

Practices & Processes of Odds-Beating Middle Schools: A Cross-Case Research Brief

What processes and practices distinguish odds-beating from typically performing middle schools?

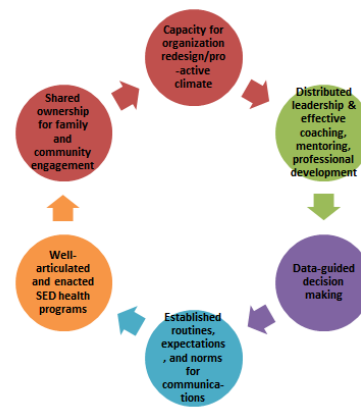
Introduction

The middle school was designed to facilitate early adolescents' transitions from a child-centered elementary school to a subject-centered high school.¹ In addition to preparing students academically, the middle school philosophy included a commitment to youth social and emotional developmental health, including nurturing healthy attachments to school and community.²

The study of odds-beating middle schools reported in this brief was designed to examine the question: What are the features of odds-beating middle schools that enable them to achieve better-

than-predicted outcomes on New York State's Common Core assessments?³ We found that odds-beating schools were characterized by: Capacity for organization redesign/proactive climate; distributed leadership & effective coaching, mentoring, and professional development; data-guided decision making; established routines, expectations, and norms for communications

lished routines, expectations, and norms for communications; well-articulated and enacted social and emotional developmental health programs; and shared ownership for family and community engagement. Findings are summarized according to the priorities of the Diagnostic Tool for District and School Effectiveness (DTSDE) 2.0.



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DTSDE Tenets

- District Leadership and Capacity
- School Leader Practices and Decisions
- Curriculum Development and Support
- Teacher Practice and Support
- Student Social and Emotional Developmental Health
- Family and Community Engagement

1. National Middle School Association. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Columbus, OH: Author Association for Middle Level Education.
2. E.g., Nelson, R. M., & DeBacker, T. K. (2008). Achievement motivation in adolescents: The role of peer climate and best friends. *Journal of Experimental Education, 76*(2), 170-189.
3. Wilcox et al. (2015). *Odds-beating middle schools cross-case report*. Prepared for the the NYS Education Department by the University at Albany, SUNY.

District Leadership and Capacity

A leader may be a conductor of sorts, a conductor of the orchestra, but you need everyone playing well at a high level and in tune and harmony. That's really how I see the role of leader in this modern era -- as a conductor of an orchestra -- but the orchestra is not made up of factory line workers but of skilled musicians.

Superintendent

The study found three primary distinctions between odds-beating and typically performing middle schools in regard to district leadership and capacity:

- District leaders were instrumental in restructuring, refocusing, and locally adapting the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS), Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR), and Data-Driven Instruction (DDI), taking a systemic approach that improved schools' instruction.
- They were proactive, exercising leadership prior to the state mandates while supporting teachers to meet the challenges they faced in their own classrooms.
- They developed and maintained a culture of trust between district office and middle school. Reciprocal trust and timely communications facilitated alignment between district and school, leading to effective top-down and bottom-up CCLS implementation strategies.

School Leader Practices and Decisions

Structured in part by alignment between district office and school, distributed instructional leadership was evident in odds-beating middle schools. This distributed leadership, which included the principal and others, was instrumental in supporting shifts related to implementing the CCLS.

Among the CCLS shifts was increased use of data to guide instructional and cur-

ricular changes.

Especially in larger schools, coaches were available to work directly with individual teachers and groups, modeling desirable instruction and providing feedback and professional development opportunities. Sometimes informal teacher leaders provided support to colleagues.

Besides providing feedback, leaders in several of

the odds-beating schools attended to the quality of relationships between staff. Trusting relationships enabled leaders and coaches to provide feedback to teachers in safe and meaningful ways and also to examine data without fear of evaluation. In contrast, in 2/3 of the typically performing schools, lack of instructional leadership was accompanied by lack of relational trust.

Curriculum Development and Support

Odds-beating and typical middle schools differed in regard to practices and processes related to curriculum.

Odds beaters demonstrated a proactive approach to CCLS curriculum alignment that had begun prior to the state's mandated timeline.

A collaborative approach

to curriculum design and implementation was taken in odds-beating schools. It centered on a districtwide belief in teachers' professional capacity to work as curriculum designers, helping to create a strong sense of curricular cohesion.

Odds-beating schools also stood out in their re-

sponsive approach to professional development, which was connected to and embedded in daily work for teachers and administrators and sustained over time. This professional development strategy resulted in staff members' clarity, coherence, competence, and shared, positive mindset.

Teacher Practice and Support

Odds-beating middle schools were distinctive with regard to teacher practice and support.

