

Best Practices Newsletter

Preparing Students for High School and Postsecondary Studies

If students are going to be on a trajectory for success in high school and college, they need to prepare early. All too often students struggle with the transition from the middle grades to high school, both academically and socially. Teachers must begin in the middle grades to identify at-risk students who fail to meet grade-level standards and provide accelerated curricula to prepare them for high school studies, and schools must have a plan in place to help students navigate those critical transition years.

This newsletter explores how teachers are helping students to obtain the academic, social and emotional skills and abilities necessary for success in high school, college and life.

Helping Students Transition to High School More Effectively

Students changing teachers, schools and grade levels will likely face severe stress if they do not have the necessary maturity, social skills or knowledge base to adapt to change. That's why the transition to a high school setting brings a degree of apprehension and anxiety to many students.

"When kids change schools, they need more of a helping hand. They need more personalization," said **Dave Shepard**, the lead consultant for The Middle Matters and More in Lexington, Kentucky. He noted ninth-graders are still in the adolescent stage, and it's important to consider their developmental characteristics when planning instruction and their environment.

"The very best high schools purposefully plan for the transition," he noted. Shepard, a retired teacher, coach and administrator, said there are several ways schools can facilitate a smooth transition to high school.

Keys to a Successful Transition to High School

1. Start in the spring before students make the move. Shepard said having the principal, assistant principal and guidance counselor visit sending schools' eighth-graders can have an impact. He also noted it might be useful for incoming ninth-graders to visit the high school, team up with students and see what a routine day looks like.

Another tactic might be to have freshmen teachers and eighth-grade teachers switch up and teach each other's classes for a day. "The eighth-grade kids get to see that not all ninth-grade teachers are mean and nasty," he quipped. And, eighth-grade teachers get to see the kids they had last year and observe how they've matured.

2. Have the very best teachers teach ninth grade. Shepard asked attendees at his HSTW conference session how many thought ninth grade was the best year they ever had; no one responded yes. When asked if freshmen are easier to teach than seniors, no one said yes. "If nobody likes being a freshman, and they are tougher to teach, it tells you they are a different breed," insisted Shepard. They have different needs from a maturity standpoint, and an emotional and social development standpoint. "They need more nurturing," he added.



This newsletter describes best practices presented at the 29th Annual HSTW Staff Development Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, in July 2015. **SAVE the DATE.** Join us for the 30th Annual HSTW Staff Development Conference July 13-16, 2016 in Louisville, Kentucky. Look [here](#) for updates. Come early for the College- and Career Readiness Standards Networking Conference, July 11-13, 2016 in Louisville.

3. Provide incoming students with structure and physical activity. Students need to do something besides sit down, be quiet and take notes, said Shepard. This type of instructional approach leads to success with some students, but not all. Shepard said teachers should vary their instruction and engage students in active learning. According to Shepard, giving students' choices also motivates them to do their classwork. For example, let students choose who to work with or team up with; allow them to select how to demonstrate their knowledge of an assignment or project, or let them choose the subject for a paper.

Red Flags Signaling Students Will Not Succeed

Ninth grade is a pivotal year and failure rates are high. The 2011 Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Middle Grades Commission report found 25 out of 100 rising ninth-graders in the SREB region do not graduate high school on time.

There are three indicators that warn student failure is imminent, noted Shepard.

- Little academic success — Often, when students receive too many failing grades, they think they can't do anything right and give up.
- No group to belong to — Students need to feel socially or emotionally connected to a club or extracurricular activity.
- No adult connection in the school — Students need to feel there is an adult in the school to talk to and trust.

One effective strategy for increasing student success and addressing their social, emotional and academic needs is forming a ninth grade academy.

Ninth Grade Academies

Shepard advocates establishing a ninth-grade academy as a method of meeting the needs of students. An academy is virtually a school within a school that provides ninth-graders with the resources and support they need to succeed. "Ninth-grade academies are supposed to be more like families," Shepard said. They create a sense of belonging and a more personalized learning environment.

