



SREB

MAKING
MIDDLE GRADES
WORK

Making Middle Grades Work

An Enhanced Design to Prepare All Middle Grades Students for Success in High School

Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW) is a comprehensive school improvement design for the critical middle grades. It is the nation's first large-scale effort to engage state, district and school leaders in partnerships with teachers, students, parents and the community to raise student achievement in the middle grades. This effort-based initiative is founded on the conviction that most students can master academic studies at or above grade-level standards if schools create an environment that motivates them to make the effort to succeed. Such an environment includes the following conditions:

- Students are taught to at least grade-level standards in ways that enable them to see the usefulness of their studies.
- Teacher-advisers work with parents and students to set goals and select rigorous courses that prepare students for college-preparatory classes in high school.
- The school develops supportive relationships between students and adults. These relationships provide students with the extra help and support they need to meet challenging course standards and make successful transitions from elementary school to the middle grades and from the middle grades to high school.
- School leadership focuses on supporting what and how teachers teach by providing common planning time and professional development aligned with school improvement plans and the *MMGW* Key Practices.

In an era of rising workplace requirements, successfully completing high school is more important now than at any previous time. **Responsibility rests with middle grades schools to prepare students for rigorous high school studies that, in turn, prepare them for further studies and careers.** To help middle grades schools meet this challenge, *MMGW* has developed a framework of Goals, Key Practices and Key Conditions for accelerating learning and setting higher standards. The *MMGW* design recommends research-based practices for schools to improve academic and exploratory instruction that leads to increased student achievement.

MMGW Primary Mission and Goals

The primary mission of *MMGW* is to create a culture of high expectations and continuous improvement that prepares middle grades students for challenging high school studies. To be prepared for success in high school, middle grades students must be taught to grade-level standards, exert effort in the classroom and demonstrate that they can use what they have learned in a variety of contexts. The 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) eighth-grade assessment found that at least one-third of middle grades students are not prepared for challenging high school reading and mathematics studies — an indication that there is still a need for improvement in the nation's schools. The *MMGW* Goals for continuous improvement were established to meet this need.

- Increase to 85 percent the percentages of students who meet the *MMGW* performance goals in reading, mathematics and science on the Middle Grades Assessment (a NAEP-referenced exam).
- Increase the percentages of all students who perform at the Proficient level to at least 50 percent in reading, mathematics and science, as measured by the Middle Grades Assessment.

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- Increase annually the percentage of students entering high school prepared to succeed in college-preparatory courses.
- Increase to 90 percent the percentage of students who transition into grade nine and complete high school four years later.
- Reduce the failure rate in grade nine by ensuring middle grades students receive the preparation they need to succeed in rigorous ninth-grade courses such as Algebra I and college-preparatory English and science.
- Advance state and local policies and leadership initiatives that sustain a continuous school improvement effort.

MMGW reflects a belief that middle grades schools can achieve these goals if they base their efforts on a comprehensive improvement framework of Key Practices and Key Conditions.

MMGW Key Practices for Improving Student Achievement

School and classroom practices are more likely to impact student achievement if they are aligned to a framework of key practices and conditions that facilitate and encourage comprehensive school improvement. The *MMGW* Key Practices provide direction and meaning to comprehensive improvement for increased student achievement.

- **An academic core aligned to what students must know, understand and be able to do to succeed in college-preparatory English, mathematics, science and social studies courses in high school** — All students in the middle grades need an academic core curriculum that accelerates learning, is challenging and appeals to their interests.
 - In mathematics, all students complete Algebra I or demonstrate proficiency in pre-algebra and use algebra concepts to solve problems.
 - In science, all students use laboratory and technology experiences to learn fundamental concepts in the physical, life, and earth and space sciences.
 - Reading instruction is incorporated into all academic core curriculum courses through grade eight.
 - The language arts curriculum requires students to use language correctly and effectively; to find, organize and communicate information; to write a short paper weekly; and to write at least one major research paper in all classes.
 - The social studies curriculum engages students to learn about their heritage, government, world and economic principles through key issues of the past, present and future.
- **A belief that all students matter** — Each student needs to develop a relationship with an adult who takes an interest in his or her successful learning, goal setting, course selection, educational planning, progress and personal growth. This individual, typically a teacher-adviser, works with students and their parents through the middle grades within a structured guidance and advisement system. The guidance and advisement system ensures more students complete an accelerated program of study and more teachers understand the expectations for teaching all students to at least grade-level standards in core academic courses.
- **High expectations and a system of extra help and time** — Students learn in different ways and at different rates, so schools must invest time and provide the extra help that is needed to help most or all students achieve to at least grade-level standards. Effective middle grades schools provide a structured system of instruction and extra help that:
 - gives all students opportunities to practice habits of successful learning — effective study and literacy skills, time management and learning with others.
 - provides easy access to opportunities to meet and exceed course standards and advance with their peers.
 - defines what is required for A-level and B-level work.
 - supports teachers in forming nurturing relationships with students to improve students' academic work and achievement.

