

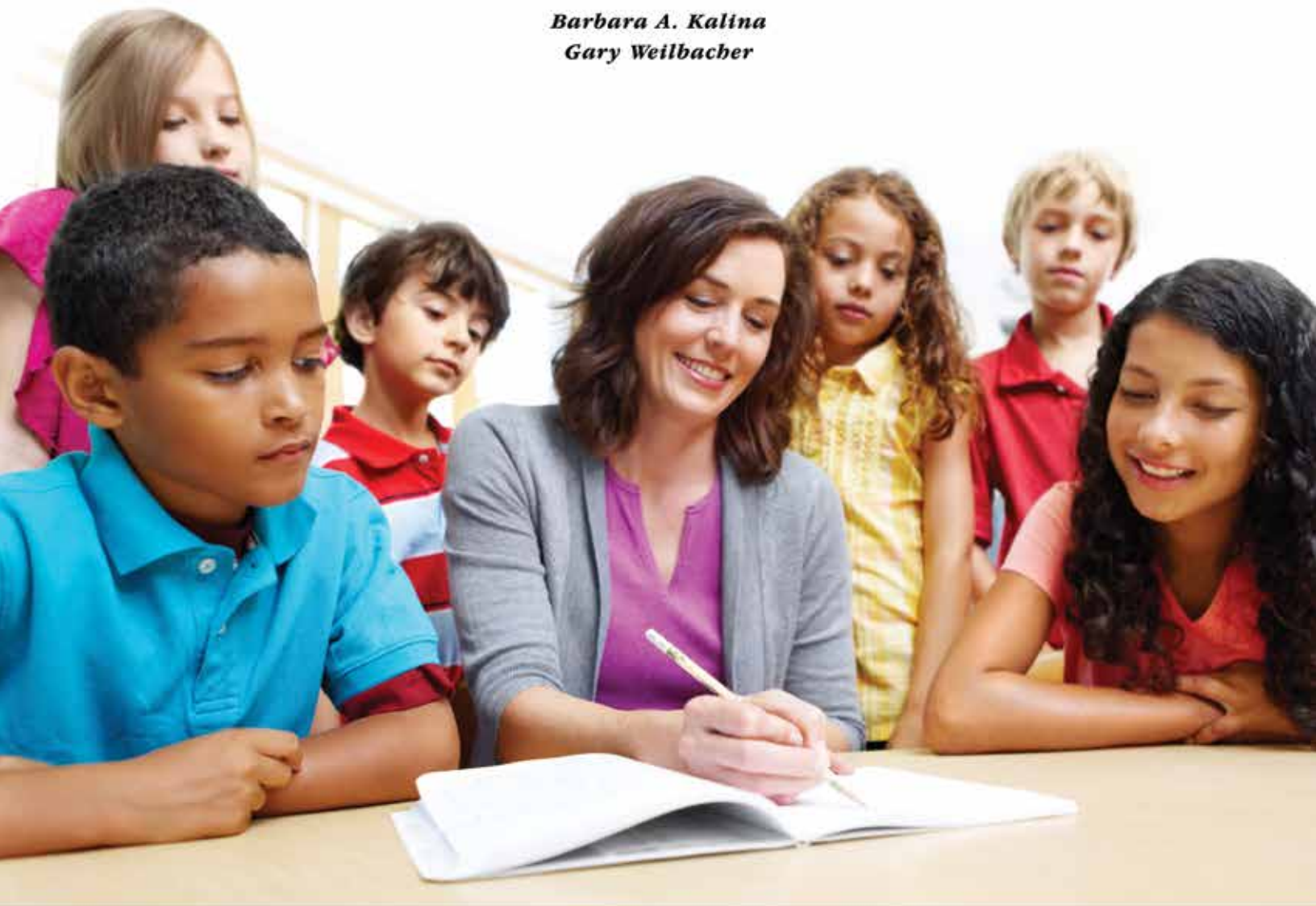


The National Forum

to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform

Building a Middle-School Program within the K-8 School: *Promises and Challenges*

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Building a Middle School Program Within the K-8 School: Promises and Challenges

Overview

Frequently, the historical entrenchment of the K-8 grade level configuration in urban schools displaces any middle grade focus. Although principals admit a need for a different program for their middle grade level students, resources for a middle-grade program are scarce. One of those resources includes interdisciplinary teams of teachers who appreciate the differences apparent in middle grade students and are trained to meet their needs. Other resources are developmentally responsive forms of curricula, instruction, and exploratory programs that appeal to the learning interests and social/emotional needs of early adolescents. Through the federal grant, Investing in Innovation i(3), six Chicago Public Elementary Schools (CPS) embarked on a journey to show how middle-grade school programs can be designed and implemented within K-8 grade configurations.

Energizing that premise, twenty-five years ago, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development released its study on young adolescents: *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1989). Shortly thereafter, the National Middle School Association presented a revision of its 1982 position paper: *This We Believe*. Both publications emphasized the importance of meeting the different range of developmental needs of young adolescents. *Turning Points* emphasized the pressures of young adolescence and the imposing need for meeting those pressures by providing guidance and rigor in their educations:

But even among those at little or no risk of damaging behaviors, the pervasiveness of intellectual underdevelopment strikes at the heart of our nation's future prosperity. (*Turning Points*, 1989, p. 7)

This concern remains with us. And, although no rigid requirements are presented for middle school grade configuration, a long, distinguished history of specific practices exists for students between the ages of 10-15 that meet their educational, developmental, and social/emotional needs. These programs embrace and exemplify the middle school philosophy and address the needs of the early-adolescent student. Rarely have K-8 schools sought to meet the unique needs of their 10-15 year old students with these practices. More often than not, specific middle-level programs have been implemented in stand-alone middle schools.