According to Shepard, for academies to be successful, administrators must select teachers who are trained to deal with adolescence and want to teach ninth-graders. He contends this group of staff members must be recognized as a unit, have a shared responsibility for a common group of students, have a common planning time to develop strategies and have a sense of comradery. Ideally, the ninth-grade academy should be in a common area of the building.

Making a Difference

If a North Carolina study is any indication of national trends, ninth-grade academies help foster student success. A study of 82 schools in North Carolina that implemented ninth-grade academies found from 2001-07, non-promotion rates decreased. Ninth grade academies had a non-promotion rate of 15 percent compared with a state average of 22 percent.

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<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/intern-research/reports/9thgradeacademies.pdf>

Ready or Not: Math Happens!

The freshman year of high school can be daunting for students, especially those who lack the academic knowledge and skills needed to succeed. Students who enter high school with deficits in the foundational literacy and math skills are at greater risk of dropping out.

The Georgia Department of Education makes every effort to intervene and help struggling students before they fail a course. This includes offering a mathematics support class as an option in its course listing.

Lanier High School, part of the Gwinnett County Public School system in Georgia, offers a math support course for ninth-graders called Algebra I Strategies. This is an elective class taught concurrently with students' regular Algebra I class.

Twenty students with little or no success in middle grades math who typically earned D's and F's on their report cards and were the lowest performers on the state-administered Criterion-Reference Competency exam were selected to take the course.



"The very best high schools purposefully plan for transitions."

— Dave Shepard

Transition Strategies

Learn about more strategies to help students successfully transition from elementary school to the middle grades to high school and finally to college at the 30th Annual HSTW Staff Development Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, July 13-16, 2016.

The strategies class was designed to address the needs of students who have traditionally struggled in math and to help them transition to high school by providing the extra time and attention they need to be successful.

In the beginning, the biggest struggle students faced was having a mindset they were not good at math, said **Tamaiko Chappell**, math department chair and member of the writing team for the ninth-grade catch-up course at Lanier. Algebra I teacher **Ana Medina-Rusch** echoed that sentiment, saying when the ninth-graders enrolled, they didn't expect to be good at math. They quickly realized that to be successful, they had to get away from just memorizing concepts; they had to understand them. "They knew they needed extra time and extra work," said Rusch.

Students used to shut down, but one of the first signs of progress was "their belief they could look at a math problem and determine if it's right or wrong, reasonable or unreasonable."

— Ana Medina-Rusch

Class Structure

The class structure was conducive for the extra learning. Classes were smaller, with a 20:1 teacher-student ratio versus a 28:1 or 32:1 ratio in a typical classroom. Unlike math support classes in some schools, Lanier used a back-to-back model. Algebra I strategies and Algebra I classes were blended together. Students spent two consecutive hours in math each day. "They were busy the entire time," noted Chappell. Time in class was filled and absorbed with students' questions and interactions," she added.

Students were not ridiculed for knowledge gaps. They felt they were all in the same boat; they had hands-on opportunities, the ability to socialize in a math way, and enjoyed the comradery of the class, maintained Rusch.

Student Progress

In the beginning of the Algebra I strategies class, students used to shut down. One of the first signs of progress was "their belief they could look at a math problem and determine if it's right or wrong, reasonable or unreasonable," expressed Rusch. They learned how to ask questions in a productive way. They knew there were multiple approaches to problems. They knew the teacher was not going to give them answers. Dialogue was constant. The students were engaged.

"I had great results," said Rusch. She indicated one student earned a low "A" the first semester and a high "A" the second semester, but most of the students earned low B's or C's. For them, that was very successful. "Their parents were thrilled," exclaimed Rusch.

Key Elements for a Successful Course

Classroom Environment: Creating the right kind of environment is critical. In the very beginning of class, let students know what's expected of them and that they will not be allowed to "check out" or engage in passive learning as tasks become more complex. Create a supportive classroom environment that provides students the opportunity to be grouped for collaborative learning. Make sure students know mistakes are okay and are to be expected.

Ready for High School Courses

SREB is developing Ready for High School courses in literacy and math. The courses are designed to prepare eighth- and ninth-graders for high school. They will be available at no cost to schools starting in 2016-17. For schools interested in implementing these courses, training will be offered through the Readiness Courses Institute July 11-16, 2016 in Louisville, Kentucky, before and during the 30th Annual HSTW Staff Development Conference, July 13-16 in Louisville.

