

## Assessing the Implementation of the Middle School Concept: A Regional Study

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### Introduction

Without a doubt, early adolescence is a period of dramatic physical, cognitive, social, and emotional change. These life changes are difficult enough in a perfect world; however, coupled with the redefinition of the family structure, the influence of the media and electronics, the expectations of the popular culture, and the pressures of other societal changes, the transition to adulthood has become increasingly more difficult. It is well documented that during this turbulent period of development, adolescents are at a greater risk of engaging in self-destructive behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual activity, and violence (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development [CCAD], 1989). Considering these factors, middle level educators are in a unique position to positively impact the lives and futures of America's next generation of leaders. Therefore, it is in the public interest that education at the middle level remains strongly committed to providing developmentally appropriate educational programs that are responsive to the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional needs of adolescents. In addition, it is critical that those in higher education remain aware of the status of middle schools and prepare highly qualified middle level teachers who have "strong content knowledge and the ability to use research-based instructional strategies and assessment practices appropriate for middle level students," as proposed by the National Middle School Association in its recently released document *Success in the Middle: A Policymaker's Guide to Achieving Quality Middle Level Education* (2006, p. 3).

### Review of Literature

During the middle school's relatively short history, proponents of the middle school philosophy have attempted to translate the initial theory of middle level education into actual practice in local schools by clearly defining those characteristics and practices that exemplified a true middle school. Leading the charge was the National Middle School Association (NMSA). The NMSA responded to the need for definition and focus in its 1982 document *This We Believe* in which it listed ten essential components of a true middle school.

As the middle school philosophy and its characteristics became more clearly defined following the publication of *This We Believe*, the middle school movement received even greater attention when the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development published its eight recommendations for middle grade reform in *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (CCAD, 1989). The focus that *Turning Points* brought to education at the middle level was applauded by proponents and considered a milestone in developing consensus in middle level education (George & Alexander, 1993; Strahan, 1992).

The early efforts of the NMSA and CCAD helped provide the framework for the middle school reform movement causing it to become one of the most far-reaching reform efforts in American education. Over time, however, it was necessary to update and refine the message espoused by middle school proponents to respond to societal changes and a growing body of research and to aid schools in more fully

implementing appropriate educational practices for young adolescents (NMSA, 2003b, Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Forum, n.d.).

Most recently, the National Middle School Association updated its position statement regarding the middle school philosophy taking into account current events and a growing research base in support of widely accepted middle level educational practices. In its most current document, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003b), the NMSA delineated the following 14 characteristics of a successful middle school including eight facets of school culture and six programmatic characteristics that flourish in such a culture:

Successful schools for young adolescents are characterized by a culture that includes:

- Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so
- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- A shared vision that guides decisions
- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- High expectations for every member of the learning community
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- An adult advocate for every student
- School-initiated family and community partnerships.

Therefore, successful schools for young adolescents provide:

- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity
- Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning
- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning
- School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Multifaceted guidance and support services (NMSA, 2003b).

Since its release, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003b) has been widely accepted as the philosophical framework after which successful middle level schools should be patterned. For this reason, it provides the underpinnings for this study.

### *Status of Implementation*

Much like the junior high school that preceded it, the middle school initially experienced rapid growth and widespread implementation of its key components. Studies have reported consistent, and sometimes dramatic, growth in middle school programs nationwide (Alexander, 1968; Alexander & McEwin, 1989; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996). In the most recent nationwide study of middle school implementation, McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins (2003) reported progress in the implementation of interdisciplinary team organization, appropriate instructional strategies, availability of remedial instruction, time allotted for instruction in the core subjects, greater mini-course offerings, increased use of interdisciplinary instruction, availability of regular and elective courses, employing of teachers with specialized middle grades professional preparation. On the other hand, McEwin et al. found the lack of advisory program implementation, the strong dependence on direct instruction, and the increased use of tracking particularly troubling.

