

*Remarks of Hayes Mizell at the first meeting of the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) Middle Grades Commission on December 13-14, 2010 in Raleigh, North Carolina. The Commission members were appointed by North Carolina Governor Beverly Perdue who also chairs the SREB. Commission members include leaders of state education agencies, education committees of state legislatures, middle level schools, etc. The purpose of the Commission is "to look at the issues of middle grades education and make recommendations aimed at making dramatic improvements in the percentage of students who leave grade eight prepared for challenging high school studies." These remarks represent only the views of Hayes Mizell and do not represent the perspectives or positions of the Southern Regional Education Board or its Middle Grades Commission. Mizell is one of the consultants to the Commission.*

### **Taking a Longer and Wider View of Middle Grades Education**

For a presentation like this, the normal practice is to begin with a litany of statistics and other indicators that reveal the problematic aspects of educating students in the middle grades. I'm not going to do that. You only have to reflect on your own middle level schooling, or that of your children or grandchildren, to understand the challenges of educating young people between the ages of 11 and 15. You only have to recall how *few* times you have said, or heard another parent say, "You know, my son's academic performance really improved when he went to middle school," or "My daughter really came into her own, she became much more confident and accomplished, in the middle grades." And, finally, you only have to read some of SREB's reports on the middle grades that it has published during the past seven years.

Many adults simply wish that it were possible to leapfrog the period of young adolescent development that is at work when young people are in the middle grades. But the fact is that no child can grow to maturity without going through young adolescence. It is a normal, necessary stage of *formation*.

Many policymakers advocate early childhood education in the belief that if children are ready for elementary school it will ameliorate problems at subsequent grade levels. There is truth in that, but the development of children is not static. They not only keep changing but they experience their most dramatic physical, cognitive, and behavioral changes in the middle grades. It is a mistake to focus on the needs of children at one stage of life but fail to attend to their needs at a later, equally critical, developmental stage.

During the past fifteen years, there has been a great increase in knowledge of how to effectively educate young adolescents. This has been the result of research and documentation of the methods and results of educators whose schools have increased students' academic performance. We now know what constitute effective *and* ineffective practices of school organization, school leadership, professional development, curricula, and instruction. But as is true in so many other areas of K-12 public education, there is more extant knowledge than there is application of that knowledge to benefit students. [Attached to this paper is a list of selected resources, beyond those produced by SREB, that represent some of the current knowledge about the middle grades and academic performance.]

States have a critical role to play in leading and supporting their middle level schools to implement practices that challenge students academically while simultaneously increasing the students' engagement, motivation, and confidence to meet those challenges.

States must believe, and act on the belief, that the middle grades represent the last best hope to put every student on a secure path towards developing their

God-given talents. This is not merely an educational ideal or a theological construct. For the SREB states, it is an economic development imperative. One would hope that each state's goal would be that by the time every young adolescent reaches age 30, he or she should be independent, productive, and not in poverty. But perhaps that goal is too distant, even too ambitious, for most states. Let's choose a milestone more consistent with our conversation here: It should be state policy that the purpose of the middle grades is to prepare every student to successfully complete at least two years of education beyond high school. Even that will require intensive and sustained investment in improving the effectiveness of the middle grades and their impact on every student.

By "two years of education" I mean either service in the military, an apprenticeship program, technical training, community college, or other educational experiences a state might define and approve. The point is that there has to be a tangible, crisp purpose of middle grades education that educators, students, taxpayers, and voters can understand and embrace. Equally important, the purpose has to be buttressed by accountability metrics that enable states to clearly communicate to these constituencies the extent to which students are on the trajectory that fulfills the purpose. But such a purpose is not possible unless elected leaders and education leaders are resolute in articulating it and defending it, especially when constituencies grasp that it means higher standards of performance, departure from familiar and convenient educational practices, and more effective student engagement.

In this day of global competition, one might assume that most schools serving the middle grades would embrace this purpose as their fundamental operating principle. However, this is not the case. Many educators continue to believe that not all students can or should seek post-secondary education. In fact, they are comfortable with and actually complicit in different expectations for different students. When students enter the middle grades behind grade level, many schools don't do whatever it takes to help the students catch up, and they use the difficulty of doing so to justify disparate levels and quality of education.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that so many schools don't develop cultures where post-secondary education is expected, anticipated, and celebrated. They don't educate all students about the need for post-secondary education, about the variety of post-secondary education options, and they don't engage all students in curricula and other educational experiences that raise their sights and empower them for the future. No wonder it is in the middle grades that some students begin to disengage from education, believing that it only aggravates their doubt, their bewilderment, their confusion, their lack of confidence, and their fear about both their current lives and the years that lie ahead.

If a state is clear about the purpose of middle grades education, it must then designate someone to champion and assist schools' efforts to fulfill their mission. Though this person would probably function within the state department of education, their sole responsibility should be to significantly improve the academic results of the middle grades. They can't do this unless they have appropriate authority and staff to provide oversight and technical assistance to schools. Equally

important, this leader should have the vision and personality to mobilize schools, educators, citizens, and the private sector in a campaign to increase expectations, support and results for students in the middle grades. This will require a person with unusual energy and creativity who is a passionate advocate for developing and preparing all students to pursue post-secondary education.

