

Executive Summary

BREAKING RANKS IN THE **MIDDLE**TM:

Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform



*With a Foreword by
Theodore R.Sizer
and Deborah Meier*



A great tug-of-war has existed for 40 years about how best to address the needs of students “in the middle”—the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

Keep them with the elementary students? Put them in their own schools? Create 6–12 schools? Unfortunately, decisions about grade configuration often are based on district budgets rather than what is best for these students who are “stuck in the middle” between those who want to pull them toward high school and those who want to pull them back toward the elementary level. Even when districts have created separate middle schools, quite often these schools, and the strategies they use, are not designed to be *academically excellent*, *developmentally responsive*, or *socially equitable* (criteria developed by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform). Legitimate philosophical issues exist about grade configurations, and there is likely no one “right” answer that can be applied across the board regarding the appropriate configuration. Only one right answer can be universally applied: Regardless of grade configuration, policymakers, school boards, and superintendents must stop making decisions based primarily on budgets and the transportation schedules and instead create schools based on what is best for young adolescents—schools that address the intellectual and developmental needs of each student.

How Well Does Your School Serve *Each* Student?

As a principal, teacher, or member of the leadership team, why would you be interested in breaking ranks from your school’s current practices or breaking ranks from the schools in your area? If your school is featured in negative news stories or is a school performing below average on state or national assessments you *may* see the obvious—a need to change. On the other hand, why make waves if your school is “average” or “above average,” stacks up well against the other schools in your area, and local media coverage has been very positive? In fact, you have proudly touted your achievements and even once boasted, “We have some of the best scores in the state; we’d be happy to compare ourselves to any school around.” A school leader that rests on his or her laurels and doesn’t try to improve is a failure for some students. The sign of an exemplary school leader is the awareness—despite the school’s successes—that there is much more to accomplish. In the experience of principals undertaking Breaking Ranks in the Middle recommendations, it is not possible to declare the work of school improvement completed, because breaking ranks is a process of *continuous* improvement. The following questions are offered as a starting point for the principal, in conjunction with the school leadership team, to consider how well the school is meeting the needs of individual students.

- Do you use data regularly to assess the effectiveness of your teams in developing differentiated lessons that meet academically rigorous standards, are consistently challenging, and are developmentally appropriate for each student?
- Is each student achieving at a proficient or higher level of performance?
- Does each of your students say he or she feels connected to or well-known by at least one adult in your building—an adult who knows the aspirations, strengths, and weaknesses of the student and uses the information to help the student become successful and personally challenged in all classes and student activities?
- Is there adequate *scheduled* time each week for teachers to collaborate on planning instruction, reviewing

student work, aligning instructional units with district and/or state standards, and encouraging interdisciplinary connections such as promoting literacy across the curriculum?

- Do administrators participate in team planning time and work sessions on a regular basis?
- Is each student regularly exposed to active inquiry and project-based instruction to ensure student engagement with essential knowledge, understanding, and skill?
- How many low-income and how many minority students are *identified and served* as gifted and talented in your school? Are all families encouraged to involve their children in challenging programs?
- Is each of your sixth or seventh grade students and families introduced to programs or services to support college awareness, aspirations, and planning?
- In addition to PTA and student council, how well does your school systematically extend opportunities to members of the community, especially the hard-to-reach parents, for input, feedback, and involvement in decision making regarding the academic, social, and cocurricular programs?
- How would your teachers respond if you were to ask them whether they have been provided with the professional development and the time to
 - *collaboratively* and regularly (at least monthly) examine student data and plan for improved student performance?
 - *collaboratively* assess and plan for students' affective development?
 - *collaboratively* plan for the integration of curriculum?
- Is each of your students involved in an ongoing effort (comprehensive multiyear program, class, advisory, etc.) that specifically promotes the development of the student's personal and social skills in the areas of effective communication, decision making, conflict resolution, self-awareness, personal safety, and stress management? Is each student assessed at different times on how effective these efforts have proven?
- Do you know what percentage of each classroom's student assessments is authentic (e.g., portfolio reviews, student-led conferences, and/or exhibitions) versus more traditional assessments (standardized tests)?
- Do you survey teachers as well as each student and family to discover whether the transition into and out of the middle level has been successful?
- How many of your "graduates" need remedial help in high school and how many drop out of school by the end of the ninth grade? Has your district ever systematically interviewed them to discover why?
- If you are a leader in a K–8, 6–12, or 7–12 school, are you satisfied with the steps your school has taken to ensure alignment of the academic, developmental, and social programs among the grades in your school for students in the 10–14 age range?



A Vision for Improvement: Nine Cornerstone Strategies

Nine cornerstone strategies have been gleaned from the experiences of schools implementing strategies consistent with Breaking Ranks in the Middle recommendations. The strategies are designed to give your school possible “entry points” to pursue fundamental changes—clearly, your school’s priorities and stage of reform may require different entry points or you may develop different strategies. This is merely one model of



simplifying implementation by providing strategies that address more than one recommendation at a time. In other words, by implementing the strategy, you will have also implemented one or more of the Breaking Ranks in the Middle recommendations. The strategies, not in any particular sequence in terms of implementation priority, are listed below.

