REIMAGINING
THE MIDDLE
GRADES
A Framework for Action
Reimagining the Middle Grades was written by the Middle Grades Collaborative. The intention of the Middle Grades Collaborative is that the solutions and innovations suggested in this Framework be implemented where possible, and that supports be put in place to ensure sustainability and to build a professional community devoted to creating environments and experiences that will ensure the personal and academic success of our middle grades students. Just as many of the suggested solutions for the middle grades involve innovative approaches, so too should the supports for sustainability involve innovation. Every student needs and deserves access to quality educational programs in order to ensure they are prepared to achieve their dreams. This Framework is being presented as the first part of a series of reports that will be published at a later time and will include specific details on how to pilot and expand both Learning Group recommendations and Working Group recommendations.
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HOW DO WE REIMAGINE THE MIDDLE GRADES?
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Framework for Action describes the work of the Middle Grades Collaborative in response to the January 12, 2016, Board Resolution “Creating A Collaborative to Focus on the Middle Grades”. Both the Board and the District have identified the middle grades as playing a key role in students’ success as they move on to high school and later, college or a career.

The Middle Grades Collaborative, formed by the Board Resolution, was made up of a working group and a learning group. The goal of the Collaborative was to “create a framework for collective action on reimagining the middle grades.” This framework outlines five areas of need specific to middle grades students, identified through the work of the Collaborative, as well as promising practices, innovations and systems that support our goal of proficiency for all. It is important to note that the intention of this document is to provide insight into the needs of middle grades students and to make recommendations on how to address those needs. The framework does not address academic and systemic programs and initiatives that are expected of all schools, PreK-12. Expectations around content, standards, multi-tiered systems of support, etc., remain in place and are, therefore, not included in the framework.

The Framework for Action is organized into three main sections:

I. Areas of Need
II. Learning Group Recommendations
III. Working Group Recommendations (Prototypes)
PART I - AREAS OF NEED

Based on the learnings and recommendations of the Learning Group, major areas of need that are particularly impactful for middle grades students began to emerge. These areas of need reflect a single theme: *It is imperative that middle school become significantly more student-centered.* The research, data and programs reviewed and analyzed by the group pointed toward the need to recalibrate our thinking around instruction, campus life, school culture, and programs. The specific areas of need and recommendations are described in the sections below. Following the recommendations are suggested options for addressing student needs in practical ways.

These areas were the prominent categories that were identified based on input from the Learning Group work:

1. Development of student identity and relationship formation
2. Growth mindset and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)
3. Authentic opportunities for student choice, both in individual classroom settings, as well as at the school level
4. Student engagement in learning and with the school
5. Real-world and personal connections to the content
PART II - LEARNING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Areas to Expand

This section focuses on programs and strategies currently being used in some schools within the District, which were identified as serving one or more areas of need. The recommendation of the Learning Group is to find ways to support the expansion of these ideas into more schools and strengthen these ideas where they currently exist, as well as to continue exploring existing programs to recommend for expansion. Examples include: advisory programs, restorative justice, and bridge programs.

Areas to Explore

The Learning Group identified a number of areas that may or may not be present in our schools, but which warrant further exploration of their efficacy or impact. Examples include: grade-span configuration, professional learning around early adolescent neurological and cognitive development, and middle grades conference/networking opportunities. The Learning Group also recommends that professional learning opportunities be developed for middle grades teachers and administrators on the unique needs associated with students in these grade levels.
PART III - WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS (PROTOTYPES)

As part of the Design Thinking protocol, the Working Group was divided into teams who individually developed ideas to address middle grades students’ needs. These prototypes are described below.

- **Social Emotional Barometer** – provides a system to be used during breakfast in the classroom where students can acknowledge how they are feeling and teachers can address any social emotional barriers to learning before beginning the lesson for the day.

- **Makerspaces** – provide schools with a flexible and creative space, available to all teachers, in which students can develop, make and present ideas using a variety of technology, tools and resources.

- **Houses** – establish a vertical model for schools, building and developing a sense of community academically and socially, while simultaneously establishing an interdisciplinary model of instruction. Students are cohorted in 6th grade and would travel together throughout middle school.

- **Student-Led School** – establishes a new school in which the system of governance is modeled after our own government. The Legislative Branch would be composed entirely of students; the Executive Branch would have the principal as the President, a student Vice President, and a cabinet made up of classified staff, parents and community partners; and the Judicial Branch would have a Chief Justice who is a staff member nominated by the staff and ratified by the students, while the remaining justices would be elected from and by the student body.

- **Effective Programs Website** – creates a website and system of support for schools to be able to research and potentially implement programs that are already in place within the District.

“The Design Thinking process first defines the problem and then implements solutions, always with the needs of the user demographic at the core of concept development... The process consists of these 5 steps: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, Test.” – Stanford D.School
PART IV - REQUEST FOR ACTION BY THE BOARD

The Middle Grades Collaborative is requesting the Board support the continuation of this work for the 2016-17 school year. Specifically, we plan to:

1. Continue the Learning Group for 2016-17. The work of this group would be to:
   a. Research the needs and recommendations from the “Areas to Explore”
   b. Explore how other districts, states and countries are addressing the needs of middle grades students
   c. Create a detailed action plan to implement and expand on the recommendations from the Framework, and any other recommendations based on new research

2. Create a Prototype Team to:
   a. Develop a detailed action plan to pilot the prototypes described in the Working Group Recommendations, and to provide incentives to schools to prototype
“The importance of middle level education can never be overestimated. The future of individuals and, indeed, that of society is largely determined by the nature of the educational experiences of young adolescents during these formative years.”