Engaging middle grades schools and educators in an initiative to more effectively educate students will be challenging. While a state can provide direction and leadership, in the final analysis it is overburdened school administrators and teachers who will have to transform their practice. They will need not only inspiration but also substantive support. The best source for that support is the professional development infrastructure that currently exists in most states.

However, states will have to use that resource much more efficiently than is now the case. For example, many states require educators to participate in a certain number of hours of professional development to maintain their certification. There is no correlation between accumulating these hours and effective pedagogy, and states lack evidence that as a result of satisfying this professional development requirement teachers improve their performance or that of their students. In addition, though there are many types of professional development that occur under the auspices of many different education programs, few states understand either the total amount of state, local, and federal funds used for professional development or their impact on teacher performance. More intensive attention to the middle grades should not occur in a vacuum, isolated from discrete initiatives that may impact educators at that level but may not function under a “middle grades” label.

Increasing the achievement of middle grades students will require new learning and new practices by educators, and the only way to accomplish that is through more targeted, intensive, and sustained professional development. This will not occur unless states critically review their current professional development infrastructure and, if warranted, reform it.

When discussing how to raise the performance levels of all students in the middle grades and significantly increase their academic achievement, it is tempting to look for a single intervention that will leverage the desired results. It's not so much a matter of waiting for Superman as it is seeking the silver bullet. But school reform experience and research has demonstrated that there is no silver bullet, no one intervention that will spur a school to high performance. This is especially true for the middle grades.

There are, however, some actions, processes, and interventions which, when implemented skillfully, coherently, and with fidelity, can yield higher achievement. The public education community has more knowledge than ever before about how to organize and operate highly effective middle grades schools. There is unlimited potential for states to put this knowledge to work by providing leadership, facilitation, and support for schools and educators that must change for their students to achieve better educational and life outcomes.

Thank you.

## Selected Resources on Academic Achievement and the Middle Grades

***Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better –  
A Large-Scale Study of Middle Grades Practices and Student Outcomes*** (2010)

EdSource

<http://www.edsource.org/middle-grades-summary.html>

“What differentiates the higher-performing schools most from the lower-performing schools is a shared district and school-wide culture that

- places its primary focus on improvements in academic outcomes for all students, from the lowest performing to the highest;
- designs its instructional program to prepare all students for a rigorous high school education.

This focus is reflected in how district and school educators set measurable goals for improvement, communicate with students and families about the relationship of middle grades achievement to future goals, and make improved student outcomes a part of educator performance evaluations. It is also reflected in the intensity and coherence with which the educators align school curricula, assessments, and instruction to the state’s academic standards; how assessment data are reviewed and analyzed to improve instruction and learning; and how both required and voluntary academic interventions are implemented to proactively keep students on track. This study did not find a consistent or strong association between student outcomes on standards-based tests and school grade configuration or organizational models of teachers and instruction.”

### ***Schools To Watch: A School Self-Study and Rating Rubric***

National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform

<http://schoolstowatch.org/portals/2/STWDocs/STWRubric.pdf>

“This rubric is a continuing-improvement tool as well as a mandatory self-rating for schools interested in applying for a state Schools To Watch designation...[19 states currently participate in the Schools to Watch program; 242 schools currently have the STW designation, indicating they have met rigorous criteria validated by on-site reviews.] The rubric is divided into four sections: Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and Organizational Support and Processes. Under each section there are general criteria followed by concrete, detailed, expected examples of excellence.”

***Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path: A Policy and Practice Brief*** (2009)

Johns Hopkins University, Philadelphia Education Fund, and The National Middle School Association

[http://programs.ccsso.org/projects/Membership\\_Meetings/APF/documents/Policy\\_Brief\\_Balfanz.pdf](http://programs.ccsso.org/projects/Membership_Meetings/APF/documents/Policy_Brief_Balfanz.pdf)

“As our research, experience, and the work of many others have shown, particularly in high-poverty environments, a student’s middle grades experience is critical to his or her life’s chances. It is during the middle grades that students either launch toward achievement and attainment, or slide off track and placed on a path of frustration, failure, and, ultimately, early exit from the only secure path to adult success. This essential path is leaving high school prepared for post-secondary education and career training.”

***The Middle Grades: Putting All Students on Track for College*** (2003)

Pacific Resources for Education and Learning

[www.prel.org/media/139979/81\\_middle-grades.pdf](http://www.prel.org/media/139979/81_middle-grades.pdf)

***Middle Grades: 15 Actions Your State Can Take to Maximize Young Adolescents’ Readiness for Grade 9 – and College and Careers*** (2009)

Education Commission of the States

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/81/38/8138.pdf>

***Assessing the Impact of Standards-based Middle School Mathematics Curricula on Student Achievement and the Classroom Learning Environment*** (2006)

National Center for Education Research, Institute of Education Sciences,

U.S. Department of Education

[www.mathcurriculumcenter.org/PDFS/MS2\\_report.pdf](http://www.mathcurriculumcenter.org/PDFS/MS2_report.pdf)

“Students using National Science Foundation mathematics curriculum and experiencing a high ‘fidelity of implementation’ together with a Standards-Based Learning Environment had significantly higher performance than students in all other groups.”

***Effects on Middle Grades’ Mathematics Achievement of Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) and New K-8 Schools*** (2006)

Paper presented at a meeting of the American Education Research Association

[www.csos.jhu.edu/new/AERA\\_2006.pdf](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/new/AERA_2006.pdf)

“...providing more access to a K-8 structure for students who would ordinarily have attended large middle schools could be a promising development. Our analyses show the importance of attending the same school over the middle grades, and the absence of a transition year associated with attendance at middle school after elementary school may help to explain the higher achievement of students in some of the new K-8

schools (even though these schools, like the middle schools, had significantly higher numbers of non-certified teachers than the established K-8 schools). The simple fact of significantly fewer students in grades 6 through 8 at these new K-8s (compared with middle schools) may reduce the middle school behavioral “chaos” factor so dramatically that it is possible for more learning to occur in these schools, and more individual attention can be paid to students struggling to master academic subject matter. Preliminary analyses indicate that the incidence of poor behavior grades is lower at new K8s than at middle schools (Balfanz & Katz, 2005), and that controlling for grade size reduces the impact of the K-8 effect (indicating it is a probable component of that effect) (Byrnes, 2005). But conversion to K-8 will require additional leadership qualities on the part of the elementary principals involved, who will have a steep learning curve to assure instructional leadership for higher level academic content and adolescent student needs not previously part of their responsibility. Recruiting teachers with sufficient content knowledge, under the new NCLB requirements, and assuring adequate professional development opportunities for these teachers who do not have the same type of “team” environment possible in the middle school context, is another challenge for these new K-8s.”

***Factors Influencing Middle Grades Students’ Algebra Learning: Multiple Research Perspectives*** (2009)

Paper presented at a meeting of the American Education Research Association  
[www.project2061.org/publications/articles/IERI/algebralearning.pdf](http://www.project2061.org/publications/articles/IERI/algebralearning.pdf)

“The finding that the amount of time spent on professional development was not a significant predictor of student learning is not greatly surprising, given the limited amount of average time spent per teacher, and the concentration of the activity in the summer. The first year of professional development consisted of only one or two days, and thus was considered ‘baseline.’ The other two years consisted of five to seven days, again in the summer. As Desimone (2009) has pointed out, other studies provide evidence that professional development is most effective when activities are spread over a semester, or when there is follow - up during the year following intensive summer work, and also when the contact time is at least 20 hours.”

***Standards-Based Mathematics Curricula and Middle-Grades’ Students Performance on Standardized Achievement Tests*** (2008)

Journal for Research in Mathematics Education  
[www.math.uic.edu/~martinez/MESG2.pdf](http://www.math.uic.edu/~martinez/MESG2.pdf)

***Effects of a Science Intervention Program on Middle-Grade Student Achievement and Attitudes*** (2010)

[Journal:] School Science and Mathematics

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1949-8594.2000.tb17263.x/abstract>

***Inquiry-Based Science in the Middle Grades: Assessment of Learning in Urban Systemic Reform*** (2004)

Journal of Research in Science Teaching

[www.its-about-time.com/htmls/pbis/letuspaper.pdf](http://www.its-about-time.com/htmls/pbis/letuspaper.pdf)

“...our findings show that reform programs that address the range of elements needed for coherence can succeed in urban settings. A combination of carefully designed curriculum materials, learning technologies that are embedded in the materials and serve the needs of learners, high quality professional development, and policies that support reform are necessary.”

***Transition Strategies and Activities for the Middle Grades*** (2009)

Southeast Comprehensive Center at SEDL

[http://secc.sedl.org/orc/rr/secc\\_rr\\_00095.pdf](http://secc.sedl.org/orc/rr/secc_rr_00095.pdf)

***Social Support, Academic Press, and Student Achievement: A View from the Middle Grades in Chicago*** (1999)

Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago

[www.ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/p0e01.pdf](http://www.ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/p0e01.pdf)

“Our findings suggest that when school systems seek to improve student achievement by raising standards and expectations for learning and by creating high stakes for academic performance, they should not ignore the social support that may be necessary for students to succeed. For students who may receive little support from home, peers, and community, it becomes even more important that principals and teachers create school and classroom environments that provide personal support for learning.”

***Promoting Early Adolescents' Achievement and Peer Relationships: The Effects of Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Goal Structures*** (2008)

Psychological Bulletin of the American Psychological Association

<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/bul-1342223.pdf>

“...results indicate that higher achievement and more positive peer relationships were associated with cooperative rather than competitive or individualistic goal structures. Also as predicted, results show that cooperative goal structures were associated with a positive relation between achievement and positive peer relationships...”