Organizing toward a New Vision and Action Agenda for Young Adolescents in the Middle Grades

SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER INPUT

JULY 2018

Early adolescence, when youth are in the middle grades (defined broadly as ages 10-15 in grades 4-9), is one of the most under-addressed periods in education, pre-k through post-secondary. This lack of attention and investment has had consequences.

- Too many students enter high school **disengaged and behind academically**, meaning efforts at high school reform are by definition starting from behind.

- Compared to many other current efforts preparing students for kindergarten or for college and career, there is **far less programming around preparing students in the transitional middle grades** to sustain gains from early childhood and elementary school and prepare students for high school and beyond.

- We are not best leveraging the **powerful research on adolescent development** – cognitive, social-emotional, health – that can boost motivation and ensure long-term success of young adolescents with learning experiences tailor made for them.

With so much of our national effort in education concentrated in early childhood and early literacy on the front end and high school graduation and college and career readiness on the back end, there is need to bring more attention and investment to the great inflection point that connects them. There are and have been organizations and initiatives upon which to build a bold new and sustained effort. A wide coalition of stakeholders working together could change the game.

To that end, in Spring 2018, with generous support from the New York Life Foundation, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) convened a wide group of stakeholders to offer insights and input on the education and development of young adolescents in the middle grades. This work is part of an emerging effort to organize a set of stakeholders around potential wider coordination, collaboration or collective action to further advance prospects and outcomes for young adolescents in the middle grades.

More than 30 organizations took part in some combination of a stakeholder survey, structured one-on-one conversations, and a series of group conference calls to dialogue together; share past, existing,

and planned work in this area; and explore the many challenges and opportunities facing the field. Stakeholders cut across research, policy, and programs and represented great experience and expertise in several aspects of this important issue, including: those who have been steeped in the research and evidence base of early adolescent development and the neuroscience of early adolescent brain development; those who have been providing in-school and out-of-school programming specifically designed to meet the needs of youth in this age range; those who have promoted critical ingredients for the success of young adolescents like relationships, social and emotional learning, mentoring, experiential learning, and self discovery; those who have been long-time, stalwart leaders and champions for the reform of middle schools; and those who have been supporting the special class of professionals in education and youth service who engage with young adolescents every day in schools and communities across the country. The hope was to be as broad as possible in assembling stakeholders and that over time even more people will lend their voices along the way.

OVERALL CHALLEGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Importantly, the dialogue among stakeholders addressed not just general needs – such as that for great teachers and school leaders, rigorous curriculum and instruction, and safe and supportive learning environments – which one could argue are necessary at all levels of the educational and developmental continuum, pre-k through post-secondary. Rather, stakeholders focused attention on the *specific* needs in these areas *particular* to the early adolescent developmental time period and the middle grades.

Researchers who joined the conversations called out some of the developmental needs of young adolescents and aspects of the middle level educational context, which helped frame many of the unique challenges and opportunities in the space

- *Emerging identity*: Early adolescence is defined by young people's quest to associate themselves with certain peer groups and internalize images they have of themselves as learners (is school "for me" or "something I have to endure") – relationships and views that tend to be "stickier" than those developed in other developmental time periods.

- *Engagement*: While attendance may be a proxy indicator, engagement rests not just on basic involvement but also enthusiasm, motivation, belonging, and connection to others and the future, which evidence shows decline in the early adolescent period.

- *Environment*: The structure of the middle grades – how students are organized, how relationships are formed and cultivated, what messages are being sent and how consistent they are, what the overall in-school and out-of-school experience entails – has a big effect on the key factors of identity and engagement.

- *Early warning indicators*: Declines in attendance, increases in challenging behaviors, and slumping course grades have been statistically tied to the long term trajectory of young adolescents and effective predictors of future success, but are also seen as symptoms of more underlying developmental and environmental issues at play.