This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents
Association for Middle Level Educators
INTRODUCTION

The importance of the middle grades in preparing students for academic and personal success has long been an area of focus in California. The refinement of ideas and approaches central to educating young adolescents can be seen in the California Department of Education’s publications: *Caught in the Middle: Educational Reform for Young Adolescents in California Public Schools* (1987); *Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-Based Education for California’s Middle Grades Students* (2001); and *Taking Center Stage—Act II (TCSII): Ensuring Success and Closing the Achievement Gap for All of California’s Middle Grades Students* (2008). All highlight that “[e]arly adolescence is one of the most exciting periods of intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development in the human life span.” (*Taking Center Stage, 2001*).

The Los Angeles Unified School District and the Board of Education agree that the time encompassed by the middle grades is of key importance in the lives of our students. The Middle Grades Collaborative was created in response to the January 12, 2016, Board Resolution titled *Creating A Collaborative to Focus on the Middle Grades*. In this resolution, the middle grade years were identified as playing a “pivotal role in high school success,” as well as being a “time of heightened vulnerability.” The resolution directed the “creation of a collaborative team of parents, students, educators, school leaders, researchers, District staff and other experts” to work together “to create a framework for collective action on reimagining the middle grades.” The expectation was to better address the particular needs of students in this age group, and better prepare both them academically and emotionally for the demands of a challenging high school program and the A-G graduation requirements. Such preparation is critical in supporting all students on the path to college and career readiness.
The Los Angeles Unified School District serves 111,082 students in grades 6-8. The various factors influencing the lives of our students, both in and out of school, are numerous and challenging. Sixteen percent of our middle grades students are considered Limited English Proficient, and 11% are considered Initially Fluent English Proficient. Thirty-six percent speak English Only (EO), and 37% are Redesignated English Proficient. The sheer number of languages spoken in the District (over 92), and the variety of student proficiency levels in both written and spoken English, present a complex situation for teachers and students to confront in the classroom. In addition to challenges related to language ability, our students are faced with issues related to poverty (79% of students in grades 6-8 qualify for free and reduced lunch), disabilities (13% of students are identified as having special needs), and instability in living circumstances (2% are in foster care). While all of these challenges can impact students’ academic performance and personal development, we can make a positive difference by strategically addressing the needs that are specific to our early adolescent students.

**MIDDLE GRADE STUDENT LANGUAGE CLASSIFICATION**

![Image of student classification]

11% Initially Fluent English Proficient (IFEP)  
16% Limited English Proficient (LEP)  
37% Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP)  
36% English Only (EO)

*Number of students = 111,082
While all of these challenges can impact students’ academic performance and personal development, we can make a positive difference by strategically addressing the needs that are specific to our early adolescent students.
The Collaborative was divided into two distinct but interconnected groups. One group, the Learning Group, consisted of a number of invited participants representing various stakeholder groups as well as being open to the general public. The group met for a series of five meetings, during which they explored current research on middle grades students and best practices in the District in an effort to identify common themes and make recommendations around how best to reimagine the middle grades and where to focus our efforts.²

The other group in the Collaborative, the Working Group, consisted of a limited number of invited participants, including school site administrators, teachers, parents, students, community partners, Local District (LD) and Central Office staff, and Board members and staff. They participated in a Design Thinking protocol over a series of five meetings. They interviewed middle grades students about their experiences and feelings about the middle grades. Using the information from the interviews and feedback from the Learning Group, Working Group participants developed prototypes for innovative solutions to address the needs of our middle grades students.
The work of both groups was combined to form the Framework for Action attached to this report for your review and consideration. Drafts of the Framework for Action were shared with various stakeholders and were made available for public comment online. The Framework for Action is organized into three sections:

I. Areas of Need
II. Learning Group Recommendations
III. Working Group Recommendations (Prototypes)

This is not the first time the District has focused on the middle grades. In 2006-07, the Middle School Accountability Task Force was established to develop “a reform plan to transform the middle school instructional program to ensure every student is prepared for an A-G curriculum”. The goal of the 2006 Task Force was around the then new A-G requirements for high school graduation and, by extension, instructional programs. The current Middle Grades Resolution, however, has initiated a dialogue about what our middle grades students need as adolescent learners in terms of engagement, social and emotional support, and connection to learning. All of these needs, when adequately supported, provide middle grades students with a sound foundation for academic success. The Middle Grades Collaborative approached this work, with an open-mindedness that allowed for addressing these needs in unique and fresh ways. Although ultimately we want to impact student learning, we recognize that focusing primarily on academics, without providing adequate developmentally appropriate supports (cognitively, emotionally, socially, personally, etc.), will ultimately fail to fully equip students for academic success.

The work of the Middle Grades Collaborative has been to identify promising practices, innovations and systems that are particularly effective in meeting the needs of middle grades students and that will support the District in meeting our goal of proficiency for all.
District in meeting our goal of proficiency for all. It is important to note that this document does not attempt to address academic and systemic programs and initiatives that are expected of all schools, PreK-12. Expectations around content, standards, multi-tiered systems of support, etc., remain in place. The intention of this document is to provide insight into the needs of our early adolescent students (who range in ages from 10-14) in the middle grades (grades 5-9), and to make recommendations on how to meet those needs, whether through established best practices or through innovative approaches to teaching and learning. To this end, our research has uncovered five areas of need that provide the foundation upon which student success is built. The ideas generated by the Collaborative to address the areas of need are reflected in the table of options, prototypes, and recommendations below, and are intended to provide high quality instructional programs for all middle grades students.

The intention of the Middle Grades Collaborative is that the solutions and innovations suggested in this Framework be implemented where possible, and that supports be put in place to ensure sustainability and to build a professional community devoted to creating environments and experiences that will ensure the personal and academic success of our middle grades students. Just as many of the suggested solutions for the middle grades involve innovative approaches, so too should the supports for sustainability involve innovation. Every student needs and deserves access to quality educational programs in order to ensure they are prepared to achieve their dreams. This Framework is being presented as the first part of a series of reports that will be published at a later time and will include specific details on how to pilot and expand both Learning Group recommendations and Working Group recommendations.
Every student needs and deserves access to quality educational programs in order to ensure they are prepared to achieve their dreams.
WHAT DO OUR MIDDLE GRADES STUDENTS NEED?
PART I - AREAS OF NEED

It is imperative that middle school become significantly more student-centered.

