

MIDDLE LEVEL PREPARATION FOR HIGH SCHOOL SUCCESS

PURPOSE OF BRIEF AND RELATIONSHIP TO SBE STRATEGIC PLAN

One of the State Board of Education's (SBE) strategic planning goals is to provide policy leadership to increase Washington's student enrollment and success in secondary and postsecondary education. An objective under that goal is to provide policy leadership to examine the role of middle school preparation as it relates to high school success. A strategy for meeting that objective is to convene an advisory group to study and make policy recommendations for ways to increase the number of middle school students who are prepared for high school.

The purpose of this brief is to identify potential areas of study and to ascertain from Board members any other areas of interest the staff might pursue.

BACKGROUND

National State Board of Education focus. The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) has summarized four reasons why middle schools are so important to state boards of education.

1. For too many students, the early secondary years mark a time when academic growth slows, performance levels drop, and achievement gaps persist.
2. High school academics are becoming more rigorous and graduation standards are increasing. Students exiting middle school must have the literacy (both reading and mathematical) to enable them to meet the challenges of high school.
3. The nation has a dropout problem, and half or more of those who eventually drop out begin to lose their way in middle school.
4. Middle school students who are wavering in terms of making good life choices are still relatively "reachable," but such openness to healthy influences does not last forever. For many students the middle school years are their last, best chance for staying on or returning to a pathway for success.¹

Washington SBE focus. Throughout its three-year discussion of graduation requirements, SBE has repeatedly recognized pre-high school preparation as a contributing factor to high school success. SBE also approved changes in November 2010 that will likely create more opportunities for students to begin working on high school graduation requirements before ninth grade. These changes include: 1) beginning the High School and Beyond Plan in middle school; and 2) making Washington State History and Government a non-credit requirement. In addition, SBE contributed to the development of a sample competency-based credit policy and procedure for world

¹ Beginning in the Middle: Critical Steps in Secondary School Reform. October 2008. National Association of State Boards of Education.

languages that will encourage districts to recognize and give high school credit for students' world language abilities regardless of current grade level.²

Current state policy already creates some opportunities for students to begin working on high school requirements by allowing districts to award credit to students before ninth grade³. SBE's transcript study of a sample of 2008 graduates indicated that 26.1 percent earned math credits and 6.3 percent earned world language credits prior to entering ninth grade⁴.

SBE initiatives, coupled with the increased rigor of graduation requirements already enacted⁵, or approved⁶, make it timely to bring attention to the role of middle school preparation, or more accurately, *middle level education*, for high school success.

Why is the term "middle level education" preferable to "middle school"? Because middle school is too limited. There are many configurations of schools in Washington that include the middle grades and offer middle level education.

There is some disagreement about what those middle grades are. In Washington's new prototype school model⁷, the funding definition of middle school is defined as grades seven and eight. Previously, no funding definition existed. In addition, Washington law⁸ referencing credit earned prior to ninth grade ("middle school" credit) specifies that the academic levels of courses must exceed the requirements for seventh and eighth grade classes. Yet, many national studies and reports⁹ identify grades six, seven, and eight to be typically associated

² Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA), Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and SBE worked on the development of a sample policy/procedure. The sample policy can be found at: <http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/2010.09.09%20Example%20policy%20-%20Credit%20for%20Competency%20-%20Proficiency.pdf>; the sample procedure at: <http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/2010.09.09%20Example%20policy%20Part%20Two%20-%20Credit%20for%20Competency%20-%20Proficiency.pdf>

³ [28A.230.090](#)

⁴ Baker, D. B., Gratama, C.A., Peterson, K.M., Bachtler, S.D. 2008. Washington State Board of Education Transcript Study. http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/TranscriptStudy2008_FINAL_000.pdf

⁵ The graduating class of 2013 will need to have three credits of math, including Algebra 1/Integrated Mathematics 1, Geometry/Integrated Mathematics 2, and Algebra 2/Integrated Mathematics 3 or a third credit of math that is consistent with a student's high school and beyond plan (WAC [180-51-066](#)). Students will also need to show proficiency on end-of-course examinations in Algebra 1/Integrated Mathematics 1, Geometry/Integrated Mathematics 2, and biology or the science High School Proficiency Exam: <http://www.k12.wa.us/GraduationRequirements/pubdocs/GraduationToolkit.pdf>.

⁶ SBE approved a new graduation framework that will be adopted once authorized and funded by the legislature. <http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/Graduation%20Requirements%20Details%20Flyer.pdf>

⁷ [RCW 28A.150.260](#)

⁸ [RCW 28A.230.090](#)

⁹ For example: Williams, T., et. al. February, 2010. [Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better](#). EdSource; Balfanz, R. 2009. [Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path](#). John Hopkins University; [Beginning in the Middle: Critical Steps in Secondary School Reform](#). October, 2008. National Association of State Boards of Education Study Group.

with middle “school.” Whatever grade students might be in, middle level education generally serves 10- to 15-year old children.¹⁰

The shaded rows in the following table indicate the state’s most typical configurations for middle level education. At least 25 percent of Washington’s 2,334 schools serve students in the sixth, seventh, and/or eighth grades. Because even the “high school” and “other” categories contain some schools that serve these grades, this is a conservative estimate.

