

M.S. 322

FINAL REPORT



New York City Department of Education External School Curriculum Audit | August 2011

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Introduction

About This Report

This final report is the result of an external school curriculum audit (ESCA) of M.S. 322 by Learning Point Associates, an affiliate of American Institutes for Research. This audit was conducted in response to the school being identified as in corrective action under the New York State Education Department differentiated accountability plan, pursuant to the accountability requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act. The utilized ESCA process was developed for and carried out under the auspices of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Office of School Development, within the Division of Portfolio Planning.

About M.S. 322

M.S. 322 (M322) is located in New York City, in Manhattan (in Community School District 6). The school serves approximately 490 students in Grades 6–8 and in special education classes. Approximately 33 percent of the students are English language learners (ELLs), and 15 percent are identified as students with disabilities. M.S. 322 shares a school building with I.S. 218 Salome Urena (Grades 6–8) and City College Academy of the Arts (Grades 6–11).

In 2009–10, M.S. 322 did not make adequate yearly progress in English language arts for all students and the following subgroups: Hispanic or Latino students, students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency, and economically disadvantaged students. In 2010–11, M.S. 322's state accountability status was designated as Corrective Action (Year 1).¹ Because M.S. 322 was designated as in corrective action, the school participated in the ESCA. Data collection for the audit took place from February through June of 2011.

Audit Process at M.S. 322

The ESCA approach utilized at the middle school level examines five topic areas: student engagement, curriculum and instruction, academic interventions and supports, professional learning and collaboration, and support for transitioning students. Data were collected at the school level through teacher surveys, administrator interviews, classroom observations conducted by trained observers, and an analysis of documents submitted by M.S. 322. From these data, Learning Point Associates prepared a series of three reports for the school's use.

These reports were presented to the school during a co-interpretationSM meeting, held on June 9, 2011. During this meeting, 14 stakeholders read the reports. Through a facilitated and collaborative group process, they identified individual findings, then developed and prioritized key findings that emerged from information in the reports.

¹ <https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb-rc/2010/42/AOR-2010-310600010322.pdf>. Accessed on March 3, 2011

The remainder of this report presents the key findings that emerged from the co-interpretation process and the actionable recommendations that Learning Point Associates has developed in response. Please note that there is not necessarily a one-to-one connection between key findings and recommendations; rather, the key findings are considered as a group, and the recommended strategies are those that we believe are most likely to have the greatest positive impact on student performance at M.S. 322.

Key Findings

After considerable thought and discussion, co-interpretation participants determined a set of key findings. The wording of the key findings below matches the wording developed and agreed upon by co-interpretation participants at the meeting. The key findings are detailed in this section.

Critical Key Findings

Co-interpretation participants identified these three areas as ones in which the school needs to improve.

CRITICAL KEY FINDING 1:

A well-executed schoolwide discipline plan does not yet exist.

Critical Key Finding 1 is supported by information from teacher survey results, school interviews, and review of school-submitted documents. Submitted documents included reference to student expectations and positive behavioral interventions for Grade 6 students, but no similar documents were submitted for Grades 7 and 8. Interviewees further supported that elements of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) are in place and that the deans, guidance counselor, and assistant principals all support conflict resolution in the classroom. However, surveyed teachers generally reported that they set their own behavior standards and that there is not a schoolwide behavior policy in place to follow.

CRITICAL KEY FINDING 2:

Classroom practices do not consistently support a positive, student-centered environment. Students are not consistently and actively engaged.

Critical Key Finding 2 is supported by information from classroom observations and teacher survey results. Classroom observations showed a general lack of regard for adolescent perspectives and student roles in facilitating the lesson and class discussion. Observed classes were generally teacher centered, with few opportunities for student leadership and connection to student experience. Observed classrooms also showed occasional (but not consistent) indications of warm, supportive, respectful relationships between teachers and students. The large majority of observed classrooms (83 percent) fell in the mid range for student engagement, indicating that students were not consistently engaged. Surveyed teachers reported engaging their students in a variety of activities. Three quarters of surveyed teachers reported that most of their students often or always participate in class discussions at some point.

CRITICAL KEY FINDING 3:

In the majority of observed classrooms, teachers are inconsistent when they activate student prior knowledge, use feedback, encourage use of higher-order thinking skills, or push students to explain their responses. This teacher behavior results in few opportunities for classroom discussions of overarching concepts, and it reflects in low student understanding of overarching concepts in more than 90 percent of observed classrooms.

The majority of observed classrooms (more than 90 percent) only sometimes presented class content in a way that helped students to understand the underlying concept. Content instruction in these observed classrooms only sometimes focused on clear, meaningful discussion of broad, organizing ideas. Similarly, in more than 90 percent of observed classrooms, teachers only sometimes provided students with the opportunity to analyze, problem-solve, reason, and use other higher-order thinking skills. Teachers provided opportunities for students to further their thinking in more than half of observed classrooms (58 percent). However, in these classrooms, prompting was only occasional, typically to ask students to explain the thinking behind their responses. Further, students were infrequently provided with constructive or meaningful feedback in a quarter of observed classrooms.

Positive Key Findings

Co-interpretation participants also identified the following key findings as positive key findings—practices that the school should continue.

POSITIVE KEY FINDING 1:

The majority of teachers use a differentiating process in modifying curriculum and content for students with disabilities and ELLs.

