Mid South Middle Start was conceived and proposed, it was clear that building alliances would be a principal strategy, given the prominent role and success of this activity in Michigan Middle Start. This approach was to consider that model but alter it in ways that would better suit the Mid South.

This report, based on documentation and interviews conducted between 2000 and 2003, presents highlights of the strategic alliance-building process in the Mid South Middle Start initiative, focusing on alliances with organizations, persons, and relationships that were developed and nurtured. Some of these were developed by design, while others developed through a less intentional process of creating opportunities that later became the foundation for a strategic alliance. In this discussion, strategic alliances are connections between the initiative's core partners and other organizations and individuals that became "alliance members." The purpose of the strategic alliances is to provide assistance to the core partners in reaching initiative goals related to building capacity, creating a movement, and sustaining middle-grades educational reform in the Mid South.

The Core Partners

Of particular importance in Mid South Middle Start alliance-building is the work shared by the core partners, the Foundation for the Mid South (FMS) and the Academy for Educational Development (AED), as well as a FMS consultant, the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) as they collaborated to build alliances with schools, organizations, agencies, and individual educators. The two core partners and CPRD worked together in a variety of roles. FMS had the primary role as the major grantee and local administrator of the initiative. Through the project director, a full-time FMS staff member, much of the conceptualizing and administration of the initiative was accomplished. AED, as the Middle Start National Center and the major managerial and technical support organization of Michigan Middle Start, had the knowledge and skills to be a major support organization for FMS in management and implementation, particularly with establishing and carrying out the school services component. AED maintained a full-time staff person, a director of school improvement services, and seven technical assistant coaches in the Mid South. CPRD administered and analyzed a "self-study" survey for participating schools. CPRD also presented the findings to stakeholders and conducted workshops to train them in understanding and using survey data.

FMS and AED, with the assistance of CPRD, have successfully forged a variety of alliances within the three states. They sought broad support within the large geographical area and within all sectors important to school reform in the region.

Broad Variety of Alliance Members

Some of the strategic alliances that developed in Mid South Middle Start came about from the original planning. It was clear from the inception of the initiative that FMS, AED and CPRD would use their contacts, knowledge of the region, and familiarity with middle-grades education and education reform to suggest individuals and organizations as alliance members. FMS and AED brainstormed about the existing structures that could increase the initiative's visibility, provide services, help build capacity, and foster good public relations. To attract alliance members, the partners stressed the two-way benefit of the strategic alliance and found ways to define it as a "win-win" relationship. As stated above, some linkages were more formal than others, and some were built upon existing relationships. As a whole, they demonstrate the core partners' numerous and continuous efforts to attract appropriate alliance members. The types of alliance members fall into the 11 categories, described below, although the particular examples do not include all the individuals and organizations contacted.

Ongoing Initiatives

A natural alliance nurtured throughout the initial stages of planning Mid South Middle Start was the linkage with Michigan Middle Start, the original Middle Start model. The plan for Mid South Middle Start was to follow the lead provided by this first implementation. The mission and goals were similar, but the "partnership" or "alliance structure" was changed to accommodate the different level of education-reform infrastructure in the Mid South region.

It was also clear that certain other FMS initiatives would be appropriate alliance members. They were well suited in terms of seeking to affect change in education, the workforce, and other relevant social issues in the Mid South. These initiatives also offered opportunities for Mid South Middle Start to benefit from the cross-fertilization of ideas and contacts. For example, FMS's Workforce Alliance was concerned with innovative programming in workforce development throughout the Delta, and the African American Faith-based Initiative was promoting productive relations between faith-based institutions, foundations and communities. These initiatives, working in the same communities as Mid South Middle Start,

offered chances for mutual growth and support and, thus, extra sustenance for school reform efforts. Further, since the FMS Mid South Middle Start project director was a committee member for Project GEARUP, this linkage was inevitable, and at various times, staff from AED and CPRD accompanied FMS staff to speak at GEARUP events and learn how each effort approached working with students.

Alliances were also forged with other initiatives working with the same communities or populations as Mid South Middle Start. One example was AIM at Middle-Grades Results, a government-funded comprehensive school improvement program that assists middle-grades schools in becoming high-performing learning and caring organizations focused on student learning and aligned with the principles of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. This initiative and Middle Start shared a common mission and worked in the same rural communities with the same population. In addition, the PREPS program (Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools), which provides professional development and evaluation services to school districts and had a working relationship with the core partners through the Southern Forum, became another Mid South Middle Start alliance member and provided professional development for Mid South Middle Start schools for two years.