Though many adolescents enjoy the benefits of attending schools that employ developmentally responsive practices, this is not the case for all students. Unfortunately, some middle schools have not progressed beyond the initial stage of renaming the school and adding selected components to their programs. Dickinson (2001, p. 4) described the condition of many middle schools as being in a stage of “arrested development.” In these schools, “the middle school concept has not been completely implemented or it was once successfully implemented, but has grown static and unresponsive.” To truly assess the effectiveness of the components proposed by middle school advocates, it is critical to determine the level to which recommended middle school practices have been implemented (George & Shewey, 1994). Additionally the assertion by Dickinson (2001) that many middle schools are in a stage of “arrested development” would indicate a need for ongoing examination of the level of implementation to ensure that schools continue to improve and avoid becoming “static” and “unresponsive,” making studies of implementation a relevant topic of inquiry.

Though a number of middle schools are liv-

ing up to the intent of the philosophy, even a cursory examination of some middle schools reveals shortcomings, even abandonment of the philosophy's ideals. The middle schools of Northern Kentucky are not immune to this phenomenon. Therefore, a critical first step in promoting developmentally responsive practices in the region is to assess the level to which the region's middle schools are aligned with the tenets of the philosophy.

#### *Purpose*

Designed to be descriptive in nature, this regional study provides a snapshot of the middle school programs in six Northern Kentucky counties. Using *This We Believe* (2003b) as the theoretical construct, the researchers collected survey data from both teachers and school-level administrators to examine acceptance of the middle school philosophy and the perceived level of implementation of key middle school components. The researchers believe that though this study is regional in scope, the condition of the middle schools in the region is likely consistent with other similar regions nationwide; therefore, the resulting recommendations are potentially generalizable to other regions around the state and country.

Implementation studies like the current study are important for several reasons. First, they provide baseline data concerning the reported acceptance of the middle school philosophy and status of its implementation. As reported by George and Shewey (1994), determining the level of implementation is an essential prerequisite to future studies examining program effectiveness. This study seeks to address that concern by collecting initial implementation data and reporting on the condition of the middle school movement in the region. Having baseline data provides a standard for comparison in future studies of this type, allowing researchers to assess improvement or decline in implementation.

Data collected through implementation studies is also a useful communication tool when discussing school improvement and professional development needs in local schools. Studies (Meeks & Stepka, 2005; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2002) highlight the fact that a large number of middle level teachers have not

received training for specifically working with middle level adolescents. The researchers believe that baseline data from this study will encourage area principals and teachers to conduct additional program evaluation, develop school improvement plans that include enhanced implementation of middle school components, and provide professional development opportunities that are targeted to the needs of young adolescents and the teachers who teach them.

Lastly, implementation studies provide the basis for enhanced pre-service middle level teacher preparation. Identifying those schools in the region that are successfully implementing middle school components allows teacher educators to provide more effective field placements in schools that translate theory into practice. Building upon the recommendation of the Southern Regional Education Board (Cooney, 1998) to require prospective middle grades teachers to complete student teaching experiences in middle grades classrooms, Jackson and Davis (2000) proposed that all field placements for middle grades pre-service teachers include "immersion in a middle grades learning community of students, educators, parents, and community leaders" (p. 101). The researchers would contend that the middle grades learning communities suggested by Jackson and Davis should consist of schools that comprehensively and consistently implement the research-supported components of effective middle schools (NMSA, 2003b; NMSA 2003a).

#### **Methods**

##### *Sample*

Inclusion in the study was based upon two criteria – geographic location and identification as a middle school. Schools selected for participation were located in one of six Northern Kentucky counties and included rural, urban, and suburban school districts. Though various grade configurations and names were evident in the region's schools, only those schools in the six-county region identified, in name, as a middle school were selected. Those identified as junior high or elementary schools, as well as community, charter, vocational, and non-public schools, were excluded. While recognizing that schools of var-

ious grade configurations and names may, in fact, incorporate many of the key components of a middle school, the researchers limited the population to include only middle schools because the purpose of the study was to determine the level of implementation in schools that had, at least in name, embraced the middle school philosophy. In all, 17 schools met the established criteria for inclusion. Eight public school districts were excluded because their organization did not include a middle school, raising issues for potential examination in future implementation studies.