Positive Key Finding 1 is supported by information from teacher survey results and review of school-submitted documents. Approximately 57 percent of teachers reported that they modify curricular materials and programs for students with disabilities, while another 42 percent of teachers reported modifying English language arts and/or mathematics standards for students with disabilities. Similarly 60 percent of teachers (or more) reported modifying process, content, or product for students with disabilities once a week or more.

Regarding ELLs, more than half the teachers (53 percent) reported modifying curricular materials or programs and less than half (40 percent) reported modifying standards. Similarly, approximately half of teachers reported modifying process, content, or product for ELLs once a week or more. Submitted documents were unclear as to how data from benchmark assessments are used to inform instruction and if there are any systematic expectations for teachers on the use of these data.

POSITIVE KEY FINDING 2:

Teachers at the school engage in a variety of collaborations.

Positive Key Finding 2 is supported by information from teacher survey results and review of school-submitted documents. Submitted documents indicated that most teachers participate in grade and subject meetings weekly. Two thirds of surveyed teachers reported meeting once or twice a week in scheduled, formal sessions to collaborate on instruction and student learning. Surveyed teachers also reported informal collaboration. About half of the surveyed teachers strongly agreed that they freely talk about instruction in a variety of settings and share and discuss student work with each other. Further, 78 percent of surveyed teachers agreed or strongly agreed that special education and general education teachers collaborate informally to share knowledge and strategies.

Co-interpretation participants expounded on this idea. They stated in the key finding that teachers believe that they can freely talk about instruction and share knowledge and strategies during weekly scheduled grade and subject-area meetings, as well as during informal (not scheduled) meetings. The majority of teachers reported that common planning was routinely used for lessons and assessments for all students. About 88 percent of teachers took the initiative to meet independently to share and discuss student work and differentiated methods of instruction.

POSITIVE KEY FINDING 3:

At least 62 percent of surveyed teachers reported moderate to great access to multiple data sources (attendance, referrals, grade point average [GPA], and so forth), with 86 percent of the completed surveys stating that teachers are using classroom or teacher-created assessments at least 1–2 times a week. According to data, 50 percent of the surveyed teachers use data to plan and deliver instruction on a daily basis. The data also showed that 36 percent of the teachers use data only 1–2 times a week to plan and deliver instruction.

Positive Key Finding 3 is supported by information from teacher survey results and school interviews. One interviewee suggested that student information is used to group students into classes and help teachers develop learning programs and begin using differentiation. Examples of information sources include parent and student surveys, report cards, Achievement Reporting and Innovation System (ARIS) data, past test scores, and prescreening assessments. Surveyed teachers reported access to a variety of data; at least 62 percent of surveyed teachers reported very good access to multiple data sources (attendance, referrals, GPAs, and so forth). Surveyed teachers reported using several data sources to inform instruction. Half of surveyed teachers reported using individualized education programs once a month or more. Classroom or teacher-created assessments were the most frequently referenced data source when surveyed teachers were planning or delivering instruction. About 50 percent of respondents reported that they reference such data daily or almost daily.

Recommendations

Overview of Recommendations

As detailed in the Key Findings section, participants at the M.S. 322 co-interpretation meeting prioritized some key findings that highlighted general school strengths (Positive Key Findings 1, 2, and 3) and other key findings that focused on areas in which the school can improve (Critical Key Findings 1, 2, and 3).

Recommendation 1 addresses a positive behavioral management system, which was identified as a need in Critical Key Finding 1. Recommendation 2 addresses student engagement, which was identified in Critical Key Finding 2. Recommendation 3 addresses instructional rigor, an issue identified by Critical Key Finding 3.

Though Recommendation 2 describes strategies for improving student engagement, staff at M.S. 322 should note that research also indicates that implementing instructional rigor will lead to improved student engagement (Cotton, 1989). Implementing both recommendations together will have the greatest impact on student engagement.

M.S. 322 should be able to leverage positive practices occurring in the school, such as those identified as positive key findings, to support the implementation of the following recommendations, which were developed to address the critical key findings. In particular, as the school seeks to improve student behavior, student engagement, and instructional rigor schoolwide, the established collaboration practices at the school can support teachers through implementation. The role of collaboration should be considered as part of the implementation plans related to these recommendations.

THE THREE RECOMMENDATIONS

With these issues in mind, Learning Point Associates auditors developed the following three recommendations:

1. Develop and implement a schoolwide positive behavior policy and system with clearly established standards for safety, discipline, and respect. The policy and related system should include concise social expectations and a continuum of supports, interventions, incentives/rewards, and consequences—including a clear delineation of activities and programs to which students are entitled rather than those activities that are privileges.
2. Initiate a schoolwide process for increasing student engagement and creating a sustainable and supportive learning environment. The aim is to improve student attendance, enhance participation, reduce boredom, end negative behaviors and the associated classroom management issues, and increase student achievement in academic and social skills.
3. Implement instructional strategies that increase opportunities for higher-order thinking, analysis and problem solving, and deeper content understanding.

These three recommendations are discussed on the following pages. Each recommendation

provides a review of research, online resources for additional information, specific actions the school may wish to take during its implementation process, and examples of real-life schools that have successfully implemented strategies. All works cited, as well as suggestions for further reading, appear in the References section at the end of this report.

Please note that the order in which these recommendations are presented does not reflect a ranking or prioritization of the recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Positive Behavioral Management System

Develop and implement a schoolwide positive behavior policy and system with clearly established standards for safety, discipline, and respect. The policy and related system should include concise social expectations and a continuum of supports, interventions, incentives/rewards, and consequences—including a clear delineation of activities and programs to which students are entitled rather than those activities that are privileges.

