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The goal of this project was to gain insight from public school middle school principals regarding what works in middle grades education and how accountability affected the organization of middle schools. Three research questions were considered in this exploratory study:

1. What is the status of the middle school model in the early 21st century?
2. According to middle school principals, how has No Child Left Behind and accountability affected their implementation of the middle school model?
3. How do middle school principals deal with the tensions between No Child Left Behind and the middle school model?

In order to gain this insight, literature about middle schools was studied, two middle schools were visited, and human participants provided feedback through a survey. As a follow up to the survey, nine survey participants consented to a more in depth follow-up interview. Through this research it was determined that accountability standards are looked upon favorably by many administrators, however, the standards have forced some schools to restructure their days in ways that do not mirror the original middle school concept that still provides a framework for middle school education. Of the principals surveyed and interviewed there was still a strong desire to educate the whole child, to allow students opportunities to explore, and to develop relationships with students as the middle school model suggested. Based on the research the reader can surmise that the middle school concept can and should still be used in middle schools.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF EDUCATION AND THE MIDDLE SCHOOL  
CONCEPT: WHAT WORKS IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS?

by

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Committee Chair

To my family.

To Micheal M. for inspiring me to find ways to make middle school work for fantastic individuals like him.

To Necia, Rydell, Angie, Anna, Sally, and Sharon for listening, collaborating, reading drafts, and being supportive in the education realm and beyond.

To my colleagues in GCS and at SAS (Jonathan, Amir and Kathy—I owe you) for allowing me to study and practice what I believe works for middle school students.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of  
The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

*Introduction to the Middle School Model*

Envision what you remember of eleven to fourteen years olds, either having been one or knowing one. They exhibit tendencies of little elementary kids, yet at the same time they have raging hormones and are thirteen going on thirty. They appear to crave the comforts of elementary school—tight communities, teachers and staff who have had an opportunity to work with them for a long time—at the same time that they want to be grown ups and start onto their paths through high school and beyond. They are the students caught in the middle. They are not old enough to drop out, but they do not always manage to fit into what has become the more typical middle school configuration in the days of accountability standards for public schools. The changes that accountability have forced in many middle schools do not fit into the middle school model that was originally created with this particular age group of students in mind.

In the 1970s a middle school model was created to meet the needs of students who are in the middle, quite literally. They are not elementary aged anymore, but they are not yet high school students scurrying to earn credits to graduate. So, a model was created to cater to this in-between group. The middle school model highlighted relationships between students and adults and afforded time in the day to formulate those relationships through advisory. “The advisory period -- ideally, a time when teachers and

students examine "real-life" issues -- is the linchpin in the middle-school movement, some experts say" ([www.middleweb.com/advisory/html](http://www.middleweb.com/advisory/html)). Advisory was intended to be a time daily where students would meet with an adult advocate. *Looping* was another strategy instituted so that the teacher, or teachers, moved to the next grade level with the students ([www.ncrel.org](http://www.ncrel.org)). Through looping, students would be challenged at higher levels because teachers would not have to take the time at the beginning of the year to learn about their students; they could just commence with the new teaching and learning. In addition, the middle school model suggested a curriculum with *inter-disciplinary study* as a method for delivering rigor and exploration at the same time. The inter-disciplinary study was designed so that students could learn how all of the subject areas were inter-related. *Intramurals* were put in place so students could explore sports in a non-competitive way. Intramurals were an evolution of elementary school recess—they required more skill than recess, but not that of competitive sports—teamwork was the emphasis. Proponents of intramurals also recognized the fact that, developmentally, middle school students still needed to move and physically play, not sit in desks for many hours. Intramurals were meant to involve all students in physical activity where scores would not be kept or would be de-emphasized. Elective or special courses were also meant to be *exploratory* to allow students experience in all of the options available to them, so that they could specialize in certain subjects by high school (Lounsbury, 1996; Mizell, 2002).

It is especially important to remember that, as *This We Believe* itself makes clear, the middle school concept cannot be communicated adequately in a list of characteristics. The middle school ideal is an entity, as much a philosophy of



education as a composite of educational programs. Its successful operation is as dependent upon teachers' attitudes and approaches as upon their technical skills and knowledge. It is this strong philosophical foundation, not the more commonly cited organizational and programmatic characteristics, that has enlisted the commitment of teachers and made it possible for middle level education to become one of the longest running, most extensive educational reform movements in the United States (Lounsbury, 1996).

Middle schools endured a lot of critique throughout the years. In more recent years, with *No Child Left Behind* standards in place, the test scores of some middle school students have made people question the middle school model. Some schools called themselves middle schools because they had some of the middle school pieces in place, but they were not implemented fully or effectively. Most middle schools simply were labeled as such, not based on practice, but rather on the grade level of the students—6th-8th. As I will discuss further in Chapter II, the middle school model had varying degrees of success and failure over the years. It is obvious that students in the middle need their schools to work for them in developmentally responsive ways.

#### *Accountability and Middle Schools*

During the latter part of the 20th Century, the focus of educational policy shifted to accountability for school performance. Year by year, states have added more layers of accountability. Although many states had been using standardized assessments like the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) or California Achievement Tests (CAT) to measure how the state's students were stacking up nationally, some started to move to state testing in the late 1990s. The test score became more and more of a focus when *No Child Left Behind* legislation was passed in 2001. In many aspects, everything changed about the way middle schools operated in 2001 with the adoption of *No Child Left Behind*. Test

scores started to become what schools and principals were held accountable for each year, and decisions began to shift from more student-focused to accountability-focused. Once the *No Child Left Behind* legislation required states to test students yearly, test scores became increasingly important. In some states schools were assessed based upon proficiency levels and growth rates for students. So, not only was there the national goal of having 100% of students on grade level by 2014, but also there were bars set by states to make sure schools were progressing toward the goal of 100% by the deadline.

Even without talking about increased accountability standards, transitions are hard on middle school aged students; adolescents are changing physically, so changes in other areas of their lives can be challenging. Their hormones are raging while their bodies are changing in ways that some students do not understand. The frontal lobe of their brains is not yet fully developed, so they are impulsive and tend to react before they stop to think about the consequences (Society for Neuroscience, 2007). For many, they have departed from a self-contained K-5 elementary classroom and school where strong community was built very methodically over the successive years that a student was a member of the school community. Then, they enter into middle schools that can be two to three times the size of their elementary schools. They have to switch classes, navigate lockers, and study increasing loads of information. An adage that is often heard regarding middle school students said, “They are expected to evolve from learning to read in elementary school to reading to learn in middle school.” Students who were in the middle grades in 2008 had been a part of the *No Child Left Behind* atmosphere most,

if not all, of their years in school. So, accountability standards, frequent formative assessment, and various forms of academic gateways have become a part of their reality.

### *Middle School Transitions*

Though many students transition well into middle schools, what happens to students who do not? Students who feel that they do not fit into a new school structure can get lost. In a New York City Coalition for Educational Justice report (2007), Hamburg stated:

There is a critical need to help adolescents at this early age to acquire a durable basis for self-esteem, flexible and inquiring minds, reliable and close human relationships, a sense of belonging in a valued group, and a way of being useful beyond one's self (p. 4).

With the increased focus on accountability, schools were forced to make hard decisions. Some schools were not focusing on this transition time as methodically as they once did, especially when the middle school model was the focus. If students were funneled from elementary school to middle school without attention paid to their specific needs, then students were potentially put at risk. If structures were not in place to nurture relationships, interdisciplinary study, and exploration, then too often middle level students experienced trouble and spent time out of the classroom--in the office, in In-School Suspension (I.S.S.), or suspended from school. Students who were assigned to In-School Suspension were assigned to a classroom within the school for a part or all of the school day. In that setting, they would work on the class work they were missing while under the supervision of a school employee. In I.S.S. students were not receiving instruction from their teachers, and they were not interacting with other students. I.S.S.

personnel were not required to be certified teachers in some states; knowing that the I.S.S. teacher would not affect scores negatively, principals tended not to put as much care into the hiring of these teachers. When in I.S.S. it is rare for students to receive exceptional children or English as a second language services as dictated by their Individualized Education and LEP plans. However, the other popular alternative of out of school suspension forbade the student from entering the school grounds for the length of the suspension. So, not only were students not receiving direct instruction, they were not given the access to the material in many cases. In some instances the alternatives used to manage difficult students were in opposition to the best practices indicated by the middle school model. Increased time spent dealing with discipline and accountability measures moved the focus away from the students themselves. The middle school model was designed to be student-centered and to focus on middle school students' needs. By allowing focus to shift to issues like discipline and accountability, students themselves were being left behind.

### *Middle Level Reform*

Middle grades reformers like Hayes Mizell (2003) considered this unique age group closely when reforming middle schools. Though, by 2008, middle schools were resembling mini high schools more and more each year, the fact remained that the students enclosed in the buildings had to be considered for their cognitive, social, and emotional needs so that they were not set up to have disciplinary or other issues during the middle grades years.

In many districts around the nation, middle and early colleges were being offered as options for students who did not fit into traditional high schools. Middle and early colleges offered high school students an opportunity to take their high school classes on a college campus so that they were surrounded by opportunities beyond high school; and, they were able to work in smaller school communities that foster relationships with them more methodically than a traditional, large high school. However, very few districts had any options for middle school students who found the traditional structure challenging. Some districts added magnet options at the middle level. Magnet options ranged from International Baccalaureate (IB) to science and technology to advanced learner academy to Spanish immersion.

Many middle level advocates argued that middle school was the last best chance to convince some students that school was a positive place for them. With standardized testing serving as the main factor affecting whether a student passed or failed a grade, many students were being retained who would have been promoted in years past. If educators continued to retain and suspend students in middle schools, then they ran the risk of sending students to high school when they were near the drop out age. “The critical turning point in reversing this failure lies in the middle grades” (NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, 2007, p. 2).

Middle school students continue to be faced with many challenges from the emergence of hormonal changes to the increasing pressures of high stakes testing. Current legislation did not fully address the needs of students in grades five through eight (ACT, Alliance for Excellent Education, The College Board, National Association of

Secondary School Principals, National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, National Middle School Association, n.d., p. 1). As districts searched for ways to reach the federal government's mandate of reducing high school drop-outs, educators had to start earlier in students' school careers to offer options and alternatives to them. The sheer size of most middle schools was prohibitive for students who are on the cusp. "If they fail to develop the intellectual, emotional, and moral capacities they need to negotiate adolescence successfully, middle-grades students can drift into self-destructive trajectories—risk-taking behaviors, dropping out of school, or pathways to prison" (NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, 2007, p. 4).

#### *Rationale for Studying Middle Schools*

Since I was middle school trained and have worked in middle schools for eleven years, I was constantly frustrated by the changes that I had seen in middle schools over the last decade. The age of accountability drastically changed the way public middle school leadership teams and administrators approached education for children in the middle. I truly felt like middle school was the last best chance to convince some students that school could be a positive place for them.

As districts searched for ways to meet the federal government's mandates of raising achievement and reducing high school drop-outs, we as educators had to start earlier in students' school careers to offer options and alternatives. The diminished choices that middle school students had to explore courses and develop positive relationships with adults made a lot of middle schools more reminiscent of the junior high schools, or mini-high schools, of days gone by. We educators and members of society

have to determine what works in middle schools within the context of accountability standards and assure that we employ what works in order to best serve our students and our future generations.

I started my teaching career in 1997 in a fairly large school district in the southeast. While I began as a seventh grade language arts and social studies teacher, after five years in the classroom and teaching at two different schools, I found myself frustrated by the way students in the middle were being educated. In my sixth year in education I took a position as a curriculum facilitator. As a curriculum facilitator, it was my job to disaggregate data, train teachers in best practices, model lessons for teachers, arrange tutoring opportunities for students, and assess educational needs and purchase resources with our Title I funds. After three years I was offered an opportunity to serve as our district's K-12 social studies specialist. I was thrilled with the opportunity to serve at the district level and to affect change on a larger scale. However, I severely missed students, so I took a job that was offered to me the following year as an assistant principal at a highly impacted urban school.

The school where I served as an assistant principal had not made Adequate Yearly Progress goals in four years. Throughout my two years at that school, I was reminded again and again that we must figure out how to make accountability standards and the middle school concept work together. I was constantly frustrated by our superintendent's suggestion that middle schools in our district were failing our students. Yet, year after year he rolled out new ways to help keep high school students engaged through middle and early college options. There was no strategic organizing in our district to get middle

schools back to what they were intended to be, but blame was cast at middle schools, in general, for low test scores. With each year, I felt more strongly that it was not our middle schools that were failing our students, but rather our middle schools that were being forced to work more and more as junior high schools or mini high schools.

When I arrived at my middle school as an assistant principal, Spanish had recently been cut due to funding allotments. So, my urban students were no longer offered an opportunity to participate in a foreign language in middle school. Our advisory program, which the middle school concept advocates in order to foster relationships with students, was reduced to homeroom time that consisted of listening to announcements, saying the Pledge of Allegiance, and taking attendance. Our staff and our administration believed in children and their ability to learn despite their circumstances at home and in the school, but the reality was that our school had become a victim of accountability standards.

Forced to consider test scores as the main measure of success, allotments and budgets had to be used to put our resources in reading and math at the expense of foreign language, orchestra, and art. Where the middle school concept encouraged exploratory elective courses for middle grades students, we were pulling our students out of their one chosen elective to remediate them in reading and math. Our students, as a whole, were not intrinsically motivated to do well in school, and many did not have families who valued education, so our students would not stay after school to receive tutoring. We had to make the difficult choice to take away their elective class and give them their extra time during the day.



In addition, we moved to a block schedule; so, a student who had a remediation class during electives had already participated in a ninety-minute block of reading and a ninety-minute block of math in the day. Then, that same student was forced into an eighty-minute “elective” class that they did not elect, so they could have another eighty-minutes every other day of reading and/or math. Because we were counting every minute of our day, club time was allocated to after school time, but the options were limited: Battle of the Books, Chef’s Club, Chess Club and Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.). Since the district-provided after school bus did not run until two hours after school ended, many of these clubs only allowed students to participate if they had rides home after an hour. This practice became an issue of socio-economically disadvantaged kids not being able to participate, thus limiting their opportunities to formulate a sense of belonging. Intramurals had gone by the wayside before I arrived at the school; and, teacher certification, in light of needing highly qualified status, forced us to keep five of our six sixth grade teachers in that grade level with no hope of having them loop with their students.

Daily I watched my students struggle to succeed. My students wanted to succeed. They even believed they could succeed, but every day I became more and more acutely aware that what we were forced to offer them paled in comparison to what other schools in our county, state and around the world were able to offer. Knowing what middle schools can and should look like made working in middle schools disheartening and unsettling to me. Every time I heard people blame the model instead of looking at what the model suggested, I became more and more aware that middle school education was

focusing on a bottom line, and that bottom line was not the students themselves. Our students are more than a test score. A great deal of work has been done to emphasize that middle school students are a unique entity with specific needs.

### *The Dissertation Focus and Plan*

In conjunction with my Masters class studies, I began to focus my attention on the middle school model and middle school aged students. So, when I finished my Masters and started into doctoral work, I knew that I had to look more closely at those two areas. This research study was formulated over my four years of study. The voices in the field were needed. This research study involved three distinct legs, like the legs of a stool. A three-legged stool is unbalanced if only one or two legs are present. The same applied to my research. In order to achieve balanced research literature was reviewed, a survey conducted, and in-depth follow-up interviews completed. In order to lessen bias, I focused on surveying and interviewing principals in counties that I did not work in, and I interviewed principals I did not know or had not worked with previously. If I had chosen schools and principals within my own district, then I feared my bias about what is good and working would interfere with my research.

To gain insight, I read literature with the question, “What works in middle schools?” as my focus. As I read the literature and started to devise my interview questions, I focused around three research questions:

1. What is the status of the middle school model in the early 21st century?
2. According to middle school principals, how has *No Child Left Behind* and accountability affected their implementation of the middle school model?

3. How do middle school principals deal with the tensions between *No Child Left Behind* and the middle school model?

As I read more, I felt like a lot of the literature pointed to the fact that middle schools are not implementing the middle school model as they used to for a variety of reasons.

Building on my own experiences as a teacher and administrator, I felt that delving into these three research questions would allow me to assess the status of middle schools and make suggestions about how to improve them. To answer my research questions, I surveyed all principals within three school districts via email. In order to get a cross-section of responses, I made sure I surveyed principals in districts that varied in size and demographics. From the surveys I asked for interview participants. In the research interviews I asked:

- What makes a good middle school?
- How has accountability affected middle schools?
- What would you do differently if accountability, like *No Child Left Behind*, was no longer an issue?
- What is the most effective thing you do at your middle school?
- Why is this the most effective thing you do?
- Are there other comments you would like to share about middle schools and your philosophy about middle schools?

The goal of my study was to determine what works in middle schools. Valuable insights about middle schools emerged through the researching and interviewing. Knowing that such insight could be gained, participants were willing to be a part of my study.

In addition, I had a strong desire to help spread the word about what can be done in spite of *No Child Left Behind* to make sure middle schools are developmentally responsive to middle schoolers. Two occurrences happened by chance as I was finishing up my coursework and looking at ways to be the voice of my children. First, I was offered an opportunity to teach in China. While the offer was to teach in a private school, the school sounded like a middle school that fits into the middle school model. Though not governed by *No Child Left Behind*, the offer seemed to fit perfectly into my desire to discover what works for middle school students. Then, I was able to join my brother's private school in another southeastern state as they spent a day at the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. After spending a day at the Ron Clark Academy in Georgia in March, then surveying and interviewing principals throughout a southeastern state over the summer, I moved to Shanghai, China in August 2008. Though my methods had been planned for my research, the chance opportunities to see the Ron Clark Academy and to move back into the classroom in a middle school that still implements pieces of the middle school model seemed to fit into my research perfectly. In Chapter IV, I will talk more about how these two experiences informed my data and my understanding of my findings.