Dialogue: Engage in math dialogue to prompt students to start thinking about math concepts involved in lessons before the beginning of the actual lesson. This time is important in helping teachers identify gaps in students' understanding of specific math concepts. These gaps can then be addressed by the teacher using direct instruction. During dialogue, students also work on problems together and figure out each other's mistakes. They would sometimes learn everyone was having the same struggle. "That discussion, that dialogue was amazing to see," said Rusch. "I would explain something to them and they wouldn't get it, but somehow what their classmate said made sense and they got it."

Lesson Format:

- Get started (three minutes)
- Engage (three to five minutes)
- Explore (10 to 15 minutes)
- Explain (10 minutes)
- Practice together (five to 10 minutes)
- Practice in teams (five to 10 minutes)
- Practice alone (five to 10 minutes)
- Evaluate understanding (five to 10 minutes)
- Close (five minutes)

Chappell stressed that time spent engaging, exploring and explaining provided perfect opportunities for students to discuss math informally and provided teachers opportunities to understand student pre-requisite skills and misconceptions. Teachers could then reteach necessary skills and correct misconceptions. She also emphasized not all of these elements need to be part of every lesson.

Evaluate Understanding: To assess student understanding of math lessons taught as well as inform teacher practice, it is necessary to evaluate. Discussions and activities during the engage and explore portion of lessons are good vehicles to check for student understanding. Quizzes provide an opportunity to evaluate their learning.

Geometry Strategies Class

Seeing a need for student remediation in geometry, Chappell taught a geometry strategies course for 10th-graders using a similar classroom structure and methods as the Algebra I strategies course. She too had promising results. There was marked improvements in students' attitudes toward math and their grades. Students were "empowered to own the mathematics and advocate for their answers," said Chappell, adding that their impression of what success is in class changed. One student admitted, "I used to be bad at math." Another mused, "I can be logical so I can do math."

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You Want Proof? Becoming a High-Performing School

In 2009 the Eldon School District in Missouri began a journey to raise student achievement and improve its high school, career center and middle grades school. ACT scores were on the decline, so was the graduation rate. At one point **Eldon High School (EHS)** had four principals in four years. Warning signs that change was needed were all around.

In the 2009-10 school year, Eldon High School and **Eldon Career Center (ECC)** embarked on a school reform journey. Staff from each school did their research, visiting model schools with similar demographics, attended national conferences and formed focus teams to study every aspect of the model schools.



Kris Harwood

The Eldon School District, comprises two elementary schools, a middle grades school and a high school. The district serves 1,876 students in grades K-12. Ninety-three percent are white and nearly 64 percent receive free or reduced-price lunches.

Kris Harwood, principal of EHS, indicated that high school students were administered the High Schools That Work (HSTW) Assessment in reading, math and science in 2009 to obtain baseline data. Results showed 43 percent of seniors met readiness goals in reading; 59 percent in math; and 51 percent in science. Students who meet these goals are likely prepared for postsecondary studies and careers. HSTW's goal is for 85 percent of students to meet the readiness goals in each subject area.

Implementing the HSTW Design for School Turnaround



Steve Henderson

In 2010 a team of staff members from the high school and ECC also attended the High Schools That Work Staff Development Conference where best practices and school reform initiatives are shared by experts and classroom practitioners nationwide. After that, "we could see that this is what we needed to turn our district around," said Harwood. That same school year, the high school and career center became part of the HSTW network of school sites and initiated implementation of the HSTW [Key Practices for improving student achievement](#).

Around that same time, the high school focus team "looked at everything imaginative in the school," said assistant principal **Steve Henderson**. Seven Focus Teams were formed: literacy, programs of study, guidance, transitions, engaging instructional strategies, advisory/extra help and assessment. As a result of their findings and the HSTW Assessment, "we really thought the key [to improve] was to get scores up in literacy. That was number one," said Henderson.