In October 2010, through the Schools to Watch (STW) program of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (from here on referenced as *The Forum*), the Association of Illinois Middle-Grade Schools (AIMS) assumed responsibility to implement the Investing in Innovation i(3) School Transformation Network grant to improve student achievement. This grant provided support necessary to build or enhance middle-grades programs for six high-poverty elementary schools within the Chicago Public School system.

One of the foundations of this grant was The Forum's Schools to Watch (STW) rubric, an extensive inventory used to evaluate the kinds and levels of middle school practice and philosophy present within a school. Essentially, this rubric measures four major domains (Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and Organization Structures and Processes), which have been historically tied to exemplary middle-level practices. Each domain consists of numerous criteria that are scored using a four-point scale (four being high). This rubric was a self-study instrument used by educators within the participating schools. In addition, it serves as the main tool to determine whether or not a school meets the Schools to Watch criteria when a team of outside evaluators conducts an on-site visit.

Because each school in the grant used the STW rubric, it became foundational to any evaluation of progress and achievement gained. The rubric components guided most of the professional development provided by the grant. In addition, two of the participating schools went through the external evaluation process and were recognized as Horizon Schools To Watch in the state of Illinois. References to The Forum's STW rubric appear throughout this paper to demonstrate the improvement of a respective school on specific items.

In order to gain an understanding of the ways that the grant impacted each school, the authors conducted a total of fifteen small group or individual interviews with both teachers and administrators from the six schools. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for common themes. What follows is a description of how the schools implemented middle-level practices in their K – 8 buildings.

The Investing in Innovation Schools

As a group, the six schools chosen by CPS to be included in the grant work shared some common factors or characteristics. Each of the schools had a history of low performance on standardized tests while educating high-risk urban students within a K-8 or Pre-K-8 grade configuration. Overall demographics in the Chicago Public School system indicated that 86.02% of the students are economically disadvantaged and 16.7 % are English Language learners. Depending on the neighborhoods served, the six schools reflected even greater levels of need among the schools than the CPS average. Differences among schools seemed to lie in the size and specific location of the student population:

- School A: Small school. 6-8 population of 172, 98% free and reduced lunch, 99% minority, and 16% ELL students
- School B: Large school. 6-8 population 283, 98% free and reduced lunch, 99% minority, and 37% ELL students
- School C: Small school. 6-8 population of 184, 97% free and reduced lunch, 100% minority, and 33% ELL students
- School D: Small school. 6-8 population of 157, 99% free and reduced lunch, 100% minority, and 0% ELL students
- School E: Small school. 6-8 population of 109, 92% free and reduced lunch, 99% minority, and 5% ELL students
- School F: Large school. 6-8 population of 306, 95% free and reduced lunch, 99% minority, and 20% ELL students

This data became part of the foundation from which each school's true middle-grade program would arise.

As difficult as providing a quality education can be under these conditions, the schools were further challenged by a series of events in CPS. Chicago Public Schools underwent transformations in leadership and administrative configurations within the district and the individual schools as well as financial concerns throughout the duration of the grant. A 7-day teachers' strike in 2012, year 3 of the grant, further compounded the process. Consequently, coaches assigned to guide the schools through the grant process decided to build relationships first between and among the school personnel and themselves. This decision provided a solid foundation from which to aid the building and implementation of middle school philosophy in the six schools.

Coaches

The coaches for this grant were carefully chosen from a variety of sources, including AIMS' contacts, coaching contacts within the Chicago Public Schools, and submitted resumes. Every coach had been a well-recognized teacher with strong middle-grades and literacy backgrounds. Three taught in CPS. Principal coaches were long-established principals, one in CPS and the other three in nearby suburban schools.

Each member of the coaching team brought unique attributes to the team as well. Two were bilingual Spanish speakers; one was a college instructor; one had strong secondary math and science background. In the group were a principal of an extremely disadvantaged school, the state Schools to Watch coordinator, and two principals of Illinois Horizon Schools to Watch. The group's strong background and complementary skills contributed to the coaches' credibility and success.

Although coaches had different job titles, they worked as teams, modeling in practice what successful middle school teams do. Their titles indicated their primary tasks: school-based, literacy, and principal coaches. One team of two coaches plus one principal mentor served three schools. Another team of two plus three principal mentors for three separate schools served the remaining three schools. One of the school-based coaches also served as a special math coach for all six schools. The coaching team met at least three times annually outside of school contact time. They assisted the Project Director and CPS Coordinator with prioritizing focus areas for their schools.

The responsibilities of the coaches included professional development, mentoring, and modeling of instruction. Principal mentors discussed administrative issues as well as the implementation of the middle school philosophy in a K-8 school. Additionally, two Schools to Watch award-winning CPS middle schools served as mentor schools. Staff members of the six i(3) grant schools visited the mentor schools during school hours to observe strategies and discuss approaches to middle-grade organization and instruction.

Throughout the grant work, coaches met and surpassed specific contact expectations:

- School-Based School to Watch Coach: Two full day visits monthly from August to June
- Principal Coach: Eight to twelve five-hour contacts annually
- Literacy Coach: Twelve days in each school over the course of the school year
- Math coach: Thirty five-hour contract days annually servicing all six schools

An analysis of their reports indicated that they exceeded the minimum contract expectations as well as made special efforts to meet the needs of the teachers. Their expenditure of time heralded their commitment to middle-grade education.

The commitment of the coaches appeared to be appreciated by the educators who were being coached. When describing the importance and effect of the coaches, “awesome” became the mantra for teachers and principals. Several teachers remarked about how the coaches found materials for them on short notice:

If ever we needed anything, we would shoot them an email and the very next day they would drop something off or offer to teach or model something for us. They brought in the energy for us.

Sometimes, coaches brought special materials or resources for specific students, showing both the students and teachers how much they “cared.” Others expressed appreciation for coaches who chose to help on field trips, model instruction in classrooms, provide feedback, and give suggestions. According to the teachers, the conversations with coaches were never preachy, never overwhelming, never demanding. They felt safe and respected as professionals. One of the teachers from School F captured this feeling:

The way she gives feedback is different from when your administration gives you feedback. When a coach gives you feedback, it is literally like a coach but when administration does, it feels like being reprimanded. It is different the way feedback is given.

