

**Improving the Quality of Literacy Education  
in New Jersey's Middle Grades  
Report of the NJ Task Force on Middle Grade Literacy Education**

**Executive Summary**

This report represents the work of the Middle Grade Literacy Task Force formed by Commissioner of Education, William L. Librera. It builds on the current momentum in early literacy education by framing the direction for a statewide initiative designed to improve literacy achievement in grades 4 – 8. The Task Force was created to:

- (1) initiate a statewide conversation about literacy education in grades 4-8, a serious area of educational concern throughout New Jersey and the nation;
- (2) produce a consensus document that provides background information to guide policy and practice along with specific recommendations for action;
- (3) improve the quality of literacy instruction in grades 4-8.

The report is divided into three parts. Part I, *Learning and Teaching in the Middle Grades: Issues and Concerns*, begins with research about learners and the challenges they face in the middle grades. *Learning in the Middle Grades*, offers background information on the nature of middle grade readers and writers, the literacy demands of the middle grades and the effects of home environment on student learning. This is followed by, *Teaching in the Middle Grades*, which includes salient research on the literacy achievement gap, English language learners, school structures, content area instruction, motivation and engagement, struggling and special needs learners, instructional technology and media resources, and assessment.

Part II, *Best Practices*, provides a set of research syntheses on effective practices in the middle grades that link back to the background information offered in Part I. Included are: *Behaviors and competencies of students*, which details the attributes that need to be cultivated to promote successful learning; *Instructional features*, which outlines what is known about successful classroom instruction; and *Features of the professional lives of teachers*, which describes key elements required for the ongoing professional development of teachers.

Part III, *Summary Statements and Recommendations for Action*, outlines recommendations based on the information provided in Parts I and II. The recommendations center on Implementing Effective Practices, Professional Development, Pre-service Teacher Education and Certification, and Assessment. Because the Task Force serves as advisory to the Commissioner, the recommendations are purposely cast to provide direction for policy and implementation at the State level. However, it is the intention of the Task Force that they be considered as recommendations for cooperative action at the State, district, and classroom levels.

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The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the Task Force.*

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# **Improving the Quality of Literacy Education in New Jersey's Middle Grades**

## **Report of the Task Force on Middle Grade Literacy Education**

### **Introduction**

The State of New Jersey has successfully implemented extensive educational reforms aimed at improving the quality of literacy instruction in its schools. Literacy initiatives include strengthening instruction in districts where overall performance is low (Abbott districts), establishment of literacy coaches to work in non-Abbott districts where particular schools are not meeting expectations, the Governor's statewide read-aloud programs, and increased support for teachers wishing to apply for certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The leadership for much of this work came about through the establishment of a statewide Early Literacy Task Force charged with the responsibility to: (1) carefully consider the literacy needs of New Jersey's young children; (2) explore the research literature regarding best practices for improved literacy instruction; and (3) develop a document that would bring these ideas together in the form of an action plan to improve the quality of early literacy instruction throughout the state. The success of this initiative, largely aimed at preventing reading failure and promoting skilled beginning reading, created the foundation for extending those efforts to levels of schooling beyond the primary grades.

This report represents the work of the Middle Grade Literacy Task Force formed by Commissioner of Education, William L. Librera. It builds on the current momentum in literacy education by framing the direction for a statewide initiative designed to improve literacy achievement in grades 4 – 8. Specifically, the Task Force was created to:

(1) initiate a statewide conversation about literacy education in grades 4-8, a serious area of educational concern throughout New Jersey and the nation;

(2) produce a consensus document that provides background information to guide policy and practice along with specific recommendations for action;

(3) improve the quality of literacy instruction in grades 4-8.

## **Part I: Learning and Teaching in the Middle Grades: Issues and Concerns**

### **Learning in the Middle Grades**

Today's successful middle grade learners read and write more than their counterparts at any other time in human history. As they move from primary to middle grade studies, these students encounter increasingly difficult and varied texts presented through a wide array of media. Not only are they required to use such texts to build and apply knowledge, they are expected to create similar texts as they learn and solve problems on their own and in collaboration with others. Later, as high school students and eventually as adults, they will need even more advanced levels of literacy to cope with a flood of information in every aspect of their lives. They will need literacy to be successful students, perform jobs, run households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. Providing effective literacy instruction is not simply an issue for the early years; it is a matter of high priority *throughout the grades* and *across the curriculum* in all subject areas.