- *Effect of concentrated poverty*: Evidence shows that particularly for young people in areas of deep poverty, even for those who did well in elementary school or had good elementary school experiences, the middle grades can be a time when they go off track more easily, vulnerable to the shifting relationships and environmental dynamics of this transitional period.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE FIELD

This grounding helped guide the stakeholder conversations. Indeed, when asked about the overall strengths of the field, stakeholders put research on early adolescence (developmental science, the science of learning, neuroscience) at the top of the list. Other assets identified were:

- social and emotional learning, which stakeholders felt had special relevance in helping young people navigate, persevere, and succeed in times of transition;
- afterschool and youth programming, much of which has been focused on enhancing self discovery and engagement for high-need student populations;
- awareness and understanding of the economic, social, and cultural context in which young people are growing and developing; and
- middle school educators, who, despite the many challenges with preparation, ongoing development, and support, garner a positive view.

Meanwhile, stakeholders identified a number of specific weaknesses in the field, namely:

- insufficient translation of the strong research base to practice;
- pigeon-holing middle grades into simply "high school prep;"
- varied and inadequate in-school and out-of-school educator preparation and certification;
- inability to attract significant interest or investment among funders;
- lack of common, agreed-upon metrics of young adolescent success; and
- lagging behind key developments in the field, such as the advent of social and emotional learning, the explosion of high school choice, early onset of early adolescence, and infusing disciplinary actions with restorative justice practices, to name a few.

POTENTIAL AREAS OF FOCUS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

While the dialogue will continue to evolve, given what we know at this stage stakeholders have begun to coalesce around a set of needs, which represent potential focus areas for collective action in the field (not ordered by priority):

1. Engaging Classroom Instruction and Out-of-School Opportunities
2. Supportive School Structures and Learning Environments
3. Teacher, School Leader, and Out-of-School-Time Staff Preparation and Support

This framing is used to summarize below the many ideas and perspectives offered by stakeholders.

1. Engaging Classroom Instruction and Out-Of-School Opportunities

The term used most often throughout stakeholder conversations was "engagement." It was a concept that cut across many aspects of the learning and development experience of young adolescents: curriculum and instruction, out-of-school time, relationships, teacher preparation, etc. Across a few different indicators – specific ones referenced and discussed were the Gallup student poll and the Search Institute Developmental Assets – student engagement drops markedly between elementary school and high school. Some of this is chalked up to social, emotional, and physiological changes among young adolescents. But, adults (parents and teachers, notably) tend to be less engaged with youth at this age as well.

Stakeholders most often reference three approaches to address engagement: youth voice, relationships, and experiential learning. These appear most tied to the overall developmental needs of young adolescents. Perhaps no wonder, these three have a good degree of overlap. Stakeholders in the out-of-school-time space also noted that one of the primary reasons schools seek out and adopt their programs is to boost student engagement.

Youth Voice

A number of programs are designed to enable young people to take on civic leadership on issues they care about, or to take part in decision-making for their school or community. Some stakeholders who offer these opportunities even observed that young adolescents in the middle grades might be more eager to do this than older adolescents in high school – they are "less afraid." Youth advisory councils or youth summits around specific issues were offered up as examples of this type of engagement-building strategy.

Relationships

Some stakeholders quipped that young adolescents "aren't the easiest to have a relationship with." But they also noted that that is one of the very reasons why relationships are so important at this stage. Stakeholders noted the need for an array of caring adults to support young people in this period of transition and formative development. As in other periods of the k-12 continuum, parent and family engagement remains important at this stage. However, relationships with parents or family members at home become more complex as young adolescents exhibit behaviors of independence, meaning other relationships outside the home become as much or even more important. Many stakeholders suggested mentoring – both adult mentors as well as near-peer mentors – as a valuable approach to fostering positive relationships. Especially because of this period of identity formation, cultural competence and understanding of the context in which students live are critical.

Experiential Learning

Stakeholders largely believed that young adolescents respond more to experiential learning opportunities than to direct instruction or traditional didactic pedagogical approaches, although some felt there was a need for both and that one without the other was not sufficient. The concept of "shaped experiences" resonated – starting with young adolescents as people first and then building a wide package of learning opportunities, in school and out of school, tailored to their particular developmental needs.

