

Implementation of Middle School Reform: 2007–2008 Midyear Snapshot

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The Office of Shared Accountability (OSA) is conducting an evaluation of Middle School Reform in 2007–2008 with a focus on the extent and fidelity of implementation of the recommended actions outlined in the *Report on Middle School Reform* (Weast, 2007). This brief discusses the midyear status of selected recommended actions within Middle School Reform.

Background

The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has begun a comprehensive reform of its 38 middle schools. This reform effort is being launched as part of a phased series of ongoing educational improvements presented in *Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence*, the MCPS Strategic Plan (MCPS, 2006). The six goals and their recommended actions for Middle School Reform are outlined in the *Report on Middle School Reform* (Weast, 2007). In 2007–2008, some of the recommended actions of Middle School Reform are implemented only in the following five Phase I middle schools: Benjamin Banneker, Roberto W. Clemente, Montgomery Village, Sligo, and Earle B. Wood.

This brief focuses on selected recommended actions from Goals 1, 2, 4, and 6 that address major themes of Middle School Reform. (An end-of-year brief will address all the goals.) The key evaluation question is: To what extent were the recommended actions of Middle School Reform implemented and with what degree of fidelity to the original intent?

Summary of Methodology

Data sources included interviews with Phase I middle school principals and school leaders (December 2007 and January 2008); reviews of program documentation; and analysis of MCPS data on course enrollment, student characteristics, and course offerings.

Summary of Major Findings

All five Phase I middle schools made a strong effort during the first semester to implement the recommended actions of Middle School Reform with a high degree of fidelity.

All of the recommended actions evaluated for Goal 1 took place as intended; the Professional Learning Communities Institute (PLCI) was initiated, parents

joined school improvement committees, and school staff members were hired for restructured positions as team leaders and content specialists and for new positions related to accelerated and enriched instruction (AEI). For at least some Phase I middle schools, all of these actions had positive effects on staff members' focus on learning, AEI for students; intervention support for students; and support for teachers.

Phase I middle schools successfully implemented all of the recommended actions of Goal 2 examined in this brief with full implementation of most of the actions and with attention to fidelity of implementation. Most of the desired effects were achieved as follows.

The instructional resources and technology outlined in Middle School Reform were provided to all Phase I middle schools. While capacity to use the tool was still being developed, school staff began to use Performance Matters technology to examine student data and to plan instruction and assessments. The 21st Century Classroom (Promethean) technology was used successfully in all schools and for most academic subjects to engage students, to enhance differentiation, and to expand formative assessment capabilities. Job-embedded professional development was delivered at all five Phase I middle schools on the following key topics: rigor, the adolescent learner, collaboration, and assessments/Performance Matters. All five Phase I middle schools offered Grade 6 students the following two new semester elective courses: 1) Arts Investigations and 2) Information and Communication Technology.

Middle School Reform provides funds to schools to create time for cohort groups to design, implement, or evaluate effective instruction. This action is known as Cohort Collaborative Work (CCW) or Cohort Planning and was the one recommended action for Goal 4 examined in this brief. All five Phase I middle schools implemented CCW, although the number of participating staff varied by school. The cohort activities focused on monitoring student performance and allowed for common team planning.

Two recommended actions for Goal 6 on parent engagement were examined. Implementation to date was partial for one action; the Study Circles Program. The second action, the Parent Academy, was implemented as designed. The training, information,

and resources provided to promote positive family and community involvement included a Study Circles Program with parents at two schools and a total of 12 Parent Academy workshops (attended by 176 parents) at Phase I middle schools.

Key recommendations from the evaluation are as follows:

- Expand leadership training to include team leaders and non-AEI content specialists.
- Encourage principals to clearly identify and limit the roles and responsibilities for team leaders, content specialists, the AEI mathematics content specialist, and the AEI literacy coach, based on the job descriptions.
- Reconsider the assessment calendar in light of the need for reteaching and for infusing the curriculum with greater rigor.
- Populate Performance Matters with the data needed to inform instructional decisions, including Measures of Academic Progress Assessment in Reading (MAP-R) and unit assessments for all subjects other than mathematics and reading. Incorporate students in advanced mathematics courses (e.g., algebra, geometry) into the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) prediction component of Performance Matters.
- Clarify to school staff what information is available in Performance Matters, especially formative assessments for Math A (Math 6), Math B (Math 7), and Math C (Algebra Prep) and end of unit assessments for English.
- Offer training to teachers in social studies, science, and other content areas about how to use reading and mathematics data in Performance Matters to benefit their instructional planning.
- Continue professional development on rigorous instruction. Provide more guidance and training on rigorous instructional strategies (“what rigor looks like”) to support school-based staff and increase the level of rigor across all classrooms.

Detailed Methodology

Interviews with principals and members of school leadership teams were conducted at the five Phase I middle schools during December 2007 and early January 2008. Table 1 displays the interviews conducted; note that one Grade 6 team leader, one other team leader, and one or two content specialists were interviewed at each school.