Based upon the official records of the Kentucky Department of Education, the seventeen schools in the population employed 804 certified personnel when the study commenced. The limited number of schools and the use of an electronic format made it feasible to use comprehensive sampling, a plan that includes all units with specified characteristics in the sample (Wiersma, 2000). Therefore, all 804 certified personnel in the 17 schools were included.

*Data Collection*

Data for this descriptive study were collected

using the Middle School Concept Implementation Survey (MSCIS), which was designed to examine the implementation of the middle school concept, the instructional practices of middle level teachers, and the influence of state assessment on those practices. Data on the use of instructional strategies and the influence of state assessments were analyzed separately (Faulkner & Cook, 2006). The complete MSCIS consisted of 66 Likert-format items, three open-ended response items, and additional items to collect demographic data. The survey items were derived from, and aligned with, the eight cultures and six programmatic characteristics of effective middle schools proposed by the NMSA in *This We Believe* (2003b).

Survey data were collected in an electronic, online format to facilitate data collection. In a letter, the 804 members of the sample were invited to participate and were directed to access the MSCIS using the given Internet link. In all, 216 (26.8%) participated. Respondents included administrators, counselors, and teachers representing all 17 schools of the target population.

*Analysis*

The primary data set utilized for this portion

**TABLE 1**  
**Summary Statistics for Culture 1**

	<i>Strongly Disagree &amp; Disagree (%)</i>	<i>Strongly Agree &amp; Agree (%)</i>	<i>Average Response</i>
Our school engages in professional development on the needs of adolescents on a regular basis.	30	70	2.89
I entered the teaching profession with the sole intent of teaching middle level adolescents.	60	40	2.47
I feel adequately prepared to address the developmental needs of my students.	10	90	3.23
I enjoy working with middle grades students.	0	100	3.62
I enjoy working at this school.	5	95	3.39
<b>Culture 1 Overall Average</b>			<b>3.12</b>

**TABLE 2**  
**Summary Statistics for Culture 2**

	<i>Strongly Disagree &amp; Disagree (%)</i>	<i>Strongly Agree &amp; Agree (%)</i>	<i>Average Response</i>
The administrators at my school are effective in defining the middle school concept.	21	79	3.03
The administrators at my school support the middle school concept.	12	88	3.20
The administration values my contributions to the school.	11	89	3.20
I am encouraged to share my opinion about school matters.	22	78	2.99
I am encouraged to take an active leadership role in my school.	14	86	3.13
I am given the opportunity to evaluate my administrator's performance.	58	42	2.41
<b>Culture 2 Overall Average</b>			<b>2.99</b>

of the study consisted of 65 Likert-format items designed to obtain teacher's perceptions on the implementation of the middle school concept. The 65 statements were organized in to eight categories based on the eight facets of school culture outlined in NMSA's *This We Believe* (2003b). The eight categories are: (1) educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so; (2) courageous, collaborative leadership; (3) a shared vision that guides decisions; (4) an inviting, supportive, and safe environment; (5) high expectations for every member of the learning community; (6) students and teachers engaged in active learning; (7) an adult advocate for every student; and (8) school-initiated family and community partnerships. Participants were asked to identify their level of agreement—strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree—to each statement. Responses for each statement were assigned a numerical value to obtain an overall average for each statement. Strongly disagree received a 1, disagree a 2, agree a 3, and strongly agree received a 4. Each group of statements within each category was then

averaged for an overall score for the category.

#### *Results*

Based on overall averages of the eight cultures identified, teachers' perceptions on the implementation of the middle school concept are relatively positive. All categories received an average score of at least 2.67 or higher on a 4.0 scale, indicating a general perception of successful implementation in all eight culture areas. Though overall averages indicate a positive level of implementation, individual components within the eight cultures are implemented to varying degrees. Some are highly implemented or supported, while others are sporadic, at best. High expectations for every member of the learning community (3.16), a shared vision that guides decisions (3.15), and educators who value working with this age group (3.12) received the highest overall averages. Additionally, students and teachers engaged in active learning (3.04), courageous, collaborative leadership (2.99), and an inviting, supportive, and safe environment (2.99) received a moderate level of perceived imple-

mentation. School-initiated family and community partnerships (2.87) and an adult advocate for every student (2.67) were perceived to be the two weakest areas of implementation.

