



Middle School Matters Field Guide: Research-Based Principles, Practices, and Tools

Chapter 2: Student Supports That Enhance Learning



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FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK



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Chapter 2: Student Supports That Enhance Learning

Introduction

Moving from the protective environment of an elementary grades classroom—where in most cases, students spend the day with the same teacher and the same group of students—to the middle grades—where students may need to rotate between three or more teachers and interact with a larger group of students—can be challenging and intimidating for students. This transition often results in a reduction of the number of friendships in students' lives,¹ which can be an additional adjustment. Research indicates that when students transition to the middle grades, there is an increase in incidents requiring school discipline (e.g., in-school suspension) for disturbance to the class learning environment or unwillingness to follow rules.² There is also evidence of a predictive association between the number of disruptive behavior incidents during elementary and middle grades years and school failure in high school, even when socioeconomic status and intellectual differences are taken into consideration.³ Middle grades students need common academic behavior and academic expectations, rewards, and consequences. Think of a middle grades student's experience throughout the day. If it is vastly different from classroom to classroom, he or she will not internalize strong behavioral and academic norms.

This chapter identifies ways schools can support middle grades students through these challenges. First, we describe what research has shown to be effective school wide strategies for reducing the risk of students' dropping out or disengaging from school. Second, we show how to develop and maintain a school climate and culture that emphasizes high academic achievement and student success supported by every member of the school faculty, and we emphasize effective strategies for forming a school-family-community partnership. Third, we describe specific school wide strategies for behavior support through the use of clear and common expectations. We also present targeted activities to motivate students and improve attendance, as well as academic and social behavior. Finally, we outline the expectations for effective extended learning opportunities that enable students to continue to learn in a way that is integrated with their regular school day and are also geared towards meeting students' needs. The following content dimensions are included in this chapter on student supports that enhance learning:

- Dropout Prevention
- School Climate, Culture, and Partnerships
- Student Behavior Supports and Motivation
- Extended Learning Time

References:

Student Supports That Enhance Learning

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Dropout Prevention

Five research- and evidence-based¹ principles have been proven to reduce the risk of students' dropping out or disengaging from school. First, specific indicators should be identified and data should be collected and monitored to understand changes in student performance, attendance, and engagement in school. Second, at-risk students should be paired with an adult advocate who is committed to their success. Third, students should take advantage of personal tutoring and develop study skills to improve their confidence in their own academic potential. Fourth, schools should use programs that recognize improvement in behavior and academic achievement, as well as those that teach strategies for healthy behavior and academic progress. Fifth, schools should find ways to enhance academic achievement by personalizing the learning environment so that it feels smaller, more intimate, and more conducive to focused learning, and so that staff can connect with students more frequently.

Principle 1:

Use data systems to help identify students who are at risk of falling off the path to high school graduation.

Identifying a set of research- and evidence-based indicators that predict which students might be at risk of dropping out and then regularly analyzing data relative to these indicators are the critical first steps in identifying at-risk students who should be considered for extra services or supports.

Practice 1: *Use data to identify incoming students with histories of academic problems, truancy, behavioral problems, and retention.*

Student absences, grade retention, low academic achievement, and behavior problems are key indicators that students are more likely to drop out.^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11} Schools should review data for incoming students on their attendance, grade retention, disciplinary issues, and weak academic performance. Schools should also review information from previous teachers about students' motivation, academic potential, and social skills, as well as any instructional challenges the teachers encountered. Since elementary school teachers have regular interaction with their students, collecting information from prior teachers is likely to be especially useful for incoming middle grades students. School leadership teams and teachers can monitor data at the grade-, classroom-, and student-level to examine how many and which students are chronically absent (missing more than 20% of school days), have disciplinary placements, and/or did not meet the state assessment standard in the prior year. Schools can analyze this data to identify patterns and trends, and then systematically act on the information using research- and evidence-based programs and policies.

The National High School Center provides resources and tools that schools can use to develop their own early warning systems.

<http://www.betterhighschools.org/ews.asp>

Practice 2: *Continually monitor the academic and social performance of all students.*

Schools should monitor students' progress by regularly reviewing report cards, test scores, and discipline referrals. Schools can then use these data to identify students who may have recently experienced a life event, academic challenge, or other social or behavioral problem that could foreshadow a higher risk of dropping out.^{11, 12} Schools should designate a staff member or team to regularly monitor data and follow up with students when needed. Follow up could be done through student advisories or adult advocates (see Principle 2).

Practice 3: *Monitor students' sense of engagement and belonging in school.*

Collecting data and monitoring the school climate and teacher-student interactions will help identify areas for improvement. Schools can survey students periodically or conduct small group interviews to learn about students' perceptions of the school climate and their sense of belonging and engagement.^{13, 14, 15} This data can help identify whether current efforts are effective in improving school climate and engagement, and where to focus reform efforts (if needed).

Sample surveys for collecting data on student engagement and motivation can be found in a report available at

http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/rei_2011098.pdf

Principle 2:

Assign adult advocates to students who are at risk of falling off the path to high school graduation.

Students' personal and academic needs should be addressed through a meaningful and sustained relationship with an adult.^{16, 17} The adult should be responsible for addressing the student's academic and social needs, communicating with the student's family, and advocating for the student. The adult advocate should be thoroughly trained prior to being assigned a student, and the adult and student should have time to meet regularly.

Practice 1: Select adults who are committed to student success.

An adult advocate should be assigned to work individually with students who are at a high risk of dropping out and have been identified through a process, such as the one described in Principle 1. The advocate is a case manager who should interact with the student, offering guidance and support on matters inside and outside of school, modeling positive behavior and decision-making skills, and being an encouraging and trusted person in the student's life.

The adult advocate could be a teacher, community member, or social worker. He or she should be based primarily at the school and should be persistent, believe in the ability of all students to succeed, be willing to work cooperatively with families and school staff, and be skilled in advocacy and communication.^{16, 17}

Practice 2: Keep caseloads low.

The programs that have been studied kept caseloads for adult advocates low (under 20). Moving to larger caseloads would have unpredicted effects, and larger caseloads preclude advocates from spending meaningful time engaging with students and resolving issues.

Practice 3: Match students with adult advocates purposefully.

Purposefully matching students and adults increases the likelihood that the relationship will thrive. Matches should take student needs into account so that the adult can effectively advocate on the student's behalf and adapt activities according to the student's interests and goals.^{17, 18, 19} It is important to provide advocates with whom students can identify: advocates should reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of the students they are mentoring for greater success.¹⁶

Practice 4: Provide training to advocates on working with students, parents, and the school staff.

Training should be provided to adult advocates so they can work with students, parents, and school staff to reduce dropout rates. Training should include an overview of resources available for students and their families and strategies for communicating with both students and families to better understand their needs in order to connect them to appropriate resources.

Examples of activities adult advocates should be trained in include (i) assisting students in overcoming obstacles ranging from transportation to school to poor relationships with teachers, (ii) helping students develop career goals and postsecondary plans, (iii) working with students on academic progress by monitoring the completion of homework assignments, and (iv) working with teachers to learn about students' academic difficulties. Advocates can also help a student's family by referring a parent to potential jobs or school training programs, or by making appointments with or providing transportation to support service agencies.

Practice 5: *Establish a regular time in the school day or week for advocates to meet with students.*

Consistent meetings between the advocate and the student provide accountability and allow the advocate to give guidance or praise successes.^{20, 21} The amount of time needed for meetings depends on the severity of the student's problems; some students need the structure of daily meetings, while others may need only weekly meetings to stay on track.

More information about the use of adult advocates can be found at

<http://www.checkandconnect.org/>

Principle 3:

Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.

Providing academic support, such as tutoring or enrichment programs, helps address skill gaps and enriches the academic experience for students who may be bored or disengaged. Academic struggles may play a role in students' feeling alienated from school, so incentives, such as leadership opportunities in academic areas or rewards for improved performance, may help increase academic and student engagement.^{16, 22, 23, 24}

Practice 1: *Provide individual or small group support in test-taking skills, study skills, or targeted subject areas, such as reading, writing, or mathematics.*

Academic support may be one-on-one or small group interactions and can include test-taking and study skills or enrichment courses. About 10–12 weeks long, enrichment courses target a particular subject area, such as reading, writing, or mathematics, and include teaching strategies designed to engage students (e.g., whole class discovery lessons or differentiated individual and small group instruction).^{25, 26} Academic support can be provided by adults or peers and can occur during advisory periods, at lunch, or during study skills periods built into the schedule.