- **Classroom practices that engage all students** — Young adolescents need varied learning activities linked to challenging academic content and real-world applications. Integrating reading, writing and speaking as strategies for learning into all courses can more deeply engage students in all areas of the curriculum. Teachers of all subject areas can engage students in learning by having them regularly read books and articles, write, make presentations, and use high-level reasoning and thinking skills.
- **Teachers working together** — Schools should establish cross-disciplinary teams of teachers and provide them with time and support to work together to help students succeed in challenging academic and related arts studies. Middle grades teachers need time to work together to:
 - align core academic courses, instructional units, classroom assignments and assessments to high school readiness standards.
 - integrate mathematics and literacy concepts across the curriculum.
 - examine student work.
 - develop common assessments.
 - discuss students' strengths and challenges.
 - identify seventh- and eighth-graders needing accelerated instruction in mathematics, language arts and reading to be prepared for college-preparatory high school course work and implement strategies and programs that target their needs.
- **Support from parents** — Parents must clearly understand and support higher standards for performance in the middle grades. School and teacher leaders can educate middle grades students and parents about the achievement level needed to prepare students for challenging high school studies. Teacher-advisers play a critical role in keeping parents informed by arranging multiple conferences among students, their parents and their teachers. These conferences provide an opportunity for students and parents to set goals that motivate students and enable them to see the relationships between their middle grades studies, high school studies and beyond. As a result of frequent conferences, families know what will be necessary to assist students in taking challenging courses. Additionally, the school and family can track the progress of students' preparation for high school.
- **Qualified teachers** — Middle grades teachers must know academic content and understand how to teach middle grades students effectively. Teachers of English/language arts, reading, mathematics, science and social studies should possess an in-depth knowledge of their content areas and teaching strategies that engage and challenge students. They need district support to acquire content expertise and access to professional development to become highly-qualified teachers who can teach all middle grades students well.
- **Use of data** — States, districts and schools must use data on student and school performance to review and revise school and classroom practices. State, end-of-course and end-of-year assessments provide student performance information that, when supplemented with other forms of school data, guides teachers and school leaders as they make important instructional decisions. A primary tool for assessing student achievement in the middle grades is the Middle Grades Assessment, which is referenced to NAEP proficiency standards in reading, mathematics and science and administered to eighth-graders. The Middle Grades Assessment also includes data from a survey of students, teachers and principals, allowing schools to link achievement to school and classroom practices.
- **Use of technology for learning** — Middle grades classrooms in all subject areas should view technology as a tool for learning. Schools can support teachers to plan units of instruction that allow students to conduct research, write papers, communicate globally, prepare presentations using electronic tools and resources, and explore the use of technology to address an array of contemporary problems.

- **Strong leadership** — District leadership should purposefully select, develop and support middle grades principals to become effective instructional leaders. Middle grades schools need principals who encourage teachers and participate with them in planning and implementing research-based improvements. Leadership must take an active role in aligning and benchmarking curricula to high school standards and providing high-quality professional development. The school district can support each school to establish a leadership team consisting of the principal, assistant principal and teacher leaders to lead focus teams and share in instructional decision-making. Principals have the responsibility of selecting teacher leaders who can work with the faculty to identify major instructional problems, take ownership of these problems, develop effective solutions and implement them in ways that make a difference.

MMGW Key Conditions for Accelerating Student Achievement

MMGW believes that everyone in the educational hierarchy — teachers, school leaders, district leaders, and local and state leaders — must work together to align policies, resources, initiatives and accountability efforts to support middle grades schools as they adopt and implement a comprehensive school improvement design.

A clear, functional mission statement defines the purpose of the middle grades school: to prepare students for rigorous, college-preparatory courses in high school. A basic set of conditions to guide the implementation of the *MMGW* school improvement framework includes the following:

- **Commitment** — State partners, the school board, district leaders and the community are committed to fully implementing the comprehensive *MMGW* improvement framework.
- **Planning for continuous improvement** — District and school leaders create an organizational structure and process that ensures continuous involvement with the faculty on what to teach; how to teach it; what students are expected to learn; how to assess what they have learned; and how district and school leaders support each other, the students, students' parents and the community.
- **Curriculum** — District leaders support and encourage a curriculum review that aligns all curricula to state, national and international standards. As a result, performance standards define the quantity and quality of work expected at each grade level throughout the system.
- **Support for professional development** — District and school leaders provide leadership and financial support for professional development directly connected to academic standards and student achievement. Professional development includes support for teachers as they develop the capacity to implement teaching practices.
- **Teacher preparation** — The local school board helps teachers without a major in their subject area upgrade their content knowledge through planned and approved learning experiences. The school board strives to hire new teachers with subject-area majors that match their teaching assignments.

