



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

Chapter 2: Student Supports That Enhance Learning School Climate, Culture, and Partnerships



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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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