



The Status of Programs and Practices in America's Middle Schools: Results from Two National Studies

Executive Summary

The Status of Programs and Practices in America's Middle Schools: Results from Two National Studies, a report of two national studies of programs and practices in the nation's middle schools conducted in 2009 by Kenneth McEwin and Melanie Greene, shows the middle school concept and philosophy remain valid. Comparison of the two studies was undertaken to determine the level of authentic implementation of developmentally responsive, research-based programs and practices in successful middle schools.

The first study included a randomly selected group of 827 public middle schools. The second study, the Highly Successful Middle School Study (HSMS), surveyed 101 of some of the most successful middle schools in the nation. Schools in the HSMS sample had been selected by the Schools-to-Watch program sponsored by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform and the MetLife-Breakthrough Middle Schools program sponsored by the National Association for Secondary School Principals. The selection process for both of these recognition programs is rigorous with criteria including, but not limited to, a successful record of improving standardized test scores. Answering electronic surveys, principals provided data about their schools and opinions on middle level topics.

Sample results

- The percentage of students on or above grade level in mathematics and reading on standardized tests was higher in the Highly Successful Middle Schools (HSMS) than in schools in the random study.
- HSMS followed the middle school concept/philosophy more faithfully and implemented recommended middle school components (e.g., interdisciplinary teaming, advisory programs, common planning time for core teachers) more frequently than schools in the random sample.
- Middle schools authentically following the middle school concept/philosophy are more likely to be associated with higher scores on achievement tests and other positive student outcomes.
- Middle schools in both studies continue to place a strong emphasis of teaching the basic subjects. Core subjects were taught an average of 221 minutes a day in schools in the random sample and 236 minutes a day in HSMS. Schools from both 2009 studies also offer rich curricula with a variety of non-core and elective subjects.

Compared to schools in the random sample, Highly Successful Middle Schools:

- More frequently used interdisciplinary team organization (90% vs. 72%).
- More frequently provided core teachers with ten common planning periods per week (40% vs. 28%).
- Less frequently organized school schedules using daily uniform periods (45% vs. 72%).

- More often used the flexible block scheduling plan (30% vs. 14%).
- Used direct instruction less frequently (71% vs. 81%).
- Used cooperative learning more often (85% vs. 64%).
- Used inquiry teaching more frequently (57% vs. 43%).
- Had higher percentages of core teachers holding separate middle level teacher certification.
- More frequently had advisory programs (65% vs. 54%).
- Placed a higher emphasis on critical thinking and problem solving (61% vs. 38%).
- Had a smaller percentage of schools where 51% or more students qualified for the free or reduced lunch (27% vs. 36%)
- Respondents in both studies similarly viewed standardized testing as having a positive influence on curriculum rigor and clarity, remediation practices, professional development for teachers and academic achievement in general.

Selected Conclusions

- Much has been accomplished toward creating developmentally responsive middle level schools. Despite difficulties encountered along the way (e.g., negative political climates, devotion to tradition of some educators and a segment of the public), the middle school concept has survived and remains a valid model for organizing the schooling of young adolescents.
- There is a significant gap in many schools between the levels of principal support for recommended middle level components and the actual implementation of those same programs and practices. Standardized testing pressures, opposition from traditionalists, and economic factors might impact the use of developmentally responsive practices.
- Administrators and other professionals at HSMS and most of the random study schools seem to understand the importance of developmentally responsive programs and practices (e.g., teaming, advisory programs, flexible scheduling). They have chosen not to go back to traditional, deeply entrenched programs and practices (e.g., departmentalization, rigid scheduling, no common planning time) more appropriate for senior high schools or universities.

The most important finding of the 2009 surveys is that the middle school concept and philosophy remain legitimate. The survey of highly successful middle schools showed that they followed the concept with more fidelity than other schools not recognized for their high levels of success.



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The comprehensive report titled *The Status of Programs and Practices in America's Middle Schools: Results from Two National Studies* is available as a free download at www.amle.org