### *Summary*

While I knew that middle school students were getting lost in the middle, I also knew that I had to research in order to find more ideas about what could work for them. In Chapter II I present what literature said about the middle school model and the middle school student. In Chapter III I outline the methodology and procedures associated with

my study. Since the literature was vague about the effects of accountability on the middle school model, I turned to the principals for their point of view since they are the obvious people to discuss the aspect of accountability on the middle school model. In Chapter IV I share my data and analyze it. Finally, in Chapter V, I offer the conclusions I have formulated based on the three legs of my study. Throughout this dissertation what works best for middle school aged students will be discussed.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### *A good middle school*

While there has been much written about middle schools in America since the 1970s, the National Middle School Association, The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grade Reform, The Carnegie Corporation, and other groups have continued to revise frameworks for a good middle school. Whether talking to people on the street, educators in a middle school building, district officials, or middle school student or teacher groups, the definitions of a good middle school vary. However, there were key elements indicated throughout the literature. As an example,

"Schools to Watch" is an initiative launched by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform in 1999. The National Forum is an alliance of more than 60 educators, researchers, and officers of national associations and foundations dedicated to improving schools for young adolescents across the country ([www.schoolstowatch.org](http://www.schoolstowatch.org), 2008).

The Schools to Watch forum developed three criteria for good middle schools:

They are academically excellent – these schools challenge all students to use their minds well. They are developmentally responsive – these schools are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence. They are socially equitable – these schools are democratic and fair, providing every student with high-quality teachers, resources, and supports ([www.schoolstowatch.org](http://www.schoolstowatch.org)).

In looking at the three aspects of a good middle school that Schools to Watch suggested, all three were very strongly tied to the original middle school model. While the original middle school model did not address academic excellence and social equity in such specific terms, the tenets of the middle school model lend themselves to both of those aspects.

### *The middle school model*

In 1994, George and Shewey wrote about middle school reform: “As the 21st century looms on the horizon, the middle school movement remains the largest and most comprehensive effort at organizational and curricular change in the history of American public schooling” (p. 3). For over forty years educators actively analyzed the most effective organizational structure for grade span in American public schools. Initially junior high schools were formed as a transition from elementary to high school for students. Then, the pendulum shifted toward the middle school model. Proponents of the middle school model, like William Alexander, looked at the middle school model to address topics like “special classes vs. heterogeneous class and inclusion, values and character education vs. sticking to the basics, general education vs. curriculum differentiation, core classes vs. exploratory experience” (Alexander, 2005, p. 1).

Since the shift toward middle schools rather than junior high schools, there existed many attempts to study the effectiveness of the model. The Rutter study showed that “the reasons for the success of some of the schools and the failure of others in this study appeared to be related to two different but closely related sets of factors: academic emphasis and the psychosocial environment” (George and Shewey, 1994, p. 12). The

Rutter study looked at middle schools for four years and concluded, "...that the crucial differences in the schools boiled down to whether or not the school effectively attended to the social side of learning" (George and Shewey, 1994, p. 13).

*Insights into what middle schools should include*

Van Hoose, Strahan, and L'Esperance (2001) quoted the work of Stevenson who worked with middle level students for over thirty years. Stevenson (1998) provided five key insights that he had found through research to help guide successful middle school practice:

1. Every child wants to believe in himself as a successful person
2. Every youngster wants to be liked and respected
3. Every youngster wants to do and learn things that are worthwhile
4. Every youngster wants physical exercise and freedom to move
5. Youngsters want life to be just (Van Hoose, Strahan, and L'Esperance, 2001, p. 4).

The Schools to Watch initiative, which was working to reform middle schools as currently at 2008, had some of Stevenson's five insights as a part of their list of components in a successful middle school: "developmentally responsive, academically excellent and socially equitable" ([www.schoolstowatch.org](http://www.schoolstowatch.org)). Social equity and a desire for "life to be just" (Van Hoose, Strahan, and L'Esperance, 2001, p. 4) addressed the same issues. The academic excellence that Schools to Watch embraced fell right in line with number three, "Every youngster wants to do and learn things that are worthwhile" on the list that Stevenson (2001) provided. Developmental responsiveness could be easily tied to these five insights as well since schools that worked to help students feel



successful and respected were in tune to the developmental needs of middle grade aged students.

Throughout the research on middle grades education and the history of it, Studies show students become more disengaged from school as they progress from elementary to middle to high school. By high school as many as 40% to 60% of students become chronically disengaged from school—urban, suburban, and rural—not counting those who already dropped out (Klem and Connell, 2004, p. 262).

There was and continues to be a great need to focus on the middle level years.

Researchers have found student engagement a robust predictor of student achievement and behavior in school, regardless of socioeconomic status. Students engaged in school are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, and have lower drop-out rates. In contrast, students with low levels of engagement are at risk for a variety of long-term adverse consequences, including disruptive behavior in class, absenteeism, and dropping out of school (Klem and Connell, 2004, pp. 262-263).

Based on the research on the psychosocial aspects of education, it was conjectured that the connections and relationships in the middle level years had to be looked at closely.

The literature made it apparent that schools had to be organized in a way that promoted student engagement.

Middle school students with high levels of engagement were 75% more likely to do well on the attendance and achievement index, and 23% less likely to do poorly on the index, with 28% of high-engagement students doing well and 23% doing poorly on the SPCI (Klem and Connell, 2004, p. 266).

### *Teaming and interdisciplinary study*

Curriculum also played a huge part in what was needed developmentally for middle level students. Proponents for middle level education suggested that “in addition, middle grades students need an extended curriculum that enables them to explore world languages, music, art, careers, service learning, and character and civic education” (ACT, Alliance for Excellent Education, The College Board, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, National Middle School Association, n.d., p. 1).

The original middle school model focused a great deal on teaming and interdisciplinary study. The concept of teaming was that students would travel between a set group of teachers in a day. So, if student A was on Team 1 and had Ms. X for language arts, then so did students B, C, D and on. The team would consist of two to four teachers teaching the core subject areas of language arts, math, social studies, and science. On a two-teacher team, teachers traditionally taught the team of students language arts and social studies or science and math. On a three teacher team all three teachers might have taught their main course of language arts, math and science or social studies and then all teach a fourth class of the remaining subject, like social studies. Or, the science and social studies teachers shared two teams and switch teams on a predetermined rotation. Four teacher teams allowed for each core subject to have a different teacher. Grade levels themselves might have anywhere from two to four teams. So, with the teaming concept, students were contained within a team of teachers and students in order to provide a smaller learning community and to foster relationships and

belonging. When students were more connected to the people within their building they were better ready and able to attend to learning and making connections with their learning than worrying about fitting in during the awkward teenage years.

In addition, by having a smaller community of teachers that shared the same ninety to one hundred twenty students, teachers could plan together so that they were teaching interdisciplinary studies. If the language arts teacher was teaching about historical fiction and read a short story about the Titanic's sinking, then the science teacher could do labs on density to determine why the Titanic sank; the math teacher could work with charts and graphs to determine the number of people from first, second and third class that were lost at sea; the social studies teachers could use historical documents and read the S.O.S. and C.Q.D. messages that were sent out to ask for help in order to plot the coordinates of the ship using longitude and latitude. By weaving in interdisciplinary study, students would be involved in more authentic learning that helped them to see the interdependence of all the subject areas.

Originally, elective courses were planned to be exploratory. Elective classes, sometimes called specials or encore classes, were the extra courses that a student could sign up to take, like health and physical education, foreign language, music, or art. In middle schools, the original intent was that students would cycle through a kind of cultural wheel to expose them to all of the various elective options available to the students when they went to high school. By allowing students a chance to explore, they were able to determine what areas interested them so that they could plan a schedule in high school that was reminiscent of their specific learning interests and needs.

Even sports involvement was supposed to be more on a club level so that students were able to sample the smorgasbord available to them later in their schooling career. So, many middle schools instituted an intramural model where all classes would compete against one another. However, while some districts did not allow sixth graders to play sports in middle schools, seventh and eighth graders were often involved in sports which shifted the focus away from the exploratory, non-competitive model that middle school frameworks suggested. With the move to year-end testing as a benchmark of success for many schools, there had been a shift in curriculum development to eliminate course offerings at the middle level in favor of focusing on the basics of reading and math.

Because data suggested the need for rigor in middle level programs, a shift had been made to teach algebra to as many middle school students as possible. “Taking algebra or pre-algebra in the middle grades leads to enrollment in higher-level mathematics courses in high school and does not increase failure rates” (Cooney, n.d., p. 2). K-8 schools could offer algebra for eighth grade students, but the staffing of such positions became more difficult to fill. The research consistently pointed to “middle grades schools that successfully prepare students for college-preparatory course in ninth grade provide extra help and link students with an adult mentor. Successful schools come in many sizes, and their students vary by ethnicity and socioeconomic status” (Cooney, n.d., p. 2). So, whether in the K-8 or middle school model, there was an emphasis on assuring eighth grade students access to algebra before they headed to high school.

Regardless of school structure, the curriculum needed to be at the heart of what was considered for students since education was the role of the school—academically, behaviorally, and emotionally. “In exemplary middle level schools, curriculum is planned in units that lasted several weeks, using complex tasks and essential questions rather than day-to-day lessons” (NMSA, 2003, p. 19). The curriculum needed to be grouped into units, but it also had to be relevant. “Relevant curriculum involves students in activities that are rich in personal meaning.... Relevant curriculum creates new interests, opening doors to new knowledge and opportunities for “stretching” students to new levels of learning” (NMSA, 2003, p. 21). The units should have been interrelated when possible. Interdisciplinary planning time should have been used to make sure that units being taught were presented in conjunction and not as separate entities. “Reading, writing, and other fundamental skills should be taught and practiced whenever they apply, rather than taught only in isolation as separate subjects” (NMSA, 2003, p. 22). Because middle school was a time to help students transition from concrete to abstract formal thinking, there needed to be opportunities for learning to be real for students and for them to explore their interests in relation to learning. “The middle school is the finding place. The entire curriculum at this level should be exploratory, for young adolescents, by nature, are adventuresome, curious explorers” (NMSA, 2003, p. 23). Learning needed to be integrated and fun for middle level learners. When the focus shifted from reaching the learner, more and more students were turned off by school. Units were being taught, but students should have had opportunities to show what they had learned and internalized as a result of the teaching.

Major learning activities or units should always culminate in some form of presentation in which students share with their parents and others what they have done and learned. Learning approaches that are developmentally responsive require students to set personal goals and consider their progress in achieving both the knowledge and behavioral goals consistent with applicable standards (NMSA, 2003, p. 26).

In addition to the research about middle school tenets specifically, education theorists like Howard Gardner worked for a number of years to attend to the different kinds of intelligences that students exhibited.

Gardner (1995) identified the essential aspects of good teaching with multiple

Intelligences:

- Cultivating desired capabilities
  - Approaching concepts, subjects, and disciplines in a variety of ways
  - Personalizing education
- ...When parents and teachers support their efforts to try out new ideas and new modes of reasoning, students begin to take more ownership of the learning process (Van Hoose, Strahan, L'Esperance, 2001, pp. 34-35).

However, if students did not feel the connection with their learning environment, if they did not feel a sense of safety, then they might employ a defense mechanism that Van Hoose, Strahan, and L'Esperance (2001) identified called "I could do it if I wanted to" (p. 35). "When faced with tasks that appear to be too difficult, many young adolescents say to themselves, 'I could figure this out if I really wanted to but I don't want to'" (Van Hoose, Strahan, L'Esperance, 2001, p. 35). By deciding which activities they would take a chance at trying, adolescents exercised the use of control theory.

Control theory describes ways that students choose their behaviors to fit their pictures of themselves and to meet basic needs for security, belonging, freedom, power and fun.... Glasser's studies show that students can form more productive pictures of themselves when they experience success and identify with significant others" (Van Hoose, Strahan, L'Esperance, 2001, p. 37).

So, if the people working with adolescents were not aware of the complexities that existed within the very being of an adolescent's developmental psyche, then it was even harder to know how to reach the students and to make them feel success.

Csikszentmihalyi (1989) and his colleagues have found that adolescents' involvement in meaningful learning activities is characterized by 'flow'. Flow is what people feel when they enjoy what they are doing, when they would not want to do anything else. What makes flow so intrinsically motivating? The evidence suggests a simple answer: in flow, the human organism is functioning at its fullest capacity. When this happens, the experience is its own reward' (Van Hoose, Strahan, L'Esperance, 2001, p. 37-38).

Students had to be given opportunities to identify what activities helped them experience "flow," and educators needed to be cognizant of finding ways to help students achieve flow. Because adults were often motivated by flow, it stood to reason that adolescents felt more engaged in the subject matter when the teachers teaching made the effort to connect with their students.

Similar results have been found with middle school students and their teachers. For this age group, relationships between students and teachers have been associated with students' motivation, achievement, feelings of belonging, and affect in school (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). In addition, middle school students' perceptions of support and caring from teachers were linked to students' current interest in class and school, which in turn, were significant predictors of GPA the following year (Wentzel, 1998). There is an indication, however, that the quality of relationships between teachers and students deteriorates from elementary to middle school (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1998), as do students' school-related

attitudes and motivation (e.g., Eccles et al., 1993; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994)...One of the most remarkable and compelling conclusions from years of resilience research is that resiliency appears not to arise from extraordinary circumstances or rare traits, but rather from the ordinary, “everyday magic” embedded in systems of development—within children, families, schools, communities, and their interactions (Masten, 2001) (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004, p. 96).

### *Relationships in middle schools*

One of the biggest arguments made about middle schools revolved around the idea that too much attention has been paid to the social side, instead of the academic side, of schooling in middle schools, thus standardized test scores continued to languish during the middle school years. In the early 21st century, it was becoming more and more apparent that students in the middle school years were losing ground academically. Throughout the nation, test scores had fallen for some students at the end of elementary school, and then plummet by the end of middle school. So, as one might expect, attention turned toward reforming schools that served the middle grade aged students again.

When adolescents feel cared for by people at their school and feel like a part of their school, they are less likely to use substances, engage in violence, or initiate sexual activity at an early age. Students who feel connected to school in this way also report higher levels of emotional well being (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002, p. 138).

In addition to what was already mentioned as parts of a middle school, like teaming and interdisciplinary study, George and Shewey (1994) also mentioned advisory programs. Advisory programs were established so that adults within a middle school had a small group of students they worked with on a consistent basis to formulate a positive student/teacher relationship, to develop character through character education programs,



and to engage in community service activities as a way to become empowered, adaptable, globally minded students. In order to foster the longer-term relationships that George and Shewey (1994) mentioned, looping was often a part of middle schools. Looping meant that the teacher moved up to the next grade level with the student. In some situations, the students looped with their advisory teacher for the three years they were in school. In the model scenario, all of the core teachers on a team looped to the next grade level with their students to continue fostering positive relationships and to increase the academic rigor since the teacher knew the students' abilities, learning styles, and strategies move them to the next level without having to take a few weeks or months to get to know a new group of students.

Though there seemed to be a lack of real research data about this age group, it was pretty clear from what was read that relationships with adults matter. Adults set the stage for student learning and serve as mentors along the way.

Analysis of data from a longitudinal study of almost 1500 young adolescents and their families in the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study shows that three essential aspects of adolescents' lives in school contexts shape their views of themselves, their social-emotional functioning and their success in school: 1) how well their experiences support a sense of competence; 2) how well their experiences support a sense of autonomy; and 3) the quality of their relationships with peers and adults (Roesser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000) (Van Hoose, Strahan, L'Esperance, 2001, p. 48).

### *History of the move to middle schools*

To look at the schools in existence throughout the nation, it was obvious that most districts made a move to the middle school structure at some point, even if the only evidence was the shift in grade span configuration that was made (i.e. from 7-9 to 6-8).

While many urban districts were putting the K-8 model into place, in whole or in part, or moving back to a junior high model (McEwin, C.K., Dickinson, T.S., Jenkins, D.M., 2003), the literature discussing whether grade span configuration or programming within a school were key factors pointed to the need to determine what adolescents needed developmentally from about ten to fourteen years of age. When addressing needs, the literature analyzed the emotional, physical and social needs in conjunction with the developmental needs of middle level aged students. The grade span configuration was a small part of the puzzle. As Schools to Watch mentioned, academic excellence, social equity and developmental responsiveness were paramount to giving adolescents what they needed.

The Coalition for Justice (CFJ) (2007) called for comprehensive reform to ensure that all middle-grades students had access to:

- Well-rounded and rigorous curriculum that puts them on the road to college;
- Strong academic, social, and emotional supports for all students;
- Highly qualified teachers and principals who understand early adolescent development;
- Smaller class size (NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, 2007, p. 3).

Middle level students were going through a period of body changes where they had disproportionate growth, bone growth, ossification of bones, hormonal changes, nutrition challenges and hair growth that was new for them (Van Hoose, Strahan. L'Esperance, 2001). Developmentally the middle level students' prefrontal cortex was still developing, so, they needed to move; they needed food and water and a variety of programs. Activities were designed to bridge concrete experiences and abstract thinking.

In the middle grades students generally began to transition from concrete operations to formal operations (Van Hoose, Strahan, L'Esperance, 2001, p. 27). Yet, by eighth grade only one third of students consistently showed formal abilities (Van Hoose, Strahan, L'Esperance, 2001, p. 31). Teachers needed to understand this developmental level so that they maintained high expectations for students—more than one third of eighth graders should be able to navigate demonstration of formal abilities. “Low expectations are a major deterrent to improving achievement; they undermine the importance of student effort and quality learning experiences” (Cooney, n.d., p. 5). Maintaining high expectations and helping students to bridge their thinking needed to be accompanied by “... steadily increasing opportunities for autonomy, opportunities to demonstrate competence, caring and support from adults, developmentally appropriate supervision, and acceptance by peers” (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002, p. 138). The kinds of teaching strategies used with the middle level student needed to focus on their developmental stage as well.

Although hands-on activities have been universally advocated, developmentally responsive middle schools take that concept further with what might be termed “hands-joined” activities, ones teachers and students develop by working together. Such activities promote student ownership and lead to levels of understanding and motivation unlikely when students are simply completing teacher-made assignments (NMSA, 2003, p. 16).

Based on the Illinois Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) study, middle schools needed to fully implement the middle school tenets: “The more consistently and more fully the nationally recommended practices occurred as a total package, the greater the student achievement in mathematics, language and reading”

(Muir, Anfara, Andrews, Caskey, Mertens, Hough, n.d.). The tenets of the middle school model worked to establish an environment where students felt nurtured.

