

The Success for All Middle School: Adding Content to Middle Grades Reform

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Sixteen years ago, the Carnegie Corporation (1989) issued a report that profoundly affected the education of young adolescents. *Turning Points* critiqued the rigid traditional structure of middle schools and advocated reforms intended to make middle grades education more personalized, supportive, and active: interdisciplinary teams, cooperative learning, involvement with families and community, mentoring, and active teaching.

Today, the middle school movement is itself at a turning point. The *Turning Points* reforms, where they have been implemented, have created more humane, child-focused environments that are more in tune with the developmental needs of young adolescents. Yet the achievement of children in the middle grades, especially in high-poverty communities, has continued to languish.

As recognized by one of the intellectual leaders of *Turning Points*, Tony Jackson (Jackson & Davis, 2000), what *Turning Points* and other middle grades reforms of the 1980's and '90's left out was curriculum and instruction. Except for general suggestions about the benefits of active, hands-on, cooperative learning and teaching, teachers have had few practical tools to translate the good ideas of the middle school movement into day-to-day teaching. In the current environment increasing accountability pressures brought on in part by No Child Left Behind, it is simply not enough to engage and support young adolescents. They also need to learn more. Reform in the middle grades needs to incorporate the advances advocated by *Turning Points*, but also to develop well-designed, replicable models that provide challenging content, research-based instructional

strategies, and extensive professional development for teachers to enable these students to make progress on the standards that all states are mandating.

The Success for All Middle School

The Success for All Middle School was designed to help middle grades educators implement the most important elements of *Turning Points* and to add well-structured curricula, instructional methods, and professional development for teachers to help students reach their full potential. The program is based on the Success for All elementary design, the most widely used and extensively evaluated of all comprehensive school reform models (Borman et al., 2003; Herman, 1999; Slavin & Madden, 2001). However, the elementary model was totally redesigned to meet the very different developmental needs of young adolescents and the institutional realities of middle grades education. It provides teachers with specific, well-structured student materials, manuals, and other supports, as well as extensive professional development, follow-up, and opportunities for continuing growth.

School and Classroom Organization

Interdisciplinary teams. Like many other middle school reform models, students in Success for All middle schools are grouped in interdisciplinary “teams,” each of which has one teacher of each subject. The purpose of these teams is to provide students with a smaller core group of peers and caring adults to attend to their academic and social needs.

Facilitator. Each Success for All Middle School has a full-time facilitator who helps all teachers implement the program, visits classes, organizes data for grouping, and maintains coordination among all staff.

Grouping for Reading. Ensuring literacy for all students is a primary goal of the Success for All Middle School. Students in each grade, 6-8, are assigned to a reading class according to their level of reading skill. A common time period is set aside for this purpose, and all teachers, including art, music, physical education, and other special subject teachers, teach a reading class. Because of this common reading period, students who make rapid progress can be easily moved at any time to higher-performing reading classes without upsetting their entire class schedules. Further, teaching reading gives all teachers strategies in their subject-matter teaching that continuously reinforce literacy skills.

Cooperative Learning. Cooperative learning is extensively used in all subjects in Success for All Middle Schools. Research on cooperative learning has long established that students who work in small, well-structured learning teams gain academically if there are clear group goals and if group success depends on the individual learning of all group members (see Slavin, 1995; Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain, 2003). A cooperative group typically involves four students who are diverse in skills, gender, and ethnicity. Students work together on projects and academic work and help each other learn content, but ultimately each student must show individual mastery of the content. Use of cooperative teams also contributes to outcomes such as improved social acceptance,

intergroup relations, and self-esteem, all of which are of particular importance for young adolescents (Slavin, 1995).

Curriculum Components

The Reading Edge. The most important curriculum focus of the Success for All Middle School is reading. Reading performance in high-poverty middle schools is unacceptably low (see Donahue et al., 1999; Cooney, 1998), and this deficit holds back progress in all subject areas (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

As students beginning middle school face more challenging content in various subject areas, advanced reading skills and strategies become essential. The Reading Edge program meets this need with an accelerated 60-minute block every day, providing students at all reading levels with structured lessons. Phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and basic and advanced comprehension strategies form the program's foundation. Students learn to understand expository as well as narrative texts and to build the study strategies for success in high school. In addition, Reading Edge lessons make extensive use of cooperative learning, harnessing the strength of peer relationships in young adolescents and giving students powerful incentives to read and to help their teammates read. These reading and cooperative learning techniques are reinforced throughout the day in the other components of the SFA Middle School.

Assessment, Grouping, and Regrouping. At the beginning of the school year, a standardized assessment provides baseline data on each student's reading level (from pre-primer to eighth grade). The SFA facilitator compiles this

data to help him or her place students in instructionally appropriate reading levels. As noted earlier, all faculty members teach reading to maximize the number of classes and reduce class size. Having homogeneous classes limits the range of performance levels and allows teachers to customize instruction for individual learning styles. Every eight weeks, students are reassessed and regrouped according to the progress they have made. In this way, students have the opportunity to move more than one reading level each year until they are proficient, on-grade-level readers.

Humanities. The SFA Middle School humanities curriculum challenges students to make practical use of reading, writing, and analytical skills. These standards-based units are taught daily, usually in a double period, and include both social studies and language arts curricula. In social studies units, students investigate important themes and topics, connecting what they learn about the past with their own lives, and present their findings in various forms of writing. In language arts units students explore different genres of literature, write original pieces following conventions of writing, and learn and practice basic grammar skills.