When grant teachers felt burdened by the myriad of expectations placed on them, the coaches listened to and supported them: “At times they were counselors, too.” Coaches approached solutions to problems through proactive planning. They encouraged teachers to recognize and accept what was out of teacher control and determine what was possible: “their support was to work on instruction.” Consequently, the answer lay in additional or more in-depth professional development sessions. Those sessions often focused on strategies that could be taken and used in the classroom the next day, allowing teachers to feel more in control.

One teacher professed that the coaches were most influential in aiding the movement into a true middle school. By focusing on middle school teachers and structure, the culture of the schools began to change. They were no longer just the upper grades; they were the middle school with a curriculum, schedule, instruction, and appearance that made them unique within the K-8 school: “Even the minor changes, the uniforms, the logo. It was finding our identity.” As a later section in this paper suggests, developing an identity as a middle school was one of the major outcomes of the grant.

Professional Development

As mentioned above, the coaches provided most of the professional development sessions that addressed authentic middle level practices for both the teachers and principals. These sessions concentrated on middle level tenets such as advisory, flexible scheduling, interdisciplinary planning, and exploratory activities.

Many teachers mentioned the professional development tied to creating and managing advisory programs. A teacher at School D expressed sentiments held by other teachers regarding the coaches’ influence on advisory:

I think that one of the things we implemented was the advisory period. That was brought to us from the coaches. We didn’t have that at all before. They provided literature and professional resources. They purchased professional resources for the teachers to use in the classroom for instruction. The advisory part was something that the grant brought to the table and was very beneficial.

Rather than simply presenting advisory as something to be included in the middle-grades program, the coaches aided the transitions and promoted the recognition of its importance in students’ social-emotional growth.

It is important to note that professional development was not exclusively focused on promoting and establishing middle-level ideals. Coaches spent time helping teachers use the relatively new technology that was connected to the grant. Mentioned by many teachers as valuable were professional development sessions related to using Chrome books, projectors, and Google Drive. In addition, teachers reported that coaches provided more personalized forms of professional development:

I had kids working there and she would come in and observe and ask how she could help us. She always made sure she was helping everybody, not just the literacy teachers. She would work on a hands-on activity and manipulatives [in my classroom].

This verbal evidence of the personal as well as professional connections created by the coaches reinforced the importance of their decision to build relationships first.

Additionally, the coaches provided professional development to assist the teachers and principals in gathering and evaluating data. With the data, teams were able to develop their instruction to meet both the academic and social/emotional needs of their students. Discussed later in this paper, the Early Indicators work of Robert Balfanz seemed to be the most frequent data used for intervention and subsequent professional development. These indicators involve monitoring student attendance, behavior, and course achievement in an effort to prevent dropouts. One teacher from School A summarized the thoughts of many of the educators regarding the value and use of the Early Indicators:

I think what also helps with the Early Indicator spread sheet – just having that physical document is nice to look at. Having that document visible helps let us know who to continue to target and monitor more closely -- the attendance more closely on top of academics.

As evidence of the data-gathering impact on professional development, we saw a number of impressive data walls that provided color-coded indicators for each student in the school. These ‘living documents’ were used continually to make instructional decisions for the students.

One additional role of the coaches that cannot be overlooked was their influence on the creation of interdisciplinary teams. A considerable amount of coaching time involved identifying why interdisciplinary teams were essential for the effective functioning of middle-grade schools. Although some of the schools believed they were in teams, the coaches helped them to discover that that simply being called a team did not mean they were teaming. Further, the embedded history of K-8 schools in CPS and the corresponding practice of using mainly self-contained classrooms prompted the need to instill the team concept. The transformation into teams, however, presented challenges beyond ideology.

Shifting Personnel

Arguably, the single most important factor in creating authentic middle-grade schools is organizing teachers into interdisciplinary teams. Mentioned by both principals and teachers, a key organizational/structural change involved the shifting of teachers to different grade levels and, when necessary, the hiring of new teachers. While research demonstrates that teacher mobility is rather common in large urban settings (Weiner, 2006), comments from administrators indicated that they understood how strategically shifting teachers within a building could be stressful. The principal at School A described both the larger district context and her underlying rationale for organizing a distinctly separate middle school faculty:

The thing also about CPS is that there have been so many changes in leadership: top, middle, even at this level [principal]. There have been a lot of changes so it is a constant... the one constant in CPS is those inconsistencies. Within that vein, there had been a lot of unsettled feelings. I did not feel that the staff that we had at the time had the skill set to meet the needs of middle school students. We felt the need to build them up, make them feel different, and make them feel more responsible. I guess a simple term would be "special."

This rationale by the principal emphasized the nuances to be considered by principals when making decisions about teacher assignments.

Intentionally creating interdisciplinary teams for the middle grades was not a stress-free process. Some of the teachers described the time demands related to being "built up," which included taking endorsement classes in order to be certified to teach both additional subject areas and English as a Second Language classes. Meeting the needs of the high percentage of Spanish speaking students in some of the schools necessitated the endorsement classes. From the teachers' point of view, however, acquiring new endorsements took time, energy, and money.

Additional stress occurred when teachers and administrators did not necessarily agree with placement reassignments that were intended to be in the best interests of the students and the establishment of viable interdisciplinary teams. The principal from School F described some of his experiences when asked about the kinds of grade-level changes he had to make when assembling his middle school staff:

At the beginning we had some learning experiences. The best teachers that I had called me crying to my house asking, 'what have we done wrong? Why are you punishing us? . . . You are putting the school upside down!' I moved teachers based on the expertise that they had. . . After four or five years they said, 'I was wrong, I am sorry for giving you grief, crying in your office, and calling you at home.' This was the right thing to do and now they would be very upset if I moved them.