Practice 2: *Provide extra study time and opportunities for credit recovery and accumulation through after-school, Saturday school, or summer programs.*

After hours and summer school programs address several primary academic needs of at-risk students, including providing support during the transition from middle grades to high school. These programs can also monitor credit accumulation and provide academic enrichment aimed at increasing student engagement. In after hours or summer school programs, students can work closely with teachers individually or in small groups to complete the coursework or credits²⁶ they need to catch up. These programs also help students hone the academic skills they need for future academic success.

Schools can also provide summer school enrichment programs to increase engagement. During the program, which may last between 4 and 6 hours per day for 4–6 weeks, students are exposed to a variety of experiences that target key academic areas, such as mathematics, science, or reading.²⁷

Principle 4:

Implement programs to improve behavior and social skills.

Schools can help students identify, understand, and self-regulate their emotions and interactions with peers and adults. Doing so can help mitigate problematic and disruptive behaviors both in and out of the classroom as students learn how to interact and communicate positively. This type of skill development also helps students consider the long-term consequences of their actions.

Practice 1: *Use adult advocates to help students establish attainable academic and behavioral goals.*

Adult advocates (see Principle 2), mentors, teachers, or counselors can help students set realistic goals for interacting with peers and teachers at school, progressing academically, or improving in other areas.¹⁶ Students can take responsibility for their behavior by setting personal benchmarks such as “turn in daily homework” or “attend all classes in a week.”

Practice 2: *Recognize student accomplishments.*

Students should be provided with frequent positive rewards and recognition for accomplishments based on their progress towards goals. Teachers should hold recognition ceremonies and make calls home to acknowledge students’ meeting goals, improving attendance, or completing exceptional schoolwork.^{16, 28}

Practice 3: *Teach strategies to strengthen problem-solving and decision-making skills.*

Problem-solving or decision-making curricula can be integrated with existing curricula, or students can participate in a life-skills course. Students should be targeted for participation in small group seminars, possibly facilitated by adult advocates or other staff teams during advisory periods, to help them develop these skills.^{1, 16, 17, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34} Topics should include problem recognition and evaluation, goal setting, planning and organization, anticipating roadblocks, and controlling anger and expressing emotion. Emphasis should be placed on developing cooperative learning skills and positive relationships with staff, teachers, and students.²⁷

Practice 4: *Establish partnerships with community-based program providers and other agencies, such as social services, welfare, mental health, and law enforcement.*

External factors may be the root cause of problematic classroom behavior and/or low achievement. Coordination with community-based program providers, social services, child welfare, and law enforcement agencies will help students meet needs outside of school.^{16, 27, 34, 35}

PRACTICE 4 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Behavior Program (Larson & Rumberger, 1995)

The Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) program initially was developed and tested in a heavily Latino middle school in Los Angeles and showed significant effects in reducing dropout rates. ALAS students received 10 weeks of problem-solving instruction and two years of follow-up problem-solving prompting and counseling, along with school survival problem-solving instruction. Key themes of the ten-week course were teaching students how to do the following:

- Recognize when a problem first begins.
 - Identify and define problems clearly.
 - Control impulsive reactions.
 - Overlook irritations that are best ignored.
 - Identify emotions.
 - Set clear and realistic goals for the short- and long-term.
 - Evaluate one's own competence for solving a problem.
 - Think of a variety of potential solutions.
 - Develop a step-by-step plan.
 - Anticipate the roadblocks and pitfalls when taking action.
 - Be assertive and socially appropriate when facing peer pressure or criticism.
 - Sustain persistence and effort when frustrated.
 - Control anger and express emotions appropriately and effectively.
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Principle 5:

Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.

A personalized learning environment is one in which students and teachers know one another.^{24, 26} In this type of environment, the more extensive personal interaction allows teachers to get to know each student's strengths and preferred way to learn. Students who interact with teachers more often will feel more engaged in learning.

Practice 1: Implement team teaching and smaller classes.

One way to provide more teachers per student is to pair teachers in the same classroom, which provides for common lesson-planning and decision-making^{36, 37} and gives students access to more than one teacher who can offer individualized attention or new perspectives. Smaller classes are another way to support more teacher-student interaction.^{36, 37} While there is no research to indicate whether any particular class size is optimal for middle grades, smaller classes will generally be advantageous to some extent, assuming teachers take advantage of the relatively small teacher-student ratio and time afforded to them to address individual student needs.

Practice 2: Use the school schedule to create extended time in the classroom.

Implementing block scheduling, extended class periods, or advisory and study periods provides more time for student-teacher and student-student interactions during the day.^{26, 36, 37} Students also have the opportunity to explore topics in greater depth both in groups and as individuals working with the teacher.

Practice 3: Foster after-school activities and encourage participation in them.

Schools should encourage extracurricular activities, such as participating in sports, clubs, or after-school field trips; listening to guest speakers; forging postsecondary partnerships; or joining service groups. Research indicates that participation in outside activities helps create a stronger sense of engagement in the community, encourages students to connect with peers and teachers, and provides a setting in which creative activities can be pursued beyond the rigors of classroom instruction.³⁸

PRACTICE 1 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Small Learning Communities in the Middle Grades

The Talent Development Model incorporates the idea that innovative approaches to school organization and staffing can increase student efforts and teacher effectiveness.

Consistent with that philosophy, Talent Development schools establish separate learning communities of 200 to 300 students. These small learning communities are organized into vertical houses with teaching teams (two or three teachers) responsible for fewer than 100 students. This model also encourages schools to limit the number of different specialized teachers assigned to each student in middle grades (semi-departmentalization) and, when appropriate, has teachers stay with students for more than one grade level (looping).

The resulting small, stable learning communities are meant to—and do—encourage students, teachers, and families to establish strong bonds and caring relationships.

More information about the Talent Development middle school model can be found at
<http://www.talentdevelopmentsecondary.com/>

Conclusion

The principles and practices in this section draw heavily on the guidelines recommended in the IES practice guide for dropout prevention,³⁹ which itself draws on the intervention reports of the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC); as such, the evidence is generally drawn from effectiveness research that meets the WWC standards for validity. The principles summarized in this chapter are grounded in the most valid evidence available at the time this document was written: the authors reviewed the research literature that underpins the WWC intervention reports and practice guides and then tailored the recommended practices to the middle grades and to other principles laid out in the MSM Platform.

The principles presented here are state of the art, based on evidence-supported approaches effective in reducing dropping out. Many areas of education research suffer gaps, and dropout prevention is no exception. Investments in research on dropout prevention occurred in the 1990s and tapered off as attention (and support for research) shifted in recent years to other topics related to the No Child Left Behind Act. A few prominent models to reduce dropout have emerged recently, such as Talent Development³⁷ and First Things First.³⁶ Generally, however, continuing large-scale experimentation to examine different approaches and programmatic strategies is lacking. Nonetheless, waiting for more to be known is ill advised. Dropping out continues to be common and needs to be addressed. Just as waiting for more evidence of effective medical treatments should not preclude using the most effective treatments currently known, we need to do what we can now for students who are disengaging from school.

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Dropout Prevention

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School Climate, Culture, and Partnerships

To support middle grades students and their families in improving student success, schools can create a shared vision for high academic achievement and success that is supported by the entire school staff and that reflects the vision of the community for its children. This involves developing a shared belief among staff members that they can collectively enable students to succeed and the creation of a school environment in which mutually supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents can develop. Then there can be a focused school wide effort to improve attendance, behavior, and student achievement.

Secondly, school, family, and community partnerships are important to maximize learning opportunities and success for students. Engaging families can begin by communicating the school's high academic expectations for the students. In addition, parents and other family members can be provided with education that will improve understanding of the steps students need to take to be successful in reaching high academic and educational attainment. Such education can also convey how families can support their children in completing the steps and actions that will lead to such attainment. Students and their families may have needs that the school cannot provide for; therefore, it is important to find community resources and partnerships that can be matched to students' needs so that community resources are appropriately leveraged to support families and provide for their needs.

