



Success in the Middle:

A Policymaker's Guide to Achieving Quality Middle Level Education

Federal Policy Brief on Middle Level Education Issues

National Middle School Association: May 2006

Call to Action

Every day 20 million young adolescents enter school searching for what research and practice have shown to help middle level students excel: challenging and engaging instruction that recognizes that 10- to 15-year-olds are undergoing the most rapid intellectual and developmental changes of their lives; teachers and administrators well prepared to provide young adolescents with a safe, stimulating, and supportive learning environment; and organizational structures that promote high expectations, collaboration, and continual learning for both adolescents and adults. Instead of experiencing these essential components, however, many middle level students receive an inadequate education.

National attention has focused almost exclusively on the early grades in the belief that giving students a strong start would put them on a path to success. As a result, our nation's fourth graders are showing improvement. Yet 68 percent of the nation's eighth graders still read below the proficient level, and approximately one-quarter are unable to read at even the most basic level.

More recently, policymakers have sought to improve high school education by raising graduation requirements and aligning curricula to better prepare students for college and careers. Yet the United States still does not have a cohesive national policy for the middle grades, which represent one-third of a student's K–12 education. Squeezed between the competing interests of elementary and secondary education, middle level students continue to fight for attention, respect, and financial equity.

The national movement to “leave no child behind” has largely bypassed students in the middle. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), 57% of the students tested annually are in grades 5 through 8; yet only about 15% of all Title I funds, the program that drives NCLB, are allocated to middle and high schools.

Successfully preparing the next generation of Americans for the 21st century means we must significantly improve support for middle level schools. Middle level education will need substantial upgrading to make sure that students are prepared to take rigorous high school courses, graduate ready for postsecondary education and the workforce, and become productive lifelong learners.

It's time to make an excellent education for all young adolescents in grades 5 through 8 a national priority.

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Goals for Achieving Quality Middle Level Education

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The Administration and Congress are beginning to recognize that raising student achievement in the middle grades is critical to raising our high school graduation rates and increasing the number of students prepared to succeed in college and the global marketplace. National Middle School Association, which represents 180,000 educators through individual and institutional memberships, is committed to making the middle grades the pride of the American education system and has developed a policy guidebook to help federal, state, and local policymakers contribute to this critical national effort. The following education policy brief defines the potential federal policy and appropriations issues that Congress should consider as central to reaching the five goals addressed in NMSA's policymaker's guide.

Goal #1 Ensure that all middle level students participate in challenging, standards-based curricula and engaging instruction, and that their progress is measured by appropriate assessments, resulting in continuous learning and high achievement.

Title I Basic Grants and School Improvement Grants

Under NCLB, Title I is the main source of federal funding to help schools make adequate yearly progress and to continuously raise student achievement. Due to insufficient funding—Title I remains at only half of the authorized funding level, with 80 percent of the funds allocated to elementary schools—many school districts concentrate all of their efforts in grades K–6 denying millions of eligible middle level students the help they need to succeed in reading and math. Fully funding Title I would allow every eligible middle school serving a significant population of disadvantaged students the resources to develop engaging, challenging, and relevant middle level curricula, improve instruction for all students, and provide the intense intervention many students will need to succeed at grade level. Allocating first-time funds for Title I School Improvement Grants would allow states to become partners with school districts in turning around low-performing schools and disseminating research-based models of best practice.

Note: The President has requested no new funding for Title I basic grants and \$200 million in new funds for School Improvement Grants.

Striving Readers

The U.S. Department of Education recently announced grants to eight school districts across the country to support the development, implementation, and testing of research-based reading interventions and to improve the quality of literacy instruction across the curriculum in grades

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6–12. The Striving Readers program includes a rigorous evaluation of each of the eight projects. The President has asked to expand Striving Readers Grants from 8 grants to a total of 50 to 60 demonstration sites to quickly build the knowledge base of proven practices for teaching advanced reading and writing strategies in our middle and high schools.

Note: The President has requested an increase of \$70 million for the Striving Readers program, for a total of \$100 million.

Math Now for Middle School Students

As part of the President’s American Competitiveness Initiative, the Administration’s budget calls for strengthening K–12 math and science education by enhancing our understanding of how students learn and applying that knowledge to train highly qualified teachers, develop effective curricular materials, and improve student learning. Math Now, a new math initiative, would support competitive grants to partnerships that improve mathematics instruction for middle school students whose achievement is significantly below grade level and to improve the content knowledge and effective practices of middle school math and science teachers.

Note: The President has requested \$125 million in new funding for Math Now.

Goal #2 Support the recruitment and hiring of teachers and administrators with strong content knowledge and the ability to use research-based instructional strategies and assessment practices appropriate for middle level students.

Strengthen the NCLB definition of highly qualified middle level teachers

Middle level educators need specialized preparation before they enter the classroom and ongoing professional development as they pursue their careers. Although an increasing number of states offer middle level certification and endorsements, fewer than half require specialized preparation before teaching middle grades students. Currently, only 17 states have adopted or adapted the Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards written by National Middle School Association and approved by the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education. The NCLB definition of a highly qualified middle level teacher should embody these standards.