Interviews followed a semistructured protocol, lasted 30 to 45 minutes each, and addressed school staff experiences with the implementation of the major themes and actions of Middle School Reform. Protocol topics varied somewhat by staff position.

Program documentation for a number of different recommended actions under Middle School Reform was reviewed and analyzed to determine the level and extent of implementation at midyear during Year 1. Examples of program documentation included job descriptions for new and revised positions; program information on courses, activities, and workshop offerings; and attendance records for professional and family activities.

MCPS databases were used to examine student enrollment, attendance, and demographic characteristics for course offerings.

Table 1
School Leadership Interviews (N=39)

Position	Staff interviewed
Principal	5
Staff development teacher	5
AEI mathematics content specialist	5
AEI literacy coach	5
Team leader (two per school)	
Grade 6	5
Grade 7	4
Grade 8	1
Content specialist (formerly resource teacher)	
Arts/Technology	1
English	2
Foreign languages	1
Physical education/Arts/Foreign languages	1
Physical education/Health/Arts	1
Science	1
Social studies	1
Technology/Foreign language/English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	1

Detailed Findings

Detailed findings are organized by Middle School Reform goal (e.g., Goal 1) with subheadings referencing selected recommended actions (e.g., 1.1). All goals and recommended actions are outlined in the *Report on Middle School Reform* (Weast, 2007).

Goal 1: Ensure effective leadership that promotes shared ownership for student and staff success and establishes a culture of high expectations.

The specific evaluation questions for Goal 1 were as follows: Did the recommended actions take place as intended? If so, what was the effect on staff members’ focus on learning, accelerated and enriched instruction for students, intervention support for students, and support for teachers?

1.1 Professional Learning Communities Institute

The PLCI is an “innovative professional development initiative designed to increase student achievement in selected elementary and middle schools by building the school improvement capacity of each school’s leadership team” (MCPS, 2007).

All Phase I middle schools are participating in the PLCI, which includes five full days of professional development for the instructional leadership team of each school. Also, each school has the responsibility for the following three school-based activities:

- Request ongoing support from PLCI staff.
- Develop an action plan based on PLCI activities.
- Request enhanced school improvement funding.

Three schools have arranged visits from PLCI staff (e.g., discussion of a case study), developed or proposed action plans (usually aligned to one goal of their school improvement plan), and spent their enhanced funding or have submitted plans to do so. The other two schools have spent their enhanced funding, but have not completed the other activities.

Challenges. While discussing PLCI, principals identified some challenges. One principal wanted to use the PLCI funds for classroom materials, but was not sure that would be possible. Another principal wondered whether the PLCI action plan had to be separate from the school's School Improvement Plan (SIP). Two out of the five principals would like PLCI trainings to include job-alike meetings.

1.4 Continue the Implementation of the Baldrige School Improvement Process

The opportunity for parents to be involved in the Baldrige School Improvement Process is of interest for Middle School Reform due to its emphasis on increased parent involvement (see Goal 6 for more on parent involvement in schools).

To investigate how schools make their SIP available to parents, a search of the five schools' Web sites was conducted. Two schools had the SIP posted; one school had information about its SIP posted, but not the actual plan document; and two schools did not post information about their SIP.

All Phase I middle schools reported that parents were members of their School Improvement Committee; the number of parents ranged from 2 to 10. Additionally, one school had formed a Middle School Reform parent advisory group (six members) with a schedule of monthly meetings.

1.5 Restructured Roles and Responsibilities for Content Specialists and Team Leaders

Restructured roles and responsibilities were established for team leaders and resource teachers; the title for the latter position was changed to content specialists. The responsibilities were differentiated; the focus for team leaders was student learning by leading an interdisciplinary team of teachers who shared the responsibility for a group of students. The focus for

content specialists was to support teachers by developing teachers' content knowledge and teaching strategies. (See more on both positions below.)

All principals reported communicating these new roles and responsibilities to school staff, typically by sharing documents or by reviewing the job responsibilities during interviews or preservice training. Two principals mentioned reinforcing the roles during leadership team meetings.

Team leaders. In the new job description for team leaders, key roles and responsibilities are as follows:

- Manage a grade-level team's operations.
- Coordinate the grade-level instructional program.
- Analyze student achievement data to ensure that school improvement targets are being met.
- Promote and facilitate student and parent engagement.

In descriptions of their activities, all interviewed team leaders referred to analyzing student data to support school targets, but only about one half mentioned managing their team's operations, coordinating the grade-level instructional program, or promoting student and parent engagement.

In three schools, both team leaders interviewed had a clear focus on supporting school improvement targets by developing support plans or tutoring specific students. The four interviewed team leaders at the other two schools also spent time analyzing student data but lacked a clear focus. These team leaders had additional responsibilities that competed for their time (e.g., informal observations of team members, attending meetings other than team meetings, attending training, addressing student behavior), analyzed student data with groups other than their team (e.g., cohort collaborative planning or content), or did not have responsibility for helping their team members discuss student data and work.

