

2010-2011
MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

Between

Texas High Schools That Work
for Participation in Making Middle Grades Work

&

_____ Independent School District

The Need for Middle Grades Education Improvement

Imagine a school in which all middle grades students are actively engaged in learning challenging content taught by well-prepared teachers who know their subject matter and how to teach it – a school where everyone is helped to achieve high standards. This school builds on a solid elementary background and prepares each student for a high school experience that leads to a successful adult life.

Middle grades students lag behind their elementary and secondary counterparts and increasing numbers of students are unprepared to do the quality work now demanded for graduation from high school. In the mid to late nineties, SREB began analyzing data about middle grades student academic achievement. We characterized middle grades as the “weak link” in the educational chain. We believe – based on our own developmental work, the work of other researchers and other organizations – that the causes for this weakness are:

- the lack of clarity about the middle grades mission;
- the lack of content preparation and knowledge of how to teach young adolescents by middle grades teachers;
- the lack of specific indicators or criteria for high school readiness; and
- the pervasive and debilitating belief that young adolescents are incapable of dealing with challenging work because of puberty.

The goal of Texas MMGW and SREB’s middle grades effort is to ***increase the percentage of eighth-graders who perform at the proficient level in core academic subjects and who leave eighth grade ready for college-preparatory work in high school.*** To accomplish this goal, we believe that the effort to improve achievement in the middle grades must be based on a comprehensive improvement framework of key practices and conditions grouped around themes that emphasize:

- setting a clear mission and vision of success;
- raising expectations and providing extra help;
- providing rigorous and challenging academic content;
- engaging students in learning challenging content;
- providing guidance and support to all students;
- improving transitions from elementary grades to the middle grades and from middle grades to high school;
- supporting teachers with time and structures for regular and systematic professional development; and
- demonstrating strong leadership and a focus on continuous improvement.

All students in the middle grades should have educational experiences that increase their knowledge and skills in core content areas – reading, mathematics, language arts, science and social studies – and provide opportunities to apply their skills in the fine and practical arts.

Making Middle Grades Work seeks to accelerate academic achievement in middle grades by changing:

- what students are taught;
- how they are taught;
- when they are taught certain academic subjects;
- how teachers relate to students, other teachers and parents; and
- how teachers receive support.

The comprehensive improvement framework provides specific, research-supported actions that states, districts and schools can take to move the middle grades forward.

The Purpose of Networking and Building Partnerships

SREB, in partnership with Texas MMGW and local leaders, can help accelerate change in the middle grades. By agreeing to implement the comprehensive improvement framework and by working together and sharing outcomes, each participating district and school can share strategies that assist implementation and accelerate the process of improving student achievement. The Texas middle grades network can help ensure that all middle grades students receive a high-quality, challenging and appropriate education that prepares them for success in a college-preparatory curriculum during ninth and tenth grades.

Understanding the Middle Grades Comprehensive Improvement Framework

Each participating district and school agrees to accelerate student achievement by implementing key elements and creating conditions that support teachers and school leaders in implementing key improvement practices.

- ***An academic core curriculum that is aligned to rigorous content and performance standards*** – All students in the middle grades must have an academic core that accelerates their learning, challenges them to achieve at higher levels, prepares them for high school college-preparatory classes, and appeals to their interests. SREB defines that academic core as reading, English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. Indicators that describe proficient eighth-grade performance include:
 - students read 25 to 30 books or equivalents (one book = 100 pages) across the curriculum each year;
 - students complete short writing assignments weekly and major reports once a semester;
 - students design, conduct, analyze and describe a science investigation in writing and orally;
 - students complete a research paper written to standards that indicate readiness for college preparatory English in high school; and
 - students complete pre-algebra or algebra and perform satisfactorily on an end-of-course assessment.

- ***A belief that all students matter, supported by a comprehensive guidance and advisement system that connects students and families to the school and that helps students develop educational and personal growth plans for the future*** – Each student needs a long-term personal relationship with an adult mentor or advocate who takes an interest in his or her successful learning, goal-setting, career-planning and personal growth. Key indicators for this standards include:
 - each student has an adult advisor who is the primary contact for the student’s family;
 - all staff are included in an advisory system that provides a guidance curriculum, a services continuum and training support;
 - regular meetings for advisors and students are scheduled;
 - all students leave eighth grade with a five-year educational plan; and
 - regular meetings with advisors, families and students are held at least annually to review the students’ educational plans.

