



Middle Start: Implementation, Impact, and Lessons Learned, 2003-2006

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Drawing on data collected during a third-party evaluation of Middle Start implementation in Michigan middle schools, this document addresses the following set of questions:

- What is Middle Start?
- How is Middle Start being evaluated?
- What types of changes do schools make to implement Middle Start?
- What factors affect the degree to which Middle Start schools change?
- How do students benefit from attending Middle Start schools?
- What challenges do Middle Start schools face?

What is Middle Start?

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation launched Middle Start in 1994 by making funds available to schools, professional development and technical assistance providers, agencies concerned with advocating for and offering youth services, and research/evaluation/policy groups to concentrate on addressing systematically the particular needs of adolescents. This initial infusion of resources set in motion (1) focused professional development in numerous schools that concentrated on a specific area of need over an extended period of time and (2) comprehensive school improvement in another set of schools that targeted both organization and instruction.

The most recent Middle Start work has focused on developing a reform model responsive to the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program funded by the federal government and managed by state departments of education. Over the past five years low achieving and low income middle schools have undertaken a three-year process to improve student achievement. With the guidance of a specially trained coach, these schools have worked to implement what are commonly known in Middle Start parlance as the four “principles,” with the singular goal of providing academically challenging and developmentally appropriate experiences for all young adolescents.

Reflective Review and Self-Assessment.

The Middle Start model maintains that schools grow and students learn by having staff engage in ongoing inquiry into teaching and learning, using both internal and external reviews of student work, curriculum, instruction, and teacher assignment. Reflection and inquiry are central to a school's continuous improvement of learning for all students and to its collaborative professional culture of leaders and learners. The

research that documents the value of these actions maintains that internal accountabilities are the best motivators for sustainable, student-centered school improvement (Ancess, 1996; Sykes, 1999; Little, 1999; McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001; Stokes, 2001). Specific practices associated with this intervention include:

- The school devotes resources and time to continuing and deepening school wide inquiry and reflection into teaching and learning, making it a central aspect of school culture. A democratically elected and representative school leadership team leads these efforts.
- The school collects and examines data and evidence, including a school self-assessment, to focus the staff on identifying and setting teaching and learning goals.
- The school examines evidence to identify academic progress as well as gaps in achievement related to income, gender, race/ethnicity, and special status (ELL and special education).
- The school makes inquiries into student learning through a regular and formal process of reviewing student work.
- The school conducts formal and periodic external reviews of its teaching and learning practices and uses the results to improve practice.

Effective Small Learning Communities

A second core Middle Start principle is that each school should have productive interdisciplinary teams at every grade level. Teams of teachers are expected to meet during common planning time to set instructional priorities, develop interdisciplinary units, conduct reviews of student work to assess the team's direction and needs, and communicate with parents. The research suggests that such small learning communities foster a caring and supportive learning environment where positive relationships develop between teachers and students, enable interdisciplinary and differentiated approaches to teaching and learning, promote the healthy development of young adolescents, and are associated with higher student achievement (Dufour & Eaker, 1994; Kruse & Louis, 1994; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999). Practices suggested as part of this principle include:

- School teams use common planning time to coordinate curriculum, instruction, and assessment for all students and identify an instructional focus that crosses all content areas. Teams regularly review student work to assess progress toward their teaching and learning goals, and set future directions.
- School teams are involved in making decisions about school policies, practices, and procedures in collaboration with the school leadership team.

- School teams cultivate meaningful, two-way, and regular communication between home and school that builds families' understanding of the academic and developmental needs of young adolescents. Teams also involve families and community agencies in classroom and school activities and invite their perspectives on future directions for the school.
- School teams promote the intellectual, physical, emotional, moral, and social development of every student.
- Students are flexibly grouped within small learning communities so that every child has access to rigorous curriculum, effective instruction, and appropriate levels of support.

Rigorous Curriculum, Instruction, and Student Assessment

A third Middle Start principle has schools explicitly focus on improving student learning and achievement by matching rich and rigorous curriculum with best instructional practices and exemplary assessment to standards to realize the full potential of each student. Research indicates that integrated curricula, project-based learning, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, student-led conferencing, and mastery learning are all valuable tools for educating young adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, n. d.). This Middle Start principle promotes the following practices:

- The school uses best instructional practices and a curriculum that emphasizes deep understanding, higher order thinking, and experiential learning.
- The school aligns curriculum, instruction, and assessment with each other and with district, state, and national standards.
- The school researches, selects, and uses multicultural curricula and teachers use a variety of teaching modalities to meet the needs of all students.
- The school assesses student progress in a variety of ways, including performance-based and project-based assessments, which provide all students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery and understanding.
- Teachers use standards and rubrics when evaluating student work; students have opportunities to learn about, develop, and use rubrics.
- The school engages in standards-based professional development that builds on teachers' knowledge and creates opportunities for reflection.

Distributed Leadership and Sustainable Partnerships

The intention of this final Middle Start principle is that schools should distribute leadership responsibilities through all levels of the school community and all members of the staff hold themselves accountable for student learning and achievement. Moreover,

the schools should cultivate sustainable partnerships with families, the district, the school board, local businesses, universities, and other community groups for the purpose of enhancing student learning. Middle Start schools should also foster high levels of awareness and support for middle-grades education among its partners.

Distributed leadership is a capacity-building strategy that spreads instructional leadership in schools and strengthens the long-term viability of reform (Spillane, 2003; Elmore, 2000). Engagement of families and communities in the process of school improvement enhances the prospects that the reforms are meaningful beyond just the school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Corbett & Wilson, 2000). This fourth principle embraces a range of practices, including:

- The leadership team involves families, school staff, and community partners in school governance and in making decisions about policies and practices for the improvement of teaching and learning.
- Teachers, administrators, and counselors regularly communicate with families, and welcome families and community members into classrooms, team meetings, and school events.
- The school leadership team provides space and resources to families in order to extend their knowledge about the needs of young adolescents and approaches to supporting students academically and developmentally. The school leadership team also provides access to community agencies, services, and resources.
- The leadership team facilitates the school wide collection of data to assess the concerns and perceptions of families regarding the school, and uses this evidence to improve policies and practices.
- The leadership team is collaborative and inclusive in its efforts to attain the school's teaching and learning goals. Additionally, the school's emphasis on reflective review facilitates the development of internal accountability for the improvement of teaching and learning.
- The leadership team participates in the Middle Start network and leadership seminars, and shares information from these meetings with staff. To facilitate professional development, staff from the school visit other schools to study their efforts to improve teaching and learning, and are visited by their fellow Middle Start schools for this purpose.
- The school views students as central to its purpose, and seeks their ideas on new initiatives as well as their feedback on progress in teaching and learning. The school regularly reviews students' work in teams and as a whole school, using internal and external reviewers, to gauge its progress toward its teaching and learning goals.

Although the majority of Middle Start's work to date has been geographically bounded in Michigan, Middle Start has also had a presence, via the Foundation for the Mid-South, in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Middle Start as a reform attempts to engage a wide-ranging group of partners in shaping educational policy and to enhance public engagement in middle grades reform; to create networks of participating schools so that they could continue to discuss, plan for, and make improvements in the company of peers long after special funding disappeared; to design and carry out research that documents both implementation and impact; and to eventually establish a "brand" for Middle Start – a visibly recognized and conceptually coherent package of principles, practices, and products that would under gird a national focus on helping schools serve youth academically and developmentally well in a fully equitable manner. The history of Middle Start then is at a minimum a story about schools, about agencies and their staff members who work with schools, and about attempting to promote communication, coordination, and collaboration among them. The story of this partnership is captured in a W. K. Kellogg Foundation report (Wilson & Corbett, 2004).

This document pertains specifically to the implementation and impact of Middle Start in two cohorts of Michigan middle grades settings, both of whom received three-year CSR grants to put the Middle Start principles into place. The 21 schools served predominantly low-income students in rural and urban settings. All of the schools sought to improve students' literacy skills and were involved in school-based professional development activities to enhance their faculties' capacity to accomplish this end. The schools formed leadership teams to guide their efforts and organized staff into teams to promote greater collaboration among educators and closer relationships with students. Other sections of this document address the challenges and successes that the schools experienced.

How is Middle Start Being Evaluated?

The National Middle Start Center, which is managed by the Academy for Educational Development in New York City, contracted with the authors of this report to conduct an independent, third-party evaluation of progress in CSR-funded Middle Start schools. The evaluation was to be primarily formative. That is, the data were to inform the Middle Start reform model developers about issues related to its implementation and impact that, in turn, would spark subsequent revisions in the model. The evaluation was also longitudinal. The Michigan middle schools' endeavors were tracked closely for the three years of their CSR grants and then for two years with the first cohort of schools and one year for the second after the special funding ceased. The multi-year aspect to the evaluation enabled the evaluators to address summative issues related to impact as well.

