

SCHOOLS TO WATCH AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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In 1997 a group of middle school researchers and middle level advocates began meeting to talk about their shared interest in improving middle level schools. The goal of these initial conversations was to bridge the differences among groups and identify ways that greater collaboration could take place in support of improved middle grades schools. These initial conversations led to creation of The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform and The Forum has emerged as one of the leading voices for middle school reform.

The National Forum was built on a shared vision for middle grades reform. *Speaking with One Voice: A Manifesto for Middle-Grades Reform* (Lipsitz, Mizell, Jackson & Austin, 1997) articulated that high-performing middle grades schools shared three fundamental characteristics: they were developmentally responsive, academically excellent and socially equitable.

The Vision

This shared vision changed the conversation about middle grades reform in a fundamental way. It suggested that developmental responsiveness, long a hallmark of sound middle school programs was a necessary attribute, but by itself, an insufficient response to the needs of middle school youth. The vision stated that developmental responsiveness must be accompanied by a commitment to provide every student

with an academically challenging curriculum characterized by both relevance and rigor. Supporting the first two characteristics was a commitment to social equity and assuring that every student, regardless of ability or background, had access to a high-quality educational experience. Strong organizational and support structures underpinned the three pillars of the vision.

The attributes of high-quality middle school programs articulated by The National Forum became known as the *Schools to Watch* Criteria. These characteristics, endorsed by each of the participating organizations including National Middle School Association (NMSA), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), National Staff Development Council (NSDC), are the accepted descriptors of a high-performing middle grades school.

For each of the three components, developmental responsiveness, academic excellence, and social equity, a set of specific criteria was developed. The complete list is available at the website of The National Forum, www.schoolstowatch.org. Available at the same site is a self-assessment tool that school leadership teams can use to gather evidence about how their school aligns with the *Schools to Watch* criteria.

A national *Schools to Watch* program was launched in 1999 and

selected four schools, from 64 nominated, as representative of the National Forum's vision for a high-performing school. A detailed description or "School Snapshot" about each of the four original *Schools to Watch* is available at the National Forum's website, www.schoolstowatch.org.

Schools to Watch Schools

The *Schools to Watch* criteria are a helpful vehicle for launching a conversation about high-performing middle grades schools. Even more helpful was an initiative launched by The National Forum to identify middle grades schools across the United States that exemplified the Forum's criteria. The goal of the program was to accelerate the rate of middle grades reform by identifying schools that are successful in meeting the *Schools to Watch* criteria.

Schools to Watch are just that, places where other middle grades practitioners can see The National Forum's criteria at work. Each school is unique and reflects its own unique identity. The emphasis is on outcomes for students, not a uniform program design. Thus *Schools to Watch* include a variety of grade configurations and program offerings. They are located in urban, rural and suburban sites and reflect the diversity present in this nation. Some are from low-wealth districts, others high-wealth. Some are large, others small. Some are homogeneous and others very diverse. What they share is a uniform commitment to improving the educational experience of their students and to develop a school that is

developmentally responsive and sensitive to the unique developmental needs of early adolescence, academically excellent, challenging all students to use their minds, and socially equitable, providing every student with high-quality teachers, resources and support.

It's All About Improving School and Classroom Practice

The primary focus of the *Schools to Watch* Program is to improve school and classroom practice. By accessing the website of the North Carolina Middle School Association, www.ncmsa.net, and linking to *Schools to Watch* at the bottom of the screen it is possible to take a vicarious visit to each of the 19 North Carolina *Schools to Watch*. A description of each school is provided along with a link to either the school's website or a PowerPoint presentation about the school. Each school provides a description of the practices they use to assure a learning environment that is developmentally responsive, academically excellent and socially equitable.

Each of the 19 North Carolina *Schools to Watch* faces different challenges, but each program reflects common themes found across all *Schools to Watch* and described on The National Forum's website. They are:

- Schools that know and articulate the academic outcomes they seek. In some schools they build on state prescribed outcomes and adopt additional outcomes recommended by academic disciplines.
- Schools that take deliberate steps to help students achieve those

outcomes by making strategic and intentional changes in curriculum, teaching and school services.

- Schools that have benchmarks for implementing their strategies and hold themselves accountable for results. Data plays an important role in the lives of these schools.
- Schools that strategically concentrates its energies on important focus areas. As a result, the changes in each school reflect fundamental changes in culture.
- Schools that have strong, visionary leaders who articulate challenging goals, and motivate faculty and staff to reach those goals.

Information about each of the 84 Schools to Watch in 14 states is available at the *Schools to Watch* website, www.schoolstowatch.org/state/state.htm.

Schools to Watch Program

So that the criteria could be infused more quickly into schools and classrooms and to make *Schools to Watch* more accessible to school personnel, a state *Schools to Watch* initiative was launched. Complementing the national program, professional groups like the North Carolina Middle School Association worked with the National Forum to establish a state program with the goal of identifying schools in individual states that have made substantial progress in meeting the *Schools to Watch* criteria. Fourteen states currently participate in the program. Among the first states to launch a program was North Carolina. The North Carolina *Schools to Watch* Program is a partnership of NCMSA,

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform and East Carolina University.

Each year middle schools in the fourteen states are invited to apply to become a *School to Watch*. After completing their application they are visited by an external review team that spends a day on campus talking with teachers, students, parents and other personnel to gather data about the program. The team's responsibility is to ascertain the degree to which the school's program aligns with the *Schools to Watch* criteria. Details about the application process are available at the North Carolina Middle School Association website, www.ncmsa.net.

Schools that are recognized are invited to an annual *Schools to Watch* Conference held each spring. The conference, open to all middle grades educators, provides an opportunity for identified *Schools to Watch* to share their practices, and promotes a community of inquiry that will lead to even greater progress meeting the *Schools to Watch* criteria. Details about the 2007 *Schools to Watch* Conference will be available at The National Forum's website in late 2006.

Conclusion

No single effort at middle grades reform has been more successful at describing the attributes of a high-performing middle school than the *Schools to Watch* Program. By locating high-performing schools, in all sorts of settings, and by sharing the experiences of the teachers and principals, *Schools to*

Watch is advancing middle school reform in ways that allow more substantive changes in teaching and learning to occur at the school and classroom level. The easy availability of information about schools facing the day-to-day challenges of serving middle grades youth offers both hope and guidance for all middle grades educators.

References

Lipsitz, J., Mizell, M. H., Jackson, A. & Austin, L. (1997). Speaking with one voice: A manifesto for middle-grades reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78(7), 533-540.

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