Throughout the series of Learning Group meetings, participants identified key learnings and made recommendations based upon them. As this information was gathered, major areas of need that are particularly impactful for middle grades students began to emerge. These areas of need reflect a single theme: It is imperative that middle school become significantly more student-centered. The research, data and programs reviewed and analyzed by the group pointed toward the need to recalibrate our thinking around instruction, campus life, school culture, and programs. For example, middle grades students have the highest attendance rate of all students in the District, averaging a 97% attendance rate overall, with less than 10% of middle grades students having an attendance rate lower than 91%.³ This demonstrates that our middle grades students are coming to school in large numbers, but we are not engaging them in their learning in a way that is meaningful to them. In order to increase our middle grades students' academic success we need to ensure the programs, instruction and courses we offer focus on their needs. The specific areas of need and recommendations are described in the sections below. Following the recommendations are suggested options for addressing student needs in practical ways.
In order to increase our middle grades students’ academic success we need to ensure the programs, instruction and courses we offer focus on their needs.
NEED #1 - STUDENT IDENTITY/RELATIONSHIPS

Students in this age group share some important characteristics that reflect the changes they are going through both cognitively and emotionally. As they vacillate between a desire for independence and a need for the security of childhood, these students struggle to find the answer to “Who am I?” A dawning awareness of self in relation to others leads them to be particularly sensitive to the attention of others and acutely aware of the people around them. They need guidance in shaping their identities, as well as in forming and maintaining positive relationships and responding to peer pressure. To support students in developing their identity, we need to provide opportunities for them to explore their character and interests. Play is a key component of this exploration, providing a context for the developing sense of self and the ability to negotiate interpersonal relationships.

“Play is integral to the academic environment,” as it provides opportunities for students to learn appropriate modes of interaction in a non-stressful way, enhances students’ abilities and preparedness for academics, and supports problem-solving.

They need guidance in shaping their identities, as well as in forming and maintaining positive relationships and responding to peer pressure.
NEED #2 - MINDSET AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

In light of their extreme sensitivity to the attentions and influence of other people, middle grades students need adult support in interpreting the actions of others, in appropriate response, and in self-management. In Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), students “acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, [www.casel.org]).”

Students’ belief in themselves and their ability to learn and improve is supported through instruction on mindset. Middle grade students benefit from explicit instruction on growth vs. fixed mindset, so that they see themselves as individuals who can improve through effort, who feel that challenges are opportunities for learning, who believe that attitude and effort outweigh innate ability, and who celebrate the successes of others. For middle grades students, development of a growth mindset requires consistent reinforcement and encouragement.
NEED #3 - AUTHENTIC STUDENT CHOICE

Choice is extremely important to middle grades students. In addition to grappling with their identity, early adolescents are beginning to think abstractly, and to apply their knowledge of different contexts and content to their developing sense of self. To support this development, it is crucial that middle graders have opportunities for variety and choice in their learning environments. The opportunity to make authentic choices in their learning is pivotal in their attempt to reconcile their interests and actions with who they are becoming. The more opportunities for choice they are given, the better they are able to continue to develop a more complete sense of who they are across multiple contexts and in a variety of situations.
NEED #4 – ENGAGEMENT

As middle grades students begin to think abstractly about the world and their place in it, it becomes increasingly important to provide learning opportunities that engage students in rigorous and challenging work.¹² These years are marked by physical and cognitive growth, which spurs a general need to be active. A focus on student engagement in the middle grades is crucial because it addresses the need for active involvement in learning.¹³ Hands-on, project-based, exploratory type learning environments are just a few examples of the type of engagement to which middle grades students respond well.

It becomes increasingly important to provide learning opportunities that engage students in rigorous and challenging work.

A focus on student engagement in the middle grades is crucial because it addresses the need for active involvement in learning.
NEED #5 - REAL WORLD AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

As middle grades students explore who they are and how they fit into their environments, they seek connections to the real world and to their personal lives. Learning opportunities that are meaningful, connected and rigorous drive students’ motivation and engagement. Students are most connected to their learning when they see their own lives and interests reflected in, touched by or related to it. As they make their way toward independence, they want to take with them those learnings that are personal and, therefore, relevant for their future.

Students are most connected to their learning when they see their own lives and interests reflected in, touched by or related to it.
CONNECTING STUDENT NEEDS TO ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The data from our Spring 2015 School Quality Index Surveys, described in the paragraphs and charts below, highlight how impactful these areas of need can be on our students and their academic performance. The surveys also reveal that our students’ perceptions of themselves and their school experiences sometimes vary greatly from what the adults around them perceive to be true. For example, 64% of students in grades 6-8 indicated that they felt safe at school. However, 76% of school staff felt that their schools were safe environments, and 79% of parents felt that their children’s schools were safe.

LAUSD students in grades 6-8 responded to questions relating to self-efficacy with an average score of 3.4/5. When compared with academic performance in math, by school site, the data shows that students who scored higher on questions relating to self-efficacy performed better in mathematics.

Students’ perceptions of themselves and their school experiences sometimes vary greatly from what the adults around them perceive to be true.
On average, students in grades 6-8 rate themselves at 3.7/5 for having a growth mindset. When mindset is compared to academic performance in mathematics, the data shows a positive relationship between academic performance and growth mindset:

Likewise for academic performance in English language arts, schools where students scored higher overall in Social Emotional Literacy also had higher numbers of students scoring proficient and advanced in performance in ELA.
WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND?
PART II - LEARNING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

All students deserve equal access to high quality programs and initiatives that will address their needs.