The evaluation, thus, was expected to shed considerable light on both the results of the schools' reform efforts and the process by which those results were achieved. In that regard, the evaluation addressed the issue of what the unique benefits to schools were for having implemented Middle Start, which meant that evaluation procedures had to be

sensitive to a wide range of organizational, instructional, and learning-related consequences, both intended and unintended. At the same time, the schools were likely to interpret and enact comprehensive school reform in a variety of ways, in large part due to the well-documented influence of local context and capacity. Such implementation differences had to therefore be tracked in order to explain variable outcomes among the schools and illuminate the role of Middle Start principles and change process in producing those outcomes.

The critical questions to be addressed by the evaluation were:

Implementation:

- What were the actions taken in the schools as part of the process of implementing Middle Start?
- How widespread was involvement in those actions across role groups and grade levels within each school?
- How did different role groups within each school define and respond to those actions?
- What features of each school's context and capacity influenced Middle Start implementation and how did they do so?
- How did schools differ from one another in terms of the types, breadth, and depth of actions taken?

Impact:

- How did students perform on indicators that were meaningful to the schools?
- How did students perform on state accountability indicators?
- Was the achievement gap between difference subgroups of students closing on those indicators, and what trend did it show over time?
- What, if any, indicators of developmental appropriateness did schools use, and what did they show?
- What was Middle Start's impact on classroom practice?
- How did the schools' cultures change as a result of their involvement in Middle Start?
- What relationship was there, if any, between the implementation patterns across the schools and the impacts attributable to Middle Start?
- How did students in Middle Start schools, or subgroups of Middle Start schools, perform on state accountability indicators compared to students from demographically similar schools?

To answer these questions and to fulfill the formative expectation required that the evaluation incorporate several key features into its design. First, the evaluation collected data from all participating Middle Start CSR schools in Michigan rather than a sample of them in order to be able to depict the full range of local approaches to

implementing the model and the variety of outcomes schools hoped to achieve.

Accordingly, the search for effects was broad rather than narrow, attended to the academic/developmental/equitable focus that Middle Start advocated, attempted to be sensitive to differential impact across subgroups in the school community, and flexible enough to detect unanticipated results, both desirable and undesirable, in order to present a complete picture of what happened in the schools.

Second, the evaluation drew on both qualitative and quantitative methods for multiple years. Indeed, in an evaluation of comprehensive school reform, multiple and longitudinal methods were necessary to unveil the complexities and nuances of the process. The evaluation examined data from three different sources:

- **Yearly surveys** of all teachers that contained items pertaining to implementing the Middle Start principles and how the school was organized to support changes and of all eighth grade students that had items addressing the teaching practices students encountered in the classroom and the extent to which these practices enhanced academic excellence and healthy development for all students. Scales of items related to each of the four principles and the three aspects of Middle Start's student goals were created to indicate the level of implementation of these components in the schools. The scales had an internal reliability index of right at .7 or higher.
- **On-site interviews** conducted annually with school leaders (administrators and school leadership team members), teachers, and students. These concentrated on implementation issues and indications of impact on both adults and students in the schools. The visits also afforded evaluators the opportunity to review action plans and other documents related to the schools' change efforts.
- **Results from the Michigan Assessment of Educational Progress (MEAP)** were analyzed each year. The test is a criterion-referenced instrument. Originally it was administered in the late winter to all seventh grade students but the state department of education shifted this to fall in 2005.

Third, the evaluation incorporated a quasi-experimental component to enable it to speak somewhat to whether results from the MEAP were likely attributable to the educators' implementation of Middle Start. The 21 Middle Start cohort schools were matched to non-Middle Start peers. Each comparison school was geographically proximate and had the same configuration of grades (wherever possible) as its Middle Start counterpart, had similar scores on the 2002 MEAP reading test (the year prior to the first cohort's receiving the CSR grants), and mirrored the Middle Start peer's student population in terms of poverty and race. Each year, then, the difference between the performance of the Middle Start schools in improving their students reading proficiency and this comparison group's performance was examined in terms of both statistical significance and effect size. Of course, in real world settings, it is impossible to control all the complicated and intertwined factors that influence how schools operated and subsequently affect students. Moreover, all low-income Michigan middle schools were under considerable pressure to reform, and specifically to boost their MEAP scores.

Therefore the comparison group analysis had to be situated as only one bit of evidence of what eventually happened in the Middle Start schools.

What Types of Changes Do Schools Make to Implement Middle Start?

Middle Start's underlying "theory of action" posits that the most productive way to get long-term gains in student outcomes is to work explicitly on key aspects of the organizational and instructional arrangements in schools. As mentioned earlier, Middle Start has identified four such features:

- Reflective Review and Self-Assessment
- Effective Small Learning Communities
- Rigorous Curriculum, Instruction, and Student Assessment
- Distributed Leadership and Sustainable Partnerships

Both on-site interviews and survey responses detailed the kinds of changes educators made to implement these principles.

Reflective Review and Self-Assessment

Reflective review and self-assessment were organizational habits that all of the Middle Start schools had difficulty developing, primarily because they had little or no prior experiences with routinely reflecting about their instructional and operational needs or using data to help inform decisions about how to improve in these areas. An administrator described a school's first tentative steps to enhance their capacity to use data:

After the first year of Middle Start, the staff was concerned that we were not educating the whole child. So we began exploring a cycle of inquiry and peer review so that we could better understand the importance of where we are and where we want to go. We did an initial internal assessment in November where we looked at the ratio of higher order thinking questions in our instruction. Later this spring we will have an external review team come to the school and focus on two questions: Is there evidence of application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation within the school environment? And, are students given the opportunity to make real world connections with their learning? What we have done is planted the seed with this work. The seed has popped up in a few instances but most are still in the germination stage.

The external review the principal referred to was the Collegial Peer Review (CPR) process (Weinbaum, et al, 2004), which Middle Start developed to help put reflection center stage and piloted in several of the Michigan schools. The overall goal of this inquiry-based approach is to help schools build, deepen, and sustain a reflective, collaborative culture focused on the improvement of teaching to promote increased

learning for all students. A school undertaking self-assessment involves its whole staff in a process of goal-setting regarding student learning and sets in motion an ongoing cycle of internal self-review and external peer review. A school engaged in reviewing student work engages in a regular and rigorous study of student work as a foundation for planning and implementing instructional improvements.

A teacher in another of these schools noted initial discomfort with the process but also an eventual benefit from making classroom instruction more public:

The preparation for the external review was very demanding and stressful. We all visited each other's classrooms and opened our doors [to share instructional approaches]. It was very beneficial because it brought to light what we are doing [to maximize teaching of higher order thinking skills].

The educators throughout the two Michigan cohorts readily acknowledged that they could be better at using data, but over time nearly all of them became convinced that the task was a worthy one and were willing to tackle it. And their experiences eventually proved to be rewarding. In one building, teachers described how they had turned scoring their students' writing samples into an opportunity to discuss discrepancies among teachers' ratings, which led to the entire faculty eventually achieving greater clarity about good writing and how to promote it across the curriculum. In another school, staff tracked their graduates' progress in high school to give them a sense of how well they were preparing their students for higher grade levels and of their school's instructional strengths and weaknesses. What they learned was that their students were outperforming those from the other feeder schools. To instigate daily reminders of the value of data reflection, a third school had each grade-level team take responsibility for collecting data on an aspect of student performance and create a display for a "data wall." This device enabled staff, students, and visitors to quickly see year over year progress not only on state test scores but also on attendance, discipline, and work quality. Finally, one school's examination of disaggregated test scores put in stark relief the performance of its African-American males, which spurred the staff to consider their responsibility for the situation and to make improving instruction and learning in this regard a priority in the coming year.

The primary resources schools needed to enact their versions of this principle were time to meet and someone(s) who were willing to pull the data together for others to consider. The Middle Start coaches often played this role, all the while looking for ways that the school could carry on this function after the grant period ended. The important point, though, is that nearly all of the schools eventually used data to guide subsequent action. It was not uncommon to hear positive testimonials like "Data are now viewed as a first thought rather than an afterthought" or "All decisions are now data-driven."

Effective Small Learning Communities

The introduction of effective small learning communities manifested itself through the work of grade-level teams. Middle Start expected these teams to meet during common planning time to set instructional priorities, develop interdisciplinary units, conduct reviews of student work to assess the team's direction and needs, and communicate with parents. The ideal situation from the teachers' perspective was to have both individual and common planning periods. Only a few schools (and sometimes only some grades within a school), however, were able to maintain such a configuration.