School Level	Number of Schools	Description
PreK Only	79	Schools that only serve students in preschool.
Elementary	1,098	Mostly schools serving students in grades K through 5. Other grade span configurations are included as long as they are primarily in the elementary arena (i.e., PK-4, K-3, 3-5, etc.)
Middle	373	Mostly schools serving students in grades 6 through 8. Other grade span configurations are included as long as they are primarily in the middle school arena (i.e., 5-7, 5-8, 4-7, etc.)
Junior/Senior	90	Mostly schools serving students in grades 7 through 9. Other grade span configurations are included as long as they are primarily in the junior high school arena (i.e., 7-8, 8-9, 6-9, etc.)
High	457	Mostly schools serving students in grades 9 through 12. Other grade span configurations are included as long as they are primarily in the high school arena (i.e., 9-11, 8-12, 10-12, etc.)
PreK-12	47	Schools that serve all grade levels PK-12 or many grade levels within this range. These schools cannot easily fit into one of the categories above.
K-12	80	Schools that serve all grade levels K-12 or many grade levels within this range. These schools cannot easily fit into one of the categories above.
Other	110	Schools that serve either one grade level (such as, only grade 9) or a random set of grade levels. Also includes some schools that are community colleges or special services schools.

Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction Student Information, December 2010

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

At present, there is no centralized pool of information about middle level education in the state. Although the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) assigns an assistant superintendent to secondary education, there is no single department or person at the state level with responsibility solely for middle level education.

While the SBE staff focus this year will be on information-gathering and policy analysis, the intended outcome is to determine what state-level policy recommendations the SBE might want to consider or advocate for in order to increase the number of middle school students prepared to succeed in high school.

¹⁰ National Middle School Association. 2006. [Success in the Middle: A Policymaker’s Guide to Achieving Quality Middle Level Education](#).

Potential areas of study. The following potential areas of study are organized around the questions that will guide the inquiry. In all areas, staff will be looking nationally and within the state for exemplary policies or practices to consider and showcase. Data will be disaggregated wherever possible to assess impacts on student groups.

1. Student achievement: What are districts doing to increase middle level student achievement, particularly in reading, math, and science? In order to answer that question, the SBE might want to explore such issues as:
 - a. Is there a correlation between students' performances on the seventh and tenth grade Washington state assessments?
 - b. Are the cut scores set at the "right" levels for Washington assessments in the middle grades?
 - c. What trends do we see in our eighth grade reading and math NAEP scores, and what do they mean?
 - d. What does analysis of student performance on state assessments in the middle grades tell us about the skills our students need most to improve reading, math, and science achievement?
 - e. How are schools monitoring early warning indicators at the middle level and what actions are they taking in response?

2. Student course-taking patterns: To what extent are school districts providing opportunities for students to take courses that prepare them for high school level work, or to earn high school credit prior to ninth grade?
 - a. What schools and districts offer courses for credit in the middle grades? What do we know about the students likely to be enrolled in those courses?
 - b. What types of courses are students in the middle grades enrolled in? Is there any correlation between course-taking and performance on state assessments? Course-taking and grades? Performance on state assessments and grades?

3. Student planning: What are Washington schools with middle grades currently doing to increase the likelihood that students stay in school and pursue their postsecondary goals? What are the exemplary practices? SBE might want to explore:
 - a. What are schools currently doing to provide comprehensive education and career counseling and guidance, including individual career exploration and planning, for the middle grades?
 - b. How are schools involving parents of students in the middle grades in planning for students' goals?
 - c. What types of eighth and ninth grade transition programs are proving effective?

Several national studies have shown that the majority of middle level students thought that they were definitely, or probably, going to college and that there was no chance that they would drop out of school.¹¹ College attendance and dropout data in Washington and other states confirms the mismatch between middle level students' intentions and actions.

In addition, research on dropouts has found that "in high-poverty environments, a student's middle grades experience strongly impacts the odds of graduating from high school."¹² Early

¹¹ For example: Markow, D., Liebman, M., & Dunbar, J. 2007. [Middle School Poll](#). Prepared for the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and Phi Delta Kappa (PDK).

¹² [Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better](#)." February 2010. EdSource.

warning indicators have been identified for sixth graders, including failure of math or English, attendance of less than 80percent, or receipt of an unsatisfactory behavior grade in a core course.¹³ In eighth grade, course failure and attendance bear similar predictive qualities. According to one study, each course failed in eighth grade increases the odds of non-promotion from ninth to tenth grade by 16percent.¹⁴ According to another, although eighth-grade test scores are good predictors of students' likelihood to do well in high school courses, course attendance is eight times more predictive of course failure in the freshman year.¹⁵

EXPECTED ACTION

No action is expected. Staff will ask Board members for feedback on the proposed areas of study.

¹³ Balfanz, R. June 2009. [*Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path: A Policy and Practice Brief*](#). National Middle School Association.

¹⁴ Neild, R. and Balfanz, R. 2006. [*An Extreme Degree of Difficulty: The Educational Demographics of Urban Neighborhood High Schools*](#). Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk.

¹⁵ Allensworth, E. and Easton, J. July 2007. [*What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools*](#). Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.