The recommendations of the Learning Group were compiled in two categories. The first, “Areas to Expand,” focuses on programs and strategies currently being used in some schools within the District which were identified as serving one or more areas of need. Although these programs exist in the District, they are not necessarily widely nor consistently implemented. All students deserve equal access to high quality programs and initiatives that will address their needs, therefore it is the recommendation of the Learning Group to find ways to support the expansion of these ideas into more schools, as well as to continue exploring other existing programs to recommend for expansion.

The second category of recommendations is “Areas to Explore.” The Learning Group is recommending the ideas described in this section for further exploration in the coming school year. Depending upon the outcome of the exploration, the Learning Group may develop recommendations for the implementation or trial of new ideas as part of their ongoing work.
AREAS TO EXPAND

The table of recommendations for expansion contains examples of initiatives, programs, and approaches that currently exist across the district and that address one or more of the identified needs. In addition to simply expanding what is captured in the table, we recommend the systematization of many of these programs. We need to establish a process for the district-wide expansion and support of these programs in order to ensure we have equity and access for all students.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXPANSION</th>
<th>#1 Student Identity/Relationships</th>
<th>#2 Mindset and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)</th>
<th>#3 Authentic Student Choice</th>
<th>#4 Engagement</th>
<th>#5 Real World and Personal Connections</th>
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<td>Advisory</td>
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<td>• Incorporate specific curriculum related to SEL, digital citizenship, and growth mindset</td>
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<td>• Activities to explore student identity and relationship building</td>
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<td>After School Programs</td>
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<td>• Athletics¹⁵</td>
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<td>• Interest-based clubs</td>
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<td>• Tutoring</td>
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<td>Arts¹⁶</td>
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<td>• Provide a variety of options for discrete arts courses that students may choose from</td>
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<td>• After-school programs</td>
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<td>• Arts integration across disciplines</td>
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<td>Community Engagement</td>
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<td>• After school service club/group</td>
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<td>• Community-based projects in advisory (based on student choice/interest)</td>
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<td>• Schools support students in finding individual opportunities for participating in the community (e.g., responding to organizations or individuals seeking volunteers, after-school tutoring, etc.)</td>
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<td>• Day of service during school hours</td>
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<td>Digital Portfolios of Student Work</td>
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<td>Electives¹⁷</td>
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<td>• A variety of course options available to all students</td>
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<td>• Student choice drives course placement</td>
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<td>• Options based on student interests</td>
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<td>• Electives that incorporate enrichment and intervention</td>
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<td>Students as Experts</td>
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<td>• Students teach peers/adults</td>
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<td>• Cross-age tutoring</td>
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<td>• Student-led conferences</td>
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### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXPANSION

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<tr>
<th>Flexible Scheduling</th>
<th>#1 Student Identity/Relationships</th>
<th>#2 Mindset and Social Emotional Learning (SEL)</th>
<th>#3 Authentic Student Choice</th>
<th>#4 Engagement</th>
<th>#5 Real World and Personal Connections</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Block scheduling</td>
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<td>• Later start time</td>
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<td>• Flex Period/Flex time</td>
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<td>• 4x4 model</td>
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<td>Interdisciplinary Teaching</td>
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<td>Mastery Based Learning and Grading¹⁸</td>
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<td>Multiple Means of Action and Expression¹⁹</td>
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<td>• Formative assessment</td>
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<td>• Options for representing learning in a variety of ways (e.g., visual, physical, textual, digital, oral, etc.)</td>
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<td>• Differentiated assignments based upon students’ particular areas of need</td>
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<td>• Summative assessment</td>
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<td>• For a given unit, students are offered several options to choose from to demonstrate mastery of the content</td>
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<td>• Options contain a variety of expressive forms</td>
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<td>Project-Based Learning²⁰</td>
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<td>Multiple Means of Engagement²¹</td>
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<td>• Survey students about areas of interest to incorporate into units and lessons</td>
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<td>• Student-driven units (students choose the topic of study)</td>
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<td>• Hands-on and real-world applications</td>
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<td>Restorative Justice</td>
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<td>Social-Emotional Guidance and Support</td>
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<td>• Council</td>
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<td>• Student court</td>
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<td>• Bridge programs for transitions to 6th and 9th grades focusing specifically on SEL, identity and mindset (for both parents and students)</td>
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<td>• Full-time Psychiatric Social Worker and/or counselor</td>
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<td>• Peer mediation and conflict resolution</td>
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<td>• Peer mentoring programs</td>
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<td>Themed small learning communities (SLC) or academies²²</td>
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<td>• Student choice of SLC/academy</td>
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<td>• Themes are chosen based on student interests</td>
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<td>Trauma-Informed Approach to Learning²³</td>
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<td>Whole school programs in which students can select from multiple options (either options within a single school or among neighboring schools) that interest them.</td>
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<td>• Linked Learning schools</td>
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<td>• Magnet programs</td>
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<td>• Dual Language Immersion programs²⁴</td>
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AREAS TO EXPLORE

In addition to the recommendations listed in the table above, the Learning Group recommends that teachers and administrators receive professional learning opportunities on the unique needs associated with middle grades students, for example: social-emotional learning; the middle grades brain; trauma-informed instruction; and mastery-based learning and grading. In addition to general professional learning, additional training and support may be needed by schools implementing the ideas listed in the table.

Professional Learning Community Development

*Increase Teacher Preparation* · Middle grades students have distinct characteristics that reflect their rapidly changing physical, emotional, and intellectual growth. Educators working in middle grades settings should receive training and support on understanding this period of adolescent development, as well as on best practices and approaches for working with these students. We recommend exploring options for providing middle grades teachers with pathways to specialized certification in middle grades education, both within the District, and through research on credentialing programs designed to train educators to work specifically in the middle grades.

*Offer Professional Learning Opportunities* · Understanding the middle grades student’s brain was pivotal in the establishment of the areas of need by the Learning Group. We recommend this topic be explored further, and shared with teachers and administrators of middle grades students.

*Develop Middle Grades Organization Partnerships and Conferences* · In order to further develop and support middle grades administrators and teachers, we recommend reaching out to professional middle grades organizations in order to establish partnerships, including hosting middle grades conferences locally.