The majority of interviewed team leaders were new to their position. The few who were veterans agreed that the position was being used differently, but did not agree on how the position differed from last year.

Content specialists. In the new job description for content specialists, key roles and responsibilities include the following:

- Lead the department to ensure that the instructional program is implemented with fidelity.
- Ensure that AEI and intervention support are available for all students.
- Coordinate instructional program.
- Observe teachers formally as part of performance evaluations.
- Collaborate within the department.

Based on descriptions of their activities, the majority of interviewed content specialists were implementing (at least somewhat) nearly all of these roles and responsibilities, including ensuring implementation with fidelity and coordinating instruction. At four schools, content specialists monitored student achievement or performance on assessments but with a focus on intervention support rather than on AEI. At the fifth school, content specialists addressed both intervention support and differentiation. Most content specialists spent considerable time observing (both formally and informally) the teachers within their department and collaborating with school staff within their department.

Seven of the nine interviewed content specialists were not new to the position. Three veterans reported that their position was being used differently this year; two described a greater focus on instructional strategies and one cited an increased focus on student data.

Challenges. Interviews with team leaders and content specialists revealed some challenges. Some specialists, especially those working in more than one subject area (e.g., arts and technology), did not have a time during the school day when all of their teachers could meet together. Some team leaders wanted more support to develop Academic Intervention Plans (AIP). A few team leaders were overwhelmed due to responsibilities beyond those in their job description.

School staff (e.g., principal, staff development teacher) at three schools asked for leadership training for team leaders and content specialists to support them in their new roles, especially for the many new team leaders.

1.6 New Mathematics and Literacy Content Specialists

Two new AEI positions were created and filled at each of the Phase I middle schools: AEI mathematics content specialist (AEIMCS) and AEI literacy coach (AEILC). Each new position had the following two key functions: to be the school leader in their area (i.e., mathematics or literacy) and to promote success for every student. At two schools, the AEIMCS had the additional responsibility of teaching one mathematics class.

Because most of the school staff in both of these new positions were already working at their school, they did not have trouble shifting to a new role due to their existing relationships with teachers.

AEI mathematics content specialists. In the job description for the AEIMCS, key roles and responsibilities as the school mathematics leader include the following:

- Complete formal classroom observations of teachers as part of the Professional Growth System.

- Plan with teachers to ensure that the instructional program is implemented with fidelity.
- Model instructional strategies and curriculum implementation.
- Complete informal observations of teachers to provide feedback on instruction and to assist teachers to improve teaching and learning.
- Build teacher capacity in areas of mathematics content.
- Collaborate with feeder and receiving schools about a rigorous mathematics program.

Each AEIMCS had the following key roles and responsibilities in promoting success for every student:

- Ensure accelerated and enriched instruction and intervention support is available for all students.
- Advocate for student access to advanced mathematics courses.
- Monitor student progress in mathematics courses.
- Develop a process for supporting underachieving students in accelerated courses.

Based on descriptions of their activities, all AEIMCSs were implementing (at least somewhat) the majority of these roles and responsibilities. However, not all AEIMCSs mentioned informal observations of teachers, a process to support underachieving students in accelerated courses, or collaboration with elementary school staff. Efforts to build teacher capacity focused more on differentiation than on research-based instructional strategies or use of student data/work to inform instruction.

In addition to the above duties, most AEIMCSs spent time on data analysis and some planned activities that included parents.

At each of the three schools where the AEIMCS does not teach, the AEIMCS and the principal agreed that not teaching was an advantage. As one principal said, “If they [the specialists] are respected, whether they’re teaching is not relevant ... there is accessibility. They go into classes. They have flexibility! They can provide data analysis to support content data.”

In the two schools where the AEIMCS does teach, this responsibility was a challenge; its acceptability varied with the individual’s love of teaching. As one AEIMCS said, “Some days the training schedule means I have to get subs for my class. It’s a challenge.” The other AEIMCS commented, “Harder to teach because I have to plan and support my students (e.g., at lunch). Takes time away. But I wouldn’t give it up.”

AEI literacy coaches. In the new job description for the AEILC, key roles and responsibilities as the school literacy leader include the following:

- Develop and communicate a school literacy plan.
- Model literacy practices.
- Coach and provide feedback to teachers.
- Build teacher capacity in areas of literacy practices.

Each AEILC had the following key roles and responsibilities in promoting success for every student:

- Coordinate the literacy acceleration and intervention programs for students.
- Monitor student access and progress in rigorous courses.
- Develop a process for supporting underachieving students in accelerated courses.

Based on reports of their activities, all AEILCs were fulfilling most of these roles and responsibilities. Although all AEILCs supported students, some focused on one group, such as students who needed interventions or students who needed acceleration or enrichment. Unlike the AEIMCSs, most AEILCs did not report developing a process for supporting underachieving students in accelerated courses. Not all AEILCs mentioned modeling literacy practices or developing a literacy plan.