### *Middle school reform*

How should reform be implemented for middle level student success? Many educators were advocating for a return to the K-8 structure of the past. “Like most ‘hot’ educational reforms, the K-8 school may mistakenly be touted as a silver bullet. The truth remains that silver bullets are only in the Lone Ranger’s sidearm and Stephen King novels” (Look, n.d., p.1). So, which format was the best during the era of high stakes testing and increased accountability—K-8, 6-8 middle schools, or junior high schools that house middle grades students? Was the grade span configuration at the root of the issue or did more of the problem with middle grades education lie in the teaming, scheduling and advising pieces of the traditional middle school model? Or, were there other reasons that student performance in middle schools was not as good as it was at elementary and high school levels?

As of 1995 when the Carnegie Council’s research was conducted (as cited in Van Hoose, Strahan and L’Esperance, 2001), there were “more than 19 million young adolescents ages 10-14 in the United States. Approximately 20 percent of them [were] living below the poverty line and nearly 30 percent [were] members of minority groups” (p. 4). The picture has not gotten any more promising. Based upon more recent data, poverty rates increased eleven percent from 2000 to 2005, putting nearly thirteen million children living in homes that made less than \$20,000 annually for a family of four

(National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006). If this trend continues, then students would continue to be more at risk as time passed.

Based upon what we know the literature says about middle grades education, what is best for adolescents?

Many educators (Epstein, 1990; MacIver, 1990) with experience in middle level schools for older children and young adolescents now strongly endorse several common elements: classroom based guidance efforts, often in the form of what have come to be called advisory programs; interdisciplinary team organization; common planning time for the team of teachers; flexible scheduling, often in a block format; a curriculum emphasizing balanced exploration and solid academics; arrangements which permit the development of longer-term relationships between teachers and the students they teach; heterogeneous grouping whenever appropriate; instructional strategies that consider the characteristics of the learner; a wide range of special interest experiences keyed to the development of middle school youth, and collaboration between and among teachers and administrators as they work to improve middle school programs (George and Shewey, 1994, p. 4-5).

Advocates like Sue Swaim, executive director of the National Middle School Association, argued that it “is not the name over the school door and grade configuration, but what is going on that is appropriate for learning at this developmental stage” (Norton and Lewis, 2000, p. 5). The debate, Mizell said, “needs to shift from a fixation on format to a conversation about what we want students to be able to do at the end of each grade” (Norton and Lewis, 2000, p. 5). Yecke agreed that a shift needed to happen; she quoted C.S. Lewis (1943):

If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man. Going back is the quickest way on.

Then, she went on to say:

This summarizes the key strategy for undoing the damage that the middle school concept has done to the U.S. education: We must go back to find scientifically based research that reveals the strengths and weaknesses of specific education practices, go back to proven methodologies, and go back to parents and empathetically listen to their concerns (2006, p. 25).

The National Middle School Association had been a leader in research into practices that were in place and about what worked for middle level students. They advocated: “For middle schools to be successful, their students must be successful; for students to be successful, the school’s organization, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs must be based upon the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of young adolescents” (NMSA, 2003, p. 1). They published the association’s beliefs about what made schools successful for young adolescents:

- ... [they] are characterized by a culture that includes:
- Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so
  - Courageous, collaborative leadership
  - A shared vision that guides decisions
  - An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
  - High expectations for every member of the learning community
  - Students and teachers engaged in active learning
  - An adult advocate for every student
  - School-initiated family and community partnerships.
- Therefore, successful schools for young adolescents provided
- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
  - Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity
  - Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning
  - Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning
  - School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
  - Multifaceted guidance and support services (NMSA, 2003, p. 7).

The bottom line advocated by the National Middle School Association was that “A successful school for young adolescents is an inviting, supportive, and safe place, a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students’ physical and emotional well-being. In a healthy school environment, human relationships are paramount” (NMSA, 2003, p. 12). This bottom line was well supported by the Schools to Watch initiative as well. So, whether K-8, junior high or middle school models were being considered, the current literature all pointed to these tenets in one form or the other as aspects of middle level education that were important.

*What should be considered when analyzing middle level schools?*

Hayes Mizell posed questions that needed to be considered for middle school reform. The first question had to center around who would benefit from the reform efforts. Did educators change middle grades education to make teachers happier, to raise test scores, or to benefit children? Likewise, Mizell stressed that, “All educators will not have the option of picking and choosing what they will and will not do, placing their interests above the education of their students” (Mizell, 2003, p. 5). *No Child Left Behind* and budgetary restraints limited those in charge of making the decisions and instituting change by forcing the spotlight on the tested areas of reading and math. The intent of many policies revolved around the best interest of the students, but sometimes their interest got lost because of adults jockeying to suit their own needs. For example, some schools had an established hierarchy among the staff; teachers in such schools felt like the highest need classes were reserved for the new teachers as a sort of stepping

stone to the best classes that are earned with years of teaching in that environment.

Reading current education journals, listening to practitioners, and employing common sense said that anyone could teach the students who were achieving, but the students that struggled the most needed the best teachers in a school.

As Mizell (2004) pointed out, the focus had to remain on the needs of the students. Scheduling and room placement were also areas where teachers have traditionally jockeyed for situations that worked best for them, but not necessarily for their students. Reformers need to come to a consensus about the desired outcome of education in the middle grades. “Seldom is there a living, flesh-and-blood consensus about the demonstrable results schools should help students achieve by the end of the middle grades” (Mizell, 2003, p. 5).

Once the outcomes are determined, the questions have to turn to the logistics of organizing a school to help all students achieve the results.

Schools serving youth adolescents often feel they have to genuflect before the holy trinity of middle level schooling: teams, advisories, and interdisciplinary curricula.... When teams are organized without regard to students’ ages but rather their learning styles or curricular interests, there is greater opportunity to focus on student performance than on assumptions about what students should know because they are a certain age (Mizell, 2003, p. 7-8).

Educators have to give themselves permission to change the structure if a new structure better serves the students and facilitates the desired outcomes of the education process. The organization has to be considered in terms of what could be done “to ensure that all students learn deeply and value their ability to demonstrate what they know” (Mizell, 2003, p. 10). If it makes more sense to group the students by learning styles and not by



their grade level, then educators should be willing to do that. Would such a move require more work on the part of administrators and teachers? Absolutely, but if students were taught in a way that fit them the best, then they would end up being students that were more well-rounded and happy about being at school. To think beyond the status quo in scheduling required educators “to demonstrate levels of professionalism that go beyond paint-by-the-numbers approaches to administration and teaching that at root are bureaucratic and formulaic, and therefore usually ineffective” (Mizell, 2003, p. 10).

“For many years, middle level practitioners have debated whether their schools should devote greater attention to students’ academic development or their affective development” (Mizell, 2003, p. 12). What kind of outer curriculum needed to be put in place so that the inner curriculum was also being addressed? How should professional development be geared to help achieve the outcomes? “It requires professional development to become more narrow but much deeper. It means professional development dictated by gaps in student performance rather than by certification requirements, union contracts or educators’ preferences” (Mizell, 2003, p. 15). Then, middle level educators had to agree to let go of certain practices and theories to focus on the present goals. In education, sometimes practitioners held onto the older ways of doing things because they were tried and true. To truly make a change, educators have to be willing to let go and be the ones to change.

The school’s de facto posture is that elementary schools and their students should change to meet the needs of middle school, but not that middle school should change in whatever ways may be necessary to enable students who are behind grade level to make up lost ground (Mizell, 2003, p. 17).

So, to answer all of these questions, Mizell posed the most pertinent question of whom. Who will lead middle grades reform? This final question was the most imminent one. There had to be a faction that was looking to reform middle schools based on the most current data about what works in middle schools. The topic was obviously a hot one. The entire April 2006 Educational Leadership magazine was dedicated to “Teaching the Tweens”. All of the articles centered on the debate of K-8 versus middle school and the most effective ways to teach middle school aged students. The beauty of the debate was that the merits of middle school were not being passed off as totally ineffective. Basically, the middle school concept was still being considered valuable and viable. “The true goal of the middle school movement, however, has never been organizational, but rather programmatic; and so there is another side to the story—one much more complicated and, unfortunately, much less successful” (Lounsbury and Vars, 2003, p. 2).

Sixty-five percent of the principals responding to this survey believed that grades 6-8 middle school best served young adolescents (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2002, p. 12). Principals responding to the study were also asked about the most developmentally responsive district pattern. Sixty-two percent of all respondents indicated that K-5, 6-8, 9-12. (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann & Petzko, 2002, p. 12).

Though all administrators did not agree on the absolute best way to educate adolescents, it was hard to dispute the ideas that:

Having young adolescents in a school designed exclusively for them allows all professionals at the school to focus directly and fully on providing the best learning opportunities possible. Educators in separately organized middle schools do not have to divide their energies between two or more developmental age

groups (e.g. young children and young adolescents in grade K-8 elementary schools) (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 2003, p. 46).

The developmental needs, emotional, social and academic, of the middle school aged students needed to be considered when looking at middle schools.

*Who should work with middle level students?*

A large part of making middle schools work relied on the adults that were put in the building to work with the students. “Teachers matter enormously; middle grades students who have teachers as advisers are more likely to have educational goals and plans for high school” (Cooney, n.d., p. 2). Because who was teaching the students mattered so specifically to their engagement in school, “Middle level educators have a zest for living.... They recognize the value of interdisciplinary studies and integrative learning and make sound pedagogical decisions based on the needs, interests, and special abilities of their students” (NMSA, 2003, 9). Teachers and administrators realized that:

Courageous middle level leaders know that professional development should be integrated into the daily life of the school and directly linked to the school’s goals for student and teacher success and growth. To meet these goals, people work together in study groups, focus on learning results, analyze student work, and carry out action research (NMSA, 2003, p. 11).

In addition to being courageous in the approaches they took with adolescents, middle level educators needed to be reminded that students were greatly influenced by them.

Basically, adults who appear to enjoy what they do, and who promise to make the youth’s life more enjoyable do influence young people. This is not such a bad yardstick to use—why should youth choose models who seem miserable and who strive to impoverish the future? (Csikszentmihalyi as cited in Van Hoose, Strahan, L’Esperance, 2001, p. 39).

Knowing how to pass the enthusiasm on to their students, teachers and school professionals had to keep a great deal in mind. The people working with the kids in the middle had to be aware of the developmental issues associated with working with middle level students.

As a synthesis of research on reasoning development, *Mindful Learning: Teaching Self-Discipline* and academic Achievement (Strahan, 1997) suggests four essential principles for supporting young adolescents' intellectual growth.

- Intellectual development occurs when students make connections between their own needs/interests/feelings and new ideas (personalization).
- Students learn to assume more responsibility for their own learning when they can discuss how they learn best with their classmates (conversation) and when they have opportunities to examine their choices and the consequences of those choices (reflection).
- Students learn best when they have opportunities for “hands on/minds on” problem-solving activities that use multiple intelligences (variety) and relate to real-world situations (authenticity).
- Students learn best when teachers help them learn specific mental procedures they can rely on when asked to solve new problems. These structures provide a sense of security when students face challenging tasks and provide a framework for connecting new information to prior knowledge (guidance)” (Van Hoose, Strahan, L’Esperance, 2001, pp. 41-42).

In addition to providing students with personalization, conversation, reflection, variety, authenticity, and guidance, teachers needed to afford students with a climate for learning that was conducive to knowledge gain.

The analysis revealed that school connectedness is lower in schools with difficult classroom management climates. Intervention research has demonstrated that classroom management climate can be improved dramatically through teaching and discipline reforms. When teachers are empathetic, consistent, encourage

student self-management, and allow students to make decisions, the classroom management climate improves (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002, p. 145).

“Successful leaders listen to what students and teacher say about their schools, and they raise expectations. These leaders understand how effective instructional practices and deeper knowledge of content can improve student achievement” (Cooney, n.d., p. 5). It was paramount that teacher and administrators working in middle schools knew and understood middle school aged students. In addition, they needed to have a specific desire to work with such students.

*What are successful current programs for middle level students?*

Many schools exist that were having success with middle level students. Some of the schools were K-8, some middle schools; some were sixth, seventh or eighth grade centers. Whatever the grade span configuration, schools had implemented programmatic pieces that made them more successful. As a part of studying the literature, I looked into programs that were mentioned as being successful for middle school students. Among the programs that I researched further was KIPP.

Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools were doing something right. Two reports by New American Schools Education Performance Network and the Educational Policy Institute were prepared to look at results of the various KIPP schools.

The average KIPP student who has been with KIPP for three years starts fifth grade at the 34th percentile in reading and the 44th percentile in math, as measured by the national norm-referenced exams. After three years in KIPP, these same students are performing at the 58th percentile in reading and the 83rd percentile in math” (www.KIPP.org/01/KIPPfaq.cfm on 6/19/2007 p. 2).

Across the many KIPP schools in the United States the results varied, but all had success in terms of raising test scores and academic achievement. KIPP schools were built in high need areas. Though they served students on a first come, first served basis, they were good examples of schools that served students who could be overlooked because of lack of resources or parental involvement.

“At KIPP, teachers often use techniques such as singing, chanting, and movement to make classroom lessons engaging. By making learning both relevant and fun, teachers greatly improve their ability to reach students” ([www.KIPP.org/01/KIPPfaq.cfm](http://www.KIPP.org/01/KIPPfaq.cfm) on 6/19/2007, p. 3). Teachers at a KIPP school were paid more for the extended days—students were in school for nine hours a day. KIPP schools also worked with job sharing so that parents could literally share jobs to be more flexible to be home for their own children. Like many schools across the United States, the teachers at KIPP schools ranged from having little experience to many years of teaching experience.

While KIPP was a very specific program that had a very detailed structure in place, there were other programs mentioned in literature that were working. Briarcliff Middle School in New York “has emerged as a nationally recognized model of a middle school that gets things right, a place that goes beyond textbooks to focus on social and emotional development” (Hu, 2007, p. 1). Though the school was very homogenously white, they put practices into place that could be useful anywhere. Students were given an extra textbook to keep at home so they did not have to haul heavy textbooks back and forth daily. Professional development focused on adolescents and how they thought and developed. The teachers worked to develop critical thinking, organizational skills and to

instill social and moral values. They used Habits of Mind as a guideline for all they did by emphasizing the sixteen traits from the book (Hu, 2007).

Jay Matthews (2007) chronicled the success of thirty schools nominated by Washington Post readers as successful middle schools. Though many of the schools appeared to be affluent schools, there were traits that readers highlighted that could be implemented with any student population: helping each student, creating a family atmosphere, providing field trip opportunities, formulating business partners, reading aloud to students, tutoring peers, hosting Saturday School, providing an extra period to do homework, allowing make up work, assuring library access, working with a teacher, extending the school day, being creative, allowing teacher accessibility (cell phone number, email, extended hours), and implementing the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme. Business partners could help to provide resources for a school in return for the school advertising the help the business partner provided. Peer tutoring allowed students to pair up with one another to help each other. Students who were doing well were given an opportunity to help their peers that were struggling. Peer tutoring could help both students involved to feel like a valuable part of the greater whole. Saturday School was often offered as a form of remediation or acceleration for students through an academic academy that met on the weekends and employed people from the school. Other successes that were listed dealt greatly with providing access for students—allowing them to use the library at non-traditional times, making sure they could contact their teachers, and setting up after school and weekend sessions where students could get extra help.

Again, most of what was mentioned in the Washington Post article were strategies that almost any school could implement with little to no additional monies or resources allocated to each strategy. Even schools that had tight budgetary constraints could allow for some of these opportunities that parents site were working for their students in other schools. The programs that were successful for middle schools focused on being child-centered, fostering relationships, involving parents and the community, and allowing students academic opportunities beyond the regular classes.

*How has No Child Left Behind affected middle grades education?*

When looking closely at middle grades education and what works for middle school-aged children, the literature and research consistently pointed to the need to have high quality teachers working with our most at risk students. “A primary goal of NCLB is to ensure that every child, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, disability, or English proficiency is taught by well-prepared, highly qualified teachers” (Spradlin and Pendergrast, 2006, p. 1). With the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, all students within a school fell into at least one subgroup, the whole school subgroup. Many students fell into multiple subgroups.

NCLB's stated intent is to require that states, districts, and schools acknowledge, and then end, this achievement gap. To this end, the new legislation requires that states, districts, and schools disaggregate test score results for economically disadvantaged students, students from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency and evaluate each subgroup's progression towards proficiency. The law provides that states may choose a minimum number of students that will be considered for disaggregation purposes. The only stated requirement in the law regarding the size of the disaggregated subgroup is that it be statistically significant (Lecker, 2005).



Some children, particularly those in poverty, fell into a variety of subgroups. If a school had forty or more students in a particular group, then an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) hurdle was set for both reading and math for that group. If a child was black and on free and reduced lunch, her scores counted in three categories—whole school, black and SES (socioeconomic status). His scores were counted twice because all of those categories were calculate into both reading and math score composites. So, that same child ended up falling into six categories based on two tests. If teachers were not well prepared, educationally and emotionally, to work with students who were counted so heavily in a school's achievement profile, then frustration could easily become a factor in their decisions to stay in the profession.

Performance for AYP purposes was measured purely by the number of students who passed a particular test—not based on their growth. In some states the fact that only proficiency scores counted was causing great concern. Judge Howard Manning in the Leandro (1997) case was threatening to close down North Carolina high schools that were not making AYP. In 2008 Judge Manning put North Carolina middle schools on his watch list as well. Educators could easily point out that some students grew tremendously during the year, in terms of testing, but did not pass a test. When the measure of moving toward the *No Child Left Behind* mandates was based solely on proficiency, then schools that were highly impacted and where students fell into multiple subgroups had a harder time meeting the standards.

Accordingly, there is concern that AYP may not provide an accurate picture of student performance or of a school's performance. By focusing on a student's performance at a single point in time, without any information concerning that

student's starting point, it is impossible to gauge that student's progress and to know how the school contributed to the student's progress. Moreover, by focusing solely on the point of proficiency, AYP gives no information regarding the progress of those students who are above proficiency level, as well the progress of those students who are well below proficiency level. These snapshots may tell us more about the demographics of a school than how that school has contributed to the students' learning. In March 2004, chief state school officers from 14 states wrote to U.S. Secretary of Education Roderick Paige requesting that ED allow states to include a growth model in NCLB assessment of AYP (Lecker, 2005).

This point had been made repeatedly and some states were beginning to pilot a growth component that would feed into AYP scores. “While poverty is an important contributing factor to school failure, NCLB and President Bush have ignored the social factors and made annual testing and accountability their main reform strategies” (McKenzie, 2006).