*Personalization of Learning*

*Develop Advisory Curricula* · Advisory has been identified as a recommendation for schools to address identity, relationships, engagement, personal
connections and more. However, the District does not currently offer a recommended curriculum for schools. We recommend exploring advisory curriculum options in order to support teachers with implementing impactful advisory programs.

**Acquire Effective Instructional Materials**
- The resources that support our middle grades students are an important part of instruction and engagement. Teachers need current, innovative, rigorous and engaging materials to support their instructional design processes. As we move forward into the 21st Century, the need for a variety of print and digital resources, including technology, will continue to grow, as will the pace of change when it comes to providing current tools and resources. We recommend that when new textbooks (including print and digital materials) are purchased, the evaluation criteria be reviewed and, if necessary, modified to address the particular characteristics of digital resources.

**Continue Personalized Curriculum and Instruction Development**
- The continued implementation of the Instructional Technology Initiative offers an opportunity to develop curricular and instructional practices that ensure students are able to learn at their own pace and to receive the supports they need. We recommend ongoing piloting and research into the most appropriate technological tools and digital resources to support student learning and growth, and that any such tools and resources purchased are accompanied by professional development in their use.

**Student-Directed Course of Study** – As we continue to explore ways to increase student choice in their education, one option we recommend exploring is a student-directed course of study, where learning pathways are designed by students.
School Support Services

Explore Grade Span Configuration - Transitions from elementary to middle school, and middle to high school have been identified as potential factors affecting student success. We recommend that a deeper exploration, both within and beyond our District, be conducted to determine possible grade span configurations that would decrease or eliminate the adverse effects of transitions.

Consider Local District Configuration/Designated Middle School Directors - To further support the unique needs and challenges facing middle schools, some Local Districts are identifying Instructional Directors as “Middle School Directors”. We recommend opening a dialogue around this option to consider the efficacy, feasibility and practicality of this model.

Increase Parent/Guardian Learning Opportunities - During the middle grades parent engagement has a tendency to decline. We recommend both education programs to support the parents of our middle grades students, as well as expanding opportunities for parents to participate in their student’s middle grades experience.
Increase Community Engagement

Chronic absenteeism and behavioral problems are often symptomatic of larger problems happening with families and communities. Therefore, early intervention must address the needs of the family as a whole, not just the individual middle school student. Families in challenging environments and circumstances need broad assistance (with issues of healthcare, safety, employment, local recreation and enrichment opportunities, etc.) so that their focus can remain upon providing a healthy, supportive environment for their children. We recommend exploring ways to connect and work with community organizations and other government entities (e.g., law enforcement, social services, parks and recreation) to sustain a united effort focused on community improvement, for example with programs such as Neighborhood Transformation and School2Home.
HOW DID WE INNOVATE?
As part of the Design Thinking protocol, the Working Group was divided into teams that individually developed ideas to address middle grades students’ needs. These prototypes are described below.
PROTOTYPE #1 - SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL BAROMETER

In order to address the social-emotional needs of our middle grades students, this prototype would create a classroom system that gives students the opportunity to identify their current emotional state using an emoji icon (e.g., 😊) and inbox system. During breakfast in the classroom (or advisory), students would take their name card (or this could be done anonymously) and put it in the “Emoji Inbox” that reflected their current state of mind/emotional state. We would recommend a range of emojis representing feelings like: happy, excited, sad, frustrated, embarrassed, worried/stressed, in love, neutral and mad. Alternatively, in schools where students have access to one-to-one devices, an app could be used to push students’ emoji selections to the teacher’s device, and to find the average of the responses (i.e., if there were 9 emojis to choose from, they would be numbered 1-9 and the app would take the average of the students’ submissions) and display the associated emoji on the board as a representation of the mood of the class as a whole.

Based on the responses received, the teacher would be able to identify any emotional “red flags” or “yellow flags” for individual students, then determine the next steps. Additionally, the teacher would be able to assess the prevailing emotional state of the room. If the emojis indicate the students are doing well, the teacher would move on with the lesson for the day. However, if the emojis indicated students needed to work through their current emotional state before they were ready to engage in learning, the teacher might begin a group Restorative Justice Circle discussion (if it became clear that some conflict was causing a problem) or could refer a particular student to a counselor, etc.

Restorative Justice Circles can be handled in either a whole class or small group setting. In the whole class model, the class is able to openly and honestly express their feelings and concerns in a safe environment. The goal is to have both positive and negative feelings shared, encouraging peer-to-peer respect. For instances of specific conflict between pairs
or small groups, a smaller number of people, usually including a facilitator trained in the art of conflict resolution, is convened to help surface the issues at hand, and promote dialogue and empathy between the parties in conflict.

PROTOTYPE #2 - MAKERSPACE

Middle grades students are looking for ways to actively learn and express themselves, create and be engaged in their learning. In order to provide them this opportunity, we propose that every middle school should have a fully funded and furnished room called a “makerspace” where students in all subject areas/classes could work. A makerspace would provide hands-on, creative ways to encourage students to design, experiment, build and invent as they engage with the curriculum and collaborate with each other. In addition, schools could partner with other schools to schedule visits to neighboring makerspaces in order to see what other students are creating and how they are using their makerspace.

The makerspace would be furnished with equipment and materials that will allow students to experiment and create. Such items could include technological devices, interactive whiteboards, 3D printers, robotics equipment and arts and crafts materials. There would be an area of the makerspace designated for presentations and communications, which could be used by students to present their makerspace creations, skype with other makerspace classrooms, and present to community partners. Although the basic technological equipment and some furnishings would be standardized, the makerspace should also be flexible so that it is tailored to the needs and interests of each school.