The learning curve about teaming was steep, but as successes in serving the needs of students appeared, teaming began to be a gradual ascent toward accepted change.

While many factors were involved in implementing these personnel moves, the ultimate goal was to staff the middle grades with teams of teachers who had the desire, dispositions, and skills to work with young adolescents. This notion was not lost on the teachers. A teacher from School B remarked:

Not every teacher is a middle school teacher, you know? . . . Just because you are a good primary teacher does not mean that you are a good middle school teacher and the other way around.

A teacher from School F described the necessity of finding teachers who were willing to be part of an interdisciplinary team:

I think that there have been years that there were teachers who didn't work well in middle school because they didn't want to be on a team. They kept trying to do their own thing and we would tell them that "We are not doing that anymore. We all need to be on the same page and the kids should be getting the same treatment." There are people where that did not work for them and they are better off being self-contained.

In order to create an effective middle school faculty within the K-8 setting, these comments from the principal at School A summarized what was accomplished by shifting teachers:

Not only were some people pulled out of the middle school that I felt were detrimental, but I pulled in people that I thought were more skilled in particular subject areas. . .I think they all work well together, and I think that they are highly skilled. I think they care about students, and I think they are highly professional. I think right now the right people are teaching the right subjects.

Ultimately, the transition from a self-contained model of organizing teachers to groups of interdisciplinary teams required tough decisions by principals who understood the needs of a middle-grade program and young adolescents.

While most of the participants in our study recognized the importance of establishing effective interdisciplinary teams, they also recognized that there were challenges to keeping teams together. One group of teachers from School E explained how the mid-year loss of two special education teachers impacted their Response to Intervention time:

And we didn't have anyone else who wanted to step up and do it. We used to be in small groups, and we would talk to ten kids, and they really did look forward to it. It is one piece I really wish we could have kept, but it was out of our control.

Although the teachers and team involved kept the initiatives that they could implement, they recognized that the loss of personnel created a weakness in their approach to meeting student needs.

An extended excerpt from a discussion with teachers at School F provided a perspective of the planning challenges teachers face when conditions beyond their control impact their team composition and their own teaching assignments:

M: *I have never had the same team. Having been with the same person for two years is like 'whoa!'*

W: *It is really hard to plan because we don't know what we are going to teach until September 1st, so that's a big deal.*

G: *Why does it take you that long to know?*

W: *I wish I knew.*

B: *I thought you had to know before school was out.*

M: *It is a tentative placement.*

W: *Tentative literally means tentative. I have been here three years and seen that tentative really stick. . .I have taught something different every year.*

C: *For me, she is absolutely right. I got a phone call the day before we reported to professional development before the students [came to school] I was teaching second grade, and I was informed that I would be teaching middle school. Had he told me this at the beginning of the school year I could have prepared all summer to teach not only seventh but eighth grade. I prepared all summer to teach second grade. The point is that it is common.*

The lack of a solid commitment to grade placement for teachers added to the difficulties of maintaining an effective interdisciplinary team.

In a district as large as CPS, multiple factors influence the staffing and placement of teachers. During the grant implementation, it seemed as though shifts in team composition were seen as part of the landscape. As we spoke with the principals, they shared problems faced when attempting to find appropriate resources for a true middle-grade program.

One principal reported that his interdisciplinary teams were cut from four teachers to three due to funding issues. He solved the issue by having each teacher teach in his or her specialty area plus one period of social studies. He was adamant, however, to have teachers in his middle school who were not only experts in a specific core subject but ones who “love what they do.” One teacher had excellent classroom management skills but whose students did not show any gains or improvement. He moved her out of middle school into a grade level in which her instructional skills better matched the students.

Another principal reiterated the funding issues that plagued the district: “The funding piece really drives what we are doing at any given time. “ This principal also lost teachers due to funding cuts. This loss disadvantaged the design of the middle school program. Again, the principal’s ingenuity in moving teachers into different teaching slots but keeping a middle school focus helped the middle school to approximate the original program. Although the teams were not pure interdisciplinary, the schedule maintained forms of a common planning period that allowed teachers to communicate about students and programs. In this school as in others, the grant provided professional development resources that aided teachers to initiate middle-level instructional strategies. To create the sense of the middle school being different from the K-5 program, the principal located the middle school on one floor, giving them their own identity. In many K-8 schools, this resource of space for the middle school to be separate is not available or practical.

Other than funding, a variety of factors caused the personnel shifts: sudden retirements, teacher transfers, issues tied to endorsements, the arrival of new administrators, and a reduction in staff due to reduced enrollment numbers. The principal at School A demonstrated both resignation and resiliency to the often temporary status of teams when she said, “I think that we will have changes next year in sixth grade so again we will have to move people and hire people. That just happens in life.”

Despite the challenges of maintaining teams, it seemed clear from our interviews that most of the participants saw the move to interdisciplinary teams as valuable. One teacher from School B suggested that once effective teams were in place, it was appreciated when they could remain together:

For the most part, our teachers have been here a while. We did have some that moved up and down. We have been pretty steady for the past couple of years with the same people in middle school. We also urged our coach to advocate for consistency in the middle school because it is hard to move back and forth. Our coach spoke to the administrators and asked for consistency instead of moving around every year.

One problem remained, however, due to the transitory nature of principal placement: A principal might agree with the need for consistency, but if that principal were replaced, the next principal may not see the same urgency, especially when staffing a K-8 school. The same held true for network administrators who oversaw several schools in an area. Unfortunately, the movement of principals and network administrators occurred frequently during the implementation of the grant.