### The Nature of Middle Grade Readers and Writers

By fourth grade most students have mastered the basic skills required to cope with relatively simple texts, such as narratives and uncomplicated informational books. Most can read and carry out simple directions contained in recipes and procedures for constructing models. They demonstrate increasing confidence as independent readers and writers, and as consumers and producers of written materials.

As fourth, fifth, and sixth graders progress through the grades, the variability among them seems to grow as well. Their behavior frequently ranges from childish to mature, both within a group of children and within an individual child. One very obvious way in which they vary is in their physical growth. It is common to find a group of seventh and eighth graders who vary in height from 6 to 8 inches and in weight as much as 40 to 60 pounds. This variety in physical growth is further compounded by a wide range of emotional maturity, intellectual ability, attentiveness, and interest (Irvin & Strauss, 2000).

## The Literacy Demands of the Middle Grades

During the intermediate grades, children encounter more abstract, complex, and unfamiliar content than in earlier grades. At the same time, high stakes tests are often implemented in these grades to hold teachers and children “accountable” for achievement and success (Alvermann, et al. 2002). Ivey (2002) reviewed the research on the literacy needs of middle grade and teen-aged learners. The research reveals inconsistencies between the literacy skills of these young learners and the literacy demands of the school:

(1) *A mismatch between instruction and students’ needs.* Typical requirements for middle grade and adolescent students seldom take into consideration the developmental and personal differences between students. Furthermore, students are expected to read increasingly complex materials without instruction on strategic reading. Struggling readers in particular feel they will never improve as readers in middle-level classrooms.

(2) *School literacy versus out-of-school literacy.* Students find it difficult to reconcile school literacy with the reading and writing they engage in outside of school. Students may fail the standardized literacy curriculum, yet demonstrate proficiency outside the classroom environment. Even successful readers may perceive different reasons for reading and writing in school and out of school. For instance, they may read and write simply to complete school assignments, whereas outside of school they read and write to communicate, create, and participate.

(3) *Teaching content versus teaching content literacy.* Students express dissatisfaction with the content they are required to study in school and with the absence of good reading experiences within content-area classes. For example, sixth-grade students report that they value time just to read, as well as listen to teacher read-alouds, because both practices allow them to think through texts.

### Parental Involvement and Home Environmen

Connections between home and school are generally discussed in terms of *parental involvement* and *home environment*. A research review for the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) by Marzano (2000) discusses both.

Parental involvement can be described as the degree of mutual cooperation and responsibility shared by home and school on behalf of children. It includes such things as (1) good written information exchange between school and parents; (2) parental involvement in policy and curricular decisions, and (3) easy access for parents to administrators and teachers. Unfortunately, the research on school effectiveness yields little definitive data on this topic. The degree of home-school cooperation is likely to be an important determinant of school achievement. However, this “obvious” possibility has received little research attention at the middle grade level. Whether parent-school communication differs in “more” and “less” effective schools is also unclear according to Good and Brophy’s study (as cited in Marzano, 2000). However, Juvonen, Kagonoff, Augustine, and Constant (2004) report that schools’ efforts to facilitate parental involvement typically declined between the elementary and middle school years and that fewer middle schools than elementary schools report offering services to support parental involvement, such as providing child care.

Home environment focuses solely on the home, the overall atmosphere and the nature of support extended to the child. The effect of home environment has received some attention in the literature, often as a factor in the broad category of socioeconomic status. White (as cited in Marzano, 2000) did a secondary analysis of the strong relationship between SES and achievement and concluded that the high correlations do not paint a clear picture. White analyzed the effects of various aspects of SES on achievement, including: income, education, occupation, home atmosphere, and so on. The measure of home atmosphere correlated much higher with academic achievement than did any single or combined group of the traditional indicators of SES, indicating that home environment may play a large role in the strong relationship between SES and



student achievement so prevalent in the literature. This suggests that interventions should be designed and implemented that provide parents at various SES levels with information and resources to establish a home environment that can positively effect students' academic achievement.