The makerspace would be accessible to teachers much like the library. Although the makerspace does not need a full-time staff person, it should be staffed during lunch and after school to allow students to independently access it outside of their regular class time. In addition, parent volunteers could be trained to support teachers during class when they bring students to the makerspace.
In order to ensure all teachers are able to effectively use and support students working in the makerspace, they would be provided training on the equipment and tools available in the makerspace. In addition to training teachers to use the equipment, we would also provide professional development on pedagogical training to teachers in order to help them broaden their teaching philosophy and approach to learning to support teachers in developing lessons and units that maximize the makerspace and the type of learning it supports. Students could also be trained to provide support with the various areas of the makerspace.

**PROTOTYPE #3 - HOUSES**

This prototype is in alignment with LAUSD’s Bulletin 1600 for middle school that requires all middle schools to establish personalized learning environment plans to be incorporated into the school plan. Characteristics of these plans address: establishing a common vision for creating a supportive environment; addressing school size by creating “smallness out of bigness”; creation of deep and lasting relationships between all stakeholders. The Houses prototype would create a sense of community and belonging by establishing a vertical house system on a school campus. Just as high school campuses have successfully designed their physical space to establish small learning communities, so too should middle schools be given the ability not only to create houses in the school structure but in their physical space as well.

The houses would be created where teachers are grouped in interdisciplinary teams with a common conference period. Students would be cohorted so that teacher teams would share the same group of students, which would provide students a more personalized and connected educational experience. Major elements of the house structure would include digital portfolios, advisory, restorative justice, field trips, electives at least one period per day, house competitions and events, community
service projects, and partnerships with other organizations. Ideally, each student would have a device for their digital portfolios and other projects.

Teachers in the same house would be given time to meet before the school year begins by attending a house retreat. During this time they would plan activities and learning that would promote identity discovery, community connections, and goal setting. Parents would also be invited to a parent orientation before the start of the school year, in which the house teachers and administrator would share information about house activities, projects and academics for the coming year.

Each house would be provided an intervention teacher, who would support struggling students by providing small group and/or one-on-one intervention. The intervention teacher would pull struggling students out of class to work with in a separate room. In addition, the school would be supported by a full time Psychiatric Social Worker.

Once a week on Friday, during a designated period, the house would plan activities around identity work, restorative justice, goal setting, house events, and house competitions. The classroom responsible for these activities would rotate weekly. For example, the first week activities would be done in their history/social studies class. The next week in math class, etc.

Certain times of day (e.g., lunch, physical education) would provide opportunities for whole school integration of students in order to promote a sense of community among all students on campus and to mitigate inter-house conflict.

Students would be assigned to houses randomly, and would be equally distributed across the houses using a computer program to perform the random assignments. If the house a student was assigned to proved not to be a good fit, the student could be reassigned to a different house to give them an opportunity to be successful in a supportive environment. Reassignments would be strategically planned by the site administrator.
PROTOTYPE #4 - STUDENT-LED SCHOOL (THE UNITED STUDENTS OF THE MIDDLE GRADES)

The prototype for this student-led school is modeled after the United States representative system of government. It would consist of a constitution (supreme laws) that would guide and clearly stipulate what powers would be reserved for each branch of school governance. Rather than imposing constitutions on schools, each school would develop their own constitution, which would also set term limits and include a “Bill of Rights.” The developers would be made up of stakeholders (parents, administrators, students and staff). This would be held at their own “Constitutional Convention.”

The Legislative branch, made up entirely of students, would include a Senate and House of Representatives. The Senate would include two representatives from each advisory. The House of Representatives would include members of each grade, dependent upon the number of students in each grade. There would also be additional members elected to represent important voices based on student needs (e.g., English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and talented students, foster youth, LGBTQ, females, minorities, etc.) based upon the needs of the school. Students in the Legislative Branch would be divided into committees (e.g., food, curriculum, sports, electives, arts, community, staffing). The Senate and House of Representatives would each have a teacher advisor to be present at meetings, as would each of the committees.

The Executive branch would be comprised of the administration and staff, who would retain the power to veto. The Executive branch would include a student Vice President, elected by the students, to collaborate with the administration and a Cabinet, comprised of parents, certificated and classified staff.

The Judicial branch would be an elected body of students with the Chief Justice being a staff member nominated by faculty, and voted on and confirmed by the students.
In this school, the Constitution would be the governing document that lays out who has control over the various elements of school governance. When making new laws for the school, the questions guiding law making would be: “Do our laws promote learning?,” “Are our laws equitable?,” “Do our laws align with our Constitution?,” and “Are our laws in accordance with policies and laws that govern all schools in California?”

**PROTOTYPE #5 - EXPANDING EXISTING PROGRAMS**

As part of the Learning Group, participants were exposed to a variety of programs and school designs that are currently operating throughout the District. Participants recognized the successes of these programs, and a common recommendation that emerged was to provide a way to educate schools about the types of programs currently being offered within the District, as well as to support the expansion of existing programs to more schools.

One of the major obstacles in the expansion of existing successful programs is that there is no easy way for other schools and educational leaders to explore what is currently being implemented in our middle schools. To address this need, we are proposing the development of a web-based tool in which school information can be gathered and shared to promote best practices across the District. Information collected from schools would include: a belief statement that would connect to the school’s chosen area of focus or specialization; school demographic information; bell schedule; master schedule; location; special programs; grants supporting specific programs; community partners; electives; successful routines; descriptions of effective professional development; etc. In addition, the tool would include contact information for a point person who could assist with resources and scheduling of interschool visits; best times for observations; photos and videos of the
programs in action; testimonials; descriptions of challenges and solutions; and important considerations.

Schools interested in investigating options for expanding an existing program or trying a new program, would go to this website and search keywords. The website would then return a list of LAUSD schools at which innovative practices or programs are being used. The searching school would then be able to contact the point person identified on the website for that school. Schools could set up meetings and/or campus visits to see the practice or program in action. They could compare programs from a variety of schools, weighing and considering their own schools particular needs, before developing a plan and implementing it.