Stakeholders believed there is room for more engaging and experiential curriculum and instruction within school. They also saw the importance of experiences outside of school that could be connected to and scaffolded into in-school educational programming. Stakeholders saw career exploration as particularly suited to young adolescents, as it is a time when young people are envisioning themselves as adults and can be affected by the potential pathways to the career and life to which they aspire. Furthermore, recognizing youth for their accomplishments and developed competencies in these out-of-school experiences can be motivating. For example, young people who are given opportunities for public speaking and are recognized for it in some meaningful way often internalize that competency and believe more in themselves in that area.

> **WHAT COULD BE DONE**: Refine and scale models and practical measures for engagement *specific to young adolescents in the middle grades* – pulling from the panoply of existing models designed to promote agency, motivation, social and emotional competencies, developmental or relationship assets, identity formation, etc. –, identify and develop solutions for unmet gaps as necessary, and set an ambitious but achievable target for improvement in engagement based on agreed upon metrics over a specific time period.

: Understand differing measures of engagement and associated competencies and assets that could be practically used by stakeholders across the field and determine the effects of different programming on those measures of engagement.

2. Supportive School Structures and Learning Environments

"Middle school" is used more as shorthand than a term for a uniform school structure. "Middle grades" and "middle level education" are some substitutes with greater give. Regardless, the organizing structure of schooling for young adolescents is varied. Across school systems, middle grades encompass combinations of grades and transition points from (mostly) fourth through ninth grade. There are k-8 schools, 6-8 schools, 7-8 schools, 7-12 schools, and other configurations that educate young adolescents, each with their own dominant pedagogical orientations, cultures, and staffing competencies given the overall population of students served. As students progress through schooling, they will mostly transition at least once and sometimes two or three times to different schools, and in some cases even across different districts. Most of these transitions occur in middle grades.

Administrative and governance choices for these configurations are driven by more than just the educational programming and developmental needs of young people. They are also influenced by staffing, facilities and financial resources, which may make it an especially hard issue to tackle. However, stakeholders strongly believed that the structures and environments, broadly defined, in which young adolescents are educated are critical to their success.

Stakeholders called out transitions as especially hard for young people. In many large urban districts, there has been a movement to offer greater choice of schooling, particularly at the high school level. While ideally this opens up opportunity for young people to enter into high schools that are a good fit for their learning styles and interests, it also puts greater pressure on young adolescents immediately pre-high school – in the middle grades – to make consequential choices, right at a time when youth are still figuring themselves out. Unfortunately, the level of resources and support for young people to navigate this transition point has not kept pace with the expansion of choice. And to the extent that there are supports at the middle grades level, they may not be effectively sustained in high school even though vulnerabilities persist and can increase.

The transition from elementary to middle school to high school involves significant changes in relationship dynamics, just at an age when youth are especially influenced by relationships – both peers and adults – as they work their way through identify formation. In elementary school, teachers teach students, but somewhere in the middle grades teachers switch to teaching subjects or content areas. This was seen as more than a semantic difference, but rather a true shift in orientation, operation and culture that affects relationships. And it therefore affects the array of early adolescent

development concepts around engagement, like belonging and connectedness. It is also why practices such as restorative justice, equity and inclusion are of critical importance, affecting attitudes and behaviors of both youth and adults. Beyond the structure of school and these educational transitions, there is a broader social context that youth are navigating. Stakeholders put forth the need to better understand and further develop the broader "ecosystem" of opportunities and supports.

> **WHAT COULD BE DONE**: Tailor school transitions (and supports during them) as well as school structures and in-school and out-of-school learning environments to specific developmental needs of young adolescents: identity development, engagement and relationship-building.

> **POTENTIAL INITIAL STEP**: Revisit and better understand from research and stakeholders' experience different transition points and their effect on the trajectory of young adolescents as well as specific school structures and learning environments specially tailored to hallmarks of early adolescent development that could be utilized across differing grade configurations.

3. Teacher, School Leader, and Out-Of-School-Time Staff Preparation and Support

Stakeholders called out educators in middle grades as one of the field's greatest assets. This is consistent with sentiment more broadly in education that effectively prepared and supported teachers, administrators, and out-of-school-time staff can be agents of change in schools and one of the most significant positive forces in young people's lives.