Evidence Supporting the Making Middle Grades Work Design

To measure student achievement and the progress schools are making toward implementing the *MMGW* design, SREB conducts the Middle Grades Assessment, which ties student achievement to school and classroom practices. A 2008 study of the Middle Grades Assessment results found that those schools showing the greatest improvement in student achievement had more deeply implemented several school and classroom practices related to the *MMGW* Key Practices. The report, *Preparing Middle Grades Students for High School Success: A Comparative Study of Most- and Least-Improved Middle Grades Schools*, compared the school and classroom practices of 15 schools that demonstrated the most

improvement in student achievement with those of 15 schools that showed the least improvement. SREB found that most-improved schools had made more progress in:

- closing the achievement gap between groups of students.
- creating a culture of high expectations and providing students with the support they need to be successful.
- providing a rigorous curriculum that challenges and prepares students for college-preparatory high school courses.
- engaging students with quality instructional practices that emphasize key literacy, numeracy and science instructional practices and motivate students to make the effort to meet grade-level standards.
- providing quality guidance to students and preparing them with the necessary skills to succeed in high school, college and careers.
- adopting a school mission related to increased achievement for all students and creating a shared vision of continuous improvement among school leaders and faculty.

The results of this study indicate that, when implemented with fidelity, school improvement efforts related to the *MMGW* design will have a positive effect on student achievement and school culture.

Establishing Readiness for Success

The middle grades must provide students with exciting learning opportunities. Students need to see the connection between what they are learning in the middle grades and what they will learn in high school and beyond. They need to understand that the concepts and skills they gain in the middle grades will provide the foundation for their success in high school, future studies and careers.

Failure cannot be an option in the middle grades if more students are to be prepared for high school. Students and parents need to understand that teachers and school leaders expect students to complete assignments and perform at grade level or higher. Teachers need to work together to establish a common understanding of grade-level work. A-level work should be aligned to at least Proficient-level standards as defined by NAEP-referenced exams; B-level work represents mastery of essential grade-level standards and national standards that prepare students for challenging high school work; and C-level work represents student assignments and assessments that are approaching grade level. Anything below a C level indicates a need for reteaching.

Recommended Curriculum and Instruction

The centerpiece of *MMGW* is a challenging curriculum in the core academics — English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. School leaders need to align core academic courses to essential grade-level, state and national standards that prepare middle grades students for challenging high school course work.

To reach eighth-grade proficiency and readiness for college-preparatory courses, students need to gain the essential skills for each of the core subject areas.

In **English/language arts**, each student should:

- summarize, paraphrase and categorize information from a variety of nonfiction pieces.
- make inferences and predictions from what he or she reads.
- use context clues and word parts to determine what words and phrases mean.
- write pieces that address a variety of audiences for different purposes.
- revise and edit compositions to improve clarity and correctness.
- combine reading and writing skills to produce a research paper at least once a year.
- make oral presentations that fulfill specific purposes, some of which include technology.

- take notes effectively from what is read and listened to.
- write a major research paper (with footnotes and a bibliography) on a subject he or she chooses once a semester or once a year.
- complete a short writing assignment of one to three pages for a grade weekly.
- make an oral presentation each month or each semester.
- read, both in and out of school, the equivalent of 11 or more books of various types.

In **mathematics**, each student should:

- develop and analyze tables, charts and graphs in course work often.
- use a scientific calculator weekly.
- solve mathematics problems other than those in the textbook at least weekly.
- work with one or more students on a challenging mathematics assignment monthly or weekly.
- explain to the class — both orally and in writing — how he or she solved a mathematics problem monthly or weekly.
- explain different ways to solve mathematics problems monthly or weekly.
- use mathematics skills to solve problems in other classes monthly or weekly.