An important component of this website would be a page dedicated to electives options, describing various models of implementation, and referring schools interested in a particular model to resources and school sites where they can obtain information on planning and implementation, including recommendations such as funding, staffing, and scheduling of a given model.

The goals of this website are to connect schools in order to provide a bank of ideas for schools looking to try something new or change an existing practice, and to provide a network of support for schools as they implement a new system or program.
“Obstacles to college and career readiness must be met head on. We can take the steps necessary to ensure that every student learns the essential skills necessary to handle the rigorous high school coursework that prepares them for college and career.”

The Forgotten Middle Executive Summary
WHAT ARE OUR NEXT STEPS?
The Middle Grades Collaborative is requesting the Board support the continuation of this work for the 2016-17 school year. Specifically, the Division of Instruction will plan to:

1. Continue the Learning Group for 2016-17. The work of the Learning Group would be to:
   a. Research the needs and recommendations from the “Areas to Explore”
   b. Explore how other districts, states and countries are addressing the needs of middle grades students
   c. Create a detailed action plan to implement and expand on the recommendations from the Framework, and any other recommendations based on new research

2. Create a Prototype Implementation Team to:
   a. Develop a detailed action plan to pilot the prototypes described in the Working Group Recommendations, and to provide incentives to schools to prototype.
CREATING A COLLABORATIVE TO FOCUS ON THE MIDDLE GRADES

Dr. Rodriguez, Mr. Schmerelson, Ms. Garcia, Ms. Ratliff

Whereas, The middle grade years in K-12 education play a pivotal role in high school success, and they are part of LAUSD’s plan to eliminate dropouts and ensure students graduate high school college prepared and career ready;

Whereas, The middle grade years are a time of heightened vulnerability, as the years between 6th and 8th grade are known for an increase in disciplinary problems, motivational decline, and initiation in risky behaviors;

Whereas, Chronic absenteeism and behavioral problems in middle grades are clear warnings signals of leaving high school, and without early intervention, struggling middle school students will continue to leave school;

Whereas, Los Angeles County has some of the largest middle schools in the nation, with some grade sizes at least seven times larger in middle school than in elementary school. These large environments can be intimidating for both students and parents and can impede learning;

Whereas, In response to The Forgotten Middle report that described how critical it is for students to be on target for college and career, the U.S. Department of Education now recommends that students begin planning for college as early as 6th grade;

Whereas, Middle grades education is the first step in the secondary to post-secondary pipeline, and the last chance to get students on track for a high school curriculum that will make them college and career ready;

Whereas, Students not adequately prepared in the middle grades for core high school subjects, such as mathematics and English Language Arts, can have difficulty catching up on college-readiness requirements;

Whereas, The demand for workers with postsecondary education in California is projected to grow in the 21st century economy, college and career planning needs to begin in the middle grades, so that students are prepared for the rigorous curriculum of high schools; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the creation of a collaborative team of parents, students, educators, school leaders, researchers, District staff, and other experts on the Middle Grades will work together to create a framework for collective action on reimagining the middle grades;

Resolved further, That the collaborative team’s membership should include, but not be limited to, a representative from each of the following:

- A middle school parent
- A middle school student
- United Teachers Los Angeles
- Associated Administrators of Los Angeles
- LAUSD Division of Student Health and Human Services
- The LAUSD Division of Instruction
- The LAUSD Office of Educational Services
Resolved further, That the collaborative team will identify best practices in LAUSD and across the nation around social emotional supports, grade level configurations, practices that motivate and engage our middle grade students, and how the intermediate years impact the success of students in the middle grades, in order to provide recommendations on next steps to improve and support middle grade education across LAUSD; and, be it finally

Resolved, That the collaborative team will be formed by January 2016 and will present the framework for collective action to the Board of Education by June 2016.
APPENDIX B - BACKGROUND

In order to ensure a wide variety of experiences, perspectives and knowledge were brought to the collaborative, the team included members from the following stakeholder groups:

- Middle school parents
- Middle school students
- United Teachers Los Angeles
- Associated Administrators of Los Angeles
- LAUSD Division of Student Health and Human Services
- LAUSD Division of Instruction
- LAUSD Office of Educational Services

The goals of the collaborative team included identifying best practices in LAUSD and nationally and providing recommendations of next steps to improve and support middle grade education across LAUSD. Areas of focus identified in the resolution were “social emotional supports, grade level configurations, practices that motivate and engage our middle grade students, and how the intermediate years impact the success of students in the middle grades”.

The collaborative was comprised of two separate types of meetings (a Working Group and a Learning Group), designed to gather promising practices and research on the middle grades, as well as to participate in a Design Thinking protocol intended to provide innovative ideas around reimagined middle grades experiences.

The Working Group undertook an intensive Design Thinking process to identify issues relating to the middle grades, brainstorm solutions to those issues, and come up with innovative, student-centered prototypes to address the issues. The (approximately) 25-person group consisted of students, parents, UTLA and AALA representatives, community partners, school-site administrators, teachers, board members and staff, and Central Office staff.

The Learning Group’s purpose was to gather information on topics relating to the middle grades, framed by four essential questions:

- “Who are our middle grades students?”
- “How do we engage our middle grades students?”
- “What are our middle grades students learning?”
- “How are our middle grades students learning?”

Participants, who represented the same stakeholder groups as the Working Group, as well as local district staff and the general public, attended breakout sessions to learn about existing programs around the District and current research connected to the middle grades. Over the course of the four-meeting series, participants synthesized their learning and made
recommendations regarding major themes that emerged and ideas that support those themes.

