



## Middle-Level Education

New York State United Teachers

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# Caught in the Middle

Helping students avoid the middle-school trap

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New York's middle schools are being tested and they are being found sorely wanting.

Almost without exception, New York State's middle schools are struggling - and too often failing - to sufficiently prepare their students to meet higher academic standards. Last year, more than half of New York's eighth-graders failed to meet state standards in English and math.

The shortcomings in academic performance revealed by the eighth-grade test results have many causes. Behind this poor academic performance is a fundamental flaw in the way many districts view the education of early adolescents. It is an unflattering little secret that the state and school districts are reluctant to acknowledge.

In far too many places, school districts mistakenly allow the organization and structure of their schools to dictate the education program that students in grades 5 through 8 receive. State Education Department policies on middle schools actually encourage this. Many elementary schools and junior high schools that contain combinations of grades 5, 6, 7 and 8 operate on the premise that middle-level education is something that only takes place in schools designated as middle schools.

Additionally, many school districts create middle schools to meet space needs and address enrollment shifts. Instead of seeing middle education as a supportive but academically rigorous bridge between the elementary grades and high school, they choose what is cheapest or most convenient over what is educationally sound.



In both instances, "place" takes precedence over "program."

If New York State is serious about improving the academic performance of students in the middle grades, it must begin by first re-defining this critical time in a child's life as the "middle education years." Middle education - not middle schools - is the solution, and the New York State Education Department must exert the necessary leadership to make it happen. All students in grades 5 through 8 must be challenged by a rigorous curriculum and benefit from the other elements of a quality middle-level education - one that prepares them for high school - no matter how their own school's grade levels are configured. In short, students in grades 5 through 8 must have a Bill of Rights.

Already, too much time has been lost.

### **State Test Results Point to Problems**

State tests that measure students' progress and help teachers to identify which eighth-graders need additional help reveal wide gaps in student performance. Even in the so-called "best" suburban school districts, eighth-grade test performance is oftentimes mediocre. About one-third of the eighth-graders in New York's low-need school districts, on average, failed to meet standards in math and English Language Arts in 2001.



To no one's surprise, the lowest eighth-grade test scores are found in those middle-level schools with the greatest needs. In the Big 5 large urban school districts, where concentrations of poverty, uncertified teachers and scarce resources put students at the greatest disadvantage, just 24.3 percent of middle-level students met state standards in English Language Arts in 2001. In math, only 14.3 percent of students - or 1 in 7 - in the Big 5 performed well enough to say they have the required knowledge and skills. And, in a surprising finding, minority students typically scored lower than white students no matter where they attended school.

### **Thirteen Years of State Inaction**

Quite understandably, low eighth-grade test scores have become the main impetus for reforming middle education. The State Education Department recently held forums that explored programs some districts are using successfully to improve middle-level education.

To guide the process, the department has released a Blueprint for Change, a reform agenda, along with two supporting documents: Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs, and Taking Stock: Difficulties Associated with Realizing Substantial Middle-Level Educational Change in New York State. The research papers and the just-concluded regional forums, however, are essentially follow-ups to the Regents' March 1989 policy statement on middle education.

That statement, adopted before many of today's middle school students were born, outlined in great detail what New York's school districts should do to ensure quality middle education programs. The Regents concluded 13 years ago: "The middle-level grades are a vital link in the education of

youth, a unique period of education, and an educational priority. Until schools with middle-level grades attend to the twin purposes of academic preparation and individual self-development for all students in these years, the goals of better beginnings and stronger completions for all will not be realized."1

That declaration has proved to be prophetic. Since March 1989 - just months before East Germans tore down the Berlin Wall - little has happened to actually improve middle education in New York State. The Regents and State Education Department have devoted far more energy to studying - and making declarations about - middle-level education than taking steps to fix it. It remains to be seen whether this renewed focus will be any different.

### **Middle Level Students Caught in the Middle**

In interviews and focus groups, teachers of the middle grades make it clear low test scores are merely a symptom - a predictable outcome of a larger and much deeper problem in the way New York approaches middle education. Too many middle-level schools are clearly not attending to the twin purposes of academic preparation and individual self-development. The goal of better beginnings and stronger completions has not been realized.