Regardless of administrative turnover, evidence suggested that some principals were committed to maintain interdisciplinary teams. One teacher at School F pointed out that administration responded positively to the message of trying to keep teams together:

In the past couple of years, he has tried not to make changes in the middle school with the teachers. He has been forced to make changes, for instance, when a teacher left and with the ESL requirement and endorsements that have caused him to move people around. But I think in the last couple of years . . . he tries to keep the middle school teachers within the middle school. I might not be [placed] in sixth grade, but I will still be in the middle school.

Based on comments during our interviews, it seemed clear that teachers and principals agreed upon the importance of forming interdisciplinary teams of teachers who were both capable and committed to teaching young adolescents. Most of the schools in the study had made a deliberate commitment to creating and maintaining such teams, despite the variety of challenges in sustaining them. As the next sections of this report indicate, schools that made teaming a priority began to see some tangible benefits of their efforts.

Increased Teacher Collaboration

One frequently mentioned benefit of moving to an interdisciplinary team structure was related to an increase in collaborative work. As the coaches continued to encourage interdisciplinary teaming, teachers began to realize that they were no longer working as solitary entities. This insight from a School F teacher captured this newfound awareness for working together: “We became more aware that we needed to help each other.”

Not limited to grade-level teams, increased collaboration tended to cut across grade levels and disciplines. A technology teacher from School F who worked with teams of teachers at all grade levels mentioned the increase in collaboration:

I notice a lot more collegiality. A lot more teams working together as a middle school, a lot of conversations across the sixth, seventh and eighth grades. I have noticed that with regards to the staff.

Her phrase, “as a middle school” was especially telling. It suggested the possibility that the middle school had developed a separate, distinct identity within the K-8 setting.

As more frequent collaboration became common, a number of teachers expressed how communication among the staff became more prominent:

A lot of it, too, was that we were able to build relationships with each other as well as with other teachers. Before the grant, we were just switching kids, and there really wasn't any communication. Now we are all about communicating and knowing and bringing it together as a team.

Their recognition of the importance of professional communication allowed them to practice it.

Along these lines, professional relationships became deeper and more personal. The process of getting to know each other as teachers and people appeared to be a product of the increased collaboration:

That took time, too, to figure out whom you work well with and whom you couldn't. Whether we get along or not, we have a professional relationship, and, if it needs to be done, we do it. But it makes it a lot easier when you could go beyond the professional relationship and have a friendship. We now are able to discuss what is going on in our classes and see if the same things are happening in other classes.

In part, as the teachers recognized the importance of collaborative professional relationships, they reinforced their observation that not all teachers had the skill set required of a middle-grade teacher.

Teachers were apparently not the only people in the school who noticed that they were working together more frequently and communicating more effectively. Two teachers at School D noted that the students began to be more aware of how working within teams and teaching in close proximity resulted in students becoming aware that teachers were talking about them:

We don't have to have a formal meeting all of the time because we are right next to each other.

We talk together and the kids know that we are going to 'tag team' them: "You are getting tag teamed", and that is what Ms. B. and I do. That is her word. They know we are going to tag team them.

Talking about and tag-teaming students led to stronger relationships between the students and teachers. A teacher from School B reported:

Now, one thing I notice is that I am so much closer to my students than I ever had been in the past. These last few years I have developed a closer relationship with the kids.

Not surprisingly, the stronger relationships between students and teachers were seen as influential in improving the school climates while building a middle school identity.

School Within a School

While multiple combinations of interventions can explain why the middle school had become an identifiable "school" within the larger K-8 school setting, educators from all but one of the six schools involved in the study believed it had occurred. Creating interdisciplinary teams for the middle grades clearly influenced the fostering of a middle school identity. In many instances, these teams of teachers received separate treatment from the rest of the faculty. That treatment supported middle-grade and STW concepts. As a result, the targeted professional development delivered by the coaches and geared to implement middle level practices provided stimulus. Other stimuli included administrators' creation of grade-level teams and the scheduling of separate meetings with and for middle-grades faculty. In addition, three of the schools were able to provide a physical separation for the middle grades by having students and teachers on separate building floors or wings. Each of these events furnished additional indications that the middle school was developing a separate identity.

As the team structure became solidified, teachers began to notice that they were identifying themselves as a middle school. Two teachers at School D affirmed this newly found identity:

Teacher 1: I believe that we or I forget that there are other grades. I believe that the [middle school] culture is very present and operating as a middle school itself. With us being together up here [on the third floor] by ourselves, it does feel like a middle school.

Teacher 2: I think that the grant helped with that. I don't think before we were identifying ourselves as a middle school. It was just School D Elementary School. It was the grant that brought the terminology and we said, "Yes, we are a middle school and we like that. Even things like uniforms set us apart. We are our own school within a school."

Words such as culture, terminology, identifying, and ourselves suggested that teachers were seeing themselves as a separate entity within the larger K-8 setting. In addition, references to visually distinguishing uniforms for

students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades separated them from the rest of the school population. The uniforms added to the perception that these grades were becoming more identifiable as a separate middle school.

Along these lines, many of the teachers interviewed discussed a level of independence and autonomy that signified trust between the principal and the middle-level faculty—trust in the sense of being given more power to make decisions on their own. A teacher at School E illustrated this trust between the middle-level faculty and administration:

Really, I think the middle school handles the middle school. We don't come to administration for much. We either [sic] discuss it as a middle-school team for the most part. We don't come down here [administrator's office] too much. We come down here if it is serious, if it is a financial thing, or for an approval of something. Discipline is handled with us. Even if we approach administration about grades and such, we also have a solution thought out. We are just making sure it is okay.

This interview excerpt demonstrates the kind of shared vision expected of high-performing middle school teams. Through these types of collaborative actions in the school, the participants fulfill a STW Organizational Structures and Processes rubric recommendation:

Shared, distributed, and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose.

As The Forum's STW rubric so defines, this level of trust and collaborative effort is found in middle schools that are functioning at a high level.

Schedules and Scheduling

Scheduling of classes and personnel in a school requires juggling the instructional needs of students and certifications or endorsements of teachers. Creating a middle-grades program in a K-8 school demands those factors to be considered as well as the financial resources of the school, staffing needs of the entire K-8 school, and the various requirements of the district.

Authentic middle-grades schedules include a common plan time and blocked time or extended periods so that teachers can manage time within those periods to best meet the needs of the students and the programs. This flexibility enhances teacher ownership and empowerment. School districts vary, however, in how they allocate planning time. The most successful middle-grade schedules include two plan periods: a common plan time for team meetings and an individual plan time. The common plan time provides opportunities for discussion of student needs, integrating the curriculum, or professional growth discussions as well as examining student data. It might include parent conferences as well as meeting with administration and special service personnel.

For a variety of complicated reasons, many schools do not or cannot schedule a double plan period for their middle-grade teachers. The importance of plan time, however, is emphasized in its appearance in the STW rubric for Academic Excellence:

The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice.

Determined by contract, CPS teachers have one plan period per day and are required by contract to use one of those plan times per week for common- planning or administrator-directed time. Prior to the recent CPS extension of the students' school day, teachers could meet if desired prior to student arrival. Now, because

students arrive earlier, that particular opportunity to meet no longer exists.

All of the teachers interviewed expressed their recognition of the importance of the professional discussion that occurs during plan time. Since team-planning time is limited within the weekly schedule, many teachers explained that they have taken the initiative to meet during lunch, before school, or opportune times during the day in spite of the contract language. According to teachers, this official opportunity or inclination to meet and discuss common students was not in place before the i(3) grant. When planning time was placed in the schedule and as the teachers began to see the benefits, they were increasingly inclined to meet on their own. Their recognition of the importance of professional dialogue became apparent when they completed their annual STW self-study: their summative score on a 1-4 scale for this element moved from 2.4 in 2010/11 to 3.3 in 2013/14.

The individual size of the six schools determined the common planning period and its composition. Small schools had one team of middle-grade teachers that taught all three grade levels. By nature, their meetings were interdisciplinary. One of the smaller schools met in combination teams, meaning that rather than all the subject-area disciplines belonging to a team only two related subject areas were, e.g. math and science or social studies and ELA. Larger schools had one or more interdisciplinary teams per grade level. As usual in scheduling, the number of teams that can meet during any period depends on the number of exploratory courses that meet during that period. Consequently, the schedule maker needed to look at all of the issues, including the planning period needs of the lower grades in the K-8 school. Any vertical meetings such as K-8 math teachers had to occur outside of school hours or during a professional development day.

In addition to the allowance for teachers' planning time, schedules should include adequate time for student learning. One element in the Academic Excellence category of the STW rubric emphasizes this need:

One academic guideline in the STW rubric states "Students are provided more time to learn the content, concepts, or skills if needed."

Before the schedule provided longer class periods, teachers in all grant schools admitted that they were reticent about trying new strategies or using strategies that required a lot of student participation. With longer class periods, teachers had more time to develop a lesson that provided active student engagement. With more student engagement, the teachers found that students began to take more responsibility for active involvement in their learning.

For school F, the move to longer class periods arose after they visited a mentor school. When they observed how the schedule of the mentor school included advisory in small groups for all students and longer instructional periods, the visiting teachers explored how they could adapt the concept to their needs. From this exploration and the resulting new schedule, their teaching duties changed from teaching multiple subjects like a self-contained class to being subject-area specialists that saw all students on a team. Their process of moving from a self-contained, K-8 model of instruction to more of an interdisciplinary team orientation exemplified how the schedule is not an end in itself but the means to an end.

In School D, teachers managed time within the schedule. Following district directives for the number of minutes each subject required, they collaborated to allocate the remaining time. Their team decisions varied according to the needs of the students and programs sometimes adding an advisory period or an in-depth lesson review. Often, the time came from the social studies period, which has less stringent instructional time and standardized testing requirements. School F teams managed time as well. During testing periods, they worked together to determine the best schedule for testing and for instruction. The use of flexible time by both schools

complied with the Academic Excellence STW rubric element that addresses the master schedule:

Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in academic interventions, extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry-based learning.

The positive effects of the use of time throughout the grant schools appeared in the STW summative self-study. In the four-point scale, the use of flexible time indicated that the six grant schools moved from a 2.3 rating in the first year to a 3.0 by the fourth year.

In some middle-grade schedules outside of CPS, flex time appears in the schedule as a separate period. Like the six grant schools, however, the team determines appropriate use of time. Generally, flex time is used for advisory, enrichment, or an RtI intervention period.

Flexing the schedule is not always possible due to students who are in pull-out programs. Often, these teachers must adhere to a specific school schedule. In School F, regrouping students for the testing times conflicted with students seeing their assigned teachers for a significant period of time. This form of regrouping remains an issue, one that they placed on the list of changes that need to be addressed. Because the principal has an open door policy, teachers were confident that their concerns would be heard and be addressed.

Representatives from each of the six schools mentioned that since the implementation of the grant initiatives, the middle-grade schedule is set first. In that way, their class-time periods can be blocked, they can have lunch at the same time, and they can flex their class times. Although this arrangement may cause some concern among the lower grade personnel, no staff members reported any serious problems arising.

Advisory

Since the release of Turning Points in 1989 and even by some child advocates prior to that time (Gruhn and Douglas, 1947; Eichhorn, 1966), the importance of every child having an adult advocate has been noted in most influential middle school publications. The STW rubric includes this value in the Developmental Responsiveness section:

Every student had a mentor, advisor, advocate, or other adult her/she trusts and stays in relationship with throughout the middle school experience.

As the i(3) grant began to be put into action, the importance of an advisory period became a focal point for the six schools.