1. Establish the academically rigorous essential learnings that a student is required to master in order to successfully make the transition to high school and align the curriculum and teaching strategies to realize that goal.
2. Create dynamic teacher teams that are afforded common planning time to help organize and improve the quality and quantity of interactions between teachers and students.
3. Provide structured planning time for teachers to align the curriculum across grades and schools and to map efforts that address the academic, developmental, social, and personal needs of students, especially at critical transition periods (e.g., elementary to middle grades, middle grades to high school).
4. Implement a comprehensive advisory or other program that ensures that each student has frequent and meaningful opportunities to meet with an adult to plan and assess the student's academic, personal, and social development.
5. Ensure that teachers assess the individual learning needs of students and tailor instructional strategies and multiple assessments accordingly.
6. Entrust teachers with the responsibility of implementing schedules that are flexible enough to accommodate teaching strategies consistent with the ways students learn most effectively and that allow for effective teacher teaming, common planning time, and other lesson planning.
7. Institute structural leadership systems that allow for substantive involvement in decision making by students, teachers, family members, and the community, and that support effective communication among these groups.
8. Align all programs and structures so that all social, economic, and racial/ethnic groups have open and equal access to challenging activities and learning.
9. Align the schoolwide comprehensive, ongoing professional development program and the Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) of staff members with the requisite knowledge of content, instructional strategies, and student developmental factors.

Core Area 1

Collaborative Leadership and Professional Learning Communities

At the middle level the conversation about school reform has revolved around assertions that reforms are either focused too heavily on developmental factors at the expense of academic issues or on academics without regard to developmental factors. Yet for the myriad reforms proposed, specifically those with which the majority of researchers agree as to their potential effectiveness, how many are ever implemented? Some reforms never gain traction; others are killed by boards of education, central offices, parent pressure, faculty opposition, principal reluctance, or inferior leadership.

Recommendations:

1. The principal will provide leadership in the school community by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning.
2. Each school will establish a site council and accord other meaningful roles in decision making to students, parents, and members of the staff to promote student learning and an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership.
3. Each school will regard itself as a community in which members of the staff collaborate to develop and implement the school's learning goals.
4. Teachers and teacher teams will provide the leadership essential to the success of reform and will collaborate with others in the educational community to redefine the role of the teacher and identify sources of support for that redefined role.
5. Every school will be a learning community in which professional development for teachers and the principal is guided by a Personal Learning Plan that addresses the individual's learning and professional development needs as they relate to the academic achievement and developmental needs of students at the middle level.
6. The school community will promote policies and practices that recognize diversity in accord with the core values of a democratic and civil society and will offer substantive, ongoing professional development to help educators appreciate issues of diversity and expose students to a rich array of viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences.
7. Schools will build partnerships with institutions of higher education to provide teachers and administrators at both levels with ideas and opportunities to enhance the education, performance, and evaluation of educators.
8. Schools will develop political and financial relationships with individuals, organizations, and businesses to support and supplement educational programs and policies.
9. At least once every five years, each school will convene a broadly based external review panel to develop and deliver a public description of the school, a requirement that could be met in conjunction with the evaluations of state, regional, and other accrediting groups.



Core Area 2

Personalizing Your School Environment

If high achievement for all students is the goal of reform, then a supportive environment for achievement must be established. Although some students might be able to make it through the middle level years *despite* the lack of personal connections, most students require a supportive environment—some more than others. Creating that environment is essential if a school is to bring learning to fruition for each student. In keeping with the sentiment implicit in the word, personalization can mean different things to different people, but most definitions converge on a few common principles associated with providing students with opportunities to develop a sense of belonging to the school, a sense of ownership over the direction of one's learning, the ability to recognize options and to make choices based on one's own experience and understanding of the options.



Recommendations:

10. Schools will create small units in which anonymity is banished.
11. Each teacher involved in the instructional program on a full-time basis will be responsible for contact time with no more than 90 students, so that the teacher can give greater attention to the needs of every student.
12. Each student will have a Personal Plan for Progress that will be reviewed often to ensure that the school takes individual needs into consideration and to allow students, within reasonable parameters, to design their own methods for learning in an effort to meet high standards.
13. Each student will have a Personal Adult Advocate to help him or her personalize the educational experience.
14. Teachers and administrators will convey a sense of caring so that students know that teachers have a stake in student learning.
15. Each school will develop flexible scheduling and student grouping patterns to meet the individual needs of students and to ensure academic success.
16. The school will engage students' families as partners in the students' education.
17. The school community, which cannot be values-neutral, will advocate and model a set of core values essential in a democratic and civil society.
18. Schools, in conjunction with agencies in the community, will help coordinate the delivery of physical and mental health as well as social services.

