The Status of Programs and Practices in America’s Middle Schools:
Results From Two National Studies

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Conclusions and Recommendations

A major purpose for conducting the two 2009 national surveys was to gain perspectives on the status of programs and practices that are considered to be crucial to effective middle level schooling. This section includes some selected observations and conclusions based on results from the 2009 national survey of 827 randomly selected public middle schools (Section II) and the 2009 national survey of 101 highly successful middle schools (Section III). Data from the survey of randomly selected schools were compared with data from four earlier linked surveys. These surveys were conducted in 1968 (Alexander), 1988 (Alexander & McEwin, 1989), 1993 and 2001 (McEwin, Dickinson & Jenkins, 1996, 2003). Data from the 2009 randomly selected middle schools were also compared with results from the 2009 survey of programs and practices in highly successful middle schools (HSMS). The HSMS survey was conducted primarily to determine the extent to which these nationally recognized schools were using recommended middle level programs and practices and to explore what lessons could be learned from these schools. Detailed information about the design of these studies is provided in Sections II and III.

Interdisciplinary Team Organization and Common Teacher Planning Time

One of the most disappointing findings that emerged was a decrease in the use of interdisciplinary team organization among middle schools in the randomly selected middle school survey. The percentage of middle schools utilizing this organizational plan had decreased from 77% in the 2001 survey to 72% in the 2009. This reversed a trend of ever increasing percentages of middle schools adopting this organizational plan beginning with the Alexander survey that was completed in 1968. This trend does not bode well for middle level schools or the young adolescents that attend them since this model is so widely recommended and effective (Arhar, 1990, 1992; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999, 2000; NMSA, 2010a, 2010b). This troubling trend may be the result, at least in part, to the pressures of the No Child Left Behind and high stakes testing requirements imposed by the individual states (Musoleno & White, 2010). It seems that some decision-makers are under the false assumption that eliminating teaming will increase test scores when quite the opposite is much more likely to occur.

Common planning time for teachers on interdisciplinary teams enables them to plan curriculum and instruction and work together in other important ways to increase student learning. There was some increase in the 2009 random study, as compared with data from the earlier surveys, in the percent of middle schools providing five common planning periods per week for core teachers. However, this increase was due, at least in part, to the percent of schools that no longer provided ten common planning periods per week. The trend of offering five rather than ten common planning times for core teachers was disconcerting.
since the research base and successful practice
support the importance of this organizational feature
(Mertens & Flowers, 2006; Mertens, Flowers,
Anfara, & Caskey, 2010; Mertens, Flowers, &
Mulhall, 1998; NMSA, 2010a; Warren & Muth,
1995).

Results from the HSMS survey showed that
interdisciplinary team organization is more highly
valued and more frequently implemented in HSMS
than in schools responding to the 2009 randomly
selected school survey. Ninety percent of the HSMS
reported using the interdisciplinary team
organization model as compared to only 72% of the
randomly selected middle schools. The HSMS also
more frequently provided common planning time for
core teachers. For example, 40% of HSMS provided
ten common planning periods per week as compared
to 28% of middle schools in the random sample.
Ninety-four percent of HSMS and 77% of randomly
selected middle schools provided five or more
common planning periods for core teachers.

**Recommendation**

*Interdisciplinary team organization should be implemented in the middle grades of all schools that include young adolescents. All teachers serving on teams should be provided at least one daily common planning period.*

**Scheduling Plans**

Flexible block scheduling is closely linked to the
successful implementation of interdisciplinary
teaming and common planning time for teachers and
has long been a recommended practice in middle
school education (Daniel, 2007). Flexible schedules
e.g., block scheduling, alternate day classes) provide
longer instructional times, avoid fragmented
instruction, allow for more creative and flexible use
of time by teachers, provide varying learning times
for students, and increase student engagement and
achievement (Arhar, 1992; Canady, 1996; Spear,