State-level Agencies

The state departments of education in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi were also critical alliance members to be developed. FMS, AED, and CPRD staff met with officials in all three departments to discuss the initiative's mission, publicize the need for concentrating resources on young adolescents, and request cooperation in supplying school-level test data for Middle Start's evaluators.

A Steering Committee Representing a Variety of Roles

For the initiative as a whole, the work of the steering committee empanelled by FMS represented an excellent first step in rallying the knowledge and resources in the three states to lay the groundwork for the reform of middle-grades education. Committee members from Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi held many important roles related to schools and educational policy. They included state-level administrators and curriculum specialists, district-level educators, university faculty, and executive directors of educational organizations; the committee also included some out-of-state members serving as consultants or advisors to the initiative.

The Middle Level Organizations

Organizations focused on middle-grades education in the three states also became alliance members, including the **Arkansas Association of Middle Level Education**, the **Louisiana Middle School Association**, and the **Mississippi Association of Middle Level Education**. These membership organizations provided materials, events and training sessions that were useful to the technical assistance staff as well as staff in participating schools. AED and FMS staff presented papers at the yearly conferences of these organizations, and Mid South Middle Start encouraged constituents to join these organizations, thus increasing their membership.

National and Regional Organizations

Staff of the two core partner organizations, AED and FMS, were founding members of the **National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform**. These memberships and the use of the Forum's principles to conceptualize the Middle Start model made a strategic alliance inevitable. A consultant from the National Forum helped refine the Essential Elements for Middle Start (later called the Middle Start Principles and Practices) and develop rubrics for levels of implementation. With the creation of the **Southern Forum** by members of the National Forum, Mid South Middle Start got further assistance in its efforts to build capacity in the Mid South.

Another southern organization, the **Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)** had expertise aligned with the needs of Mid South Middle Start. AED and FMS kept SREB informed about the initiative's progress, and SREB staff made presentations on lessons learned about student achievement in middle-grades education at Middle Start institutes. This type of information exchange also occurred with the **Regional Service Centers** for education in each of the states. When workshops or training sessions were scheduled, these centers provided facilities for regional meetings.

Institutions of Higher Education

In the effort to make connections with institutions of higher education, the Mid South Middle Start core partners and CPRD built on previous contacts because few postsecondary institutions had a middle-level concentration that awarded degrees or certifications. At **Mississippi College**, FMS and AED staff had previous ties with teacher education faculty through the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and through work with the

Educational Development Center. AED capitalized on these contacts to subcontract with the college for the services of two technical assistant coaches who worked with two Middle Start schools.

Foundations

It was natural for foundations with initiatives that concentrated on education reform or worked with middle-grades students to form alliances with Mid South Middle Start. Funders and staff of these initiatives shared information and participated in one another's events. These types of alliances included members such as the **Kettering Foundation** and the **Walton Foundation**.

Participating Schools

The **26 schools** in the Delta served by Middle Start technical assistance coaches and professional development providers became aligned with the core partners through the services rendered to them, as well as by attending institutes and other training sessions convened by core partners and CPRD.

The Collaborative Professional Partners (CPP)

Another set of alliance members were the organizations selected to conduct professional development services at participating schools, collectively called the CPP organizations. These included:

- The National Faculty, which addressed education in the Mid South. When the organization ceased to operate soon after the alliance was made, a staff person became a professional development provider for Middle Start in reading across the curriculum.
- The National Writing Project (NWP), a nationwide organization to improve writing. While NWP's previous work was mainly in elementary schools, Mid South Middle Start helped the organization make a transition to the middle grades.
- Ventures, a program based on brain research as it relates to problem solving and higher-order thinking, provided professional development for teachers in five Middle Start schools.
- PREPS, a program concerned with educational policy and evaluation, facilitated staff development in schools around assessment and accountability for Mid South Middle Start.
- The Algebra Project, a program for both inner city and rural areas, assists students in achieving mathematics literacy.

Community-based Organizations

Since meaningful community engagement is one of the essential elements of Middle Start, it was important to link with community-based organizations. FMS staff made strategic

alliances with **Mississippi Action for Community Education (MACE)**, which had a long history of community organizing and implementing programs in leadership, the arts, and technology. As a community partner working with FMS, MACE held educational forums and meetings, which led to the development of five curriculum modules designed to improve student achievement in public education. This natural link for Middle Start was nurtured and managed by FMS staff, who advised the organization about funding and will pilot the modules in Middle Start schools.