Each grade level begins with one or more foundation units that familiarize teachers and students with cooperative learning techniques and focus on concrete skills that students apply throughout the year. For example, in a foundation unit on the conventions of writing, students learn the steps of the writing process and peer review as they practice working as members of a

cooperative learning team. Students then refine their use of the writing process in every unit that follows.

The remaining units engage students with a problem to solve or a task to complete related to a particular theme or topic. For example, a unit on Ancient Egypt challenges students to solve the mystery of a tomb robbery. To do so, they take on the roles of possible suspects from the ranks of Egyptian society. As students learn about life in ancient Egypt, they make decisions about the robbery based on their findings. Such materials engage students' curiosity, emotions, and intellects, enhancing their motivations to learn the content.

Science. Many Success for All Middle Schools use the specially developed science program a year or two after they begin the reading program. In it, students construct knowledge on the basis of direct experience through exploration, teacher demonstration and explanation, and direct instruction and experimentation. All units are based on National Science Education Standards.

Each grade level begins with one or more foundation units that focus on a specific set of skills. For instance, a unit on science safety teaches students not only how to work safely in a science lab, but also how to respond to the classroom management strategies used in SFA classes.

The remaining units present students with a scenario or problem. For example, in Earthquake!, about a fictitious town situated on a fault, students compile recommendations concerning land use, earthquake-resistant building designs, and other issues impacted by seismic activity. In the context of this work, students learn about using models to study earth science concepts such as

plate tectonics, as well as physical science concepts such as wave structure and energy. Students also learn to read maps, informational text, organize data into charts and graphs, draw conclusions, and write their findings in a number of different formats.

School and Family Success

School and Family Success teams within each school focus on issues such as attendance, school-based intervention for struggling students, family involvement, service integration with community agencies, and building students' social problem-solving skills.

Evaluation

The Success for All Middle School is being evaluated by a third party evaluator, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, which is collecting student-level data from state assessments. However, reading results at the school level from 2001 to 2004 were obtained from state web sites. School-level results compare achievement gains on state high-stakes reading measures in SFA middle schools to those in matched comparison schools.

In all seven school pairs, students in the SFA Middle Schools gained substantially more on their state reading assessments than did students in comparison schools. In many cases, these differences were striking. At Tahola School, a K-12 school primarily serving Native American students in rural

Washington State, the Success for All seventh graders gained 95.5 percentage points in students meeting standards on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), going from 4.5% to 100% passing. The comparison school gained only 18.4 percentage points, while the state average gained only 20.7 percentage points. Similarly, seventh graders at Richards Middle School in rural Missouri gained 31.5 percentage points in students passing the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) Reading Scale, while a matched control school gained 10.3 points and the state gained only 2.4 points. Two inner-city middle schools in Indianapolis gained markedly more than their comparison schools. Coleman Middle school gained 9.0 percentage points on the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress (ISTEP), averaging grades 6 and 8. A control school gained only 0.5 points. Longfellow Middle School gained 15.5 percentage points on ISTEP, while its control school gained 4.0 points. Indiana middle grades as a whole gained 7.0 percentage points. Carver Middle School in Meridian, Mississippi gained 5.8 percentage points in students passing the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT), while its control school gained by 2.3 points. SFA middle schools in Arizona and Louisiana gained on their state assessments while both their control schools and their states lost ground.

Recognizing the problems inherent in averaging across different state measures, it is still interesting to note that across the seven SFA schools, students gained an average of 24.6 percentage points on state reading tests, while matched control schools gained only 2.2 points and the gain of in each of the schools' respective states was 4.2 percentage points.

Table 1 summarizes the gains in each SFA school, its matched control, and its state.

Table 1
Gains in Percent of Students Passing State Reading Tests
in Success for All and Control Middle Schools,
2001 to 2004

<u>School</u> <u>(State)</u>	<u>Measure</u>	<u>Grades</u> <u>Tested</u>	<u>Gains in Percent Passing</u>		
			<u>SFA</u>	<u>Control</u>	<u>State</u>
Washington	WASL	7	+95.5	+18.4	+20.7
Missouri	MAP	7	+31.5	+10.3	+2.4
Indiana-pair 1	ISTEP	6, 8	+9.0	+0.5	+7.0
Indiana- pair 2	ISTEP	6, 8	+15.5	+4.0	+7.0
Mississippi	MCT	6, 7	+5.8	+2.3	+8.1
Arizona	AIMS	8	+3.0	-12.0	-6.0
Louisiana	LEAP	8	+12.0	-8.0	-5.0
Means*			+24.6	+2.2	+4.2

*Means across different state assessments should be interpreted cautiously.

Conclusion

The Success for All Middle School design is a comprehensive, replicable model for middle schools serving many at-risk young adolescents. Not only does it incorporate the structural features emphasized in *Turning Points*, but it also goes beyond this to provide specific content, instructional strategies, and professional development to help all teachers implement state-of-the-art instruction in their classes. Third-year evaluation data show that this approach is having a substantial impact on students' reading achievement in all of its pilot

schools. As the Success for All Middle School and other content-focused middle school reforms begin to work at a larger scale and continue to produce convincing data, we may finally achieve the breakthrough that *Turning Points* promised sixteen years ago: reliable, replicable models to help schools ensure the success of young adolescents.

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