Culture 1: Educators who value working with this age group and prepared to do so

Despite the fact that 60% of survey participants revealed they did not enter the teaching profession with the sole intent of teaching middle level adolescents (see Table 1), based on survey results an overwhelming percentage of participants indicated they enjoy working with middle grade students (100%), enjoy working at their particular school (95%), and feel adequately prepared to address the developmental needs of their students (90%). In addition, a majority indicated their school participates in professional development designed to enable teachers to meet the developmental needs of adolescents (70%).

Culture 2: Courageous, Collaborative Leadership

In the realm of courageous, collaborative leadership, the majority of participants responded positively to the focus of effective leadership

allowing for collaboration, although admittedly there was limited opportunity for formal evaluation of the administration. A large majority of respondents perceived the administration valued teachers' contributions to the school (89%), supported the middle school concept (88%), and encouraged teachers to take an active leadership role in the school (86%). In addition, 78% of participants indicated they were encouraged to share their opinion on school matters. However, only 42% acknowledged they were given the opportunity to formally evaluate their administrator's performance (see Table 2).

Culture 3: A shared vision that guides decisions

Based on survey results, 99% of respondents indicated their schools have a mission statement with 98% of respondents supporting the specific mission of the school and 85% actually being involved in the process (see Table 3). Though support for the mission statement is overwhelmingly high, 50% acknowledged that the mission statement is not regularly reevaluated or revised and almost 20% of the respondents revealed that decisions made in the school do not reflect the

**TABLE 3**  
Summary Statistics for Culture 3

	<i>Strongly Disagree &amp; Disagree (%)</i>	<i>Strongly Agree &amp; Agree (%)</i>	<i>Average Response</i>
My school has a mission statement.	1	99	3.54
Faculty and staff were involved in developing the school's mission statement.	15	85	3.15
I support the mission of the school.	2	98	3.38
Decisions made in my school reflect the mission statement.	19	81	3.08
My school regularly reevaluates and revises the school mission statement.	50	50	2.60
Teachers at my school support the middle school concept.	8	92	3.14
<b>Culture 3 Overall Average</b>			<b>3.15</b>

**TABLE 4**  
**Summary Statistics for Culture 4**

	<i>Strongly Disagree &amp; Disagree (%)</i>	<i>Strongly Agree &amp; Agree (%)</i>	<i>Average Response</i>
Teachers in this school respect the students.	8	92	3.15
Students in this school respect the teachers.	34	66	2.67
Students feel safe at this school.	7	93	3.22
Teachers feel safe at this school	2	98	3.38
Teachers at our school try hard to help students solve interpersonal conflicts.	14	86	3.15
Students at my school are generally well behaved.	18	82	2.87
The students at my school enjoy attending school.	19	81	2.84
I promote healthful lifestyles with my students.	5	95	3.22
Students at our school are heterogeneously grouped.	15	85	3.10
Students at my school are organized into teams or houses	6	94	3.48
Teachers at my school ar organized into interdisciplinary teams	15	85	3.18
Our team meets on a daily basis for planning.	56	44	2.38
Our team works effectively with one another.	17	83	3.10
Intramurals are an important part of our middle school program.	55	45	2.41
Clubs are an important element of our school.	39	61	2.66
<b>Culture 4 Overall Average</b>			<b>2.99</b>

mission statement.

Culture 4: An inviting, supportive, and safe environment

In terms of general safety and school environment, more than 90% of the respondents believed that both teachers (98%) and students

(93%) feel safe at school, with about 80% of the respondents indicating that students were generally well-behaved (82%) and enjoyed attending school (81%). Furthermore, most respondents (92%) believed that teachers respected the students. However, slightly more than one third of the respondents (34%) reported that students did not respect the teachers (see Table 4).