### **Teaching in the Middle Grades**

Many middle school advocates believe that improving education for middle grade students hinges on improving the competence of teachers. Teacher capacity can be improved through teacher preparation and professional development. Such ongoing preparation must take into account the many issues and challenges facing these teachers discussed below. In addition to the research cited below, an overall view of many of these topics can be found in a research review by the RAND Corporation (Juvonen, et al. 2004).

### The Literacy Achievement Gap

Strickland and Alvermann (2004) reviewed the literature on issues related to the achievement gap. Issues regarding the literacy demands of the middle grades are compounded when the students come from low income and minority homes. Specifically, these issues become demonstrably acute when students are members of families that are poor and African American or Hispanic. Such students are likely to attend schools with high mobility rates, inadequate resources and facilities, and large numbers of children with challenging learning needs. Even when their teachers try hard to make the best of the challenges before them, Knapp (1995) suggests that “many wonder why it seems so hard to engage and maintain children’s attention to learning tasks, communicate what often appears to be common sense, and show demonstrable achievement gains on conventional measures of learning” (p. 1). On the other hand, Knapp also offers what is likely to be the thoughts and feelings of many of the students these teachers are trying to reach: “From their point of view, it is not always obvious what they have to gain from being in school or from going along with what schools ask of them” (p.1).

Despite efforts by educators and policymakers during the last several decades, achievement gaps between certain groups of students stubbornly persist. Surveys of student achievement by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (2000)

between 1973-1999 showed a persistent although slightly narrowing gap between White and Black students. The score gap between White and Black fourth-graders was smaller in 2002 than in 1994 and the gap between White and Hispanic fourth-graders narrowed between 2000 and 2002 but neither was found to differ significantly from 1992. At grades 8 and 12, no significant change in either gap was seen across the assessment years. It is important to note that overall NAEP results for reading in 2002 were not encouraging. The fourth-grade average score in 2002 was higher than in 1994, 1998, and 2000, but was not found to be significantly different from 1992.

Similar trends are evident in the state of New Jersey. Results from the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) from 2000-2002 indicate consistent differences in partially proficient, proficient, and advanced proficient between District Factor Groups (DFG's) and race/ethnicity. Moreover, achievement differences between special needs districts and non-special needs districts show similar trends on the 2002 GEPA. A 35-percentage point difference exists in the numbers of total students scoring *proficient* and *advanced proficient* in Language Arts Literacy in 2002. The District Factor Group is an indicator of the socioeconomic status of citizens in each district and has been useful for the comparative reporting of test results from New Jersey's statewide testing programs.

In 2001, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the No Child Left Behind Act, brought greater attention to this problem by requiring individual states, districts, and schools accountable for eliminating the achievement gap by the year 2014. States and districts are required to assess all students annually from grades 3-8 and disaggregate the results to show adequate yearly progress for their total student population as well as for different demographic groups. Achievement disparities between DFG and race/ethnic groups occur annually from 2000-2003 on fourth grade assessments in language arts literacy (Elementary School Proficiency Assessment-ESPA, and the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge-NJASK4 for 2003). Differences in *proficient/advanced proficient* scores in ESPA Language Arts Literacy for Black and White Students from 2000-2003 vary from 25 percentage points to over 30 percentage points each year.

Although a great deal of serious attention has been given to this problem, it is safe to say that, as an educational community, we are far from final answers. The emerging

concerns faced by educators and policy makers are extremely complex. Contributing factors rarely stand alone. More often, they are interactive and interdependent and include issues of socioeconomic status, home and linguistic background, and quality of instruction.

### English Language Learners

The ranks of children who need extra help learning English have burgeoned in recent decades. Almost 4 million public school children – nearly one in 12 – received special assistance to learn in English in 2001-2002, according to the U.S. Department of Education Center for Education Statistics (2002). In New Jersey, the percentage of non-native English speakers has increased over the years, from 16.8% in 1998 to 20% in 2003. The actual population of non-native English speakers in 2003 was 276,031. This includes all school-age children, including those in preschool. Approximately 63,000 English language learners, who constitute 4.6% of the state’s total student population, received services in English language acquisition in 2003. This translates into 1 in every 20 students who require additional assistance in New Jersey schools.