Core Area 3

Making Learning Personal: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

The challenge for schools is to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment so that students know what standards they need to meet and then are given the support to become engaged in achieving those standards. What does that support look like? In the preceding chapter, we discussed the critical importance of building personal relationships to open the door to, and generate excitement about, learning. In this chapter we begin to address the *relationships between students and ideas*—how the student interacts and directs his or her own learning with the oversight, coaching, and motivational strategies associated with student-centered curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The relationship formed between students and ideas, also referred to as personalized learning, lies at the heart of each of the Breaking Ranks in the Middle recommendations in this chapter. How can you create personalized learning in your school?

Recommendations:

19. Each school will identify a set of essential learnings—in literature and language, writing, mathematics, social studies, science, and the arts—in which students must demonstrate achievement in order to advance to the next level.
20. Each school will present alternatives to tracking and ability grouping.
21. The school will reorganize the traditional department structure and foster the use of teacher teams provided with ample common planning time to integrate the school's curriculum to the extent possible and emphasize depth over breadth of coverage.

22. The content of the curriculum, where practical, will connect to real-life applications of knowledge and skills, and will extend beyond the school campus to help students link their education to the future and to the community.
23. The school will promote service programs and student activities as integral to an education, providing opportunities for all students that support and extend academic learning.
24. Teachers will design high-quality work and teach in ways that engage students, cause them to persist, and, when the work is successfully completed, result in student satisfaction and acquisition of knowledge, critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, and other abilities.
25. Teachers will know and be able to use a variety of strategies and settings that identify and accommodate individual learning needs and engage students.
26. Each teacher will have a broad base of academic knowledge, with depth in at least one subject area.
27. Teachers will be adept at acting as coaches and facilitators to promote more active involvement of students in their own learning.
28. Teachers will integrate assessment into instruction so that assessment is accomplished using a variety of methods that do not merely measure students but become part of the learning process.
29. Recognizing that schooling is a continuum, educators must understand what is required of students at every stage and ensure a smooth transition academically and socially for each student from grade to grade and from level to level.
30. Schools will develop a strategic plan to make technology integral to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, accommodating different learning needs and helping teachers individualize and improve the learning process.



Focus on Transition

It is easy for those who don't work regularly with middle level students to forget that sixth-graders are only five or six years removed from their teddy bears; those who do work with middle level students sometimes forget that, by the time students leave "the middle," the rigors of college are only four short years away.

A positive transition is crucial for middle level students. Some schools do not do much to aid in the transition, while others have elaborate plans. How many of those plans simply focus on the incoming students—rather than both incoming students and those moving to the next level? Are the students who have left your school no longer your concern? How many plans address personalizing the environment and making incoming students comfortable but forget about the need to personalize instruction and assessment practices?

It is impossible to alleviate all anxiety for each student (and perhaps some anxiety and anticipation are beneficial). But implementing transition practices will go a long way toward mitigating potential problems, and they can present an opportunity for teachers and principals to increase the amount of information they have about their new students. During the transition period, schools also have the opportunity to invite parents of students in underserved populations into the school, to get to know the school as well as other parents and staff. Too often, transition programs at schools end after making sure that incoming students can find their way to class and their lockers. Developing that level of comfort in the school is important, but it should not be the end.

Advance Praise for *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*TM

Breaking Ranks in the Middle distills the most important key concepts in middle grades reform into a clear, user-friendly document that belongs in the library of everyone who is serious about improving the school experience for young adolescents. It provides a tremendous resource for school leaders who wish to focus the efforts of their staff on student achievement and educate their communities about the critical role that middle level schools play in an educational system committed to excellence for all students.

J. Howard Johnston
Professor of Secondary Education
University of South Florida

Outstanding schools for young adolescent learners are possible, and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* showcases superb examples of schools breaking the mold. School leaders will benefit greatly from this guide's recommendations and strategies—and so will their students!

Deborah Kasak
Executive Director
National Forum to Accelerate
Middle Grades Reform

For those of us who believe the middle grade years are uniquely important in a young person's development, it is of great value to reflect on what contributes to the best possible school experiences during those years. *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* provides a valuable framework for considering the many aspects of middle school education. It should serve as a potent catalyst for reflection and growth of individuals and groups that want the full spectrum of early adolescents to flourish in school.

Carol Ann Tomlinson
Professor, Curry School of Education
University of Virginia

Maintaining a middle level school that makes a difference in the lives of young adolescents requires a complex mixture of leadership, commitment, programs, and practices implemented in a caring, collaborative environment. *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* is a comprehensive presentation of key elements, processes, and examples for all middle level educators to study. The guide challenges principals and teachers to fold together those elements and processes and apply them with the dedication and energy that will make a difference in the lives of all students.

Jerry Valentine
Director
Middle Level Leadership Center
University of Missouri-Columbia

To order copies of *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*, call the NASSP Sales office at 800-253-7746 or visit www.principals.org.

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