- ***High expectations and a system of extra help and time*** – Students learn in different ways and at different rates. It is important to provide enough time and help to give all students the opportunity to meet more rigorous eighth-grade academic standards. Key indicators include:
 - students and families receive samples of and guidelines for quality work;
 - work is revised until quality standards are met;
 - students who earn less than a “C” grade are required to attend extra help sessions; and
 - extra help is delivered in ways that are different from the original instruction.

- ***Classroom practices that actively engage students in their learning*** – Young adolescents need varied learning activities linked to challenging academic content, and they need opportunities to use new skills and concepts in real-world applications. Students should learn to solve problems, conduct research, analyze and interpret data, defend conclusions, use scientific investigation methods, recognize patterns and trends, reflect on written materials, respond orally and in writing, and work in teams. Key indicators include:
 - students are required to respond orally and in writing to various prompts;
 - instruction is balanced between teacher-centered and student-centered activities;
 - faculty groups investigate and discuss research-based instructional strategies;
 - teachers group students in ways that foster deeper and more advanced learning; and
 - students tackle thought-provoking, complex problems; try different strategies to solve them; present ideas for consideration; evaluate various strategies and focus on concepts that will help them solve similar problems more efficiently.

- ***Teachers working together supported by time and structure*** – All teachers need time to plan together, to develop and coordinate high-quality learning activities, and to share student work that meets proficiency standards. Key indicators include:
 - common planning time is used to examine student work and improve instruction;

- teams are composed of academic core teachers and representatives from the fine and practical arts, special education and second language programs;
 - teachers have opportunities to observe colleagues and master teachers during instruction; and
 - teams have flexibility to schedule learning experiences for groups of students.
- ***Parent and community support*** – If students are expected to meet higher standards, parents should be provided with examples of what constitutes quality work and should be helped to understand the higher content and performance standards. Key indicators include:
 - content and performance standards are shared with parents and throughout the community in language that can be understood by non-educators;
 - partnerships with businesses and community agencies provide resources and support for the school, students and families;
 - schools provide information regularly to parents and the community through a variety of methods – newsletters, web pages, media linkages; and
 - regular parent conferences are scheduled at times and places convenient for families.
- ***Well-qualified teachers in all middle grades classrooms*** – The strongest link between high student achievement and other factors is qualified teachers. Middle grades teachers must have in-depth knowledge of both their subject(s) and of how to teach young adolescents. Teachers who lack majors or minors in their teaching assignments need support to upgrade their content knowledge or obtain a major or a minor as a condition for continued employment. Key indicators include:
 - new teachers in the middle grades demonstrate content mastery in a subject area(s) by earning majors or minors and completing portfolios of work, oral presentations and/or tests;
 - states require subject-specific teaching licenses in the middle grades;
 - teacher candidates for the middle grades have varied, supervised teaching experiences with middle grades students; and
 - schools have professional development plans that support higher standards for students and update middle grades teachers’ content knowledge and teaching skills.
- ***Use of data*** – Successful districts and schools use data on student, school and teacher performance continuously to affirm or revise school and classroom practices that will improve student achievement. The continuous use of data helps advance student learning and identifies conditions that help students meet curriculum and performance goals. Key indicators include:
 - data reports are provided to all faculty members;
 - data are disaggregated by gender and ethnicity and discussed by grade-level and content area teams of teachers;
 - data are shared among schools in a cluster of sending elementary, middle grades and receiving high schools; and

- school data are shared with parents and the community and individual student profiles are shared with families.
- ***Exploring and using technology to advance learning*** – Students have higher achievement when technology is an integral part of the instructional process. Key indicators include:
 - schools share information by using communication technology;
 - integrated projects provide opportunities to use a variety of technologies – computer, video and audio;
 - students apply technology experiences to demonstrations of learning; and
 - staff members have access to technological training and equipment.
- ***Strong leadership*** – Middle grades schools need strong, effective principals who encourage teachers and actively participate with them in planning and implementing research-based improvements in school and classroom practices. Key indicators include:
 - administrators participate in professional development opportunities with staff;
 - administrators provide instructional leadership through observation, feedback, demonstration and consultation;
 - the school develops an action plan addressing its students’ most urgent needs; and
 - administrators meet regularly with faculty groups to plan, implement and monitor school improvements.

To fully implement the comprehensive improvement framework requires a sustained effort and support from the educational system as a whole. Certain conditions that provide a structure for changes in climate, practices and personnel help schools focus on the elements in the framework that must be strengthened.