LINK TO RESEARCH

One of the greatest obstacles within urban schools is the large number of students whose behavior interferes with their achievement or the achievement of others. Often these students have behaved in a manner that disrupts the educational climate of the classroom and the school. One key element for changing this pattern is the implementation of a schoolwide behavior program that is developed with the input and support of parents and staff.

Chicago Public Schools, Office of Specialized Services (1998) describes schoolwide behavior programs:

Effective schoolwide behavior programs have clearly established standards for safety, discipline, and respect. Students need a secure, orderly environment that promotes their personal well-being and supports learning. Rules should also be fair and stress students' responsibility to the school community, their parents, and themselves. All students in the school need to be aware of the rules, the reasons for the rules, and the consequences for breaking the rules. Effective discipline programs are based on praise and encouragement for positive behavior and clear, consistent consequences for misbehavior.

Sprague (2011) provides more details about behavior management:

Effective schools build and maintain a positive "social culture." Successful students are safe (don't hurt themselves or others), respectful (follow adult requests and get along with their peers), and responsible (arrive to class on time and complete assignments). These foundational skills are essential for a safe and orderly school environment. In addition, members of a positive social culture use higher-order skills, such as (a) impulse control, (b) anger management, (c) conflict resolution, (d) empathy, and (e) drug and alcohol use resistance and prevention. Research studies consistently show that schools that establish a positive social culture also achieve the best academic gains.

Positive behavioral interventions—when used correctly by teachers, administrators, and parents—encourage or strengthen desirable behavior and reduce inappropriate behavior. Positive interventions have a greater likelihood of enabling a student to change his or her behavior in a way that does not interrupt learning. Effective interventions encourage praise and recognition of positive behavior and demand clear and consistent responses to misbehavior. Children and youth tend to respond to positive techniques. In some cases, however, more restrictive interventions may be necessary to control and change extremely inappropriate and aggressive behavior (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP] Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2011b).

QUICK LINKS: Online Sources for More Information

Alcott Middle School Behavior Expectations and Related Teaching Materials (Video)

http://www.pbis.org/swpbs_videos/alcott_mid.aspx

"Discovering School-Wide PBS: Moving Towards a Positive Future" from Florida's Positive Behavior Support Project (Video)

http://www.pbis.org/swpbs_videos/pbs_video-discovering_swpbs.aspx

Washington Elementary School Example (Video)

http://www.pbis.org/swpbs_videos/wash_elem.aspx

Schoolwide positive behavioral support (SWPBS) is based on the research-based application of lessons learned from more than 7,000 schools currently implementing successful changes in their school environment. Schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS) evolved from valid research in the field of special education. SWPBS is not a curriculum, intervention, or practice but a decision-making framework that guides selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidenced-based behavioral practices for improving important academic outcomes for all students (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2011b).

Researchers have only recently begun to study the effects of schoolwide behavioral management systems and what it takes to implement these systems effectively. Although it is too early to offer “recipes for success,” the work of key researchers and their school-based colleagues are providing some encouraging developments. These schools understand that change is incremental and are approaching implementation of their schoolwide systems slowly and over an extended time period. Although there are different variations of schoolwide systems of behavioral support, most systems have certain features in common. The emphasis is on consistency—both throughout the building and across classrooms. The entire school staff is expected to adopt strategies that will be uniformly implemented. As a result, approaches necessitate professional development and long-term commitment by the school leadership for this innovation to take hold.

Common Features of Schoolwide Behavioral Management Systems

- Total staff commitment to managing behavior, whatever approach is taken.
- Clearly defined and communicated expectations and rules.
- Consequences and clearly stated procedures for correcting rule-breaking behaviors.
- An instructional component for teaching students self-control and/or social skill strategies.

Reprinted from *Schoolwide Behavioral Management Systems* by Mary K. Fitzsimmons, at <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED417515.pdf>. Published in 1998 as ERIC/OSEP Digest E563.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

1. Understand the guiding principles of classroom behavior management.

The OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2011b) has established the following SWPBS guiding principles:

- “Develop a continuum of scientifically based behavior and academic interventions and supports.”

If not already established, a well-articulated schoolwide behavior policy/student code inclusive of positive expectations, minor and major infractions, and so forth, must first be in place. Clarity around expectations for staff’s handling of in-class behaviors is important in this situation. Authentic faculty feedback and participation are important throughout the policy and system development processes.

- “Use data to make decisions and solve problems.”

Data on both minor and major behavior incidents should be collected, tracked, analyzed, and utilized in decision making by the team and faculty on a monthly basis, at a minimum. Data should be presented in user-friendly format.

- “Arrange the environment to prevent the development and occurrence of problem behavior.”

This principle includes 3–5 positively stated overarching schoolwide social expectations that are posted prominently around the schools, particularly in problematic areas.

- “Teach and encourage prosocial skills and behaviors.”

Students should be introduced to or taught the schoolwide expectations, rules for specific settings, reward/consequence system, and related interventions/supports. Staff should be trained on how to present expectations to students. Ongoing communication and collaboration with families and the community are very important.

- “Implement evidenced-based behavioral practices with fidelity and accountability.”

Interventions should be multitiered, increasing in levels of intensity and inclusive of evidence-based programs or strategies. The primary level (all students) is the overall behavior management plan. The secondary level (some students) is for a targeted group or focused on individual plans for those who did not respond to the first level. The tertiary level (few students) includes highly individualized students who did not respond to the first two levels.