Other Alliances

The Mid South Middle Start core partners made a few strategic alliances with individuals with no specific organizational affiliation. These were persons with great expertise in the educational issues and concerns relevant to Middle Start. Joan Lipsitz became a critical friend to Mid South Middle Start in its design phase and assisted with the first analysis of the opinions of Mid South stakeholders. Another individual member was Sue Rosensweig, who had created a resource guide for Michigan Middle Start and was contracted to do the same for Mid South Middle Start. Alliances with these individuals were a clear advantage as they provided expertise about substantive issues and experience from the design and implementation of the original model.

In conclusion, the types of relationships with organizations, institutions, and individuals described above helped “get the word out” about this educational reform effort in the Mid South. Such strategic alliances are vital to the development of broad-based support of such efforts and their long-term sustainability.

Initiating and Nurturing the Alliances

Successful alliances involve clear goals, direct action, nurturing, and a shared sense of ownership. Achieving these critical components requires a coordination of efforts and investments on the part of all alliance members. In the case of Mid South Middle Start, it was the responsibility of the two core partners and CPRD to select strategic allies and create enduring relationships. The documentation of the initiative revealed evidence that the formation of strategic alliances was accomplished in most cases with a series of intentional steps. They are the following:

Recognize a need in respect to the work,

Agree on the need and criteria for choosing a new alliance member,
Generate a list of possible alliances members,
For each candidate, brainstorm a list of mutual benefits (i.e., what can the member bring to the initiative, how can the initiative be helpful to the member),
Rank the candidates,
Contact potential members for a preliminary discussion,
Make final selection in consultation with other core members,
Plan and work with the alliance member once the relationship is established, and
Manage and nurture the alliance continuously.

Many alliances created for Mid South Middle Start using this method continue to be strong, especially when they are relevant to the core partners' previous or ongoing work. The following list describes specific instances of how this happened in the following areas: building capacity, increasing visibility, and creating a movement.

Building the Capacity of the Region

The numerous examples of alliance members who shared their knowledge and skills with the core partners, CPRD, and other stakeholders of Mid South Middle Start show that the region has benefited from increasing access to expertise in education reform.

FMS and AED staff worked tirelessly with participating schools to keep them current on funding opportunities and deadlines and to help them complete funding applications.

FMS and MACE staff presented conference sessions to participating schools on community engagement to support the improvement of public middle schools.

Although they were not directly participating in Middle Start, the Jackson Public School district in Mississippi and Little Rock Public Schools in Arkansas were encouraged to review data generated by the self-study. The core partners and CPRD provided displays of materials for these potential partners, given their vested interest in middle-grades education.

Mid South Middle Start staff was strategically aligned with the FMS communications director, who addressed Middle Start constituents about the importance of establishing a strong communications plan in each school and developing relationships with the local media.

By working with Mississippi College and having its coaches attend Mid South trainings, the initiative reached the important teacher preparation sector of education reform. This will assure that education faculty are influenced by the efforts to reform middle-grades education. One faculty member said, "Mid South Middle Start helped us to build our infrastructure to work with schools. We hope it goes on. We have the potential to be a strong partner."

Increasing the Visibility of Middle-Grades Education Reform

The core partners and CPRD intentionally built alliances in all sectors important to school reform. They reached out by inviting potential partners to meetings and activities, and convening educators and nationally known experts, thus creating broad-based awareness of and support for Mid South Middle Start.

Some contacts made by core partners and CPRD were not to create an alliance but rather to exchange information—to convey information and materials about Middle Start and to gain information to pass on to constituents. For example, to find out what services and resources were available to schools in the region, Mid South Middle Start staff contacted the Desegregation Assistance Centers, the Southeastern Equity Assistance Center and the Southwest Educational Development Labs. Information about the services of these organizations was passed to the technical assistance coaches and, in turn, to the participating schools. Thus, the participating schools were enhanced by these contacts, but also the initiative became known within these important support organizations.