However, the preparation and certification for educators of young adolescents was largely seen by stakeholders to be inadequate and varied. For teachers, stakeholders noted that few states offer a specific middle grades licensure. As a result, most individuals teaching in middle grades have either an elementary or secondary certification and/or a content licensure; and the view was that the elementary pre-service preparation skews more toward early primary grades and that secondary pre-service preparation concentrates more on the high school period and content areas. Furthermore, states place the divide between elementary and secondary certifications at varying grades (with cutoffs usually somewhere in the 6th, 7th, or 8th grade). While most have middle grades endorsements, the requirements for these are highly varied across states and shift often.

All of this leaves teachers in middle grades with less focused preparation on the young adolescent time period compared to earlier or later developmental stages. Furthermore, since most certifications are elementary or secondary and not middle, fewer teachers are drawn to the teaching profession specifically to teach in the middle grades. Stakeholders suggested that a great many middle grades teachers are likely teaching middle grades for a host of other reasons – including availability of job

opportunities – and they desire to move up or down when positions open. This challenge is likely compounded in high need communities where there are many teachers operating with "emergency" certifications. Regardless of teachers' abilities generally, their interest in middle grades and preparation for teaching in them impacts their effectiveness with students in this age and grade range.

The view of principal certification and preparation was commensurate with that of teachers. Few states have middle level licensure for administrators and few principal candidates are adequately prepared for leading schools to meet the unique needs of young adolescents. Meanwhile, most districts do not effectively account for experience or competencies in the early adolescent period when making decisions on administrator hires or assignments. Importantly, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers some opportunity in this area with more focused attention and investment in school leadership and development.

As for out-of-school-time staff, stakeholders noted that that area of the broader education and youth field has historically been under-addressed. People who work in out-of-school-time programming vary greatly in their preparation, training, and on-the-job support, and they are typically under-compensated and experience high rates of turnover.

> **WHAT COULD BE DONE**: More targeted recruitment and more tailored preparation, certification, and support to educators who teach, support, and develop young adolescents and administrators who lead schools with middle grades.

> **POTENTIAL INITIAL STEP**: Study and better understand the true state of play for teacher, principal, and out-of-school-time staff preparation specifically for young adolescents in the middle grades. Leverage work from educator-focused organizations that promote standards and best practices for middle level educators and youth service professionals.

CONCLUSION

Input from stakeholders suggests a number of specific possibilities to "move the needle" for young adolescents in the middle grades. One-on-one conversations are ongoing and will attempt to get additional or more refined insights and engage more people. The next formal step in the process is to convene stakeholders in person in late 2018 or early 2019 to go deeper on potential areas for coordination, collaboration and collective action. Hopefully, the above, along with results from ongoing dialogue, will ensure that follow-on discussion is focused on taking action. More detail on the convening is forthcoming.

STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPANTS

Executives and leaders from the following organizations joined the stakeholder conversations (group and one-on-one), while more will continue to be engaged and added. Each organization was placed in one of the below categories, although in actuality some organizations span multiple categories.

RESEARCH	POLICY/ADVOCACY	PROGRAMS	EDUCATORS
- ACT - Gallup - Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University - Middle School Matters Institute, University of Texas at Austin - Search Institute - University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research - University of Texas at Dallas - University of Georgia - University of Virginia	- Afterschool Alliance - Alliance for Excellent Education - America's Promise Alliance - Civic Enterprises - Learning Forward - National Forum for the Acceleration of Middle Grades Reform - MENTOR	- After School All Stars - BELL - Center for the Collaborative Classroom - Center for Supportive Schools - Citizen Schools - City Year - Classrooms Inc. - Coalition for Community Schools - Higher Achievement - High Jump - International Baccalaureate - Mikva Challenge - Millennium - Spark Program - Special Olympics National Education Leadership Network - We Thrive	- Association for Middle Level Education - Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation - National Association of Secondary School Principals