The following section lays out principles for schools to follow in implementing change that will affect the school climate, culture, and partnerships (across schools, families, and communities) in a positive way.

Principle 1:

Create a *can do* school culture marked by a shared mission among the staff members that centers on academic achievement and a shared belief that they can collectively enable students to succeed.

In the middle grades, students interact with a wider array of adults than they did in the elementary grades, and students need to receive a consistent and common message—that they can and will learn and achieve. This experience needs to be actively built and managed. In particular, when educating large numbers of students with high degrees of educational and behavioral challenges, as is often the case in high-poverty environments, adults need high levels of collective efficacy and trust to create the uniform and consistent experiences students need to succeed.^{1, 2}

Practice 1: *Organize the school around teams of teachers working collectively with a common set of students that is stable and of a manageable number.*

The principal should provide teacher teams with a common work time; facilitation and training around working as a team; access to information on effective practices; benchmark data on student performance, progress, and engagement (attendance and behavior); and mechanisms for obtaining additional supports for their students. The principal also needs to actively empower teacher teams and hold them accountable for raising student achievement.

Practice 2: *Establish a distributive leadership structure so that all key stakeholders are involved in school decision-making and committed to do what it takes to raise student achievement, with time and effort invested in mission building among the staff.*

For example, within organized teacher teams, one teacher should serve as the team leader responsible for organizing and facilitating teacher team meetings and serving on a school wide leadership committee. Principals can empower teacher teams by establishing clear parameters under which they can exercise authority (i.e., alternating the daily schedule within their team, establishing incentive systems for good student behavior and work, deciding how to apply small discretionary funds to advance student achievement, setting up a schedule for peer-based classroom observations, or selecting at least some of the core improvement goals they will work on for the year). Principals should then hold team leaders and their teams accountable for productive and focused collaborative work and gains in student achievement.

PRACTICE 1 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Methods of Teacher Team Organization

There are a number of different ways to organize teachers and students to create teams of teachers working with a common set of students. In sixth grade, for example, one teacher could teach mathematics and science to two or three classes of students, and another could teach English and social studies to the same classes of students. The schedule could be organized so that both teachers have collaborative work time scheduled when their classes are taking electives.

Alternatively, the school can be organized on a block schedule consisting of four longer periods and one shorter period, with students organized into homerooms that travel together throughout the day. A four-person team consisting of a mathematics, English, science, and social studies teacher could then teach the same set of students and have a collaborative work period during the shorter period when students are in electives.

Principle 2:

Create a school environment in which mutually supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents can develop.

Student success is greatest when teachers, students, and parents are collectively working together to enable student success.^{2,3} The actions of each group can positively reinforce the others or work at cross-purposes. If any one group feels unsupported by the other, it can lead to reduced effort.

Practice 1: *Use surveys to gather information on school climate and culture.*

Schools should use validated survey instruments to annually survey students, teachers, and parents about their views on the school climate and culture, their sense of school belonging, and the effort they put forth.

Practice 2: *Use teams of parents, teachers, administrators, and students to analyze survey data and to create and implement action plans based on the needs the survey identified.*

The creation of teams of parents, teachers, administrators, and students who can analyze the results and use them to create yearly action plans to improve student-teacher-family relationships is also recommended.

Principle 3:

Engage in school wide efforts to increase student attendance, promote positive behaviors, and increase student effort (where needed).

It is during the middle grades that students make an independent decision about their level of school engagement. When significant numbers of students are chronically absent, regularly misbehave, or put forth limited effort, their behavior can have substantial negative impacts on school wide academic success.² If these behaviors reach a critical mass, they need to be addressed with school wide prevention and action, rather than on an individual basis.

Practice 1: *Measure and analyze data on chronic absenteeism, suspensions, and sustained mild misbehavior.*

At the grade and classroom level, principals and teachers should track and monitor how many students are missing 10 to 19 percent and 20 percent or more of school days; how many attend nearly every day; and how many engage in behaviors that lead to suspensions, mild sustained misbehavior, and office referrals. Principals and teachers/school teams should analyze the data to identify patterns and trends and then act upon the information.

Practice 2: *When chronic absenteeism and student misbehavior are at significant levels, implement evidence-based, whole-school strategies to prevent and reduce these behaviors.*

Typically, effective programs come to an agreement among the adults at the school on what constitutes good attendance and appropriate behavior so that these behaviors can be set as expectations and reinforced. Public announcements that recognize students who exhibit good behavior are important because they clearly communicate that this outcome is important. The results of

this positive reinforcement are increased attendance and improved behavior at the classroom and individual levels. In the same way, consistent reactions to poor attendance and behavior (e.g., every absence brings a constructive response from the school) and problem-solving responses/mechanisms when students do not respond to school wide efforts² will help bring about the needed change.

Attendance is an area where benchmarks can be set, data can be collected, and parents can become involved to ensure on-track-to-high-school readiness for middle grades students. Recommendations to improve attendance rates include the following:⁴

- Gather data on attendance in a way that is informative to direct future action. For example, keep track of the number of students who have good attendance (absent 5 or fewer days per year), moderate absence (10 to 19 days per year), chronic absence (20 or more days per year), and extreme absence (40 or more days per year).
- Reach out to students with absenteeism to let them know they are missed, learn more about why they are absent, and help them solve any challenges.
- Recognize individual good attendance, as well as classes that reach attendance goals.
- Provide an opportunity for students to make up missed assignments.
- Survey students about their reason for missing school, any concerns they may have about school safety, and their level of engagement in school.
- Identify clusters of students (by homeroom or other grouping) that have more negative feelings about their experience at school than other students to problem-solve issues that may be specific to their experiences as a group.

PRACTICE 1 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Using Data to Understand Absences

A sixth grade team had been working hard to reduce the level of chronic absenteeism among its students and was making some progress, but it also noticed that a subset of students had not responded to their efforts to date. The team charted the attendance of these students by day for three months and invited members of the school's student support team, which included an assistant principal, the counselor, and a part-time social worker, to look at the data with them. This collaboration helped them recognize that most of the absences were occurring at consistent times across the months. The counselor and social worker shared that most of the students came from families that were struggling economically, and the absences seemed to be occurring at the times when family resources were low.

The teacher and student support teams connected with local community-based organizations to organize food and clothing resources to be available at the school during these predictable time periods so that by coming to school, students could get help with their needs.

Principle 4:

Focus the school-family partnership on communicating to students the importance of high academic and educational aspirations and showing the steps that need to be taken to actualize these aspirations.

In early adolescence, students need to hear a combined and consistent message from school and home that it is important they attend school, behave, and try, and that if they do, there is a clear and understandable pathway to adult success. Parents have goals and aspirations for their children but sometimes they lack an understanding of what is needed to improve their academic success and preparation for postsecondary success. This work with parents is a two-way communication to connect the goals of the family, the needs of the student, and what is needed for success in the middle grades and beyond.

Practice 1: *Provide parents, supportive adults, and students with information on the important role the middle grades play in high school readiness, high school graduation, and postsecondary success.*

Parents, supportive adults, and students need to be informed through multiple means, such as mailings and emails, about start-of-year meetings, report card conferences, and similar school events. The importance of regular attendance and hard work needs to be particularly stressed as, historically, the middle grades are often viewed as a resting place between elementary and high school while students go through the developmental changes of early adolescence. The data, however, is clear that students who develop poor attendance habits in middle grades, do not complete their assignments, and begin to get in trouble have considerably lower odds of high school and postsecondary success. This message needs to be communicated to parents, supportive adults, and students early and often.