With skilled explicit instruction, many children who start school speaking little or no English can gain word reading and spelling skills equal to those of native speakers in two years. However, developing the vocabulary and comprehension skills needed to understand the meaning of texts is much harder and takes longer. Most English language learners lag well behind [native English speaking] classmates in the oral language skills necessary for success in reading and in higher academic achievement. It takes at least several years to acquire the skills necessary to speak with confidence and comprehension in the classroom on academic subjects. This higher-level competence is sometimes called “academic English” and is directly connected to reading comprehension. Academic English includes the ability to read, write, and engage in substantive conversations about math, science, history, and other school subjects (American Education Research Association, Winter 2004). Suggestions for policymakers include: (1) provide extra time and instruction in literacy; (2) assign the best teachers; (3) use proven techniques; (4) provide lots of practice reading and frequent assessments to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses; (5) provide structured academic conversation, built around books and other subject matter activities to build vocabulary and comprehension; (6) provide intensive,

high-quality instruction to help students master vocabulary, comprehension, and oral language skills to make them fully fluent in speaking, reading, and writing English.

### School Structures

School organizational structures can influence the quality of the instruction students receive. Research on school size and tracking in the middle grades has important implications for instruction.

*School size and nature of instruction.* Eccles and colleagues (1993) reported multiple differences between middle schools and elementary schools. Middle schools are typically larger, less personal, and more formal than elementary schools. Middle grade teachers are often subject-matter specialists and typically instruct a much larger number of students than do elementary teachers in self-contained classrooms, making it less likely that they will come to know students well. Middle grade school classrooms as compared to elementary school classrooms are characterized by greater emphasis on teacher control and discipline, less personal and positive teacher student relationship, and few opportunities for student decision-making, choice, and self-management. The shift to traditional middle grade schools is associated with an increase in practices such as whole class task organization, and public evaluation of the correctness of work. There are also increases in between-classroom ability grouping (p. 558-559)

*Tracking.* Gamoran (National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement, Spring 2003) and colleagues examined two large data sets: a National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) that tracked reading achievement for a representative sample of students from 1988-1992, and a CELA study of more than 7264 middle and high school English classes in 5 states during the 1999-2000 academic school year. They sought to determine the extent to which differences within and between schools contribute to the literacy achievement gap. They found that differences within schools (tracking) accounted for more of the achievement gap than differences between schools. Given the generally close correlation between student track assignments and SES, careful consideration was given to both student prior achievement and SES in conducting his analyses. These researchers concluded that although not all of the unequal literacy levels observed can be attributed to schooling, differences in track assignments and instruction contribute significantly to the literacy achievement gap in middle and

high schools. Three elements of quality instruction seemed to be important: (1) literacy gains are greater in classrooms where students engage in dialogue with their teacher and each other as they build deeper and broader understandings; (2) the dialogue and activities are designed to support and connect to students developing interests and understandings; (3) academic standards are high.

Because track assignments are usually determined by students' prior achievement and since prior achievement is usually associated with SES, students of high SES are usually over-represented in the higher tracks, and students of lower SES in the lower tracks. And since instruction differs between the tracks in ways that privilege the higher track students, the overall effect is to widen the achievement gap between high and low performing students over time.

#### Content Area Instruction

As children reach the upper-elementary and middle grades, literacy demands in the various subject areas become increasingly more sophisticated and frequent because teachers are expected to cover extensive content (Katims & Harmon, 2000). Much has been written about the "inconsiderate" nature of texts at this level that make them difficult to comprehend. In addition, teacher's manuals frequently lack the instructional support teachers need to help students access and interpret information. Nevertheless, textbook-centered approaches to content area instruction remain prevalent in the middle grades. These include silent and oral readings by students, lectures and discussions led by the teacher, the use of worksheets, and the assignment of end-of-unit questions as homework. This kind of instruction, offered without attention to the literacy tasks involved, yields less than desirable results for those who are already struggling with less challenging reading.