In too many school districts, middle-level teachers report their best efforts to help students to soar are grounded before they even take flight. Middle level teachers say effective instruction is often compromised, if not thwarted outright, by a lack of clarity in their school's mission. They say their middle-level schools are not built around a clear idea of what they should be doing. Teachers cite poorly thought out efforts to improve teaching techniques; vague curriculum that is not aligned with the state standards; haphazard implementation of academic intervention programs; and an illogical testing system as some of the reasons middle education performance has been so disappointing.

These shortfalls in how school districts deliver middle level education, and how well students do at meeting state requirements, are exacerbated by other factors.

For instance, entry into the middle grades coincides with a child's greatest physical, emotional and hormonal changes since infancy. Adolescence brings on a special set of developmental and academic challenges for middle-level educators, yet schools rarely have enough social workers, guidance counselors, and psychologists to provide the professional support students need. Teacher turnover; a shortage of qualified school leaders; bullying; and shortages of technology - including modern science equipment - also impact student performance.

The end result is that many teachers and students are caught in the middle. They are under pressure to produce, but their schools are ill-equipped to support the mission of helping all students meet state standards and enter high school prepared to meet tougher Regents' graduation requirements.

### **NYSUT Calls for Swift, Decisive Action**

The 480,000-member New York State United Teachers calls on the State Education Department to take swift, decisive steps to begin helping teachers and school districts to improve middle education. Our students - New York's children - cannot wait any longer.

In this report, *Caught in the Middle: Helping Students Avoid the Middle School Trap*, NYSUT presents 10 elements that every child has a right to in grades 5 through 8.

As a package, they form the "NYSUT Bill of Rights for Students in the Middle Grades." The union that represents more than 90 percent of New York's teachers recommends every parent and student in the middle grades use this Bill of Rights as a measuring stick. Parents and students have a right to know whether the middle-level education program provided in their school district embraces these elements. Parents should help ensure that middle-level programs in their communities have all these elements in place to prepare children to thrive in high school and beyond.

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## NYSUT Bill of Rights: For Students in the Middle Grades

Students in the middle grades, in order to succeed on eighth-grade tests; achieve higher academic standards; make a smooth transition to high school and develop to their fullest potential as adults; must be provided certain educational rights. New York State United Teachers believes students in the middle grades have the right to:



1. [Know what they must learn and what will be tested.](#)
2. [Teachers who are certified, who know their subject area, and how to teach it.](#)
3. [Teachers whose skills and knowledge are continually updated through ongoing, meaningful professional development.](#)
4. [A balanced and academically rigorous education that prepares them to succeed in high school.](#)
5. [Freedom from bullying and bad behavior that disrupts learning.](#)
6. [Know that their hard work counts.](#)
7. [Extra help when they need it.](#)
8. [Small classes where they can receive more individual attention.](#)
9. [A support system of guidance counselors, school psychologists, librarians, nurses, social workers and other professional and support staff.](#)
10. [Schools equipped for the 21st Century.](#)

See also: [Conclusion](#) | [Sources](#) | [Footnotes](#)

## 1. Know what they must learn and what will be tested.

All students should first have the opportunity to learn a subject before they are tested on it. While that statement is both logical and obvious, today's middle-level students can be - and sometimes are - tested by the state on academic material they have not covered in class.

In fact, what middle-level students are taught in school varies widely from school district to school district and, in many cases, from school to school within the same district.

This lack of a coordinated, common course of study for all students in the core subject areas is a glaring shortcoming in middle-level education and one that most harms students living in poverty. Students should know what they are expected to learn at each grade level and on what they will be tested. In addition, teachers at every grade level have a right to know what they need to teach - and to receive professional development that deepens their understanding of the subject area content of the state's curriculum.

By the start of the next school year, the State Education Department should design and make available a clearly defined grade-by-grade, core curriculum for the middle grades. At the very least, before students return to school in September, the department should provide a core curriculum in English Language Arts and math. This subject-by-subject curriculum would include the facts students must know, the skills they must acquire and the concepts they must understand, no matter where in the state they go to school. Although the state curriculum would not be mandated, school districts, if they chose to, could adopt it or use it as a model to develop their own curriculum. The State Education Department should also make available model curricula that successful middle-level schools are using to help their students shine on the eighth-grade state tests.