Practice 2: *Create and provide parents and students with ready access to high school readiness benchmarks.*

Beyond information on the importance of middle grades success, it is important to provide parents, supportive adults, and students with an easy-to-understand set of benchmarks to let them know the student is on track for high school readiness. These key individuals should be provided information on what is considered good attendance (missing 5 or fewer days in a year) and what constitutes acceptable course performance (B or better average) and behavior (showing evidence of employing the positive academic and healthy behaviors). Likewise, off-track behaviors (missing 20 or more days, failing core courses, and exhibiting sustained misbehavior) and the extent to which students are currently exhibiting these behaviors should also be communicated. These benchmarks should be accompanied by tips on how students can improve.^{5, 6}

Practice 3: *Make adult participation a critical part of your process.*

Create mechanisms to foster participation by parents or supportive adults that recognizes their interests but accommodates real-world constraints. One evidence-based approach is to form an action team that focuses on one core goal each year. *Action teams* are composed of parents, teachers, school administrators, and, often, students and community members. These team members interact with the schools to identify key needs that can be enhanced through parental and/or community involvement. Team members can develop action plans based on evidence-based practice, distribute roles and responsibilities among team members to implement plans, and meet regularly to review progress and adjust actions. Often, these plans are year-long campaigns with focused and sustained efforts on clear and meaningful tasks. They have been shown to have greater impact than more generalized efforts to increase parental involvement.⁴

PRACTICE 2 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Creating Student Engagement in Their Own On-Track Status

Three times a year, students could participate in a report card conference in school with an adult who is not their teacher. Following a rubric, the student and adult could examine the report card and discuss obstacles to success and strategies for improvement. Once a year, the student could lead this conference and invite his or her parent(s) or guardian(s) to attend. Part of the conference would be a review of the extent to which the student is on track to succeed in high school, where evidence of attendance, behavior, effort, and academic performance is examined. The outcome of the conference would be either recognition that the student is on track or development of a plan of action for him or her to get on track. If a plan is developed, it would be signed by the student, parents, and teachers so all parties acknowledge the needed change and plan of action. Progress would then be reviewed in the next conference and changes made to the plan if needed.

Principle 5:

Conduct student-need and -asset analyses and select community partners and supports based on student need. Design and manage a plan to link community supports to success in school and use common metrics to gauge their impact.

Too often, community supports are co-located in schools but not integrated into the school day or directly linked with student needs in school. Schools often say yes to multiple community partners, believing any support will help, but by not selecting supports against an analysis of student needs or holding community support organizations to common outcomes, impacts are often minimal, and at times, more distracting than beneficial. Schools should invest in coordinating this community support and involvement.

Practice 1: *Create and maintain on-site, in-school coordination and monitoring of community support programs.*

Evidence indicates that the impact of community supports is maximized when there is on-site, in-school coordination; when partner selection is driven by needs assessment and evidence of impact; and when there is close monitoring of student participation and its impact on student outcomes to ensure that the right students are getting the right supports with the intensity required. To help ensure success with community supports, all partners should align their impacts against a common set of metrics linked to student success in school (see *Practice 1 Example Application*).

PRACTICE 1 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Schools and Communities Working Together

The leader of a school calls together all of the community organizations that work in the school. He or she asks them to appoint a coordinator who can be a single point of contact. The leader also asks the groups to work collectively with him or her to achieve the school's top priority of the year, which is to ensure that all students complete their assignments successfully and on time. The leader asks the community groups to design a plan where they align their resources against this goal and meet with him or her quarterly to assess progress.

Conclusion

All of the principles in this section are supported by a moderate-to-solid evidence base ranging from regression studies and quasi-experimental matched comparison studies to randomized control trials. The importance of a *can do* culture and mutually supportive school climate is grounded in a research synthesis by the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning¹ and studies of the Chicago Consortium on School Research.⁷ While the latter focused on K–8 schools in Chicago, much of what was learned is directly applicable to middle grades intervention and can be applied here.

School, family, and community strategies are supported by the extensive research conducted by Joyce Epstein and her team at Johns Hopkins University,⁸ as well as others in the field, and recent quasi-experimental and randomized control studies conducted by the Communities In Schools program⁹ upheld the power of organizing community supports against a needs assessment, having these efforts organized by on-site coordination, and measuring success by common metrics.

Some of the practices and most of the practice examples shown in this section are best-practice applications based on current understanding supported by or derived from the foundational research described above. While these practices and examples have not been rigorously evaluated to date, the data support their use.

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Student Behavior and Motivation

The mission of public schools is not only to impart academic knowledge to students but also to educate students to become productive, well-functioning citizens. Positive behaviors contribute to a student's success in school, while maladaptive behaviors prohibit learning. In fact, past research has found preliminary evidence that behavioral skills are not just important for the social development of students but that both positive and negative behavior shows relationships with academic outcomes.¹

Similarly, for students to succeed, they need to try to master their schoolwork and push through the difficulties they will encounter. Yet, the evidence is clear that the more years a student spends in school, the more their motivation to do so wanes. According to two Gallup polls of public school students, eight out of ten elementary students report high levels of academic effort even in the face of challenges, but just six out of ten middle grades students and only four out of ten high school students report the same.^{2, 3} These results signal changes in how students view their relationship to schooling as they age. It is in the middle grades that students tend to formulate an independent answer to the question, "Is schooling for me?" Some students conclude that, even when boring or hard, school is a place that will help them achieve important life outcomes. They have a sense that they belong there and are cared for and that if they try, they can succeed. Other students come to believe that school is largely an unpleasant and even sometimes hostile environment where they feel alone and unsupported. As a result, they seek to simply endure it for as long as they can with the minimum amount of effort and investment required. This internal decision on the value of schooling and their connectedness to it, as well as the subsequent decline in motivation through the middle grades, is greatly shaped and influenced by actions taken by middle schools. For example, the Gallup polls show large declines through the middle grades in the percentage of students reporting that they received recognition for "doing good schoolwork in the last week."^{2, 3} In short, at the very time students are looking for reaffirmation that schooling is for them, teachers start providing less regular feedback to students (i.e., that if they try, they will succeed and that adults in the school value their effort).

According to research, there are three key principles schools should implement to support student behavior, and there are three areas where schools can increase student motivation in the middle grades. What follows are descriptions of these principles, which are related to improved student outcomes, as well as specific practices—actions that schools can take to accomplish each principle. As appropriate, an illustration is provided to show how the practice might be implemented.

Principle 1:

Consistently teach, model, and recognize appropriate and positive academic and social behaviors across all classrooms.

By modeling, teaching, and encouraging appropriate behaviors, educators can significantly reduce students' antisocial and maladaptive behaviors that reduce and inhibit effective classroom instruction and student learning.⁴

Practice 1: *Modify and reduce maladaptive classroom behavior through consistent teaching, modeling, and recognition of positive classroom behaviors.*

A strong body of evidence at the elementary school level, and growing body of evidence at the middle grades level, suggests that maladaptive classroom behaviors, such as acting out, being disrespectful, and not paying attention, can be modified and reduced through consistent teaching, modeling, and recognition of more positive classroom behaviors.⁴

Maladaptive classroom behaviors can be reduced by teaching students how to appropriately and respectfully gain attention from adults and students, how to effectively participate in group activities (disagree without being disagreeable), and how to develop emotional awareness and self-regulation (learn to recognize situations or behaviors that lead to negative behaviors and have alternative strategies ready). The following table provides strategies.

Positive behaviors need to be taught like any other skill—by breaking them down into concrete, teachable steps, explaining to students the rationale for learning the skill, creating opportunities for guided and independent practice, prompting and cuing students about the use of the behavioral skills, and recognizing the effective use of the skills. In order for students to internalize the new behavioral norms, they need to be consistently taught and recognized across the classrooms students participate in. What follows are some sample topics for teachers to use with students to assist them in developing appropriate behavior skills.

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING APPROPRIATE BEHAVIORAL SKILLS

A structured plan for academic instruction centered on developing behavioral skills is needed. Some recommended instructional strategies are provided in Table 1.

Strategy	Description
Introduce skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explain the specific appropriate behavioral skill to the students.• Provide examples of why it is a school norm.
Provide clear steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Break down the skill for appropriate behavior into a few concrete steps that can be modeled and practiced.
Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide examples of how the skill is applied in different settings.• Use role-play and stories to demonstrate the behavior you want to see.
Guided and Independent Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide time for students to practice the behavior independently and with other students through role-play guided by the teacher.• Have the teacher provide feedback afterward.
Reminders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a prompt to remind students to use their skill(s) whenever a situation arises.
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide feedback with specific information about the positive ways that students implemented the new skill.• Make suggestions to move students toward improved mastery of the skill, if needed. (Over time, such prompts and encouragement can be reduced.)
Reinforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• As students continue to learn and apply new skills, periodically review and reinforce prior skills.

