

**WARREN COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Warren, Pennsylvania

**MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION  
STUDY TEAM REPORT**

Submitted:

October 12, 1999

To:

Dr. J. Hugh Dwyer, Assistant Superintendent/  
Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction

By:

Pat Scutella and Susan Williamson, Co-Chairs

Adopted by Board of Education on December 6, 1999

## MIDDLE LEVEL PHILOSOPHY

The Middle Level Philosophy of the Warren County School District recognizes the unique needs and characteristics of the young adolescent. Realizing students of today will become the leaders of tomorrow, the Warren County School District prepares students to become creative, productive, and responsible members of an ever-changing society. The academic curriculum and extracurricular activities of the Middle Level are designed to provide for the physical, emotional, social, ethical, and intellectual growth of each student in a supportive environment that is academically challenging as well as sensitive to the relationship between development and learning.

Middle Level Education fosters personal growth while bridging the gap between childhood and adulthood. A gradual transition is provided from the elementary school structure to the specialized programs of the secondary school. The focus of the curriculum is on students, encouraging them in the development of independent thinking and study skills, community awareness and involvement. An atmosphere fostering courtesy, respect, and responsibility contributes to the development of academic and social skills.

The emphasis is on cooperation as students, parents, teachers, and administrators work together to develop relationships in an atmosphere of active goodwill and trust with commitment to both high academic standards and to developing well-rounded and balanced students.

## Components of a Middle Level Program

1. Create small communities for learning where stable, close mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are considered fundamental for intellectual development and personal growth. The key elements of these communities are students and teachers grouped together as teams throughout the day and small group advisories that ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult. Overall, the task of advisors is to help the students remain positive and to look ahead positively towards the future.
2. Teach a core academic program that results in students who are literate and who know how to think critically, lead a healthy life, behave ethically, and assume the responsibilities of citizenship. The curriculum should be challenging, integrative, and exploratory.
3. Ensure success for all students through elimination of tracking by achievement structure and promotion of cooperative learning, flexibility in arranging instructional time, and adequate resources. A variety of evaluations and assessment techniques should be used.
4. Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students.
5. Staff middle grade schools with teachers who have been specially prepared and/or trained for assignment to the middle grades. This training will allow them to better understand the unique differences of the physical, social, emotional and intellectual developments among ten to fourteen year old children.
6. Improve academic performance through fostering the health and fitness of young adolescents.
7. Reengage families in the education of young adolescents by giving families meaningful roles in school governance, communicating with families about the school program and student's progress, and offering families opportunities to support the learning process at home and at school.
8. Connect schools with communities which together share responsibility for each middle grade student's success.

## Characteristics of Exemplary Middle School Programs

1. A philosophy based on the unique needs and characteristics of the young adolescent
2. Educators knowledgeable about and committed to the young adolescent
3. A balanced curriculum between the cognitive (subject-centered) and affective (student-centered) needs of the young adolescent
4. Teachers who use varied instructional strategies
5. A comprehensive advisor/advisee program
6. An interdisciplinary team organization at all grades
7. A flexible block master schedule
8. A full exploratory program
9. Both team planning and personal planning for all teachers
10. A positive and collaborative school climate
11. Shared decision-making in which the people closest to the "client" are involved in the decision-making process of the school
12. A smooth transition process from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school
13. A high-quality extracurricular program including intramurals, interest-based mini-courses, clubs, and social events
14. A physical plant where teams are housed together for core classes and large areas for full team sessions
15. A commitment to the importance of health and physical fitness for all students on a regular basis
16. A commitment to regular involvement of families in the education of young adolescents by keeping them informed of student progress and school programs and by giving them meaningful roles in the schooling process
17. A positive connection between school and the community through student service projects, business partnerships, and use of community resources within the school curriculum
18. Consistent use of cooperative learning strategies in the classroom
19. An emphasis on the use of higher-order thinking skills and hands-on instructional strategies
20. Empowerment of students whenever possible

## Middle School Structure

1. Middle Level Grades:

Grades comprised of students most likely between ages 10 - 14. Middle level grades refer to those adhering to a middle school philosophy and concept where teachers use various components of interdisciplinary units, advisory programs, block scheduling and exploratory programs. Middle level schools should contain programs whose goal it is to develop and implement curricular, instructional and co-curricular programs to address the developmental concerns and needs of the middle level students.

2. Interdisciplinary Teams:

An interdisciplinary team is created when teachers share a group of students, have daily common planning time, plan and implement interdisciplinary units of study, evaluate students and their needs as a group. Comprised minimally of the core academic teachers. If possible, other non-core teachers should be included. Teachers on a team should be located in the same area of the building and have the same schedules. The physical plant should be one that accommodates teams and provides spaces for both small and large group meetings. When structured correctly, interdisciplinary teams function as small communities where students and teachers interact closely with each other in a mutually respectful relationship.

3. Advisor/Advisee Program:

An effective adviser/advisee program creates a setting in which all students are well-known by at least one adult in the school. A comprehensive advisory program includes components such as peer relations, self-awareness, group cooperation, self-esteem, and goal setting - both academic and personal. The advisory group should have a student to adult ratio much smaller than typical classrooms; ideally, no more than 15 students to one adult advisor. The advisory group should not replace the school guidance program; rather it should complement and assist the counselors by informing them of students with problems who otherwise might be lost in the larger school setting. Staff development is vitally important to prepare teachers properly to have a successful program. The program must have an agreed upon statement of purpose that is known, understood, and implemented.