The use of the flexible block schedules had
decreased in schools in the 2009 random sample as
compared with the earlier studies. In the 2009
random study, respondents were asked to select the
one choice that best reflected their schedule type. In
the four earlier studies, respondents could check
multiple choices of different schedule types.
Therefore, the 2009 data are not totally comparable.
Given these limitations, it is difficult to determine
trends among the studies. However, when results
from the two 2009 surveys were compared, 30% of
HSMS utilized flexible block schedules as compared
to only 14% of schools from the randomly selected
sample. HSMS were also much less likely to utilize
daily uniform periods (45%) than were schools in the
randomly selected middle school sample (72%).
HSMS also used daily periods of varying lengths
(30%) more often than the randomly selected middle
schools (14%).

**Curriculum**

The core subjects of language arts, mathematics,
science, social studies remain a high priority in
middle schools in both the HSMS and randomly
selected middle school surveys. The time allotted
daily for instruction in these core subjects is
substantial. In the 2009 randomly selected middle
schools, the average number of minutes allotted daily
at the sixth grade level was 226 minutes and 219
minutes at the seventh and eighth grade levels.
HSMS allotted more time for core subjects at the
sixth (240 minutes), seventh (234 minutes), and
eighth (233 minutes) grade levels. As revealed
earlier in this report, required subjects, other than
core subjects, most often included courses such as
art, general music, and reading. Although there were
some differences found between results from the two
2009 studies, in most cases the percentages of
schools requiring non-core course revealed few
differences.
Similar patterns for the elective subjects offered were comparable in both 2009 studies. Band, chorus, art, and orchestra, computers, and general music were popular electives at all grade levels. Band was offered somewhat more frequently at HSMS, but few other differences were found. Larger percentages of HSMS (49%) than randomly selected middle schools (39%) offered interest/mini-courses to enrich their curriculum. HSMS reported placing a stronger emphasis on global curriculum than schools in the 2009 randomly selected middle school survey. This included, but was not limited to, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, and science.

**Recommendation**

*All schools that serve young adolescents should place a major emphasis on the core subjects of language arts/reading, science, mathematics, and social studies. Significant portions of each instructional day should be devoted to these subjects while ensuring other developmentally appropriate experiences are included. A rich selection of required non-core and elective subjects should be part of the curriculum. A focus on the components of global education should be infused throughout the curriculum.*

**Advisory Programs**

The importance of advisory programs has long been recognized in the junior high school and middle school literature (Alexander, 1968; Briggs, 1920; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; George & Alexander, 2003; Gruhn & Douglas, 1956; Powell, 2011; Van Til, Lounsby & Vars, 1961). Results from both 2009 studies revealed that they are far from being universally implemented in the nation’s middle schools. Fifty-three percent of schools in the randomly selected middle school sample and 65% of HSMS reported having advisory programs. HSMS allotted larger amounts of time for advisory periods. Although the percentage of schools in the 2009 randomly selected middle sample with advisory programs had increased from 48% in 2001 to 53% in 2009, almost one-half of middle schools in the nation still do not have advisory programs. Successful advisory programs are difficult to implement and maintain for many reasons (Anfara, 2006). However, because of the importance of these programs, steps need to be taken promptly to implement these programs in all schools enrolling young adolescents.

**Recommendation**

*Carefully planned student advisory programs should be a high priority component of all middle level programs and schools. Advisory groups should meet at least twice per week, and the advisory curriculum should be carefully planned, articulated, implemented, and evaluated. All teacher advisors and other professional personnel should be provided ongoing professional development regarding effective advisory programs and be held responsible for their success.*

**Teaching Strategies**

Respondents from both 2009 surveys were asked the extent to which selected teaching strategies were rarely or never, occasionally, or regularly used in their schools. The percentage of schools in the 2009 randomly selected middle schools sample using direct instruction on a regular basis decreased from 90% in 1993 to 81% in 2009, while the use of cooperative learning, inquiry, and independent study increased. Fifteen percent of schools reported the use of online instruction on a regular basis and 54% indicated occasional use.