It is crucial that middle level teachers have a thorough knowledge of the subject areas they teach. At the undergraduate level, middle level teacher preparation programs should require preparation in two academic areas, for example, mathematics and science. In addition, highly qualified middle level teachers should have a solid understanding of instructional strategies and assessment practices appropriate for young adolescents and understand the intellectual, emotional, and physical needs of this age group.

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Support student loan forgiveness and other incentives to recruit and retain highly qualified middle school teachers in high-need areas

Improving the quality of instruction and closing the achievement gap are possible only if every middle level student, including those in our highest-need schools and school districts, is taught by highly qualified teachers. Expanding student loan forgiveness to all teachers who agree to teach in high-need secondary schools; offering college grants to students who agree to major in *and teach* math, science, or critical foreign languages in middle schools and high schools; and providing other financial incentives to attract highly qualified teachers are important to this effort.

Increase the quality of professional development for all middle school teachers, especially in the areas of math, science, and literacy

The National Academy of Sciences recent report recommends “increasing America’s talent pool by vastly improving K–12 mathematics and science education” and calls for recruiting 10,000 new, highly qualified math and science teachers and strengthening the knowledge and skills of 250,000 current teachers to foster high-quality teaching with world-class curricula, standards, and assessments of student learning. The academy’s recommendations on math and science education have been embodied in the PACE ACT, recently introduced in the Senate with strong bipartisan support.

Note: The President has requested a total of \$380 million for U.S. Department of Education math and science initiatives.

Researchers have identified the lack of explicit instruction in intermediate and advanced reading and writing skills as one of the main causes of low literacy levels in the upper grades. All middle level teachers must understand how to reinforce literacy skills across the curriculum, concentrating on building academic vocabulary, comprehension, and critical thinking skills. Today there is no national program in place to help more than 70% of our middle level students read and write proficiently.

Note: The President continues to support \$1 billion a year for Reading First for grades K–3. There is no “Reading Next” or equivalent proposal for grades 4–12.

Goal #3 *Support organizational structures and a school culture of high expectations that enable both middle level students and educators to succeed.*

21st Century Community Learning Centers

In communities today, 14.3 million children take care of themselves after the school day ends, including almost 4 million middle school students in grades 6 to 8. Just 6.5 million children are in after-school programs, but the parents of another 15.3 million children say their children would participate in an after-school program if a program was available. Helping communities establish

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and expand after-school centers for all students, especially those attending high poverty schools, is critical for middle level students who need extended time to meet performance standards in core academic subjects.

Note: The President continues to support \$1 billion a year for after-school centers.

Educational Technology State Grants

This program provides funding to states and school districts to support the integration of educational technology into classroom instruction and support data-driven and computer-assisted instruction and other activities to improve student learning.

Note: The President has proposed to eliminate the current \$272.3 million for Educational Technology State Grants.

Goal #4 Develop ongoing family and community partnerships to provide a supportive and enriched learning environment for every middle level student.

Learn and Serve America

Learn and Serve America supports and encourages service learning throughout the United States, and enables more than one million students to make meaningful contributions to their communities while building their academic and civic skills. By engaging our nation's young people in service learning, Learn and Serve America instills an ethic of lifelong community service by providing direct and indirect support to K–12 schools, community groups, and higher education institutions to facilitate service learning projects.

Character Education

This program makes competitive awards to states and school districts for such activities as developing character education curricula; implementing model character education programs that involve parents and community members, including private and nonprofit organizations; and training teachers to incorporate character-building lessons and activities into classroom instruction.

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Goal #5 Facilitate the generation, dissemination, and application of research needed to identify and implement effective practices that lead to continuous student learning and high academic achievement at the middle level.

Comprehensive Centers

Improving instruction and learning at the middle level requires a coordinated and fully funded national effort to develop and use research to guide policy and practice. Middle level educators must have timely access to sound research that specifically and significantly advances our understanding of how to help all young adolescents excel. Competitively selected in 2005, 16 new regional centers and 5 content centers work with specified geographic regions to help them implement NCLB school improvement measures and objectives and provide in-depth, specialized support in key areas. Separate centers focus on assessment and accountability, instruction, teacher quality, innovation and improvement, and high schools. A new center on middle level education is needed to provide up-to-date resources and expertise in middle level research and practice.

Statewide Data Systems

Research shows that assessment for learning is one of the strongest interventions schools can make to raise test scores for all student groups—with the greatest gains occurring among the lowest-performing students. The most valuable measures provide information about each student's development over time. Called the "growth model," this method uses individual assessments to determine adequate yearly progress and should become the standard for determining progress in middle level schools. Statewide Data System grants help state education agencies design, develop, and implement longitudinal data systems that would enable states to use individual student data over time.

Note: The President has asked for a substantial increase, for a total of \$55 million to support grants to states for Statewide Data Systems.

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