For the most part, administrators and teachers wrestled continually with how to accommodate collaboration and were forced to seek creative ways to keep the teams functioning. For example, teachers said they tried to make better use of informal occasions:

We work as a team as well as we did before, despite no formal time to plan. We meet at lunch, during individual planning time, or after school. We review each other's assignments. We have learned to put personal feelings aside, and we are much more united than before we started Middle Start.

A teacher from a different school echoed the value of meeting as a team, even when regular opportunities were not available:

We have fantastic teachers on our team who want to see the school improve. We have learned to work much better as a team. We share informally but regularly what we are each doing. We know and coordinate our work.

On the other hand, some teams simply abandoned collaborative work efforts when the formal time to do so was removed from the schedule:

We feel insulted when we are called a team. We're not. It's a disaster this year. We can't plan anything.

Thus, while all of the schools formed teams, some were in name only.

The problem, of course, was time. A few of the schools were unable to establish the common planning periods because the schedule would have violated contractual obligations for individual planning. In one case, the only part of the day that leadership could actually insist on joint discussions was in the few minutes after teachers were required to arrive at school and prior to students entering their classrooms!

Amazingly, except for a couple of instances, team work got done. Interviews surfaced several illustrative examples of how what this "work" looked like. Teachers integrated certain skills, mostly literacy, across disciplines, met with parents and external consultants, enhanced instructional consistency from classroom to classroom, and developed common assessments. For example:

We work on integration of content across our subjects. We also communicate with parents. In addition we talk about student discipline and how we assess our students.

We met weekly with our Middle Start coach and we also had time to meet with parents.

We now work together to develop common rules and routines. The kids know them, so there is some consistency.

This year our team has focused on writing assessments. Everyone does a writing protocol four times a year and we share what students have done and how well we think they have done it.

Middle Start had our team look for strategies that everyone can use. For example, we now all do double entry journals. As a result, we now use instructional time more effectively.

The tenacity teachers exhibited to maintain a collaborative spirit derived from its efficacy:

We meet once a week and it is productive because we now focus on student concerns. That is new because we bring different perspectives to the table. We also discuss common teaching strategies.

Keeping the focus on students meant that the discussions, they hoped, would eventually culminate with increased student learning:

We will keep teaming no matter what. We see so much progress as a result of it. We've developed consistent expectations for students. Because of teaming we hold each other more accountable. I have seen more improvement in student learning and I attribute that to the fact that we collaborate more and share ideas.

Rigorous Curriculum, Instruction, and Student Assessment

Promoting rigorous curricula, instructional practices, and formative and summative assessments is Middle Start's most direct path to improving students' learning experiences. All of the Michigan schools focused on literacy during their CSR-funded reform cycles and their Middle Start professional development activities (including the leadership seminars, school-based training, and visits to other schools) introduced to them a host of "best practices," nearly all of which were intended to be used "across the curriculum."

While almost every Middle Start teacher argued that all subjects were important, most concurred that if students could not read or write, then they could not perform adequately in any other content area. The attention to literacy was less on what students read/wrote (although students were quick to point out that they were reading more

interesting novels) but rather on how to get them to read/write better and how to ensure that all teachers saw reading/writing as their responsibility, independent of their content specialty. One teacher described the bundle of strategies the faculty learned about and were using:

We now incorporate reading in all areas. We use strategies brought in by RRIM (Real Reading in the Middle). We all like journaling, “tea party,” and double entry journaling. I spend a lot of time with response writing and partner reading. We’ve been very happy with these strategies and I have seen improvement in students’ ability to communicate.

At least one person from a cadre of Middle Start resource people – including coaches – shared their knowledge about literacy with every Middle Start school in formal training. The general approach followed by most schools was to expose faculty to a wide range of instructional strategies (from “read alouds” to “double entry journals” to “anticipation guides”) that any teacher in any discipline could use, and then the schools or teams within schools settled on a subset they would adopt as part of the regular routine. As examples:

We learned a ton of reading strategies from [name]. We focused on five of them: “tea party,” “read alouds,” FQR, “say something,” and connections. We’ve all tried them.

*We started using the techniques that were introduced to us, like partner reads, anticipation guides, KWL [what we **K**now, what we **W**ant to know, and what we **L**earned], and post-it notes. It’s changed the way I teach. I give fewer worksheets. Students focus more and understand the material more in-depth.*

By the third year of implementation, it was quite common to hear teachers talking about the use of rubrics as a new assessment tool. These were used not only individually but also collectively:

We use rubrics. We use a six-point rubric in language arts. We also created rubrics for speaking and listening. We’ve come a long way on this. We are even starting to have students score each other’s writing using a rubric. They’ve really helped establish consistency in grading. Social studies, science and math also use rubrics for projects.

We started working on six-traits writing last year. We have a rubric that we are using more and more. When we evaluate writing we do so in pairs and try to evaluate students who aren’t in our class. That way it’s not so subjective.

As teachers and administrators reflected in interviews about these changes to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, by far the most important consequence they noted was greater instructional consistency across teachers, subjects, and grade levels. In

a profession that has traditionally been marked by individuals “doing their own thing,” this was a significant change. Teachers said they were now much more “deliberate” in the classroom, making sure that they used a common language to talk about instruction, helped students to connect lessons across subject areas, had similar academic expectations, and used similar literacy strategies. For instance:

The strategies have helped us develop a common language.

We are trying to revisit the same things in all classes so kids see the connections.

Writing is now emphasized in all classes. Students know what to expect, and they are getting better with writing. We have a common vocabulary now.

Kids know what is expected of them. We are getting much better quality as a result. Our biggest success was to get a teacher from another grade level join us for a professional development class. That was a huge step in our building.

Faculty members did not construe the goal of consistency as an attempt to have everything done the same way at the same time. Indeed, through their professional development, teachers remarked that they appreciated even more the diverse learning styles of their students:

They teach us different ways to do [math] problems. It’s good because people learn differently. This helps things make more sense.

A teacher in one of the schools summed up the benefits of having the school pay closer attention to curriculum, instruction, and assessment this way:

Teachers are adopting more strategies. The curriculum is more closely tied to benchmarks. We do more cooperative learning activities. And there is better teacher/student interaction.

With the exception of one school where the widespread use of literacy strategies disappeared concomitant with a change in principals, the other schools continued to use and refine the strategies introduced during Middle Start. A person at one school even suggested that a particular note-taking strategy (double entry journals) was so ingrained that teachers incorporated it into substitutes’ lesson plans, since students know exactly what to do and did it willingly – and gratefully. Another school became the innovative leader in its district with other schools looking to it for instructional and assessment strategies. Several teachers at this school, who became state-approved trainers in these strategies, eventually began to train staff across the district. A common refrain in the buildings, as principals reflected on the changes over the past several years, was simply that Middle Start was **THE** impetus to get the ball rolling for improved practice.

Just as Middle Start created the Collegial Peer Review process as a pilot effort to build schools' capacity to reflect on data to improve instruction, it also started an initiative to further increase rigor in schools' instructional programs called "ABCI" (Kenkel, Hoelscher, & West, 2006; Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2005). ABCI denoted the grading system the schools put in place. Students could get an A, a B, and a C on their graded assignments, tests, projects, etc. If their work was not at least of C quality, then they had to do it over. If the work was not done over or if it was not done over in a reasonable time, then students got an I. And all Is had to be made up, be it in a week, in a month, at the end of the year, or in mandatory summer school – and regardless of whether the students had an A, B, or C average on all of their other work. If an assignment was worthy of being done, in other words, it must be done.

The particular group of schools that agreed to pilot ABCI expressed keen concern for the quality of the work students did – in terms of both whether they did it and how well they did it. This concern with poorly done work did not make this group of schools unique in any way within the Middle Start cohorts. What set the buildings apart was that the teachers looked at themselves rather than students, parents, or society for guidance to remedy the situation. If students failed, they reasoned, then there must be something about "our" educational system that allowed that to happen. Or, as a teacher explained:

It always threw me. I saw [the students who had graduated the middle school] leaving high school. Kids had been passed along with Ds and Fs and had never been retained. So when they started having to take high school classes over again to get their credits, they started dropping out. It wasn't that they couldn't do it; they had never been told they had to do it. The system set them up to fail. And I couldn't get my [middle school] kids to realize that was happening to them.

The educators recognized an educational truism: If students were given the choice to fail, some would.

Teachers faced considerable day-to-day challenges with ABCI. For instance, teachers had to rethink what an assignment was. What were they willing to define as a task that was worth having to be finished – with no exceptions – and worth having to be redone until it was done satisfactorily? The burden of responsibility for student success almost by definition fell on their shoulders because students no longer could opt for a zero or an F, and therefore teachers had to come up with an effective balance of rigorous and yet enticing work for students to do. According to a teacher, for example, staff in one school started to give more "projects and quality assignments, and fewer worksheets." The central role "quality" assignments played in stimulating quality work from students was not lost on this student:

It makes teachers give better assignments because they don't want to fight with us about stupid things.