While the majority of teachers acknowledged that students are organized on teams or houses (94%) and that teachers are organized into interdisciplinary teams (85%) that work effectively with one another (83%), more than half (56%) of the participants indicated that the team does not meet on a daily basis for planning.

**Culture 5: High expectations for every member of the learning community**

Based on responses, almost 95% of teachers expected all students to be successful academically and 96% agreed that the administration expected teachers to be successful (see Table 5). In addition, 87% of respondents acknowledged that students are challenged academically and that they are able to meet the academic needs of students. However, less than three fourths of the respondents (74%) believed they successfully

teach all of their students.

**Culture 6: Students and teachers engaged in active learning**

All respondents to the survey (100%) indicated utilizing a variety of teaching strategies in the classroom and 97% encouraged all students to express themselves during classroom discussions. In addition, teachers also reported engaging students with critical thinking activities (91%), cooperative learning experiences (88%), and problem-based learning opportunities (79%). However, only about half of the respondents (57%) believed teachers worked together to integrate curriculum for students through thematic or integrated units (see Table 6).

**Culture 7: An adult advocate for every student**

While an overwhelming majority of respondents (92%) believed advisory programs are important for adolescents, only about one third (35%) of the respondents indicated that their school has an advisory program for students, with even significantly less (11%) acknowledging they are assigned as an advisor and facilitate small groups of middle level students on a regular basis (see Table 7). However, all respondents (100%) reported having a guidance counselor in

**TABLE 5**  
**Summary Statistics for Culture 5**

	<i>Strongly Disagree &amp; Disagree (%)</i>	<i>Strongly Agree &amp; Agree (%)</i>	<i>Average Response</i>
I expect all of my students to be successful academically.	6	94	3.32
I successfully teach all of my students.	26	74	2.90
The administration expects teachers to be successful.	4	96	3.33
I am able to meet the academic needs of my students.	13	87	3.11
Students at my school are challenged academically.	13	87	3.14
<b>Culture 5 Overall Average</b>			<b>3.16</b>

**TABLE 6**  
**Summary Statistics for Culture 6**

	<i>Strongly Disagree &amp; Disagree (%)</i>	<i>Strongly Agree &amp; Agree (%)</i>	<i>Average Response</i>
I utilize a variety of teaching strategies in my classroom.	0	100	3.49
I encourage all students to express themselves during classroom discussions.	3	97	3.41
The curriculum accommodates the diverse interests of my students.	17	83	3.07
I utilize cooperative learning activities on a consistent basis.	12	88	3.17
I consistently provide opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking activities.	9	91	3.17
I consistently engage students in problem based learning activities.	21	79	3.02
Students at our school are offered a variety of encore classes.	8	92	3.28
Teachers at our school integrate curriculum through thematic or integrated units.	42	58	2.63
I consistently relate course content to real-life situations.	3	97	3.39
Exploratory courses are offered to provide enrichment experiences for students.	43	57	2.61
I consistently utilize a variety of both formal and informal assessments.	6	94	3.32
Our team works together to integrate instruction.	43	57	2.62
Our school uses a flexible or block schedule.	56	44	2.38
<b>Culture 6 Overall Average</b>			<b>3.04</b>

the school, though only about two thirds (67%) of the respondents believed the guidance counselor developed programs to address student needs.

Culture 8: School-initiated family and community partnerships

Based on survey responses, the majority of

teachers (85%) consistently informed parents of their child's academic progress and remained in contact with parents on a regular basis. In addition, 81% reported they encouraged their students' parents to participate in school activities and that the school consistently scheduled events for parents to get involved within the school

(72%). However, only about a third of the respondents (34%) believed students were consistently involved in community service activities (see Table 8).

#### *Discussion*

The initial intent of the study was to determine how closely aligned middle schools in the Northern Kentucky region were to the middle school concept as outlined by the National Middle School Association. Overall, the middle schools in the area generally supported the middle school concept, believed it is important for adolescents to experience the different components of the middle school concept, and wanted students to be challenged and excel academically. However, much of the perceived support was directed towards theory and beliefs—like working with middle school students, high expectations,

and a shared vision—rather than actual organizational structures—advisory, integrated curriculum, and community service. While it was encouraging that a high level of support exists for the middle school philosophy, some of the specific organizational components were lacking or needed to be more clearly defined and implemented to fully embrace the middle school concept.