Because of numerous loopholes provided by the Ed Department’s cynical application of the law, the impact has been felt most severely on the very children the law has claimed to protect. Poor children and minorities are the real losers in this tale. The Ed Department has actively fostered the lowering of standards by states in order to avoid sanctions, pressuring states with good tests to exchange them for bargain basement tests that require little thinking from children but make schools and states look better than they deserve. We have seen educational inflation and fraud spread across the land under the banner of school reform (McKenzie, 2006).

With increased pressures and demands on the educators and administrators working in the field with children, the demand to recruit, retain and support teachers has become a national issue. *No Child Left Behind* forced schools to look at budgets and hiring practices differently than they might have prior to the implementation of the legislation.

*What can researchers conclude from the existing literature?*

Students in the middle too often get lost in the shuffle of school, especially as schools work to raise test scores and to retain the best possible teachers. Because middle schools were already being scrutinized for lower test scores compared to elementary schools and high schools, and the whole middle school model is being questioned, education leaders have to analyze the issues related to teacher recruitment, retention and support. Anyone who works in middle schools is well aware that success must be measured in more ways than test scores. However, with accountability standards high, a balance needs to be found between what the law requires and what really helps students learn.

Having served as an administrator I am well aware of the budget shortfalls each year. Our school improvement and Title I plans were reflective of test scores and how to improve those. Our budgets had to reflect our goal to raise test scores. Administrators had to fight to assure we had the right people on board to meet the multifaceted aspects of legislation.

Structurally, there was a debate about whether or not K-8 schools helped get back to the core of the programmatic structure that the middle school model proposes. Urban districts in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Brookline, and Cincinnati were shifting to K-8 schools (Yecke, 2006, p. 20). Based on research and the shifting of urban districts back to the K-8 model, it appeared that K-8 structure would help school systems better implement the most important aspects of the middle school concept. However, other schools and districts were making great strides with programmatic changes. Still other

schools and districts were making a concerted effort to return to the basics of the middle school model.

What is required is courageous, deliberate, collaborative efforts by all those responsible for the education and welfare of the age group to create authentic middle schools that are reflective of what those schools should and could be. Half-measures lead only to partial implementation and result in limited success (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 2003, p. 66).

The literature that exists was inconclusive. There was a great amount of agreement between researchers and middle level advocates about programmatic structures that needed to be in place to make middle level students more successful. However, little of what was published focused on students and what they claimed kept them involved through the volatile middle level years, nor were many administrators referenced about the tension they experienced between what they knew was right and what *No Child Left Behind* required.

*What makes a good middle school? A framework for understanding*

From the review of literature, there were elements that came up continually in reference to good middle schools. Based on the literature, we know that good middle schools:

- Fostered relationships between students and adults.
- Used meaningful instruction that helped students see how subject areas overlapped.
- Allowed students the opportunity to explore options related to their interests in core subject areas and sports, languages, music, and art.

- Focused decision-making on students' developmental needs.
- Should be socially equitable.

Based on this framework, it was obvious that I had to determine what principals felt made a good middle school. From the literature I knew what middle schools should include, but knowing what principals thought versus what was being done was important. It was not apparent in the literature how *No Child Left Behind* has affected middle schools other than in hiring and retaining teachers; the voices of practitioners needed to be considered in order to explore the tensions between practice and theoretical concepts. Based upon my literature study, my research questions emerged:

1. What is the status of the middle school model in the early 21st century?
2. According to middle school principals, how has *No Child Left Behind* and accountability affected their implementation of the middle school model?
3. How do middle school principals deal with the tensions between *No Child Left Behind* and the middle school model?

Using the literature as a springboard for research, in Chapter III I outline how I approached my research about what works in middle schools.

## CHAPTER III

### OUTLINE OF PROCEDURES

#### *Methodology Rationale*

In the initial phases of planning, I thought about soliciting the voices of students explaining what they felt worked in middle schools. When I designed my research proposal I read a lot of about middle grades aged students, and I was serving daily in a middle school. Since I had been in education prior to *No Child Left Behind* being implemented, I was fully aware that a lot had changed as a result of the legislation. Reading the literature and thinking about my practice reiterated to me the impact that *No Child Left Behind* has had on middle schools and the implementation of the middle school model. As I talked more to people in education, participated in a study involving middle school students for my methodology course, and read more, I realized that I needed to start my search and quest for answers from a broader perspective--that of the public school principals.

While I was still very interested in hearing the student voices, I realized that I needed to talk to the people running the schools to see what they felt was working, so that I could eventually talk to students as a part of other studies. Since I had not encountered a school that was truly working according to the middle school concept in my eleven years in education, I felt that a case study would not help me to get the answers that I sought. I could have picked a school or two to focus a study on, but I really did not feel

like I would find the kind of answers through looking at a couple of schools in depth. My committee and I talked about doing a quantitative study that involved all of the middle school principals and superintendents in a state as another option. However, to do research like that I would have relied heavily on survey research. One of my committee members pointed out that the return rate on emails and internet surveys is small, maybe only one fourth of those contacted. So, my committee agreed that research and study should focus on a plan that provided me with optimum information from a variety of sources, including literature and middle school practitioners, so that I could pull out the common threads and understandings.

### *The Research Plan*

Knowing that a quantitative research project would not allow principal voices to be heard as specifically because such a study would focus more on numbers and statistics instead of the voices of people serving in education roles, I opted to use a qualitative approach as I studied through doctoral coursework. Using Creswell's (1996) book, *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*, and my notes from my qualitative research class, I looked back at the potential methods for studying my topic of interest. In thinking about ways to involve a greater number of principal voices than a case study would allow, my committee and I agreed that I should aim to gather a variety of data that would yield an exploration of the current status of middle grades education. I used mixed research methods, including reviewing the literature, surveying middle school principals in six counties in a southeastern state via email, and completing follow-up interviews with nine principals from the districts surveyed. The

counties were chosen so that there were a variety of sizes and demographic make-ups represented.

Having reviewed the literature over the last year and a half I was able to use that knowledge to design an email to send to principals. The initial email contained the information from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent form such as the purpose of the study, the methodology, and the benefits of participating in the study as a sort of introduction, then there were three questions: What is the most effective thing you do in your middle school? Why do you think it's effective? Would you consent to a follow up interview? The intent of the initial survey was to look at the answers principals sent to see if what they listed as their most effective programs, strategies, or operational structures lined up with what the literature said about middle schools. In addition, by asking about what each school was doing well, all principals should have been able to think about something to highlight about their schools without having to discuss the challenges they faced daily in terms of budgets, test scores and allocations.

### *The Research Process*

Initially I sent the survey to three counties in a southeastern state that were not counties that I worked for or had ever worked with. This initial survey recipient list included forty-two principals in total. I obtained email addresses for each of the principals through the districts' websites and the individual school websites, in some cases. The original counties were chosen so that a small, medium and large sized district would be represented. After one month, I added three more counties' middle school principals to the survey pool. Again, I included a small, medium, and large county from



the same southeastern state as surveyed previously. In the third month of attempting to gather initial survey data, I added three more counties: one very small, and two medium sized counties.

While I initially had a goal of hearing from thirty to fifty principals, after nine email requests over a four-month period, only about twenty-four percent (fifteen out of sixty-two) of the principals contacted responded by answering the questions emailed. Two other principals responded. One principal was opening a new middle school, so he could not answer the questions since he had not yet worked in a middle school as a principal. Another principal emailed back to say that she was not interested in participating in the study. If those two are included in the response record, then seventeen out of sixty-two responded in some way, or twenty-seven percent.

Nine principals agreed to be interviewed further. Three other principals indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed, but either due to their district's policy about interviews or shifting jobs to move to another school or county, interviews could not be completed.

### *The Follow-up Interview*

From the responses gathered, I looked at what the literature said makes a middle school good, cross-referenced the principals' responses with the literature, and used those two pieces to guide my follow-up interviews with principals. My follow up interviews provided me an opportunity to delve into the initial responses that were submitted to me. Since the initial survey questions asked principals what was the most effective at their schools, the survey allowed each one to focus on a positive aspect of their schools before

talking more specifically about areas that needed work or discussing the tensions that existed between *No Child Left Behind* and the middle school model.

To conduct the follow-up interviews I used a combination of phone and in person interviews. While I preferred to travel to the middle schools to complete the interviews, principals' schedules precluded my visiting them at their schools. Since I was conducting my research during the summer, many of the principals and I had to work around training sessions and vacation time. I traveled to four of the nine middle schools to meet with the principals in person. Five of the principals were interviewed over the phone.

In setting up the phone interview procedures with the participants, I explained my purpose and steps to all of them, and then I asked their permission via the consent form that I emailed to them prior to our phone conversation. All five of those principals emailed me back from their work emails to say that they consented to the interview as explained and outlined. All email consents were added to the signed consent forms that the principals who were interviewed in person signed. All consent forms were locked into a filing cabinet in my possession.

As the phone interviews commenced, I explained that I would be recording the interview via my Garage Band application on my Mac iBook laptop. I assured the participants that I would use no identifying information in my written analysis and that the audio files would be stored under lock and key for three years after research concluded. Principals that were interviewed over the phone were asked if they minded being put on speakerphone so that I could record their responses. In addition, I assured the principals that I was alone in the house so no one would hear them on speakerphone

talking about their schools. I did not start recording any interviews until after the principals and I had gone through the preliminary information and discussion since identifying information was discussed in that portion of the interviews.

For the in person interviews, I followed much of the same format. I used my Mac iBook's Garage Band application to record the interviews so that I could listen to them again later. In addition, I used the recordings to create a chart of data for use in the data analysis stage. I went through the consent form with the principals and answered any questions that they might have before I started recording.

In all, the research plan went pretty well. Technology was hard to work with only in relation to emails. While I knew that principals received many emails a day, I underestimated how this could impact my initial surveying. I am fairly certain that all of my emails went to spam folders in email in some districts because of that fact that no principals responded in any way. In other districts I am fairly certain that word of mouth helped to get me some of the other responses agreeing to interview for the study. Some principals asked me if others in their district had responded. While I could not tell them who had responded or not, I could verify if others had answered at all. Knowing that the IRB application was very specific about what can and cannot be done, I knew that I could not change the email survey that I sent out. If I had been completing a survey with my school staff, for example, I would have changed my subject line and some of the wording to catch their attention with each sending of the email. However, this option was not possible lest I break the IRB protocol. The interviews themselves went off as well as expected and better in some cases. Setting up times to interview the principals was the

only other part that got a little cumbersome. When traveling to a district, I tried to schedule more than one interview in a day, if possible, so that I would not have to spend so much time in driving to the interviews. However, my civic duty, jury duty, interfered with two interviews that I had set up out of town. Principals were very understanding that I had to reschedule with them, but my timeline was delayed because of jury duty. The final interview that I set up was willing to have me visit her school, however, by the time she responded, I was going to be out of town, so we were forced to do a phone interview. Through all of the interviews the principals were attentive and appeared to appreciate a time to have their voices heard and that I was respectful of their time by being organized and timely.

In the follow-up interviews I asked the principals' opinions about what made a middle school good, how accountability measures changed middle schools, and what they would do differently to make their middle school better if the accountability of *No Child Left Behind* was not a factor in their decision making. As a result of my interviews, I was forced back into the literature to explore the Schools to Watch organization and their work with middle schools. Since at least two principals mentioned using the Schools to Watch framework in leading their schools, I had to make sure that I looked more specifically at the framework and how it could impact my research.

### *The Data Analysis*

Throughout the summer of 2008, I interviewed principals. I was able to spend time visiting their schools and chatting with them. Once the surveying and interviewing concluded, I spent a bulk of my time replaying the interviews that I conducted. Knowing

that transcription is the traditional method of data processing in qualitative studies, I debated about this format for me. With a background in English, as I worked to transcribe the first few interviews, I was bogged down by the sentence fragments and my inability to punctuate the interview properly. As a result, I was spending too much time on the look of the transcription and not on the content of the interview. Since I had recorded all interviews, I decided that my learning style would be best served by listening to the interviews, making notes about trends I heard, listing specific times in each interview to go back and transcribe, and listening to them repeated times. As I listened to the interviews, I created a chart. In the chart, I detailed information about the principal, including but not limited to, how long they had been at their school, in education and in middle schools. I made note of the demographics of the schools. My survey respondents represented eight counties in a southeastern state, while my interviews involved principals in five counties. Therefore, sixty-two and a half percent of the counties that were represented in the initial survey were then embodied in the in-depth interviews. Prior to each interview I looked at the school's website. As a part of each interview, I made notes about the demographics of the school: student population, subgroups, Title I status, and magnet status, among others; all of this information was transferred to the chart I created so that I could start to visually analyze the data.

For the interviews, the principals served schools that ranged in size from 240 to 1300 students. All nine principals had at least one assistant principal. Most had at least some form of an instructional support person though the names used to label the role varied from district to district. The remainder of the chart encompassed answers to the

other areas discussed: What makes a good middle school? How has accountability affected middle schools? If accountability measures were no longer a factor, what would you change? What is the most effective thing you do at your school and why? And other information that the principal shared that could be pertinent at a later point was added to another column that I labeled “other comments.”

In analyzing the data, I made an initial draft of trends noticed as I was working through both the survey and the interviews. When I concluded each interview, whether in person or via the phone, I made notes to myself about trends I thought might be emerging and topics that I wanted to explore further. As I looked back over the interview chart that I had created, I made separate lists with some of the basic information I collected: factors affecting demographics, Title I status, Free and Reduced lunch count, school size, years at the current school and years in education. Beyond the lists that I created, I went back through the interviews and the chart to code words and concepts that emerged in multiple interviews. I looked at the coded information to determine what the data was telling me and how that insight could deepen my understanding of what works in middle schools. Then, I checked my findings from the interviews with the initial survey responses and the literature to formulate ideas about what consistently showed up about what works in middle schools in the context of accountability standards. Finally, I related the data I had received to my own experiences, including my experience as a middle grades educator, the insights I gained from visiting the Ron Clark Academy, and lessons learned from working at an international school in China in relation to the data I had been collecting over the last two years for this dissertation.

### *The Participants*

As mentioned previously, nine principals consented to follow up interviews. While each interview will be discussed in more detail in Chapter IV, each principal will be introduced in this chapter. Knowing a bit about each principal helps to explain their perspective on middle schools.

#### *Eric*

Eric was the first principal that I scheduled a time to talk with. Eric requested a phone interview, so aside from looking at his school's website, I had to use the interview itself to paint a picture for me of his school. Eric was a white male who had been at his school for thirteen years. Though the school was a relatively small middle school with only 425 students, he was allotted an assistant principal. In addition, Eric had support personnel to help in reading and math facilitation one day a week. Eric's school was in a rural school district and served a predominantly white population. He did have a subgroup of Hispanic students. Since the school was in a rural area with an attendance zone that spread over a large area, the students could not stay after school very easily.

Class size at Eric's school was around twenty-four to twenty-five students per class. Eric admitted that class size had reduced by three to four students over the last ten years due to a shift in industry in the area. Once jobs left the area, his school population dropped, and the school's free and reduced lunch (FRL) count shifted from thirty percent ten years ago to fifty percent in 2008. The reality was that Eric's community of stakeholders did not have the disposable income that they once had, so Eric and his staff had to consider this in all that they did with and for students.

Eric viewed his most important job as providing a safe, caring school. This was also what Eric listed as the most effective thing he did at his school. Eric himself actually gave training sessions at the beginning of the year to all students to talk about respect, tolerance, and handling conflict. Eric touted this time as a way to set the tone for his school.

### *Anna*

For the second interview I traveled to the school to meet with Anna. Anna's school was not far from a highway. The exit for the school had everything from a strip shopping center with nice stores to a Starbucks. When I pulled into the school I felt like I was stumbling upon a gem. Off of a busy road was a driveway that was easy to miss. When I drove into the parking lot, I felt like I was on a small high school campus. Everything was well labeled, so I found my way inside to the office without an issue. As I opened the front door, I made a note that all signs posted were in English and in Spanish. I waited for Anna in the front office. A couple of faculty members were talking and trying to determine the attendance zone for a Spanish-speaking family. Everyone who passed by me was friendly and welcoming.

Anna and I met in the conference room for over an hour. Anna was a white female who had spent the last twenty-two years working in middle schools. She spent three years in elementary school, but she said that middle school was where she belonged. She had served as a middle school administrator for the last ten years, four of which had been spent at her current middle school. In her ten years in administration, Anna had served in two of the largest school districts in the state. When I asked her if she felt like



being middle school trained affected how she ran the schools Anna commented, “It makes a difference in how you organize the school day, how you discipline your students, what you expect of teachers and your expectations for instruction.”

Anna’s middle school housed 740 students while the district average was 1000 students in middle schools. Forty-nine percent of her students qualified for free and reduced lunch. She had eighteen special populations from self-contained Autistic to learning disabled to mainstream Autistic to other health impaired. Black students make up forty percent of her student population. In her limited English proficient (LEP) and Hispanic subgroup she had about forty to fifty students. The school was a sort of neighborhood school, but Anna’s district worked to balance school populations as much as possible without constantly shifting students’ assignments. Anna worked with two assistant principals, and one of them has been at the school for twenty-one years. They were able to maintain a class size average in the range of twenty-six to thirty-four students.

Anna was the principal who spoke highly of PBS (Positive Behavior Support). Positive Behavior Support was a program that Anna’s state department of instruction had instituted in schools to help provide structure in schools in a way that allowed for positive interactions as often as possible, even when dealing with discipline. PBS focused on teaching behaviors explicitly to students so that expectations were very clear. Her school used to be a magnet school, so the population shifted over the last few years, thus the mindset of the children was different than it had been. Since the staff attitude had to shift with the change in students as well, Anna felt that PBS helped to get them all back on the

same page. Anna was a proponent of the middle school model and of finding teachers who were best suited to work with middle grades aged children. K-6 certified teachers were more likely to be successful in teaching middle school than trying to move a high school teacher down, in Anna's opinion.

As one could imagine, in over twenty-two years in middle schools, Anna had seen a lot of changes. She was a teacher when testing was initially implemented at the end of the school year, though *No Child Left Behind* did not yet require it. "We freaked out with the first testing, but there was no sanction, so we kept doing what we were doing because we thought it was really good stuff."

#### *Linda*

My third interviewee, Linda broached the interview process differently. She asked for my questions ahead of time so that she could write responses to them to send via email in order to shorten our follow-up interview. Since I did not want to turn away an interview opportunity, I agreed. Even though we had already conversed via email, Linda and I talked for a while about middle school.

