



# Making Schools Work

## Key Practices for Middle Grades

SREB's **Making Schools Work school improvement process** is grounded in research showing that increasing student achievement begins with increasing student effort. Five focus areas guide the process: *leadership for continuous improvement, aligned curriculum, engaging instruction, career exploration* and *systems of support*. Making Schools Work engages the whole school community — teachers, leaders and staff working together in a distributed leadership structure — in addressing these focus areas and taking ownership of their improvement efforts.

To help students and states meet the demands of a competitive world, SREB's improvement framework for the middle grades, **Making Middle Grades Work**, helps schools prepare students in grades six through eight to complete rigorous high school courses and graduate on time and ready for a broad array of postsecondary programs and satisfying careers.

SREB has identified 10 key school and classroom practices that positively impact student effort and achievement in the middle grades. When implemented with fidelity, these practices provide students with purpose, direction and opportunities to engage in accelerated learning and prepare for success in high school, further education and life.

Schools use the 10 Key Practices to guide improvement. The process often begins with [SREB's Curriculum and Instruction Review](#), in which an external team of teachers, leaders and local partners assess promising practices and problems of practice in the school and recommend actions to eliminate those problems. Later, SREB's [Site Development Workshop](#) engages faculty focus teams in analyzing CIR findings, conducting research, setting bold goals for student achievement and developing plans for improvement. SREB offers [school improvement coaching](#) and [professional learning](#) to support these plans.

By combining this process with the **10 Key Practices** below, middle grades schools build their capacity to continuously address problems and meet clear targets for student success.

1. **High Expectations** — Establish policies and practices that inspire each student to complete intellectually demanding courses that prepare them for success in high school. (*Leadership for Continuous Improvement*)  
*Indicators*
  - A. Teachers establish a culture of high expectations through challenging assignments, instructional practices and procedures.
  - B. School leaders and counselors ensure students have access to advanced courses.
  - C. Teachers embrace school and classroom practices that promote a growth mindset.
2. **Aligned Curriculum** — Design and deliver instruction that helps each student understand and achieve the full intent of state standards. (*Aligned Curriculum*)  
*Indicators*
  - A. Teachers regularly use protocols to design instruction, assignments, questioning and feedback strategies, and summative and formative assessments that promote students' mastery of standards.
  - B. School leaders create a data-driven environment in which teachers receive the tools, resources and support they need to use student data to inform and adapt their instruction.
  - C. School leaders work with teachers both individually and in groups to use data to align their instruction with standards and evaluate the impact of instructional strategies on student engagement and achievement.
  - D. Each student learns academic content and skills through the lens of real-world problems and projects.
3. **Integrated Literacy** — Help teachers in all disciplines, including English language arts, social studies, science and mathematics, integrate literacy strategies into their instruction, assignments and assessments. (*Aligned Curriculum*)  
*Indicators*
  - A. Content teachers choose literacy strategies that scaffold reading, writing, speaking and listening skills into their lessons.
  - B. Each student uses evidence from texts in their writing to make claims and think critically about essential content.
  - C. Teachers choose grade-level or higher texts that are appropriate for the discipline.
  - D. Teachers plan lessons that align with literacy and content standards.
4. **Access** — Ensure each student has access to high-quality courses, instruction and resources. (*Career Pathways*)  
*Indicators*
  - A. School leaders and counselors ensure curricula and programs are inclusive and accessible.
  - B. Teachers prepare lessons that incorporate diverse perspectives and acknowledge that perceptions of events are affected by race, ethnicity, culture, religion, education, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability and personal experience.
  - C. Teachers help students consider past and current events in historical, geographical, social and economic contexts.
5. **Student Engagement** — Use research-based instructional strategies and innovative technology practices to actively engage each student. (*Engaging Instruction*)  
*Indicators*
  - A. Each student regularly participates in inquiry-based learning that includes opportunities to design investigations, think critically, use technology, record qualitative and quantitative data, analyze results and discuss findings.
  - B. Each student has opportunities to explore and discuss multiple strategies for solving real-world problems, reflect on efficient methods and justify their solutions.
  - C. Teachers use powerful instructional practices for [literacy](#), [mathematics](#), [science](#) and other curricular areas to engage students in authentic learning.
  - D. Teachers intentionally plan authentic [project- and problem-based learning strategies](#) to engage students in quality instruction and assignments that engage students in a productive struggle and lead to meaningful learning.
6. **Teacher Collaboration** — Provide teacher teams with the training, time and support they need to work together to improve instruction. (*Engaging Instruction*)  
*Indicators*
  - A. School leaders make time for teachers to meet in professional learning teams in which they use student work and assessment data to reflect on prior instruction and make decisions about future instruction.

- B. Teachers collaboratively design and implement engaging instruction and accelerated learning opportunities that increase student motivation and achievement.
- C. Teacher teams use structures and protocols to ensure that meetings are meaningful, productive and beneficial for all team members.

**7. Quality Career and Technical Education —** Provide developmentally appropriate career exploration experiences that prepare each student to make informed career pathway choices in high school. (**Career Exploration**)

**Indicators**

- A. All teachers, including CTE teachers, offer career exploration experiences that help students understand their high school, college and career options, such as personalized instruction, project- and problem-based learning, work-based learning and opportunities to participate in career-technical student organizations.
- B. Business, industry, postsecondary and community partners help the school design and deliver quality CTE and career exploration programs.
- C. School counselors and teachers provide each student with opportunities to participate in career interest and aptitude assessments, career fairs and mentorships with community partners.

**8. Guidance and Advisement —** Provide guidance programs that empower each incoming middle grades student and rising ninth grader to transition successfully to the next grade. (**Systems of Support**)

**Indicators**

- A. School leaders and counselors design programs that help students and parents learn about the school's academic and social-emotional expectations, policies, practices and supports.
- B. School leaders, teachers and counselors implement a comprehensive guidance program that pairs students and parents with teacher-advisers who meet with them regularly to create, review and revise personalized programs of study for high school and beyond.
- C. Each student is expected to develop and complete a personalized program of study that leads to high school and postsecondary success.

**9. Interventions and Enrichments —** Personalize supports for each student based on their unique identified needs. (**Systems of Support**)

**Indicators**

- A. School leaders, counselors and teachers monitor early warning indicators and target struggling students with timely and effective interventions.
- B. School leaders provide structures and programs that accelerate learning for struggling students.
- C. Teachers provide enrichment opportunities for students who are performing on or above grade level.

**10. Culture of Continuous Improvement —** Engage the whole school community in continuously analyzing data to identify problems of practice, devise action plans for solving those problems and monitoring student learning outcomes. (**Leadership for Continuous Improvement**)

**Indicators**

- A. School leaders work with faculty and staff to develop, establish and communicate a shared vision and mission and engage in strategic planning for continuous improvement.
- B. School leaders employ a distributed leadership approach to engage teams of teachers, counselors and other staff in using SREB's [problem-solving process](#) — based on Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act approach — to strategically plan for school improvement.
- C. School leaders use focus teams to share responsibility for school improvement and foster an environment of collective leadership.
- D. School leaders develop a plan to effectively support new teachers that includes mentorships, specialized professional learning and time to collaborate with other new teachers.