

LRSD Middle School Reform Effort

The LRSD School Board has as one of its five goals to “fix” the middle schools. The LRSD Middle School Task Force has met with principals, teachers, parents, students and community members several times over the past three years in the effort to improve middle schools in the district. The Task Force was concerned about elementary parents who were opting not to send their children to LRSD middle schools.

Purpose of the Middle School

What then can be done to “fix” the middle schools? Before detailing strategies to answer that question, it has to be determined what the real purpose of middle schools is. The real purpose of middle schools is to prepare students to be successful for the broad, rigorous liberal arts courses that they will encounter in high school. To fulfill this purpose, it is necessary for there to be a broad, rigorous liberal arts curriculum in middle school; it also is necessary that every student in middle school is challenged. We need to look far beyond the goal of preparing students to be proficient or higher on the ACTAAP examinations. We can no longer afford to send students to high school who are not prepared for the rigorous high school curriculum.

Consistency of Educational Practices

What is happening in our middle schools is that there is a lack of consistency in the educational practices at the schools. Schools have different ways of dealing with common challenges. In the middle school reform effort, we are looking for the best way to uniformly meet these challenges in every middle school. The LRSD Secondary Collaborative Team (a team that consists of directors and their colleagues in various subject areas, statisticians etc.) is a group of LRSD educators whose primary purpose is to provide services for secondary schools’ instructional reform efforts. We realize that middle schools cannot successfully implement the reform efforts unless they are given the support they need from central office professionals.

Safety and Security

The middle school reform effort begins with the absolute necessity that every middle school in our district must have a safe and secure learning environment. There are some parents who will not even look at our middle schools because of the perception that their child will not be safe in the school. To counteract this perception we are requiring all of our middle schools to have monitoring/visibility plans in operation. This plan will detail the locations and duties of staff members before school, between classes, during lunch and after school. The idea here is for there to be a plan to constantly monitor a school's building and grounds so as to maximize safety at the school.

Collaboration

Another reform effort of the middle schools is that all middle schools are required to submit a collaboration plan. Collaboration may well be the highest form of learning. Collaboration is a process whereby professionals actively engage in discussions/debates in interpreting the curriculum; and in planning lessons, activities and assessments. Through the process of collaboration, teachers also can examine students' work and develop more rigorous assignments. Collaboration assures that schools offer quality instruction regardless of the experience level of the teacher in the classroom.

Numeracy and Literacy across the Curriculum

Yet another middle school reform is that all middle schools are required to plan and implement numeracy and literacy across the curriculum. What this entails is that all teachers in the school teach math and literacy concepts every day in every course in the context of teaching the curriculum for the course. The idea here is to strengthen all students' math and literacy skills so that they can be ready for the rigorous courses that they will take in high school.

Consistent Use of Data

Still another strategy that every middle school is directed to use is that every middle school is required to use data in the same manner. The LRSD Secondary

Collaborative Team developed a seven step data template that all middle schools are required to use. This data template not only ensures that the state's benchmark examinations data are interpreted in a consistent manner, but also ensures that schools use data in a manner that will focus on students' growth/readiness for high school. We want to be forward looking in how we use data in our middle schools.

Gifted and Talented (GT) Program

Expansion of the GT program at all middle schools is a reform strategy designed to raise the quality of instruction in the middle schools. This will be accomplished by making sure that every middle school has enough teachers with GT training, and by requiring the schools to show documented evidence of recruitment/retention of GT students at the school. The GT program also is looking at ways of making the program more inclusive by recognizing students who are talented in the middle schools.

True Curriculum

All middle schools also are required to implement the true curriculum in their schools. This curriculum is really the actual curriculum without the commercial programs that have cluttered the curriculum in the past. By collaborating on the true curriculum, teachers can design much more effective lessons and assessments for their students.

Recruitment Plans

The final two reform strategies involve recruitment plans. All middle schools are required to have a teacher recruitment plan on file. It is imperative that every middle school do everything it can to not only recruit the top teachers, but retain the top teachers that are currently on staff. The recruitment and retention of top teaching talent is the single most important thing a principal can do to improve instruction at his/her school. It also is important that every middle school has a student recruitment plan on file. A process for attracting and keeping students in our middle schools is critical to the success of the schools.

These middle school reform efforts require that every principal documents that they have fully implemented the effort. As mentioned earlier, the LRSD Secondary Collaborative Team is one of the primary support mechanisms in place to ensure that schools have the help that they need to implement the reforms. Another support mechanism in place is the Middle School Summit where principals and their instructional coaches meet on an ongoing basis for the specific purpose of collaborating on the middle school reform efforts. There have already been two Middle School Summits' held this year. More are planned for the future.

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