Linda was a white female who had always worked in middle schools. She was at a middle school where she served as the assistant principal and then was promoted into the principalship, though she was one of less than five in her county that had done that. Linda served in one of the three largest districts in the southeastern state that was chosen for study. Her teaching experience was in a middle school, and Linda said, "I am deeply rooted in the middle school concept." Linda was a young administrator who spent four

years teaching middle school, one year as a full time intern, two years as an assistant principal, and three years as a principal.

Linda served a large middle school of 1300 students in a county that averages 850 students in a middle school. Her school was a neighborhood school that has been opened for five years, so Linda had been at the school as an administrator for the entire life of the school. The school opened five years ago with 920 students and a thirteen percent FRL count. Linda admitted that her school did not look like most suburban middle schools. She said that her teachers had certifications in various areas, and she was able to offer a lot of different experiences because she was not under the microscope based on test scores.

Linda's school had a very involved parent population. She said that her challenge had been in following a principal that the school and community felt "walked on water." She explained that she felt it took her almost four years to truly earn her reputation as a good leader. Part of her strength was in finding teachers for her school. Linda argued that K-6 trained teachers served as a good transition for kids moving to middle school. "I believe in fit." Linda said she looked for those who were genuine, real, and willing to go above and beyond because that was also what she expects of herself. Linda implemented block scheduling with flexibility to change the schedule around without prior approval so that teams could make decisions with the best interest of the students in mind. Interdisciplinary units were encouraged at Linda's school.

*Carl*

My fourth interview participant, Carl, invited me to his school. Carl's school was in one of the three largest districts in the chosen southeastern state. Carl and I set an early morning time, so as I got off the highway and wound through the neighborhood that was not far from the exit, I saw students on the way to summer school walking toward the school. My directions led me through a neighborhood that appeared to be working class. The houses were mostly individual houses with a few small apartment buildings interspersed. When I found the school, I realized that it was tucked into the neighborhood. I would not have stumbled upon this school if I had not been looking for it consciously.

The school was decently kept from the outside. It was obvious that the building was fairly new based on the architecture. When I walked into the school I followed a student in the door. Someone who appeared to be an administrator admonished the student for being late, but then said she was glad the student was there and to hurry on to class. There were two other teachers in the atrium with lists of students. I assumed they were there to help point students to the correct class since it must have been one of the first few days of summer school. Both of those ladies were polite and welcomed me to their school. After I found the office, I was greeted promptly and the principal, Carl, was alerted to my arrival. I heard the front office staff, which included a bilingual staff member, talking fondly of their principal, Carl.

Carl's first question of me was how I had known to contact him. I reminded him that he had answered my email survey and said he'd be interviewed. In fact, Carl was the

very first principal to respond to my email survey. I told him that I had used the website to get all email addresses for his county. Carl, a white male, told me that he had previously been an elementary principal, and his wife was currently an elementary principal. Before entering into administration, Carl was an elementary and middle school counselor. When he was in the elementary school counselor role he admitted to finding himself on the fourth and fifth grade hallways a lot of the time. He had been both an elementary and middle school assistant principal as well.

Carl's school was in its fourth year as a school. They were projected to have 980 students in the fall. Sixty-five percent of the students were black, thirty percent were Hispanic, and five percent were white or Asian, though they did not make up a subgroup for AYP measures. Carl's school was seventy-eight percent free and reduced lunch; that was down from eighty-five percent in years' past. Last year the school met twenty-one of twenty-five subgroup targets. The students did have school choice because the school had not made AYP, so they could opt out of Carl's school to attend a school elsewhere in the district. The district dictated which school the students could choose to attend. In addition to having school choice, Carl's students were offered supplemental education services (SES)-- tutoring after school by private companies that was paid for with federal money. Last year about eighty students opted out of Carl's school, and most of them were at the higher end of the spectrum. Carl called his school more a "dishonest school" than a poor school. He explained to me that the neighborhood that I had driven through to get to the school had one of the highest crime rates in the area. Some of the local

gangs were literally born in that neighborhood. In addition to black gangs, the Hispanic gangs infiltrated Carl's school as well.

Carl's school experienced a fifteen to twenty percent teacher turnover rate each year, which he admitted was more than most high poverty schools. On the flip side, Carl's staff had four of sixty members holding National Board Certification. Many of the teachers held Masters degrees. Three assistant principals, a math facilitator, and an academic facilitator supported Carl. Carl worked consciously to make sure there were quite a few males on staff. In Carl's opinion, being a white female on staff was the hardest role in the school. Carl's district funneled extra funds to the lowest performing highly impacted schools in the district, so there were extra funds and resources at this school, and teachers could receive a bonus if their students made expected growth.

Carl's school operated on a block schedule with a fifth block of time added in to provide what kids needed at any given time. They used A/B days so that they students had a double block for reading and math. While many schools were facing budget and allocation cuts, Carl commented, "They'll tell you they don't have enough stuff; I'll tell you they don't use their time wisely enough."

### *Sally*

After I left my interview with Carl, I drove to the other side of that county to talk to Sally. To get to Sally's school, I drove through a quaint little town. The town itself had a small college, brick shops lining the main street, and traffic circles to keep the traffic flow from moving too quickly through the area. I rounded a curve to see Sally's

small school in an old-fashioned building on the left. The parking lot was small and it was very obvious where the front entrance of the school was. As was typical of schools in the summer time, there were lots of classroom materials in the hallways as I looked for the main office. Sally was ready for our interview, and she moved out to the main office to chat with me because she was filling in for the secretary at that time.

Sally was a white female who has been at her school a little over a year. She admitted that the district's trend was to move elementary principals to middle schools to high schools. She said she did not believe that you have to be middle school trained to lead a middle school. Previously she led one of the largest elementary schools in the southeast.

Sally had a student population at her school of 240. The school was a magnet school with a priority attendance zone. So, some students that lived around the school were allowed into her school each year. Since the magnet status was based upon academic standing, her 240 students represented twenty-three elementary schools. She had thirty staff members with twenty-four teachers. Since they were an academic magnet, they had to offer a foreign language and the arts in order to meet the magnet requirements. However, because of the teacher allotment, the band and orchestra teachers also had to help teach drama. Sally's school operated on a block schedule with an A/B day, meaning the students had language arts and math every other day. Like Carl mentioned, in order to meet Healthy and Active Kids guidelines, Sally's school also added time to the lunch block daily to allow recess time for the kids. They did have a subgroup of black students since twenty percent of the student population identified as black. They only had eleven

percent free and reduced lunch, and they did not have any LEP students. There are just a few exceptional children. Ninety-five percent of the school's population scored proficient on the testing measures at the end of the year.

### *Necia*

A week later I traveled to meet a principal in a medium-sized district. Like the other principals I had visited, Necia's school was near a highway, too. The school was in the middle of a working class neighborhood. It was raining as I rushed into the school, but the parking lot was well kept and the building well labeled. The entryway to the school reminded me of a nice shopping mall. There were potted plants and comfortable chairs sprinkled throughout. A bulletin board entitled, "Oh, the places you will go!" was prominent and had entries from the staff about their summer plans. The office door was open, so I went inside. One of the janitors found me and went to alert Necia's secretary that I had arrived. The secretary welcomed me and apologized for the disorder as they were cleaning the floors in the main office. After a few minutes, she led me back to meet with Necia.

Necia was a black female who has been at her school for nine years as the principal, though she had been a middle school administrator for thirteen years. She had a background in science and special education in middle schools, but she did not subscribe to the theory that you had to be middle school trained to be the most effective middle school leader. Necia believed you should know about the curriculum base for each of the grade levels served.



The school Necia led was forty percent black, forty percent white and twenty percent other populations, though Hispanic students comprised most of that group. Her school was a neighborhood school for the most part. She had two assistant principals to support her efforts, in addition to one person to coordinate curriculum, professional development and advanced learners.

Necia addressed the need to have staff members who really wanted to work with middle school students because they were “students that you can mold, guide, and show them why school is important.” Necia said that she liked middle school because the students were not too old to decide on the things of life, but they were not too young to understand where you were coming from. Like Eric, Necia felt that everyone wanted to feel safe, and she said, “It starts at the top.”

Communicating effectively, leading instruction, sharing a vision, and staying organized were the most effective things that Necia did at her school. She said, “You must be a good manager.” Necia expounded upon her concept of middle grades education:

Children are children. Being effective does not come overnight. You’ve got to fix it as you move about. Is it test scores or the whole child? We could move them to higher levels if we could get our children to be better children. How can you learn if you are sitting in a classroom afraid that someone is going to beat you up? We have to get back to the basics. You can move the grades, but the product will still be the same... The products that you are putting in whatever grades you have are still the same.

*Randy*

My next interview was a phone interview with Randy. Though Randy and I had the shortest conversation of all of my interviews, Randy addressed my questions thoughtfully and completely. Randy had just moved to his middle school to serve as the principal. While he was now in a very small district that had only two middle schools, he previously served as a high school assistant principal for a large, urban district. Randy's teaching experience was in another large district in the southeastern state where he served as an exceptional children's teacher, and then he became an assistant principal at the same school for three and a half years.

Randy's school was situated in a small county. His school had 440 students. His demographic make-up was fifty percent white, forty-five percent black, and five percent Asian or Hispanic. Fifty percent of his school qualified for free and reduced lunch, but he opted not to take Title I money, partly because his district did not have a plan for Title I in the middle schools. The school he served was just four years old and already they did not have many offerings in terms of intramurals and clubs. Randy was a proponent of the middle school philosophy because he felt middle school was the "last chance to educate the whole child and keep their interest in education." Randy believed that all teachers should share the wealth and have teams that were truly heterogeneous in make-up.

*Rydell*

My eighth interview was with Rydell. Rydell requested a phone interview, so as I had done with all of my phone interviews, I visited the website for his school to get a feel

for the school since I would not visit it physically. In looking at the website I saw that Rydell arrived at his school in March and that he was making efforts to turn the school around.

As Rydell and I spoke, this black male told me that he has been in education for twenty-four years. Rydell had been a principal at two elementary and two middle schools. He served as an administrator at both ends of the demographic and performance spectrum. In addition, Rydell was a middle school curriculum and instruction district leader.

Rydell's school had 600 students in a district that has an average of 850 students in a middle school. They had a ninety percent free and reduced lunch status, and the school had not made AYP. Only forty percent of Rydell's students were on grade level. The school was in the first year of its restructuring plan. The restructuring plan involved reconstituting the staff, reorganizing the master schedule, adding the AVID program school wide, refining a reading and math academy, using common assessments, assessing the exceptional children's program, revamping the school wide discipline plan, and developing a school wide school improvement plan.

Rydell described a good middle school as:

One that there is a relationship piece between stakeholders and we provide a safety net for students so they can achieve what we want them to achieve... We cannot allow the middle school to look like a high school.... Students should be able to explore beyond the core courses and need to have a rich variety to choose from. We need to have a lot of activities in place for the parents. If they know we genuinely care for the, then the will work for us. We need rigor, relevance, and relationships.

Rydell went on to explain that he saw himself as the broker in his school to make sure the needs were met. Rydell realized that he has to build capacity with teachers, especially in a high poverty school so that the teachers “own and buy into the restructuring plan.” Rydell strived to help his teachers earn the respect they needed as the teacher in charge of the classroom so that they could implement the lessons they planned to address the needs of the students. To further help students, students were scheduled into AVID as an elective class to help with their reading and math. These classes were computer based and run by a teacher who was trained to teach them as they worked through the units. Remediation was done through language arts and math as the teachers had students in reading and math for ninety minutes daily. Science and social studies were on an A/B rotation for ninety minutes at a time. The teams moved students between the teams to help them with objectives not mastered. The first twenty minutes of every science and social studies class was devoted to doing reading across the content area strategies. Rydell used data with his staff to constantly remind them that reading was the responsibility of all.

### *Angie*

My final interview was with Angie. Angie was a white female who had been a principal for four years at her current school. She had previously served as an assistant principal at that school, but then she left for a year and returned as the principal. She worked in two different school districts as both a middle and high school level administrator. She taught seventh grade language arts as a teacher. When asked if she felt being a middle school trained person helped in her leading a middle school, Angie

said it absolutely aided her as a leader, “I think it is essential.” Angie went on to explain that her undergraduate training was as a middle school teacher, not elementary or secondary. Angie reflected that because all of her education was geared toward adolescents, she felt better able to lead at a middle school.

Angie’s middle school was in a medium sized district. Her school houses 1100 students though that number has decreased over the last couple of years from 1300. They had fifty-five percent black, thirty-five percent white, and ten percent Hispanic. Forty-two percent of Angie’s students qualified for free and reduced lunch. She said they serve the state average for exceptional children and advanced learners. Angie’s school was a neighborhood school. It was an older school with a long history of tradition and excellence. Some of the teachers actually went to school there, as did some of the parents. Angie explained that her school used to be a rural school, but a growing population of very transient urban students changed the look of her school.

Angie claimed that a program called Capturing Kids Hearts was the most effective thing her school did. The goal of the program was to create a warm, inviting classroom that was appropriate for adolescents. Part of the program involved a leadership elective. In the elective, students were selected to reflect the make-up of the school. So, if five percent of the student population was in a gang, then five percent of the students in the leadership class should be gang members. The leadership class worked on goal setting, public speaking, and writing. In addition, Angie aimed to have a lot of options for students in terms of clubs and athletics. At Angie’s school, technology was a way of life and not reserved for special days. For the 2008-2009 school year,

Angie was moving to flexible math groups to better meet student needs. Based upon the scheduling research of Dr. Lynn Canady out of the University of Virginia, Angie hoped to make math groups flexible and fluid. Angie emphasized to her students and staff that the needs and developmental level of sixth, seventh and eighth grade students were different. So, she facilitated conversations about what behavior should look like at each grade level to assure that the sixth grade does not end up stricter than the eighth grade.

### *The Writing Process*

While I completed the majority of my surveying and interviewing throughout the summer, I was far from finished with the study. Toward the end of the summer I went to Alpharetta, Georgia to stay with my family prior to moving to Shanghai, China. While in Georgia I completed my ninth follow up interview and conversed with my dissertation chair via email. When I got to China, my dissertation chairman, Dr. Lashley, and I conversed via email and Skype. Skype is a free Internet phone service that allows chatting, phone calls and face-to-face conversations over the World Wide Web. As I worked on my draft, I emailed Dr. Lashley pieces I had been working on, then we talked weekly via Skype. While this method of working through a dissertation was new to Dr. Lashley and the department, we found that it was quite valuable. Since we were already conversing on the computer, it was easy for us to pull up my drafts simultaneously for discussion. As we talked, Dr. Lashley would send me his latest comments via email. Despite being over seven thousand miles apart and having a twelve-hour time difference, through technology, Dr. Lashley and I were able to converse almost as we would have when I was two blocks away in the same town. Not only did we use Skype to confer

weekly about my dissertation drafts, but also The Graduate School granted us permission to have my dissertation defense via Skype in October 2008. Through the willingness of my committee members, especially Dr. Lashley, and The Graduate School, I was able to move to Shanghai, China to teach at a school that allowed me to put my framework from Chapter II into action.

Through the surveying process I knew that the data had the potential of being a bit lopsided since I was not handpicking who would respond to my email. Since my follow-up interviews were based upon a question about their willingness to participate in an interview, there was a chance that the data would be skewed again. However, the principals that ended up responding were from a variety of backgrounds, served different kinds of schools, had varied experiences, and brought different perspectives to the study.

Qualitative researchers, who frame their studies in an interpretive paradigm, think in terms of trustworthiness as opposed to the conventional, positivistic criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998). Denzin and Lincoln suggest that four factors be considered in establishing the trustworthiness of findings from qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bowen, 2005).

Though the selection of my survey and interview participants was random, my data was still trustworthy. Since my interview participants volunteered themselves for this study, they were credible. They all knew that they were not going to be identified in this study in any way that would reveal who they were, so there were no pretenses about making themselves or their schools sound a particular way. Since this was an exploratory study, they knew that there were no risks to them, but the potential to gain insight that would

help them better run their schools existed—there was transferability. Other practitioners and researchers could take what was learned from this study and use it in their own studies. *No Child Left Behind* has been in existence since 2001 and the middle school model since the 1970s, so the data share through this study is dependable—“the stability of the findings over time” (Bowen, 2005). The findings from this study relate to the tensions between these phenomena in the 21st century, and such tensions will continue to exist until one or the other is changed or abandoned. Since there are no signs of either of these options happening, the data had dependability. “...confirmability [refers] to the internal coherence of the data in relation to the findings, interpretations, and recommendations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994)” (Bowen, 2005). The data in this dissertation were coherent in these areas. In Chapter V, more the findings, interpretations, and recommendations will be discussed, thus the final part of establishing trustworthiness in this work will be complete.

### *Methodological Lessons*

The research process is painstaking at best. No matter how carefully you feel you design a study, there are always lessons learned. Through my graduate work I worked on three different studies prior to my dissertation work; in all three instances, I learned a great deal about the process. This study was no different.

Surveying principals via email made the most sense initially because I felt there was more chance of them answering an email than returning a paper survey in the mail. What I did not anticipate was the spam filters that most school districts have installed. Due to the fact that I heard from no principals in some districts, I am fairly certain my



emails ended up in the spam filter. Since my IRB application only detailed email surveying, I could not cold call principals to make sure they had gotten the surveys. In some cases I am fairly certain administrators I talked to mentioned to colleagues my email, thus prompting some to respond, but I cannot be sure of that. While I avoided interviewing in the county where I work, if I had chosen to do so, I may have had a higher return rate because of name recognition and issues with spam filters. Time is also a factor that I assume was an issue for a lot of the principals. Even if they got the actual email, agreeing to participate in a study, even in a small amount, takes time. With all that principals are being asked to do daily, time is a limited commodity. If I were to redesign this study, I might choose to be more purposeful in how I chose my participants so that I could have a wider range of responses.

Transcribing my interviews versus listening to them was a stylistic choice on my part. When I debated about this process, I had to consider my learning style and the professional development that I have been through. Knowing that I retain information best when I listen and take my own notes, I knew that some kind of chart had to be made to help me organize my findings. As I worked to transcribe the first few interviews, I found that the first one was not so difficult. However, by the second interview, I was more wrapped up in “ums” and punctuating fragments than I was in the content. Since my second interview was one that I considered to be my most valuable in terms of data, I wanted to be sure that I was getting the true essence of what Anna shared. Therefore, I made a decision to listen to the rest of my interviews rather than transcribing them. By listening to them, I was able to put them on my iPod so that I could listen to each

interview multiple times. In the chart that I made, I was careful to write specific times that I might want to revisit as other trends emerged. When I heard quotes that I knew I wanted to use, then I transcribed portions of the interview. So, while all of my interviews were not transcribed in their entirety, all interviews were transcribed in part.