Highlights of High School Initiatives Stemming From Focus Teams

College and Career Day: Dozens of exhibitors from colleges, training facilities and technical schools are available for students to question and gather information.

Mock Interviews: Seniors are required to participate in mock job interviews. They dress professionally and interview with representatives from business and the community. Some have even been offered jobs.

Job Shadowing: Eleventh-graders learn about careers and the real day-to-day requirements of various professions.

Ninth-Grade Summer Bridge Program: Students who need extra help to be successful in high school may attend the program for 20 days over the summer.

Dual Credit Offerings: EHS increased dual credit offerings from 176 in 2009 to 284 in 2014.

Harwood indicated one of the first things the high school did was follow HSTW's recommendation that each student reads 25 books per year. The first year students in all grade levels at the school read over 700,000 pages. Last year the high school student body read over 2 million pages — not class-assigned books, but extra books students read on their own.

Teachers also require students to do more essay and short-answer questions, do weekly writing assignments in all classes, conduct peer reviews of other students' writings and write at least one research paper per semester. In English class, students are asked to write and refine at least one paper to a publishable level.

Literacy Strategies



Shaun Fischer

To help grow students' literacy skills even more, in fall 2013, EHS and ECC and **Eldon Middle School (EMS)** implemented the [Literacy Design Collaborative \(LDC\)](#), an instructional design model for developing students' literacy skills preparing them for the demands of college and careers. LDC provides a system for developing reading, writing and thinking skills within a variety of academic disciplines, not just in English/language arts courses.

"Reading is an everyday thing for our students," noted EMS Principal **Shaun Fischer**. He indicated the high school picks up on that right away when new freshmen arrive from the sending school. Teachers notice "...they are willing and able to read outside of class."



SREB trainers and coaches worked with the schools to prepare teachers to implement the LDC framework, which includes creating modules of three-to-four weeks of literacy-rich tasks and instruction. Administrators attended the training too, and it made a huge difference, indicated ECC Director **Kelli Engelbrecht**. "When we evaluate them [teachers] we know exactly what they ought to be doing and they know we know it."

ECC is a shared-time center that serves six schools, including EHS. Getting teacher buy-in to incorporate literacy in career and technical education (CTE) classrooms wasn't easy. It's hard for students to see the relevance of literacy at a career center, noted Engelbrecht. "They want to hit the road and build a house," she said. Teachers were reluctant as well. "They all see relevance, but there's a fear factor and a difficulty level of being outside their comfort zone," added Engelbrecht.

Still, ECC followed suit and implemented literacy in the curriculum because of the need to "keep up with what business and industry is begging for," noted Engelbrecht. They did not see that schools were sending them students with writing, math and communication skills, she added.

Whereas high school students may write essays or major research papers, CTE students' writing is tied to what students would actually do in a given career field. For example, automotive students write service plans and graphic art students write critiques.

Engelbrecht also indicated it was important for ECC to prove it was instrumental in increasing ACT scores and students' scores on end-of-course exams.



Kelli Engelbrecht

As a result of using the LDC instructional model, the EHS student failure rate declined; attendance went up, and ACT scores climbed. Harwood noted, "In the last 20 years, we have only scored 21 or above four times and three of those have been since we started HSTW."

ELDON HIGH SCHOOL

Indicator	2009	2014/2015
F's	335	203
Composite ACT Score	20.3	21.7
Graduation Rate	73%	90%
HSTW Readiness/Reading	43%	72%
HSTW Readiness/Math	59%	73%
HSTW Readiness/Science	51%	77%

Middle Grades School Jumps Aboard

In the 2011-12 school year, EMS joined the school improvement initiative and created three focus teams: high expectations/extra help, engaging instructional strategies and literacy across the curriculum. EMS also implemented the Power of ICU and stressed that student failure is not an acceptable option.

"We shifted our mindset. If students don't turn in assignments, we don't just give them a zero and move on," said Fischer. Parents are sent text messages or emails notifying them when their children did not complete assignments. So-called school lifeguards ask students about missed work and help them during advisory periods to understand concepts taught. Fischer, his assistant and a school counselor make up the lifeguard team.

"The emphasis is on learning the material," maintained Fischer. When students do turn in missed work, it's up to each individual teacher whether students receive full credit or partial credit.

Math Strategies

The middle grades school, high school and tech center began using the mathematics instructional strategies known as the [Mathematics Design Collaborative](#) (MDC) during the 2013-14 school year. Central to MDC are sets of formative assessment lessons (FALs) which are aligned to college- and career-readiness standards.

SREB trainers coached teachers in how to embed FALs into units of instruction to engage students so they understand not only the hows of math, but also the whys. Rather than teachers showing students predetermined steps to find answers, teachers support students in a productive struggle to solve problems.

Teachers who use FALs say students are talking more about math than ever before with high engagement. Students are explaining and defending their thoughts, processes and answers, and students are realizing that teachers are facilitators of learning.

"The most beneficial change that MDC has brought to our teachers is in their everyday teaching and their questioning," said Fischer. He also noted student retention is much greater since teachers began using FALs and "our math scores have risen over the last couple of years," he added.

"LDC and MDC were the perfect fit," said Harwood. "It was exciting because the scores turned around quickly." And that obtained buy-in from teachers, she noted.

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Fourth Annual College- and Career-Readiness Standards Networking Conference

Attend in-depth sessions and workshops on LDC and MDC July 11-13, 2016 in Louisville, Kentucky to learn how you can implement these proven literacy and math strategies. Look [here](#) for updates. LDC/MDC sessions are also available at the HSTW Staff Development Conference, July 13-16, 2016, in Louisville.

Effective School Transformation via a Freshmen Seminar

Students go to school to learn the skills that help them become proficient in reading, math science and critical thinking so they can become successful in college and the workforce. Today, more and more schools are seeing the benefit of teaching students the social and emotional skills they desperately need in school and life.



R. Keeth Matheny

R. Keeth Matheny teaches social and emotional learning (SEL) skills to freshmen at **Austin High School** in Austin, Texas, in a course called Methods for Academic and Personal Success (MAPS). Through SEL, students learn how to manage their emotions, build healthy relationships, solve conflicts and create a vision for their futures. “Healthy emotional responses must be learned,” said Matheny.

The five core SEL competencies are:

- Self-awareness — I know how I feel and what I do well.
- Self-management — I control myself; I behave appropriately.
- Social Awareness — I care about others.
- Relationship skills — I work and play well with others.
- Responsible decision making — I make good choices.

“All of this work with social and emotional learning is a proactive approach to teaching skills that will make our students’ lives, schools and society a better place,” maintained Matheny. When students can’t manage anger, it often leads to fights or aggressive behavior. When students can’t feel empathy, it may lead to bullying. Matheny maintained that fights in the hallway, emotional outbursts and inappropriate behaviors in the classroom are symptoms of skill deficiencies. “I see it as an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” he noted.

MAPS became part of the curriculum at Austin High School in the 2010-11 school year. It was offered to freshmen to help them make the critical transition from the middle grades to high school. When he started working at the high school in 2009, Matheny said data showed over 60 percent of failures and discipline referrals campuswide were freshmen. Matheny along with other teachers and administrators put their collective heads together and came up with the idea of a class that literally teaches students skills for success in school, relationships and life.

A Sample of Strategies Taught in MAPS Class

Matheny noted his classroom spends time on academic skills such as organizational skills, notetaking and keeping a planner, but for the most part, students are learning about SEL skills. The following is a sample of lessons taught:

Active listening: “It’s a major problem in our society. We are not good at giving undivided attention to anyone, ever,” said Matheny. Active listening is a significant part of relationship skills. Without active listening, it’s hard to build relationships and empathize with others, maintained Matheny.

Collaborating effectively: Students are taught to have an open mind and listen to the opinions of others; they learn how to disagree without being disagreeable — in other words, being able to disagree without attacking someone personally. Mastering this skill “is a huge sign of emotional maturity,” said Matheny.

