Recognizing Excellence in Middle-Grade Schools

Leaders in schools with grades 5 to 8 face unprecedented responsibilities in working with young adolescents. As schools respond to the mandates of No Child Left Behind, more than half of the students tested annually will be enrolled in these middle grades. This means that the success or failure rate of schools nationwide will be largely determined by the competencies of middle-grades students. Yet, even after a decade of surging interest in this group, there remains a great deal of confusion about how middle-grades schools can most effectively serve their students.

Three Essential Elements

High-performing middle schools are often characterized by three essential elements: academic excellence; responsiveness to the developmental needs of young adolescents; and social equity. These schools challenge students to use their minds well, providing them with the curriculum, instruction, assessment, support, and time needed to meet rigorous academic standards.

Because early adolescence is characterized by dramatic cognitive growth, enabling students to think in more abstract and complex ways, principals of middle-grades schools need to ensure that the curriculum is both challenging and engaging, tapping the boundless energy, interests, and curiosity of young adolescents.

At the same time, school leaders must also ensure that teaching approaches and school structures are developmentally responsive. Schools can meet this need by creating small learning communities in which adults and students are involved in stable and mutually respectful relationships that support students’ intellectual, ethical, and social growth. Schools also need to provide comprehensive services to foster healthy physical and emotional development, and to give students opportunities for both independent inquiry and collaborative learning.

Socially equitable schools are committed to helping every child produce high-quality work, making sure that all students are taught in academically rigorous classes by experienced and expertly prepared teachers. These teachers acknowledge and honor their students’ histories and cultures while working to overcome variations related to race, class, gender, and ability.

40 Schools to Watch

All of these practices are grounded in research on what works best in the middle grades. To demonstrate how they are applied in successful schools, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform—an alliance of professional associations, researchers, and state and local leaders—has developed a set of 37 criteria (www.schoolstowatch.org) that can be used by middle-grades schools to assess the quality of their practices and organizational processes.

The National Forum, with the help of NAESP and other partners, has identified 40 schools in nine states as meeting its Schools to Watch criteria. The identified schools are all quite different. Some are urban; others rural. Some have several thousand students; some a few hundred. Some are in high-wealth areas; others are in high-poverty areas.

Modeling Excellence

What does an excellent middle-grades school look like?

Probably a lot like Freeport Intermediate School in Texas, a School to Watch where 60 percent of the students qualify for the free or reduced-
cost lunch program and nearly 20 percent have limited proficiency in English. Despite these challenges, Freeport has developed a culture of promoting active teaching and learning, in which each student is expected to perform at a high level. Freeport’s outstanding record of student achievement has earned it recognition as a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education and an “exemplary” classification by the Texas Department of Education.

Freeport’s principal, Clara Sale-Davis, believes the Schools to Watch criteria allow others to use her school as a model. “For instance, if you ever need examples of data-driven decision-making, take a look at us,” she says. “Student-level data informs just about every decision we make, from what we teach to how and when we teach it.”

North Carolina Principal Robert Patton’s East Burke Middle School, which received a School to Watch designation in 2004, agrees that the criteria have focused on the reasons why his school has performed so well. “We’ve always had a good school,” he says, “but the criteria have given us a way to talk about the things we’re doing in a way that parents, teachers, school board, and county commissioners can all understand.”

The observations of these two principals underscore the importance of involving the larger community in the discourse of middle-grades school improvement and the need for principals to communicate the vision of high-quality middle-grades education.

The middle grades offer great hope and promise for making every child’s pathway to high school and beyond a successful journey.

John Harrison is executive director of the Southern Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. His e-mail address is jha@ncrr.com.

Deborah Kasak is executive director of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. Her e-mail address is DKasak@edc.org.