This brief description oversimplifies ABCI. Teachers and administrators in these buildings asserted that what they were doing was the hardest thing they had ever done. Their journey caused them to consider not only the quality of the assignments given (e.g., did they address standards rigorously or were they “busy work” or “old favored chestnuts”) but also how to devise an array of interventions to get students with Is caught up and to keep them that way and how to reach closure on an assignment without resorting to issuing zeroes, Ds, or Fs. In the process, the staff in these schools reported that some unanticipated wrinkle in implementing ABCI always cropped up, a decision to handle it had to get made, and then immediately several other issues would ensue from that decision.

They also said that their efforts – still midstream – seemed to be worth it. Drawing on the teacher quoted above to be the spokesperson for numerous others involved in ABCI who shared the same sentiment:

I've created a new middle class. I used to have students who got As and Bs and students who got Ds and Fs. And these latter ones could get up to C with doing homework. Now I have more Cs but these kids are getting more of the concepts and are getting a much better foundation for high school.

Distributed Leadership and Sustainable Partnerships

The use of school leadership teams was typically how the Michigan schools enacted this expectation. And the logic for their creation was simple: Rather than relying on the will and persuasion of one person – the principal – to get a larger group of people to move in a common direction, a school staff as a whole should build consensus about its direction and then take collective responsibility for moving toward that defined direction.

To be sure, distributing leadership did not just magically happen because the principal simply agreed to devolve some powers. In most schools a gradual process of trial and error occurred, with teachers slowly learning to accept more responsibility. This growth in maturity of distributed leadership was nicely captured by a teacher in a school where there was a slow evolution toward more appreciation for the benefits of having multiple staff take responsibility for improvement.

In the first year of Middle Start things were mandated. For example, we all had to do a word wall and there was rebellion like you wouldn't believe. In the second year the school leadership team did push some things but they gave us more choices. This year is really nice because of more staff buy-in. Decisions are now staff-guided, facilitated by the school leadership team. Because of that the principal is no longer seen as the bad guy when instructional changes are encouraged. Now there is more team responsibility for making those changes.

The principal in that same school described the issue of distributed leadership thusly:

The school leadership team is developing a culture of improvement in the building. The progress is slow but they are wearing down some of the resistors. The school leadership team now keeps the issue of best practices at the forefront [of teachers' minds] but with a light-handed touch rather than top down. Folks are taking more ownership with instructional improvement. We used to talk about these things and then all eyes would go to me [for a decision]; now they take responsibility for that.

In another school where the school leadership team played a key role in building improvements over the three years of Middle Start, staff members eventually recognized how integral the team had become to the school's functioning, particularly with the arrival of a new principal. According to one of the teachers:

The school leadership team is strong in making decisions. They have worked to encourage the [new] principal to be open to our ideas. The entire staff feels strongly about important instructional practices.

Perhaps the strongest statement of the consequences of collective responsibility came from a teacher who described its impact with the emphatic use of the plural rather than the singular:

*As a [school] team **we** no longer let the kids fail who don't do the work. This collaborative work forces **us** to change what **we** do.*

This spirit of working closely together produced a healthy synergy where everyone knew what was happening and helped each other along the way:

That is my favorite part of working here – sharing in decisions. We all have good knowledge of our goals whereas in other schools only one person knows the goals. All teachers here are willing to help each other.

Middle Start's concept of distributed leadership also includes partnerships that reach beyond the professional staff in the building to engage parents, community members, and students. The Middle Start schools generally worked from an implied assumption that they had to first get their own house in order, so less progress was made with bringing in others. But that should not downplay the fact that several schools began to work hard on that front, and for their part, most Middle Start coaches maintained an ongoing dialogue with the schools' central offices.

Varied Implementation of the Four Middle Start Principles

A nearly universal characteristic of school reform, one that is under analyzed and underappreciated, is simply the marked differences in the degree to which schools respond to reforms they have adopted. The two cohorts of Middle Start schools were no different. Implied in the above discussion is the fact that the schools went about implementing Middle Start in different ways. This was to be expected because Middle

Start hoped to inject as much local ownership of decisions and actions into the process as possible and many of the schools adopted Middle Start precisely for this reason. They were wary of programs that prescribed the changes to be made.

A survey administered in the spring of 2005 in nearly every one of the Cohort 1 (beginning Middle Start in the fall of 2002) and Cohort 2 (starting the reform in the fall of 2003) schools underscored the existence of this variation. On the survey, teachers responded to items that described school conditions that reflected the four principles and teachers used a four-point rating system to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement that the condition was characteristic of their school. Individual items were then aggregated into school-level scale scores for each of the four principles (by computing an average across the individual items for each principle). The scales had an internal reliability index of .7 or higher.

In Table 1, the school reporting the highest overall implementation of a principle had a 3.56 on the Reflective Review and Self-Assessment measure. This meant that the faculty responded somewhere between “agree” (a 3) and “strongly agree” (a 4) that the principle was in place in their building. The lowest implementation score – a 2.23 on the Distributed Leadership and Sustainable Partnerships scale – was closer to “disagree” (a 2) than “agree.” The least variation among the schools occurred with Rigorous Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (a difference of 0.70 between the lowest and highest schools) and the most was for Reflective Review (1.22), which of course made sense because all the scores engaged in professional development and team planning with respect to literacy while data review was admittedly the habit they had least developed.

Table 1: Spring 2005 Survey Index Scores for the Four Middle Start Principles (N=21)

Middle Start Principle	Minimum School Score	Maximum School Score	Difference
Reflective Review and Self-Assessment	2.34	3.56	1.22
Effective Small Learning Communities	2.45	3.30	0.85
Rigorous Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment	2.65	3.35	0.70
Distributed Leadership and Sustainable Partnerships	2.23	3.17	0.94

These quantitative findings reinforce the diverse responses described in the qualitative depictions of the organizational and instruction changes being made in Middle Start schools. However, to say that schools went about implementing Middle Start in different ways is not to say that the schools picked and chose which of the Middle Start principles and student goals they wanted to address. Educators understood that they all were headed in the same direction organizationally and instructionally. It was just that the Middle Start process allowed – actually encouraged – schools to fit the process to their circumstances. Thus, any participating faculty that thought the flexibility built into the process also meant that their school did not need to fully embrace the core principles

and goals would have been mistaken. And, as it turned out, such a school would have disadvantaged its students academically because MEAP test scores and implementation data from the survey suggest that the schools that paid closer attention to putting the principles into place more thoroughly enjoyed subsequent greater benefits with students' reading performance.

Table 2 offers some supporting evidence. For example, when the Middle Start schools were divided into higher and lower implementing groups of nearly equal size, the 10 higher implementing schools had a 2003-2005 average gain of 17.3 percent in

Table 2: Spring 2005 MEAP Reading Results and Implementation Scores, Middle Start Schools, 2003-2005

School	2003 Prof	2004 Prof	2005 Prof	2003-05 Growth	Middle Start Implementation Score
High Implementers					
6	61.0	51.3	94.2	33.2	3.3
10	58.5	56.8	75.6	17.1	3.2
15	71.2	75.3	81.1	9.9	3.1
18	28.3	41.2	51.7	23.4	3.0
13	51.1	50.0	62.2	11.1	3.0
11	50.9	57.6	71.4	20.5	3.0
20	70.0	74.2	77.8	7.8	3.0
14	56.2	61.7	78.8	22.6	2.9
4	5.9	11.1	27.0	21.1	2.9
12	64.0	63.9	69.9	5.9	2.9
High Implementers Subtotal					
	51.7	54.3	69.0	17.3	3.0
Low Implementers					
9	53.6	51.6	74.7	21.1	2.8
23	26.4	43.3	40.9	14.5	2.8
7	54.4	50.6	59.1	4.7	2.8
25	42.8	33.4	48.9	6.1	2.8
17	42.3	51.3	73.6	31.3	2.7
8	48.9	49.5	73.8	24.9	2.7
22	44.6	48.9	55.2	10.6	2.7
16	39.5	38.1	40.8	1.3	2.6
24	28.0	67.9	65.3	37.3	2.6
19	64.1	56.6	61.1	-3.0	2.6
3	11.6	28.1	25.6	14.0	2.4
Low Implementers Subtotal					
	41.5	47.2	56.3	14.8	2.7

proficient or better readers as compared to a 14.8 percent gain for the 11 lower implementing schools – which was a 16 percent improvement for the former group over the latter. The differences between the high and low implementers are not statistically significant, using either parametric or non-parametric tests

Because statistical significance is so heavily affected by sample size, it is not unusual for comparisons of groups of this size to struggle to achieve statistical significance. That is why studies that are able to do so strive to maximize the power in their designs. To avoid relegating potentially important effects of a reform to the trash bin, it is also helpful to examine the effect size between the two groups. Effect size measures the magnitude of a “treatment’s” influence and is unaffected by sample size. In this instance, the effect size is .25, a level which teeters on the borderline between a small and medium “treatment effect” for Middle Start implementation, using conventional standards of interpreting the statistic Cohen’s *d*.