Creating a Movement for the Improvement of Middle-Grades Education

To turn separate activities and actions into a sustainable initiative, FMS and AED had to “bring the alliance members along” in a way that fostered momentum. They did this by modeling, convening and creating a groundswell of awareness of, and attachment to, middle-grades educational reform. They asked tough questions, challenged misconceptions, and gave feedback. In response to such questions, one alliance member said, “The participation of [this organization] offers another set of eyes for assessing the needs and discovering ways of meeting them.” Staff of this alliance member were eager to replicate the best practices of Middle Start. Such a response demonstrates an important commitment, beyond that of the core partners and necessary for the initiative’s long-term sustainability.

For two years, two middle-grades comprehensive school improvement programs, Mid South Middle Start and AIM, shared a consultant, who shared information and expertise with the two initiatives. Although they were competitors for funding, at times they worked together. The alliance between Middle Start and AIM was not only a source of assistance to each but also helped “grow” the work of middle-grades educational reform in the region.

FMS, AED and CPRD approached each of the state departments to discuss several issues, including new accountability requirements and ongoing funded initiatives serving the same population as Mid South Middle Start. In other instances, the alliance with education-related departments developed more spontaneously. For example, FMS and AED staff met with newly hired or appointed educational officials on the state or local level shortly after they took office. These alliance-building efforts were particularly strategic because they addressed the political forces that monitored education within each state.

In Louisiana, the FMS project director challenged the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to include a category specifically for dispensing funds for the middle grades. After this was accomplished, Louisiana schools participating in Mid South Middle Start were reminded that this state funding was available and were helped

with applications. This gave Mid South Middle Start a link to state-level policy—an outcome that increased its visibility and helped build a ground swell of support for middle-grades reform.

These examples of the alliance-building work accomplished by FMS, AED and CPRD, reveal the vast amount of time and effort required for making affiliations and nurturing them to move the initiative forward. Staff members of two alliance organizations attested to the work involved:

Mid South Middle Start is one of the most well-connected groups around. They do a fabulous job!

We need to stay in contact with schools. Mid South Middle Start helped us to do this. We now have a better picture of education in Mississippi, and this helps make the connection from theory to practice.

Another member specifically mentioned the work done by the local FMS and AED directors of the initiative:

Thank heavens for those two who actively get out there and beat the bushes for Mid South Middle Start to become known and to work.

When a great deal of time has been invested in developing and sustaining an alliance, it is prudent to examine individual alliances, as well as all of them together, to determine the long-term value and look for gaps that could be filled by creating new ties in different sectors or in other parts of the region. The core partners posed these questions, thus fortifying the strategic nature of the alliances and insuring the future productivity of this endeavor.

Challenges to the Alliances

Beyond the time involved, much effort and energy are needed to create and sustain alliances. Alliance members must become familiar with the ideas and requirements of the initiative and then incorporate them into planning and action. As the input of individual alliance members is assimilated into the whole initiative, the shared knowledge helps deepen the work, but more time and funding are needed for participants to think, plan, present ideas, and make decisions than would be needed without a multimember configuration. Mid South Middle Start subsisted with collaborative work between the core partners and each alliance member but struggled to link the alliance in such a way that members felt a sense of collaboration. To a great degree, alliance members remained as separate peripherals with little contact with one another.

Thus, what was created was a series of strategic alliances with connections to the core partners, as well as to the FMS consultant CPRD.

This lack of connection among alliance members was evident in responses to questions about the initiative's structure. Core partner and CPRD staff described how alliances were carefully crafted in various sectors throughout the region. Alliance members also gave positive assessments about the alliance-building work done by core partners, but they wanted to become more involved in joint work with other members. Three of them said:

We are being proactive with Mid South Middle Start staff to gain involvement past what we are doing to help in the schools.

We would like more of a spirit of togetherness, more connections and meetings with all of the doers in Middle Start.

I know Mississippi College and CPRD are in it, but I don't know what they do.

Thus, it is clear, that the alliances are largely between the various organizations, institutions, and individuals and the core partners and CPRD, and do not connect members to one another as a team in ways that members deem meaningful. In order to fully realize the strength that alliances can bring to an initiative, these separate affiliations with the core partners need to be linked in ways that will provide ongoing, institutionalized support to Mid South Middle Start. Use of the Internet is a way to allow more alliance members to communicate with one another and foster the alliance as a whole.

Other challenges to alliance-building generated from interview responses of core partners and CPRD staff and the documentation of the work are expressed as a "wish list" for the initiative. These items listed below, if available through new alliances, would foster the initiative's success.