- “Screen universally and monitor student performance and progress continuously.”

There should be a plan for collecting data to evaluate PBIS outcomes, wherein data is collected as scheduled and used to evaluate PBIS effectiveness for future adjustments.

2. Build a team.

Florida’s Positive Behavior Support Project (2005) outlines a SWPBS process to provide a systematic structure and formalized procedures that can be implemented during the summer months. The initial steps should be to establish the program, encourage all staff to buy in, and establish a schoolwide leadership team or behavior support team. The goal is not to develop yet another group but to fold SWPBS into the roles and responsibilities of an already established team. Members of the team should include administrators (i.e., principal, assistant principal, or dean), counselors, social workers, the regular education teacher, the special education teacher, a member with behavior expertise, and a coach/district representative. It is vital that the administration supports the process, takes as active a role as the rest of the team, and attends most meetings.

3. Determine school capacity.

Other important implementation consideration points center around gauging and developing the school's individual and collective capacities to implement a comprehensive program. Related initial key questions include the following:

- What are the schoolwide social expectations, routines, and so forth?
- Who at the schoolwide level has the unique disposition necessary to both firmly hold students accountable *and* support them as they attempt to adjust with fidelity?
- What are the procedural expectations of teachers for managing in-class behaviors?
- What manageable recourse do teachers have for patterns of extremely disruptive and disrespectful instances of behavior “in the moment” (i.e., immediate referrals to a dean/counselor/administration, in-school “timeout room,” and so forth), and what are the criteria for reentry?
- What is a specific, realistic, and *manageable* continuum of interventions and supports?
- What is the specific, realistic, *and manageable* continuum of consequences for patterns of disruptive in-class behavior?
- How will the efficacy of chosen interventions and supports be intermittently monitored and adjusted as needed in a data-driven manner? Who is responsible for this monitoring?
- What are the mechanisms for notifying and collaborating with students’ parents or guardians in the process early and often? Who is responsible for the communication (i.e., teachers, counselors, social workers, deans, or administrators)?
- What are the thresholds for more severe consequences/privilege losses for patterns or disruptive behaviors?
- What outside resources are available to support students and families struggling with issues that are affecting students’ behavior but are well outside of the school’s capacity to address?
- What privileges and incentives (i.e., extracurriculars, athletics, field trips, social activities, and so forth) are currently in place that can serve as points of leverage? Do more privileges and incentives need to be identified?
- How are students who actively exhibit established desirable social behaviors formally recognized? Perhaps most importantly, how are those students who are actively attempting to make sustained social adjustments formally recognized and supported (without stigmatizing)?

Positive Behavior Support in the Classroom

- The classroom is arranged to “minimize crowding and distraction.”
- The classroom has “explicit routines [and] directions” that are linked to schoolwide routines and direction.
- There are “3–5 positively stated expectations (or rules)” that are “posted, taught, and reinforced.”
- There are frequent acknowledgments of appropriate behaviors.
- Students have “multiple opportunities to respond and participate during instruction.”
- The teacher actively supervises class during instruction.
- Inappropriate behavior is ignored; instead, quick, direct, explicit reprimands/redirections are provided.
- Multiple strategies are in place to acknowledge appropriate behavior (points, praise) linked to schoolwide strategies.
- Specific feedback is given in response to social and academic errors and correct responses.

Adapted from *Classroom Management: Self-Assessment Revised* by Brandi Simonsen, Sarah Fairbanks, Amy Briesch, and George Sugai, available at http://www.pbis.org/pbis_resource_detail_page.aspx?Type=4&PBIS_ResourceID=174.

Jonesboro Middle School

Jonesboro Middle School, located in Clayton County, Georgia, provides a good example of a positive behavior management system.

Jonesboro Middle School (JMS) has a population of 558 students, a 65% poverty rate and sits in the center of Clayton County, Georgia. JMS is also a model demonstration school for the state of Georgia's Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support efforts. Like hundreds of schools across the United States and Canada, JMS has found that implementing School-wide Positive Behavior Support can have many benefits.

In 2003, JMS was one of several middle schools in Clayton County that received a stipend to send a team of staff members to a 3-day training on a schoolwide PBIS effort that Georgia calls Effective Behavioral and Instructional Supports (EBIS). The team that JMS sent, included: the assistant principal in charge of data and discipline, representative core teachers from each grade level, representative special education teachers, representative staff members, and a parent representative.... The JMS team learned how to develop capacity by successfully implementing the following characteristics of EBIS:

- Using Data-based Decision Making
- Developing a Simple Set of Behavioral Expectations
- Teaching Behavioral Expectations
- Acknowledging Appropriate Behavior....

The JMS team developed 3 simple rules, or behavioral expectations, for their school. Once they were developed, the team took the expectations to the entire staff for approval. The staff settled on the following set of behavioral expectations:

1. Be Respectful of Self, Others, and Property.
2. Be Responsible and Prepared at all Times.
3. Be Ready to Follow Directions and Procedures.

To acknowledge the good behavior of students, the team decided on a "gotcha" system that would be brought to the office to be traded for a small prize such as ice cream at lunch. They introduced the gotchas to the teachers and instructed them on how to use them. They made sure that the entire staff understood that these were not to be given out to every child in their class; rather, the staff was to monitor the non-classroom areas looking for good examples of "Doing it the Jonesboro Way" and giving a gotcha for a specific exemplar. This is why unsuspecting students who picked up trash on the school grounds were surprised by the assistant principal jumping out of the bushes or coming out from around a tree to give them a gotcha for picking up litter and respecting property. Word spread quickly of the assistant principal's penchant for positives, and the grounds have never looked lovelier. Students in the cafeteria are quick to assist someone who drops a tray because they never know when someone will be watching to give them a gotcha for respecting their neighbor....

