

Education Daily

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Experts Call for Innovation in Middle-Grades Education

Challenges abound in middle-grades education, but some experts say that the field presents special opportunities for students and educators alike. Developmentally responsive and engaging curricula along with social supports can set the tone for young adolescents' academic motivation and success.

This is important in the middle grades, as research by Robert Balfanz, co-director of the [Everyone Graduates Center](#) and a research scientist with the [Center for Social Organization of Schools](#) at [Johns Hopkins University](#), has shown that poor achievement and negative school experience during these years are strong predictors of dropping out of high school.

A recent [National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform](#) panel discussion featured educators' and policy specialists' experiences on what can be done at the federal, state, and local levels to facilitate middle-grade educational success.

Balfanz, who served as a panelist, said that as-yet unpublished research from the [Alliance for Excellent Education](#) has found that "in a major state," students have a 75 percent chance of a postsecondary education if they attend school 95 percent of the time, have no failing grades or behavior incidents, and are on-age for their grade. But only 20 percent of ninth graders met these criteria, he said.

Student absences can increasingly be attributed to their families' need for an in-home care provider, Balfanz said. He would like to see a case management approach to absence and behavior issues that affect grades used along with data-driven early-warning systems. "Data is great, but what really matters is the intervention," Balfanz said.

He stressed the importance of creating compelling instruction incorporating team projects and problem-solving skills that make students want to come to school. He also favored "self-management" instruction - what he called "staying-out-of-trouble skills."

Such programs lend themselves to the middle grades, according to Balfanz. He explained that while elementary school is driven by basic skill acquisition and high school focuses on college- and career-readiness, the middle grades offer schools "more open terrain, [with more possibilities] to innovate there."

The [Common Core State Standards](#) provide a pedagogical "anchor" of required content from which to innovate. Balfanz used science, technology, engineering and math education as an example where a middle school applied a combination of their math and science curriculum to explore seldom-taught engineering and "make it alive."

But LEAs need to hire educators who specialize in middle-grades education, according to Frank Stetson, chief school performance officer for [Montgomery County \(Md.\) Public Schools](#). Stetson also noted the district's focus on middle school planning and professional development time, as well as academically related afterschool and summer programs and parent outreach and engagement.

State boards of education need to understand middle-grades education in their state and realize that middle school is "not a mini-high school," said Brenda Welburn, executive director of the [National Association of State Boards of Education](#). She added that states should designate middle school as a critical-needs area of academic transition.

Recruitment and retention of teachers and principals who specialize in the middle grades was also stressed by Ryan Reyna, education program division program director at the [National Governors Association](#) , who noted that 29 states differentiate between middle school and high school certifications. He favors state support to LEAs and schools, and programs to ease student transitions, especially from elementary school to middle school. Reyna added, "Middle school is an area [that is] ripest for playing around with [learning and classroom] structure."

"This is a very unusual time . . . there are a lot of things coming together" to facilitate education-systems change, including the Common Core, [Model Core Teaching Standards](#) , common education data standards, and open platforms for data analysis, said Linda Pittenger, network director of [Next Generation Learners](#) at the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#) .

She added that with the pending ESEA reauthorization and the administration's waiver plan, "It looks like the pendulum is swinging from federal input back to the states; it is a tremendous time for states to get involved and really set the course [for] college- and career-readiness."

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