More disaggregated data on the populations served by the initiative;

More work with community colleges;

More contacts in Arkansas and Louisiana—although the initiative has developed participation in all three states, the large geographical area served by the initiative makes some locations difficult to reach, and to date, more alliances have been developed in Mississippi;

Additional relationships with institutions of higher education;

Closer ties with state departments of education to supply data needed to measure student academic improvement; and

Close touch with policymakers in official positions to focus on the middle-level education for funding and reform and affect policies based on Mid South Middle Start experience. This would help build the sustainable movement needed when the present funders and core partners are not so directly involved. This need to include more policy work issues is being met by the work of a Middle Start Advisory Board convened by FMS in 2003.

Other needs, based on the experience of Michigan Middle Start, that are anticipated for the long-term future of Mid South Middle Start are:

More programs to give technical assistance and professional development to Middle Start schools,

An institutional home to do the core work,

A partner that can network the schools (perhaps beginning with the clusters of schools that have been formed through focus professional development), and

An ongoing evaluation process to study the continuing implementation and outcomes of Mid South Middle Start.

Conclusion

The core partners and strategic allies of Mid South Middle Start have successfully implemented a school reform effort focused on middle-grades education in three states. Similar to the original model implemented in Michigan, this regional effort has sparked interest, increased awareness, and built capacity in the Mid South for comprehensive changes in the education and social lives of youth ages 10-14. The core partners have developed the groundwork for change by mobilizing strategic allies in the region to take on this reform effort.

Building these strategic alliances with education-related individuals, institutions, and organizations was a conscious agenda of this initiative that, to this point, has resulted in effective alliance-building, with the potential for more team-building, inter-initiative linkages, and effective partnerships. The core partners, FMS and AED, along with CPRD, worked together, receiving and giving information, making decisions, making grants, and providing services, data, and other feedback in ways that engendered good public relations, regional exposure, and the mutually beneficial involvement of a variety of organizations, institutions, and individuals, as described throughout this report. As a result, participating schools now have access to support and expertise from alliance members, and long-term connections and commitments can be expected in all relevant sectors as these linkages are nurtured and connected. In effect, the alliances are an investment that will help maintain and sustain the broad-based comprehensive nature of Mid South Middle Start.

Bringing about educational improvement is challenging and time-consuming, but strategic alliances in which the members are mutually supportive and committed have the potential to make the work more successful. It is vital to engage stakeholders in ways that not only help accomplish the initiative's outcomes, but also foster interaction and communication among alliance members and weaken issues of "turf." It is also important to move alliance-building beyond individual organizations, building partnerships with multiple organizations. This can be accomplished, for example, through cross-organizational grants requiring groups that normally work separately to share resources and power; the sustained collaborations fostered by such grants could, in turn, leverage the collective power and resources of multiple entities toward the shared aspirations and goals.

The continued caring and striving of FMS, AED and CPRD, working as mentors and models to their strategic partners, will enhance this process. While the inevitable problems of time and distance may continue to challenge the initiative, the skill, commitment and collaboration of all partners and alliance members will ensure continued progress in shaping a successful and sustainable Middle Start Initiative in the Mid South.

The **Academy for Educational Development** (AED) is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to addressing human development needs in the United States and throughout the world. As one of the world's foremost human and social development organizations, AED works in five major program areas: U.S. Education and Workforce Development; Global Learning; Global Health, Population and Nutrition; Leadership and Institutional Development; and Social Change. At the heart of all our programs is an emphasis on building skills and knowledge to improve people's lives.

The **AED Center for School and Community Services** is part of AED's U.S. Education and Workforce Development Group. The Center uses multidisciplinary approaches to address critical issues in education, health, and youth development. To achieve its goals, the center provides technical assistance to strengthen schools, school districts, and community-based organizations. It conducts evaluations of school and community programs while striving to provide the skills and impetus for practitioners to undertake ongoing assessment and improvement. The center also manages large-scale initiatives to strengthen practitioner networks and accelerate systems change and uses the knowledge gained from this work to advocate for effective policies and practices and disseminate information through publications, presentations, and on the World Wide Web.

AED is headquartered in Washington, DC, and has offices in 167 countries and cities around the world and throughout the United States. The Center for School and Community Services is in AED's office in New York City. For more information about the Center's work, go to the Center's website at www.aed.org/scs or contact Patrick Montesano or Alexandra Weinbaum, co-directors, at 212-243-1110, or e-mail [sweinbau](mailto:sweinbau@aed.org) or pmontesa@aed.org.

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