#### Motivation/Engagement

There is a widely reported trend indicating that middle school students are less intrinsically motivated for reading than elementary students. Early documentation of this trend was provided by Gottfried (1985) who showed that as students moved from Grade 4 to Grade 7 their intrinsic motivation for reading declined. Ironically, at the same time that intrinsic motivation decreases during the transition from elementary to middle school, extrinsic motivation for reading increases. In middle school, students are more oriented to

grades, competition, and their own competence than they were as early elementary students. These processes are stronger for lower achievers. That is, students who are struggling lose their intrinsic motivation for reading more rapidly than students who believe they are competent readers (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992). Conversely, students who believe they are competent in school reading as they enter middle school are likely to decline less in intrinsic motivation. Although all students decline in motivation as they enter middle school, competent readers maintain a balance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, whereas less competent readers drop precipitously in intrinsic motivation and become oriented only to extrinsic factors such as grades and recognition. Middle grade learners who are struggling readers are often disengaged from reading altogether. They are unlikely to read for their own enjoyment, to seek satisfaction of their curiosity through books, to enjoy the challenge of a complex plot, or seek knowledge in books (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

#### Struggling Learners/Special Needs

According to Alvermann (2002), the struggling reader label is a contested term and one that means different things to different people. It is sometimes used to refer to youth with clinically diagnosed reading disabilities as well as to those who are English language learners (ELLs), “at risk,” underachieving, unmotivated, disenchanting, or generally unsuccessful in school literary tasks that involve print-based texts. As such, these labels tell very little about the reader, though they do suggest ways of thinking about culture and adolescents, who for whatever reason are thought to be achieving below their “full potential” as readers (p.195). To be sure, the concerns described elsewhere under other topics discussed in this document are exacerbated when students struggle with reading and writing.

Some researchers, interested in adolescent learners who struggle, have offered new frameworks through which to examine literacy instruction. One such framework is the notion of re/mediating struggling readers’ relationships with texts, whether these are traditional print texts or those of new communications media (Luke & Elkins, 2000). Literacy instruction would not only focus on methods to fix deficits or to remediate in the ways consistently used by special educators and reading specialists. Rather, literacy education would involve staging the conditions for students to rethink and reenact their

social and semiotic relations. Attention would be given to change the ecology of the learning environment in ways that take advantage of what is known about how middle grade students learn and how to engage and motivate them.

### Instructional Technology and Media Resources

The importance of computer technology and library media resources is particularly relevant to middle grade learners. Technology has held promise for a range of education needs over the years. Although many of these needs were never matched well to the technological tools available, the use of multimedia resources provide interest and motivation to this population. In their review of research on computer technology in the classroom, Kim and Kamil (2002) underscore some of the important instructional issues and considerations involved in the application of computer technology. Research suggests that technology can be used as a tool to facilitate reading comprehension and to support a wide range of literacy tasks from word processing to vocabulary instruction. Technology can effectively provide additional support for special populations, including readers with learning difficulties and nonnative English learners. However, Kim and Kamil caution that providing access to technology is simply not enough. Processing multimedia information and learning with computers entail special considerations for success. Specific instruction and prompting to help students attend to salient information and use assistive tools is required to help students process multimedia information effectively.

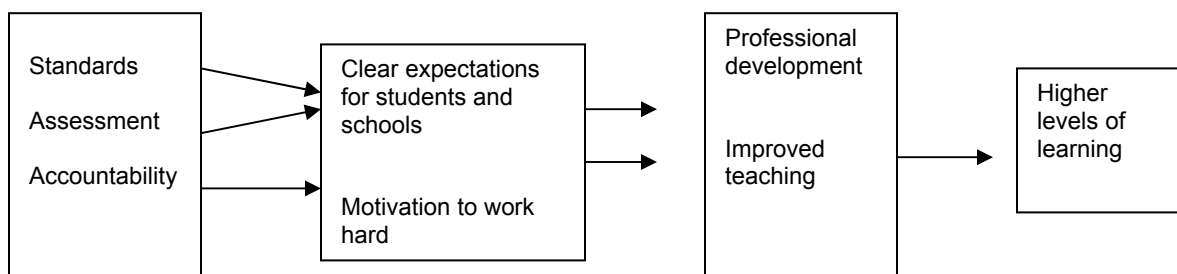
The widespread use of technology tools is still somewhat crude and in need of further development and research in order to refine who is best served by the wide range of technological tools available. Placing computers in every classroom does not necessarily improve students' academic success. In the same way we must be wary of the expectation that struggling readers will automatically benefit from computer work. As with all tools, it is a combination of the quality of the tool, its appropriate matching to the instructional task, and adequate professional development for teachers that will make all the difference (Kamil, 2003).

