

## Salem Middle School Success Initiative Research Summary

Researchers and educators across the nation have identified middle school education as a critical lever in academic student success in public education. This paper summarizes some of the most notable research on middle school best practices and highlights some current models for high-performing middle schools.

1. [Ed Source, "Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do it Better." 2010.](#)

In the 2008-09 school year, researchers from EdSource and Stanford University conducted a large-scale study of 303 middle schools in California. The team surveyed 303 principals, 3,752 English Language Arts (ELA) and math teachers in grades 6-8, and 157 superintendents. The sample of schools included grades 6-8 (50%), K-8 (24%), and 7-8 (26%). Half of the schools served predominantly low-income student populations and half served predominately middle-income populations. This report compares the responses of high-performing schools to identify which school characteristics are most highly associated with high student performance.

The report found that these high-performing schools:

- Make academic achievement and improvement for all students their primary focus
- Design their instructional program to prepare all students for a rigorous high school education
- Employ standards-based curricula
- Collect and use student data to guide strategies for improvement
- Use early identification systems to intervene with struggling students
- Develop principals as instructional leaders
- Encourage a culture of professionalism among teachers

### [Kuss Middle School, Fall River, MA](#)

Kuss Middle School currently serves 623 students in grades 6-8. In 2004 the school was the first in Massachusetts to be declared "chronically underperforming;" and in less than a decade rose back up to named Level one school, the highest rating on the State's accountability system. One of the keys to Kuss' success was the addition of 90 minutes to the school day, allowing for an enhanced focus on key elements, including:

- More rigorous standards and curricula for core subjects, including math and ELA
- Small-group "ramp-up" classes for core subjects that provide additional support to struggling students
- Expanded elective classes, including standard specialty classes (PE, art, music and family and consumer sciences) along with a range of arts classes taught in collaboration with community members
- More individual and collaborative planning time for teachers
- More sophisticated data systems to track student progress and provide interventions
- Regular peer observations for teachers and job-embedded professional development
- Improved school facilities, including a move to a new building in 2009

Since 2004, the school has seen steady academic improvement as well as improved attendance and student behavior.

2. [Southern Regional Education Board, "Improved Middle Grades Schools for Improved High School Readiness: Ten Best Practices in the Middle Grades." 2012.](#)

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) manages a network of 138 middle schools across 16 States through its *Making Middle Grades Work* initiative. In this report, SREB examines the 10 highest-achieving middle schools in its network through school achievement data and interviews with principals.

Overall, the report found that the most common trait across high-performing schools is that they are committed to creating a *culture of continuous improvement for all students*. Other characteristics include:

- A clear mission focused on high school preparation and beyond
- Reinforcing this mission regularly with faculty and students
- Strong district support for the school's mission and adjusting curriculum and school structure as needed
- An accelerated curriculum benchmarked with ninth-grade college-preparatory standards and that encourages teacher collaboration
- Engaging student assignments that use real-world issues and cooperative learning
- A strong focus on developing students' reading and writing skills
- High expectations for all students
- Early identification of struggling students combined with effective intervention strategies
- High-quality guidance and advisement for students, preferably through a one-on-one connection with a faculty member
- Extensive job-embedded professional development for teachers aligned with the school's mission
- A strong school leadership team

[Salem Academy Charter School, Salem, MA](#)

Salem Academy currently serves students in grades 6-12, with 185 students in grades 6-8. The school follows the philosophy that every student is capable of success when held to high expectations and provided with structure and consistency. The school creates a community among students and faculty based on mutual respect and thoughtful relationships, and defines its expectations for students as "REACH" - Responsible, Empathetic, Assertive, Cooperative, Honest. Students in grades 6-8 participate in extended and performance-based math and ELA classes. The school also offers students electives as well as extended school time on Fridays for additional activities. The school strives to develop strong ties within the school community, with students attending a daily "connections class" in which students gradually take control of the content of the class to better suit it to their needs. The school also has an SFC (School Family Community) Team to act a connection between the school and the greater community.

Salem Academy regularly performs at or above both the district and the State average in both Math and ELA on MCAS for the middle grades.

3. [ACT, “The Forgotten Middle,” 2008.](#)

ACT examined the results across three of their tests for middle and high-school aged children to determine which factors can predict student success after graduation. The study looked at 98,812 students who graduated from high school in either 2005 or 2006. Students took each of the three exams comprising the ACT college readiness system: 1) EXPLORE, offered to 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders to measure their academic preparation; 2) PLAN, offered to 10<sup>th</sup> graders to track their progress on academic goals; and 3) ACT, offered to 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders to measure their readiness for making the transition to college and careers. ACT then went a step further to examine 2,928 students across 24 middle schools to determine which student academic behaviors best predict student achievement.