Like many schools that have adopted an advisory period, School B had several starts at incorporating advisory into their team time. They admitted having some difficulty in part because they were uncertain about how to lead it. Their application of it improved each year as they explored what it should be and how it should look for students. Their 90-minute blocks of time further allowed them the flexibility to incorporate advisory into the schedule. Topics addressed in advisory included study skills, organization, priorities, and a study of Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful Students*. As the teachers became more comfortable with the intent and content of advisory, they were more successful in putting advisory into action. Further, the teachers discovered the existence of social/emotional standards in the Illinois standards. That awareness aided their foray into a productive and student-centered advisory experience.

Believing it to be beneficial in knowing their students, the teachers in School D incorporated advisory into their middle-grade program. As noted in the Schedules and Scheduling segment, they allocated time for

advisory from their social studies time, generally on Friday. One team occasionally separated the girls and boys to work with personal and social issues of importance to the separate genders. Fridays became Friday is Tie Day for boys and Pearls for Girls for the girls. Boys wore ties and girls wore a string of pearls purchased for them by the team. Sensitive to the more open relationships possible between boys and male teachers, a male teacher not connected to the team worked with the boys. The team used a suggestion box for topics to be discussed and teenage social interest books purchased for them by their coach. Their advisory goal was to focus on authentic-life scenarios of interest and importance to the students. Through their approach to advisory, the teachers not only believe that they were better able to know their students but observed a positive change in the students' behaviors. An excerpt from a discussion between two teachers at School D offered an insight into the kinds of behavioral changes that many teachers reported:

We did it [advisory] once a week and we were able to hear what was on their minds as well. They felt good about it. The boys were opening doors for the ladies. It changed their behavior. We looked forward to it. . .

The behavior issues with children, you know the ones that like to be at the back of the line because they know they could cause the mischief and go unnoticed would come to the front of the line and stand at attention. The behavior changed, and it was amazing. It was a great thing to be a part of.

Additionally, during some advisory times, several schools used Robert Balfanz's Early Indicator data to review individual progress reviewed with students. Individually, students analyzed their progress, perhaps consulted with the teacher, and developed personal learning goals based on their self-analysis. As a result of these sessions, students began to take personal responsibility for their learning. Prior to initiating an advisory time, the teachers had not focused on these elements of the learning process.

Schools E and F regard advisory as the most influential program introduced and the one intervention that provided the most benefit to students. Anti-bullying and conflict resolution emerged as important skills for the students to absorb. As a result of addressing those issues, School E reported a noticeable decrease in fighting. Additionally, these schools included advisory programs that dealt with personal hygiene and public behaviors often separating boys and girls as done in School D. In School E, as the middle-grades success with advisory was noted in the building, the concept migrated to several lower grades.

School F teachers stated their belief that support for the social/emotional needs of students aids students' academic achievement. Prior to the grant, no advisory was in place for either school. After the grant process began, School F tried several advisory formats and schedules. Wanting to emulate the stand alone middle-grade mentor schools that had a blended 6-8 small-group advisory, they could not find a way to schedule it within their K-8 school configuration. They continued with the single- grade version but in larger groups than preferred. Once a month, however, they meet in smaller-group advocacy versions of advisory. According to a teacher in School F, the relationships built in advisory and advocacy assisted the students' comfort level when seeking adult help:

[Advisory and advocacy have changed the school through] better relationships, better behaviors, where students feel that you are not just the authority. They feel some sort of connection with their teachers.

The noted change existed as well in student understanding of expectations and encouraged them to be more reflective about their academic and behavior engagement, holding themselves more accountable. To encourage those behaviors, the teachers in School F used Covey's book, *Seven Habits of a Highly Effective Teen*.

Closely identified with middle-grade programs, advisory has been adapted and adopted by high schools (National Association of Secondary Principals, 2004). Successful middle-grade programs incorporate it in some form that will fit the school schedule and promote teachers' abilities to establish relationships with students. These schools have seen the benefits and worked to incorporate the program within their schedules. Further, the approaches used by the i(3) grant schools respond to several STW rubric guides in the Developmental Responsiveness segment:

Students talk about daily issues in their own lives, their community, and their world.

Students take action, make informed choices, work collaboratively, and learn to resolve conflicts.

Additionally, as the teachers sought to improve the methods and content of the advisory period, they addressed a STW Social Equity rubric item:

The faculty is always seeking ways to improve programs, curriculum, and assessment to better meet student needs.

Early Indicators

Extensive professional development familiarized teachers and other significant staff members with Robert Balfanz's research on Early Indicators for student failure. These empirically researched indicators help schools with the early identification of students who are likely to fail and to drop out of school. Balfanz refers to them as the ABC indications: A for attendance, B for behavior, and C for course achievement. Each element has guidelines to indicate problems. Additionally, CPS includes the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) test tracked quarterly and tardiness to determine student success. Each of the six schools has an Early Indicators data base manager.

As Early Indicators patterns emerged in School F, the teachers found a basis for professional dialogue about students and use of the advisory period. Their students began to monitor their own progress and logged their goals. Serious problems in any of the ABC or CPS areas were colored in red, giving students targets on which to set goals. Additionally, the principal posted the Early Indicator color-coded information on the wall in his office. Student progress for the entire school was followed with trends and patterns showing clearly.

School E cited the Early Indicators as a positive in impacting their development of a successful middle-grade program. Having the data readily available aided their planning and differentiating of instruction. Further, the visual color-coding allowed students to see at a glance how they were progressing. They became enthused about their ownership when they moved up from red to yellow or yellow to green. When teachers encouraged students to take ownership of their own learning, students began to self-compete.

Besides watching for at-risk students, School D teachers used the data to address the needs of students who were on track. They used that information to give students positive reinforcement for jobs well done, again building on relationships. The folders that they created for each child became viable parts of their planning and instruction. They provided a basis for differentiated instruction as well. In this school, the Early Indicators were also the basis for parent-teacher conferences in which the entire team would meet. Color-coding helped parents immediately to see and to understand their child's exact situation. Use of the Early Indicators as a basis for instruction allowed School D and others to meet one of the STW rubric goals for Developmental Awareness:

The staff provides a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical social, and physical development.

