



National Middle School Association®



## NCLB Reauthorization Recommendations to Improve Middle Level Education

**ACT**

**Academy for Educational Development**

**Alliance for Excellent Education**

**The College Board**

**International Reading Association**

**National Association of Secondary School Principals**

**National Council of Teachers of English**

**National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform**

**National Middle School Association**

The reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act presents an excellent opportunity to establish national middle level policy and help raise student achievement in the middle grades. Each of the national organizations signed on to this statement has developed its own set of recommendations for the reauthorization of NCLB. In doing so, it became clear that we would need to join forces around our common goals in improving national middle level education policy to focus national attention on these critical years. While we fully agree with the basic goal of NCLB that every child in our nation deserves an excellent education that enables him or her to be successful in college and the workforce, we do not believe the legislation fully addresses the needs of students in grades five through eight.

Students must be proficient in reading and math to be successful in rigorous coursework that prepares them for college and the workforce. However, a challenging middle level curriculum is distinguished by activities that engage students and develop their analytical and problem-solving skills. Such a curriculum blurs the artificial boundaries among subjects by tapping into young adolescents' emerging ability to understand complex concepts and make multidisciplinary connections. In addition, middle grades students need an extended curriculum that enables them to explore world languages, music, art, careers, service learning, and character and civic education.

Although we can identify individual schools in every grade configuration – for example, K-8; 5-8; 6-12 – that are succeeding and meeting these goals, far too many of our middle level students are being left behind. Middle level schools do not operate in a vacuum. They reflect the aspirations of their local

communities and are part of a system of education that determines their organizational structure, their funding, and their ability to hire and develop exemplary staffs. Middle level schools also must respond to state goals and directives ranging from testing targets to teacher licensure standards. Federal policy affects all aspects of middle level education and can strengthen or hinder state and local efforts to improve schools. We urge Congress and the Administration to consider the following recommendations to strengthen the reauthorization of NCLB and create a national middle level education policy necessary to help young adolescents to achieve their fullest potential.

The following eight recommendations are supported by all of our organizations. The first five recommendations would establish a national middle level education policy to help all students succeed. The next three recommendations are necessary to improve student achievement across grades K-12 and are critical in supporting student success at the middle level.

### **A National Middle Level Education Policy**

- 1. Authorize and expand Striving Readers as part of NCLB and fund it at \$200 million in the first year and increasing to \$1 billion over a period of five years. The Striving Readers Act (S. 958), new legislation to help ensure that older students who are struggling can read and write at grade level, will give students the literacy interventions they need to succeed in school and graduate from high school with a meaningful diploma. Every state would receive a grant to help teachers in the content areas improve reading and writing achievement across the curriculum in grades 4 through 12.***
  - As educators and policymakers examine the data from their state and district reading assessments, they are concerned that eighth grade reading scores remain flat, and twelfth graders on average have shown no reading improvement in the last 30 years. ACT reports that over fifty percent of high school graduates in 2005 did not have the reading skills they needed to succeed in college. Middle school students who are not on target in reading are significantly more likely not to be on target in English, Math and Science. In fact, ACT's latest research suggests that if students do not achieve a minimum level of academic preparation by middle school, high school may be too late to make up for these deficits.
  - Closing the achievement gap and ensuring that every student is proficient in reading requires an intense focus on literacy teaching and learning in the middle grades.
  - Struggling readers exist in every school. In our inner cities and rural poor areas, it is not uncommon to find 50 percent of our eighth graders reading at "below basic" levels. Scaling up effective literacy instruction and support for struggling students in the middle grades requires a significant investment beyond the funding currently available under Title I.
  - Federal reading policy essentially stops after 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Students need more intensive reading curricula and support for the remainder of their primary and secondary education in order to achieve academically and in a postsecondary world.
- 2. Include the "Math Now" proposal included in the Senate version of the America Competes Bill (S. 761, Title II, Section 3201). This necessary and important initiative would help strengthen teacher preparation and professional development in math in the elementary and middle grades.***

- Although eighth grade math scores have improved, we are still far from preparing all students to take algebra by the end of eighth grade so they can go on to higher level math courses in high school. In fact, test data show the middle grades as the point when average student achievement begins to lag. For example, the national average mathematics score at grade four increased by three points from 2003 to 2005. But the score at grade eight showed only a one-point increase in that same time period.
- The National Academy of Sciences has pointed out that “students who choose not to or are unable to finish Algebra I before the ninth grade - which is needed for them to proceed in high school to geometry, Algebra II, trigonometry, and pre-calculus - effectively shut themselves out of careers in the sciences.”
- A full 86 percent of math and science teachers in the nation’s highest minority schools are teaching out of field.