4. Flexible/Block Schedule:

With block scheduling, teams of teachers share a common block of time, and working together, coordinate the daily schedule for themselves and their common group of students. Flexible scheduling creates a schedule where the order of the day need not be the same. In a flexible schedule, the period length, group size, or subjects taught each day can vary. In this concept, some of the responsibility for the school's schedule is shifted from the administration to the teams of teachers.

5. Exploratory:

An effective exploratory program offers a variety of special interest mini-courses that are not traditionally academic in nature, but can be wonderful learning experiences. Those subjects mandated by the state or required by the school district should not be included in the program, and student evaluation should be non-threatening. Teachers who are involved in the program should teach the mini-courses in which they have an interest or expertise, and courses should last for three to nine weeks. Also part of the exploratory is the opportunity for all students to participate in intramural sports, social events, and clubs.

6. Cooperative Learning:

Cooperative learning requires the use of a wide variety of specific strategies focusing on the development of both cognitive and social skills. More than just students working in small groups, it also involves face-to-face interaction, heterogeneous teams, structured goal interdependence, individual accountability, and an emphasis on practicing social skills. Success is contingent on every student learning the information taught. Establishing group goals means the team members are helping one another and are working together to reap the rewards.

7. Frequent Parent - Teacher Communication

A middle school must show a commitment to involving families in the education of early adolescents by not only keeping them informed of student progress and school programs, but by giving them meaningful roles in the schooling process. Provide opportunities for parents to be included as volunteers and as community resources. A positive connection between school and community should be built through service projects, business partnerships, and full use of community resources within the school district. Time and access to phones should be available daily for teacher-parent contact when needed. Teacher teams should set goals for contacting all parents throughout the year, sharing good news as well as concerns. Frequent communication through newsletters, phone calls, conferences, and parent involvement in the classroom and school activities should be a goal in fostering good teacher-parent communication.

## Major Distinctions Between The Middle School And The Junior High School

### MIDDLE SCHOOL

1. Is student-centered
2. Fosters collaboration and empowerment of teachers and students
3. Focuses on creative exploration and experimentation of subject matter
4. Allows for flexible scheduling with large blocks of time
5. Varies length of time students are in courses
6. Encourages multi-materials approach to instruction
7. Organizes teachers on interdisciplinary teams with common planning period
8. Arranges work spaces of teamed teachers adjacent to one another
9. Emphasizes both affective and cognitive development of student
10. Offers advisor/advisee teacher-oriented guidance program
11. Provides high-interest "mini-courses" during school day
12. Uses varied delivery systems with high level of interaction among students and teachers
13. Organizes athletics around intramural concept

### JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

1. Is subject centered
2. Fosters competition and empowerment of administrators
3. Focuses on mastery of concepts and skills in separate disciplines
4. Requires a regular six-period day of 50-55 minute periods
5. Offers subjects for one semester or one year
6. Depends on textbook-oriented instruction
7. Organizes teachers in departments with no common planning period
8. Arranges work spaces of teachers according to disciplines taught
9. Emphasizes only cognitive development of student
10. Offers study hall and access to counselor upon request
11. Provides highly-structured activity program after school
12. Uses lecture styles a majority of the time with high percentage of teacher talk time
13. Organizes athletics around interscholastic concept

## MIDDLE LEVEL STUDY TEAM

Pat Scutella	Principal/Chairperson
Sue Williamson	Principal/Chairperson
Anna Joncus	Teacher
Laura Dorunda	Teacher
Shirley Corelli	Teacher
Diana Lillard	Principal
Virginia Elms	District aide
Debra Young	Counselor
Cheryl Holquist	Teacher
Gary Holcomb	Teacher/Athletic Coordinator
Barbara Roberts	Parent
Jill Reed	Parent
Joan McAoos	Parent
Paul Yourchisin	Principal
Brent Casey	Teacher
Karen Landin	Parent
Trudy Gentz	Parent/School Board member
Gary Whippo	Teacher



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baenen, Judith (1991) "H.E.L.P. How to Enjoy Living with a Preadolescent"  
*National Middle School Association*, Columbus, OH

Brough, Judith A. (Winter 1990) "Changing Conditions for Young  
Adolescents: Reminiscences and Realities", *Educational Horizons*,  
Bloomington, IN

Dorman, G., Lipsitz, J., and Verner, P. (1985) "Improving Schools for Young  
Adolescents" *Educational Leadership* 42, 6:44-49 ASCD

Eichhorn, D.H. (1987) "The Middle School", *National Middle School  
Association*, Columbus, OH:

Forte, Imogene & Schurr, Sandra (1993) *The Definitive Middle School  
Guide*, Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications, Inc.

George, Paul & Alexander, William *The Exemplary Middle School*, Fort  
Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1993

"This We Believe" Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools"  
*National Middle School Association's Primer Position Paper*, NMSA,  
Columbus, OH

Totten, Samuel & Snider, Dennis (Sept./Oct. 1996) "Middle Level  
Terminology/Concepts: Misconceptions Corrected" *Schools in the Middle*  
NASSP

"Turning Points: Preparing American youth for the 21st Century (1989)  
New York *The Carnegie Corporation of New York*