MMGW Supports Key National Mathematics Advisory Panel Recommendations

Charged with using the best available scientific research to advise improvements in the mathematics education of the nation's students, the National Mathematics Advisory Panel published curricular content and instructional recommendations for improving mathematics education. The following recommendations are supported by *MMGW*:

- *A focused, coherent progression of mathematics learning, with an emphasis on proficiency with key topics, should become the norm in elementary and middle grades mathematics curricula. MMGW prepares schools to use SREB's Getting Students Ready for Algebra I guide to focus on key mathematics topics in the middle grades.*
- *All school districts should ensure that all prepared students have access to an authentic algebra course — and should prepare more students than at present to enroll in such a course by grade eight. MMGW schools revise courses and prepare middle grades teachers to teach mathematics with the goal of most students enrolling in algebra by grade eight so students will have an opportunity to experience higher levels of mathematics needed for postsecondary studies and careers.*
- *To prepare students for algebra, the curriculum must simultaneously develop conceptual understanding, computational fluency and problem-solving skills. MMGW encourages teachers to plan units of study that incorporate a conceptual understanding of mathematical operations — using assignments that are problem- and project-based to help students understand the relevance of mathematics to other subject areas, habits of success and life skills.*
- *Teachers and other educational leaders should consistently help students and parents understand that an increased emphasis on the importance of effort is related to improved mathematics performance. Developing a culture of high expectations that provides extra help when students are challenged and communicating the belief that failure is not an option encourages students to make the effort to master challenging knowledge and skills.*

In **science**, each student should:

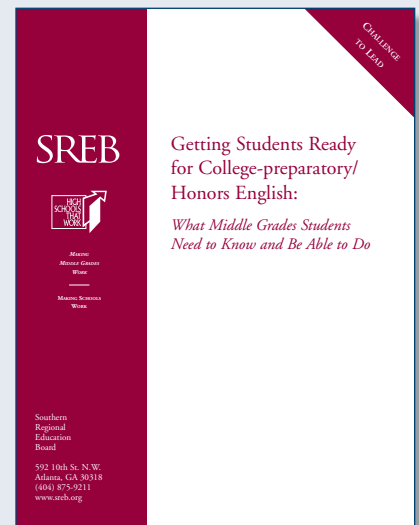
- complete science projects that last one week or longer.
- complete written lab reports once a semester or monthly.
- use equipment to complete activities in science labs with tables and sinks once a semester or monthly.
- use word processing software to complete an assignment or project often.
- complete short writing assignments of one to three pages for a grade once a semester.
- use a laptop computer, hand-held electronic device, lab book or notebook to keep records, logs and comments.
- write long answers to questions on science assessments monthly.

SREB's *Getting Students Ready for High School Series*

SREB has developed three readiness guides to help middle grades schools get more students ready for college-preparatory studies in high school:

- *Getting Students Ready for Algebra I: What Middle Grades Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*
- *Getting Students Ready for College-Preparatory/Honors English: What Middle Grades Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*
- *Getting Students Ready for College-Preparatory/Honors Science: What Middle Grades Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*

These guides are built on the assumption that students who are performing at grade level can succeed in college-preparatory courses in high school. Each guide includes content and process indicators aligned to recognized state and national standards that describe the essential knowledge and skills that students need to succeed in challenging high school studies. The guides describe readiness indicators, with sample assignments and assessments that illustrate the rigor and depth of work needed to achieve at the Basic, Proficient and Advanced levels.



In **social studies**, each student should:

- understand the essential concepts of geography, economics, history and government.
- analyze conflicts and evaluate, debate and defend a position.
- participate in hands-on activities, such as problem-solving and decision-making in real-world situations and service learning.
- describe his or her heritage, government, world and economic principles through the study of key issues of the past, present, and future.

In **exploratory courses**, each student should:

- experience a curriculum that is aligned to core academic standards.
- explore and use technology in the context of addressing contemporary problems and issues.
- read and write to learn.
- use language correctly and effectively to find, organize and report information through reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- work on projects that require the application of mathematics and science knowledge and skills.
- use labs and technology to learn scientific concepts in physical, life, and earth and space sciences.
- explore different career and educational pathways.

Academic and Career Exploration in the Middle Grades

Exploratory courses offer students an opportunity to use technology and academic skills and knowledge to solve authentic problems in a broad range of interest areas. These courses help middle grades students understand the connection between what is learned in school and the knowledge needed to address real-world projects.

Exploratory courses are more than an introduction to an area of study or possible career choice. They give students the opportunity to become proficient in skills across all subject areas that they will need as they move into high school and beyond — skills such as managing resources, conducting research outside of the classroom, collecting and analyzing data and learning how to work in a team environment.

Schools can combine exploratory studies with challenging academic knowledge and skills that engage middle grades students in fun, active and meaningful discovery. The Project Lead The Way® program, Gateway to Technology, offers five middle grades exploratory courses:

- **Design and Modeling** introduces students to the design process. Using design briefs, students create models and documentation to solve problems.
- **The Magic of Electrons** gives students the opportunity to explore the science of electricity, the movement of atoms, circuit design and sensing devices.
- **The Science of Technology** teaches students about the mechanics of motion, the conversion of energy and energy transfer.
- **Automation and Robotics** explores the history and development of automation and robotics while teaching students about structures, energy transfer, machine automation and computer control systems.
- **Flight and Space**, which was developed with NASA, introduces students to the technology of aeronautics, propulsion and rocketry.

