

**Middle Grades Teacher, Student, and Principal Roundtables**  
**Los Angeles, California: October 10-11, 2011**  
**Portland, Oregon: October 12, 2011**  
**Washington, D.C.: October 17, 2011**

*“These are the pivotal years, where we make or break a student, where we turn them on or off.”*

**SCHOOLS VISITED:**

- 1) Millikan Middle School, Sherman Oaks, CA  
*Facilitated by Geneviève DeBose, Washington TAF*
- 2) Culver City Middle School, Culver City, CA  
*Facilitated by Geneviève DeBose, Washington TAF and Juan Govea, Classroom TAF*
- 3) H.B. Lee Middle School, Portland, OR  
*Facilitated by Kareen Borders, Classroom TAF and Geneviève DeBose, Washington TAF*
- 4) Multiple teachers and principals from Prince William County and Loudon County Public Schools at the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform Policy Briefing in Washington, D.C.  
*Facilitated by Geneviève DeBose, Shakera Walker, & Maryann Woods-Murphy, Washington TAFs*

**THEMES FROM ROUNDTABLES:**

- 1) **Middle grades students need a variety of choices** in their classes, their programming, and their activities. This is a time of great change, when students are trying to figure out who they are. Offering young adolescents an array of classes will allow them to try new things in a safe space. Be it theater, sports, math club, or peer mediation, students will be more engaged and more likely to academically achieve if they have relevant choices available to them.

*From the field:* “At this age students need options. We never know what will grasp their interest, make them excited about learning, and want to keep coming to school. They need choices—arts, sports, specialized programs in science, writing, teaching, etc. We need to find their interests and let them run with them.”

“It is at this point (the middle grades) that they need to be able to explore pathways and careers. There must be a wide range of choices and students must be supported in their exploration. I hate the notion that failure is not an option. This is the time when students should be allowed to try and fail. Failure is only a failure if learning and growth does not occur as a result.”

- 2) **The middle grades experience needs to be one that focuses on the whole child.** Middle grades education cannot simply be about academics. It also has to be focused on the social and emotional development of a child. Life skills, study skills, and social skills need to be taught during these years and are just as important as academics. If students lack the behaviors for academic success they are less likely to be academically successful.

*From the field:* “Finding the balance---that’s what the middle grades is about.”

“If we want rigor, we must support the whole child.”

“Our kids don’t care to know what you know, until they know that you care.”

- 3) **Middle grades schools need time in the day** for teachers and students to build relationships; for teachers to adequately teach a class; for teacher collaboration; for planning interdisciplinary curriculum. Without sufficient time students' needs will not be met which could lead to disengagement, negative behaviors, and poor course completion.

*From the field:* "There are so many expectations. We need a substantial amount of time in order to be mindful of meeting the needs of each student."

"I have so many students that I have less than one minute of attention to give each individual child."

- 4) Middle grades schools need to have **clear intervention programs for struggling students**. Once students have been identified as "struggling" there need to be school or district-wide programs in place to help support these students, their families, and their teachers. When it is left up to individual or even teams of teachers to do this work it is unsustainable and could lead to teacher burnout.

*From the field:* "Social and emotional supports have dried up which makes it hard for some of my students to be academically successful."

- 5) Middle grades schools need to have a **strategic partnership between students, teachers, and families**. School-wide structures need to be in place to engage, welcome, and communicate with all families. When students see that their families are valued, welcomed, and engaged they are more likely to exhibit positive behaviors.

*From the field:* "Without great communication between school and home, we are setting ourselves up for failure."

- 6) **Middle grades programs need to be adequately funded**. Budget cuts have negatively impacted middle grades students and teachers. Teacher lay-offs result in larger class sizes during a time when it is imperative that students are known well by the adults in their lives. Staff lay-offs result in less counselors and school support staff such as family liaisons who are crucial to a young adolescent's development. Arts and extracurricular programs are often cut in tough budget times. These are the programs that allow middle grades students to explore, try new things, and remain engaged in their learning. Without appropriate funding we will continue to lose the students we most need to engage.

*From the field:* "One teacher librarian and over 2,000 students just doesn't cut it."

"Every year teachers are expected to do more with fewer resources. We continue to meet the challenge because we care about our students, but I've seen excellent teachers come close to their breaking point."

- 7) Middle grades schools need to be **flexible but structured** because "our students at this age are just that."

*"There needs to be an emphasis on middle grades because this is a critical time in our students' development where they'll learn crucial skills that will take them through high school and beyond."*