



## National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform Vision Statement

We, the members of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, believe that youth in the middle grades are capable of learning and achieving at high levels. We share a sense of urgency that high-performing schools with middle-grades become the norm, not the exception.

High-performing schools with middle grades are **academically excellent**. They challenge all students to use their minds well, providing them with the curriculum, instruction, assessment, support, and time they need to meet rigorous academic standards. They recognize that early adolescence is characterized by dramatic cognitive growth, which enables students to think in more abstract and complex ways. The curriculum and extra-curricular programs in such schools are challenging and engaging, tapping young adolescents' boundless energy, interests, and curiosity. Students learn to understand important concepts, develop essential skills, and apply what they learn to real-world problems. Adults in these schools maintain a rich academic environment by working with colleagues in their schools and communities to deepen their own knowledge and improve their practice.

High-performing schools with middle grades are **developmentally responsive**. Such schools create small learning communities of adults and students in which stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships support all students' intellectual, ethical, and social growth. They provide comprehensive services to foster healthy physical and emotional development. Students have opportunities for both independent inquiry and learning in cooperation with others. They have time to be reflective and numerous opportunities to make decisions about their learning. Developmentally responsive schools involve families as partners in the education of their children. They welcome families, keep them well informed, help them develop their expectations and skills to support learning, and assure their participation in decision-making. These schools are deeply rooted in their communities. Students have opportunities for active citizenship. They use the community as a classroom, and community members provide resources, connections, and active support.

High-performing schools with middle grades are **socially equitable**. They seek to keep their students' future options open. They have high expectations for all their students and are committed to helping each child produce work of high quality. These schools make sure that all students are in academically rigorous classes staffed by experienced and expertly prepared teachers. These teachers acknowledge and honor their students' histories and cultures. They work to educate every child well and to over-come systematic variation in resources and outcomes related to race, class, gender and ability. They engage their communities in supporting all students' learning and growth.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform represents educators, researchers, professional organizations, and foundations. We work with middle-level educators, policymakers, leaders in higher education, family and community members, and other stakeholders to identify and replicate successful practices, share resources, and create a coordinated movement for reform of middle-grades education.



## THE SCHOOLS TO WATCH® CRITERIA

**ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE.** The school is academically excellent. It challenges all students to use their minds well.

1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards.
2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards.
3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills.
4. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the grade-level standards, concepts, and skills being taught.
5. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess and monitor the progress of student learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, assignments, exhibitions, projects, performance tasks, portfolios).
6. The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous academic standards.
7. Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards.
8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice.



**DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSIVENESS.** The school is sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development.
2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.
3. Teachers foster curiosity, creativity and the development of social skills in a structured and supportive environment.

4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents.
5. Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world problems.
6. Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.
7. All students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities.
8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children.
9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support.
10. The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom environment.



**SOCIAL EQUITY.** The school is socially equitable, democratic, and fair. It provides every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. It keeps positive options open for all students.

1. To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations.
2. Students are provided the opportunity to use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.
3. Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs.
4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.
5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures.
6. The school community knows every student well.

7. The faculty welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families and makes sure that all its families are an integral part of the school.
8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship.
9. Staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of its students.
10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied.



ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES. The school is a learning organization that establishes 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.
2. The principal 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 time and opportunity for reflection are the norm.
4. The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional development, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement.
5. The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system, i.e., districts, networks and community partnerships.
6. The school staff holds itself accountable for the students' success.
7. District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students.
8. The school and district staffs work with colleges and universities to recruit, prepare, and mentor novice and experienced teachers.
9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance.