



Policy Statement

Social Equity and Closing the Achievement Gap

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The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (the Forum) urges federal, state and local policy makers and legislators to initiate, promote and support policies that enable all students in schools with middle-grades students (ages 10-14) to learn and achieve at high levels. Such policies will result in higher graduation rates and increased access to postsecondary education for every student, regardless of race/ethnicity, language, immigration status, poverty, and disability. In the end, this will lead to a more productive work force and more responsible members of society, thereby enhancing the quality of life, improving the economy, and increasing international competitiveness.

In this policy statement, we define 'social equity' as providing equitable resources and support to students who need them to meet the high standards set by the education system and to succeed in postsecondary learning, in work, and in life. In this definition, equitable does not mean equal, but rather "fair and just."

THE PROBLEM

In 2007, eighth graders posted gains in reading on the 2007 Nation's Report Card, which summarizes data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP. At the same time, significant gaps in achievement persisted among groups of students, based on race/ethnicity, poverty status, first language, and disability.

In 2009, the results for the NAEP mathematics assessment also showed gains overall. In fact, the Nation's Report Card celebrated the fact that, on average, eighth graders posted the highest scores to date on this annual measure of academic achievement. Yet, once again, the NAEP results showed persistent gaps in achievement among various groups that cannot be ignored. While the average mathematics scores were higher in 2009 than in both 2007 and 1990, gaps between White and Black students had not significantly diminished over time.¹

The difference among the various groups is dramatic, as shown in the following table². Unless the problem is addressed, the gap will only widen.

Student Group	Percentage of Students Demonstrating Proficiency in Mathematics		
	1996	2009	Percent Gain
White	18	44	26
Black	5	12	7
Hispanic	7	17	10
Asian/Pacific Islander	29	54	25
American Indian	0	18	18

These data call for immediate action. They are especially troubling given the fact that we are serving an ever-increasing number of Black and Hispanic students, as well as English language learners, and students with disabilities in our nation’s public schools. In its 2009 report on the Condition of Education, the Institute of Education Sciences noted the following:

- From 1972 to 2007, the percentage of public school students who were White decreased from 78 to 56 percent. The percentage of students from other racial/ethnic groups increased from 22 to 44 percent, with the largest increase representing Hispanic students.
- In the West, 57 percent of the students enrolled in public schools now represent racial and ethnic groups which are not White.
- Between 1979 and 2007, the number of school-age children who spoke a language other than English increased from 3.8 to 10.8 million or from 9 to 20 percent of the population in this age range.
- By 2007, 6.7 million students (about 9 percent) were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), up 3 percentage points from 1977.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan, in response to the 2009 NAEP results, reflected that it is imperative that we simultaneously raise the achievement of all students while closing gaps in achievement among different groups of students. While results demonstrate that this can be accomplished, Duncan also observes that the progress has been too slow, achievement gaps are still too wide, and overall achievement is too low, especially compared to other countries. Consequently, he asserts: “We must accelerate school reforms to make sure all of our students are prepared to compete in the global marketplace.”³

The 2010 census paints an even more diverse portrait of the student population attending middle-grades schools in the United States. Moreover, the challenges associated with race/ethnicity, language, immigration status, and poverty often interact. Thus, while middle-grades schools are showing achievement gains overall, they need additional programs, resources, and supports to accelerate the performance of those groups that are not only performing poorly, but also growing in size.

The middle grades can play a key role in preventing students from dropping out of high school. Recent research has found four clear distress signals that students may exhibit in the middle grades: a final grade of F in mathematics, a final grade of F in English, attendance below 80 percent for the year, and a final “unsatisfactory” behavior mark in at least one class. Students that demonstrated even one of these signals had at least a three in four chance of dropping out of high school. Furthermore, the earlier a student displayed one of the signals, the greater the chance that the student would drop out of high school.⁴

The National Forum has issued this policy statement as a further call to action to provide equitable resources and support to middle-grades students who need them to meet the high standards set by the education system and to succeed in postsecondary learning, in work, and in life.

The Solution

We cannot wait until students reach high school to intervene. According to a recent study by ACT, *the level of academic achievement that students attain by eighth grade has a greater impact on students’ college and career readiness than anything that happens academically in high school.* In fact, it is stronger than any other single factor examined, including high school courses and grades and demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and household income. ACT further concludes that, despite positive overall average increases in current NAEP scores, less than 20 percent of eighth graders are on target to be ready for college-level work by the time they graduate from high school.⁵

Therefore, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform calls upon federal, state, and local policy makers to provide programs, resources, and supports designed to ensure that all middle-grades schools are socially equitable. Such schools ensure positive options open for every student to overcome systematic variation in resources and outcomes related to race, class, gender, and ability.

Specific Recommendations for Federal, State and Local Policy Makers

1. ***Focus increased attention and resources on middle-grades schools, especially those schools with large populations of low-performing students and traditionally under-served student groups.*** Provide resources for districts and schools to participate in the Schools to Watch Program, a systemic process to establish high performing middle-grade schools currently used in 19 states.

2. ***Ensure that all students have access to a rigorous curriculum that enables them remain on track for college/career readiness.*** Policies should ensure that student have access to and are encouraged to pursue rigorous coursework, including Algebra 1, while in middle school.
3. ***Support students socially, emotionally, and academically to the demands of rigorous coursework.*** Policy makers should ensure that middle-grades schools have adequate support staff (nurses, counselors, psychologists, and social workers) and resources to support supplemental services, after-school programs, and other support services.
4. ***Require the use of evidence-based practices that show promise for improving both teaching and student learning.*** Revise school continuous improvement plans and processes to require that schools utilize evidence-based best practices as part of the review/plan.
5. ***Support professional development programs that meet the standards of Learning Forward (formerly NSDC).*** Require that middle schools engage in systemic, on-going professional development directly connected to evidenced-base best practices.
6. ***Create or support policies that encourage highly qualified teachers to work with those schools and students that are most in need.*** Provide incentives and alternative licensure pathways to retain teachers in hard to staff schools.
7. ***Require the use a wide variety of assessments throughout the school year to monitor student progress.*** Policies should ensure that assessments are used to inform instruction and measure student growth, not just minimum standards or proficiency, to support the academic advancement of all students.
8. ***Ensure that districts and schools adopt open and fair student assignment practices rather than rigid tracking.*** Policies should ensure that students are grouped and regrouped for purposes of instruction, that the assignment is temporary and based on the diagnosed needs, interests, and talents of students, not on a single achievement test.
9. ***Create and support policies and programs that prevent bullying, violence, and other forms of negative behavior.*** Require the districts and schools create or revise student behavior polices to reflect a zero tolerance for bullying or other violent actions. Modify state laws and establish clear procedures for addressing “cyber bullying.”

Summary and Conclusion

The middle-grades are a pivotal point in students’ lives. Concentrating policies, resources, and efforts at the middle grades will promote greater gains and reduce achievement gaps on both national and state assessments and help ensure that our nation’s students are well prepared for

high school. This investment in the middle-grades will, in turn, reduce dropout rates, increase access to and success in postsecondary education, and ultimately result in a more productive workforce, more responsible citizens, and greater international competitiveness. The Forum urges policy makers to implement the above recommendations so that high-performing middle-grades schools that meet the needs of all learners become the norm, not the exception.