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PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Middle Start Marks One-Year Anniversary of *NCLB* By Recognizing the Act's Worthy Goals But Calls for More Focused Middle Grades Related Policy and Support

School Improvement Organization Offers Tools and Services for Strengthening Middle-Grades and Responding to Rigors of NCLB

New York, NY – On the anniversary of landmark national education reform legislation, Middle Start lauds the overall goal of the *No Child Left Behind Act* to strengthen student achievement and offers support to schools required to turn those goals into reality. At the same time, Middle Start recognizes the dire need for a more fully developed education reform policy necessary to better support the work of creating excellent middle-grades schools.

“The *NCLB Act* advances many of the proven elements of reform that Middle Start has been advancing for some time, including the use of disaggregated data to help close the achievement gap; the alignment of curriculum with standards; and appropriate qualifications for teaching,” said Patrick Montesano, Vice President and Director of Education Reform Programs at the Academy for Educational Development which houses the National Middle Start Center.

Nevertheless, Middle Start, an education improvement program and services provider, recognizes the challenges states and districts face in meeting the day-to-day demands of this *Act* and offers a host of initiatives that can help schools manage achievement and stay off corrective action lists under this relatively new law, including assistance in identifying methods for paying for these initiatives.

At the same time Middle Start works to strengthen public policy and public engagement so that there is a greater support for effective middle grades-specific reform. The National Middle Start Center at the Academy for Educational Development, together with Middle Start's regional partnerships, work to mobilize demand for excellent middle grades-related policy and fight for the appropriate levels of funding required for middle grades schools to be excellent.

Through its comprehensive school reform model delivered by partners in Michigan, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas, Middle Start provides a strategic road map for getting all school community members to pull in the same direction for the benefit of all middle-grades students. Middle Start also offers a professional development program that assists teachers and administrators in fulfilling their promise so that students will too.

Congress' willingness to make permanent the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, authorized for the first time in *No Child Left Behind* as a strategy low-performing schools should consider for school improvement, is a recognition of what has been accomplished by programs such as Middle Start to date. "The federally funded Comprehensive School Reform program is helping to move educators and communities throughout the nation from piece-meal fads to the systematic search for and use of evidence-based, effective programs and practices," Montesano said.

Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, thousands of schools will face corrective action next year if they fail to raise the academic performance of their students. Analyses suggest that thousands of additional schools nationwide could be labeled low-performing over the next several years under new "adequate yearly progress" requirements. In response to this significant challenge, Middle Start stands ready to guide schools with middle grades that need improvement as well as middle grades already doing well that want to be doing even better.

Middle Start can be considered unique among CSR providers in that it bridges local expertise across regions, constantly shaping its offerings so that they are optimally responsive to local needs without compromising fidelity to its research-based best practices and guiding principles.

"By coalescing support around tested methods and providing a focused plan for improvement, we help to move school communities from a culture of compliance with any one piece of legislation to a culture of commitment for lasting positive change. Our program helps channel the experience and fulfill the potential of participants so that they can be effective school leaders working in concert, not only embracing positive change but becoming the catalysts for lasting improvement," Montesano said.

"While the *No Child Left Behind Act* contains much that is worth while, clearly there needs to be appropriate funding available to support these new mandates. And it's critical that future national education reform legislation specifically target the challenges facing middle grades. Only one in three eighth graders is proficient in reading, while slightly more than one in four is proficient in mathematics. That's very far from good enough. More than 9 million young adolescents are in dire need of improved policies and practices that will lead to better middle-grades schools. Middle Start knows what works in the middle grades and has identified a proven approach that will help rectify these abysmal statistics. Middle Start's powerful vision -- developed by a collective of researchers, educators and others -- is driven by tangible results in school after school." Montesano said.

“Together we have a lot of work to do in the middle grades and relatively few federal dollars to do it with. There must be a coordinated and concerted effort among policy makers at every level to ensure that middle grades have the financial and human resources necessary to provide students with what they need in order to achieve. Key areas critical to middle grades improvement that policy makers should focus on in the future involve the following:

- Making sure that middle-grades students receive a fair share of federal and state resources
- Ensuring the use of many kinds of data and indicators in assessing school and student performance
- Mandating that teachers be prepared to teach at the middle level by having deep knowledge of their subjects and understanding the unique needs of young adolescents and how to teach them effectively
- Promoting small learning communities, so that teachers can learn together and students are taught by adults who know them well
- Providing high-quality, ongoing professional development for every educator
- Providing sufficient resources so that teachers have time to collaborate on a regular basis

The National Middle Start Center partners with like-minded organizations such as The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform and New American Schools to provide in-depth information that policy makers need to make responsible decisions.

About Middle Start

The Middle Start initiative combines on-site coaching and professional development and partner resources to strengthen student achievement in schools with middle grades. Guided by current research and practice emphasizing the developmental needs of young adolescents, Middle Start upholds the three goals that create the foundation for student success – academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity– and it does so through small learning communities; team structure; guidance on effective curriculum; student-centered instruction; meaningful student assessment; reflective review and self-study; as well as sustainable and meaningful partnerships. The Middle Start National Center at the Academy for Educational Development provides leadership and support to regional Middle Start partnerships and school networks. For more information visit www.middlestart.org

About the Academy for Educational Development (AED)

Founded in 1961, AED is an independent nonprofit organization committed to solving critical social problems. The Academy works with schools, school systems, families, and community-based organizations on comprehensive school and community improvement initiatives, as well as programs addressing specific education issues.

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