Essential Conditions for Raising Student Achievement

- A commitment of support from the district and school to provide the necessary leadership to ensure successful implementation of the comprehensive improvement framework.
- A commitment from the school board to support a rigorous and challenging academic core for all students in the middle grades.
- An organizational structure and process that provides both time and ways in which administrators and faculty can work together to plan actions for implementing the comprehensive improvement framework.
- A commitment from the district superintendent to complete a curriculum review that compares all curricula with national and international standards for grades 4-9 as a minimum with K-12 as the ideal. As a result, each grade will have a set of standards to achieve, a set of

performance criteria that defines the quality of work expected, and standards that are aligned with state standards.

- Professional development for middle grades teachers that is directly connected to academic standards and student achievement needs and that is part of an ongoing plan with follow-up in each school site.

The Middle Grades Assessment

To determine progress on implementing the comprehensive improvement framework, Texas MMGW and SREB requires an assessment process that combines tests, surveys, school visits and other data collected by schools. The Middle Grades Assessment will enable school leaders and teachers to:

- understand the strengths and weaknesses of their efforts;
- compare their progress to composite results from all sites and from high-achieving sites with a student population most like that at their school; and
- share what they have learned with staff in other schools.

SREB administers The Middle Grades Assessment every two years to determine the extent to which the comprehensive improvement framework is assisting schools in raising achievement. The Middle Grades Assessment includes the following parts:

- ***School Data Profile*** – The school data profile provides demographic and organizational information about the school and is completed by the principal, site coordinator or other designee. Critical information that helps determine the context of other assessment data is gathered through this profile. Annual updates on demographics and programs are required.
- ***Teacher Survey*** – All teachers in the school, including full- and part-time, core, exploratory and related arts teachers complete this survey (*School counselors, administrators, and media specialists do not complete this survey.*) The purpose of the survey is to give teachers a voice in the school improvement process. Survey information can be used to plan professional development programs that fit teacher and student needs.
- ***The Principal's Survey*** – In general, this survey covers school climate, processes and policy information. It is completed by the school principal.
- ***SREB Middle Grades Student Assessment*** – The Middle Grades Assessment is based on items produced by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and contains four sections: Reading, Mathematics, Science and a Student Survey. The assessment uses blocks of NAEP items, but has been constructed for SREB use only.
- ***The Technical Assistance Visit*** – To supplement the data gathered through the Middle Grades Assessment, SREB in partnership with the state, conducts a three-day, technical assistance visit with a team from the state and district to each school during the year they join

the network. The purpose of the technical assistance visit is to help school leaders and teachers identify changes needed to improve student achievement in the middle grades. The technical assistance visit should be a growth experience for all who are involved with it. As a follow-up to the visit, SREB produces a report that recognizes the school's strengths, identifies the challenges they face in improving student achievement and recommends actions that school leaders can consider as they refine the school's improvement plan.

- ***The Technical Review Visit*** – Approximately three after the technical assistance visit, the school receives a one-day visit from the technical assistance team leader and state coordinator. The visit provides an opportunity for *Making Middle Grades Work* schools, SREB staff and state coordinators to assess progress in implementing the comprehensive improvement framework. It also helps fine-tune action plans and identify further technical assistance that the school needs.

BENEFITS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

- Middle grades students who learn rigorous content and meet performance standards will become more confident in their ability to meet life's challenges and see themselves as worthy and contributing individuals.
- Teachers who become part of a team that aligns and focuses the academic core curriculum and plans staff development activities to improve student achievement see themselves as a positive factor in students' lives and as emerging leaders in their profession.
- Principals strengthen their leadership skills through new techniques of scheduling and staffing and through active involvement in curriculum instructional issues.
- Schools receive data to help identify what is needed to improve the performance of middle grades students in mathematics, science and reading. The information becomes the basis of an action plan to focus faculty and administration on making needed changes. *Making Middle Grades Work* results in improved communication across the educational system-- high schools, middle grades and elementary schools.
- Parents become more connected with schools through access to information and evidence on what works in the middle grades and how it can be used to improve student achievement.
- States acquire new strategies for working with local school systems on a long-term basis to bring about "whole school" change. By sharing information on the middle grades framework and its implementation, states gain knowledge about how policies can support comprehensive school improvements.
- The community, state and nation benefit from improved mathematics, science and reading/English achievement in the middle grades. More students remain in school and develop plans to pursue careers and education beyond high school.

Establishing benchmarks of progress and readiness

Schools that become part of the Texas MMGW network are expected to show progress in changing school and classroom practices that have proven most effective in engaging students in learning and advancing achievement. True school reform is not a quick process. Texas MMGW and SREB expect all schools to show consistent progress until the comprehensive school improvement framework is fully implemented and at least 85 percent of students reach achievement goals in reading, mathematics and science.