High expectations for both teachers and students emerged as two of the most supported perceptions among the respondents. Add to that the fact that an overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated they enjoy both working with middle school students and working at their specific school, as well as feel adequately prepared to meet the needs of adolescents, enhances the likelihood a middle school student in the region would experience a safe and supportive environment. Surprisingly though, with almost

**TABLE 7**  
**Summary Statistics for Culture 7**

	<i>Strongly Disagree &amp; Disagree (%)</i>	<i>Strongly Agree &amp; Agree (%)</i>	<i>Average Response</i>
My school has an advisory (advisor/advisee) program for students.	65	35	2.24
I am assigned an advisor and facilitate small groups of middle level students on a regular basis.	89	11	1.77
I think advisory programs are important for adolescents.	8	92	3.10
My school's advisory groups discuss topics designed to address the needs of adolescents.	76	24	2.02
My school has a guidance counselor.	0	100	3.52
The guidance counselor develops programs to address student needs.	33	67	2.79
At my school, programs are in place to assist struggling students.	10	90	3.22
<b>Culture 7 Overall Average</b>			<b>2.67</b>

**TABLE 8**  
**Summary Statistics for Culture 8**

	<i>Strongly Disagree &amp; Disagree (%)</i>	<i>Strongly Agree &amp; Agree (%)</i>	<i>Average Response</i>
I encourage my students' parents to participate in school activities.	19	81	3.05
I contact students' parents on a regular basis: email, phone, conferences.	16	84	3.08
I consistently inform parents of their child's academic progress.	15	85	3.09
Students at this school are consistently involves in community service activities.	66	34	2.26
My school consistently schedules events for parents to get involved with the school.	28	72	2.85
<b>Culture 8 Overall Average</b>			<b>2.87</b>

one fourth of the respondents (26%) believing they are not successful with their students and more than half of the respondents not entering the profession with the intent of teaching middle school adolescents, coupled with minimal professional development based on adolescent needs, the question of how teachers define meeting adolescent needs and success surfaces. Additional qualitative investigation is needed to explore this further. Researchers also speculate that changes in teacher certification and limited job availability led many teachers to grades six through eight, and over time teachers may have developed an understanding of the specific developmental needs of adolescents.

Most respondents acknowledged both establishing and supporting a mission statement that guides decision making in the building. In addition, respondents reported teacher contributions are valued by administration (89%); they are encouraged to take an active role in leadership opportunities (86%) and share their opinions about school matters (78%). Researchers contend that this support most likely increases the chances

of establishing a collaborative environment facilitated by courageous leadership. However, the fact that the mission statement is not regularly reevaluated and revised (50%) and only 42% of the respondents indicated they are given an opportunity to evaluate their administrator's performance leads the researchers to question whether a true system of collaboration is in place. Administrators are missing out on a valuable opportunity to receive feedback on their leadership and how closely their decisions are aligned to the mission statement. In order for collaboration in decision-making to be most effective and for administrators to make decisions that best reflect the beliefs of the school, accountability and support among all stakeholders should exist (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

On the surface, interdisciplinary teaming appears to be one of the most widely accepted and implemented middle school components in the region's middle schools. Data, however, reveals that for most schools, teaming is a matter of organization, not function. Though the schools are organized as teams, it appears the

teams do not function effectively as teams (i.e., little team planning, lack of collaboration, minimal integration of curriculum, limited flexibility in scheduling), leading the researchers to conclude that the respondents have implemented “teams,” not “teaming.” The fact that most respondents believed teachers worked effectively on teams, yet half of the respondents reported no integration of curriculum and most did not enter the teaching field to work specifically with adolescents leads the researchers to believe that the teachers may not have been trained on how to effectively work as a team or be familiar with the intended purpose of teaming in the middle school. Additional investigation is needed to explore the mismatch between perceived and actual implementation, as well as lack of curriculum integration and daily planning.