[High Tech Middle, San Diego, CA](#)

High Tech Middle is a member of the High Tech High consortium of charter schools. These schools are dedicated to the fundamental design principles of common intellectual mission, adult world connection and personalization. High Tech Middle emphasizes inclusivity and strives to promote excellence for all students. The school maintains high standards for students while allowing teachers the flexibility to act as curriculum designers who strive to create innovative project-based learning experiences that engage all students in complex, adult world projects. Students participate in cross-subject teaching teams for the full school year as well as classes in art, drama and Spanish. Each student has a designated faculty advisor who offers academic, emotional and social support for all three years of schooling. At the culmination of the school year, students present their final projects to the local community.

High Tech High schools boast a high rate of achievement, with 98% of high school graduates attending college. Of these, 35% are first-generation college students.

**The report finds that eighth grade achievement is the best predictor of college- and career-readiness by high school graduation.** It adds that improvement on eighth grade academic achievement is more beneficial in terms of college and career readiness than any high school-level academic strategy. Regarding academic behaviors, it found that students exhibiting academic discipline – which the report defines as a combination of planning and organization, follow-through and action, and sustained effort – combined with orderly conduct are more likely to succeed in high school. It concludes that focusing on both achievement and behavior in middle school is vital for enhancing success in high school.

The report makes the following recommendations for middle schools:

- Focus middle school standards on the knowledge and skills that are essential for college and career readiness and make these nonnegotiable for all students.
- Monitor student progress in becoming ready for college and career, and intervene with students who are not on target.
- Improve students’ academic behaviors and monitor issues including homework compliance, attendance and other behaviors.

4. [Kristen Campbell Wilcox with Janet Angelis, "What Makes Middle Schools Work," University at Albany, State University of New York, 2007.](#)

Researchers interviewed teachers and principals across ten of New York's highest-performing middle schools about what these staff saw as the most critical components of their schools. The schools represent a range of student populations and geographic locales, though all exceeded the State achievement average in both math and ELA. Following the interviews, researchers worked to discern which characteristics cited by teachers and principals most differentiated these high-performing schools from average-performing schools in New York State.

Researchers identified five common elements that help these schools "build a culture of success:"

- Building trusting and respectful relationships between students, teachers, administrators and parents
- Attention to students' social and emotional well-being, including providing a stable climate and emotional support for students
- Encouraging teamwork between teachers and administrators
- Employing evidence-based decision making, including sharing data across multiple sources and analyzing regularly for warning signs
- Establishing a shared vision of the schools' mission and goals

#### [Roxbury Prep, Roxbury, MA](#)

Roxbury Prep is a member of Uncommon Schools, a charter management organization dedicated to the idea that all students can succeed in middle and high school when: 1) the curriculum is rigorous, engaging, and well-planned; 2) the school emphasizes student character, community responsibility, and exposure to life's possibilities; and 3) a community network supports student academic, social, and physical well-being. The 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. school day includes rigorous college prep classes in the core subjects, individualized reading groups for students and daily physical education and arts classes. The school puts a heavy emphasis on its internal community and code of conduct, requiring students to adhere to a dress code and regularly participate as active members of the school community. Teachers engage in intense annual professional development and are expected to plan their own lessons that meet the school's high standards while also addressing the individual needs of their students. Principals and instructional coaches work with teachers to continually analyze student performance data and revise lessons as needed.

Since its creation in 1999, almost all Roxbury Prep students have gone on to graduate from high school and 60% are attending or have graduated from a postsecondary institution. For the past six years, Roxbury Prep eighth graders have performed above the Massachusetts State average on the MCAS in both math and ELA.

**Other Resources:**

- Balfanz, Robert, Lisa Herzog and Douglas Mac Iver, "Preventing Student Disengagement in the Middle Grades," Educational Psychologist, 2007. <http://web.jhu.edu/sebin/g/b/PreventingStudentDisengagement.pdf>
- Farrington, Camille et al., "Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Non-cognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Review," The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2012. <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Noncognitive%20Report.pdf>
- Dana Center at UT Austin, "Driven to Succeed: High-Performing, High-Poverty Turnaround Middle Schools," 2002. [http://www.utdanacenter.org/downloads/products/driven/ms\\_vol2.pdf](http://www.utdanacenter.org/downloads/products/driven/ms_vol2.pdf)
- Styrton, Ronald and Terri Nyman, "Key Characteristics of School Performance," Research in Middle Level Education, 2008. [http://www.amle.org/portals/0/pdf/rmle/rmle\\_vol31\\_no5.pdf](http://www.amle.org/portals/0/pdf/rmle/rmle_vol31_no5.pdf)
- Herlihy, Corrine and James Kemple, "The Talent Development Middle School Model: Context, Components, and Initial Impacts on Students' Performance and Attendance," MDRC Publications, 2004. <http://www.mdrc.org/publication/talent-development-middle-school-model>