Schools in the HSMS sample were less likely to use direct instruction on a regular basis (71%) than schools in the 2009 random study, and they more regularly used cooperative learning, inquiry teaching, independent study, and online learning on a regular basis. The difference found between the use of cooperative learning in HSMS (85%) and schools in the random sample (64%) was especially noteworthy. While the trend toward more frequent use of student-centered strategies is encouraging (i.e., cooperative learning and inquiry teaching), an overreliance on teacher-centered direct instruction remains in the nation’s middle schools.
Instructional Grouping Practices

Data from both 2009 studies revealed discouraging trends in instructional grouping practices. The number of schools in the 2009 random study using random instructional grouping has declined 9% since 1993, documenting a move away from heterogeneous grouping in middle schools. An identical 23% of schools in both 2009 studies reported that instructional grouping was random at their schools. Trends clearly show that ability grouping is increasing in middle schools despite serious concerns that this practice may benefit high achievers but negatively affect low achievers (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2001; NMSA, 2007b; Pool & Page, 1995; Slavin, 1990; Wheelock, 1992).

Professional Preparation and Certification/Licensure

A major roadblock to the full success of junior high schools and middle level schools has been the practice of employing teachers who lack specific professional preparation to teach young adolescents. Historically, middle level classrooms have been staffed with teachers who were prepared to teach students at other developmental stages and levels of schooling (e.g., young children in elementary schools, older adolescents in senior high schools). Furthermore, many states lack effective certification/licensure regulations to ensure teachers are specially prepared for the middle grades. Some states do not require middle level teachers to hold separate middle level teaching certification/licensure, and four states do not have any form of middle level license/certification (Gaskill, 2007). In some states, middle level teacher licensure is granted to anyone who has completed a senior high or secondary school professional preparation program. In some other states, middle level teacher licensure can be obtained by simply having an undergraduate degree in some area and passing a standardized test. Significant progress has been made in recent years in the areas of specialized middle level teacher preparation and distinct middle level licensure regulations (McEwin, Dickinson & Smith, 2003, 2004; McEwin & Smith, in press). However, many thousands of middle level teachers still begin their careers without the specialized knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be highly successful teaching young adolescents.

Respondents provided information about the percentage of core teachers with some level of specialized professional preparation to teach at the middle level. In approximately one third of schools in both the random and HSMS 2009 surveys, more than 90% of core teachers had some level of specialized middle level professional preparation. However, the survey instrument did not define the nature of this preparation. Higher percentages of teachers in HSMS held separate middle level certification/licensure as compared to schools in the random study. Forty-nine percent of HSMS reported that the majority of core teachers (51% or more) held distinctive middle level licensure, while only 29% of
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The Status of Programs and Practices

Middle Level Programs and Practices: 2001 to 2009

When the current status of middle school programs and practices as revealed in the 2009 random study is contrasted with those found in the 2001 study, results are mixed. While gains have been made in some areas, the tenets of middle level education remain far from being universally implemented. Some comparative statistics from the 2001 and 2009 surveys of middle school are provided below. These data help make it clear where progress has been made and point out areas that need immediate attention and action on the part of all those responsible for the education of young adolescents. Readers should read Section II Results from the Survey of Randomly Selected Middle Schools for a more detailed description of results. The first percentage in each statement below represents data from the 2001 survey of randomly selected middle schools and the second percentage represents data from the 2009 survey of randomly selected middle schools.

