



# Making Middle Grades a National Priority

— The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform

There are approximately 14 million middle-grades students in U.S. public schools. While there have been some gains in their performance over the last decade, they still fare poorly on national and statewide assessments.

## *The Facts Tell a Troubling Story*

- Less than one third of America's eighth graders can read and write with proficiency according to the most recent data available (NCES, 2004).
- Math proficiency is even more troubling. According to the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 29 percent of eighth graders can perform at the proficient level, and nearly a third score below basic.
- Only a fraction of middle-grades students have teachers who are adequately trained to teach their subjects.
- Worst of all, the achievement gap among various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups continues (NCES, 2004).

## *The Success of NCLB Depends on the Middle Grades*

The success of the landmark *No Child Left Behind* Act rests largely on the shoulders of middle-grades students and their teachers. Of the 25 million students tested annually, 14 million (57 percent) represent young adolescents in grades 5–8. What's more, what they learn in the middle grades affects their chances of success in high school and beyond. Some students will develop the knowledge and skills needed for high school, college, and the world of work. Others will begin a downward spiral that may result in academic failure, risky behavior, or dropping out. Unless middle-grades students have access to rigorous courses and the supports they need, attempts to restructure our nation's high schools will likely fall short.

## *We Know What Works*

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, a unique alliance of organizations and individuals dedicated to improving the education of young adolescents, has created a vision of high-performing middle-grades schools based on the latest research evidence.

The Forum has also identified more than 50 Schools to Watch in 11 states that exemplify its vision. These schools exhibit three basic qualities:

- *Academic Excellence.* They provide every student with a rigorous curriculum that encourages critical thinking and problem solving.
- *Developmental Responsiveness.* They provide a safe, healthy and personalized learning environment, make sure the curriculum is engaging, provide students with many ways to learn, and engage parents and community members in their children's learning.
- *Social Equity.* They make sure that all students have access to high quality classes and the support they need to achieve at high levels.

Visit [www.schoolstowatch.org](http://www.schoolstowatch.org).

## Recommendations for Policy Making

- ✓ *Recognize and identify the middle grades within legislation and research.* Unless the middle grades are recognized as a unique developmental stage, efforts to improve middle-grades schools and enhance teacher quality will fall short. Policy makers may want to begin by renaming ESEA.
- ✓ *Provide a fair share of resources to the middle grades.* To sustain the gains made in the early grades and achieve the maximum benefits from high school reform, we must invest resources in the middle.
- ✓ *Establish a National Center for Middle-Grades Education.* Too often, administrators simply move students from one building to another—say from a 6–9 school to a K–8 school—without changing the quality of teaching and learning within the school. A National Center could provide much-needed research, develop and disseminate tools and materials, and provide technical assistance to enhance middle-grades education.
- ✓ *Advance adolescent literacy at the middle level.* Simply providing resources so that young children learn to read is not enough. Research suggests that, starting in fourth grade, students need a new set of skills—reading to learn. As the federal government increasingly focuses on adolescent literacy, we cannot ignore the middle grades, where many students still struggle with the basics of reading and comprehension.
- ✓ *Enhance administrator and teacher quality in the middle grades.* Both content knowledge and pedagogy are as important for middle-grades teachers, as they are for others. Understanding the unique needs of young adolescents and how to teach them effectively is also essential.
- ✓ *Expand successful federal programs that can help middle-grades education,* including CSR, Small Learning Communities, and Gear Up. These programs are extremely helpful in creating high-performing middle-grades schools and ensuring that students are prepared for high school.

## Conclusion

The benefits of providing more focused support to the middle grades go beyond improving the lives of individual students. They include a more productive workforce, enhanced tax revenues, and reduced spending on unemployment, criminal justice, and social welfare programs. Significant investment in education reform has been made in the elementary grades, and funds are going to reinvent our nation's high schools. We must now focus on students in the middle, if we want to maximize our investment in public education.



### The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform

The National Forum is dedicated to improving the education of young adolescents so that all students leave the middle grades prepared for success in high school and beyond. The National Forum provides in-depth information that policy makers need to make responsible decisions regarding the education of young adolescents. It employs the best research and proven results to influence and shape decision-making by the public and private sectors. For more information about middle-grades education, contact:

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