Last year [prior to implementing EBIS], JMS dealt with 1,252 office discipline referrals (ODR). This year [in the first year of EBIS implementation], they only dealt with 674 ODR. Assuming the average ODR takes approximately 15 minutes for each, this is a savings of 8,670 minutes. This is equivalent to 145 hours or almost 21 days. That is a month more of contact time that the staff had to spend instructing and interacting positively to their students.

Adapted from the *Jonesboro Middle School Case* by the OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2011a), available online at http://www.pbis.org/school/primary_level/jonesboro.aspx.

Recommendation 2: Student Engagement

Initiate a schoolwide process for increasing student engagement and creating a sustainable and supportive learning environment. The aim is to improve student attendance, enhance participation, reduce boredom, end negative behaviors and the associated classroom management issues, and increase student achievement in academic and social skills.

LINK TO RESEARCH

Student engagement provides an essential foundation for increasing achievement levels. “Educators must work to build engagement levels if they hope to support students in meeting higher standards” (Learning Point Associates, 2005, p. 2).

Literature about middle school reform acknowledges the importance of an academically challenging and supportive environment to engage young adolescent learners. Student motivation, a meaningful curriculum, and student choice also are important factors for engaging middle-level learners (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Learning Point Associates, 2005; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1995).

In a report on the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), which was taken by 42,754 students, Yazzie-Mintz (2010, pp. 2–3) describes a spectrum of student disengagement—from temporary boredom to dropping out—and attributes this disengagement to the following: uninteresting and irrelevant material, work being too challenging or not challenging enough, no interaction with the teacher, not liking the school or the teacher, not seeing value in the assigned work, adults at the school not caring about the student, safety and bullying concerns, schoolwork not connecting to real world or real work, feeling little connection with any adult at the school, teacher favoritism, ineffective instruction or instructional methods, feeling unheard and not responded to or respected, and feelings of frustration and disconnection.

When students feel marginalized or alienated at school, they lose interest and become disengaged. Yazzie-Mintz (2010, p. 17) concludes that there are considerable gaps not only in academic achievement but also in student engagement. He suggests the integration of engagement data with academic data as a useful tool for school planning and decision making.

Factors that would increase student engagement, according to the surveyed students (Yazzie-Mintz, pp. 18–23) are as follows: supportive and nurturing schools; increased individualization; classes that are more fun as well as interactive, experiential, and relevant; a schoolwide belief in relationships, respect, and responsibility; coaching and modeling for the staff of good student engagement practices; reflection on and response to student ideas; adult understanding of student skills, strengths, and interests and having these qualities inform instruction; experiential learning and interdisciplinary studies; and opportunities for students to work together on finding solutions to real-world problems and issues.

Students need to build a sense of self-efficacy (Alvermann, 2003) in an inclusive environment in which they can achieve competence. They should be engaged in authentic and personally meaningful work, using a culturally relevant curriculum with an appropriate level of difficulty and challenge—one that requires problem solving (Voke, 2002). In addition, Gordon (2006)

QUICK LINKS: Online Sources for More Information

Center for Mental Health in Schools (Website)

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (Website)

<http://www.casel.org>

Illinois Learning Standards for Social/Emotional Learning (Website)

http://isbe.state.il.us/ils/social_emotional/standards.htm

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility (Website)

<http://www.morningsidecenter.org>

suggests the recognition and leveraging of individual student strengths and recalls a typical student response from the 2005 Gallup Youth Survey (pp. 77–80):

“My teacher understood the way that I learned and worked. I was never criticized for my ideas or feelings, but I was met with questions and ideas that could change the way I looked at something.” —Jessica, 17, Waverly, IA (p. 77)

A rubric titled the “Partnership Guide for Culturally Responsive Teaching” (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000, pp. 185–187) offers a list of engagement activities (establishing inclusion, developing a positive attitude, enhancing meaning and engendering competence) and assessment tools. The Executive Summary of *Engaging Schools* (Committee on Increasing High School Students’ Engagement and Motivation to Learn, 2003) provides 10 recommendations for reaching “the goals of meaningful engagement and genuine improvements in achievement” for high school students (pp. 4–9). Easton (2008) discusses engaging struggling high school students by using experiential learning, essential questions and a whole-child perspective in curriculum development, instructional strategies, professional development, and teacher evaluations. “If there is a secret to motivation in the classroom,” says Gordon (2006, p. 80), “it lies in the interaction between the teacher and the student.”

“There is a growing consensus that whatever else is done, schools must also become places where it is easier for students and teachers to know one another well and for students to connect to the school and its purposes, says Sergiovanni (2006, p. 58). “Schools in other words must be caring and learning communities.”

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS: WHOLE-SCHOOL PRACTICES

Incorporating student engagement practices should be part of the annual school improvement process. Whole-school practices such as building a safe and supportive school environment are part of this process. Students can learn effectively only in environments in which they feel safe and supported and where their teachers have high expectations for their learning. Implementation of a schoolwide positive behavior plan that is based on pro-social values, social competencies, incentives, and positive peer relationships will lay the foundation for classroom-level work and must occur before the classroom work can begin.

