



The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform

Schools-to-Watch Criteria

Academic Excellence

High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.

1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards. Teachers supply students with exemplars of high quality work that meets the performance standard. Students revise their work based on feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard.
2. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned with high standards. They provide a coherent vision for what students should know and be able to do. The curriculum is rigorous and non-repetitive; it moves forward substantially as students progress through the middle grades.
3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts, development of essential skills, and the ability to apply what one has learned to real-world problems. By making connections across the disciplines, the curriculum helps reinforce important concepts.
4. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the concepts and skills being taught.
5. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess student performance (e.g., exhibitions, projects, performance tasks) and maintain a collection of student work. Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against the performance standards.
6. The school provides students time to meet rigorous academic standards. Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry-based learning. Most class time is devoted to learning and applying knowledge or skills rather than classroom management and discipline.
7. Students have the supports they need to meet rigorous academic standards. They have multiple opportunities to succeed and extra help as needed.
8. The adults in the school have opportunities to plan, select, and engage in professional development aligned with nationally recognized standards. They have regular opportunities to work with their colleagues to deepen their knowledge and improve their practice. They collaborate in making decisions about rigorous curriculum and effective instructional methods. They discuss student work as a means of enhancing their own practice.



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Developmental Responsiveness

High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

1. The school creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. The school groups adults and students in small learning communities characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships.
2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.
3. Teachers use a wide variety of instructional strategies to foster curiosity, exploration, creativity, and the development of social skills.
4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal interests of young adolescents.
5. Teachers make connections across disciplines to help reinforce important concepts and address real-world problems.
6. The school provides multiple opportunities for students to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.
7. Students have opportunities for voice -- posing questions, reflecting on experiences, developing rubrics, and participating in decisions.
8. The school develops alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of their children. It involves families as partners in their children's education, keeping them informed, involving them in their children's learning, and assuring participation in decision-making.
9. The school provides students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, uses the community as a classroom, and engages the community in providing resources and support.
10. The school provides age-appropriate co-curricular activities.



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Social Equity

High-performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.

1. Faculty and administrators expect high-quality work from all students and are committed to helping each student produce it. Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, special adaptations, and other supports.
2. Students may use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.
3. The school continually adapts curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet its students' diverse and changing needs.
4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.
5. Students have on-going opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures. The school values knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school and our nation.
6. Each child's voice is heard, acknowledged, and respected.
7. The school welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families.
8. The school's reward system demonstrates that it values diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship.
9. The faculty is culturally and linguistically diverse.
10. The school's suspension rate is low and in proportion to the student population.



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Organizational Structures and Processes

High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does drives every facet of school change. Shared and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose.
2. Someone in the school has the responsibility and authority to hold the school-improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication.
3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and reflection are the norm. Expectations of continuous improvement permeate the school. The school devotes resources to ensure that teachers have time and opportunity to reflect on their classroom practice and learn from one another. At school everyone's job is to learn.
4. The school devotes resources to content-rich professional development, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision. Professional development is intensive, of high quality, and ongoing.
5. The school is not an island unto itself. It draws upon others' experience, research, and wisdom; it enters into relationships such as networks and community partnerships that benefit students' and teachers' development and learning.
6. The school holds itself accountable for its students' success rather than blaming others for its shortcomings. The school collects, analyzes, and uses data as a basis for making decisions. The school grapples with school-generated evaluation data to identify areas for more extensive and intensive improvement. It delineates benchmarks, and insists upon evidence and results. The school intentionally and explicitly reconsiders its vision and practices when data call them into question.
7. Key people possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere and overcome barriers, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development for all students.
8. The school works with colleges and universities to recruit, prepare, and mentor novice and experienced teachers. It insists on having teachers who promote young adolescents' intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and ethical growth. It recruits a faculty that is culturally and linguistically diverse.
9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance. The school informs families and community members about its goals for students and students' responsibility for meeting them. It engages all stakeholders in ongoing and reflective conversation, consensus building, and decision making about governance to promote school improvement.