The library media center is one of the places where students learn and apply multimedia resources. A study of 13,000 students in grades 3-12 (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2003) supports a variety of ways in which school libraries benefit children. The study

looked at 39 effective school libraries across Ohio in order to understand how students benefit from school libraries and to quantify the school library's relationship to student learning. The top five (student ratings of 94% or higher) ways that students report school libraries help them are: (1) to find and use information; (2) to work out the questions for the topics they are working on; (3) to find different sources of information such as books, magazines, CDs, websites, and videos; (4) to use computers to find information inside and outside of the school library; and (5) to learn more facts about their topics. This study and previous research (Lance, Welborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993) demonstrate that the size and quality of a library media center's staff and collection was the best school predictor of academic achievement. Effective school libraries, led by credentialed school librarians who have clearly defined roles in information-centered pedagogy, play a critical role in facilitating student learning for building knowledge. Moreover, these factors plus a strong computer network lead to higher student achievement, regardless of social and economic factors in a community.

### Assessment

In 1999, the National Research Council produced the report, *Testing, Teaching and Learning*. Produced by NRC's Committee on Title I Testing and Assessment, the report was designed to serve as a guide for states and school districts. The research and recommendations were meant to guide continuing decisions in the development and improvement of new systems of assessment and accountability under Title I. These guidelines continue to provide a useful basis for making decisions, since they speak to No Child Left Behind, the current Title I legislation. The committee introduced the *expanded model* shown below.



*Expanded model of the theory of action of standards-based reform: An education improvement system.*



The above model is grounded in a theory of action that suggests that everyone—students, parents, teachers, principals, district administrators, state officials, and policy makers at the district, state, and federal levels—know what is expected what they will be measured on and what the results imply for what they should do next. Those directly responsible for raising student performance—teachers and schools—have access to high quality information about performance and about the effects of their instructional practices (p. 20).

The committee noted that not all assessments are equally capable of providing useful information. The most informative measures are ones that respond to instructional changes aimed at teaching toward the standards. Such measures inform students, teachers, and parents about the effects of instruction and suggest directions for improvement. The array of assessments would include those that accurately and validly measure the achievement of students with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency (p.21).

## **Part II: Best Practices**

Research on middle grade literacy and reports of large-scale national assessments of reading progress demonstrate the importance of providing literacy instruction for students beyond the primary grades. Until recently, however, the literacy needs of older learners did not garner much attention. Efforts to improve urban education have helped to focus attention on best practices in literacy education at the middle grade levels. Our discussion of Best Practices is divided into three categories: (1) those that focus on the behaviors and competencies of students in literacy supportive classrooms (Alvermann, et al., 2002); (2) those found in schools and classrooms where students “beat the odds” (perform better than similar students in comparable schools) (Langer, 2000); and (3) those that characterize the professional lives of teachers in schools that “beat the odds” (Langer 1999).

### **Competencies of Students in Literacy Supportive Classrooms.**

Based on an exhaustive review of the research literature, Alvermann et al., (2002) offer eight statements or principles that describe the behaviors and competencies that intermediate and middle grade students exhibit in literacy-supportive classrooms. These students:

- (1) Engage in print and non print texts for a variety of purposes.
- (2) Generate and express rich understandings of ideas and concepts
- (3) Demonstrate enthusiasm for reading and learning

- (4) Assess their reading and learning competencies and direct their future growth
- (5) Participate in active learning environments that offer clear and facilitative literacy instruction
- (6) Connect reading with their life and their learning inside and outside of school
- (7) Develop critical perspectives toward what they read, view, and hear
- (8) Participate in respectful environments characterized by high expectations, trust, and care.

**Noteworthy Instructional Features in Schools that *Beat the Odds***

Langer and her colleagues investigated the characteristics of instruction that accompany student achievement in reading, writing, and English. The study focused on English language arts programs in schools trying to increase student performance, comparing those schools whose students perform higher than demographically comparable schools with schools whose scores are more typical. The study took place in four states and included 25 schools, 44 teachers, and 88 classes, studied over a 2-year period each.