Teachers had ready, on-demand access to a variety of data useful for informing instruction. They regularly analyzed and used these data to guide modifications in classroom practices. This was evident in the differen-

tiated and reflexive instruction observed in their classrooms.

Teachers were supported in data-guided practice by established organizational routines, expectations for collaboration, and norms for communication, as well as responsive professional development supports and resources.

These characteristics shaped teachers' understandings of their respective responsibilities and expected behaviors, helping to account for the generally high-quality, engaging instruction they provided to students.

My teaching is always a work in progress. I try to be well prepared for each lesson, but I'm also constantly adapting and adjusting as my students engage with me and with the ideas.

Teacher

Student Social and Emotional Developmental Health

Leaders of odds-beating middle schools prioritize social and emotional developmental (SED) health, and they enact a systematic strategy to support and achieve it.

In these schools, programs had been designed purposefully to ensure that all students enjoy a positive relationship with an adult, as well as connect with the school through extracurricular activities.

School and district personnel reached out to partner with whatever social service agencies were available to them.

A systematic approach to students' SED needs also was evident in the ways support staff members were used to provide both counseling and direct instruction on SED topics.

Formal programs of character development were in place, and staff members

reported that these benefited the learning environment as well as the general school climate.

Overall, commitment by both school and district to social and emotional developmental health was manifest in: 1) a well-articulated priority for SED; 2) allocation of resources for SED programs and staffing; and 3) the commitment and ability to partner with outside agencies.

The least expensive investment that a district has in terms of personnel is hiring advisors and coaches for that 2-3 hours at the end of the school day.... It puts a positive role model in every child's life. Some of them might not need it. A lot of them do need it. So it puts a positive adult role model in the life of the child, and it puts a positive peer role model in the life of a child. And many children of poverty need positive peer role models, because we all know that even though they live in the same community, they live in a different world than everyone else.

Superintendent.

Family and Community Engagement

Educators at odds-beating middle schools made formal and informal efforts to improve parent engagement.

Educators at all levels -- teachers, principals, and district office personnel -- provided shared leadership for this priority because of a belief in two things:

1. They believed they needed support from the

2. They also believed that they needed to help parents support and nurture their children.

In contrast to the one-way relationships that characterize typical school-to-parent communications, in which educators ask only

that parents help them, educators in the odds-beating schools have worked to establish mutually beneficial, two-way relationships in which educators reach out to assist and support parents. These relationships result from deliberate and ongoing efforts to find ways to meet parent and community needs.

Considerations

The findings outlined on pages 2 and 3 lead to several considerations for practice, a selection of which follow:

For District Leaders:

- Make clarity, coherence and alignment a never-ending priority.
- Distribute leadership widely so that others within the district office and the schools share responsibility and accountability.
- Develop and use data systems to ensure that programs, including professional development and related budget allocations, are tied firmly to aligned school and district improvement goals.
- Starting with district leadership and management team(s), structure and support professional learning communities districtwide.
- Communicate regularly and effectively to build and cement trusting relationships with school leaders to facilitate joint planning and collaborative decision making.
- Routinely visit classrooms and schools, asking teachers and other front-line professionals what they want and need to learn in order to improve practice and programs to better support students.
- Demonstrate commitment to social and emotional developmental health by providing adequate resources to support effective programs.
- Seize opportunities to participate in community events and build ties to community organizations.

For Building Leaders:

- Communicate frequently with both district and school personnel to promote curricular and instructional alignment and meeting districtwide goals.
- Foster mutual respect for the expertise of all administrators, teachers, and staff to encourage ongoing and productive instructional and curricular conversations.
- Distribute instructional leadership responsibilities among building leaders, coaches/department chairs, and teacher leaders.
- Build positive relationships with teachers and staff; support a culture of collaboration and trust fueled by open, timely, and accurate communications.
- With building colleagues develop and articulate clear expectations for student behavior and develop systematic processes of intervention, both behavior and academic, through which all staff create consistency and stability.

For Teachers and Other School Staff:

- Use the strength of teams as well as less formalized networks to focus your collaboration on children's learning and growth.
- Produce and use a variety of social-emotional and performance data to inform instructional adaptations.
- Use differentiated and positive reinforcement strategies in your classroom interactions with children, including variable questioning and feedback techniques, scaffolded tasks, diverse materials/resources, and humor to engage and capture all children's imaginations and intellectual curiosities.

*Kristen C. Wilcox
Karen Gregory
Janet I. Angelis
Francesca T. Durand
Kathryn S. Schiller
Sarah Zuckerman
Nisa Felicia
Hal A. Lawson*

**School of Education
University at Albany, SUNY
1400 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12222**

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