Literacy Across the Curriculum

MMGW has identified five literacy goals that result in significantly higher student achievement:

- **Read the equivalent of 25 books per year across the curriculum** and demonstrate understanding of the content of materials read. Proficient readers summarize what they have learned; ask clarifying questions; use pertinent vocabulary; and analyze the purpose, content and structure of a text.
- **Write weekly in all classes** as a way to deepen understanding and retention of subject-matter content.
- **Use reading and writing strategies to enhance learning in all classes.** All teachers are trained to use reading and writing strategies in ways that enhance students' reading and subject-area achievement. Proficient readers can use strategies to get the most from what they read and can construct meaning from reading assignments in all of their classes.
- **Write research papers in all classes.** Students see the importance of writing in all subject areas — to express what has been learned, to understand the vocabulary associated with the subject area and to develop the thinking skills associated with conducting research and developing a product of the research.
- **Complete a rigorous language arts curriculum.** Students demonstrate understanding of their reading assignments; write short, graded papers weekly; and complete research papers.

These literacy goals can be accomplished only when teachers have been trained and prepared to teach essential reading and writing skills in all subject areas. Schools should not try to make all teachers reading or writing specialists, but to help all teachers understand how to embed literacy strategies into the curriculum in ways that advance achievement both in reading and in the subject area. Specifically, teachers in all content areas need to help all students gain the following reading and writing skills:

- Develop vocabulary appropriate to reading, writing and speaking proficiency.
- Summarize, paraphrase and categorize information.
- Compare and contrast information, ideas and structures to clarify meaning of various materials.
- Make inferences and predictions.
- Connect what is read to personal experience and the world beyond the classroom.
- Identify and interpret literary structures, elements, devices and themes.
- Compose writing that conveys a clear main point with logical support.
- Edit and revise writing for the strongest effect.
- Use English language structure and grammar appropriately to communicate effectively.

Engaging All Students in Learning

How teachers teach matters in the middle grades. Teachers should be trained to:

- give students choices in assignments and assessments.
- provide assignments that challenge students to develop ideas and think creatively and at a high level.
- use technology and research-based teaching strategies.
- allow students to share what they have learned.
- allow students to practice and refine key skills by working with partners and in teams.

SREB has found that a cluster of six teaching practices are significant predictors of higher achievement in reading, mathematics and science for all student groups. Teachers should:

- indicate the amount and quality of work needed to earn a grade of A or B.
- encourage students to do well in school.
- encourage students to help and learn from each other.
- know the content and skills of the subject and make it interesting and useful.
- set high standards and help students meet them.
- require students to redo work until it meets grade-level standards.

Transitions from Elementary School to the Middle Grades and from the Middle Grades to High School

As students transition from elementary school to the middle grades and from the middle grades to high school, they often experience an achievement lag for a year or more unless the transition is well planned and executed. Students who are entering the middle grades need teachers who have proven that they will accelerate, rather than impede, their achievement. Middle grades schools are responsible for creating a strong bridge from the middle grades to high school and ensuring students complete the work necessary to meet the requirements of a rigorous high school curriculum.

Helping Middle Grades Students Become Independent Learners

The sixth grade is an appropriate time to assess student needs and plan for a successful middle grades experience. Sixth-grade students who fail mathematics or English, have poor behavior or frequently miss class are at high risk of dropping out of high school. *MMGW* encourages schools to place highly qualified teachers in the sixth grade and adopt an accelerated curriculum and engaging learning activities that help all groups of students meet grade-level standards. For some students, the achievement gap begins in the middle grades; and, for those students who enter the middle grades achieving below grade-level, that gap continues to widen in grades six through eight. Unless appropriate interventions are provided in the middle grades, students will be unprepared for high school and at risk of dropping out. By providing high-quality teachers and an accelerated curriculum in grade six, schools can begin to reverse that process and prevent the development of the achievement gap.

To ensure students are on track for high school readiness, middle grades schools need to screen fifth- and sixth-graders to determine if they are reading at grade level. Low reading achievement affects performance not just in English/language arts courses, but in all subject areas. Students reading well below grade level should be provided with direct reading instruction and interventions to bring them up to grade level by the completion of the middle grades. Extra help can be provided to assist students as they read textbooks, classroom materials and online resources required to complete assignments.

Extra-help programs can help students learn the core academic material that will enable them to be successful in high school, but students entering the sixth grade also need to develop independent learning and social skills. Effective middle grades schools teach students the habits of successful, independent learners.

