



## Executive Summary

# Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path A Policy and Practice Brief

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“Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path: A Policy and Practice Brief” is based on more than a decade of research and development work at the Center for the Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) at Johns Hopkins University as well as direct field experience in more than 30 middle schools implementing comprehensive reform and a long-standing collaboration with the Philadelphia Education Fund and several middle schools that serve high-poverty populations in Philadelphia. Our research and fieldwork illuminate key policy and practice implications of the role the middle grades play in achieving our national goal of graduating all students from high school prepared for college, career, and civic life.

## Major Research Findings

### Role of the Middle Grades in Determining the Odds of High School Graduation

Our fundamental finding is that, in high-poverty environments, a student’s middle grades experience strongly impacts the odds of graduating from high school. Working with the Philadelphia Education Fund, we followed several cohorts of Philadelphia students from sixth grade through one year past on-time graduation. Sixth graders who failed math or English/reading, or attended school less than 80% of the time, or received a poor final behavior grade in a core course had only a 10% to 20% chance of graduating on time. Fewer than 1 in 4 of these students with at least one of these risk factors would graduate within one year past on-time graduation. Subsequent replications of the Philadelphia study in five additional school districts confirm the core findings of the Philadelphia study and collectively indicate that, at least in high-poverty environments, it is possible to identify up to half, and sometimes even more, of eventual dropouts in

the middle grades. The replications also provide important nuances:

- Critical attendance thresholds varied by school district.
- Mild but sustained misbehavior appears to have an independent effect on graduation odds.
- In the sixth grade, students tend to have one or two off-track indicators (not three to four, as is common in high school).
- The earlier students develop off-track indicators, the lower their graduation odds.
- Students who exhibit off-track indicators in the middle grades are resilient.

### Role of the Middle Grades in Closing Achievement Gaps

Efforts to keep students on the graduation path need to be paired with efforts to close achievement gaps. It is during the middle grades, and particularly in lower-performing schools that serve high-poverty populations, that achievement gaps often become achievement chasms. To achieve the nation’s goal of graduating all high school students ready for college and career, students must enter high school with at least close to grade level skills and knowledge.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

A unified middle grades improvement strategy that will lead to both increased academic achievement and higher graduation rates will need to focus on the following areas.

### Attendance

School districts with low graduation rates usually have significant—and often unrecognized—chronic

absenteeism in the middle grades. Consequently, we must prevent students from developing poor attendance habits.

- We need to measure attendance in informative and actionable ways.
- Good attendance needs to be recognized regularly.
- Schools need to be perceived as safe and engaging places.

### **Belief, Behavior, and Effort**

Middle grades students need to believe that hard work will bring life success, that positive behavior is recognized and desired, and that they need to be self-motivated in their efforts to succeed. Middle school students need

- Highly engaging electives that provide avenues for short-term success.
- Activities that honor and use their desire for adventure and camaraderie.
- Organizational and self-management skills training.

### **Course Performance**

The most critical challenge is improving the quality of middle grades coursework and course performance to

- Challenge students to integrate a series of skills and a set of knowledge to produce an intellectual product.
- Create college readiness indicators that are meaningful and engaging to middle grades students and understood by parents.
- Provide specific, customized, timely support.

### **Early Warning and Intervention Systems**

To get the right interventions to the right students, at the right time, we need to

- Focus on effective interventions not just identification.
- Build models on students' strengths rather than on deficits.

- Provide time, training, and support to teachers for implementation.
- Evaluate effectiveness of interventions.

Data is available now at your school for getting started.

### **Challenges**

Three major challenges to effectively acting upon the insights generated by our research and fieldwork are

- Providing the correct ratio of skilled adults to students in need.
- Getting teacher buy-in and support for the mission of keeping middle grades students on the graduation path.
- Strengthening the parent, student, teacher support triangle.

### **Conclusion**

Two thousand high schools produce half the nation's dropouts and more than two-thirds of its minority dropouts. The nation's dropout crisis is driven by these high schools and their feeder middle grades schools. Until we transform these high schools and the middle grades schools where large numbers of students are falling off the path to graduation, the nation will not achieve its goal of graduating all students from high school prepared for college, career, and civic life.

As our research, experience, and the work of many others have shown, particularly in high-poverty environments, students' middle grades experiences are critical in launching them toward achievement and attainment or placing them on a path of frustration, failure, and, ultimately, early exit from the only secure path to adult success—finishing high school. Our challenge is to use our considerable knowledge of how the middle grades can be transformed to enable all students to stay on the graduation path.

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The full policy brief, "Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path: A Policy and Practice Brief," by Robert Balfanz, is available from National Middle School Association. Visit [www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org) for more information.



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