While the implementation of a team organizational structure enjoys a relatively high level of implementation, other essential components of effective middle schools do not fare as well. Respondents reported minimal efforts to implement intramural programs, clubs, advisory programs, and community service opportunities for students. In fact, advisory programs appeared to be the least implemented component throughout the schools included in the study, even though most respondents believed it was important for adolescents to have that experience. The lack of an advisory program in middle schools is often attributed to lack of training, limited teacher support, and increased need for academic rigor (George, Lawrence, & Bushnell, 1998). The data indicated a large number of respondents did not enter the teaching profession specifically to teach middle school and have encountered minimal professional development. Naturally, inadequate training would lead to a disconnect for teachers and potentially create anxiety and frustration for individuals responsible for facilitating an advisory group. Furthermore, with only one third (34%) of the respondents indicating students regularly engage in community service experiences, a valuable opportunity exists to incorporate community service and provide a specific direction for the advisory program.

### *Recommendations*

From the findings of this study of middle school component implementation emerge four primary recommendations. First, to promote and encourage the continued reform of middle grades education, it is essential for teacher education programs to place more emphasis on the pre-service experiences of students by assigning them to field placements that support and embrace the middle level concept. As pre-service teachers prepare to work in middle schools, it is important for them to observe effectively implemented components of the middle school concept (i.e., advisory, teaming, integrated curriculum), meaningful instruction and assessment strategies, and positive teacher-student interaction that takes into consideration the developmental characteristics of adolescents (NMSA, 2006). The failure of teacher education programs to provide field placements that surround pre-service teachers with effective, fully implemented middle school practices perpetuates the underutilization of effective techniques and strategies learned in teacher training programs and continues the cycle of poorly implemented middle level components (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2002; Pilcher & Boyce, 2005).

Second, the researchers recommend continued examination of the condition of the middle school movement and the implementation of its tenets both regionally and nationally. Though this study provides baseline data that provides valuable insights into the condition of the region's middle schools, examination of implementation must be ongoing. Future implementation studies should seek to refine the method of measuring implementation quantitatively and address the need to assess the quality of implementation. In addition, future studies should expand the scope of inquiry to include all schools with middle grades.

Third, schools are encouraged to develop comprehensive program evaluation systems to assess school effectiveness beyond performance on state-mandated tests. While the researchers recognize the importance of state accountability systems, often school effectiveness is based solely on test performance. In an effort to increase test scores, essential components of the middle

school that enhance school climate and the social-emotional well being of the students are often overlooked, only partially implemented, or even eliminated. School effectiveness should include both academic performance measures as well as school climate measures as they both play a critical role in effective middle school programming.

Finally, schools must continue to strive to establish the cultures, and fully implement the components, of the middle school philosophy as proposed in *This We Believe* (2003b). Special attention must be given to several components – in particular, teaming, advisory, integrated curriculum, and community service. Though many schools report the implementation of teaming, data from this study suggest that team organization exists in many schools, but the teams are not fully functioning. For teams to be effective, they must be supported organizationally with common planning time for teachers and targeted, ongoing professional development that addresses the needs of both the adolescents and teachers on the team. Additionally, effective team organization allows teachers to more fully integrate curriculum and instruction to help teachers make learning more meaningful and relevant to the students' lives.

Consistent with national trends, advisory programs are the least implemented middle school component in the region's middle schools. Addressing the social-emotional needs of the adolescent is a critical component of a developmentally responsive middle school, and the literature reports that properly implemented advisory programs can help schools meet these needs. When implemented fully, advisory programs can also allow the school to incorporate other beneficial student activities such as intramural athletics, clubs, community service, and exploratory programs of interest to the students further enhancing the educational experience.

As educators, we are in a position to positively impact both policy and practice, and we must actively advocate for schools that address the needs of the students they are intended to serve. Through comprehensive program evaluation, continual reflection, courageous leadership, ongoing professional development, and

unwavering commitment to the tenets of the middle school philosophy, we can help our middle schools become what they were intended to be – positive learning communities providing relevant, meaningful, and engaging educational experiences for young adolescents.

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