- The number of public middle schools with the most common grade organization patterns of 5-8, 6-8, and 7-8 increased (12,377 vs. 13,918);
- The percentage of middle level schools utilizing interdisciplinary team organization decreased (77% vs. 72%);
- The percentage of middle schools providing ten common planning periods per week for core teachers decreased (41% vs. 28%);
- The percentage of middle schools providing no common planning periods for core teachers increased (5% vs. 8%);
- The percentage of middle schools using flexible block schedules decreased (23% vs. 14%);
- The average number of minutes allotted daily to core subjects increased slightly in some subjects (e.g., sixth grade language arts, 67 vs. 70 minutes);

Recommendation

Middle level educators should work collaboratively with policymakers, teacher preparation representatives, state department of education officials, professional practice board members, and other stakeholders to create specialized middle level teacher preparation programs and mandatory middle level teacher licensure requirements where they do not exist and to strengthen them where they are already available. Whenever possible, personnel directors and principals should employ teachers who have received specialized middle level professional preparation and hold middle level teacher certification/licensure. Comprehensive and ongoing professional development should provide teachers and other school personnel with a knowledge base that focuses on young adolescent development, middle level curriculum, middle level instruction and assessment, effective middle level programs and practices, and other key topics. Middle level educators should support and promote specialized middle level professional preparation as well as specific middle level teacher certification.
• Higher percentages of middle schools required non-core courses such as physical education, health education, and reading at all grade levels;
• The percentage of middle schools offering the most popular electives increased (e.g., sixth grade band, 82% vs. 97%; seventh grade chorus, 70% vs. 78%; eighth grade art 47% v. 63%);
• The percentage of middle schools offering orchestra decreased significantly at the seventh and eighth grade levels (72% vs. 39%);
• The percentage of middle schools with interest/mini-course programs decreased (49% vs. 39%);
• The percentage of middle schools with advisory programs increased (48% vs. 53%);
• The percentage of middle schools using cooperative learning on a regular basis increased (60% vs. 64%);
• The percentage of middle schools using direct instruction on a regular basis decreased (88% vs. 81%);
• The percentage of middle schools using random (non-tracked) instructional grouping remained about the same (22% vs. 23%);
• The percentage of middle schools tracking in mathematics increased (73% vs. 77%);
• The percentage of middle schools providing before and after school tutoring remained the same (84%); and,
• With the exception of summer school for remediation (67% vs. 59%), the use of remediation plans increased (extra period instead of elective, 48% vs. 63%; pull out language arts, 45% vs. 54%; pull out mathematics, 42% vs. 50%).

Lessons Learned from Highly Successful Middle Schools

The researchers conducted the survey of highly successful middle schools to help determine what kinds of programs and practices were dominant in these schools. Were these schools following the middle school philosophy or had they moved in other directions? Are there lessons that can be learned from these middle schools that have been nationally recognized for their successes?

Portions of the following also appeared in the Middle School Journal (McEwin & Greene, 2010). One major lesson that can be learned from the 101 HSMS is that the middle school concept as originally proposed by Alexander in 1963 remains valid (1968) and supported in the middle school literature (NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2010a, 2010b). As documented in the survey results, HSMS tend to embrace programs and practices associated with developmentally responsive schools—the middle school concept. The HSMS study also suggests that leadership is a key factor. The overwhelming majority of the highly successful, nationally recognized schools have principals who strongly support components of the middle school concept and implement recommended middle level programs and practices in their schools at higher rates than are found in the general population of public middle schools in the nation. The listing below includes selected findings among data from the two 2009 surveys. Compared to middle schools in the randomly selected sample, HSMS:

• More frequently used interdisciplinary team organization (90% vs. 72%);
• More frequently provided core teachers with ten common planning periods per week (40% vs. 28%);
• More often used the flexible block scheduling plan (30% vs. 14%);
• Less frequently organized school schedules using daily uniform periods (45% vs. 72%);
• Allotted more daily instructional time to core subjects of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies at the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades levels (sixth grade, 240 vs. 226; seventh grade, 234 vs. 219; eighth grade, 233 vs. 219);
• More frequently offered interest course/mini-course programs (49% vs. 39%);
• Used direct instruction less frequently (71% vs. 81%);
• Used cooperative learning more often (85% vs. 64%).
• Used inquiry teaching more frequently (57% vs. 43%);
• Had higher percentages of core teachers holding separate middle level teacher licensure (Table 51);
• More frequently had advisory programs (65% vs. 54%);
• Offered daily advisory periods less often (44% vs. 54%);
• Had larger student enrollments (Table 28);
• Had a smaller percentage of schools where 51% or more students qualified for the free or reduced lunch (27% vs. 36%);
• Had a higher percentage of students—51% or higher—on or above grade level in mathematics (94% vs. 82%);
• Had a higher percentage of students—81% or higher—on or above grade level in mathematics (53% vs. 30%);
• Had a higher percentage of students—51% or higher—on or above grade level in reading (98% vs. 86%);
• Had a higher percentage of students—81% or higher—on or above grade level in reading (45% vs. 39%);
• Placed a stronger emphasis on global education elements (Table 36);
• More frequently offered intramural sports programs (65% vs. 55%);
• Used ability/tracking somewhat more frequently in most core subjects (Table 42);
• More strongly supported the components of middle level schools as recommended in the middle school literature (Tables 23 and 52); and,
• More highly implemented the components of middle level schools as recommended in the middle school literature (Table 53).

Advice from Highly Successful Middle School Leaders

Respondents from HSMS were asked to provide advice for middle level schools striving to be more successful. Seventy-eight of the 101 principals responded to this open-ended survey item. A number of comments centered on the importance of recruiting and maintaining teachers who want to teach young adolescents and have the specialized knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be effective. Many comments emphasized fully implementing teaming, common planning time for core teachers, and flexible scheduling. Other responses stressed the importance being committed to a vision and always making decisions based on what is best for young adolescents. Some representative comments from respondents include those presented below.

• **Develop the vision and mission for the school and grow a climate of respect and trust among the adults and students. Never stray from your goals, and if you do, get back on track.**
• **Follow the tenets of NMSA’s This We Believe, NASSP’s Breaking Ranks in the Middle, and the National Forum’s School-to-Watch criteria.**
• **Be responsive to the middle school philosophy, build collaborative teams, and use best practices and research to guide decisions.**
• **Support new teacher ideas and innovations; focus on individual student successes and practices.**
• **Create a culture on campus that promotes the values you are trying to establish. This includes students, staff, administration, and parents.**
• **I would advise principals to grow professionally and support the professional growth of all teachers and staff members.**
• **Accept responsibility and stop blaming (parents, the economy).**
• **Teacher-student advisement is crucial to building close relationships with students. Students need to know teachers care about them as people first and foremost. They also need someone they can turn to in times of need or in times of success.**
• Constantly process and try to adjust to every changing variable. Things get better or worse; they do not stay the same.

• Develop trust. Work with your staff as a member of their team. Collaborate. Get students involved in decision making. Do not let testing drive your school. Know what your students need to be globally competitive and offer them experiences that will get them there. Make school fun for both students and teachers.

• Visit other schools that have received awards or distinctions to observe and discuss.

• Common prep time for teams is extremely important for success.

• The number one factor is teamwork and creating a collaborative environment in which teachers work together to design and implement instruction, discuss student needs, and analyze performance data. It cannot be done alone!

• Have a sense of humor and have fun.

• Communicate among yourselves—within the school. Visit excellent schools and provide opportunities for you staff to do so. Constantly process and adjust to ever changing variables. Things get better or worse—they do not stay the same. I believe this statement and live by it. Schools need to constantly review and amend what they do and how they do it.

• Know and understand the unique characteristics of middle level kids. Develop structures and policies that support collaboration and kid-centered education.

• Let the social and emotional needs of students frame your work.

• Find ways to make all students feel successful. Think outside the box when it comes to student needs. Always ask yourself if what you are doing is best for students.

• To be successful you have to focus on problem solving and building a positive community culture.