This particular rubric was the site of great gains in the grant schools' self-evaluation process: They moved from a 1.9 in the first year to a 3.0 in their final year. Essentially, they moved from a barely existent event to a high frequency occurrence.

After School and Outside Resources

In a recent *Education Week* Commentary, Peter Gibbon paraphrased John Locke, the 17th Century philosopher: "Children must play. Their minds wander. They need to be busy, and they love change and variety. They are naturally curious." (Gibbon, 2015) The principals and teachers of the i(3) grant schools believed this tenet as well. To accomplish this end, they sought a variety of outlets for students. Resources, however, continued to be scarce and, in the light of financial cut backs, the principals looked for supplemental support from a variety of organizations.

School A found academic help and relationship building from Sprouting Leaders, a predominantly Latino college student volunteer group. These volunteers met with students outside of school hours to help with homework, conduct special events for students, and provide school supplies. The principal remarked about how the relationships seemed to change the students:

On Saturday service day, the students witnessed twenty year olds being silly and having fun.... [The students] witnessed that life could be lighthearted and [they] could go to college.

A problem remained in establishing the programs. Although the programs might be free, the principal had to find money in the budget to provide security personnel and sufficient monitors.

With the belief that schools need to provide engaging activities for the students after school, the principal at School A worked with I Am Seeds and the Museum of Mexican Art to provide art projects. As a result of these partnerships, three murals appeared in the building that were designed and completed by students. Each of the murals has a positive theme that speaks to the vision of the school. The latest mural, Unity, portrays Martin Luther King and Caesar Chavez to signify the two different cultures in the school: African American and Latino.

School F offered a STEM program as an after-school program. One program, underwater robotics, incorporated computer science and robotics. Additional courses in this school's offerings included computer science and Adobe Youth Voices. The teacher's communication with the students' teams of teachers aided student behavior and engagement in the STEM activities as well as the academic program.

As in other schools outside of the grant schools, sports and athletics were important to the students. The teachers in School B found that the students responded positively when the teachers attended their sporting events. Although not having attended events prior to the grant work, the teachers believed that their attendance and support increased positive relationships: "They know that we are there for them outside of the classroom, and it is not just 8 to 3."

When the principal in School B integrated an arts program into the middle school, he found an outside grant to pay for the additional security hours required to implement it. The Mexican Museum of Art provided instructors for the program. Students would have an hour of academic support before the hour of art. Additionally, with grants he provided physical involvement through cheerleading, soccer, and boys and girls basketball.

School D tapped into the Rush Hospital nursing program to provide health education for the students. Believing that the extra programs were important for the students, the principal shared her beliefs:

. . . the sports piece, the after-school piece to keep them out of trouble during the evening . . . Use what you have, build on when you can.

As in the other schools, meeting Developmental Responsiveness criteria required ingenuity and researching to find programs and grants. When able to find those resources, the principals and staffs were able to address another STW rubric:

Students co-curricular activities cover a wide range of interests—team sports, clubs, exploratory opportunities, service opportunities, and a rich program in the visual and performing arts. Through the dedication of the principals and staffs of the schools, students had valuable experiences outside of the traditional classroom.

Concluding Remarks

As evidenced through the interviews conducted with the principals and staffs of the i(3) grant schools, it seems clear that it is possible to create exemplary middle schools within school buildings that have traditionally been organized as K-8 settings. The six schools provided tangible evidence of this notion, and two of the schools even were designated as Illinois Horizon Schools to Watch by a team of outside evaluators using The Forum's rubric. Another of the schools felt secure enough to apply for Horizon STW status but was denied a visit based only on the limitations of their paper application. In addition and due to the positive progress of the schools, CPS removed two of the schools from their closure list. Based on our interviews, it was clear that all of the schools had implemented in varying degrees at least some aspects of middle level practices.

The schools that were designated as Horizon Schools to Watch provided some valuable insights into the processes involved in becoming exemplary middle schools. While not necessarily recommended as a formula for creating middle schools, these two schools had the following processes and components in common:

- *Being led by administrators who considered middle school philosophy and practices as being relevant and important for young adolescents:* Both administrators made comments about the importance of meeting the unique needs of middle-grades students. One of the administrators put it this way: "Think about putting this [learning] in the hands of your students. If we want to go to the higher level of learning, the students have to be in power and it has to come from them."
- *Staffing the middle grades with teachers who have both the expertise and the commitment to teach middle level students:* Although challenging, it was crucial to organize the faculty in a way to maximize the skills and dispositions of the teachers to create effective interdisciplinary teams.
- *Providing professional development:* The teachers and principals we interviewed made it clear that the coaches were influential in providing them with the knowledge necessary to adopt the kinds of middle-level practices that changed the way they taught sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. Without professional development and the opportunity to provide dedicated time for these sessions, it would seem to be difficult to understand how teachers could learn to function as interdisciplinary teams, how advisory can change the school climate, and how instruction can become more student-centered.

- *Creating a schedule that encourages longer class periods and teachers' control of flexible time:* With extended time and classes blocked sequentially, teachers reported that the extra time allowed them to meet individual student needs. Further, the needs of the middle-grades staff were identified and met by providing common planning periods that promoted professional dialogue.
- *Creating a separate identity for the middle school:* While it may not be necessary to create a 'school within a school', the schools that were more wedded to the middle level concept constructed a separate identity by moving middle grades students to the same wing/floor, holding special events, and providing different uniforms. Fostering a unique identity helped to provide both teachers and students with a sense of ownership within a larger setting.
- *Committing to the process of change:* Quite possibly the most important aspect of forming a middle school was the dedication we saw from teachers and administrators who were willing to meet outside of regular contract hours to do the necessary reform work.

The bottom line of this project seems to be that it is indeed possible to create high-fidelity middle schools in K-8 settings.

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