Reviving “digital zombies:” Students are taught how to create a “balance between being connected and being present.” Young people are often connected to their phones and social media, but they must also learn how to be present wherever they are, maintained Matheny. He said, “When we allow ourselves to be connected to someone who is not here, we are missing out on the here and now.” He believes balance is paramount. Matheny also lamented how, just a generation ago, students interacted more with friends; they rode bikes, talked and played games together. All of those activities brought about negotiations and collaborations. But today, he said too many students are better at interacting with screens than with people.



MAPS Teachers Making a Difference

There are over 400 teachers teaching a version of MAPS at schools across the country. It is a semester-long elective course at Austin High School, and just over 300 of the school’s 500 freshmen enroll in it. Those who don’t take the course are double blocked for athletics, band or fine arts. In addition to Matheny, there’s one other MAPS teacher at the school.

They not only help students with social and emotional maturity, they also form positive and caring relationships with the students that inspire them to feel more connected to the school and see relevance in it. They teach them to think about their hopes, dreams and aspirations and about a vision for their futures, then they show them how school can be a vehicle to their futures.

Matheny said too often when students don't have a plan for their lives, they see schoolwork as a "have to" not a "want to," and they may not do it. But when they have a vision for their futures, they are more likely to be motivated to do the schoolwork because it becomes vehicle to get where they want to go. They see schoolwork as a "want to."

Decline in Failure Rates and Discipline Problems

Four years after MAPS was added to the curriculum, Matheny said discipline referrals for freshmen dropped by 71 percent and course failures dropped by 41 percent. Data also showed improvement schoolwide. Matheny reports campus discipline referrals dropped by 49 percent and the dropout rate declined by 30 percent. "Students feel they have the tools for success," he said. He also noted teaching social and emotional skills is a "time maker, not a time taker. These skills pay huge dividends in student outcomes and time on task for teachers."

Rudolph Matheny rudolph.matheny@austinisd.org

Launching Alabama Middle Grades Students to a Better Future

In September 2014, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a GEAR UP grant (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) to the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Education. The mission is to prepare students in the Black Belt region of the state for postsecondary education.

The Black Belt region is plagued with high poverty, sub-standard housing, high unemployment, low wages, a declining population and failing schools. According to the state department of education, 28 percent of students in the region did not graduate from high school. Fifty-four percent enrolled in college following their senior year of high school, but most needed remediation; a mere 18 percent placed in college-level math and only eight percent placed in college-level English.

With the federal dollars, Alabama started GEAR UP Alabama (GUA) and turned a laser-like focus on improving the nearly 10,450 students from 18 school districts and 53 schools in the Black Belt region.



Veronique Zimmerman-Brown, GEAR UP Alabama's project director, said GUA's overall goal is to increase the number of low-income students succeeding in postsecondary education. Its activities are aligned with the grant's five objectives:

- Increase the academic performance and preparation for postsecondary education for GEAR UP students.
- Increase the rate of high school graduation enrollment in postsecondary education.
- Encourage greater knowledge among students and families of postsecondary education options, preparation and financing.
- Increase the percentage of GEAR UP students who enroll and succeed in postsecondary education.
- Increase the preparation of teachers and staff to teach and serve GEAR UP students.

To address these objectives, GUA teamed up with SREB's Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW) initiative. MMGW requires schools to rethink beliefs about education. According to MMGW director **Deborah Bass**, at the core of the initiative is the need to shift from an ability-based learning model to an effort-based model. It is a fundamental shift, which supports "the idea that with appropriate structure, support and additional time, if needed, all students can be successful," said Bass.

MMGW Core Beliefs

Bass indicated that the MMGW framework offers seven core beliefs that deliver change in school practices.

- Nearly all students can and will make the effort to learn grade-level and course standards if adults in the school create the right conditions.
- All students should complete a program of study that will prepare them for further study and a career.
- Students who have goals and see meaning and purpose in learning are more motivated to learn grade-level and course standards.



- Students learn best when they have a personal connection to the school.
- Students learn best when teachers maintain a demanding yet supportive environment that pushes them to do their best.
- Faculty should continuously improve teaching and learning.
- Students change behavior and become more motivated to meet school goals when adults use school and classroom practices based on effort rather than ability.