### TIMELINE OF THE MIDDLE GRADES COLLABORATIVE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORKING GROUP</th>
<th>LEARNING GROUP</th>
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</table>
| February 25, 2016  
Nightingale MS  
Who are our middle grades students? | February 16, 2016  
Nava Learning Academy |
| March 17, 2016  
Maclay MS  
How do we engage our middle grades students in learning? | March 3, 2016  
Nava Learning Academy |
| March 31, 2016  
Ochoa Learning Center  
What are our middle grades students learning? | April 7, 2016  
Orthopaedic Medical Magnet |
| April 14, 2016  
Madison MS  
How are our middle grades students learning? | April 28, 2016  
Nava Learning Academy |
| May 11, 2016  
Contreras Learning Complex  
Nava Learning Academy |
APPENDIX C – RESOURCES ORGANIZED BY AREA OF INTEREST

The resources referenced below are not necessarily cited in the Framework for Action. They are listed here as additional research material for the continuation of the Learning Group, as well as further research on the topics discussed in the framework for interested readers.

A-G AND GRADUATION READINESS

3. *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents.* Westerville, OH: Association for Middle Level Education, 2010. Print.
4. California Department of Education
   - [http://pubs.cde.ca.gov/tcsii/abouttcsii/aboutcsiiindex.aspx](http://pubs.cde.ca.gov/tcsii/abouttcsii/aboutcsiiindex.aspx)
   - *Caught in the Middle: Educational Reform for Young Adolescents in California Public Schools* (1987)
   - *Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-Based Education for California’s Middle Grades Students* (2001)
   - *Taking Center Stage–Act II (TCSII): Ensuring Success and Closing the Achievement Gap for All of California’s Middle Grades Students* (2008)

EFFECTS OF TRANSITIONS ON LEARNING


ENGAGEMENT

IMPLICATIONS OF NEUROSCIENCE FOR INSTRUCTION

- Immordino-Yang, Mary Helen

- Recommendations on School Start Times

MINDSET

- Boaler, Jo
- Dweck, Carol
  - http://mindsetonline.com/
- Schwartz, Katrina.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, www.casel.org
- http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2015/10/02/how-to-weave-growth-mindset-into-school-culture/

STUDENT IDENTITY/RELATIONSHIPS

- The Importance of Play
ENDNOTES


2 Middle Grades Learning Group Series, http://achieve.lausd.net/middlegradesLG


4 Middle Grades Learning Group - Session 1, “The Middle Grades Student Brain” Breakout Session, Video Interview with Dr. Immordino-Yang, February 27, 2016.


7 Middle Grades Learning Group - Session 1, “The Health of Middle Grades Students” Breakout Session, February 27, 2016.


9 Session 1, Health Breakout Session, February 27, 2016.


11 Session 1, Immordino-Yang video, February 27, 2016.

12 Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 90-98.

13 Session 1, Immordino-Yang video, February 27, 2016.


18 Middle Grades Learning Group - Session 4, “Mastery Based Learning and Grading” Breakout Session. April 14, 2016.
19 Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 102-106.


21 Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 90-98.


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Los Angeles Unified School District would like to thank the following people for their contributions to this Framework:

Board Member Rodriguez, Board Member Schmerelson, Board Member Garcia, and Board Member Ratliff for sponsoring the Middle Grades Resolution and establishing the Middle Grades Collaborative.

Superintendent Michelle King and Chief Academic Officer Dr. Frances Gipson for supporting the work of the Collaborative within the Division of Instruction.

Dr. Derrick Chau for leading the work of the Middle Grades Collaborative.

The Learning Group session presenters: Dr. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang from the University of Southern California, Daryl Narimatsu from School Operations, Dr. Lisa Regan DeRoss from the Division of Special Education, Timothy Kordic from Health Education Programs, Erin Cuenca from the Division of Instruction, Jami Krielaart from the Division of Instruction, Esther Soliman from Linked Learning, Renata Simril from LA84, Patrick Escobar from LA84, Dr. Derrick Chau from the Division of Instruction, Elaina Garza from the Division of Instruction, Dr. Luis Rodriguez from Nava College Prep, Juan Torres from Nava College Prep, Jonathan Davalos from Nava College Prep, Judy Iguina from the APOLO/Dual Language Department, Dr. Marguerite Williams from Linked Learning, Melissa Guico from the Division of Instruction, Steven McCarthy from the Arts Education Branch, Ivette Muñoz from the Multilingual and Multicultural Education Department (MMED), and Gene Wong from Madison Middle School.


The anonymous students who agreed to be interviewed by members of the Working Group in order to provide insight into the middle grades experience.

The student panels from Orthopaedic Hospital High School Medical Magnet and Dr. Julian Nava Learning Academy for providing feedback on the prototypes developed in the Working Group.

For their participation in the Working Group and for developing prototypes for further exploration: Manny Aceves, Aixle Aman, Max Arias, Veronica Arreguin, Gabriella Barbosa, Andrew Basurto, Christina Basurto, Charles Bolton, Edgar Campos, Derrick Chau, Erin Cuenca, Victoria Deneroff, Tanya Franklin, Rafael Gaeta, David Gonzalez, Erika Gonzalez, Marcus Jenkins, Jami Krielaart, Arthur Lopez, Gustavo Lopez, Ray Lopez Chang, Heidi Mahmud, Carlos Martinez, Silvia Martinez, Steven McCarthy, Christine Moore, Daryl Narimatsu, Diane Panossian, Lisa Regan DeRoss, Jennifer Reid, Board Member Rodriguez, Board Member Schmerelson, Ada Sneathen-Stevens, Diego Toscano, Raquel Toscano, Agustin Urgiles, Annette Ventimiglia, and Deborah Wiltz.

Principal Maria Ozaeta and the staff of Dr. Julian Nava Learning Academy, Principal Erick Mata and the staff of Orthopaedic Hospital High School Medical Magnet, Principal Rafael Gaeta and the staff of Nightingale Middle School, Principal Carlos Tobar and the staff of Maclay Middle School, Principal Mara Bommarito and the staff of Ellen Ochoa Learning Center, Principal Estelle Baptiste and the staff of Madison Middle School, and Principal Nova Meza and the staff of Miguel Contreras Learning Complex, for allowing the Middle School Collaborative to use their campuses and rooms.

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