Source: Adapted from Epstein, et al. (2008)⁴

Table 1. Instructional strategies to help students develop skills for appropriate behavior

TOPICS FOR DEVELOPING APPROPRIATE BEHAVIORAL SKILLS

Teachers can assist students with developing appropriate behaviors by providing examples, guided practice, and feedback in the following areas:

- Gaining attention from the teacher in an appropriate and respectful manner
 - Gaining attention from peers in an appropriate and respectful manner
 - Taking turns sharing, communicating ideas, cooperating, and problem-solving during small group settings
 - Self-monitoring and self-managing one's social behavior and completion of academic work
 - Developing emotional awareness, tolerance, self-regulation of emotions, and personal responsibility
-

Principle 2:

Provide classroom instruction in self-monitoring and regulation, academic organization and study skills, goal setting, persistence, and healthy behaviors.

Self-monitoring and regulation, academic organization and study skills, goal setting, persistence, and healthy behaviors have all been linked to academic achievement.⁴ In the past, students who developed these behaviors, often through home or out-of-school experiences, succeeded in achieving greater academic excellence. Since it is imperative that all middle grades students be on a path to high school and college- and career-readiness, it is important to provide all students with the opportunity to acquire these essential skills.

Practice 1: Teach academic and healthy behaviors that support success in school.

Provide entering middle grades students with learning experiences that explicitly teach academic organization and study skills, as well as self-monitoring and regulation. The content of the course can be organized around career exploration and college readiness, which then provides a context for teaching goal-setting and healthy behaviors (e.g., stress management, proper diet and sleep, etc.). For example, through a series of career exploration and goal-setting activities, middle grades students can take a self-assessment to show them a broad range of careers that match their interests. Students could then be asked to research the educational qualifications of these careers by using the Cornell note-taking method learned in class.

Practice 2: Embed the self-monitoring and regulation, academic organization and study skills, goal-setting, persistence, and healthy behavior skills into the academic courses students take throughout the middle grades.

For students to internalize the academic and healthy behaviors they are taught, the behaviors need to be applied throughout students' middle grades experience. Teams of teachers can work collectively during common planning periods to infuse reminders and explicit uses of the behaviors into students' core courses. Additionally, teacher teams or the entire school can collaboratively identify a small set of positive academic and healthy behaviors, and formally incorporate student progress in these areas into report cards or progress reports. Students who are identified as needing improvement in a given area should then be provided additional learning experiences.

Practice 3: Provide students with opportunities to practice and employ these skills through service learning projects, as well as high interest and participatory electives with strong cognitive content like drama, debate, and robotics.

One good way for middle grades students to develop important academic and healthy behaviors is through activities linked to their developmental needs, including activities for adventure and camaraderie. Service learning, in which teams of students participate in the design and execution of a service project, as well as electives that combine rich cognitive content with teamwork, performance, and tangible outcomes over relatively short durations (a few weeks or a month or two) are particularly well-suited for this task. What follows are types of opportunities and activities students can participate in to practice healthy behaviors.

PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH STRUCTURED HEALTHY BEHAVIOR OPPORTUNITIES

Many activities can be structured at school to engage students and allow them to practice healthy behaviors. A few suggestions are provided in Table 2.

Type of Opportunity	Description of Activities
High Engagement Electives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debate • Drama • Robotics • Chess • Other educational experiences that students can engage in and derive success from despite areas of academic weakness
Adventure and Camaraderie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group projects • Service learning opportunities • School improvement (facilities, morale, etc.): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Plant a garden ○ Plan a school spirit activity ○ Paint a classroom
Recognition for Achievement of Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of class goals by students with teacher support • Development of goals related to behavior by students • Class recognition upon goal completion
Learning Organizational and Self-Management Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study skills and organizational skills (e.g., note-taking, time management, study strategies) taught and modeled by teachers • Positive social skills and conflict resolution modeled by teachers and practiced by students through role-play

Source: Adapted from Balfanz (2009)⁵

Table 2. Opportunities to practice healthy behavior while building on student strengths and interests

Principle 3:

Establish processes for identifying problem behaviors early, diagnosing their causes, identifying effective interventions, applying the interventions at the scale and intensity required, and monitoring their effectiveness.

The earlier problem behaviors are identified and understood, the more likely that an intervention will succeed. If schools do not have a well thought-out process for early identification that matches interventions to student needs and monitors them for effectiveness, student supports tend to be ad hoc, uncoordinated, driven by triage, and, as a result, both expensive and ineffective.

Practice 1: *Implement an intervention framework generalized to student attendance, behavior, and course performance.*

Effective intervention frameworks will include whole-school prevention programs, targeted supports of moderate intensity or duration delivered to groups of students, and cases managed with one-on-one or one-on-few support. Schools should make early warning indicator data available to teacher teams and other adults who provide student supports (counselors, community-based organizations, and national service corps members). Schools should also analyze the data to ensure that student supports of sufficient intensity and scale are available. On a regular basis, teacher teams and other student support providers should meet and review the early warning indicator data, assign students to appropriate interventions, monitor student progress and intervention effectiveness, and make adjustments as needed. An example of this follows in the *Practice 1 Example Application*.

It is important to view effective classroom instruction and academic intervention in each core content as the cornerstone of school wide prevention, while recognizing that a subset of students will need support beyond a good lesson every day. Early warning and multi-tiered intervention systems also need to be integrated into school wide data efforts led by the school leadership team and should not be seen as stand-alone activities done by a separate team of student support providers. A few recommendations for steps to understand and change student behavior are shown in Table 3.

PRACTICE 1 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Teacher Communication

In the middle grades, multiple teachers often share students. Therefore, it is important for teachers to have time and opportunity to talk with each other about shared students who need to change their behavior. During these meetings of teacher teams, the following activities can be used to gather information and generate strategies for handling student behavior challenges⁶:

- Share observations about a specific student's behavior (time of day, frequency, setting, etc.).
- Share ideas about action steps a teacher can implement in the classroom to address the behavior and reduce the impact on the rest of the class.
- Share lesson plans or lesson plan ideas for engaging students in a way that might reduce the behavior.
- If the student is shared by multiple teachers, other teachers can exchange information about the extent to which the behavior occurs in their class, the triggers, and any strategies that work to reduce or eliminate the behavior in their class.
- Share strategies for engaging parents in a discussion about the behavior of their child.
- Involve the school principal if a change in school policy would help address the behavior for this and other students.

Action Steps	Considerations
Describe the behavior and its effect on student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be concrete in the description of the behavior. • Include details about the setting in which the behavior occurred. • Specify the time and frequency of the behavior. • Explain the extent to which the behavior impacts the student's learning and/or the learning of others.
Consider factors that may contribute to the student's behavior.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the behavior influenced by cultural or linguistic differences? • Does the student have the academic skills to complete the task that was required when the behavior occurred? • Does the student have the necessary behavioral skills for the situation in which the behavior occurred? • Has there been any new stress or trauma in the student's life or family?
Gather data on the frequency and setting of the behavior.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What patterns exist between the occurrence of the behavior and other environmental settings? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Location of behavior ○ Time(s) of day, class periods ○ Subjects or classes where behavior occurs or does not occur ○ Assignment student is working on ○ Level of difficulty of the assignment • Specific peers or adults present when the behavior occurs • Ask parents if the behavior occurs at home and the context of its occurrence. • Ask other teachers if the behavior occurs when the student is in their classroom and the context of its occurrence.
Identify what or who might be instigating or reinforcing the behavior.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What need might this behavior be fulfilling? • Is there a certain environment that seems to trigger the behavior? • Are there certain students or adults who are with the student each time the behavior occurs? • Are there any specific curriculum or instruction variables that seem to trigger the behavior? • Are there certain seating arrangements where the behavior is more common (rows, small groups, pairs)?
Identify what happens after the behavior in terms of teacher and student reactions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the student react after the behavior? • Is the student being positively reinforced by the teacher or the students after the behavior? • Are there any consequences that might be reinforcing the behavior?