- **Create and maintain relationships** — Students' success results from their own efforts and from the assistance, guidance and encouragement of others. They need the opportunity to develop positive relationships with each other and with their teachers.
- **Study, manage time and get organized** — High-achieving students are usually well organized and have learned successful approaches to studying and managing time.

- **Read and write across the curriculum** — To continue developing literacy skills, students should write, revise their writing and use reading strategies in all of their academic and exploratory courses.
- **Use mathematics across the curriculum** — Mathematics success in grades seven through nine is a powerful predictor of whether students will leave high school with the knowledge and skills needed for further study. Students need the opportunity to practice these skills and to apply them to real-world mathematics problems.
- **Set goals and plan** — Students need to learn why goals are important and how to set and achieve them. Teachers can help students by discussing short-term academic goals and supporting students in the achievement of their goals.

Preparing Students for High School

Building a strong bridge from the middle grades to high school is essential in raising student achievement and keeping students in school. **Getting students ready to meet the requirements of a rigorous curriculum when they begin high school is a primary mission of the middle grades.** To ensure more students are prepared for rigorous studies, district, high school and middle grades leaders can work collaboratively to:

- establish readiness standards for succeeding in challenging English, mathematics and science high school studies.
- align middle grades curricula, teacher assignments and assessments to high school readiness standards.
- set goals to increase annually the percentage of students who successfully complete Algebra I by the end of grade eight.

Getting Unprepared Students Ready

Middle grades leaders and teachers should implement catch-up strategies to get unprepared students ready for challenging high school work.

Develop a program for seventh- and eighth-graders who need accelerated instruction in mathematics, language arts and reading. Schools can provide double-dose courses in English and mathematics to give students the extra time and help they need to be ready for college-preparatory English and Algebra I in the ninth grade. Two semesters of an accelerated curriculum in grade eight will provide the extra time that many students need to strengthen their skills in preparation for high school.

Provide a four- to six-week summer bridge program to help seventh- and eight-graders who need additional instruction to succeed in high school. Classes in core academics provide students with targeted instruction to re-teach basic skills and focus on areas of weakness identified in school and state assessments. Teachers should provide hands-on, real-world learning experiences while building the students' skills and content knowledge. In addition to academics, students may receive guidance and instruction in study habits, communication skills and personal responsibility.

Train teachers to prepare and implement catch-up courses using standards-based units. Middle grades students who are not performing at grade level need an intensive intervention before leaving the middle grades. *MMGW* schools use a standards-based planning process to develop units of instruction in English/language arts, mathematics and science that are taught in the eighth grade to help close the learning gap before the transition to high school. Standards-based units go beyond traditional teaching and learning by focusing the subject content on the application of new knowledge and skills to complete real-world projects. The planning design aligns instruction with grade-level assignments and assessments to help all students achieve at the Proficient and Advanced levels.

Measuring School Improvement

The Middle Grades Assessment

Making Middle Grades Work partners with schools, districts and state departments of education in using data from a variety of sources to guide school improvement efforts. All *MMGW* schools participate in the Middle Grades Assessment in even-numbered years. The Assessment includes the following components:

- **Subject Tests** — The Middle Grades Assessment includes three subject tests: English, mathematics and science. These tests are based on the NAEP, which is administered nationally to random samples of schools and students to document what students know and can do.
- **Student Survey** — The student survey includes approximately 150 questions related to students' middle grades educational experiences. Questions relate to course experiences; the amount of time spent on homework and reading; English/language arts, mathematics and science classroom experiences with regard to the quality and type of assignments completed and teachers' expectations; transitions; extra-help experiences; and guidance experiences.
- **Teacher Survey** — All full- and part-time teachers in grades six through eight complete this survey. Teachers are asked a variety of questions regarding the school mission, high expectations and extra help, rigorous and challenging content, engaging instructional practices, guidance and advisement, transitions, continuous improvement, strong leadership and professional growth.

By administering a student survey in conjunction with the assessment, *MMGW* is able to provide schools with a comprehensive report of results that illustrate student proficiency in reading, mathematics and science, as well as student course-taking patterns in the middle grades. School leaders and staff use the information provided to assist them in revising instruction, curriculum, guidance and extra-help systems. The Middle Grades Assessment provides data to measure school improvement and progress toward the goal of at least 85 percent of students meeting the *MMGW* achievement goals in reading, mathematics and science.