The following guidelines were developed by the Victoria Department of Education and Early Child Development (2009) for implementation of effective student engagement strategies across whole schools at the building level:

1. Create a positive school culture.

Teachers and staff must recognize students as individuals by acknowledging and celebrating the diversity of the student population. The school must find ways to connect students to school (through clubs, sports, student council, and other activities) so they develop a sense of belonging. The school should provide transition programs and practices at different stages of schooling that will minimize anxiety, increase resilience, and ensure that students develop a readiness to enter their new environment and make successful transitions between year levels.

2. Encourage student participation.

Giving students a voice is not simply about the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it also is about having the power to influence change. Incorporating meaningful involvement of students means validating and authorizing them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge and experiences throughout education to improve the school.

3. Proactively engage with parents/caretakers.

Keys to successful partnerships with parents/caretakers and families include strong two-way communication, volunteer opportunities, curricula-related collaborations, shared decision making, community-based partnerships, and efficacy building.

4. Implement preventative and early interventions.

The school needs to determine how it will intervene when students exhibit disengaged behaviors—specifically poor attendance and anti-social behaviors. Prevention strategies should target the whole school and should be designed to reduce any risk factors that may contribute to attendance or behavioral issues.

5. Respond to individual students.

The school should have a process in place to identify and respond to individual students who require additional assistance and support. It is imperative to coordinate early intervention and prevention strategies that utilize internal as well as external support services in order to identify and address the barriers to learning that individual students may be facing.

Schools also can implement major changes to their structures that can make it easier to develop positive learning relationships, including small learning communities, alternative scheduling, team teaching, teaching continuity, school-based enterprises, and professional learning communities.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS: CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Keeping middle school students focused and engaged in the classroom is quite a challenge amid the entire complex changes—physical, intellectual, emotional, and social—that they experience during this phase of their lives. Youth ages 11 to 13 years (a period sometimes called the “tween” years) are characterized by a growing desire to think and act independently while at the same time caring deeply about being accepted by peers and being part of a group (Caskey & Anfara, 2007).

1. Relate lessons to students’ lives.

A relevant curriculum relates content to the daily lives, concerns, experiences, and pertinent social issues of the learners. Teachers can gain insight into student concerns by taking periodic interest inventories, through informal conversations, and from classroom dialogue (Learning Point Associates, 2005). These issues and topics then can be incorporated into units, lesson plans, and further classroom discussions.

2. Make the learning authentic.

Newmann et al. (1995) advocate for authentic instructional practices to engage learners and offer three criteria for authentic instructional practices: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond the school.

The first criterion for authentic instructional practices is to facilitate the construction of knowledge by acknowledging students' existing understanding and experience. Identifying students' preconceptions and initial understanding is critical to the learning process. "If students' preconceptions are not addressed directly, they often memorize content (e.g., formulas in physics), yet still use their experience-based preconceptions to act in the world" (Donovan & Bransford, 2005, p. 5).

The second criterion for authentic instructional practices is to facilitate disciplined inquiry through structured activities; the inquiry process is critical to the construction of knowledge (Marzano, 2003; Newmann et al., 1995). This process consists of building on the learner's prior knowledge to develop a deeper understanding, integrating new information, and using the knowledge in new ways.

The third criterion for authentic instructional practices is value beyond school (Newmann et al., 1995). This criterion may entail connecting content to personal or public issues as well as the demonstration of understanding to an audience beyond the school. Examples of such activities include writing persuasive letters to the city council to advocate for a skate park, interviewing community elders for an oral history project, or communicating the impact of a development project using scientific concepts.

3. Give students choices.

Finally, providing choice in middle-level classrooms will engage learners. Providing opportunities for students to select a topic or text acknowledges young adolescents' need to exercise more decision-making power. Giving students ownership in their learning process increases motivation and keeps interest levels high. Students who have a strong interest in a specific subject may wish to pursue an independent project. These projects may be used as a differentiated way to explore the curriculum. (See "Regard for Adolescent Perspectives in the Classroom" on the following page.)

Regard for Adolescent Perspectives in the Classroom

Following are some suggestions for showing regard for adolescent perspectives. These ideas are based on the work of Smutny, Walker, and Meckstroth (1997) and Tomlinson (1999).

- Independent projects will extend learning beyond the curriculum in the textbook and develop enthusiasm, commitment, and academic skills in addition to allowing students to develop deeper relationships with subject matter.
- “Brainstorming with...children on what kinds of projects they could do may also generate ideas teachers may never have thought of on their own” (Smutny, 2000, p. 7).
- Surveying students’ interests in the beginning of the school year will give teachers direction in planning activities that will “get students on board” from the start.
- Surveying again at key points during the year will inform teachers of new interests that develop as their students grow.
- Interest centers are designed to motivate students’ exploration of topics in which they have a particular interest. They are usually comprised of objects that students can explore, such as shells, leaves, maps, or projects, and are centered around broad topics. Students can choose from the menu and note their choices accordingly. Teachers decide how many items on the menu (minimum) that each student is required to complete. This is adjusted to meet instructional needs on an individual basis.