Challenges. At two schools, both the AEILC and AEIMCS faced challenges in balancing roles and understanding priorities. Also, a few of the staff members in these new positions related to AEI were confused about responsibilities for AEI; schools had a partial (.4) AEI instructional support teacher or a reading specialist prior to the implementation of Middle School Reform, guidance personnel traditionally have handled some AEI functions, and all teachers are to provide rigorous instruction under Middle School Reform.

Summary of Findings for Goal 1

The recommended actions evaluated for Goal 1 took place as intended; PLCI was initiated, parents joined school improvement committees, and school staff were hired for restructured and new positions. Furthermore, all of these actions had the desired effects for at least some schools as follows:

- The PLCI school-based activities completed by three schools focused on student learning. Interviewed team leaders at all schools focused on student learning, albeit to different extents.
- All the AEILCs and AEIMCSs supported AEI for students either by increasing access to rigorous courses or supporting differentiation to offer more challenging instruction. All interviewed content specialists, along with the majority of interviewed team leaders, worked to provide intervention support for students.

- All AEILCs, AEIMCSs, and interviewed content specialists provided support to teachers.

Goal 2: Engage all students in effective and differentiated instructional practices using a rigorous, standards-based curriculum and challenging assessments.

The specific evaluation questions for Goal 2 were as follows: Were the instructional resources and technology provided? If so, what was the effect on instructional practices, rigorous instruction, and student engagement?

2.2 Formative and Benchmark Assessments and Performance Matters

The Middle School Reform plan calls for the use of “formative and benchmark assessments in all content areas in all grades” and indicates that “technology tools will be used to help teachers create reliable assessments and provide timely feedback to students, teachers, and parents” (Weast, 2007). The technology tool chosen was Performance Matters.

Assessments. All 10 AEILCs and AEIMCSs reported using student data to plan instruction and support students. In additional interviews, eight team leaders and five content specialists discussed using student data to help with planning instruction and assessments.

One AEIMCS said, “We keep a data notebook and printout from Achievement Series. We print out item analyses and make comparisons to the school, the district and the county.” An AEILC said, “On unit assessments with science and social studies, we saw students were struggling. We analyzed questions on the summative assessment, identified skills, and then helped to build ways [for students] to . . . be successful.” An English content specialist said, “We identify topics that are most important, based on MSA content, and what students need next.”

Challenges with using assessments. Content specialists and team leaders were asked about challenges in planning instruction to coincide with the assessment calendar. Staff in every Phase I middle school reported that there were very real challenges. This concern was reflected by a team leader who stated, “Seems like we just finished reviewing one and we’re doing the reteaching, and then it’s time to give another assessment. There is not enough time to teach in between.” Another team leader said, “I’m behind [the schedule] with ELL [English Language Learners] and at-risk kids; they need more days to get it.”

Several teachers were particularly concerned about starting the school year well with students and not letting the assessment calendar rush the pace of instruction too much. A team leader said, “At the beginning of the year, we need time to build

relationships with students. It's only possible to meet the schedule if we teach only to the test. There's not enough time to teach other indicators and skills such as students needing support to complete reading a novel."

Findings suggest that the tight assessment timeframe can have an impact on the time available for reteaching. For example, one team leader said, "Those assessment windows are hard and fast. Here, there isn't any grace period. So it's more difficult to respond to the needs of kids and . . . we don't spend time on reteaching, to meet the window."

One content specialist, who was concerned about the ability to deliver rigor while keeping to the assessment schedule stated: "Rigor suggests depth, but formative assessments, we feel, are focused on breadth."

In addition to timing, other assessment challenges were reported. Some school staff felt that there were errors in the English assessments. Several requests were made for more questions per indicator for the unit mathematics assessments. One content specialist was concerned about how to count assessment results and stated, "We were told that it's a school-based decision on how to count the assessments. Then at the next meeting, we were told that it should count. We felt [it was] not fair to count it because we couldn't cover all the material prior to [administering] the formative assessments."

Performance Matters. The Performance Matters technology was provided to Phase I middle schools to assist with data-driven decision making. Staff at Phase I middle schools reported that they used data from Performance Matters for the following purposes, which corresponded to content from the Performance Matters summer training:

- Identifying at-risk students
- Identifying students needing acceleration
- Examining MSA results by subgroup (e.g., race)
- Making MSA performance predictions
- Making comparisons to class, school, and district performance
- Reviewing students' ESOL levels
- Conducting item analysis, including which item students chose
- Informing postobservation discussions

Challenges with using Performance Matters. Some of those interviewed said they prefer other data systems (Achievement Series, Instructional Management System [IMS], Data Warehouse, or "our own system") to Performance Matters because of data speed or data availability. Another challenge mentioned was the inability to scan assessments using Scantron (bubble sheet) technology directly into Performance Matters. Further, Performance Matters lacked some data of interest to teachers such as MAP-R and foreign language assessments.

Some staff members stated that Performance Matters needed data which were actually in Performance Matters, specifically formative assessments for Math A (Math 6), Math B (Math 7), and Math C (Algebra Prep), as well as end of unit assessments for English.

