



Best Practices for Implementing HSTW and MMGW

SREB

MAKING
MIDDLE GRADES
WORK

Keeping students moving forward on the journey from the middle grades into high school

The ninth grade has the highest failure rate of any grade, and this dramatically increases the likelihood that students will not finish high school. One in three students in the Southern Regional Education Board states does not graduate on time. The picture is especially bleak for minority and male students: Fewer than half of African-American and Hispanic male students receive a high school diploma in four years.

As a result of these findings, states and schools are placing increased emphasis on helping students make the transition from the middle grades to high school and beyond. By the same token, special efforts are being made to assist students in completing grade nine successfully.

The *HSTW* research brief titled *Middle Grades to High School: Mending a Weak Link* contains these facts:

- Enrollment in demanding courses does not result in more failures. In fact, the evidence suggests that tougher content results in lower failure rates. Many students can handle intellectual work that is more challenging than schools are willing to assign. Enrolling ninth-graders into low-level academic courses that have low expectations and boring assignments is a recipe for failure.

- Taking algebra or pre-algebra in the middle grades leads to enrollment in higher-level mathematics courses in high school and does not increase failure rates.
- Middle grades schools that are successful in preparing students for college-preparatory courses in the ninth grade provide extra help and assign students an adult mentor. Successful schools come in many sizes, and students vary by ethnicity and socioeconomic status.
- Teachers matter enormously. When they serve as teacher-advisers, their students are more apt to set educational goals and make plans for high school.
- Middle grades schools and high schools can take action to ensure that almost all students will succeed in college-preparatory courses.

Three major strategies will assist students in making the transition from the middle grades to high school.

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This newsletter of “best practices” in implementing *High Schools That Work* and *Making Middle Grades Work* is based on presentations related to Conference Objective 6 (Providing Extra Help and Ninth-grade Transition Strategies) from the 19th Annual *HSTW* Staff Development Conference. The conference was held July 13-16, 2005, at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Conference Center in Nashville, Tennessee. For more information on Conference Objectives, go to www.sreb.org.

Comparing High- and Low-implementation Middle Grades Schools

Schools that fully implement the *Making Middle Grades Work* model are much more likely to have students who achieve at a high level in getting ready for high school studies. Certain school and classroom practices make the difference in whether a school ranks as “high implementation” or “low implementation.” These practices are

- A rigorous curriculum;
- Engaging assignments;
- Relevant instruction;
- Support for students and teachers;
- A focus on high school readiness; and
- Leadership for continuous improvement.

The 2004 *MMGW* Assessment and student survey revealed that much higher percentages of students in high-implementation schools than in low-implementation schools met the *MMGW* performance goals in reading, mathematics and science. The results were 59 percent, compared with 35 percent, in reading; 61 percent, compared with 38 percent, in mathematics; and 50 percent, compared with 32 percent, in science.

The same pattern of achievement by students from the high-implementation schools held true in meeting proficiency levels in reading, mathematics and science. For example, 36 percent of students in high-implementation schools, compared with 17 percent of students in low-implementation schools, scored at the Proficient level or above in reading; 33 percent, compared with 16 percent, reached the Proficient level in mathematics; and 29 percent, compared with 17 percent, scored Proficient in science.

More students at high-implementation schools completed rigorous English/language arts, mathematics and science curriculums. Their courses were filled with opportunities to read and write across the curriculum, to use mathematics actively in solving problems and to conduct hands-on projects that relate to real life.

School leaders working to align the middle grades academic core to high school readiness standards and to provide students with guidance and extra help can do these things:

- Take time to assess your current effort.
- Identify an outstanding practice already in place at your school.
- Select a major topic for year one, year two and year three. The actions should be measurable.

(This information is from a **PowerPoint presentation** by Gene Bottoms at the 2005 *HSTW* Staff Development Conference. The presentation is available for download on the SREB Web page at www.sreb.org. Click on *High Schools That Work* Publications and Materials — Special PowerPoint Presentations. A **videotape** of the presentation is also available. (05V04v) VHS; \$30. Call (404) 875-9211, Ext. 236, or e-mail publications@sreb.org.)