**3. Amend the definition of Highly Qualified Teacher. Highly qualified middle level teachers should demonstrate that they are subject-matter competent by obtaining either a major or its equivalent in one or more subjects that they teach or by passing a state-approved competency measure or assessment, as well as demonstrate a solid understanding of pedagogy for young adolescents.**

- Ensuring that all young adolescents have highly qualified teachers and administrators is an essential first step in moving toward the ultimate goal of “highly effective” teachers in every classroom supported by “highly effective” school leaders.
- If we expect all middle level students to succeed, we must eliminate the disparities in their education starting with the quality of the teachers and administrators hired to work with them. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 left out a specific definition of a highly qualified teacher at the middle level and did not speak to the qualifications of school leaders.
- Although an increasing number of states offer some type of middle level certification or endorsement, fewer than half require specialized, middle level preparation before teachers can work in the middle grades. Only seven states insist that middle level administrators know and use research-based leadership and instructional practices to increase the academic performance and healthy development of young adolescents.
- According to The College Board, 40 percent of middle school students in the physical sciences (including chemistry, biology and physics) are taught by unqualified teachers, with the proportion in biology approaching 30 percent. In math, these numbers exceed 20 percent.
- New teachers should be required to obtain a middle level certification and have a major in their subject area as the first step to becoming a highly qualified and highly effective teacher. Funding should be provided so teachers already in the workforce can earn a middle level certification within five years through recertification course work and/or personalized professional development growth plans that include work in both content knowledge and pedagogy.
- Furthermore, we recommend strengthening and expanding the incentives for highly qualified administrators and teachers to lead middle level reforms in our highest-need schools and school districts.

**4. Provide adequate funding and support for ongoing, state-administered technical assistance programs for all middle level schools identified as “in need of improvement.” Funding should be allocated for the development and implementation of school improvement plans.**

- According to the Center on Education Policy, about ten percent of all schools (a majority of which are middle schools) have been labeled in need of improvement. In the last two school years, however, nearly two-thirds of the states reported receiving insufficient federal funds to carry out the NCLB-imposed duty of assisting schools identified for improvement.
- Technical assistance to help low performing schools is not widely available, leaving many middle level schools without support.
- Funding to implement school improvement plans is critical. For these plans to succeed, they need the financial resources to provide supports such as school improvement facilitators, adolescent literacy programs, professional development, extended learning time and personal graduation plans.

**5. *Promote research and dissemination on effective policies and practices in middle-grades education. While there is a growing body of research on middle-grades education, the knowledge base is still relatively small and not well understood. To ensure that educators make wise decisions based on the latest scientific evidence, we recommend that Congress do the following:***

- Encourage IES and other educational research agencies to develop a strand of research designed to enhance the performance of middle-grades schools and students, including those who are most at risk of educational failure. Research could target specific issues such as effective practices in math, science and literacy; school-improvement programs; and strategies for closing the achievement gap.
- Encourage the Department of Education (through IES or NCES) to develop a national database at the middle level that will enable researchers to identify school and classroom factors that facilitate or impede student achievement.
- Establish a National Center on Middle-Grades Education, modeled after the National High School Center, that can synthesize and disseminate the available research on effective middle-grades policies and practices.

**K-12 Recommendations Necessary to Support a National Middle Level Education Policy**

- ***States should be required to provide ongoing, job-embedded professional development for principals and teachers that support school-based collaborative problem-solving and decision-making activities to improve student achievement. Due to current national needs, specific professional development in math, science, literacy, formative and summative assessment practices, and English language learning must be ongoing, especially in our highest need schools.***
  - The traditional “one size fits all” method of advancing educators’ skills by offering professional development to all the teachers in a school or school district without regard to individual needs is both inappropriate and ineffective. Generic staff development does not improve instruction and learning. We must ensure that all middle grades teachers, both new and experienced, participate in quality professional development that includes deep understanding of their subject areas and sound instructional methods to teach young adolescent learners.

- Data-informed instruction is essential for high achievement. Research indicates that formative assessment is one of the strongest interventions schools can make to raise test scores for all students with the greatest gains occurring among the lowest-performing students. Delivering this staff development requires a wide range of professional development opportunities.
- In today's achievement-focused atmosphere, it is imperative that principals be effective instructional leaders and that they know how to collaborate with staff members to establish the school's learning goals.
- ***Because some states do not have data management systems in place to track each student's progress, the federal government must provide incentives and guidance to ensure that all states develop effective procedures for collecting and analyzing such information. Further, improving the quality of assessments so that they are both valid for accountability purposes as well as a tool for improving instruction is critical for the success of America's students.***
  - The most valuable achievement 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.
  - These state longitudinal data systems are a prerequisite for implementation of "growth models" and are a more accurate measure of school quality because they follow students' academic progress over time.
  - Once-a-year, norm-referenced tests that focus on groups of students for school accountability purposes do little to help teachers diagnose specific learning needs and design appropriate interventions for individual students. Although such assessments of learning are important, they must not be the only criteria by which we evaluate students' achievement. Formative assessments must be put in place to help teachers differentiate and improve instruction.

***Provide the necessary resources and support for students who need to accelerate their academic learning through practices that include extended instructional time during the regular school day, an extended school day, Saturday and summer classes and after-school programs with highly qualified and knowledgeable educators.***

- Educational standards for our youth in America have increased substantially over the last two decades, yet we have not provided students with the additional time or support they need to achieve those higher standards.
- Children in the U.S. have summers without school for up to 13 weeks, while most industrialized countries average only seven weeks off. Shorter periods of time off can prevent learning loss by students, particularly those who do not have access to summer enrichment activities provided by families.
- Extra learning time provides an opportunity to reinforce the relevance of the subjects students are studying and to keep them engaged in school.
- The addition of high-quality teaching time is of particular benefit to certain groups of students, such as low-income students and others who have little opportunity for learning outside of school.