• Keep the developmental needs of students at the forefront when planning your program and the daily operations of your school. You are there for each and every individual student, and you should strive for a year of growth for each year a student spends at your school.

• Love and enjoy your students.

Principals from HSMS also provided a list of pitfalls schools should avoid as they strive to become ever more successful. They included:

• Partial implementation of effective middle level programs and practices.

• Lack of ongoing, comprehensive professional development targeting specific middle level topics.

• Acceptance of the status quo and/or traditional popular practices that are not effective at the middle level.

• Giving in to the pressures associated with standardized tests to the extent that other important programs and practices suffer.

• Not understanding the need to continually advocate for developmentally responsive middle level education.

• Not using the middle level knowledge and research base when making decisions.

• Not holding all professionals accountable for their roles in developmentally responsive schooling.

• Not working to create a vision that includes a commitment to always doing what is best for young adolescents rather than what is most comfortable and familiar for adults.

Learning from principals of highly successful schools seems wise as middle level programs and schools seek to become ever more successful. One trend the researchers noticed continuously as they read the open-ended comments made by respondents was that although they were proud of the accomplishments of their schools, they were always seeking new and better ways to educate young adolescents. As was recommended by Alexander, the leaders at these schools believe that middle level schools should be ever emergent as they adjust to meet the changing needs of young adolescents and the world in which they live.
Implementing Highly Successful Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools

Results from the 2009 surveys and contemporary middle level literature lead to the overall conclusion that although there is much to celebrate, even more remains to be accomplished if authentic developmentally responsive middle level programs and schools are to become a reality for all young adolescents (George, 2009a, 2009b; Lounsbury, 2009). All stakeholders need to intensify their efforts to overcome the complex challenges associated with authentic middle level school reform and work persistently and collaboratively to implement key middle level programs and practices. Otherwise, middle level schools may slip further back into the mistakes made in the first reform movement to create developmentally responsive schools for young adolescents—the junior high school movement. The rationale for developmentally responsive junior high schools had much in common with the current rationale for developmentally responsive middle level schools. One of the problems with junior high schools was that so many of them became junior versions of the senior high school. This same fate may befall contemporary middle level schools if more progress is not made in authentically implementing what is known to be effective middle level programs and practices. Results from the 2009 study of randomly selected middle schools indicate this is already beginning to happen in some middle schools (e.g., decrease in the percentage of schools with interdisciplinary team organization and reduced common planning time provided).

The middle level research base has expanded, and growing numbers of successful, developmentally responsive middle schools are being identified through recognition programs such as those sponsored by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform (Schools-to-Watch) and the National Association for Secondary School Principals (NASSP Breakthrough Middle Schools). HSMS are providing models for reaching high levels of success, as demonstrated by data from the 2009 survey. To establish and maintain highly successful middle schools, middle level leaders must avoid a recurring mistake—blindly following tradition and staying with what is comfortable and noncontroversial rather than pushing forward with courage and purpose to ensure that all schools serve young adolescents effectively. There are many more highly successful middle schools than are currently formally recognized. These successful schools should be sought out and learned from so that ideas and programs can be adopted and adapted in ways that will enhance all aspects of student learning.

Concluding Remarks

Much has been accomplished with respect to creating and maintaining developmentally responsive middle schools. The middle school concept and philosophy has persevered despite many barriers encountered along the way (e.g., negative political climates; devotion of many decision-makers, the public, and educators to traditional programs and practices; overreliance on standardized test results in defining success). Results from earlier and current studies reveal, however, that many middle schools have failed to fully and authentically implement developmentally responsive programs and practices. This reality has resulted in rather vocal criticism of middle schools and the middle school concept. However, the problem does not lie in a lack of knowledge about the components needed, but rather in the failure to implement these features in ways that benefit all young adolescents. There are multiple reasons that could be provided to help explain this situation (e.g., misdirected actions based on pressures from high stakes testing; a lack of understanding on the part of many middle level educators about the tenets of effective middle level education).