MMGW Services to GUA

MMGW partnered with and provided services for GUA in four steps. SREB administered a survey to teachers and students at each school in the Black Belt region, performed a desktop audit of each school, conducted an onsite instructional review of individual schools known as a Technical Assistance Visit (TAV), and provided a complete case study school report. Details are below.

Technical Assistance Visit

A Technical Assistance Visit (TAV) is an on-site instructional review of individual schools. The TAV teams consist of academic and career and technical education teachers, a superintendent or a principal, a principal from a feeder middle grades school, a counselor and a postsecondary administrator or teacher and at least one person from the state department of education.

The purpose of a TAV is to help school leaders and teachers take stock of where they are and where they need to go in school improvement. The TAV team observes classes, conducts informal interviews, analyzes student work, debriefs promising practices and comes to consensus on the challenges that need to be addressed around the MMGW framework. The team provides written reports of the schools' strengths, challenges and action steps.

Student Surveys

The surveys were administered online to all sixth- and seventh-grade students and all teachers in the region. The survey included questions to determine how well students:

- Were exposed to a rigorous curriculum
- Engaged in academics
- Experienced an emphasis on high expectations and extra help if necessary
- Understood the importance of school

The results helped school teams determine students' perceptions of what teachers asked and expected them to do, what they were taught and what level of effort they had to make to meet school standards. Use of such data is an essential element in the comprehensive framework for improving middle grades schools.

According to SREB research assistant **Chris Fuga** results showed that 29 percent of students reported having low expectations indicating they did not feel challenged or motivated. This in turn supported the need for higher expectations and rigorous assignments.

Nearly 75 percent of students perceived their English/language arts curriculum as not rigorous; 47 percent perceived their math curriculum as not rigorous, and 85 percent had the perception their science curriculum was not rigorous.



Desktop Audit

MMGW gathered and analyzed school data on student demographics, student attendance, discipline, faculty attendance rates and turnover, partnerships and parental involvement, extracurricular activities, course offerings and course-taking patterns, past/fail rates by course and overall student achievement.

Case Study Report

Data from the desktop audits, student and teacher surveys and TAVs were summarized in written case study reports. The report was designed to reveal the culture and climate of the each school and its college- and career-readiness needs. It also offered baseline information how to move students forward academically. Over the summer GUA and SREB met to determine professional development needs for the 2015-16 school year.

Next Steps

As a result of the student and teacher surveys and TAVs, Zimmerman-Brown said the school teams attended a two-day workshop centered on the **MMGW Key Priorities** framework. The schools analyzed the perception and needs assessment data and left with ideas for an action plan that will lead to a school improvement plan with embedded GEAR UP action steps.

The MMGW school Improvement initiative is organized around eight key practices:

1. **Purpose-Driven Mission:** Align school practices to reflect a mission focused on preparing students for success in rigorous high school courses, resulting in most students able to graduate and proceed to college or technical training.
2. **Embed Rigorous State Standards:** Accelerate instruction to help all students perform at grade level on rigorous college- and career-readiness standards.
3. **Focus on Literacy:** Focus the middle grades curriculum on literacy in all content areas to embed literacy skills and build students' abilities to read and understand grade-level texts and related documents and to express thoughts orally and in writing.
4. **Balanced Approach to Teaching Mathematics:** Accelerate mathematics instruction through the use of instructional strategies that focus on reasoning, understanding and application.
5. **STEM:** Engage students in a sequence of coherent STEM experiences that provide more opportunities for students to discover their interests and aptitudes by **applying literacy, math, science and engineering ways of thinking to complete project-based learning assignments.**
6. **System of Support:** Develop a comprehensive system to accelerate student learning, identify potential dropouts and implement immediate targeted interventions to support these students to meet grade-level standards. Implement strategies to get below grade-level students on track to graduate.
7. **Comprehensive Guidance and Career Exploration:** Assist schools to provide a range of exploratory experiences. Help students and their parents to understand future career and education options, and guide them to develop individual academic and graduation plans.
8. **Instructional Leadership:** Focus professional development for teachers, counselors and school leaders to continuously improve teaching and learning. Use data, classroom observations and proven leadership techniques to guide school change and to support teacher growth.

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