If one maximizes implementation differences by comparing the five highest implementing schools’ test results to the five lowest implementing schools, the difference in means widens decidedly. The top five had a gain of 18.9 percent compared to 12 percent for the bottom five, a 57 percent improvement. The effect size jumped well into the medium – and broaching large – effect category (.61). While obviously not conclusive, this information points to there being a reasonable probability that schools that attended more assiduously to putting the whole Middle Start package into place in ways that made sense for their circumstances also reaped the benefits of their efforts in terms of students’ academic performance.

As a final note, Table 2 uses data from the spring of 2005 administration of the MEAP test and the survey. The testing schedule was changed at the state level to the fall beginning with the 2005-2006 school years, ostensibly so that the department could get results back to schools during the school year. Because the survey was not re-administered until the spring of 2006, its depiction of the schools’ situations became out of sync with the testing cycle. Thus, it seemed most prudent to make the winter of 2005 the endpoint for the investigation of the relationship between test scores and the survey scales. A later section of this document looks much more closely at student outcomes and will draw on the subsequent Fall of 2005 MEAP results to update the student reading achievement picture.

What Factors Affect the Degree to which Middle Start Schools Change?

While the substantive focus of implementation became consistent across the schools in terms of promoting literacy across the curriculum, implementation of the Middle Start principles varied among the schools, to the apparent advantage of students’ academic performance in the more thorough schools. Returning to the qualitative data provides insights into why and how these implementation variations occurred. In fact,

the interviews and site observations suggest that five key factors were involved in facilitating implementation:

- Staff ownership
- Coaches' actions
- The quality of leadership
- Approach to professional development
- Contextual characteristics

Staff Ownership

Underlying the emphasis on making the Middle Start process a flexible one was an intention to have the school people feel like the process and resulting changes were of their making, and not imposed on them. Such ownership should have made staff more willing to change and more committed to enacting new practices surfaced during professional development. The theory proved correct, in those sites that fully embraced Middle Start as “their reform.”

In these schools, teachers reported that they became more energized about their craft because they felt like they were more in charge:

Middle Start has given us the tools to make good decisions about instruction; we do more projects and fewer work sheets. The teachers are beginning to think about why they do things the way they do.

I use a ton of new strategies (e.g. pair/share, double entry journal, questioning text writing) and now I take more responsibility for their success . . . I'm more purposeful. I pay more attention to their mastery.

Teachers from another school said that by taking ownership of curriculum, instruction, and assessment they were looking more closely at what they were doing in those areas:

We are more serious about getting kids up to grade level. We are looking at a range of strategies like incorporating Accelerated Reader, compass learning, literacy circles, journaling, and 6+1 writing program.

As a math teacher I used to use the overhead 24/7. But now I diversify. I do less lecturing and I find I am doing cooperative learning most every day.

In situations where ownership was slower to take hold, faculty did not seem to leap into changing practice as enthusiastically, or even to engage in the change process for that matter. In one school, where the central office had different priorities for the school than did the school staff, teachers reported going through the motions of Middle Start activities since they believed any changes would be overruled by those with more authority. In another case, a new principal arrived with different expectations and

ownership in Middle Start principles lagged as teachers tried to sort out the level of support they would receive.

Coaches' Actions

Every Middle Start school was provided a coach to facilitate the implementation process. On average, coaches worked on-site twice a month. In addition, they attended the monthly Middle Start seminars. Coaches seemed to take one of two approaches in terms of who they worked with in a school. Some coaches worked solely with leadership teams and administrators while others, in addition to interacting with leaders, became involved with teacher teams and individual teachers. In fact, some schools used a portion of their grant money to specifically hire an “academic” coach to work in tandem with Middle Start coaches who tended to attend mostly to leadership-related issues. Regardless, one of the coaches suggested that “Working with teachers on instruction is the way to get naysayers on our side” and thus the coaches were fully aware that the schools could not be left on their own to reinforce changes in practice.

This latter approach increased the visibility of a coach in a building but more importantly the teachers found the experience highly advantageous. Teachers explained that they desired and needed having someone to help them translate professional development ideas into classroom practices. Lists of best practices, research detailing them, and professional development about them still left numerous questions in their minds about what the practices should and would look and sound like in their specific classrooms. When left on their own to answer these questions, the result, according to teachers, was that some used them well, some ignored them, and some picked and chose what appealed to them or what they understood best. When they had additional assistance, teachers said that they tended to put the ideas to more practical and consistent use.

To teachers, it did not necessarily matter if it was the Middle Start coach, the academic coach, or someone else who gave the help, it simply mattered that someone did. Thus, when, in one school without additional instructional support, the Middle Start coach stepped into the breach to help teachers reflect on and try out some new practices, people took notice, as a principal, teacher, and an in-house literacy coach remarked:

Our coach acts as an independent set of eyes in our classrooms. I would like to be in the classroom more often but for a variety of reasons I simply have not been able to do it this year. The coach is especially helpful because [the coach] always does a pre-conference, observation, and debrief with all the staff after each visit. This has helped us implement stuff across the board [i.e., ensure that everyone is doing it right] and he/she does it without being evaluative. [Principal]

Our coach is dynamic. [The coach] helps us be more deliberate about what we do. [The coach] sits in on team meetings, follows up with us, and offers us strategies to use in our classrooms. [Teacher]

As a literacy person, it was so nice to have our coach say the same thing. It was very validating. The staff has a certain level of respect for our coach. They get to hear a different voice. [The coach] is very affirming and brings a certain level of consistency to the building. [Literacy Coach]

One of the coaching strengths teachers often commented on was that coaches did not adopt a “cookie cutter” approach to resolving implementation issues. Instead, coaches began where the schools were and developed individualized strategies to handling matters. Teachers found it refreshing that the coaches recognized differences across schools and did not try to mold each school into a preconceived entity. Coaches who created true partnerships with teachers based on mutual respect and open communication were the most revered and in turn experienced greater buy in and implementation. A staff person in one school offered this assessment of the coach’s influence:

Our coach has helped us to better understand our kids; most of us are white and middle class and we come from different backgrounds than our kids. [The coach] brings in personal experiences or shares what [the coach] knows is happening in other districts, and is very knowledgeable and free in sharing with us. . . . The coach is receptive to our ideas. There is a positive degree of challenging each other without being judgmental.

Perhaps the willingness of coaches to expand their role as necessary was most apparent in situations where schools had trouble making much implementation progress until a change in coach occurred. In one such instance, staff said that a new coach had taken on a much greater presence in the building than the first one had. Another one had had trouble making headway; for some reason the leadership team and the coach just did not “click.” As one leadership team member said, “It’s been like molasses running up hill in January.” The same person elaborated concerning the arrival of a different coach:

[The new coach] is here every week and meets second period, fifth period, and after school with teachers. [The coach] has had a significant presence and impact in the building. If we’d had this coach [earlier], we’d be much further along. [The coach] has ideas about how to do different things, helped us do a walk-through, is providing support for us and finds resources for us, and does minutes of all the meetings [to share with the rest of the school]. This is the best set-up ever. We are looking at restructuring within a school. It has taken hold and [the coach] has given us ideas about what “school-within-a-school” looks like. [The coach] shares tangible activities to do in the classroom. [The coach] took one look at what we had done [i.e., how little had been accomplished] and said ‘Oh, my god’.

Others in the school who were interviewed joined in the litany of praises. One said: “It’s like we’re back in our first year of the grant.” The teachers lamented the lack of progress for two years but were excited enough about the new prospects for change that they were

stridently seeking a way to pay for the coach to continue with them in the next school year.

The Quality of Leadership

While coaches provided an external source of expertise, support, and guidance, principals and leadership team members were the keys to setting a positive culture in the school and keeping the momentum going on a day-to-day basis. Teachers described effective leadership as being consistent, focused, and shared. The three characteristics drew their power in combination as shown in the following staff person's quote about a principal who was adept at concretely and specifically keeping school goals at the forefront of staff thinking.

[The principal] compiles and makes public a list of professional development activities and accomplishments and also begins each staff meeting with an update on our three goals.

In this instance, teachers grew accustomed to the principal's repeated statements about the targets of their actions and rarely had to wonder about the outcomes of important improvement events.

Principals could exert positive leadership as well by maintaining the school's attention on what was important and yet being a little less in the spotlight than in the prior example by promoting the staff's guiding of the Middle Start process. As one of the Middle Start principles, distributive leadership was an essential component of implementation. It took many forms and was engendered in a host of ways. One principal felt that involving more staff in the Middle Start leadership seminars was helpful:

This year I asked for everyone from every part of the building to get involved in the Middle Start seminars on a rotating basis. I want the whole building to be represented and to get a chance to participate.