Fidelity to the underlining principles of the middle school philosophy and concept is found wanting in too many of today’s middle schools. Lounsbury (2009) confirms that the problem often lies in the lack of authentic implementation. He observes that “The true middle school concept . . . has not been practiced and found wanting; rather, it has been found difficult to implement fully, and is practiced, then, only partially” (p. 31). This lack of implementation of middle level programs and practices also manifests itself in schools with other names and grade configurations that include young adolescents, for example grades K-8 schools (Epstein
It is young adolescents and those who teach them and serve them in other ways that are paying the price for this failure to fully implement developmentally responsive middle level program and practices.

One trap that must be avoided is defining effective middle schools as ones that have programs, practices, and policies that can be simply “checked off a list” without full implementation. The misuse of middle level programs and practices at some middle schools does not negate their importance nor provide a valid excuse for non-implementation. Being satisfied with the status quo is neither acceptable nor productive and can lead to what Dickinson (2001) termed arrested development—the failure of schools to move forward from the levels of implementation already accomplished. This situation, in turn, can result in complacency and a lack of forward movement toward excellence. Without substantial reform, many young adolescents will have to spend their formative middle school years in schools that would better serve other developmental age groups at other levels of schooling (e.g., older adolescents in senior high schools).

Results from the two 2009 studies that are the focus of this report confirm that recommended middle level programs and practices can be effectively implemented and that when this occurs, results are positive and encouraging. A key finding from the 2009 surveys was that there was strong support among middle level principals regarding the importance of the programs and practices associated with the developmentally responsive middle school model. However, genuine implementation is clearly an area in need of much emphasis and one that requires collaborative and courageous action by all stakeholders. Results from the highly successful middle school survey, in particular, help document and lend credibility to the reality that middle schools can implement effective programs without abandoning developmental responsiveness as a guiding principle. Principals and other leaders at HSMS have chosen not to go back to traditional, deeply ingrained programs and practices more appropriate for students enrolled in senior high schools or universities thinking this will increase student learning and raise standardized tests scores (e.g., departmentalization, no interdisciplinary teaming or common planning time for core teachers, rigid scheduling plans). Paradoxically, these more traditional and inappropriate programs and practices are the same ones that have been recognized as largely ineffective at the senior high school level. Many of the practices advocated in contemporary high school reform are those that in the past have been considered major components of middle school reform. For example, there are many similarities in recommendations found in Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform (NASSP, 2004), Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform (NASSP, 2006) and This We Believe: Keys to the Education of Young Adolescents (NMSA 2010b).

The most important finding of the 2009 surveys is that the middle school concept and philosophy remain legitimate. The survey of highly successful middle schools showed that those schools are following the middle school concept with more commitment than are other schools that have not been recognized for their high levels of success (e.g., standardized tests scores, developmental responsive programs and practices). These time-honored, effective middle level programs and practices—frequently identified as the middle school concept—must be top priorities if full success is ever to be achieved.

The need to work collaboratively to fully implement recommended middle level developmentally responsive programs and practices (NMSA, 2010b; NASSP, 2006) is more urgent than ever in the changing world faced by young adolescents. Without authentic and sustained implementation, the middle school is in danger of being simply another organizational plan for housing the middle grades rather than being a specialized school that represents the philosophical and programmatic expression of an educational ideal—an ideal that recognizes the uniqueness and extraordinary talents and potential of young adolescents. When developmentally responsive programs and practices are in place, middle level teachers and other middle level educators can focus intently on achieving the key
goals of middle level education (e.g., increasing student learning; enhancing healthy development; helping produce productive citizens; achieving the goals of middle level education and American education in general). The possibilities for success at the middle level are promising, but only if each one of us commits our efforts to provide the young adolescents of our nation the quality of middle level education they need and deserve. The stakes are too high to allow for inaction on the part of all those responsible for the education and care of young adolescents.