Examples of Student Engagement

The National Center for School Engagement (2007) compiled the following examples of student engagement best practices from school districts across the United States:

MOBILIZE COMMUNITY:

Community Now! is an asset-based community development tool of the Connection Institute. It uses asset-based language and planning to bring the community together to discover what values the community shares as a whole. It then works to mobilize community members around its assets and shares values to become proactive in its planning rather than reactive. Source: Kittery Children's Leadership Council, Kittery, ME

COLLABORATE WITH HIGHER EDUCATION:

In Mesquite, Texas, a local college delivers 3.5 hours of continuing education courses ("Educational Opportunities") to truant students and their families. The curriculum includes the negative consequences associated with poor school attendance and the positive consequences associated with scholastic achievement. Discussion of transition from high school to college is discussed and a tour of the college is provided. Source: Dallas Independent School District, TX

OFFER INCENTIVES:

As a reward, a lunch-time soccer game is organized for students with good attendance by school staff. Source: Summit School District, Frisco, CO

SUPPORT POSITIVE BEHAVIOR:

Jacksonville School District adapted the principles of *Got Fish?* (a book to build business morale) for the classroom. Principles include: being there, play, choosing your behavior, and make their day. Students are recognized when observed "living" each of the principles. Source: Jacksonville School District, Jacksonville, FL

CREATE STUDENT-GENERATED CLASSROOM RULES:

In Eugene, Oregon, students create a list of classroom rules to be followed. Each student signs off on the rules and is held accountable by fellow students. In addition, they developed their own "honor roll," in which students are recognized for doing their best, following directions, and not talking out more than 3 times a day. Source: Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District, Eugene, OR

FACILITATE POSITIVE STUDENT-TEACHER CONNECTIONS:

Some schools in Oregon encourage students to sign up for a one-on-one lunch with their teacher during school time. The teacher uses this time to get to know the students and offers them encouragement and praise. Children and youth benefit when their teachers demonstrate that they care about student well-being in addition to academic success. Source: Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District, Eugene, OR

Reprinted from *21 Ways to Engage Students in School*, available online at <http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancyPreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/21WaystoEngageStudentsinSchool.pdf>. Copyright © 2007 National Center for School Engagement. Reprinted with permission.

Recommendation 3: Instructional Rigor

Implement instructional strategies that increase opportunities for higher-order thinking, analysis and problem solving, and deeper content understanding.

LINK TO RESEARCH

Instruction that pushes students to engage in higher-level thinking leads to deeper learning for students (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka, 2001; Pashler et al., 2007). Too often, particularly in schools where students are struggling, instruction focuses on lower-level thinking skills, basic content, and test preparation. Teachers of struggling student groups or tracks usually offer students “less exciting instruction, less emphasis on meaning and conceptualization, and more rote drill and practice activities” than do teachers of high-performing or heterogeneous groups and classes (Cotton, 1989, p. 8). Yet this focus on basic skills does not necessarily improve student achievement.

Several research studies were completed from 1990 to 2003 “which demonstrated that students who experienced higher levels of authentic instruction and assessment showed higher achievement than students who experienced lower levels of authentic instruction and assessment” (Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007, p. vii). These results included higher achievement on standardized tests (Newmann et al., 2001). It is also important to note that these results “were consistent for Grades 3–12, across different subject areas (mathematics, social studies, language arts, science), and for different students regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status” (Newmann et al., 2007, p. vii).

Teachers need to provide structured opportunities and time for students to take on higher-level cognitive work (Tomlinson, 2003). In discussing the *gradual release of responsibility model*, Fisher and Frey (2008) state that “the cognitive load should shift slowly and purposefully from teacher-as-model, to joint responsibility, to independent practice and application by the learner” (p. 2). This process allows students to become what Graves and Fitzgerald (2003) call “competent, independent learners” (p. 98).

There are several steps to ensure that students are being asked to complete this type of intellectually challenging work, which increases test scores and improves performance on authentic assessment measures as well. Newmann et al. (2001) define *authentically challenging intellectual work* as the “construction of knowledge, through the use of disciplined inquiry, to produce discourse, products, or performances that have value beyond school” (p. 14).

Daggett (2005) agrees, stating that all students should be pushed “to achieve academic excellence, which ultimately boils down to applying rigorous knowledge to unpredictable, real-world situations, such as those that drive our rapidly changing world” (p. 5). Disciplined inquiry, which occurs in the classroom, requires that students “(1) use a prior knowledge base; (2) strive for in-depth understanding rather than superficial awareness; and (3) express their ideas and findings with elaborated communication” (Newmann et al., 2001, p. 15).

QUICK LINKS: Online Sources for More Information

Doing What Works: Providing
Research-Based Education
Practices Online (Website)

<http://dww.ed.gov/>

*Organizing Instruction and
Study to Improve Learning*
(Publication)

[http://ies.ed.gov/
ncee/wwc/pdf/
practiceguides/20072004.
pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/20072004.pdf)

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

1. Cultivate schoolwide high expectations for students.

- Align instruction with the New York State P–12 Common Core Learning Standards. According to NYCDOE (2011), schools in New York City are set to have fully adopted the P–12 Common Core Learning Standards for students to take aligned assessments during the 2014–15 school year. These standards are internationally benchmarked and rigorous; they clearly explain what students at each grade level are expected to know and be able to do. Some schools were involved in pilot programs in 2010–11.
- Develop a shared understanding of instructional rigor through collaborative curriculum planning, design, and/or redesign. When developing or revising curriculum maps, identify opportunities for formative assessment tasks that encourage higher-level thinking for each unit of study.
- Through teacher collaboration, develop common student assignments that ask students to perform rigorous and authentic tasks.
- Through teacher collaboration, develop common student assessments that include rigorous and authentic summative assessment tasks.
- Monitor implementation of expectations through classroom observations, lesson plan review, and student achievement results on common formative assessments.

2. Provide professional development for teachers on instructional strategies that push students to engage in higher-order thinking.