Another Middle Start school expanded the notion of distributed leadership by creating "Critical Accountability Teams" organized according to the school's goals and the various initiatives they had started under Middle Start, such as Responsive Thinking Process (RTP), ABCI, and advisories. Every middle school staff member was on at least one team, based on their interest. As the principal explained, "The CAT teams are intended to drive the process, collect data, and take ownership of improvement."

Still, the more basic idea of a representative leadership team served a number of schools well. Teachers claimed that the leadership teams were symbolically and substantively indicative of the "shared" nature of Middle Start planning and implementation:

We have a leadership team. They get input from [grade level] teams and plan and facilitate professional development. It is very teacher driven. They are the driving force with our school improvement efforts.

The principal is no longer seen as the bad guy [when reforms are introduced]. This year there is no bad guy. The staff is now guiding our work and the SLT facilitates. There is more team accountability.

Principals greatly appreciated such a development:

The leadership team helps me immensely. I love when the staff spearheads things. I try to guide the direction we go in, but I let the staff take us there.

Unfortunately, leadership sometimes thwarted a school's efforts. Teachers said they did not respond to leadership that was top-down or overly authoritative. Instead, they wanted a leader who supported the concept of a professional learning community and encouraged consensus-building. Teachers found their efforts undermined when their administrators clearly did not value their input and did little to incorporate the perspectives of those who would be implementing the changes into decisions about what the changes would be. In fact, in one school, leadership appeared to deteriorate over the grant period, at least according to teachers, one of whom said leaders seemed to be "working backwards." The person, and two others, explained further:

In the first year of the grant we were given more choices about what we would be doing. But in the last two years we have had less say. The agenda for our leadership meetings now comes from the coach and the principal, not the teachers. We can add or modify the agenda but not set it. That is not healthy.

We have a new principal this year who has a top-down approach, whereas before it was more about consensus-building. [The principal] is not utilizing the leadership team as well as it could be. It's been a struggle.

Like everything else, we learned about RTP right before school started. We had to vote until it was accepted. We had no time to process. That's where the opposition comes from. We're not against the process, just how things are done.

Approach to Professional Development

High quality professional development is one of the pillars of the Middle Start model. Effective professional development, according to participants, was targeted, relevant, and on-going and such training was celebrated as one of the biggest benefits of schools' participation in Middle Start. Two teachers said:

The money provided through Middle Start has given us opportunities that we wouldn't have otherwise had. As a small district, we couldn't afford to participate in the types of professional development Middle Start offered us. The professional

development opportunities we've had have been greatly appreciated. Middle Start has been a great resource.

I really like the professional development through Middle Start. It gave us all opportunities to get involved. I appreciated that we all got relevant training and could share with each other.

For many teachers and principals, their involvement with Middle Start was the first time they were able to share and network with other schools. Through this networking, schools exchanged ideas and facilitated the implementation of programs such as the RTP, ABCI, and a school-wide novel initiative. Opening their doors to other educators was a new concept for most Middle Start schools, but one that was described as extremely valuable:

The biggest benefit of Middle Start has been the networking. That's how we discovered ABCI and school wide novels. We also got to visit a number of schools to talk about RTP. We've gotten more out of networking and sharing ideas with other schools than anything else.

Most of the schools that surfaced on the surveys as higher implementing took great care to bring professional development into their buildings, both in terms of having trainers do extended follow-up and by building the internal capacity to facilitate and foster on-going learning. One school, for example, created an after school mentor/mentee program for staff. Each staff member identified his/her strengths and areas of expertise and volunteered to offer mini-professional development sessions for anyone who wanted to attend. The purpose of the program was to promote the idea that teachers are continual learners, and according to the principal, "This will be a key piece of our sustainability."

Thinking along the same lines, another school built the cost of an internal literacy coach into their funding plans for the following year. However, the school also came up with a much less costly way of making in-house expertise visible and helpful. The school held "model" days, in which teachers did not talk about their strengths, they demonstrated them in their classrooms. Staff alternately took turns observing and teaching on such days and a combination of substitutes and planning periods freed every one in the faculty to participate in one capacity or another.

Nevertheless, several challenges emerged. Teachers said one of their biggest frustrations was when they were asked to implement a strategy or program without adequate training. Whether referring to doing a double-entry journal or adopting ABCI, staff said they wanted to feel confident and knowledgeable before putting new ideas into practice with students. A lack of sufficient training had deleterious effects, as shown in the following statement:

We implemented RTP without proper professional development. Not everyone is on board and it is not being implemented consistently.

One of the things that Middle Start absolutely discouraged was the one-shot type of professional development. On-going training and follow-up were key elements to developing a professional learning environment. When there was a lack of follow up by the coach, principal, or leadership team, teachers said that what they learned often was put on the backburner or forgotten. Teachers argued that they needed time to process, practice, implement, and discuss what they had learned:

We started working on reading strategies two years ago. The challenge is that we learn something, but we have no time to do it. Things have fallen by the wayside this year because we haven't revisited anything.

Contextual Characteristics

For a number of Middle Start schools, their surrounding environment played a significant, and almost always, negative role in shaping their improvement efforts. More specifically, district administrators' actions, budget cuts, and organizational restructuring tended to undermine implementation in several schools.

Teaming, in particular, came under fire from both the budgetary and administrative fronts. While the ideal situation was for schools to schedule time for individual and team planning time, such scheduled opportunities were often times one of the first things to disappear with the tightening of district budgets. A few schools managed to coordinate both team and individual planning time on a daily basis, but that was not the norm. The problem was that arranging for team time presented organizational problems. For example, staffing patterns changed with enrollment and the ability of a school to hire qualified teachers, as one teacher illustrated:

Our teaming situation changes every year depending on our student numbers and teacher certification. We don't have much stability. Things are always changing, so we have to start over every year.

This meant that the makeup of teams varied from year to year – affecting continuity – and that schedules could not always accommodate freeing all members from instruction at the same time. Contractual obligations further complicated the situation, as mentioned earlier in this document. But, as also noted earlier, teachers felt that “where there was a will, there was a way” to support teams and so, in most situations, they patched together a workable combination of informal and formal occasions to collaborate.

On another front, Middle Start found itself not always aligned with district goals or priorities. Without congruence between district and school priorities and directives, educators were caught between sometimes contradictory forces that they felt helpless to

resolve. Three educators' commented on how developments beyond the school impinged on Middle Start.

We developed an improvement plan last spring that was known statewide (the state directed other schools to contact them about their process), but the central office dismantled all of that.

This year we have had lots of conflicting demands from different central office staff (after they had created a clear path/direction the previous summer). We asked that one of our Middle Start trainers return for more help and that was denied. We have the freedom to try new things, but we only do that individually, not systematically.

We have committees in place to work on improvements but we always spend our free time (professional development) doing things defined by others.

Staff expressed a desire while discussing these issues for Middle Start to take a more proactive role in gaining the support of the district and promoting alignment between district and Middle Start goals.

We need Middle Start to meet with our district to start a dialogue about what we're doing. Conversations aren't being had with the district. If we want sustainability, we need some alignment with the district's objectives.

Also out of the hands of school officials were imposed organizational restructurings. Several schools were or were slated to be restructured during their participation with Middle Start. One school became an elementary/ middle school during the process, with administration shared between both. The staff and the principal both said the principal was often unavailable and did not really understand Middle Start concepts, and as a result, the leadership team was essentially on its own to move the process forward. The Middle Start coach worked solely with the team. Another school was being forced to add a grade level to their school next year. As a result, they would no longer be able to have grade-level wings. In addition, after working for three years to build cohesion and a common approach they would soon have to bring 25 percent of the "new" staff up to speed on building commitments and activities.

How Do Students Benefit from Being in Middle Start Schools?

Middle Start promotes "academic excellence and healthy development for all students." This section, then, looks at academics, development, and equity in turn; although as indicated by Middle Start's casting its view of significant student benefits in a single sentence, the expectation is that these three outcomes intermingle in their attainment.

Two data sets provide a longitudinal look at students' situations in the schools. First, the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) results track students' academic performance from the early spring of 2003 through the most recent test scores from the fall of 2005. Not only are the internal trends for the cohort available during this time but also a comparison between the schools and a matched group of non-CSR Middle Start middle schools in the state. These comparison schools mirrored their Middle Start counterparts demographically (on racial diversity, wealth, and size) and academically, based on the 2002 state reading test. Second, eighth grade students completed a survey each year concerning instructional conditions in their schools and the degree to which their schools promoted the three Middle Start goals of academic excellence, healthy development, and social equity.