Provide a system of extra help and time to help students meet high standards

It is important for schools to provide ongoing systems of extra help and time designed to help students meet rigorous standards, pass high-stakes exams and stay on target to graduate with their peers. *HSTW* uses two indicators to measure the amount of emphasis a school places on extra help:

- Teachers are frequently available before, during or after school to help students with their studies.
- Students are able to get extra help from teachers when they need it without much difficulty.

Only 28 percent of students participating in the 2004 *HSTW* Assessment reported that extra help often was available. Of these students, 63 percent met the *HSTW* performance goal in reading, 66 percent met the performance goal in mathematics and 55 percent met the performance goal in science. Of the 72 percent that said extra help was hard to obtain, only 50 percent met the reading goal, 55 percent met the mathematics goal and 44 percent met the science goal. These findings clearly point to the connection between extra help and student performance.

The 2004 *MMGW* Assessment and student survey showed that 42 percent of students could obtain extra help without much difficulty.

Making teachers available before, during and after school is not the only way to provide extra help and time to students. Other methods are: support classes, tutoring, computer-assisted instruction, Web-based instruction and resource classes.

Lumberton High School in Lumberton, North Carolina, uses computer-assisted instruction as part of its extra help system. “Technology will not take the place of good teaching, but it can enhance it,” Principal **Greg Killingsworth** said. Mathematics teachers use laptop computers and interactive presentation systems that have all but replaced traditional chalkboards. In addition, a teacher can post a full set of notes on his or her class Web page at the end of each class. Five wireless mobile computer labs are available for students’ use.

(Contact Greg Killingsworth at killingsworthg.lshs@robeson.k12.nc.us.)

Align the middle grades curriculum to high school standards

Aligning the middle grades language arts and reading, mathematics and science curriculums to the standards that students are expected to meet in high school is a critical action for student success. Students need to begin preparing for high school and beyond while they are in the middle grades.

Middle Grades to High School: Mending a Weak Link notes the importance of high schools and middle grades schools working together to tell middle grades students and their parents what to expect in high school. Schools can arrange for one-on-one planning sessions to assist students and parents in developing a challenging program of study to support their goals for college and a career.

Vertical teams of high school and middle grades teachers from **Laurens District 55** in Laurens, South Carolina, meet monthly to discuss and align the curriculums in English, mathematics, science and social studies. They discuss what students are expected to know for success in each subject.

(Contact Marlene Stephens of Laurens District 55 at MStephens@Laurens55.k12.sc.us.)

Provide special programs to help students catch up

Middle grades schools and high schools are providing catch-up programs to help students meet the requirements of college-preparatory-level English/language arts and Algebra I. These initiatives include summer bridge programs, double-doses of English and mathematics in grade nine, and ninth-grade academies. The ninth grade is a “make it or break it” time for students. High schools need to identify eighth-graders who are not ready for college-preparatory-level courses and provide rich summer or school-year experiences to bring them up to speed.

Jackson County Comprehensive High School in Jefferson, Georgia, offers two programs designed to increase students’ success in high school. The first is an eighth-grade acceleration academy conducted for 12 half-days during the summer. Incoming freshmen that are performing poorly in academic classes take language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. They also delve

into career awareness, learn new study skills and practice reading-for-learning strategies. Each academy teacher teams with an eighth-grade teacher to build communication between the high school and the middle grades and to increase the chances students will make a successful transition into high school.

The other academy is for low-performing freshmen that want to recover credits and prepare for more advanced courses in the 10th grade. Students meet in half-day sessions for three and a half weeks during June to study English I, Algebra I, probability and statistics, biology and other courses. If they meet specific criteria, they can earn up to one credit for the session.