The interviews themselves varied in length. All interview participants were asked the same questions. Though, as I heard responses that made me think of other questions, I did ask more of each participant. The core of what I asked was the same. I identified each participant in my interview chart by race and gender. If I were to do another study, I would allow the participants to self identify. However, I did ask all of them specific questions about their backgrounds in education and their number of years in education. I feel that the length of the interview really was more about personalities than anything else. All nine principals seemed very willing to share. None of them made any comments about going off record other than to assure that they would not be identified by name or school name in my study. The interviews that were shorter were with principals that were pretty direct in their answers. They seemed well versed in the idea of just answering the question and not elaborating. One principal had a background as a counselor, so I felt that his approach entailed more listening to me and answering as he had to throughout the interview. Another principal was brand new to his school, so though he had been in middle schools most of his career, he could not expound upon specifics about his school like some of the other principals could.

The final lesson I learned through the methodology portion of this study related to member checking and trustworthiness. When I took the qualitative research courses as a

part of my program, I was not overly clear on either of these concepts. As my dissertation chairman and I discussed the two, and I researched them again for clarification, I became more and more aware that neither member checking or trustworthiness are overly clear to me. The issue I see with this is that I was not in the process of intense research when I studied these pieces, so I did not internalize this learning as effectively as necessary. If I were to do another study, I would seek a more thorough explanation of these concepts and read more examples of other researchers' explanations of how they did member checking and assured trustworthiness.

Through my research I was able to gain insight into the literature that I had studied, and I was able to formulate a clearer idea of what works in middle schools and how accountability has affected middle schools. In Chapter IV I will discuss my findings and analysis of those findings in more detail.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Building upon the framework for middle schools I mentioned in Chapter II, I was able to formulate my survey and interview questions with the following components of the framework in mind:

- Relationships between students and adults needed to be fostered.
- Students needed to have meaningful instruction that helped them see how subject areas overlapped.
- Students needed to be able to explore options related to their interests in core subject areas, sports, languages, music, and art.
- Students' developmental needs should be the focus of decision making.
- Middle schools should be socially equitable.

Through asking principals what made a good middle school, what had changed in middle schools since accountability increased, what they would do differently if not governed by accountability standards, and what the most effective thing was that they did in their schools, I was able to determine the state of middle schools in 2008. After using a three pronged approach to gather information (literature, email survey, and face-to-face or phone interview), I started to analyze what I found in all of the data. In all, fifteen principals throughout a southeastern state responded to an initial email survey about the

most effective thing they did at their middle school. Nine principals consented to more in-depth follow-up interviews. In the midst of collecting data I was able to visit a school that fit the framework I outlined, and I was offered a job at a school that implements many of the aspects of the middle school concept. Throughout this chapter, I will detail what I learned through my interviews and field experiences.

Knowing that I wanted to look at the status of the middle school model in the early 21st century from the principals' perspective about the tensions between *No Child Left Behind* and the middle school model, I started initial data collection with an email survey that was ultimately sent to middle school principals in nine counties in a southeastern state. While I knew that I eventually wanted to get to questions about accountability and what makes a middle school good, by starting with questions that allowed participants to focus on positive practices in their schools, my committee and I felt that the principals would share more freely. When asked about the most effective thing that was being done in their schools, the answers were broad from providing opportunities beyond the school day to being a strong communicator to implementing specific programs to help students succeed. I have included a chart of responses from the email interviews.

	<b>What is the most effective thing you do at your middle school?</b>	<b>Why do you think it is effective?</b>
* 1	"[We] provide opportunities beyond the core academics to involve students in the school."	"Because a certain percentage of our students would have no interest in attending nor working at school (high poverty urban middle school)."

*2	“... I strive to be present myself as an accessible leader who listens and tries to resolve issues that inhibit productivity (teaching and learning). I think the teachers at [my school] see me as a "person" who likes to create a team approach of collaboration...”	“I try to get to know who they are as people as much as I do as professionals. This not only to create a sense of teaming but one of family. While I endeavor to keep the atmosphere positive, I also have very high expectations for myself and for others. I do not accept status quo and am always pushing for growth and improvement...”
3	“We have initiated a 45-minute ‘ninth block’ to our schedule.”	“It has been successful in that it meets the wide needs of our student population, from remediation to classes for the highly gifted.”
*4	“The most effective thing I do in this building is to provide a safe, caring and inviting environment for students to learn and teachers to teach.”	“EVERYTHING else is a spin-off of an environment that makes learning the main focus. Teachers from other schools apply to come to our school because they hear about our emphasis on learning and our strong desire to minimize distractions.”
5	“Review student data and plan accordingly.”	“This allows us to create better programs that assist in increasing student achievement.”
6	“Build relationships with teachers, parents, and students.”	“It is a bridge to all communications including the difficult ones.”
*7	“... the implementation of PBS (Positive Behavior Support) program. This program focuses on school wide expectations for behavior and promotes positive interactions with students.,”	“This has been very effective as it puts the focus on teaching and learning. The process has reduced tardies to class, reduced disruptions caused by dealing with tardies and increased instructional time on task for all students.”
*8	“The most effective thing I do is to build capacity with teachers that fosters increased student achievement.”	“This is effective because it is the central core of our business—student learning!”
*9	“Improve teaching and learning.”	“I have seen teacher professional growth and more self-awareness. The scores, however, do not reflect it yet. I began at this school in March 2007.”

10	“The most effective thing that we have done is to implement an intervention plan for struggling students, with three week assessments and layers of intervention applied based on formative assessment results.”	“We saw some very significant gains in student achievement this year as a result. The three week assessments and subsequent grouping and interventions were effective because it helped maintain the focus on what students needed and we did not wait until the end of the quarter to apply interventions.”
11	“We have a major focus on RELATIONSHIPS, RELEVANCE, and RIGOR. Relationships are imperative before one can do anything else in an educational setting... While building those relationships, establishing expectations is also imperative. (Harry Wong!!!).”	“I believe it is effective because the majority (nearly all) of our staff has 'bought into' the belief...therefore, work hard to build those relationships. This is also what 'people' need for success...a 'connection'. All staff members review the REACH lessons plans at the same time AND in a very similar manner, as well.”
*12	“Strong communicator; instructional leader; has a vision; well organized; put all ingredients together makes an effective school.”	“Communication sets the tone of the school; you must be a good manager.”
*13	“Use data.”	“Every teacher should share the wealth.”
*14	“Capturing Kids Hearts—the concept is to create a warm, inviting classroom that is appropriate for adolescents.”	“Capturing Kids Hearts is the umbrella to teach team building and other middle school type activities. It emphasizes relationships and a teen leadership course.”
15	“We have professional learning communities that go along with the literacy problem which is a part of Breaking Ranks in Middle Schools.”	“Because PLC creates a climate that teachers learn from one another, plan together, establish pacing and assessments.”
* indicates respondents who committed to a follow-up interview		

Of the fifteen principals who answered the email survey, only three mentioned specific programs, Positive Behavior Support, Capturing Kids Hearts, and Breaking Ranks in Middle Schools, as the most effective thing they did. Two of the three

principals completed a follow-up interview and were very enthusiastic about the programs; they spent a good deal of time in the follow up conversation discussing these programs. Six of the respondents answered with responses that more specifically pointed to what they themselves did by discussing accessibility, relationships, developing capacity, and strong communication—all parts of developing a Professional Learning Community, which multiple principals discussed as part of the follow up interviews, even if developing Professional Learning Communities was not mentioned as the most effective thing they did. A few of the principals mentioned student specific areas in what they do the best by addressing having a variety of activities and providing remediation and acceleration possibilities for all students. Some of the research pointed to specific programs that should be put into middle schools, while other research emphasized the middle school concept, including building relationships, providing opportunities, and meeting students where they were and moving them further. While building relationships matched the wording of the framework I mentioned at the end of Chapter II, the other areas I set forth in the middle school framework were not as explicitly mentioned in the initial survey responses.

While some principals referred to developing well-rounded children, the discussion by at least three principals alluded or specifically addressed the development of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). “What do you want them to learn? How are you going to know if they learned it or not?” were questions posed by Eric to his staff as a part of starting the PLC dialogue. A principal at a small, magnet school, Sally, was working to form departments so teachers could analyze data and make a plan. Due to



space constraints, she had teachers sharing rooms, which forced them to share ideas with each other, whether consciously or not. The other principal who discussed PLCs alluded to the fact that she was trying to formulate PLCs through the structures she had put in place in her school.

Building a Professional Learning Community may have been a goal of some of the principals, but others, like Anna, hinged building community in her school on something different. When looking at the reasons Anna cited Positive Behavior Support (PBS) as the most effective thing her school does, the inference could be made that getting student behavior under control in a positive manner allowed for a different level of collaboration for the students and staff. Anna elaborated:

[PBS] put us back on the same page in terms of behavior for students... it allows us to work on academic expectations as well. Our overarching expectations address academic and behavior goals. It allows us to discuss what students can do and what they should be expected to do. Like the produce stand... we don't get to pick. Whatever we are delivered, we sell. We can't throw it out. They are just 11-14. They are what they are. We are working on managing the adolescence piece and not escalate the kids, which allows us to focus on learning.

Though the initial survey questions focused on what middle schools were doing well as a part of determining what works in middle schools, there were questions that needed to be asked more specifically. In follow up interviews the focus shifted from what was being done well to what made a good middle school, how middle schools had to change based upon *No Child Left Behind* and government regulations, and what principals felt they would do differently if they were no longer governed by such a specific accountability measure.

The survey served as the recruiting tool for the follow up interview. Though the follow up surveys were designed with no premeditation about who would be included, participants for the surveys ended up representing a diverse group of principals in a southeastern state. In order to protect their privacy, pseudonyms were used for all of the principals in this dissertation. Five of the participants who agreed to follow up interviews had their doctorates already and one other was finishing up her doctoral degree, and most of those principals commented on their willingness to help because they had been in the same position, or they would be in the same position soon in their studies. In order to emphasize the diversity represented by the participants, each participant was discussed in more detail in Chapter III, so the findings from their interviews will be discussed in a thematic format throughout this analysis. Because so much of what each principal said was mentioned in other interviews, a thematic approach to presenting the data was logical.

#### *Principal perception of what makes a good middle school*

In each of the nine interviews, I asked the participants' opinions of what made a good middle school. As you can imagine, the answers varied, and more than one commented on the broadness of the question. Seven of the nine principals interviewed spent time discussing the need to have staff members that knew and understood middle school kids and who wanted to be there even knowing what middle school students could be like. Linda said, "You have to love it or not; this is not just a place to try it out." Seven of the nine principals mentioned the need to have a child-centered school in their definitions of a good middle school. "Adolescence is a very confusing time for people and we don't give that enough credit," Anna commented. In terms of being child-

centered, principals suggested that their middle schools needed to be a place where kids wanted to be—pleasant, engaging, appropriate for needs, sense of belonging, and full of choices for kids. Another principal spoke to the fact that middle school was the last chance to educate the whole child and keep his or her interest in education. According to Angie, “Curriculum is all fine and good, but if you aren’t remembering and working with adolescents in the place that they are, then the curriculum doesn’t mean anything.” High expectations were mentioned by three of the nine principals specifically. High expectations, though, extended beyond the students to the teachers as well, “We can bore them to death because they are really quite bright. We forget sometimes because their behavior doesn’t look like they’re bright. It’s about node development,” Anna said. Another principal mentioned the need to hold kids accountable while “keeping in mind fragile ego.” Linda explained her definition of a good middle school:

I think the middle school setting is very unique due to the developmental needs of the students and parents that it serves... It is critical for middle school educators to be sensitive to this as well as implement ways to accommodate it. I highly prescribe to the National Schools to Watch criteria that establishes that a good middle school is developmentally responsive, academically excellent, socially equitable also has a well-established organization and management system to ensure that it is efficient and effective. I also believe that the most important job of a principal is to hire good people. I take this aspect of my job very seriously and only hire the type of teachers that I feel would be good for my two children. If they don’t meet the standard, they don’t get hired.

While most of the principals interviewed had middle school experience prior to their current assignment, three were pretty specific about middle school being a different kind of place than elementary or high school. “I disagree with the person that says good

instruction is good instruction. Middle school instruction, just like a middle school kid, is a different animal,” argued Anna. However, at least half of the principals mentioned somewhere in their conversation that a K-6 certified teacher was more likely to do well in middle school than a high school trained teacher which suggested that a teacher does not have to be middle school trained to be effective, especially if he or she had elementary training.

*Principals’ opinions of the effect of accountability on middle schools*

While the initial surveys were purposely worded to avoid discussion of accountability measures, the interviews that were conducted with principals all included questions about how *No Child Left Behind* affected middle schools. The middle school concept was very specific about what should be included, like advisory, exploratory electives, intramurals, and looping. As the conversations shifted to how accountability affected middle schools, the sentiment toward *No Child Left Behind* was much more positive than anticipated. The principals interviewed felt that accountability was needed, but, as Eric pointed out, accountability can be a “double-edged sword.” There was only one of the nine principals blatantly opposed to the NCLB legislation. Other principals said that they were not fans of the legislation in whole, but they admitted to feeling that parts were helpful and even necessary. Many of the principals mentioned that they felt it was necessary to look at all children and raise the bar. Linda, who served a large suburban school, commented that *No Child Left Behind* provided a healthy level of competition, fostered a high level of collaboration and sharing, and made teachers responsible for all students. Rydell, who had served as curriculum coordinator for middle

schools, in addition to teaching middle grades and being an administrator in middle grades, commented that he felt the accountability measures helped to raise the bar and give school communities something to aim for. He concurred with the idea that accountability measures ensured attention was paid to the achievement of all kids. According to Rydell, “Accountability is the first step, then you have to drill down.” Another side effect of accountability that was mentioned related to the bonuses teachers were getting to work in high impact schools, particularly in the larger districts. Randy, who was a principal in a smaller school district, commented that his applicant pool was reduced because of the supplements that neighboring counties offer and bonuses that teachers could earn by going to highly impacted schools in urban areas.

Though most of the sentiment about having accountability for all kids was overwhelmingly positive from the principals interviewed, there were issues caused. For example, there continued to be more and more legislation, including *No Child Left Behind*, but also the Healthy Kids Act, among others, without the proper funding to help ascertain that the legislation could be implemented successfully, as Eric pointed out. Issues of fairness were also raised. Randy, who had recently moved to a very small rural district, commented that he was opting not to take Title I funds for his school because sanctions were only put in place for schools that receive federal funds.

What was an acceptable level of failure? Anna, a veteran middle school principal and educator who served an urban school, posed this question. Unlike some other areas, her school system used attendance zones to help even out the subgroups among the schools. Even still, she pointed out that reaching 100% passing for all subgroups was

hard and virtually impossible. “If you never fall down it’s either because you are too cautious or you didn’t try hard enough.” Anna continued to argue that educators need to look at engagement for students/academic success versus measuring a school by the subgroups. Necia, also a veteran principal and educator who served an urban population, agreed that all should be accountable, but she said she was not a big NCLB advocate for some components, like 100% of subgroups meeting AYP, because schools could make great strides and still not make it in all subgroups.

Aside from added pressure to make sure all students achieved, a great deal of the middle school concept had gone by the wayside in the schools where most of these principals were administrators. Among the losses suffered by schools were: reduction of advisory time, elimination of chat groups, abolishment of intramurals, paring down elective choices due to need to have remediation classes for level one and two students, and purging of looping due to highly qualified requirements.

Anna pointed out:

Intentionally or unintentionally what has been inherent in this process of accountability has been the reduction of things that are important for kids. Now, I say that as a former dance educator. So, I come to this with an arts and literature background. I am heartbroken when I have to decide that a child who really excels in art class... and I have to pull them out for remediation during the school day because I don’t see any other way to make it happen. And, I see us really squashing the spirit of great kids... We seem to have lost sight of really good integrated instruction, which is the hallmark of a good middle school. A lot of drill and kill; and, it’s hard to look past it sometimes; we hesitate to let go of what we know.

*Principals' ideas of changes to their schools if there were not accountability standards*

Many of the principals, especially those who had had a number of years of middle school experience, lamented that middle schools stopped looking so closely at the whole child. These principals commented on the lack of time to address character education because of the increased emphasis on reading and math. Even other core subjects, like science, social studies and physical education have suffered from a reduction of time as schools moved to variations of a block schedule. All principals discussed using data to help drive their decision making, but the sentiment that was transmitted was summarized by Linda, "While 'no child is left behind' we may be leaving parts of the child behind as we sacrifice the other important elements of a good education (arts, sports, social opportunities, healthy living, technology) for the reading, writing, and math." Rydell commented, "I think that is something that has been dropped [referring to clubs and intramurals] across the board, but it's something that I think we should pick back up." Eric's school achieved proficiency with *No Child Left Behind* standards, however, he commented that he still felt the pressure to make every second count in a way he had not had to in all of his thirteen years at that school, "Every minute of every day is accounted for all day long." When even the principal evaluations were based upon the bottom line of test scores, there was "not enough opportunity to go outside and play—that's what we sacrifice so they can bubble in on a test," Linda pointed out. Angie explained that she felt that being more conscientious of time management forced her staff and her "to think about it, plan it and integrate it into the big picture which prevents us from doing little things in isolation."

A cornerstone of the middle school concept, and even of the Schools to Watch framework, was attending to the emotional wellness of children. “Our scores went up, but the trade off is you have kids who are probably dealing with more baggage internally... maybe if kids are scoring better they feel better about themselves,” Eric explained. “We are no nonsense in the classroom, but then when there are good character development opportunities, the teacher feels the pressure of getting through the pacing guide and doesn’t stop,” lamented Linda. Principals in all interviews cautioned that educators have to remember that a child is more important than a test score. Carl had a background in counseling and was not shy about saying that he felt the business model harmed education. He elaborated and argued that the public, and those in the education community, needed to keep the human side in mind, but he also commented that keeping the human side in mind had not always been in his favor since test scores are the bottom line, especially to school systems treating schools like a business—it was all about productivity.