To foreshadow this section, the Middle Start schools' attention to students' reading skills seemed to pay off for students. They outperformed peers in non-Middle Start schools sufficiently to suggest that their attainment was a consequence of their attending Middle Start schools. For their part, administrators, teachers, and students in the schools had no questions that students were doing better – and as a direct result of their efforts related to Middle Start. Students benefited in other ways as well, e.g., better work quality, internalizing learning strategies, adopting a thought process for controlling their own behavior, and generally being less likely to escape attention if they were having difficulties.

Academic Excellence

The first part of this section looks solely at student performance on Michigan's state reading test. Because improved standardized test scores represented only a portion of what Middle Start schools hoped to accomplish, the second part of the section examines other aspects of academic achievement, such as student work quality and internalizing learning strategies, that teachers and students said resulted from Middle Start activities.

MEAP Results. Since the Cohort 1 schools had completed their involvement with Middle Start for the most part prior to the fall 2005 MEAP administration, it made most sense to use this group as the test case for identifying a Middle Start “effect” operating in the buildings. To that end, Table 3 displays the percent of seventh graders who achieved at or above grade level across the four most recent administrations of the MEAP test for which there were comparable test items for both the Cohort 1 schools and their non-Middle Start counterparts.

The Middle Start Cohort 1 schools, on average (group means are in bold at the bottom of the columns), improved the performance of seventh grade students reading on grade level by 18.5 percent over the three and a half year period. The comparison schools did not fare as well over the time period, showing a 12.8 percent improvement. Thus, the Cohort 1 buildings outperformed their non-Middle Start peers by 45 percent. A standard test of statistical differences (t-test) suggests there was not a statistically significant difference – using the standard of significance=.05 – between the Middle Start

**Table 3: MEAP Reading Results, 2003-2005,
Cohort 1 and Comparison Schools**

Middle Start Schools

School	Winter 2003 Proficient	Winter 2004 Proficient	Winter 2005 Proficient	Fall 2005 Proficient	Growth, Winter 03 To Fall 05
#1	40.0	45.1	62.7	59.5	19.5
#4	5.9	11.1	27.0	38.3	32.4
#6	61.0	51.3	94.2	82.9	21.9
#7	54.4	50.6	59.1	68.2	13.8
#8	48.9	49.5	73.8	73.9	25.0
#9	53.6	51.6	74.7	78.4	24.8
#10	58.5	56.8	75.6	73.9	15.4
#11	50.9	57.6	71.4	62.9	12.0
#12	64.0	63.9	69.9	76.3	12.3
#13	51.1	50.0	62.2	74.1	23.0
#14	56.2	61.7	78.8	75.3	19.1
#15	71.2	75.3	81.1	73.5	2.3
#16	39.5	38.1	40.8	58.2	18.7
	50.4	51.0	67.0	68.9	18.5

Comparison Schools

School	Winter 2003 Proficient	Winter 2004 Proficient	Winter 2005 Proficient	Fall 2005 Proficient	Growth, Winter 03 To Fall 05
#1c	41.2	50.2	67.9	59.3	18.1
#4c	30.0	34.1	34.8	32.5	2.5
#6c	68.6	53.6	70.9	73.5	4.9
#7c	61.5	54.7	68.8	76.8	15.3
#8c	57.4	62.7	75.7	75.9	18.5
#9c	62.6	58.9	67.5	79.0	16.4
#10c	55.6	62.5	68.4	66.9	11.3
#11c	48.3	63.3	77.2	72.4	24.1
#12c	74.6	60.7	61.7	77.9	3.3
#13c	66.6	44.8	78.6	64.6	-2.0
#14c	63.0	52.5	80.2	82.2	19.2
#15c	55.0	48.5	75.8	88.5	33.5
#16c	41.5	31.2	29.4	43.1	1.6
	55.8	52.1	65.9	68.7	12.8

schools and their matched comparison sample ($t=1.59$, significance=.124). Again, this is not surprising given the small sample size. Nevertheless, the results are positively favoring the Middle Start schools. Another way to assess the difference is to look at

effect size. The effect size for this comparison of performance was .66 and indicates that the difference between the two groups was probably substantively important. Thus, while both groups have a way to go to meet federal goals for 2014, students in Middle Start schools are relatively advantaged with respect to those attending schools not involved with Middle Start.

This tentative empirical conclusion about students' reading improvement in Middle Start schools understates the progress that teachers and administrators saw and attributed directly to the intensive professional development they participated in and incorporated into their lessons. These educators had no doubt that their effort via Middle Start was responsible for the gains. A principal claimed:

All of our MEAP scores went up this year. I would attribute it to the fact that teachers are teaching benchmarks using simple reading strategies. Teachers are more accountable, and they are focused on our SMART goals and student achievement.

A teacher went out on a limb with her expectations for an upcoming test administration:

I will be highly surprised if we don't get a jump on the MEAP. I see kids excited about reading.

The teacher was not surprised, as the school's gain in the percent of proficient or above readers was almost 19 percent. A student did not need to wait for test scores to affirm the improvement, simply stating:

We read better and quicker.

Other Academic Outcomes. All Middle Start schools had to state an "academic" goal as a requirement of securing their CSR funds. A concentration on reading dominated their proposals because of a common belief that this skill was a gateway to understanding any of the other subjects better. As the schools progressed with their goals, reading often was expanded into a more generic "literacy" goal, which typically included writing. Schools did not limit themselves to this one academic objective but few others were widely spread throughout the two cohorts of schools, mostly because of Middle Start's firm adherence to a commitment that each school take responsibility for fitting reform to their local circumstances. Still, at least two additional outcomes – one expressly targeted and one emergent – were achieved in several schools.

At least seven schools began to focus on **improving the quality of student work** as part of the ABCI pilot. The schools established various interventions to try to prevent any student from accumulating an insurmountable number of incompletes, such as a re-teaching period during the last 30 or 60 minutes of the school day, Saturday school, and after-school sessions. Summer school awaited the most intransigent stragglers, with the length of attendance determined only by how long it took students to complete their

remaining assignments. Not surprisingly, schools reported some noticeable changes in grade distribution and promotion at the end of the first school year. One teacher noted:

I've looked at student grades from last year to this year and compared Is to failing grades. My kids have better grades now than they would have. There's more accountability.

In another school, an entire grade-level team looked at report card grades for the first three quarters under ABCI and compared them to the first three quarters in the previous year. They found about an eight percent increase in As, Bs, and Cs, and the percentage of students receiving Is was about 25 percent less than the percentage that got Ds and Es the previous year.

Additionally, three of the ABCI schools were into their third year of implementing the initiative in the fall of 2005. Their gain in students reading at grade level (15.2 percent) compared to their non-Middle Start, non-ABCI comparison schools (5.2 percent) was nearly 200 percent greater. The effect size was also large at 1.43.

Summing up their feelings about ABCI, two students from different schools said:

ABCI is good because it makes us get our work done. We have to pay attention.

We started using ABCI this year. If we get lower than a C we have to do the assignment over again. It's good because it gives us a chance to pass.

However, students overall appeared to be equally split about recommending ABCI. For every "It makes you buckle down and finish things," there was an "It was too stressful." Taken together, the positive and negative recommendations still underscored the central premise of the initiative: If allowed to fail, some students would. And that was the condition that prompted the schools to be so keen on using a change in the grading system as an academic lever in the first place.

Staff in several schools noted that students were showing signs of **internalizing learning strategies** that teachers had incorporated into their lessons. These included specific reading strategies, good writing traits and/or rubrics, and higher order thinking processes. In fact, a majority of Middle Start schools attempted to promote the use of such strategies "across the curriculum," to the point that it would not be unusual for a math, science, or social studies teacher to blend them in with content acquisition. Teachers argued that if students were aware of various tactics that would enhance their comprehension and work quality, and consciously drew on these, then they would not only do better in the short-term on the MEAP but also they would be well-equipped throughout their educational careers. Thus, staff in a number of schools set out intentionally to instill such strategies in students:

We use rubrics. We use a six-point rubric in language arts. We also create rubrics for speaking and listening. We've come a long way on this. We are even starting to have students score each other's writing using a rubric. They've really helped establish consistency in grading. Social studies, science, and math use rubrics for projects.

The outcomes of internalization were both general and specific. A teacher noted an overall change in students' willingness to engage themselves in school work:

I see much more confidence in students. They believe in their ability. The reluctant readers are excited to read now. They have so many tools now to tackle their work.

Students indicated that they thought more concretely about when and where the strategies should be used, and verbally adopted the actual labels:

We write a lot. We do Type I-IV. We do Type I's in math, Type I-III in social studies, and Type I-IV in language arts.

And, they adopted a utilitarian perspective on their immediate value:

We have a rubric. We always know how to get points.

We have a rubric that can be used in any class. It is helpful. It makes things less confusing.