- Provide ongoing professional development for teachers that describes the importance of pushing students to do higher-level thinking and provides strategies for how to do so. This training may be provided through ongoing professional development sessions and/or support of an instructional coach.
- Create clear expectations regarding how teachers should implement this professional development in the classroom (e.g., one strategy utilized each day as reflected in lesson plans, authentic assessments at the end of each unit).
- Identify how this professional development can be incorporated into scheduled teacher collaboration sessions.
- Monitor implementation of professional development through classroom observations, lesson plan review, and student achievement results on common formative assessments.

3. Develop examples of authentic intellectual work.

The following example can be used to help school leaders and teachers understand what authentic intellectual work might look like.

Examples of High-Scoring and Low-Scoring Measures of Authentic Intellectual Work

The research report *Improving Chicago's Schools: Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence?* by Newmann, Bryk, and Nagaoka (2001) provides examples of two sixth-grade writing assignments: one that scored high and one that scored low on measures of authentic intellectual work. The authors conclude each example with a commentary of why the assignment received the score that it did.

High Scoring Writing Assignment

Write a paper persuading someone to do something. Pick any topic that you feel strongly about, convince the reader to agree with your belief, and convince the reader to take a specific action on this belief.

Commentary

In this high scoring assignment, demands for construction of knowledge are evident because students have to select information and organize it into convincing arguments. By asking students to convince others to believe and act in a certain way, the task entails strong demands that the students support their views with reasons or other evidence, which calls for elaborated written communication. Finally, the intellectual challenge is connected to students' lives because they are to write on something they consider to be personally important.

Low Scoring Writing Assignment

Identify the parts of speech of each underlined word below. All eight parts of speech—nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections—are included in this exercise.

1. My room is arranged for comfort and efficiency.
2. As you enter, you will find a wooden table on the left.
3. I write and type.
4. There is a book shelf near the table.
5. On this book shelf, I keep both my pencils and paper supplies.
6. I spend many hours in this room.
7. I often read or write there during the evening...

Commentary

This assignment requires no construction of knowledge or elaborated communication, and does not pose a question or problem clearly connected to students' lives. Instead it asks students to recall one-word responses, based on memorization or definitions of parts of speech.

Reprinted from page 24 of *Improving Chicago's Schools: Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence?* by Fred M. Newmann, Anthony S. Bryk, and Jenny K. Nagaoka, available online at <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/p0a02.pdf>. Copyright © 2001 Consortium on Chicago School Research. Reprinted with permission.

Further examples of authentic intellectual instruction, teachers' assignments, and student work can be found in the following source:

Newmann, F. M., King, M. B., & Carmichael, D. L. (2007). *Authentic instruction and assessment: Common standards for rigor and relevance in teaching academic subjects*. Des Moines, IA: Iowa Department of Education. Retrieved June 24, 2011, from <http://centerforaiw.com/sites/centerforaiw.com/files/Authentic-Instruction-Assessment-BlueBook.pdf>

Plainwell Middle School

Plainwell Middle School in Plainwell, Michigan, serves students in Grades 6–8. The school has had success in improving instructional rigor.

In 2005, Plainwell Community Schools implemented districtwide curriculum restructuring with professional development focused on using the research-based instructional strategies outlined in Robert Marzano's *Classroom Instruction that Works* (2003)... Some of the instructional delivery techniques that were adopted as part of this professional development include the use of nonlinguistic representations of abstract concepts and the use of higher-order questions to elicit student explanations. Teachers find Marzano's strategies to be compelling, noting the evidence of a significant correlation between increased student achievement and the use of research-proven instructional techniques. This approach lays the groundwork for a shift in staff culture, moving away from the use of personal intuition to the use of empirical, quantitative data to inform decisions around teaching and learning.

In 2005, social studies teachers at Plainwell Middle School decided to adopt a new curriculum aligned with Marzano's strategies.... Interactive slideshows are used as a way to actively engage students in new content learning, letting them participate in lectures by touching, interpreting, and acting out historical images and events projected onto a screen. The curriculum also supports vocabulary instruction with graphic organizers that connect definitions with visuals to help students understand and retain key terms. Some teachers...have modified the workbook graphic organizers to create their own "visual dictionaries"...

Higher-order questions are also used as an instructional technique through the new curriculum. Response groups are a structure that teachers use to facilitate small group discussion on controversial topics in history. Through a series of probing questions that require critical thinking and the use of evidence, teachers elicit student explanations that require analysis and application of historical information. Finally, students match up their decisions and viewpoints with actual decisions made in history.

In addition to these strategies, social studies teachers at Plainwell Middle School intentionally build review into daily lessons and assessments. Each day begins with a warm-up activity that quizzes students on a previous lesson.... When introducing a lesson, teachers also make sure to begin with a preview activity that they can refer back to when reviewing the material....

Curriculum restructuring at the middle school is carefully implemented to ensure success.... First, a less-is-more approach is taken, allowing ample time for teachers to learn and practice a single strategy before moving on to another one. Also, teacher training is conducted by lead teachers...who model classroom techniques, lead guided discussions, and set periodic objectives for teams. Instead of a passive "sit-and-get" approach, teachers actively practice the strategies and report to their teams about their progress. Finally, administrators support the efforts by aligning observational classroom walk-through forms to match the professional development focus, keeping the strategies at the center of conversation about teaching.

Description excerpted from the *Doing What Works* website (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) at http://dww.ed.gov/media/CL/OIS/TopicLevel/case_plainwell_71508.pdf. This information is in the public domain.

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Suggestions for Further Reading

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