"In New York City, each district is left on its own," said Richard Miller, vice president for middle and intermediate schools for the United Federation of Teachers. He said teachers in New York City do not have curriculum guides for core subjects and instead rely on textbooks. "Many texts are outdated and in some cases in insufficient numbers to distribute to every student in the classroom. Consequently, in any one given content area, teachers and students are often without any uniform guidelines and suggested methodology."

He noted the UFT is investing considerable time and money developing a standards-based curriculum in the core subjects.



Richard Miller

A core curriculum for middle-level education - used from Riverhead to Rochester, and from Newburgh to Niagara Falls - would coordinate instruction from one grade to the next. This organized approach to teaching and learning would help to build a solid foundation for all students. Local autonomy is very important in developing a curriculum. However, a New York State middle grades core curriculum could allow room for sufficient local autonomy, while still providing clear guidance and communication to students, parents and teachers.

Since the eighth-grade tests would be closely aligned with the new curriculum, students would then know what they cover with their teachers is what they will be tested on by the state.

To start with, everyone would have a clearer idea of how students are doing and what they must learn to be ready for the next grade. Seventh-grade teachers would know in September, for example, what their incoming students learned the previous year and in what areas they struggled. Thanks to the grade-by-grade curriculum, these seventh-grade teachers would also know what their students must know and be able to do to succeed in eighth grade and beyond.

The need for a common core curriculum and accompanying assessments has never been greater. Student mobility is a severe problem. Officials estimate 20 percent of students change schools during the year, with much higher student turnover in New York City and other poor urban districts. When children move from one district to another, gaps in learning open and widen. Frequently, they fall further and further behind. Students can't succeed if the schoolhouse door is a revolving door.

Results on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) show, for example, that eighth-graders who changed schools at least three times scored an average of 26 points lower on math proficiency exams than students who did not bounce from school to school. Other studies show that students who move frequently are more likely to need remedial help, have poorer attendance, score lower on state tests and repeat a grade than students who move less often. [2](#)

A common grade-by-grade state curriculum in the core subjects is a necessary first step to minimizing the disruption to students' education caused when their families move. It is something that other states - and other nations - use as a foundation for their educational systems. A core curriculum would benefit all students in New York State, and all students in the middle grades.

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## **2. Teachers who are certified, who know their subject area and how to teach it.**

All children in the middle grades deserve teachers who are state-certified, have command of the material they are responsible for teaching, know how to engage adolescents and have control of their class. The vast majority of New York's middle-level teachers - like their colleagues at other grade levels - meet the high standards for entering and remaining in the teaching profession. In fact, even before the Board of Regents raised standards for the teaching profession in July 1998, New York's teachers were among the most highly trained, best educated and most experienced in the nation.

Today, however, the same performance gap that is so evident among middle-level students in the Big 5 is also seen in the teaching profession. Of New York's 212,000 teachers, some 26,600 - or about 12.6 percent - are currently not certified. [3](#) But that doesn't tell the full story. Nearly 70 percent of the state's uncertified teachers are concentrated in New York City. Many of the rest teach in Yonkers, Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo. Some uncertified teachers clearly are unprepared for the challenges of a classroom, but are hired under emergency licenses to take hard-to-fill positions in the poorest urban classrooms. Others are misassigned into teaching subjects they are not qualified to teach. Still more receive "experiment in organizational change" variances to teach in middle schools, even though they are only certified to teach in the elementary grades or high school. Those variances will no longer be granted after February 2004, but their impact is reflected in eighth-grade test scores.

While many factors, including poverty, parental involvement, mobility, school resources and attendance, influence student performance on eighth-grade tests, the high number of uncertified teachers in New York City certainly appears to play a role. Recently released data shows the largest percentage of uncertified teachers (26.2 percent) are found in New York City school districts with the largest percentages of low-income, minority students. Low-income, minority students also fare much worse on the eighth-grade English Language Arts and math tests than other students.