Healthy Development and Equity

Because of external pressures to improve academics such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, schools understandably focused most of their attention on that aspect of students' school experiences. Nevertheless, Middle Start's philosophy advocated strengthening the whole child. To that end, the schools took several steps to promote healthy development and equity. And as with their responses about academics on the survey, students appeared comfortable with the surroundings in which they daily found themselves with respect to these other two Middle Start outcomes.

About 10 schools adopted the Responsible Thinking Process (RTP) – the number is inexact because it appeared a couple of schools were introduced to the process but little follow-up emphasis occurred -- wherein staff modeled a way of thinking about one's behavior that focused on what students did, why they did it, and what the likely consequences of such actions would be. The goal was for students to internalize this line of thought and begin to regulate their own behavior.

Staff in one school felt like the process was the reason that major student discipline issues had decreased in the current school year. In fact, one teacher claimed that when she encountered misbehaving students, she only had to confront them with the first of the sequenced questions that comprised the core of the program. "Normally," she

said, “I just have to say ‘What are you doing?’”. Students were familiar enough with the rest of the line of questions that they would usually stop the situation from escalating any further. A student concurred:

Some kids use RTP to get out of class [to go to an in-school “Responsible Thinking Classroom”], but others stop misbehaving as soon as the teacher starts asking the questions.

Developing sexual identities are central to this phase of adolescents’ lives. One school discovered research that indicated that not only do males have different reading interests than females but also each gender is likely to concentrate more on what they are reading if they are not constantly monitoring their presentation of self to the opposite sex. Another school discovered that the females in the building were reading at a more advanced level. In both cases, the schools, thus, experimented with separating the sexes during a literacy period into “gender split” classes.

It appeared to be successful. Teachers in the first building found a wealth of material that boys were willing to read – newspapers, magazines, and the like – which contrasted to the more lengthy fiction pieces that attracted the girls. Additionally, students apparently had gender-based styles in demonstrating comprehension as boys tended to retell what they read and girls “talk about the characters.” Teachers also felt that the separated students commented on literature based on their actual opinions as opposed to the opinions that might be well-received by the opposite sex. A teacher claimed:

It is working well. They are more open. They share more with each other about books, a lot more.

Two students in the second school, after grumbling some about the apparent qualitative differences in the reading levels of the two sexes, both saw value in the experiment. A female commented that “We like our reading class; it’s the first time we feel challenged.” A male countered, “We like our class too; we’re just more normal.”

The demands of seeking a high quality education for “all” students was constantly on educators’ minds. Both the ABCI initiative and the gender-split reading classes were examples of attempts schools made to reach all of their students academically, developmentally, and equitably. Thus, these efforts to engage more students productively in school promoted greater educational equity in the buildings. Access to learning opportunities widened as more students made the choice to do assignments and to participate in thoughtful classroom conversations.

For their part, students were not very critical of their schools. Their interview comments lent texture to their assessments but little out and out complaining emerged. Likewise, a quick glance at the student survey results portrayed in Table 4 shows that while students in some schools encountered situations more facilitative of academic

excellence, healthy development, and equity than others, generally the range of responses across the schools were close to “often” (a 4 on a 5 point scale) when asked how frequently their teachers, administrators, and peers engaged in certain supportive actions. Each outcome scale was created by computing an arithmetic average across five items in the survey that captured the meaning of each item (e.g., Academic Excellence included items that asked how often (1) the student did well on assignments and (2) understood what it took to get good grades, and then how often (3) the teacher made sure the student did his or her work well, (4) made sure the student turned in work, and (5) informed the student about progress in class.) The scales had an internal reliability of .7 or higher.

Table 4: Spring 2006 Survey Index Scores for the Three Middle Start Outcomes, As Perceived by Cohort I Eighth Graders (N=14 schools)

Middle Start Outcome	Minimum School Score	Maximum School Score	Difference
Academic Excellence	3.79	4.27	0.48
Developmental Responsiveness	3.56	4.20	0.64
Equity	3.78	4.40	0.62

What Challenges Do Middle Start Schools Face?

All reforms place great demands on educators, if they are serious about what they are trying to do. Middle Start is no different in this respect. It goes without saying that time and energy are at a premium. Apart, though, from the challenges that any school enacting any reform model faces, there are at least three that are particularly pertinent to Middle Start: balancing flexibility with full implementation, ownership, and self-capacity to change.

The first is that **schools must balance the flexibility inherent in the Middle Start process with the eventual need to fully implement the four principles and attend to all three of the student outcomes.** Some schools selected Middle Start as their reform model precisely because it was not as prescriptive as some of the others. Middle Start encouraged schools to select goals appropriate to their circumstances and to make changes suited to their contexts. At the same time, Middle Start advocated a broadened and deepened definition of desirable outcomes for students and the set of four principles to guide school organization and instruction. This apparent balance between flexibility and guidance appealed to schools and continued to do so over time. In fact, when the balance shifted too much either way, educators noticed immediately. For example, some balked in the schools where administrators more or less “announced” that CPR, RTP, and/or ABCI would be implemented and other faculty members’ efforts floundered where priorities and direction were too vague.

Being cautious about not infringing too imposingly on decisions, however, should not dissuade school leadership teams from seeking and using concrete guidance on how to navigate the change process. The educational reform literature is replete with rich and detailed direction about how to engender commitment to change and how to nurture people as they attempt to behave in ways different from the ones they are accustomed to. Armed with knowledge of effective leadership and the Middle Start principles, coaches are in a good position to mentor leaders – many of whom are newly labeled leaders in the first place, such as those on the leadership teams. It would be very beneficial, therefore, if school leaders – along with the coaches – developed implementation benchmarks to identify important steps in enacting structural and instructional changes, probably attached to a rough timeline. While such guidance should not be too rigid, leaders might still benefit from having several clear signposts to use to mark their progress.

Most importantly, Middle Start appears to make a difference for students, according to test scores, teacher reports, and student comments. This means that the configuration of organizational changes, professional development, and technical assistance managed to touch classroom life. The higher implementing Middle Start schools in particular engendered an environment in which the schools' capacity to change and to instruct students effectively improved significantly. This fact alone should be enough to remind leaders of the importance of carefully maintaining the delicate balance between flexibility and guidance.

Second, schools must develop ownership of the process and the changes to be made and not overly rely on the Middle Start coaches to move the process forward. Obviously the Middle Start coaches were a necessity. Without their intervention, implementation would have suffered noticeably if not ground to a halt completely. The coaches' actions were indispensable. One reason coaches had to adapt their roles to surmount various obstacles was that schools had different capacities to support instruction. Coaching coupled with school-based professional development enabled schools to create conditions under which it was highly likely that teachers would be able to effectively translate ideas about best practices into action. In schools with academic coaches, for example, the Middle Start coach had the luxury of being able to concentrate on the kind of leadership necessary for high quality implementation. When academic help was scanty or non-existent, it fell to the Middle Start coach to penetrate to the classroom via grade-level/departmental meetings and/or actual observations and demonstrations to facilitate the instructional translation process. Staff learned that figuring out the application of new knowledge to practice was not best left to individuals; it was a collaborative endeavor, and one that required having an expert available often as a resource.

So the point is not that the Middle Start schools need to wean themselves from coaches but that the schools need to figure out ways to begin incorporating “coach-like” roles and behaviors into their faculties' repertoire of skills. They are always going to need people who can help teachers translate instructional ideas into classroom practice,

who can readily draw on strategies for helping groups perform tasks, and who can access and/or provide needed training. Those actions, while critical to implementing Middle Start, are ones that any effective organization needs to continue to sustain excellence over time – and the time to begin embedding these skills into a school is during Middle Start implementation, not after. The current cohorts of schools followed three avenues, apart from the ultimately self-defeating tactic of scrounging post-grant funds to continue hiring an external coach: creating an in-house coaching position, focusing on skill development within the leadership team by continuing to attend Middle Start leadership seminars, and strengthening the collaborative capacity of the grade-level teams. There is no evidence to recommend one over the others and probably the appropriateness of an approach is best contextually determined.

The second challenge is a prelude to the third and final one, which is that **schools need to develop the capacity to change on their own**. When schools finish their formal relationship with Middle Start, they exit with certain shared notions of what effective middle schools are and with improved instructional practices, and they all praise Middle Start for this. But, like young people leaving home, the schools are not all equipped to live well once they do leave. If they are fortunate and face few formidable obstacles, then perhaps they will experience a long enough grace period so that what they put in place during Middle Start has a chance to thrive. Put without being able to **proactively** nurture the reform, almost any challenge – a drop in test scores, budget cuts, or staff turnover – will weaken commitments and begin to weed out some of the instituted practices. So, one of the organizational goals of engaging in Middle Start should be to prepare a building to continue the progress the staff made during implementation.

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