

NCLB RECOMMENDATIONS

National Middle School Association

NMSA has established longstanding partnerships with national, state, and local groups interested in improving the lives of young people, and we want to continue that tradition working with the Administration and Congress to strengthen education policy at the federal and state levels. We recognize that middle level schools do not operate in a vacuum and that government policies at all levels profoundly affect the ability of educators to incorporate best practices in our classrooms. Middle level educators must respond to state goals and directives ranging from testing targets to teacher licensure standards. Likewise, federal policy affects all aspects of middle level education and can strengthen or hinder state and local efforts to improve schools.

The reauthorization of NCLB presents an excellent opportunity to strengthen national middle level policy and help raise student achievement in the middle grades. While we fully agree with the basic goal of the No Child Left Behind Act that every child in our nation deserves an excellent education that enables him or her to be successful in college and the workforce, we do not believe the legislation fully addresses the needs of students in grades five through eight.

Every day 20 million young adolescents enter school searching for what research and practice has shown to help middle level students excel:

- challenging and engaging instruction that recognizes the developmental changes in students' lives;
- access to a common core of studies that includes advanced mathematics, science, literacy instruction, social studies, health, and physical education as well as an extended curriculum that allows them to explore such things as world languages, the arts, and civic education;
- teachers and administrators well prepared to provide young adolescents with a safe, stimulating, and rigorous learning environment that promotes high expectations;
- collaboration and continual learning for both adolescents and the adults who teach them.

Although we can identify individual schools representing every grade configuration—K-8; 5-8; 6-12 and others—that have implemented these components and are succeeding, far too many of our middle level students are being left behind.

As educators and policymakers examine the data from their state and district reading assessments, they are concerned that eighth grade reading scores remain flat, and twelfth graders on average have shown no reading improvement in the last 30 years. Closing the achievement gap and ensuring that every student is proficient in reading requires an intense focus on literacy teaching and learning in the middle grades. Struggling readers exist in every school. In our inner cities and rural poor areas, it is not uncommon to find 50 percent of our eighth graders reading at “below basic” levels. Scaling up effective literacy instruction and support for struggling students in the middle

grades requires a significant investment beyond the funding currently available under Title I. Under NCLB, 57 percent of the students tested annually are in grades five through eight, yet only about 15 percent of all Title I funds are allocated to middle and high schools. The Striving Readers program will demonstrate the power of infusing literacy instruction across the curriculum while at the same time providing intensive intervention and extra time for students who need it in grades six through twelve. ***We support authorizing and expanding Striving Readers as part of NCLB and funding it at the President's original request of \$200 million in the first year in order to increase the number of grants from the current eight sites to a much wider demonstration of the best research-based practices in adolescent literacy.***

Although eighth grade math scores have improved, we are still far from preparing all students to take algebra by the end of eighth grade so they can go on to higher level math courses in high school. The National Academy of Science has pointed out that “students who choose not to or are unable to finish Algebra 1 before the ninth grade—which is needed for them to proceed in high school to geometry, Algebra II, trigonometry, and pre-calculus—effectively shut themselves out of careers in the sciences.” NMSA recognizes that academic preparation for advanced study begins in middle school. ***Therefore, we believe that the bipartisan draft of the Math Now proposal included in the Senate version of the Competitiveness Bill discussed in the last Congress is an important initiative that deserves serious consideration. It would help strengthen math teachers' preparation and professional development in the middle grades.***

Ensuring that all young adolescents have highly qualified teachers and administrators is an essential first step in moving toward the ultimate goal of “highly effective” teachers in every classroom supported by “highly effective” school leaders. In a 1998 study involving half a million elementary and middle grades students in 3000 Texas schools, researchers found that the most important factor in student achievement was teacher quality. In 2003 the Education Commission of the States released a review of 92 prior research studies. The review concluded that to be an effective teacher one must have both a grasp of the subject area and an understanding of the related pedagogy. Requiring only a bachelor's or master's degree in the subject area does not automatically make a teacher highly qualified. Likewise, according to a 2004 Wallace Foundation *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, leadership not only matters, it is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning. Furthermore, the impact of leadership tends to be the greatest in schools where the learning needs of students are most acute.

If we expect all middle level students to succeed, we must eliminate the disparities in their education starting with the quality of the teachers and administrators hired to work with them. In particular, policymakers should ensure that all middle level teachers have a deep background in the subjects they teach and use instruction and assessment strategies that research has shown to be effective with this age group by the improvement of student achievement. Policymakers should ensure that middle level administrators know and use research-based leadership and instructional practices to set a clear course

for school improvement; to support and develop the skills, talents, and academic growth of all members of the learning community; and to create a school organization that clearly supports, rather than inhibits, teaching and learning. *No Child Left Behind left out the definition of a highly qualified teacher at the middle level and did not speak to the qualifications of school leaders. NMSA believes that both areas must be strongly addressed in the reauthorization of NCLB.*

Although an increasing number of states offer some type of middle level certification or endorsement, fewer than half require specialized, middle level preparation before teachers can work in the middle grades. In addition to the limited state support for specific middle level teacher preparation, only seven states insist that middle level administrators know and use research-based leadership and instructional practices to increase the academic performance and healthy development of young adolescents.

