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## INTRODUCTION

# PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

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Highly successful middle level schools are exciting, dynamic and vital places. They are places where students and adults are actively engaged in learning, where expectations are high and where the environment is developmentally responsive.

It is evident that in these middle level schools, principals and teachers know what needs to be done to successfully meet the needs of young adolescents and to satisfy the expectations of parents, community members and governmental agencies. Because of their knowledge of the increasing body of research on middle level education, they now have strong support for middle level values and beliefs and the confidence to implement the programs, structures, and curricular and instructional practices that long have been considered to be components of the middle level concept. These schools, with the guidance of skilled and visionary leaders, know that when fully implemented, the middle level concept has a positive influence on the achievement of all young adolescents (Felner et al., 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2004).

### **What Distinguishes Highly Successful Middle Schools?**

What is it that highly successful and high-performing schools do that makes them places where all students can be successful? What characteristics of these schools distinguish them from other middle level schools? Information from a variety of sources about middle level school success, including the opinions of students, parents and community members; examples drawn from successful practice; and results from middle school research yields findings that are strikingly similar in describing highly successful, high-performing middle level schools.

Jay Mathews, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, expressed his surprise at the response he received when he challenged readers to identify middle schools in his readership area that were meeting both the academic and nonacademic needs of young adolescents. More than 500 parents, students, educators and community members wrote describing the efforts of great teachers and wise principals who were making real progress in the education of young adolescents. Thirty of the recommended schools were studied and then profiled by Mathews in the 15 April, 2007, *Washington Post Sunday Magazine*. While Mathews suggested that his list was not comprehensive, he contended that the elements of great middle schools were very evident:

- Principals who are liked and respected by parents.
- Teachers who are imaginative and willing to give more to students who need help.

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## SECTION I

# Principal Leadership for Improving Schools: What It Is and What It Can Be

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### ■ PREVIEW

Meeting the challenges of bringing about successful middle school improvement requires strong, visionary leadership, leadership that has its foundation in knowledge, experience and beliefs. Principals of highly successful and high-performing middle level schools are knowledgeable about middle level education and adolescent development, and they use this knowledge as a foundation for establishing school beliefs and core values and for setting leadership priorities that focus on learning and school improvement.

The three articles in this section

- Examine the challenges of what must be done to create highly successful middle level schools.
- Offer perspectives on middle school principals' beliefs, priorities, experience and knowledge base.
- Describe what principals of high-performing schools do to create places where all young adolescents are successful learners.

Middle school leaders have spent considerable time and effort making structural and organisational changes, changes that often have little impact on student learning. The way in which leaders use structures to support learning among students and adults is more important to success than the structures themselves. Finding the structure that best fits a school and effectively implementing that structure is the key to successful student learning. Revitalising and improving middle school curriculum and instruction is dependent on leaders who know how to create and use structures that support accountability, learning and teaching.

Principals' beliefs and values are based upon knowledge, expertise and experience. These beliefs and values play a significant role in determining how principals lead, what they establish for priorities and how they choose to spend their time. Successful middle school principals are those who have made themselves knowledgeable and who spend their time on these tasks that result in significant school change and improvement. There are many middle level schools that are realising great success in helping young adolescents achieve at high levels. These schools serve as examples of the effects of strong, knowledgeable and visionary leadership. In these schools principals and other school leaders exert a positive influence on student success by knowing where to focus their priorities. They focus on learning, they insist on curricular rigour and appropriate instruction, and they build and sustain positive relationships.

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## The Challenge of Curricular and Instructional Improvement in an Era of High-Stakes Testing

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*Middle school leaders need to take the initiative to strengthen curriculum and instructional practices in ways that are appropriate for young adolescent learners and that will also produce results acceptable to parents, community members and policymakers.*

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Middle level school improvement efforts during the 1990s placed major emphasis on implementing structural/organisational changes such as interdisciplinary teaming; teacher advisories; flexible schedules; and expanded exploratory, elective and activity programs. Two factors were conducive to the implementation of these kinds of changes: (a) Many of *Turning Points*' (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) recommendations called for structural/organisational changes, and (b) structural changes are generally easier and more appealing to implement than curricular and instructional changes, which usually require changes of attitudes and school cultures (Elmore, 1995).

It is evident that the implementation of structural/organisational change has improved relationships within schools (Midgley & Edelin, 1988), and as a result of these changes, many middle level schools are "warmer, happier places for students and adults" (Lipsitz, Mizell, Jackson, & Austin, 1997, p. 535). There are concerns, however, that the structural/organisational changes have not resulted in changes at the core of most students' school experience: curriculum, assessment and instruction. Lipsitz and colleagues expressed this concern when they suggested most schools have not "taken the critical next step to develop students who perform well academically with the intellectual wherewithal to improve their life conditions" (p. 535).

It appears that the emphasis on making structural/organisational change has clearly overshadowed the efforts to focus on how young adolescents learn, the way curriculum is organised, and the way students are taught.

Middle level leaders must accept the challenge and take that next important step in middle level school improvement—the implementation of high-quality curriculum and instruction in their schools. In doing so, leaders must address the mounting pressures of high-stakes testing and standards-based reform while at the same time ensuring that curriculum and instruction are appropriate to the needs and concerns of young adolescents.