#### *Perceptions of needed changes*

While recognizing what was sacrificed in middle schools with accountability, principals were cognizant that some staff were more comfortable with the “more academic regimen” anyway. Anna claimed, “Formative assessment will be the key. The pivotal part to change the way we teach and deliver instruction.” By being forced to monitor the needs of all students and meet them where they were—moving the high end higher and the low end up—teachers and administrators had to look for the results from everything. Moving from using just “autopsy data,” as Anna called it, to really analyzing



formative assessments—both formal and informal—data could be used to attend to the whole child.

Once interview participants shared about how they felt accountability standards, particularly *No Child Left Behind*, affected middle schools, the conversation shifted to what they would do differently if they were told that they did not have to worry about accountability. Interestingly, eight of the nine were very specific about keeping accountability as a part of their model, regardless of the federal mandates. Anna explained:

We'd spend less time on autopsy data—it's after the fact, what are you going to do now? I'd keep formative assessment with more emphasis on interdisciplinary work and authentic tasks and assessments, and offer cross grade level classes for acceleration and support.

Sally felt that she'd shift the focus more to diagnostic tools and teacher made assessments to drive instruction (pre and post). In addition, she mentioned returning to some kind of nationally normed test to get an idea of how her students stacked up compared to other students at the same grade level across the nation. She explained that students have gotten decent at taking our state level tests, but Sally questioned how educators knew where their state stacked up in comparison to other states based on the model currently used.

#### *Principal comments about middle school's roots*

Since all principals mentioned the loss of character education or advisory type activities in the era of accountability, it was no surprise that returning to some of the

middle school roots was mentioned by Eric, Anna, and Carl—specifically advisory and non-academic activities. Rydell commented:

I wouldn't do anything differently as far as lowering standards or our plans... even without those measures we will still know there are kids coming to us that are not ready; our mission is to make sure they can do grade level or higher work to be successful in high school. They are embedded enough now that we are still going to push ahead strongly. I would really like to go back to look at Advisory. We need to have that time.

Randy suggested he would, “Go back to teaching the way I was taught in school. I don't see what was wrong with it. You had the chance to build the whole child...” An alternate perspective, which no one else commented on specifically, was offered up by the principal who serves a very large, suburban school outside of a major city. In talking about hiring teachers, Linda was adamant that they be good enough for her children, or she would not hire them. She pointed out the fact that, in the process of leaving no child behind with the federal legislation, other groups that do not constitute a subgroup (or a larger group in some schools, for example, the white students), were not factored into the equation other than as part of the whole school population. Linda voiced her fear that “educators would go back to doing what is good enough to teach students that make up the majority.” Necia and Angie were hopeful that the removal of federal guidelines would prompt teachers to be more creative in the curriculum and their classrooms by focusing more on interest based learning and less on mastery and remediation.

Through my interviews it was apparent that the middle school model was not in place as designed in any of the schools, though not because the principals did not want to implement or believe in the concept. Increasing accountability forced all of the

principals interviewed to take steps to make sure their schools were making the grade, but some of those steps required them to let go of programs and pieces that they really believed were beneficial to serving the whole child. The principals that served highly impacted schools had fewer chances for flexibility than higher performing schools. If given the chance, the principals interviewed would not do away with accountability measures, but they would refocus their schools on relationship building, teaching creatively, and providing more options for children.

#### *Successful programs in action*

While looking at the three areas of data, I wanted to make sure that I took the chance to see some of the programs and schools that were working, if possible. After completing research about middle schools and what was working in middle schools, but prior to talking to public school educators, I was afforded the opportunity to visit a school that embodied the middle school concept through the founder's beliefs about what works for children, not necessarily through the middle school model. March 5, 2008 I spent a day at the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. Ron Clark was the Disney Teacher of the Year in 2001. After appearing on Oprah, Mr. Clark decided to write a book about his philosophy on teaching and learning, *The Essential 55*. Through his book, Mr. Clark presented his philosophy that students can have rigor, relevance and relationships through 55 rules and expectations. In the fall of 2007, the Ron Clark Academy (RCA) opened with a class of fifth and a class of sixth grade students. Educators can attend daylong sessions that allowed them to sit in on classes, eat with the students, and talk to Ron Clark and Kim Bearden, the Disney Elementary Teacher of the Year in 2001.

Entering the gates of the Ron Clark Academy, we had just driven through a run-down neighborhood with many boarded up houses. When we stopped to ask for directions to the school, no one seemed to even know the part of the neighborhood we were talking about. When we finally found the street, and drove through the gates, we entered a different world. The gates were emblazoned with words from six of the seven continents the RCA students will be visiting in their tenure. We walked into a fairly nondescript brick building and were immediately assaulted with color and liveliness. In the lobby a friendly receptionist welcomed us and gestured to cushioned seats in the lobby. We looked around to take in everything. In the middle of the lobby area was a circular slide. On the landing of the stairwell there was a spinning wheel. In the laminate on the steps were coins from around the world. Ron Clark's list of his fifty-five rules and procedures was posted on parchment that hung above the stairwell. The girls' bathroom was set up like a dressing room, while the boys' bathroom was jungle inspired—the school was decorated according to stereotypical fantasies children have. Soon, students began to arrive. As each student arrived in khakis, a white button down oxford shirt and a navy blue blazer, they came to us, introduced themselves, shook our hands, and welcomed us to their school.

In a letter he posted to the school's website about the Ron Clark Academy, Ron Clark says:

We have fostered an environment that inspires academic excellence, leadership, collaboration, and a world-class education for our students. Our school is a magical place where children experience the true joy that comes with learning. We teach in innovative, creative, and inspiring ways, and we empower youth to take charge of their own destinies, reach their goals, and fulfill their dreams with

compassion, integrity, and honor. We fill our students' days with knowledge and wonder, all while demanding academic rigor and achieving incredible results ([www.ronclarkacademy.com](http://www.ronclarkacademy.com)).

After my own visit to the Ron Clark Academy, while I was asking myself my research question, what works in middle schools, I quickly realized that the Ron Clark Academy was an example of what works. The Ron Clark Academy embodied the middle school concept.

Students were sorted into houses upon their arrival in the fall that served as their advisory groups their four years at the Ron Clark Academy. The house system allowed students to form lasting relationships with each other and staff members at the school. The students were in mixed-age group elective classes that helped foster relationships, whether as peers or mentors. An organic garden was grown and maintained by the students, and the school chef prepared meals with those products. From the beginning, they were taught the value of applied science and health. The students were taught the connections between what they were learning in class and how that could be transferred to their work in the garden or kitchen. The teachers were set up to loop with the students so that the students have the same core teachers at least two subsequent years. There were clubs and activities offered daily after school, with transportation home provided, so that the students could participate. Clubs were a piece of the middle school concept that allowed for exploration. While Ron Clark's books are motivational in their approach, a visit to the Ron Clark Academy's website, [www.ronclarkacademy.com](http://www.ronclarkacademy.com), or the school itself, gives a clearer picture of how the school was working for middle school aged students. There was a video that plays from the homepage about the school that was

actually filmed on the day that we visited. Having seen the school staff and students in action and watching the video, I can attest to the fact that an accurate picture is painted about the school. People from our visiting group were interviewed, including my own brother, about what they experienced on our visit.

While RCA was a private school, the student population was chosen from the Atlanta area. Students had to interview and were chosen based on their desire to study at RCA and leadership aptitude, rather than test scores. Though the school was small, Ron Clark had solicited donations from many corporations and donors to make the school a school without walls. Before the students leave RCA they will have visited six of the seven continents. What was obvious at the school reflected what the middle school model suggested, the Schools to Watch framework elicits, and the principals interviewed commented on—rigor, relevance and relationships were key to the learning, especially for students caught in the middle. In Ron Clark’s math class the students sang songs to remember how to solve their math problems; they used their upcoming London trip as a basis for figuring out area, calculating tips, and converting money from dollars to pounds. We were able to visit each core class, and all classes moved at a fast pace, but students were supported in their learning.

Emphasis was put on the fact that this school was theirs. The day ended with all workshop participants sliding down the circular slide to be reminded that learning can be fun and meaningful. Then, the four houses presented a rap, chant or song that they had just developed to summarize their week. Each school spun the wheel on the landing to determine how many points their house would earn, and then they said good-bye to us. It

was hard to imagine how any person could spend a day at RCA and not become a believer in what the middle school concept embodied.

As I interviewed principals and heard their responses about how middle schools had changed with accountability and about what they would do differently if not governed by accountability measures anymore, I realized that everything they mentioned, the Ron Clark Academy had in place. Study participants lamented the loss of advisory time and opportunities to bond with students. RCA had advisory through their houses, and the teachers moved with the students to maintain that relationship. Principals mentioned adding clubs or intramurals back into their days. The students at RCA had the opportunity to stay after school daily to participate in clubs like gardening and recording studio. Most principals talked about how they wished their teachers could be more creative again and not so tied to their curriculum and pacing guide. As you could see in the video on the RCA website or on a visit at RCA, creativity was key to what Ron Clark and his teachers did daily. In a ninety-minute math class, the students sang at least three different songs that they had learned to help them remember math rules. Mr. Clark planned his lesson based upon their upcoming London field trip. He was teaching algebra, but he was tying all aspects of algebra into what the students would need for their personal experiences.

#### *An international school perspective*

After completion of the literary research, surveying and interviewing, I opted to move to an international school community and work in a middle school that embraced the middle school philosophy. Looking at the school's recruiting information and self-

study that were available on its website, the information provided clearly said that the middle schools on both campuses were structured in relation to the National Middle School Associations principles, “focusing on providing developmentally appropriate challenges in cognitive, social, emotional, physical and moral development” (www.saschina.org).

While *No Child Left Behind* was not a factor at this school, the tenets that were in place should be possible in a public middle school as well. Scheduling was truly flexible. The core teams were assigned their core block of time, as well as a lunch window, and they decided how to split up the time as a team. For example, in sixth grade the teams chose to see all three of their groups of students on Mondays and Fridays. On Tuesdays through Thursdays they saw two of their three groups for a longer period of time. But, in seventh and eighth grade, teams chose to teach two core classes daily. In order to see them in this way, an A/B day was used. Students had a variety of elective offerings. All students took physical education/health, art, music or drama and a foreign language. In order to accommodate this, the elective classes were on a four-day rotation. Though budgeting and allocations forced some decisions, like making a humanities block because there were not enough students to constitute a four teacher team with a separate language arts and social studies class, the school was able to embrace many of the middle school concept’s aspects.

The students were offered a wide variety of after school activities that ranged from badminton to chess to Kong Fu to Pilates, in addition to electives that they could participate in every other day with similar offerings. They had advisory every other day



for forty-five minutes. Like the Ron Clark Academy, there was a focus on moving students beyond the four walls of a school building. All three grade levels left school for a day for a bonding trip every September. The sixth grade went bowling; seventh grade traveled to a park; the eighth grade visited a low ropes course and amusement park. Advisory activities culminated in the spring with week-long field trips to explore China. Sixth grade students travel to see the Terracotta Soldiers. Seventh grade students go to Beijing and the Great Wall of China. Eighth grade students travel to the countryside to explore the area through such activities as riding a bike through rice paddies. All of the aspects of the middle school model that the middle school principals I interviewed discussed as pieces they would like to reintroduce to their schools were present in both the Ron Clark Academy and the international school where I currently work.

Being a part of a middle school that mirrored the middle school model as closely as any other middle school I had worked in or with, I believed, more than ever, that any middle school could look like the model. Accountability made administrators, teachers, parents and students focus their attention on tests and test scores, but the administrators in the field also knew that there was a need to develop the whole child. Most of the aspects of the middle school model that principals were the most adamant about bringing back would not require more money, just a reallocation of time. If the whole child was being developed would it stand to reason that they would perform better in the academic arena as a result? In Chapter V I discuss the conclusions I have drawn based upon my research.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

This study has looked at the status of middle schools in 2008 and the tensions that exist between accountability standards and implementation of the middle school model. The purpose was to gain insight from middle school principals about what is working in middle schools and how accountability has affected middle schools. In Chapter I explanation was given about how the middle school model was crafted over forty years ago in order to be appropriately responsive to middle school aged children's needs. However, with the introduction of accountability standards like *No Child Left Behind*, the context of education has changed. In Chapter II literature was reviewed to give a background about the middle school model and the rationale behind it. Chapter III served as an outline of the methodology used in this exploratory study. In Chapter IV the results of research were shared.

Middle school students are vibrant. They are malleable. They are desperate for connections with other people. The middle school model is still very appropriate for middle school aged children. Educators have to pay attention to the needs of the whole child—we owe it to our society, but most importantly, we owe it to our students. We have to provide them with the best possible opportunities through an education that is designed for them with their specific needs in mind.

Middle school students are a different from any other group of children. Middle school students need a different approach to their education than is necessary at other levels. My review of the literature backed the claim that middle school students have specific needs for relationships, academic challenge, and exploratory opportunities. The voices of the principals in middle schools resonated-- all of the aspects mentioned in the framework for middle schools in Chapter I and the literature reviewed in the Chapter II were not present in middle schools because of accountability standards that necessitated decision-making with test scores in mind over the consideration of the children. Schools like the Ron Clark Academy and the international school in China where I work show that the middle school model in practice was possible.

In the following sections, I will review the study's research questions and provide some insight into the findings of the study. The goal of this project was to gain insight from public middle school principals regarding what worked in middle grades education and how accountability affected the organization of middle schools. Three research questions were considered in this exploratory study:

1. What is the status of the middle school model in the early 21st century?
2. According to middle school principals, how has *No Child Left Behind* and accountability affected their implementation of the middle school model?
3. How do middle school principals deal with the tensions between *No Child Left Behind* and the middle school model?

*What is the status of the middle school model in the early 21st century?*

Since middle school students are different than other school aged student, middle schools have to be different kinds of schools than elementary or high school. The literature supported this statement; surveys conducted for this study pointed to this; interviews with principals reaffirmed this statement; my own experiences backed this conjecture. Based upon the social, emotional, and cognitive development of middle school aged children, the middle school years will be tumultuous for students, parents and teachers compared to other years. Even though they were not asked to discuss the problems in middle schools today, the principals interviewed for this study helped to paint the picture of middle schools today:

- huge emphasis on reading and math,
- fewer options for elective classes than in previous years,
- elimination of advisory,
- dismantling of clubs,
- removal of intramurals,
- creation of teams based upon highly qualified status versus interest,
- instruction via memorization and testing versus interdisciplinary theme-based units of study,
- use of data to drive instruction,
- block scheduling.

Many of these problems can be attributed to the current emphasis on accountability for standardized test scores. For example, many middle school principals talked about rearranging school time to focus on reading and math instruction and emphasizing teaching of basic knowledge via pacing guides instead of interdisciplinary, creative teaching and learning.

For a middle school trained teacher and administrator, the picture that was painted about the status of middle schools in relation to the middle school concept was bleak. Knowing that the research pointed back to the middle school model (Lounsbury, 1996; Mizell, 2003; National Middle School Association, 2003), it was disheartening to hear about what middle schools were no longer including in their programs. Not only did the literature emphasize the elements of the middle school model as outlined at the end of Chapter II in the framework for middle schools, but the principals interviewed all mentioned aspects of that model as being helpful to developing middle childhood aged children. By sacrificing the development of a child for a test score, educators were failing to attend to the emotional and social aspects of the child. The middle school concept and model were very specifically designed to attend to the social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of students as a way to develop the whole child. If molding the whole child ceases being the focus of middle schools altogether, then why even have a separate school for middle school aged children? Why wouldn't school systems revert to a K-8 and 9-12 model or return to the old junior high school approach?

*According to middle school principals, how has No Child Left Behind and accountability affected their implementation of the middle school model*

All of the middle school principals interviewed changed their schedules to block scheduling over the last few years as a result of testing mandates. Moving to a block schedule to provide for more reading and math time accomplished the goal of giving more teaching time to tested areas, but it also meant that science and social studies classes were shortened in many cases. Hours have not been added to the school days, so lengthening any section of the day required shortening or eliminating another;

- advisory periods
- core time
- elective time
- recess or socialization time
- club opportunities
- intramurals

In America the pervading culture was not what it was for my Korean students in China. When my Korean students leave school at 3:00 p.m. each day, they continued to their Korean academy. Many of them participated in school until midnight nightly, and then they were up for the buses by 6:00 a.m. They even attended their Korean academy on the weekends. Since this dedicated learning practice is not in place in America, educators have to realize that we are affecting the time given to particular subject areas by shifting the focus to the tested subjects. Even elective times were shortened from what they had been in middle schools or junior highs in the past. Where students used to have health and physical education daily, many schools have had to move from that

practice in order to give time to reading and math. Eric commented on this specifically when he said:

The trade off is you have kids who are probably dealing with more baggage internally, maybe not making as many contacts with teachers in a way that is a non-academic contact. What I mean is that trust factor as someone I can talk to about my problems.

By removing advisory programs from schools there was a reliance on school counselors and social workers to formulate relationships. Two or three staff members in a school cannot serve the purpose that advisory was intended to serve. Linda remarked, “One of the goals of middle school is to help kids find their niche.” She continued to explain that by lessening elective classes and being no-nonsense in the classroom, then there are “good character development opportunities that present themselves then and there, but the teacher feels the pressure of getting through the pacing guide.”

In my current school, advisory classes were given to all core and specialist teachers. The students were assigned to teachers randomly. So, I mentored seventeen students, some of whom I did not teach. As the year progressed, I worked with them on goal setting, building literacy skills, and developing leadership abilities. We talked about their lives at school and at home. We worked to build a community within our class. For these students I was an adult advocate for them. Again, I worked in a private school; so two counselors were available to work with about 400 students.

In the schools where I interviewed, the smallest traditional school had about 700 students and two counselors. By removing the advisory portion of the day, students were forced to advocate more for themselves. They initiated forming bonds with adults in

their schools themselves. Some students possessed this ability, but there were many students who were unsure of themselves in middle schools, so they were not prone to forming relationships, particularly with adults, unless some structure existed to help facilitate such a bond.