Source: Adapted from Epstein, et al. (2008)⁴

Table 3. Action steps for identifying problem behaviors and their causes

Practice 2: *Connect teachers to one another or to mentors to help with ongoing problem solving, student behavior, and any other classroom management needs.*

If data reviews identify a classroom or group of classrooms with higher than average attendance, behavior, or course performance problems, assign a peer teacher, mentor, or instructional coach to observe the classroom. Then, depending on what is learned, either develop targeted professional development supports that address the issue or provide the classroom with additional student and family support. When a particular classroom or set of classrooms exhibits higher than average problematic behaviors, it is typically for one of two reasons: (1) either the teacher has not yet developed the set of classroom management and instructional delivery skills needed to succeed with the students, or (2) the level of student and family need in the particular classroom is very high. What is required in these situations is a neutral investigation of the classroom dynamics from someone who can either provide or design the additional teacher supports needed or who can work with the school leadership and teacher teams to enhance the level of student and family support being provided. In some cases, the solution may involve changing classroom dynamics by altering the composition of students in the classroom.⁶

Principle 4:

Make the value of schooling personal.

We often tell students that schooling is essential for their success in life. This is often communicated in broad terms: “If you don’t go to college, you won’t get a good job.” For middle grades students who are 11 and 12 years old, this is a distant reality. A growing number of studies have shown, however, that small activities that cause students to reflect on and make connections between what they are learning and their current and future lives can have strong, positive impacts. Emerging research also suggests that when these connections include a potential link to the wider world beyond oneself, effort on even tedious but important learning tasks is increased.⁷

Practice 1: *Engage students in activities that allow them to reflect on the influence school will have on their future life and goals.*

Having students write short reflective paragraphs every few weeks on the usefulness of specific course material (what they are currently learning in math, English, science or social studies) to their lives has been linked to higher levels of interest in the material and course grades.⁸ A variation on this is to have middle grades students create time capsules that show what their lives will be like at age 25 and the impact that schooling and important decisions and actions had on their life. In both cases, the key seems to be not simply telling students that school matters for their future lives, but providing them the opportunity to actively reflect on it in very personal ways.

Principle 5:

Create a sense of belonging for all students.

The middle grades are a very tough time for students' sense of self and perception of feeling welcomed by others. Research indicates a key intervention is to show students that a sense of not belonging at the start of a new phase of schooling, (e.g., entering the middle grades), is normal and fades over time. This helps shift student perspective from an internal one, such as "I don't fit in," to an external one—that all sixth graders feel like this in one way or another.

Practice 1: *Include information on social integration in middle school transition programs.*

The evidence suggests that middle grades transition programs are likely important and that they should include more than just purely logistical information (e.g., *here is how your schedule works* or *this is how lockers open*). Including material on social integration into middle school and how all students often feel out of place at the start but find that these feelings fade over time, may help students make a smoother transition.

The emerging evidence also indicates the merit of sharing older middle school students' essays, in which they discuss how they initially felt out of place but found a sense of belonging, and then asking incoming students to write essays on how they relate to these feelings.⁹

These preventive efforts may also have to be paired with more targeted efforts like anti-bullying campaigns.

Practice 2: *Carefully frame academic tasks to reduce the risk of stereotype threats.*

A related challenge for some students is a stereotype threat. There are widely disseminated beliefs in our society that individuals from different racial and ethnic groups, as well as genders, "naturally" perform better or worse on different academic tasks. A growing body of research has shown that these stereotypes can have very subtle but profound impacts on a student's sense of belonging and motivation in school. High-quality research has shown that the impact is greatest on the most challenging problems or toughest academic tasks. In these circumstances, just small amounts of distraction caused by the student reflecting on the stereotype diverts enough mental focus to undermine success on tasks that require all available mental effort to complete. The research has also shown that a stereotype threat can be manufactured for anyone. We are all susceptible to the shadow of doubt in our ability to succeed on tasks.¹⁰

Be careful in how tasks are described to students and parents, and when possible, reduce the potential for a stereotype threat (e.g., by pointing out, "Research has shown that boys and girls perform equally well on these types of math problems.")¹¹

Principle 6:

Connect students' academic success to effort.

It is often in early adolescence that students become increasingly exposed to views that abilities are fixed (e.g., a student is “good at math” or “bad at writing”). This leads students to focus on their perceived strengths and withdraw effort from areas of perceived challenge. This viewpoint breaks the critical connection between effort and academic success. If students come to believe they are good at a subject because they are “smart” or not good at a subject because they are “bad at it” (e.g., “I am not a math person.”), then their overall level of effort may well decline.¹²

Practice 1: *Set high expectations for students and clearly communicate those expectations and the belief in their potential to succeed when providing feedback to students.*

A growing body of interdisciplinary research has shown that direct instruction in advisories or as part of core instruction, as well as teachers' communication with students, makes it possible to push back against views on ability-driven outcomes. Students can be taught that making errors is normal and leads to useful learning opportunities. This strengthens students' belief that with effort and productive persistence, they can succeed on challenging tasks, learn new things, and improve their academic skills. This in turn leads to greater effort by students and, through it, higher grades. For example, research has shown that middle grades students are much more likely to revise essays if they receive feedback that says, “I am giving you these comments because I have high standards and I know you can meet them” rather than a more neutral statement like, “Here is some feedback on your paper.”¹³

Practice 2: *Eliminate the use of indiscriminate incentive programs and unearned praise.*

Research has shown that two common approaches to improving student motivation, incentives and generic praise, either don't work or work only in narrow circumstances and can often have unintended negative consequences. While it is true that people broadly respond to incentives, it is also clear that building effective incentive systems to increase student effort is very difficult and often counter-productive. Compelling evidence has shown that incentives work only when the action being incentivized is fully under the control of the student and is directly related to important school outcomes. Thus, incentives have been shown to be more effective in increasing the number of books elementary students read than in having middle grades students improve their grades or attend school more regularly. Students can directly control whether they read another book, but they often do not fully know or understand how to raise their grades.¹⁴

There is also clear evidence that if not well conceived and executed, incentive systems can lead to decreased effort among some groups and across many students over time. For example, if students conclude they will never perform well enough to receive an incentive, they may in fact decrease their engagement and effort. Incentives may also inhibit students from seeing the value of the activity itself, and eventually, the lure of the incentive may decrease, leaving them less motivated over time.

Evidence also shows that indiscriminate praise or recognition of participation does not lead to increased motivation. Unearned praise sends the signal that effort does not matter. As the Gallup polls^{2, 3} show, the key feedback students are looking for, and what currently declines precipitously in the middle grades, is not praise for being who they are, but rather recognition for doing good schoolwork.

Conclusion

There is growing experimental literature showing the benefits of school wide positive behavior strategies and lesser literature on school wide attendance campaigns. The evidence base for teaching positive social and academic behaviors across classrooms is well explored in an Institute of Education Sciences (IES) practice guide,¹⁵ which provides recommendations for reducing high school dropout rates and presents intervention strategies that have been proven to work.

In recent years, a fair amount of high-quality research has shown that when educators help middle grades students develop a strong sense that schooling is for them and support them in their academic efforts, students can succeed academically. The other good news is that, by and large, this research has shown that relatively small changes in what schools do and how teachers interact with students can have substantial impacts on increasing student motivation.¹⁶

In addition to the IES guide on dropout prevention,¹⁵ an increasing number of quasi-experimental and randomized control trials have shown positive impacts of providing instruction in academic organization, self-regulation, and goal setting. Since these studies focused on a single component or program, the impact of more comprehensive and integrated efforts has yet to be determined; however, early identification of problem behaviors and how to meet them is supported by a wealth of research in the public health domain. Some of the practices and most of the practice examples shown in this section are best-practice applications based on current understanding supported by or derived from the foundational research described above. While these practices and examples have not been rigorously evaluated to date, the data support their use.