Two important challenges that face middle level leaders in their efforts to place greater emphasis on curriculum and instruction in their schools are (a) creating and maintaining high-quality, developmentally responsive curriculum and instruction in an era of standards-based reform and high-stakes accountability and (b) assisting teachers in making the changes in their classrooms that will support high-quality student learning.

### **Developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction and high-stakes accountability**

The question that faces all middle level leaders is this: What effect will the pressure of high-stakes accountability have on the implementation and maintenance of developmentally responsive curriculum

## What Should Accountability Really Mean to School Leaders?

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There are many misconceptions about accountability and its effects on middle level education. Some middle level educators feel that the increasing pressures for accountability reduce school curricular options and restrict school autonomy. Other educators feel that accountability and the accompanying high-stakes testing limits the assessment of student success to a single measure that does not adequately measure learning. These fears, along with the feelings of helplessness and frustration that frequently accompany teachers' and administrators' reactions to accountability, are often a result of limited understanding of accountability and how it applies to their schools and to their professional lives.

Accountability, in and of itself, does not restrict programs or school autonomy. It is not in conflict with the middle level concept or developmentally appropriate education. It is the way accountability is interpreted and applied by school leaders that determines whether successful middle level programs are supported or undermined. When accountability is recognised and understood as a complex issue, influenced by diverse values and beliefs and applied in multiple ways, it can be used as a positive vehicle for creating learning environments where students and adults can be successful.

In understanding the complexities of accountability, leaders need to know to whom they are accountable. They also need to understand that accountability takes many forms. Middle level leaders must be

- *Personally and professionally accountable*—Middle level leaders hold themselves accountable for their

own learning and that of the students and adults in their schools.

- *Ethically accountable*—Middle level leaders are committed to doing the right thing.
- *Politically accountable*—Middle level leaders recognise and address the expectations of stakeholders.

### **Personal and Professional Accountability: Building and Maintaining Knowledge Bases**

Leaders of successful middle level schools recognise the importance of learning, and they hold themselves accountable for their own intellectual development. They realise that knowledge is constantly expanding and that being current is critical to their own success and the success of their teachers and students (Clark & Clark, 2002c). These leaders use a variety of strategies to enhance their own knowledge bases, knowledge bases that give them a better understanding of young adolescents, developmentally responsive middle level programs and effective leadership practices. They also hold themselves accountable for ensuring that their teachers are knowledgeable about the middle school concept, curriculum structures and appropriate instructional practices.

Personal and professional accountability means acting responsibly based upon the information available. It assumes that the available information is current and relevant (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This, however, is not always the case. Research studies reveal that principals and teachers lack specific preparation in middle level education. In one study, only about 25% of middle

## Is Teacher Leadership an Integral Part of Your School?

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*By empowering teachers with leadership responsibilities, principals can engage teachers in school improvement, in shared decision making and in developing site-based professional development that is focused on adult and student learning.*

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There are good reasons why the concept of teacher leadership is receiving increased emphasis. With the complexity and number of instructional and curricular issues brought about by standards-based reform, accountability and high-stakes testing, it is impossible for leadership to be the responsibility of one person. Lambert (2002) stated that “the days of the principal as the lone instructional leader are over” (p. 37). Others (Barth, 2000; Fullan, 2002; Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2004) also agree that the principal’s perceived role as sole leader is much too narrow and limited to bring about significant changes in a school’s learning culture. In addition, concepts such as integrated leadership (Marks & Printy, 2003), distributed leadership (Elmore, 2000; Riordan, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001) and building leadership capacity (Lambert, 2002) present powerful options for principals in sharing leadership responsibilities in their schools.

The importance of teacher leadership is widely recognised by scholars, researchers and practitioners as a critical component in creating the learning communities essential for improved student learning (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Katzenmayer & Moller, 2001; Lambert, 2003a; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Schlechty, 1997). Jackson and Davis (2000) stated that learning communities where many different stakeholders can and often do assume leadership roles are fundamental in bringing about school improvement. National Middle School Association (2003) in *This We Believe* called for “courageous,

collaborative leadership” (p. 7), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2004) recommended that “teachers will provide the leadership essential to the success of reform” (p. 63). Schools to Watch (2005), an initiative by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle School Reform, states in its organisational structures and processes criteria, “Shared and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose” (p. 1).

Sharing leadership through the use of teacher leaders not only spreads the responsibility of leadership, it also serves as the foundation for building collaborative professional learning communities in successful middle schools where every child can learn (Brazee, 2002; Valentine et al., 2004). Despite the many benefits of shared leadership, it appears that middle school principals are less likely to be sharing leadership and collaborative decision making with their teachers than they were a decade ago (Clark & Clark, 2002; Petzko et al., 2002; Valentine et al., 2002).

### Teacher Leadership: Roles and Definitions

Teachers can—and do—assume many leadership roles in middle schools, including the more traditional and formal roles of department heads and team leaders. Lord and Miller (2000) suggested that in most schools teacher leadership includes working with teachers in classroom and in professional development settings. Within these settings, teachers typically assume leadership roles such as mentoring or coaching other teachers,