Issue	Beating the Odds Schools and Teachers	Typical Schools and Teachers
<i>Approaches to skills instruction</i>	Systematic use of separated, simulated, and integrated skills instruction	Instruction dominated by one approach (which varies among schools and teachers)
<i>Test preparation</i>	Integrated into ongoing goals, curriculum, and regular lessons	Allocated to test prep: separated from ongoing goals, curriculum, and instruction
<i>Connecting learnings</i>	Overt connections made among knowledge, skills, and ideas across lessons, classes and grades, and across in-school and out-of-	Knowledge and skills within lessons, units, and curricula typically treated as discrete entities; connections left implicit

	school applications	even when they do occur
<i>Enabling strategies</i>	Overt teaching of strategies for planning, organizing, completing, and reflecting on content and activities	Teaching of content or skills without overt attention to strategies for thinking and doing
<i>Conceptions of learning</i>	When learning goal is met, teacher moves students beyond it to deeper understanding and generativity of ideas	When learning goal is met, teacher moves on to unrelated activity with different goals/content
<i>Classroom organization</i>	Students work together to develop depth and complexity of understanding in interaction with others	Students work alone, in groups, or with the teacher to get the work done, but do not engage in rich discussion of ideas

**Features of Excellence that Characterize the Professional Lives of Teachers in Schools that *Beat the Odds*.**

In addition to the characteristics of instruction in schools that beat the odds, Langer and her colleagues investigated the professional and classroom practices that lead to the development of high literacy. This research produced the following list of essential characteristics of teachers’ professional lives that accompanied student learning and achievement in English.

- 1) *Coordinating efforts to improve achievement.* Although the organizational hierarchies differed from locality to locality, there was always a coordinated effort by teachers and administrators to identify needs, investigate and then develop strategies for improvement, and set into motion a variety of ways to help teachers gain the knowledge to effectively incorporate the new practices into their daily routines.
- 2) *Fostering teacher participation in professional communities.* All of the teachers in the successful programs were members of several ongoing professional communities (e.g.,

teams and support groups, curriculum development groups, local reading groups, English and reading affiliates, university-school collaborations).

3) *Creating activities that provide teachers with agency.* Teachers in successful schools felt they could shape the work they do. They develop curriculum solve problems, make decisions, and set directions in curriculum and instruction in their department, school, or district, and pass this sense of purposeful action on to their students.

4) *Valuing commitment to professionalism.* Teachers in successful programs possess a sense of professional identity. They are proud to be educators, think of themselves as professionals, and carry their professional selves with them wherever they go.

5) *Engendering caring attitudes.* A cross-cutting characteristic of these exemplary programs is that they share an ethos of caring (Noddings, 1984). Teachers care about their students and about the people with whom they work.

6) *Fostering respect for learning.* Teachers in successful schools were learners themselves, in their personal as well as professional lives. The teachers are exposed to a plethora of opportunities to keep in touch with the latest thinking in their field. However, it is the range of opportunities and the manner in which teachers are invited to intellectually engage with and respond to the ideas more than any one kind of learning activity that seemed to be important.

## Part III: Summary Statements and Recommendations

### **Implementing Effective Practices**

Teachers and administrators in high achieving schools consistently demonstrate an understanding that students in the middle grades (4-8) must be proficient readers and writers in the English language arts and across the content areas. Attention to special populations and those not experiencing success involves providing adequate resources, explicit teaching of literacy strategies and opportunities to work with challenging materials in settings where students are motivated and expected to achieve.

1. Establish an office of Middle Grade Literacy at the State Level, which would foster effective practices, support and coordinate statewide professional development, inform pre-service and certification issues, and coordinate issues related to assessment.
2. Establish district and school Academic Achievement Councils, composed of middle grade educators (with representatives from earlier and later grades) to review New Jersey State test results and recommend instructional practices, and plan professional development activities to improve student performance.
3. Recommend that all districts publish school-based data that document and interpret middle grade performance on each New Jersey State test by content area (example: NJASK 3 and 4 literacy and math scores; GEPA literacy and math scores) in order to influence the ongoing and effective use of data that inform policy and instructional practice and keep stakeholders abreast of student progress at the school and district levels.