Technical Assistance Visits and Technical Review Visits

MMGW school improvement consultants visit schools to gather baseline data and work with school leaders to assess implementation of the *MMGW* Key Practices. There are two types of school visits:

- **Technical Assistance Visit (TAV)** — The TAV assists school leaders and teachers to identify changes needed to improve student achievement in the middle grades. It usually occurs when a school joins the network and is led by a state appointed leader or a *MMGW* consultant and a team that includes representatives from the district, feeder elementary schools, high schools associated with the middle grades school and the community. After the visit, *MMGW* produces a report that recognizes school's strengths, identifies challenges and proposes a series of recommended strategies the school can take in the preparation of a strategic improvement plan to deeply implement the *MMGW* design.
- **Technical Review Visit (TRV)** — The TRV is a one-day follow-up visit to assess the school's progress in implementing the recommendations in the TAV report. It is typically scheduled three years after the TAV at the request of the school or district. The visit is led by a *MMGW* or state consultant and includes a state leader and a district leader who knows the school well. The TRV enables SREB staff and state coordinators to assess progress in implementing the comprehensive improvement framework and helps school leaders fine-tune action plans and identify further technical assistance the school may require.

Annual Site Progress Report

Each *MMGW* school site prepares an annual site progress report to document accomplishments and challenges in its effort to implement the *MMGW* Key Practices. The annual report is part of a planning process through which schools note accomplishments from the previous school year and outline improvement priorities for the upcoming year.

What *MMGW* Agrees to Do

Making Middle Grades Work agrees to provide leadership, guidance, information and assistance to support schools, districts and states in improving student achievement. Schools can work with *MMGW* through one of three arrangements: joining a state *MMGW* network through the state department of education, contracting independently with *MMGW* or participating as a member of an urban district network. Services and agreements may vary depending on whether a middle grades school is a contracted site or a member of a state network.

Priority Services SREB Provides to Schools Participating in a State Network

- Support the state agency that manages and coordinates *MMGW* sites.
- Provide consultation to the state and its network schools.
- Collaborate with the state to develop statewide *MMGW* councils that provide overall guidance to *MMGW* efforts.
- Provide information and dissemination services to support state and site efforts using print, video and Web-based resources.
- Evaluate sites' progress in implementing the *MMGW* design and raising the achievement of students in reading, mathematics and science through biennial Middle Grades Assessments.
- Provide an annual statewide Site Development Workshop to introduce teams from new sites to the *MMGW* model, indicators and goals.
- Manage and help states lead on-site Technical Assistance Visits.
- Provide staff development opportunities for states and sites through national staff development, including the *HSTW* Summer Staff Development Conference for all network sites and state leaders, which typically attracts more than 7,500 participants and national experts.
- Create networking opportunities for sites to share strategies and resources.
- Train state personnel to assist in providing *MMGW* services.
- Conduct an annual leadership forum for teams and district leaders from all *MMGW* states.
- Seek support from the private sector and foundations for delivery of *MMGW* services.
- Disseminate information about *MMGW* best practices to state organizations.

*Priority Services SREB Provides to Schools Contracting with *MMGW**

- Provide an orientation to *MMGW*.
- Manage and lead a Site Development Workshop at participating schools.
- Manage and lead an on-site Technical Assistance Visit and Technical Review Visit to each participating school.
- Provide improvement consultants to work with schools in the delivery of technical assistance and coordination of services.

- Work with schools to examine staff development and follow-up coaching needs, including site-specific and national staff development programs.
- Help schools plan and implement site-specific staff development to support teachers in changing what and how they teach.
- Evaluate sites' progress in implementing the *MMGW* design and raising the achievement of students in reading, mathematics and science through biennial Middle Grades Assessments.
- Provide on-site coaching and additional electronic and telephone support.
- Provide workshops for the school leadership team.
- Assist in aligning curriculum in English/language arts and Algebra I.

What Participating Sites Agree to Do

Schools and school systems participating in *MMGW* agree to take the following actions to implement the *MMGW* school improvement design:

- Have site leaders — superintendents, school board members, the principal and a core group of teachers — examine the *MMGW* Goals and Key Practices to decide if *MMGW* is viable for the school and the community; if they are committed to at least a five-year implementation effort; and if they will implement a rigorous, upgraded academic core curriculum.
- Appoint a district- and school-level staff member to coordinate *MMGW* action planning (e.g., examine policy and curriculum decisions, staff development and technical assistance; coordinate data collection; monitor progress; foster communication; integrate the *MMGW* Goals and Key Practices with other school improvement efforts).
- Lead faculty during the first year to establish the need for change, orient them to the *MMGW* Goals and Key Practices, and invite broad participation in the planning and implementation process.
- Support academic and related arts teachers with staff development, materials and time to work with content area teachers to implement the Key Practices
- Organize a school leadership team composed of key academic and related arts teachers; administrators; guidance counselors; and representatives of business, industry and postsecondary education.
- Establish individual focus teams to address curriculum, guidance, evaluation, staff development and transitions.
- Prepare an action plan for implementing the Key Practices and a site-specific staff development plan to help teachers carry out the action steps.
- Participate in the biennial Middle Grades Assessment to obtain baseline data and to measure progress in raising student achievement.
- Host a Technical Assistance Visit involving a team led by SREB or the state to review progress and the challenges to be addressed to raise student achievement.
- Participate in district leadership activities, state staff development activities and the annual *HSTW* Summer Staff Development Conference.
- Become an active member of a state network for sharing information and ideas.
- Designate staff members to coach all teachers to use reading, writing and mathematics strategies across the curriculum to improve achievement in all content areas.
- Promote a vision of high achievement for all students among faculty and staff, parents, students and community members.