Currently, 17 states have adopted or adapted the Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards written by NMSA and approved by the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (a full list of the standards can be found at www.nmsa.org/Professional_Preparation/NMSAStandards). Middle level certification in these states require the equivalent of a minor in two related subjects, recognizing the need for content knowledge and the ability to integrate the curriculum in two or more subjects. These standards merit every state's consideration in establishing high expectations for middle level teacher preparation and licensure. *We highly recommend a requirement that all states adopt the NMSA/NCATE Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards or the equivalent in the reauthorization of NCLB. New teachers should be required to obtain a middle level certificate or a certificate with a middle level endorsement as the first step to becoming a highly qualified and highly effective teacher. Teachers already in the workforce should be expected to earn a middle level endorsement or certification within a reasonable amount of time through recertification course work and/or personalized professional development growth plans that include work in both content knowledge and pedagogy. Requiring both new and current middle level teachers to obtain middle level endorsement or certification will result in ensuring a highly effective teacher in every classroom who possesses both content knowledge and the understanding of related instructional and assessment strategies. A range of methods that demonstrate student gains over time must be the standard by which we hold teachers accountable. Furthermore, we recommend strengthening and expanding the incentives for highly qualified administrators and teachers to lead middle level reforms in our highest-need schools and school districts.*

The traditional “one size fits all” method of advancing educators’ skills by offering professional development to all the teachers in a school or school district without regard to individual needs is both inappropriate and ineffective. Generic staff development does not improve instruction and learning. We must ensure that all middle grades teachers, both new and experienced, participate in quality professional development that includes deep understanding of their subject areas and sound instructional methods to teach young adolescent learners. Furthermore, comprehensive and data-driven instruction are essential for high achievement. Research indicates that

formative assessment is one of the strongest interventions schools can make to raise test scores for all students with the greatest gains occurring among the lowest-performing students. Delivering this staff development requires a wide range of professional development opportunities. ***States should be required to provide quality professional development for administrators and teachers aligned to the standards-based curriculum and the implementation of formative assessments to improve student achievement. Due to current national needs, specific professional development in math, science, literacy, assessment practices, and English language learning must be provided on an ongoing basis, especially in our highest need schools.***

Once-a-year norm-referenced tests that focus on groups of students for school accountability purposes do little to help teachers diagnose specific learning needs and design appropriate interventions for individual students. Although such assessments of learning are important, they must not be the only criteria by which we evaluate students' achievement. The most valuable achievement measures provide information about each student's development over time. Called the "growth model" this method uses individual assessments to determine adequate yearly progress and should become the standard for determining progress in middle level schools. ***Because some states do not have data management systems in place to track each student's progress, the federal government must provide incentives and guidance to ensure that all states develop effective procedures for collecting and analyzing such information. In this way, educational accountability becomes an effective and comprehensive system of evaluating instruction and learning that can help all middle level schools reach high academic standards.***

No Child Left Behind has radically changed accountability standards of U.S. schools and has increased the urgency for large-scale, longitudinal studies of instruction and achievement at the middle level. Such research would improve the reliability of existing data and enable us to generalize findings across the different school settings. Students attending middle level schools that provide high degrees of both academic and social supports made the greatest achievement gains. These findings need to be shared more widely with middle level educators and policymakers to ensure that regulations and practices are consistent with what research has shown to improve the quality of education provided to young adolescents. ***We highly recommend creating a national middle level database accessible to education researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to spur middle grades school reform. The federal government must lead the effort to promote collaborative research initiatives that examine and respond to the most critical middle level education issues, such as improving adolescent literacy, increasing math and science proficiency, and closing achievement gaps among groups of students.***

National attention has focused almost exclusively on the early grades in the belief that giving students a strong start was enough to put them on a path to success. A new body of research and data tells us we have to do far more. Preparing every student to graduate from high school ready for college and work begins with early education and ends with a high school diploma but the middle grades are a critical moment in a child's education when many of the most important decisions are made. By

the eighth grade, for instance, many students have decided whether they will drop out or graduate from high school, whether they will take courses that predict success in college, and whether they will engage in risky behaviors such as drug use.

Robert Balfanz, a leading education researcher at Johns Hopkins University found in high poverty environments student disengagement and academic failure in the middle grades often leads to “educational doom.” In Philadelphia, for example, sixth graders who attend school less than 80 percent of the time or fail math or fail English have only a 10 percent chance of graduating on time and a 20 percent chance or less of graduating at all. Up to 40 percent of eventual high school dropouts can be identified in the sixth grade and up to 60 percent by the time they reach eighth grade. Balfanz suggests that three levels of interventions are needed in middle schools with a high concentration of high poverty students: school-wide preventive measures aimed at eliminating 75 percent of problems at this level; targeted interventions for 20 percent of the students who need additional supports and intensive individual supports for 5 to 10 percent of the students who have multiple risk factors.

ACT, a leader in middle school and high school assessments and college admissions testing, reports that over fifty percent of high school graduates in 2005 did not have the reading skills they needed to succeed in college. Of the 640,000 eighth and ninth grade students who took ACT’s EXPLORE program in 2005-6, only 13 percent of eighth graders were on target to be college-ready and only 35 percent are planning to take a core curriculum in high school. Middle school students who are not on target in reading are significantly more likely not to be on target in English, math, and science. In fact ACT’s latest research suggests that if students do not achieve a minimum level of academic preparation by middle school, high school may be too late to make up for these deficits. ***Thoroughly preparing all students to succeed in a demanding and evolving global economy requires the transformation of middle level education to meet these new demands. It is time to make an excellent education for all young adolescents a national priority.***

These findings and others were presented in September at the “***National Policy Symposium on Middle-Level Education: Where Do We Go From Here?***” sponsored by the National Middle School Association (NMSA), the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Alliance for Excellent Education. The symposium proceedings are available on line at www.nmsa.org.

Earlier this year, NMSA released “***Success in the Middle: A Policymaker’s Guide to Achieving Quality Middle Level Education***” that outlined five goals for federal, state and local policymakers to help transform middle level education for the 21st Century. (www.nmsa.org). Together, we hope these efforts and recommendations will begin a serious discussion addressing a national middle level policy that can become a part of the next generation of No Child Left Behind.