(Contact Chanda Palmer, English teacher, at cpalmer@jackson.k12.ga.us or Kendra Phillips, mathematics teacher, at kphillips@jackson.k12.ga.us.)

Blackman High School and **Blackman Middle School** in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, have formed a partnership to implement a transition program known as “Crossing the Road.” The purpose of this six-week summer program is to provide additional learning opportunities for middle grades students who are struggling or failing. Teachers from both schools work with the program, allowing students to interact with teachers they already know as well as ones they will have in high school.

Computer technology is used extensively to teach reading comprehension, writing, mathematics, science, keyboard and computer skills, and study and communication skills.

The two schools have seen the following advances in student achievement:

- Students’ reading skills improved by 1.4 grade levels.
- Eighth-graders gained 20 percent and seventh-graders improved 16 percent on a pre-algebra test.
- Students increased 3 percent in grammar and usage, 7 percent in writing and 11 percent in sentence structure.
- Students’ grade point averages grew from 72 in the eighth grade to 82 in the ninth grade.

(Contact William Vaughn, principal, Blackman Middle School, at vaughnb@rcs.k12.tn.us.)

Second Chance is a credit recovery program in **Henry County, Georgia**, to help ninth-graders at six high schools stay on track for graduation. **Jan Harris**, assistant principal, and **Barbara Rosolino**, English teacher, both of **Eagle’s Landing High School** in McDonough, Georgia, described the program and its results in terms of keeping students in school.

The philosophy of Second Chance is that students do not always learn at the same rate and in the same amount of time. The program gives such students an opportunity for 30 more hours of instruction followed by an additional 30 hours if needed. If students demonstrate mastery of the content at the end of the program, the failing grade is removed from their transcripts and their GPAs are updated. Students who participate in Second Chance are first-time freshmen that have failed first-semester English, algebra or physical science. Each student is allowed to register for one course.

English, mathematics and science teachers from the high schools meet annually with district curriculum coordinators to design a pre-test and two post-tests (one for the first 30 days and another for the second 30 days). The tests are based on the objectives that the students are expected to master in each course. Teachers base their instruction on the pre-test.

Many students fail courses because of poor behavior patterns. The Second Chance program takes a strong stand by enforcing strict rules about absences, late arrivals (10 minutes or more) and tardies (less than 10 minutes). Certain numbers of late arrivals and tardies equal an absence. Students that have four or more absences are dismissed from the program.

Second Chance teachers are selected because they are dependable, cooperative, focused, consistent, strong in their content areas and dedicated to helping students succeed. They decide whether the one-hour Second Chance classes will be taught before or after school.

District data for 2003 and 2004 reflect the success of the program in keeping first-time freshmen on target for graduation in four years. Close to 70 percent of students are successful if they take advantage of the opportunity to recover a grade and master the content.

(Contact Jan Harris at jan.harris@henry.k12.ga.us or Barbara Rosolino at b.rosolino@henry.k12.ga.us.)

Strategies for an effective transition system

The *HSTW* publication *Opening Doors to the Future: Preparing Low-achieving Middle Grades Students to Succeed in High School*¹ outlines several strategies for an effective transition system:

- Use an interdisciplinary approach to accelerate low-performing middle grades students.
- Conduct summer schools for middle grades students to prevent loss of learning and to provide a head start on the coming school year.
- Enroll incoming ninth-graders who are below grade-level standards in a summer program.
- Establish jump-start programs for ninth-graders.
- Create teacher support teams.
- Develop academies and small learning communities.
- Offer double-doses of English/language arts and mathematics.
- Create special programs to prepare students for high school and beyond.

¹ *Opening Doors to the Future: Preparing Low-achieving Middle Grades Students to Succeed in High School* contains 15 examples of school transition programs that work in helping students make the journey from the middle grades to high school. (02V41); 72 pages; \$5; \$2 each for 10 or more. For more information on ordering this publication, call (404) 875-9211, Ext. 236, or e-mail publications@sreb.org.