The problem is likely to get worse. The Board of Regents has ruled that school districts will not be allowed to use uncertified teachers beyond September 2003. That immediately throws into question the future of uncertified teachers now in New York's classrooms - including the 18,400 in New York City. In addition, new state requirements that go into effect in 2004 narrow the certification areas and raise additional hurdles for new teachers to become certified. The new certification requirements are a clear impediment to meeting the need to put a qualified, certified teacher in the front of every classroom.

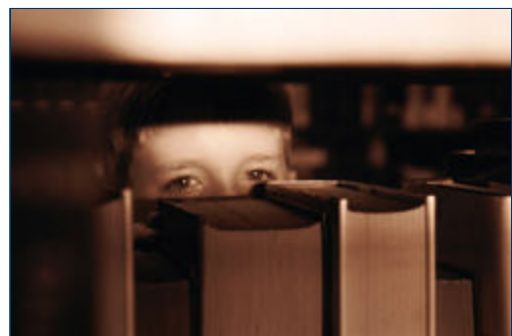
Higher standards for teachers should go hand-in-hand with higher standards for teacher education programs. Schools of education should examine their admissions requirements and revamp their own curriculum so it is better aligned with what teachers and districts need to help students learn to the new higher standards. Only the best college students should be able to become classroom teachers.

However, we must recognize that putting a highly qualified, certified teacher at the front of every classroom will take more than mere words. We must have the will - and the wallet. Salaries for teachers in New York City and elsewhere must be more competitive with what teachers earn in suburban school districts, and with what the private sector pays professionals with similar education and experience. New York City and other districts must also dramatically improve working conditions if they are to attract - and retain - the best teachers. Only by making the teaching profession a more attractive career choice will New York City and other large urban districts increase their pool of highly qualified teachers who have the skills, knowledge and desire to help students succeed.

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### **3. Teachers whose skills and knowledge are continually updated through ongoing, meaningful professional development.**

Every middle-level teacher should also be a student. Students and parents have a right to know that teachers believe learning is a lifelong process and believe in continually updating their skills. New research about how adolescents learn, as well as the new state standards, testing regimen and scoring rubrics make continuing professional development more important today than perhaps ever before.



Just as children sense what skills they need to develop in school and what sparks their own intellectual curiosity, teachers too know what they want and

need for their own continuing professional training. In interviews, what teachers say they want most is professional development that is subject-area content rich and tightly knitted to a state curriculum. They also want more support from administrators, constructive coaching and follow-through, and for professional development to be a regular part of the school day. Many teachers express concern, however, that too often the professional development they are provided is not relevant to them or their students, and is offered in a haphazard manner with little follow-up.

"Teachers want something they can take away from professional development and find it meaningful enough to use right away," said Terry McSweeney, who teaches math and science at the Driver Middle School in Marcellus, outside Syracuse.

In a survey conducted by NYSUT in May 2001, 76 percent of local union presidents reported their school district's Professional Development Plan did not target the needs of fourth- and eighth-grade teachers preparing their students to take state tests in English Language Arts and math. Fifty-five percent said their districts were not focusing their training on improving student achievement on state tests.

New research shows just how shortsighted some districts are being. The American Education Research Journal reports math and science teachers gain the most from long-term professional development that offers them ways to tie what they learn to broader goals and experiences. Their professional development is most useful when it focuses on content as well as instructional methods. [4](#)

Ilene Dillon, who teaches middle school in Yonkers, underscored that point. "Little is offered in content," she said. "For example, social studies teachers would be well-served by workshops focusing on current events, such as Arab-Israeli relations."

In a similar survey reporting on the 1999-2000 school year, 52 percent of local union presidents said their school districts either did not provide eighth-grade teachers with professional development on the new state standards, or that the district's training was not adequate. Similarly, 49 percent of local presidents said their district's math teachers either did not receive professional development tied to the standards, or that the training offered failed to meet their needs.