Some staff members were concerned that Performance Matters does not predict MSA performance for all students including those taking above-level mathematics classes. As one staff development teacher said, "Math can't monitor all students. Only Math A, Math B, and Math C formatives are tied to MSA."

Trainer-of-trainers model for Performance Matters. A trainer-of-trainers (TOT) model was used to deliver Performance Matters training to Phase I middle schools. School staff members were asked whether they thought this model was effective.

Staff members who liked the TOT model focused on the ability to tailor training to the needs of staff in a particular school. One team leader said, "It was broken up, parsed out in stages that were appropriate . . . It's more personalized for us." A content specialist said, "The TOT model is more effective because we can filter to our teachers. The training needs to be differentiated." Another team leader liked that the school's leadership delivered the training at school and decided where to place emphasis. "It's better for leadership to . . . give me the meat of the training. A lot of the data analysis was done by leadership."

Training challenges. Those staff members who were not satisfied with the TOT model were mostly concerned about whether or not the peer trainers were sufficiently prepared to do the job. As one team leader put it, "I don't think the trainers got enough training. They weren't comfortable with the tool and they weren't convincing." One of the peer trainers, a content specialist, said, "It was hard, because even though I [was a trainer], I wasn't an expert. And it was a bit confusing about who was responsible about delivering training back at school."

A principal expressed concern about the workload for trainers and said, "The trainer-of-trainers model was hard because many trainers already had teacher duties. It was not the best model."

Interviewees requested additional training for social studies and science teachers and others who do not teach mathematics or reading, in order to use Performance Matters effectively across all disciplines in a school.

Performance Matters Usage. Data on Performance Matters usage were available through the Division of Career and Technology Education. During the monitoring period (November 1, 2007–January 25, 2008), all Phase I middle schools used Performance Matters, for a total of 200 to 300 hours per school. Each school accessed both administrative functions

(81–217 hours per school) and teacher functions (55–119 hours per school).

2.4 21st Century Classroom Technology

Middle School Reform calls for the use of “innovative classroom technology in selected content area classes to actively engage students in instruction” (Weast, 2007). Classroom technology in Middle School Reform is intended as a tool to support student engagement and critical thinking skills, as well as to prepare students to use technology in the world outside the classroom.

MCPS is using the Promethean “Activclassroom” to provide the 21st Century Classroom technology. The Promethean technology includes the Activboard, an interactive “smart board,” a formative assessment tool called Activote, and other hardware and software controlled by the teacher at a desktop computer workstation. Students can interact with the lesson on the Activboard and take part in formative assessments using a special stylus (Activwand), voting mechanism (Activote), or other tools.

School staff members were uniformly enthusiastic about the 21st Century Classroom technology and were utilizing many of its capabilities. One team leader said, “I use it a lot to interact with students. I do everything on Promethean, activities, the agenda... Today we were subordinating conjunctions. Students selected the correct answers for sentences. Daily announcements go through Promethean.” A content specialist said, “We have been able to use it for everything, all of the lesson parts. For agendas and objectives all the way to the summarizer. We use Activote to practice selected-response questions for HSA [High School Assessments] and MSA.”

Several teachers talked about the ease with which they can show videos on the Activboard and can access any Web-based content directly to the Activboard. An AEIMCS pointed out that the Activboard can be used with online quizzes to provide immediate formative assessment and encouraged her teachers to use this capability.

While teachers were still developing their ability to use some of the features such as Activote, several of them made a special point to emphasize that they were working hard to use the technology as more than “a really cool overhead.”

Some teachers had students use the technology to develop presentations. At one school, students used Activboards for presentations at a Family Math Night.

Student engagement. The ability to engage students and hold their attention was a particular strength of the technology, according to staff in the Phase I middle schools.

For example, a staff development teacher said, “The technology has transformed classrooms. It changed the tone and tenor of classrooms, the way instruction is delivered. The impact is especially [great] for kids who were not engaged in the past. It engages kids who are not engaged by a textbook and a chalkboard.” Another staff development teacher talked about students volunteering to come up to the board who usually do not participate in this way—something mentioned by several others. One team leader said, “Even my ESOL students, who don’t like to speak in class, like to do the Promethean.” Another team leader mentioned how the board helps special education students practice their handwriting. Activote is one of the ways teachers mentioned that makes it easier for *all* students to be engaged.

Staff members gave specific examples of student eagerness in interacting with the classroom technology. A team leader said, “I have a lot more kids now saying ‘I get math! I’m good at math!’ I think it’s because of the boards.” Another team leader said, “They look forward to using it. They did not want to stop today!” One teacher summarized student engagement by saying, “They’ll do anything if you put it on the boards.”

Challenges and future needs. Interviewees would like more support for the 21st Century Classroom technology in two key areas. The first is training. School staff would like more teachers trained to use the technology and additional training in using more advanced features of the technology. Some staff in Phase I middle schools wanted training focused on using the technology with specific content areas or with supporting differentiation within a lesson.