Clubs and intramurals used to provide students a way to develop their whole selves, not just their academic side. As a part of the exploratory aspect of the middle school concept, clubs and intramurals were designed to give students exposure. My current school still uses advisory, but it also had everyone in the school separated into houses. The year started with a house assembly and the pumas, falcons, bears and dolphins showed their spirit through dressing up, making banners, and cheering on their team. Daily during lunch the students were invited to participate in non-competitive sports to earn points for their teams. So, even if middle school principals do not feel that they could give away time each day for advisory time, something like intramurals or clubs potentially provided opportunities for bonding and forming relationships between teachers and students. Clubs operated in much the same way by allowing students an opportunity to work with adults that may or may not teach them on something that was not necessarily academic. Therefore, while the framework for middle schools pointed to the need to develop relationships with students, some of the key pieces that used to be place to facilitate relationships were missing in a lot of middle schools that would help make the concept a reality. The model did not just fade over time. In many ways it was never implemented as it was intended, but on the other side of the argument, accountability measures make it appear scary for schools to follow the model.



When human resources departments had to start hiring teachers who completed at least eighteen credit hours in a subject to be highly qualified, some teachers were pushed into teaching areas that were not their strengths, or they were eliminated from job opportunities altogether. For example, I took the PRAXIS in language arts though my degree was in middle grades language arts and social studies. When I graduated from college I could teach either subject area. When highly qualified standards were put in place, I was no longer allowed to teach social studies. While language arts was my preference, what if it was not? As Anna, Angie and Necia all mentioned, the more and more the teachers are limited by standards like highly qualified, the more and more looping is impossible.

*How do middle school principals deal with the tensions between No Child Left Behind and the middle school model?*

While most principals interviewed talked about the need to implement pieces of the middle school model better in their schools, they also pointed out the reasons why they could not or had moved away from those aspects in the first place. Knowing what should be embedded in the school culture to be developmentally appropriate and making it happen were two different things. In one way or the other, all of the principals interviewed alluded to the tensions that exist between knowing what should be done and knowing what could actually be done because of accountability standards. Throughout my research there were many general themes that emerged, many of which were not mentioned in the literature:

- Though the principals had leadership experience, not all of the principals had backgrounds in the middle school concept.
- Only three of the principals interviewed did mention grade span configuration, but none of them saw grade span configuration as the issue in middle schools.
- All principals agreed that teaming was essential as were rigor, relevance, and relationships.
- The principals recognized the need to help develop well-rounded students and Professional Learning Communities.
- Some principals found another tension related to implementing the model because their districts have moved to a business model in education.

From the themes that emerged, my final research question was answered. The bottom line was that the middle school model works for middle schools. Accountability forced schools and school systems to make decisions that were contrary to the model, though, thus middle school administrators have to deal daily with the tension between the model and accountability. In the next few sections I will further explain the themes that emerged in relation to the final research questions regarding the tensions between the middle school model and accountability.

*Training in the middle school model is imperative*

Administrators trained in the middle school concept and philosophy seemed to buy into that philosophy and work to find ways to incorporate a lot of the model, more so than those administrators that had other experiences prior to being assigned to a middle school. Angie enthusiastically said her training absolutely helps her as a leader, “I think it is essential.” Angie’s background was middle grades education from undergraduate through her doctoral work. While all administrators felt that qualities of a good leader were similar across all grade levels, like being the instructional leader, strong communicator, and vision creator that Alexis discussed, there was a decided difference in how the middle school trained administrators viewed middle schools and the needs for their middle schools compared to the other principals.

In dealing with the tensions between the middle school model and accountability, the middle school trained administrators more consciously articulated their decision making process based on the needs of middle school students with the model as a tool. By no means am I suggesting that people not trained in middle school are not good administrators, but through my conversations and observations I realized that administrators assigned to middle schools need exposure to the middle school model, especially its rationale. It would be hard for a principal to argue their reasons for maintaining advisory, offering a variety of elective courses, providing a range of club and intramural opportunities when instructional time is critical in middle schools. Even encouraging teachers to plan and teach in an interdisciplinary way could be hard for administrators to argue for if they did not really understand the middle school concept. Anna, Angie, Necia, Carl, and Randy were well ensconced in the middle school concept

and made comments about working to find ways to keep aspects of the concept in place despite the mandates of accountability.

Administrators with a middle school background saw value in using data and having accountability like the other principals, but they were more conscious of addressing the whole child and his or her development. Randy suggested going back to “the way I was taught in school. I don’t see what was wrong with it. You had the chance to build the whole child.” Interestingly, the two that mentioned programs, Anna and Angie, had the most extensive experience in middle schools having taught in middle schools and served as administrators almost exclusively in middle schools. Though programs will not cure the implementation of the middle school model, both principals commented about how implementation of the programs helped them to re-focus on what was important in middle school. “[It] allows us to focus on learning,” according to Anna.

Administrators who were not middle school trained did not feel that they needed to be in order to be effective middle school leaders. They were able to talk about the middle school concept when asked about specific portions of the concept, but they did not volunteer the information or discuss specifics as readily, and, in some cases, unless prompted. As I walked away from each of those interviews I realized that training in the middle school concept was essential. While training could occur in many forms, if a principal was simply promoted from elementary to middle school without attending to the uniqueness of both the middle school child and the middle school concept, then they would be inclined to gloss over some key concepts of the middle school philosophy and not realize why some pieces were in place in the model.

*Grade span configuration is not the issue.*

Though the research was rife with suggestions that moving to different grade span configurations could be the cure for what ails middle schools, none of the initial responses from the fifteen principals pointed to restructuring into more non-traditional grade span configurations. No one that responded had shifted to K-8 or more of a junior high model. In a follow-up interview, Necia commented that she felt the schools were too large and that size was the issue, not the grade span.

You can move the grades, but the product is still the same... The products that you are putting in whatever grades you have are still the same. I do think our schools are too large. No matter how small or how large, there's got to be time in the day for you talk to children.

The principals who were trained in the middle school model were among those opposed to shifting the grade span, as Necia mentioned. However, considering one of the questions asked was what works in middle schools, I expected other principals to suggest a change in grade span, but the other principals did not even mention changing the overall grade level structure of middle school. Based upon my observations and conversations, I think that principals understood that middle school students need something different than elementary and high schools offer. Randy discussed the fact that his district has some K-8 schools, but more so out of financial necessity. Even the literature alluded more to this sort of shift being a financial move rather than a move based on developmental needs. Randy mentioned that his small district had looked at such a shift in order to save resources and money.

### *Teaming is essential*

All of the principals interviewed are using teams to arrange their students within a grade level as the middle school model suggests. Randy was adamant that teams need to be as heterogeneous as possible to “share the wealth”, but others did not make this claim as adamantly. Some teams were comprised of the students that they were because of the math offerings (Algebra, Geometry) or the exceptional children services dictated by Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Most principals were utilizing block scheduling and some flexibility within the block. However, few managed to maintain an advisory period within the school day. Most of them commented on the need to develop the whole child, so this said to me that whether consciously or not, those principals knew that they should strive to find time in their days to fit advisory. The framework I outlined for middle schools also pointed to this need. Principals need to find ways for adults and students to formulate relationships. While looping has become one of the components that no one can manage anymore because of highly qualified (HQ) status and the need to know a subject area intimately because testing is paramount, most of the principals seemed aware that looping or some form of a continued relationship with a caring adult was a part of the middle school concept, however, the principals did not discuss how they were working to make sure relationships like that could be developed.

### *Rigor, relevance and relationships*

All principals in the survey and interviews referred to rigor, relevance, and relationships implicitly or explicitly. In fact, while I entered into this study with the belief that I would hear about programs that would work for more schools or a grade span configuration change that would revolutionize middle grades, all of my surveying, interviewing, and school visiting pointed to the same three R's. Bill and Melinda Gates have been working to revolutionize high school in America for a while by emphasizing rigor, relevance and relationships.

Businesses can illustrate the changing nature of the workplace and what that means for education, he [Bill Gates, Sr.] says. "High expectations are not only important for the workplace, they're important for the health of our civic institutions. Closing the achievement gap is not just a workforce development issue, it's a social justice issue," he [Bill Gates, Sr.] says (Weeks, 2003).

The Schools to Watch organization addressed social justice as well. Schools have to be socially equitable; therefore, principals needed to find ways for the curriculum to be rigorous, apply to students' lives, and allow for relationship formation.

High schools must change utterly, she says, because "the world has changed its expectations of our children." To succeed as adults, they will need, more than ever before, to think critically, work collaboratively, and be self-motivated. They will need technical and personal skills they can apply to new situations—the rate of change in today's working world spins ever faster (Weeks, 2003).

If our middle schools do not attend to the three R's, then our students will continue to leave middle school unprepared, not just academically, but emotionally and socially.

Knowing that high schools were focusing on the three R's and the aspects that Weeks

(2003) mentioned, then middle schools have to make sure students are ready. One of my initial survey respondents commented,

Relationships are imperative before one can do anything else in an educational setting. If students feel a 'connection' with a staff member...or the to the school in general, he/she is far more likely to be successful in that environment. While building those relationships, establishing expectations is also imperative. (Harry Wong!!!).

A return to the more traditional middle school model would help to assure that middle schools are preparing students for high school in today's society.

Good elementary schools, where students spend most of their day with the same teacher, have always been built around caring relationships. Introducing rigor and relevance at that level has involved curriculum and professional-development challenges, but the nature of the changes is comparatively modest. Reading had to be more focused around material that students wanted to read, and teachers have had to learn how to raise expectations for all students. The elementary "scope of work" was and is reform, not "reinvention." ...(Wagner, 2002).

Like Wagner discusses in relation to elementary schools, middle schools need reform, not reinvention. There is a model that has been developed over time.

#### *Well-rounded students and Professional Learning Communities*

Part of reforming middle schools needs to focus on developing Professional Learning Communities with the purpose of developing the whole child through that.

When given time to expound upon the initial survey or to provide other information about what they were doing in their schools, principals responses centered around two main themes: having well-rounded students and fostering Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in their schools in order to improve teaching and learning. Eric commented:



Our kids are well rounded. We have an excellent arts/music program here... We have a health and wellness room that kids go in to tailor a program for them.... I just have a really good staff very low turn over rate, and a good community.

Principals, like Sally, mentioned the desire to use more diagnostic assessments and teacher made tests to assess student needs and to plan based on those needs. Professional Learning Communities provide a forum for such discussion to happen. My final survey respondent said that professional learning communities provide the “climate for teachers to learn from one another and plan together.”

*What should middle school principals do?*

Based upon my research, it became apparent to me that the middle school model was still the key to making middle schools work. However, principals are not implementing the pieces of the model because of the drive to raise test scores. The current context of legislation changed the atmosphere in middle schools, in all schools, but legislation alone did not require middle schools to change. As Wagner (2002) pointed out, middle schools did not have to reinvent, they just needed to refine. Administrators have to be willing to read the literature about the middle school concept and work with their leadership teams and school communities to make sure that the tenets of the middle school model are in place. Schools have to make a conscientious effort to train new staff members in the model, particularly teachers that are trained to be elementary or high school teachers. Time has to be rearranged to attend to the whole child by allowing time for advisory, recess, a variety of electives, intramurals, and clubs. Curriculum focuses have to shift from teaching for a test to authentic learning. Teaching has to have a large-scale shift to provide learning opportunities that allow students to

understand concepts and how those concepts apply to their lives. Middle schools have to make a conscious effort to consider all aspects of students. If the whole child is not attended to, then schools may end up with students who are scoring better, but their emotional domain will have been sacrificed.

*The tensions are more complicated than just NCLB*

Accountability measures had been put in place because there was a gap between the achievement levels of minority and majority students. So, large-scale research led to the development of *No Child Left Behind*. Through accountability measures and sanctions, schools were subject to reorganization if they do not show improvement after a few years. The catch that Carl, Randy, and Alexis mentioned was that all schools are not privy to these sanctions. Only schools that receive federal funds have the potential for sanctions. Whole school districts can have sanctions and district improvement plans put in place based on district scores, but the worst of the sanctions falls on schools that receive federal money. Some districts, like where Linda, Sally, Carl, Rydell worked were moving to a business model. In some districts this model may have some positive effects, it is absolutely essential that district leaders, no matter what their background, become versed in the middle school philosophy as well. If school districts operate as a business, then the superintendents and other district leaders do not necessarily have to have any education background. Having district officials know and understand why middle schools should operate under the middle school model could go a long way to helping principals feel like they could manage the tension between the model and accountability. Middle school philosophy was carefully constructed almost forty years ago, and current

data still pointed to its effectiveness. It is paramount that district and federal leaders understand this point so that they can help to support the model. The realization has to dawn that attending to the whole child will provide more results in the long run. More research should be done in regards to the middle school model in light of the business model for organization of schools and districts. Interview participants hinted to some of the problems encountered at their school or in their district when a business model is in place.

One principal who I interviewed was opposed to *No Child Left Behind*. He pointed out that only schools receiving federal funds are really held accountable for the measures, so they were unfair. His school was rural and small. What he could offer prospective teachers paled in comparison to other counties. He remarked that he did not see what was wrong with “the way we were taught” in school. Randy’s main point was that kind of teaching attended to the whole child, but Randy was also one of the principals that had a strong background in middle school education. Randy was the most obviously opposed to accountability measures, but Eric mentioned that accountability brings more laws but no more funding. Necia pointed out that she thought NCLB was unfair in that reaching 100% was a lofty goal. Anna’s point resonated—accountability measures need to look in terms of “an acceptable level of failure.” If ninety percent of students are proficient one year when seventy percent of them were proficient the year before, that showed progress. All of the principals were intent upon helping all students progress.

*What was surprising to the researcher?*

Entering into the research phase of my doctoral work, I expected to hear administrators say that accountability standards have been more negative than positive and that grade span configuration could help to address middle school students' needs more effectively. As an administrator, I have consistently heard the negative effects of accountability from the administrators, teachers, parents, and students that I work with; therefore, I was enlightened to hear that all nine principals felt that accountability had some positive aspects even though there were varying ideas about what the current model of accountability looks like. I expected the principals to suggest grade span configuration would work to fix middle schools as my previous superintendent suggested. The overwhelming suggestion that rigor, relevance, and relationships were key to fixing middle schools far exceeded any mentions of grade span configuration.

Perhaps the most surprising realization to me was how differently middle school trained administrators viewed the middle school concept. Since I earned a B.A. in Middle Grades Education as an undergraduate student, I noticed the difference in middle school trained teachers, but I had never considered the administrative level. When I moved to be an assistant principal, my principal very purposefully hired two assistant principals with middle grades backgrounds since he did not have the experience. I thought his thinking was logical, but not having an opportunity to be around many principals in my roles, I had never guessed that such a lack of training would be obvious to me as a researcher.

### *Recommendations*

Throughout my research of the literature, surveying and interviewing many thoughts swirled through my mind. Using all that I found and my own experiences in middle schools, I offer suggestions to policymakers, practioners and researchers.

#### *Policymakers*

How might policymakers adjust policy to make it more likely that middle schools would meet the needs of students? Proficiency scores alone cannot continue to be the bottom line that separates good schools from poor ones. Growth needs to be a measure in all composites throughout the nation. Policy also needs to look at ways to share the burden of the policy more equitably. The school districts that were paying closer attention to the make-up of each school and using attendance zones to help create a more balanced student population were spoken of highly by the principals in those districts. When all schools have the same pressure from the policy, then all administrators might broach data and the use of data differently. If all schools had similar student populations, then principals might see the value in collaboration versus a debate between the “haves” and the “have nots” among schools.

#### *Practitioners*

How should practitioners use the information herein to improve their practice? Principals and teachers cannot change the policies or legislation, but they can have a say in both through their willingness to speak out and to vote for elected officials that support all children. However, daily, principals and teachers have an opportunity to structure the day and their classes in ways that help develop the whole child. Teachers and

administrators being assigned to middle schools should have some training in the middle school model, even if it is just a workshop that highlights the tenets and the rationale for them. School staff has to look for creative ways to maintain an advisory program. Relationships occurred in the research more than other areas, at the very least, advisory needs to be a part of the day in middle schools. Once schools have figured out how to maintain or reinstitute advisory programs, then clubs, intramurals, and exploratory elective offerings can be considered. Adding time for advisory should be one of the easier components of the middle school model to apply. Inter-disciplinary study is the other facet of the middle school model that needs to be emphasized. Through inter-disciplinary study the students can better understand themselves and the world around them. A key to any of this refocusing must be to educate the public. The practitioners in the field today have to know the middle school model and rationale, but they also need to be on a campaign to spread the word to all of the stakeholders and to get buy-in. The community in and around the schools will be much more supportive of the model if they understand it. Since some aspects of implementation could require funding, a campaign needs to be waged to help garner economic support for developing the whole child.

### *Researchers*

Key pieces are missing in all of the research. The voices of the teachers and students do not ring loudly in what has been written and reported. While personal experience, interview data, performance data, and research inform my opinion that the middle school philosophy can, does and will work for middle grades-aged children, I still feel like there are children being left behind daily that need to have a voice in this process.

Teachers that work with those children have valuable insight to contribute to the conversation. Rather than implementing accountability standards that force educators to look at all subgroups, we as educators have to make more of an effort to examine those subgroups to determine what works for them. Studies have been conducted to look at the brains of boys and girls and identify what works best for each gender, but we should look further at what impacts various cultures as well. Having worked with an emerging Hispanic population and a large Korean population, it became very obvious to me that a cultural divide is emerging in American education. Cultures view education in different ways, so some of the accountability standards need to attend to the differences in cultures and how they view education. Public education in America is no longer geared toward students who come from families that all value education and who teach them how to play the school game. Further research needs to be done so that the voices of various cultures' students and teachers are heard and taken into consideration.

### *Summary*

Middle school students deserve the best that education has to offer, all students do. Through my research I wanted to determine what works in middle schools, particularly in the current context of accountability. While tensions exist between the middle school model and accountability standards, the middle school model is developmentally appropriate and should be implemented in schools. Practitioners have to be willing to learn about the model, or review it, and work with their schools and districts to blend the model with what is required by accountability standards.

Accountability needs to go beyond – accountability is a broader concept than the bottom line accountability that has been in effect since 2001. Education for middle school students needs to be bigger than test scores and drop out rates. Schools may manage to close the achievement gap by 2014 and have all students on grade level for a test, but just being concerned about scores does not solve the problems. Educators have to be responsible for children in the broader context—socially, emotionally, and physically. The middle school concept is just a theory, but this study has helped to point out that the theory has not had a chance to be put into practice as it was intended, so education is going to continue to have a divide. Unless educators consciously focus on all aspects of each child, then students will not be served by middle schools as intended.



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