What Participating States Agree to Do

States participating in *MMGW* agree to provide the following support services to the network:

- Designate a state *MMGW* coordinator to assist with Technical Assistance Visits, Site Development Workshops and orientations and to serve on the *MMGW* Consortium Board.
- Allocate discretionary funds to help sites implement their school improvement plans.
- Conduct Technical Assistance Visits to one-third of sites annually to recommend ways for existing sites to advance student learning.
- Conduct Technical Assistance Visits to all new sites during the first year of participation to help them develop and implement action plans for raising student achievement.
- Encourage sites to attend the annual *HSTW* Summer Staff Development Conference and identify site participants to serve as presenters and presiders.
- Link staff development to sites' school improvement plans and create opportunities for teachers and administrators to participate in state-sponsored institutes and SREB workshops and conferences.
- Support sites in participating in the biennial Middle Grades Assessment and help them use the data to improve their action plans.
- Provide technical assistance to develop action plans during the first year of participation.
- Provide annual staff development support that includes a statewide *MMGW* staff development conference.
- Foster networking through meetings, visits and electronic communication.
- Convene sites regularly to share resources and solve common problems.

How to Become a *MMGW* Site

Becoming a State Network Site

SREB and *MMGW* states work together to provide services to *MMGW* sites. Each state uses its own process for selecting school sites to participate in *MMGW*. In most states, schools wishing to join the state network must submit an application. Some states require majority approval by school staff for adopting the *MMGW* design. Schools or districts seeking *MMGW* site information should contact the state coordinator at the state department of education. For a list of state coordinators and contact information, visit the SREB Web site, www.sreb.org. Choose the link for *Making Middle Grades Work*.

Becoming a Contracted Site

Schools receiving grants or districts that wish to implement the *MMGW* design must do so through a contractual arrangement with SREB. Schools choosing the *MMGW* design and seeking to contract with SREB for services will review an information packet, participate in a phone call to discuss services and costs, review a draft contract from SREB and seek approval from the state coordinator. A memorandum of understanding outlines what the school and district will do and how *MMGW* will assist the school in reaching its improvement goals.

What *Making Middle Grades Work* Does for Middle Grades Schools

Participation in *MMGW* benefits all stakeholders in the middle grades community: students and their parents, teachers and administrators.

Benefits to students — *MMGW* improves students' academic knowledge and skills. It shows students the connection between the middle grades, high school and their futures. It encourages them to prepare for a rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum in high school to help them meet their goals.

Benefits to teachers — Teachers gain confidence in their abilities to help all students complete challenging middle grades studies while preparing for rigorous high school college-preparatory course work. They work collaboratively to implement more rigorous curricula and classroom instruction and plan professional development activities aimed at raising students' achievement.

Benefits to principals — Administrators strengthen their understanding of curriculum and instruction as they lead the staff to align curriculum, student assignments and classroom assessments to high school readiness standards. They become more adept at leading a continuous improvement program — planning, doing, reviewing, evaluating, making new plans and revising old ones — to improve student learning. They experience the benefits of shared decision-making for school improvement.

Benefits to schools — Schools receive data about strengths and weaknesses in reading, mathematics, science, and school and classroom practices through the Middle Grades Assessment, Technical Assistance Visits and Technical Review Visits. Based on this information, teachers and administrators can take actions to improve the rigor of the curriculum, the relevance of classroom assignments and the support students need to meet higher standards. The result is improved communication among faculty and staff, students, parents and secondary institutions.

Benefits to educational reform — *MMGW* provides states with Goals, Key Practices and Key Conditions for working with local school systems to improve the middle grades. School leaders and teachers discover that they can raise the achievement of all students, including those previously underserved.

Benefits to the community and nation — A well-taught, accelerated curriculum in the middle grades can 1) reverse the downward trend in students' reading, writing, mathematics and science achievement that currently is occurring in most middle grades schools; and 2) significantly increase the percentage of students ready for challenging high school studies and, ultimately, their achievement potential as adults.

For More Information

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