The second area is developing and sharing lessons designed for delivery on the Activboards. School leadership team members reported that teachers spend 45 minutes or longer adapting each lesson to the technology. Teachers would like a pool of lessons available to share. Teachers are already sharing informally, but they need district-level support. Some schools are using CCW time for a cohort to work on lesson development (see more on CCW under Goal 4).

While several teachers talked about the Promethean Activboards as an excellent way to show videos or film clips, one noted that the speakers in desktop computer systems do not provide adequate sound volume.

2.6 Rigorous Elective Course Offerings

All five Phase I middle schools offered two new semester elective courses for Grade 6 during fall 2007. The new Arts Investigations course was taken by 345 students and the new Information and Communication Technology (ICT) course was taken by 374 students. Additional details are in Appendix A (Tables A1 and A2). Though the recommended action for developing these courses indicated that they should be rigorous, the

interviews did not address rigor in the new elective courses. However, one principal commented, “The ICT elective has some rigorous content. One unit is redundant and non-rigorous. We need to eliminate the busy work, expand gaming and robotics. It could be the first course in a series. The new Arts elective [Arts Investigations] is fine but it needs more rigor.”

In addition to the arts and technology elective courses, *Lights, Camera, Literacy!* (LCL!) was offered as a school day elective course at Earle B. Wood Middle School. LCL! was developed as a new extended learning opportunity under Middle School Reform. See Hickson (2008) for a detailed evaluation of the implementation of LCL! during summer 2007.

2.10 Professional Development

Staff at all five Phase I middle schools received training on rigor, the adolescent learner, and collaboration, delivered during summer or preservice, during the school year, or at both of these opportunities.

Staff at all Phase I middle schools received districtwide training on the use of real-time formative and summative assessment data/reports to predict success on MSA. All Phase I middle schools offered additional training at school on assessments/Performance Matters, though this was presented by different personnel at different schools (by the staff development teacher, by other school staff, by trainers from outside of the school, or by a combination of these staff members).

All Phase I middle schools participated in the training opportunities delivered by PLCI staff and in training on the 21st Century Classroom technology. Four schools offered additional training on 21st Century Classroom technology; three of these schools invited consultants or instructional specialists from outside of the building.

Staff development teachers provided spontaneous mentions of other topics of training and professional development at school, outside the major strands of Middle School Reform.

Challenges. School personnel are still seeking guidance on what rigor “looks like,” according to these interviews. The staff development teachers did trainings on rigor as part of job-embedded professional development. At one school, an instructional specialist from central office came to conduct four days of walk throughs to help staff learn about what rigor looks like during instruction.

Two principals said more training is needed on understanding the adolescent learner and on what rigor in middle school should look like. One principal mentioned that it is hard to convince parents that each team is providing rigor; parents want to see a packaged program (as opposed to “embedded” rigor).

Phase I middle schools had a sizeable training agenda to complete. The advice given to school staff was to start the agenda for Middle School Reform (collaboration, rigor, the adolescent learner) during summer preservice (two days were added to the preservice schedule). Staff at four schools reported that they followed this schedule. At one school, staff members did not follow this schedule, but introduced all of the new content during fall staff development sessions. Using this delayed schedule created a substantial challenge for this school.

Summary of Findings for Goal 2

Phase I middle schools implemented the recommended actions of Goal 2 examined in this brief, with nearly full implementation of most of the actions and with apparent attention to fidelity of implementation as follows:

- The instructional resources and technology outlined in Middle School Reform were provided to all five schools. While capacity to use the tool was still being developed, schools had begun to use Performance Matters to examine student data and to plan adjustments to instruction.
- The 21st Century Classroom (Promethean) technology was being used successfully in all schools and in most academic subjects to engage students, to enhance differentiation, and to expand formative assessment capabilities.
- Job-embedded professional development was delivered at all five Phase I middle schools on the following key topics: rigor, the adolescent learner, collaboration, and assessments/Performance Matters.
- All five Phase I middle schools offered Grade 6 students two new semester elective courses; the extent of rigor in those courses has yet to be determined.

Goal 4: Implement organizational structures that maximize time for teaching and learning, cultivate positive relationships, and promote increased student achievement.

4.4 Cohort Collaborative Work (CCW)

CCW or Cohort Planning is viewed by staff at Phase I middle schools as one of the most valuable aspects of Middle School Reform. One principal said, “If I had to give everything back, I’d keep this! Collaboration is one of the most valuable things in Middle School Reform.” Another principal commented that “people are collaborating who didn’t used to. Special education teachers can work with classroom teachers.”

CCW activities. The number of cohorts and the number of staff participating in cohorts varied by school.

Analyzing student data and looking at student work were common themes of the collaborative process. So were instructional planning and designing lessons for the 21st Century Classroom technology. At one school, social studies staff members were working with English and reading indicators from the Maryland State Voluntary Curriculum to create lessons that tie into the Reading/English MSA. One school had staff book clubs, supported by the AEI literacy coach.