To achieve continuous improvement, schools need to set benchmarks for determining school progress that are strongly associated with improving academic achievement. SREB's sample benchmarks are based on the middle grades comprehensive improvement framework and essential conditions and are grouped around themes that can help organize all efforts to improve student academic achievement.

The Importance of Well-planned Transitions

Most students in the middle grades spend less time in middle grades schools than in elementary and high schools. For this reason, it is important that moves to and from the middle grades are as smooth and free from disruption as possible. The transition to a new school may be as nerve-wracking for families as it is for students – it can disrupt family patterns because of time and distance as well as through unfamiliarity with school policies and procedures.

Research on test scores indicates each student transition, unless well planned and carried out successfully, results in an achievement lag for at least a year. Schools can help adolescents be successful students through a strong program of activities to bridge the movement between schools.

Effective transitions help assure that:

- students and their families become members of a school's community and are better informed about programs, requirements, procedures, opportunities, and responsibilities;
- students are better prepared for new curricular and social demands;
- teachers are better informed of the connections between programs at elementary, middle and high schools; and
- middle grades teachers and leaders are better prepared to help students adjust to and succeed in a new school environment.

Schools with successful transition programs provide information on the new school in a variety of ways and at various times for students and parents. They connect "buddies" from the high school with incoming students and families of high school students with middle grades families to provide social support for students and increase the involvement of families in the school. They also bring middle grades and high school personnel together to discuss each other's curriculum and expectations.

MAKING MIDDLE GRADES WORK COMMITMENTS:

Districts and schools participating in Texas *Making Middle Grades Work* agree to:

- Negotiate an annual contract with the SREB as the provider of the Making Middle Grades Work which outlines technical assistance and professional development, the TAV/TRV to ensure deep implementation of the MMGW framework model
- Promote a vision of high achievement for all students.
- Participate as a faculty in a site development workshop and agree to use the middle grades framework to accelerate student achievement.
- Obtain district and school board support for SREB's middle grades initiative and the changes required to implement the comprehensive improvement framework.
- *MMGW* sites agree to increase annually the percentage of students enrolled in Algebra I by 10% at a minimum with the goal of having all eighth graders complete Algebra I.
- Participate in Texas MMGW workshops and conferences designed to assist sites in deeply implementing the *MMGW* improvement framework..
- Align core curricula to *MMGW*'s readiness indicators; in year one align mathematics curriculum, in year two align the English/language arts curriculum and in year three align the science curriculum. *MMGW* strongly recommends that sites participate in one Getting Middle Grades Students Ready workshops each year to train teachers in aligning assignments and assessments to readiness for college-preparatory courses in high school.
- As the school raises expectations, students must receive focused extra help and time to meet higher standards. *MMGW* strongly recommends that sites explore the many ways other network sites have revised school schedules, policies and programs to provide students with targeted assistance. *MMGW* especially recommends that schools look at ways to offer catch-up courses that are designed to give rising ninth-graders who are deemed at risk for remedial studies in high school one last chance to catch up. SREB and Texas HSTW offers training on the design and implementation of catch-up courses including developed lessons as part of its Getting Students Ready for High School workshop series.
- All *MMGW* sites are expected to implement SREB's five literacy goals.. Each site shall establish a literacy team in year one to research how other network sites have addressed implementation of these goals and to develop a site-specific literacy plan..
- Appoint a site coordinator to coordinate planning, professional development and technical assistance; organize data collection; monitor progress; foster communication; and coordinate integration of the middle grades initiative with other school improvement efforts.
- Establish benchmarks for progress.

- Develop a three- to five- year improvement plan and submit it to the Texas MMGW state coordinator and SREB for review 120 days after the site development workshop.
- Organize a school improvement committee comprised of key academic and fine/related arts teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, parents and community representatives. Subcommittees shall be established to address curriculum, instruction, guidance, evaluation and professional development.
- Support teachers with professional development, materials and time to work together to implement the comprehensive improvement framework and participate in national, state and school professional development as needed.
- Participate in a Technical Assistance Visit in year one as part of assessment activities. Fund necessary outside staff to attend your schools visit and allow your staff to attend other TAV's at their expense through coordination and the assistance of the SREB consultant assigned to your school.
- Administer the biennial Middle Grades Assessment (student tests and surveys, teacher surveys, principal's survey and a school data profile.)
- Submit annual progress reports to the state and SREB that show significant progress toward fully implementing the middle grades comprehensive improvement framework and raising student achievement.
- Engage in a contract for services between Education Service Center, Region XIII and the school for comprehensive guidance/counseling services which will include professional development opportunities for guidance/counseling staff.
- Be an active member of the middle grades network by sharing information and ideas.