4. Institute a process to facilitate district use of multi-year curriculum planning guides to be used by districts for projecting, tracking, and reviewing curriculum needs and resources to insure appropriate alignment to local and state standards.
5. Require districts to provide adequate resources for middle grade students, including classroom and school library media resources and professionally trained library media specialists, in order to support classroom instruction and professional development in literacy for *all* teachers that makes use of the expertise of reading specialists and other language arts literacy educators.
6. Fund research to enlist teachers and other educators as researchers who will develop additional best practice programs to address the unique needs of the middle grade populations in their schools.
7. Highlight, demonstrate, and promote through meaningful public relations campaigns the importance of English Language Arts/ Literacy at the middle school level.

### **Professional Development**

High quality professional development opportunities are required to keep teachers informed and to act as a catalyst to greater cooperation across disciplines at the middle grade levels. Professional development must be of high quality, conducted on an ongoing basis, involve faculty and staff as members of instructional teams, and focus on areas of need identified by the participants.

1. Provide Literacy Coaches with special expertise in reading/English language arts to build instructional support for middle grade teachers. Literacy coaches would work on an ongoing basis with language arts teachers and content area specialists on issues related to improving school achievement.
2. Require professional development experiences for all middle grade teachers, regardless of discipline. Recommend to districts that 50 of the required 100 hours of professional development be devoted to language arts.
3. Provide professional development for administrators (who are responsible for middle grades) that is ongoing and linked to the professional development opportunities offered teachers. Encourage teams of administrators and teachers to participate in ongoing professional development.

4. Facilitate coordination of and support for professional development through the use of online activities such as the New Jersey Department of Education Professional Education Port (NJPEP). Act as a clearinghouse for informing districts about the possibilities for online professional development.

5. Recommend content priority for professional development of middle grade teachers. This may include attention to strategies for literacy instruction relative to: English Language Learners, multilevel instruction, gender issues, making use of assessment to guide instruction, improving reading comprehension, differentiated instruction, etc.

### **Pre-service Teacher Education and Certification Programs**

Teacher quality is one of the most critical factors affecting student achievement. Teachers with strong preparation in the subject matter they teach are better able to help their students meet the curriculum and academic standards successfully. However, many English language arts teachers at the middle grade level do not feel prepared to implement curriculum, help students reach performance standards, or address the diverse student population they face in their classrooms. Teachers whose primary area of responsibility is in the content areas often feel ill-equipped to deal with the literacy demands required of students if they are to master the content under study. New requirements for middle grade teachers (grades 6-8) require a K-5 elementary certificate, passage of the Praxis middle school content examination, a course in Adolescent Psychology, and 15 credits in a “content area.”

Pre-service teachers must be nurtured and supported. They must have a substantial amount of time throughout their preparation to work in classrooms alongside effective teachers to learn from observation and their own teaching. In addition, their coursework must include immersion in research-based literacy instruction to acquire the critical skills needed to teach students beyond the stages of early reading development.

1. Support the implementation of a rigorous and unified “theory into practice” program of student teaching at the middle grade levels with carefully selected cooperating teachers and supervisors, who are knowledgeable about the issues and concerns stressed in this document and who can successfully integrate literacy with the content areas.



2. Encourage the use of full-time literacy education faculty to teach methods courses to all pre-service students who wish to teach at the middle grade level.
3. Support a recommendation that would require all those teaching at middle grade levels to have a concentration of coursework in reading/English language arts.
4. Give special attention to helping students assess, and support students who are not performing well.

### **Assessment**

Assessment data, both formative and summative, should be used to inform decisions about resources, programs, and practices. At the classroom level, teachers may analyze individual assessment results in terms of how well a student is performing in relation to previous assessments, how well he or she is performing in relationship to other students, and how well the group is performing overall and on specific tasks. The same rationale can be used to analyze assessment performance of schools and districts with similar populations. Used wisely by individuals who understand the nature of the tasks involved, assessment can be a critical tool for instruction.

1. Provide professional development that focuses on teachers' abilities to collect and analyze multiple sources of data from their own classrooms in order to make instructional decisions for individuals and for the group.
2. Identify and recommend appropriate assessment procedures for assessing literacy proficiency within specific areas of study (e.g. science, history, etc.).
3. Promote greater and more effective uses of state assessments at the district and school levels to inform the local community and for use in planning resource allocations and priorities. Encourage differentiated use of data by teachers and administrators. Stress the need to make certain that standards of performance on all assessments are transparent to all involved.

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