Mechanics of the process. Comments about the process to request CCW funds were positive. The forms were found to be user friendly and staff members understood how to develop proposals.

The availability of teacher compensation was viewed as a strength of the collaborative process. It indicated the worth of teachers' investment in the process. One principal said the stipend "values the teacher's time and identifies it as a priority that we value." Some school staff members were confused about which tasks and which staff positions can be compensated.

Summary of Findings for Goal 4

The one recommended action for Goal 4 examined in this brief was CCW. It was implemented by all five Phase I middle schools; however, the number of participating staff varied by school. The cohort activities focused on monitoring student performance and allowed for common cohort planning.

Goal 6: Engage parents and the community as partners to promote school and student success.

The specific evaluation question for Goal 6 was as follows: What training, information, and resources were provided to promote positive family and community involvement?

6.2 Study Circles

The MCPS Study Circles Program helps schools address the challenges that cultural and racial differences can bring to academic achievement. Parents, staff, and students come together for a series of meaningful discussions, led by a skilled facilitator. See Wade (2007, 2008) for reports on evaluation of the MCPS Study Circles Program.

While the Study Circles Program is not unique to Middle School Reform, the Phase I middle schools were expected to offer study circles during the current school year as part of their efforts to increase and support parent involvement.

Three Phase I middle schools held study circles in fall 2007, one of which was a study circle for the school leadership team. One school submitted plans to conduct a study circle with student participants in spring 2008. One school has not yet submitted a plan for 2007–2008.

Although the plan for Middle School Reform utilizes the Study Circles Program to enhance parent involvement, to date only two schools have included parents in their study circles.

6.5 Parent Academy

The MCPS Parent Academy is an educational program designed to help parents support their children in getting the most from their MCPS education. Content is delivered in a series of workshops, each on a specific topic.

While the Parent Academy program is not unique to Middle School Reform, the Phase I middle schools were focus sites for the workshops. Phase I principals had input into the topics and dates based on the needs of their school's communities.

Topics of October and November workshops held at Phase I middle schools included the following: MSA, gang awareness, middle school success, homework, communication with teachers, and the importance of reading in middle school. At the five Phase I middle schools, total attendance was 176 over the 12 workshop sessions. (See more detail in Appendix B, Table B1.)

All five Phase I middle schools scheduled Parent Academy workshops for January and February in 2008.

Summary of Findings for Goal 6

Two recommended actions for Goal 6 were examined in this brief. The training, information, and resources provided to promote positive family and community involvement included study circles with parents at two schools and a total of 12 workshops (attended by 176 parents) at the five Phase I middle schools.

Implementation to date was partial for one action, the Study Circles Program. The second action, the Parent Academy, was implemented as designed.

Synergies of Middle School Reform

Because Middle School Reform is a complex undertaking with many parts, principals were asked if they see some important synergies between and among aspects of the reform.

One principal said, "All the parts fit together! Promethean [technology] helps us to focus on engagement and rigor. Cohort Collaborative Work supports collaboration." Another said, "Promethean has increased student engagement, teachers are planning differently, and the process to evaluate rigor is also integrated."

Principals in fact did not single out any one aspect of middle school reform as "most" critical. Two principals discussed the centrality of CCW. Three principals discussed the value of technology in

supporting student engagement and creating a data-driven environment. One principal described the AEI literacy coach and AEI mathematics content specialist positions as “critical.”

Strengths and Limitations of the Methodology

The content of this brief was based primarily on comments from in-depth interviews with members of school leadership teams. The interviews documented a rich source of firsthand experience with aspects of Middle School Reform according to key academic leaders. However, some responses might not generalize to the experience of every educational staff member in a Phase I middle school.

The interviews used open-ended questions (e.g., what kinds of things are you doing this year?) to introduce the topic of job responsibilities. The open-ended approach identifies those areas on which staff members are focused, on an unaided basis, and provides spontaneous responses (Schuman & Presser, 1979). A possible limitation is that not every staff member will mention all (or any) of the topics of interest.

Recommendations

Based on school staff interviews and other evaluation activities, the following refinements to Middle School Reform are indicated:

Goal 1

- Consider job-alike meetings during the afternoon of PLCI meetings.
- Clarify permissible uses for PLCI funds and relationship between PLCI and SIP action plans.
- Encourage every school to post the SIP on its Web site, along with information on how parents can participate in the school improvement process.
- Provide guidance to schools on how to schedule a common planning period across all members within a department or within a team, so as to support content specialists and team leaders.
- Expand leadership training to include team leaders and non-AEI content specialists.
- Encourage principals to clearly identify and limit the roles and responsibilities for team leaders, content specialists, the AEIMCS, and the AEILC, based on the job descriptions and teaching responsibilities, so as to avoid overlap, to clarify priorities, and to improve implementation.
- Clarify for schools which staff member (i.e., AEIMCS, AEILC, or guidance personnel) should handle each specific AEI responsibility.

