

Appendix # 1

Middle Level Education in Maine: Taking Stock

In 1987-1988, the Middle Level Task Force, a group of educators and citizens from around the State, met to study middle level education in Maine. The report to Commissioner Eve Bither, *Schools in the Middle* (1988), provided information about middle level education and set the direction for middle level schools in the next few years. How effective were the 18 recommendations in that report? While there is little hard data to evaluate, several members of the current Maine Commission on Middle Level Education also served on the 1988 Middle Level Task Force. Their analyses indicate that Maine's middle level schools made progress in implementing some of the signature programs most often recommended for middle level schools, including advisory programs, teams, exploratory offerings, activity programs, and early attempts at multidisciplinary curriculum units.

Unfortunately, many of the recommendations for various stakeholder groups were either short-lived or never did materialize. The recommendations to the Maine Department of Education, (known then as the Department of Educational and Cultural Services) called for middle level education to be recognized as a separate entity from elementary and secondary education in educational laws and Department regulations. That did not happen in 1988, but a number of changes to Chapters 125 and 127 now recognize middle level education as a separate entity. Other recommendations called for the Department to establish a separate per pupil funding formula for grades 5-8, with a separate space utilization formula for buildings with middle level students, and to develop funded incentives for middle level initiatives through various Department initiatives. None of that came to pass. A middle level education office was initiated for two years after the prior report for the purpose of helping schools across the State promote middle level education, provide models and strategies for implementation, and more. Finally the recommendation to the Department to establish distinct endorsements for middle level teachers and guidance counselors and a distinct certification for middle level principals was only partially realized. Due to this recommendation, the Maine Association for Middle Level Education helped achieve a Middle Level Teaching Endorsement for grades 5-8 that still exists today. Unfortunately, the endorsement has had a negligible impact on teachers (fewer than 1% of Maine teachers have it) and there has been no move for specialized preparation or recertification for counselors or middle school principals.

Maine's colleges and universities have been slow to respond, with few middle level teacher preparation programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. While several campuses have thriving undergraduate or graduate programs, the lack of a middle school certification (or license) makes it too easy to ignore any specialized preparation for the middle level only.

The brightest star in the recommendations from 1988 might be the leadership that Maine Association for Middle Level Education (MAMLE) has exhibited from the beginning. MAMLE has established local, regional, and statewide networks to promote young adolescents and middle level education, raising the awareness of the needs of middle level students in Maine and the need for improvements to schools and teachers.

MAMLE's advocacy, along with that of professional groups like Maine Principals' Association and others, have added a great deal to Maine's middle level schools.

Finally, the recommendations in the 1988 study relied heavily on local systems to examine their philosophies and subsequently adopt more student-centered approaches, work on a responsive curriculum, provide co-curricular activities which are appropriate, recognize the importance of ongoing professional development, form transition teams with their high school colleagues, and more. Some Maine middle level schools did some of these things, but many did not. The signature programs of middle level education were easily accomplished, but many schools simply did not go beyond those programs that were easy to implement.

What We Have Learned About Successful Middle Level Schools in Maine

Successful middle level schools in Maine encourage students to learn and develop as people. These schools begin with a commitment to young adolescents, insist on deep, rather than superficial learning, create a learning community where adults and students work closely together, and recognize that this is a system where each element depends on the others. These schools share a vision and a mission that guide the programs, expectations, and directions they create. Furthermore, they are guided by high standards and they build an assessment system that measures learning in a variety of ways responsive to this unique age group.

Successful middle level schools recognize that young adolescents learn best: when they are actively involved in their learning; when students' questions drive the curriculum; and when expectations for students of teachers and teachers of students are high.

These successful schools are organized in teams, preferably small, partner teams that may stay together for more than one academic year. The teams provide a supportive atmosphere for students fostering close relationships with peers and teachers. Often with such teams, a separate advisory program is not needed.

Students are held to high expectations, learn at high levels, and score well on the Mesa and other standardized measures of achievement. In addition, these students become self-starters, responsible to themselves, their parents, and their communities. They are well-prepared for high school and beyond, and exhibit good character, as well.

Academic Achievement in Maine's Middle Schools

There are several major elements by which we need to assess middle level schools, including how attuned they are to the developmental needs of their students (which includes paying substantial attention to intellectual development), the degree to which schools are socially equitable, and how they are organized to support their mission and beliefs. However, the public seems most interested in students' standardized test scores as the means of evaluating school effectiveness.

As demonstrated throughout this report, an exemplary middle school is academically excellent and expects high levels of achievement from all students (The National Forum, 2002). During the past several years, Maine 8th graders have been in the top 10 states in reading, writing, mathematics, and science on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Using this as a standard to identify effective schools, it

would appear that Maine has many high performing middle schools. However, as indicated earlier in this report, there are many school configurations that house the middle grades in Maine. The Commission grappled with the question of whether there is a significant difference in student achievement in Maine schools that have moved to a middle school philosophy compared to those that operate, regardless of the name over the door or the grade configuration, as more traditional junior high or elementary schools.

In Maine we have not attended to the evaluation of middle schools as a distinct way of schooling for our young adolescents. For example, in our search for data supporting high achievement in our middle schools on the Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) and other assessments, this Commission was unable to make distinctions between schools that had implemented elements of middle level philosophy and those that had not. Therefore, we have no substantial data that allow us to determine how students in schools that are true middle schools perform compared to those with a more elementary or junior high school-like philosophy. National research findings do, however, clearly show that systemic implementation of the middle level strategies articulated in *This We Believe* and *Turning Points 2000* do have a positive impact on student learning. In Illinois, students in schools with high levels of implementation of those middle level elements listed as Core Principles earlier in this report achieved at much higher levels than those in more traditional, junior high settings (Felner, 1997). Similar results were found in Massachusetts where students in schools participating in the Middle Grades Systemic Change Network had the highest gains on the Massachusetts Educational Assessments. In addition, 13 schools in the Boston area who have participated in *Turning Points* reform for the past several years have consistently out-performed non-participating schools on the statewide assessment in score gains, percentage increase of students in advanced and proficient levels, and in percentage decrease in students performing at the failing level (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2002).

Other data that indicate substantial gains in student achievement in mathematics and science in schools that incorporate “high authentic pedagogy and instruction” are described in the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 and the School Restructuring Study from 1991-1994 (Successful School Restructuring, 1995). In summary, “authentic pedagogy” was defined as instruction that involves students in the “construction of knowledge”, the production of complex understandings, and the exploration of connections to the world beyond the classroom. In addition to higher levels of achievement, both studies indicated that “authentic pedagogy” reduces the inequalities in achievement between students of high and low socioeconomic status. While these studies do not specifically identify these practices as part of the middle level reforms described in this report, they certainly fit the criteria for effective teaching strategies in high performing middle level schools.

In summary, Maine continues to do well on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). However, we have little data that help us to understand the effects of school organization or instructional practice on student achievement at the middle level in our State. At the national level, many research studies over the past several years continue to demonstrate that schools involved in systemic middle school reform show increased student achievement on standardized and state-level achievement assessments (Anfara, 2003).