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Extended Learning Time (ELT)

Middle grades schools can provide students with opportunities to learn outside the school day. The best opportunities should be integrated with the regular school day by connecting with the academic program students already participate in.^{1, 2, 3, 4} School staff should align any program with what is going on in the school. This might include aligning with important deadlines (e.g., student project due dates) or extending other key academic activities. To ensure participation in extended learning time, programs should be geared toward meeting the needs of students and making sure that both parents and the community are aware of the programs. What follows are five research- and evidence-based principles to ensure the success of extended learning programs.

Principle 1:

Align the Extended Learning Time (ELT) program academically with the school day.

To improve academic performance, Extended Learning Time (ELT) programs need to align with what students experience during the school day. The ELT program coordinator should communicate regularly with school staff and can work with a designated coordinator from the school to ensure frequent communication takes place. Cooperation between programs and the school helps ELT programs evaluate student needs and provide more effective instruction and services.^{1, 2, 3, 4}

Practice 1: *Use ELT program coordinators to develop relationships and maintain ongoing communication between schools and the ELT program about student academic performance and personal and social issues.*

The ELT coordinator has a critical role to ensure instructional components of the ELT program are aligned with the school day. Coordinators need to obtain information from school staff to guide instruction in the ELT program, through communication with key school staff and/or participation in school meetings and committees. The following are a few ways that coordinators can maintain communication with a school:

- Attend school staff meetings
- Participate in common planning periods
- Serve on school leadership teams
- Participate in parent-teacher organizations

When possible, the ELT coordinator should be housed within the school and be present during daily school hours. By being more visible to students and teachers, the ELT coordinator can create more opportunities to communicate

with teachers, principals, and counselors,⁵ build stronger relationships, and better understand the needs of students.

Practice 2: *Designate a school staff person to coordinate communication with ELT programs.*

Schools should designate a staff member as the school's coordinator to work with the ELT coordinator or with coordinators from multiple ELT programs, if relevant. The school coordinator should be the first point of contact for ELT programs and should ensure that ELT instruction is aligned with school goals.

Practice 3: *Connect ELT instruction to school instruction by identifying school goals and learning objectives.*

Information from the school and district is the basis for prioritizing ELT activities being designed to raise academic achievement. ELT programs can help students develop skills that support classroom instruction, such as learning how to plan, take notes, develop an outline, or study for an upcoming test. When promoting the use of skills from ELT during the school day, instructors should coordinate with classroom teachers to ensure the relevant skill aligns with classroom instruction and does not disrupt classroom routines.² Field trips or cultural activities that are part of the ELT program should connect to something the students are learning in school to help them see how what they learn in school relates to their real-life experiences.

Practice 4: *Coordinate with the school to identify staff for ELT programs.*

ELT programs have several roles for which effective classroom teachers are well suited. Teachers can serve as ELT coordinators, particularly during summer programs when they might not face conflicting demands on their time from regular teaching schedules. When funding is available to hire effective teachers from the school to serve as ELT instructors, these teachers can use their experience and knowledge of instructional methods to maximize academic gains for participating students.

PRINCIPLE 1 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Collaborating to Make the Most of ELT

Schools with ELT should set aside three weekly meetings of about 45 minutes each (up to two hours per week) for teachers to coordinate regular- and extended-day activities. Administrators should attend each meeting and identify common themes and hurdles to help make the most of ELT programs.

Grade/subject meetings: For these meetings led by department heads, all teachers in a grade and subject (such as seventh-grade English language arts teachers) meet to review specific curricular objectives and approaches for tackling them. Material to be covered in regular- and extended-day lessons is reviewed.

Cluster meetings: Facilitated by one teacher, these meetings are attended by teachers responsible for clusters, including subject area teachers of mathematics, ELA, science, and social studies. The cluster groups of teachers discuss individual student progress, curricular issues, and opportunities for cross-curricular collaboration. Material to be covered in the regular- and extended-day lessons is reviewed. Teachers who facilitate the cluster groups may or may not be rotated to allow other teachers the opportunity to participate.

School improvement planning: At these meetings, all teachers in the school review the school's improvement plan and progress toward its objectives. The school administrator chairing the meeting reviews various indicator data and identifies milestones and a plan for reaching them. How the extended day program is supporting school improvement should be reviewed at every school improvement meeting.

Principle 2:

Maximize student participation and attendance.

ELT programs should determine which factors are preventing students from participating and work with schools and parents to address the factors. Parents are critical to participation because they have a strong say in which programs they believe are beneficial to their child, and children generally value their parents' judgment.⁶ Important factors parents take into account when deciding whether their child can participate in an ELT program include location, transportation, timing, length, program offerings, and frequency of services.⁶

Practice 1: *Design program features to meet the needs and preferences of students and parents.*

The ELT program should gather information from parents through a survey and talk with school staff to identify the needs of students and parents, and responses should guide how the program organizes and provides its services. One priority of ELT programs should be to work with schools and districts to ensure design features make the program accessible.^{2, 7, 8, 9} For example, parents often prefer the use of school facilities for services, which eliminates the need to transport students to another location after school,¹⁰ an option that is often not practical for working parents. If the program is not located at the school, or if the program is serving students from multiple schools, schools and districts should ensure that transportation to and from the program is readily available and affordable (or provided at no cost), and that adult supervision is provided while students are being transported.

Practice 2: *Promote awareness of the ELT program within schools and to parents.*

ELT programs should regularly inform parents, teachers, and other school staff about program activities and outcomes. Programs can use websites, flyers distributed at parent meetings, notices on school bulletin boards or in school newsletters, email (if appropriate), social media, and word-of-mouth to provide program location, hours of operation, and contact numbers. The information may need to be available in multiple languages.

Schools can work with ELT providers to promote participation. Teachers and administrators can identify and recruit students who might benefit from participating in the ELT program even one or two days a week. Teachers can provide referrals or informational materials to parents, or give the program a list of students they believe need academic assistance.^{2, 11, 12, 13} Teachers or school administrators can also remind students at the end of the school day about attending the after-school program.

Practice 3: *Use attendance data to identify students facing difficulties in attending the program.*

Program coordinators should systematically collect ELT program attendance data and use it to identify students with low attendance. ELT staff can follow up with school staff to see if the attendance problem extends to the school day. ELT staff could also coordinate with school staff to contact parents and determine the reason for the absences.^{5, 7, 14} Programs can consider using reward incentives, positive reinforcement, or special privileges to encourage regular attendance.

Principle 3:

Adapt instruction to individual and small group needs.

ELT is an opportunity to supplement learning from the school day and assist students whose needs extend beyond the instruction they receive in the classroom. Since ELT programs are shorter than the school day, instruction must be focused and targeted. Determining the most appropriate skills to teach and the right level of difficulty and pace is critical to effectively individualize instruction while making it challenging in practice.^{15, 16} To provide targeted help, instructors first need to assess and document students' academic progress. The assessment can then be used to provide students with instruction that accommodates their level of development and rate of learning.^{15,16}

Practice 1: Use formal and informal assessment to inform academic instruction.

ELT programs can use assessments administered during the school day—combined with input from classroom teachers—to individualize instruction. General assessments can measure a student's content knowledge and mastery of a topic and point to skills that should be emphasized during instruction. The information from assessments should be used to adapt the content, pace, and approach in ELT instruction.^{1, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21} If additional information about student progress is needed, ELT instructors should incorporate formal and informal assessments into tutoring and homework assistance time.^{7, 14, 20, 22}

Practice 2: Break students into small groups and use one-on-one tutoring if possible.

Ideally, ELT programs should use one-on-one tutoring to provide academic instruction to students.^{12, 13, 17, 18, 23, 24} A one-to-one ratio enables the most attention for students and facilitates the continuous assessment of student progress and academic needs.¹⁵

If resources are limited and do not allow for one-on-one tutoring, three to nine students can be grouped,^{2, 10, 14} especially when there will be opportunities for students to work independently.^{15, 16, 24}

Practice 3: Provide professional development and ongoing instructional support to ELT instructors.

In order for ELT instructors to adapt instruction to meet the individual needs of their students, all ELT teachers should participate in a professional development and support program. Schools and districts may have high-quality training and professional development resources, and it may be to the school's benefit to be involved in the training of ELT instructors, many of whom may be classroom teachers or paraprofessional staff. Schools should provide professional development and discuss training options with the ELT program coordinator. Schools should also consider involving ELT program instructors in training and professional development courses at the school and district levels.