Goal 2

- Reconsider the assessment calendar in light of the need for reteaching and for infusing the curriculum with greater rigor.
- Conduct formal reviews of the MCPS unit assessments in all subject areas to ensure quality, consistency, and adequate numbers of items to measure each of the needed indicators.
- Populate Performance Matters with the data needed to inform instructional decisions, including MAP-R and unit assessments for all subjects other than mathematics and reading. Incorporate students in advanced mathematics courses (e.g., algebra, geometry) into the MSA prediction component of Performance Matters.
- Clarify to school staff what information is available in Performance Matters, especially formative assessments for Math A (Math 6), Math B (Math 7), and Math C (Algebra Prep) and end of unit assessments for English.
- Offer training to teachers in social studies, science, and other content areas on how to use reading and mathematics data in Performance Matters to benefit their instructional planning.
- Strengthen the TOT model for Performance Matters by ensuring that those who serve as trainers have more training.
- Support student engagement by increasing the number of classrooms with 21st Century Classroom technology, by training more teachers, and by providing lesson plans that incorporate the technology.
- Provide training on the advanced features of the 21st Century Classroom (e.g., Activote, formative assessments) for teachers who are ready.
- Provide additional speakers for streaming audio and video in classrooms with 21st Century Classroom technology to augment audio capability beyond the desktop computer systems.
- Continue professional development on rigorous instruction. Provide more guidance and training to schools on rigorous instructional strategies (“what rigor looks like”) to support school-based staff and increase the level of rigor across all classrooms.
- Be consistent countywide with the use of course codes in middle schools for high school, advanced, elective, and intervention courses. It is not possible to analyze the implementation and outcomes of Middle School Reform without the ability to identify all students who are taking or have taken specific courses.

Goal 4

- Continue to distribute information about tasks and staff positions eligible for CCW compensation. Encourage principals to clarify these points to staff.

Goal 6

- Continue to develop plans for study circles that include parents as members of the groups.

Next Step

The evaluation staff will collect additional data through surveys, classroom observations, and document and database reviews to describe implementation. The next update will be a year-end report on the implementation of the recommended actions for all goals of Middle School Reform.

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ⁱ The authors wish to thank the principals, administrative secretaries, and leadership team members at the five Phase I middle schools for assisting with the evaluation.

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Implementation of Middle School Reform: 2007–2008 Midyear Snapshot

Appendixes

Appendix A

New Elective Courses

Table A1
Characteristics of Students Taking Arts Investigations, Fall 2007

	Phase I Middle Schools		All MCPS middle school students ^a (N=30,983) %
	All students in course (N=345) %	All students (N=4,006) %	
Gender			
Female	44.1	47.6	48.6
Male	55.9	52.4	51.4
Race			
African American	35.1	32.7	22.9
American Indian	n/r	n/r	n/r
Asian American	10.4	13.5	15.0
Hispanic	29.0	27.0	21.3
White	25.2	26.5	40.5
Eligible for extracurricular activities			
Eligible	87.2	85.1	89.9
Not eligible	12.8	14.9	10.1

Note. n/r indicates “not reported” because there are less than 0.5% in this category.

^a First marking period, November 2007.

Table A2
Characteristics of Students Taking
Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Fall 2007

	Phase I Middle Schools		All MCPS middle school students ^a (N=30,983) %
	All students in course (N=374) %	All students (N=4,006) %	
Gender			
Female	48.7	47.6	48.6
Male	51.3	52.4	51.4
Race			
African American	36.6	32.7	22.9
American Indian	0.0	n/r	n/r
Asian American	8.0	13.5	15.0
Hispanic	31.6	27.0	21.3
White	23.8	26.5	40.5
Eligible for extracurricular activities			
Eligible	82.1	85.1	89.9
Not eligible	17.9	14.9	10.1

Note. n/r indicates “not reported” because there are less than 0.5% in this category.

^a First marking period, November 2007.

Appendix B

Additional Detail on Recommended Actions

Table B1
Attendance at Parent Academy Workshops Held at Phase I Middle Schools, Fall 2007

Topic		Attendance sign-in ^a	Feedback completed	Have middle school child ^b
All workshops ^c		176	152	
October workshops		116	100	
Benjamin Banneker	MSA	29	19	17
Roberto W. Clemente	MSA	12	8	6
Montgomery Village	Gang awareness	38	38	20
Sligo	Homework	11	11	6
Earle B. Wood	MSA	15	13	6
Earle B. Wood	Middle school success	11	11	3
November workshops		60	52	
Benjamin Banneker	Importance of reading in middle school	11	8	5
Roberto W. Clemente	Importance of reading in middle school	14	13	--
Montgomery Village	ESOL	11	9	4
Sligo	Middle school success	4	4	4
Earle B. Wood	Communication with teachers	4	4	--
Earle B. Wood	Homework	16	14	7

Source: Division of Family and Community Partnerships.

^a The number preregistered for workshops was higher than the number who attended.

^b These are likely to be students at the corresponding Phase I middle schools.

^c Totals may count the same parent or family more than once.

Note. Dashes (--) indicate no parents belong in this category.