EXAMPLE PROGRAM: Enhanced Mathematics Instruction in an After-School Program¹⁴

Using out-of-school time to focus on middle school mathematics instruction has been shown to improve mathematics scores on standardized tests. A study looked at enhanced mathematics instruction using Harcourt School Publisher's *Mathletics* program, which was built around five mathematical themes, or strands: (1) numbers and operations, (2) measurement, (3) geometry, (4) algebra and functions, and (5) data analysis and probability. The program is designed to teach skills that should have been learned in prior school years but were not mastered by students.

Teachers in the after-school program used a planning guide to diagnose each student's performance on the pretests and determine which program activities were appropriate. Students charted their daily progress with a "My Math Fitness Plan" chart, which listed assignments and their completion.

Based on the pretests, students were grouped by grade, with separate materials for grades 2 through 5. Lessons averaged about three hours a week, either in four, 45-minute lessons or in three, 60-minute lessons. Periods were modeled after a gym exercise session, with a short warm-up problem for all students, two, 15-minute workout rotations focused on individual skill-building, and a final whole group cool-down activity related to the warm-up activity.

After the initial warm-up exercise with the teacher, students broke into groups or worked individually during the workout section of the class, with two, 15-minute rotations. The teacher worked with the groups to go over solutions and develop math skills. While teachers worked with groups, other students worked on their own to complete skill packs or computer math activities; some students worked in pairs on math games as well.

Over the course of a week, the teacher tried to meet with each student at least twice, with the goal of having students complete work on at least one or two skill packs per week.

More information about this example of an after-school program can be found at
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pdf/20084021.pdf>

Principle 4:

Provide engaging learning experiences.

ELT programs typically are voluntary and must compete with other activities to attract students; therefore, instruction must be engaging to overcome fatigue and distractions. ELT activities should be interactive, hands-on, learner-directed and related to the real world while remaining grounded in academic learning goals.^{1, 8, 25} Fortunately, ELT programs have the flexibility to provide engaging opportunities for student learning.

Practice 1: *Make learning relevant by incorporating practical examples and connecting instruction to student interests and experiences.*

The ELT program should use tools or materials to which students can relate. ELT staff should identify the academic concept being taught and then find practical examples and relevant material to support that learning objective. When possible, programs should consider integrating academic content using an overarching program theme or final project to reinforce different learning activities and make learning more meaningful.^{5, 8, 9, 19, 26}

Practice 2: *Make learning active through collaborative learning and hands-on academic activities.*

ELT instruction should encourage students to think actively about and interact with academic content. ELT programs can encourage interaction between peers by pairing struggling students with more advanced partners to help grasp difficult concepts.²⁷ ELT instructors can break students into groups to work together to solve a problem or to rotate through learning stations, although effective group exercises can be less formal and as simple as having a group of three students complete a mathematics problem together.^{28, 29} ELT programs can use role-playing activities to make experiences real and meaningful for

students.^{30, 31} Hands-on activities can also be helpful in reinforcing academic content.³²

Practice 3: *Build adult-student relationships among ELT program participants.*

Positive and supportive relationships with adults can help students feel connected to the ELT program and invested in its academic material.^{7, 11, 22, 26, 27, 33} ELT programs can help build adult-student relationships through activities such as field trips, and the programs can help engage students by personalizing activities to fit their interests. As instructors get to know their students, they can pinpoint students' interests, relate academic content to their context and interests, and encourage them to have high expectations.²² To be most effective, ELT programs need to hire staff with backgrounds and interests that complement those of their students.^{5, 25} ELT programs can then use relationship-building activities to help staff get to know students and become invested in their outcomes.^{11, 22}

Principle 5:

Assess program performance and use the results for program improvement.

In implementing the ELT program, organizers should use *formative* evaluations to assess how a program has progressed and which program aspects are working well and *summative* evaluations to assess how effective a program has been in achieving its goals, which usually will include improving student academic outcomes. Both types of evaluations are instrumental in program improvement efforts and should be used in tandem.

ELT providers should put internal mechanisms in place to monitor staff performance and collect data related to program implementation. Schools or districts should then be responsible for evaluating program impacts on students. Evaluation findings can be used to identify problems and develop potential solutions, evaluate conditions under which the program is most effective, or make comparisons with the performance of other programs. These findings can be especially valuable in making long-term decisions about which strategies and programs should be continued or replicated in other areas.

Practice 1: *Develop an evaluation plan for ELT programs.*

An evaluation plan should include evaluation objectives and research questions, as well as details for data collection and analysis processes. The plan should contain information about the outcomes that will be used in the evaluation, the data that will be collected to measure those outcomes, and how data will be gathered. The plan should also outline the timeline for carrying out various

components and describe how results will be disseminated and used.

Practice 2: *Collect program and student performance data.*

Program implementation data, student outcome data, and feedback from other stakeholders regarding satisfaction with the program should be gathered.²³ Program activity should be monitored as closely as possible, since the more detail available about implementation, the easier it will be to identify specific areas for improvement. The school ELT coordinator should have a lead role in program monitoring.

Practice 3: *Analyze the data and use findings for program improvement.*

Schools should analyze the data on implementation, student outcomes, and satisfaction, and use findings to improve the program. Schools should look for inconsistencies between what ELT providers proposed to do, how the program has actually been implemented, and identify patterns in the data that suggest problems areas, such as irregular attendance on certain days of the week. Districts can then use a larger data set to look for patterns across schools or across ELT providers. Schools should share their evaluation results with the ELT program to encourage growth and improvement, and then work collaboratively with the program to develop strategies that address areas of concern.

PRINCIPLE 5 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Using Data for After-School Program Improvement—The Providence After School Alliance Initiative³⁴

The Providence After School Alliance, a citywide consortium that began in 2004, emphasizes continuous improvement using both performance and evaluation data.

To set up its performance data, the Alliance reviewed established quality standards from other cities and adapted them to meet their needs. The Alliance then used quality measures to develop indicators and assessment tools, and installed an information system to collect and analyze the data. The system manages data on enrollment, participant background and demographics, attendance, retention, and programming schedules. The system's reporting feature supports analysis by individual programs, groups of programs, and providers, and allows the Alliance to track students with different patterns of participation and attendance. The system is also used to manage logistics, transportation, and program attendance.

The data were also linked with the school district's data, and the Alliance worked with a consultant to identify patterns and correlations in the two databases, such as links between after-school program attendance and school outcomes. Alliance managers use reports to regularly share participation numbers with the board of directors, the city council, funders, and other interested parties.

The Alliance also contracted for a three-year evaluation of its outcomes on young people with two main components: an implementation study that included an evaluation of the Alliance's quality strategy, and an outcome evaluation that follows a cohort of sixth graders, looking at grades, test scores, and attendance. The outcome evaluation includes a survey of participants and nonparticipants, and focuses on social and emotional competencies.

More information about this example of an after-school initiative (and four others) can be found at
http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR882.html

Conclusion

As with dropout prevention, the practices and principles for ELT rely on the recent IES practice guide,³⁵ adapted for this field guide for a middle grades context. After-school and extended-day programs have emerged relatively recently (the federal effort to support after-school programs only began in 1998 and the first evaluation of that program ended in 2005). Research in these areas is, therefore, limited and has considerable gaps. The IES practice guide synthesized research from various strands related to after-school and extended-day programs, but significant questions remain. Some concerns include how program exposure (sometimes called “dosage”) relates to effectiveness, whether there is comparative effectiveness of different delivery models, and whether there is a tradeoff between using after-school time to develop academic skills versus other skills or proficiencies, such as music, art, dance, and cultural understanding. It has been suggested that developing other competencies contributes to stronger school engagement, but the topic is currently being explored; likewise, the highly varied landscape of after-school providers, contexts, and program designs suggests that caution is appropriate for any general statement about programs.

The broad literature review undertaken for the IES practice guide has the advantage of thoroughness and objectivity; the latter aspect in particular is often lacking in the charged policy environment of after-school programs. Practices not included here are likely to have a weaker evidence base.

The IES Practice Guide can be found at:

http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/ost_pg_072109.pdf

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Extended Learning Time (ELT)

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