Teachers and, by extension, students benefit when school districts offer meaningful professional development. The State Education Department should increase its oversight of how school districts design and implement Professional Development Plans so that teachers receive training that is closely linked to subject-area content. The Department should also help ensure that teachers not only participate in the planning of their own professional training, but in its implementation.

Middle-level education is undergoing great change. Teacher turnover is increasing. Half the state's teaching force is projected to retire over the next five to seven years. As New York raises academic standards, and imposes new and more rigorous testing requirements, all teachers should receive regular, meaningful professional development. New teachers should observe and work with more experienced colleagues through state-funded mentoring programs. Teachers also need time for reflection, planning and collaboration with colleagues, and to meet as teams to discuss student needs. This professional time is essential for teachers to set thoughtful instructional goals and to weave ideas that help students make connections across subjects.



Teacher Centers and BOCES, as well as local teachers' unions, are leading forces in keeping teacher professional development on the cutting edge. The state must fully fund BOCES and Teacher Center programs to help ensure continued excellence in teaching. Student learning is enhanced when school districts provide quality professional development programs that are closely linked to the tougher standards and new state tests.

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#### **4. A balanced and academically rigorous education that prepares them to succeed in high school.**

From ages 10 to 14, children undergo tremendous social, emotional and physical transformation. Early adolescence is when young people begin to experience puberty. Their personal growth and development is more pronounced than at any other time in their lives but infancy. These dramatic physical changes are accompanied by hormonal changes that create a roller coaster of emotions. Young teens can be jaunty and self-assured and vulnerable to extreme emotional hurt and anxiety - sometimes all within the span of a few hours. Early adolescence is also a time when students face choices about sex and substance abuse; forge a self-identity; learn new social rules and how to "fit in," and develop a personal code of ethics to guide their own behavior.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, students entering the middle grades are confronted with more rigorous academic challenges - and change. Instead of learning from a single teacher in a self-contained classroom, students in many middle-level schools must adapt to the rules, styles and expectations of five or six teachers. Dennis Ball, a seventh-grade technology teacher at Farnsworth Middle School in Guilderland, describes a typical student's day this way: "It's run, run, run - a short lunch - and on the go for nine periods. It makes for a long day."

The middle education years also begin to expose inadequate academic preparation in elementary school, particularly among those students who are poor, members of racial or ethnic minorities, or who are recent immigrants to this country.<sup>6</sup> As the most recent school report cards demonstrate, eighth-grade performance is weakest among those students who attend middle grades in poor, urban districts with the fewest resources.

Sometimes districts focus so intently on test scores, everything else goes out of kilter. Miller, the UFT's middle-school vice president, summed up the feelings of many teachers. "Preparing for standardized tests has become paramount in the middle grades. 'Drill and kill' have replaced direct teaching and exciting curriculum offerings," he said. "Subjects that would excite our students and prepare them for high school, and motivate them to stay in school, have been dropped."

Other challenges - and obstacles - to successful reform are worth noting.

NYSUT has found that many school districts create their "middle schools" to serve as a "buffer" to absorb the ebb and flow of student enrollment trends. Instead of designing their middle-level education programs around what is academically and developmentally sound, many see their middle school structure as an easy fix to temporary space crunches resulting from spikes in the student population.

Data from the State Education Department backs this up. It shows no fewer than 10 different grade configurations that schools in New York State use to accommodate their middle-level education

programs. (A 1997 survey by the New York State Middle Schools Association found 1,018 schools with a Grade 7.) As the chart indicates, grade configurations fluctuate dramatically.

### Grade Level Organization in New York State

Grade Span	81-82	91-92	98-99	99-00	00-01	Change 1981-01
K/1-5	452	789	1,041	1,040	1,124	+672 (149%)
K/1-6	1,468	981	659	659	599	-869 (-59%)
K/1-8	71	60	96	97	108	+37 (52%)
5-8	50	87	101	101	102	+52 (104%)
6-8	162	292	398	397	436	+274 (169%)
6-9	34	30	15	15	14	-20 (-59%)
6-12	16	30	42	43	48	+32 (200%)
7-8	120	93	71	71	76	-44 (-37%)
7-9	211	78	39	39	29	-182 (-86%)
7-12	227	224	166	171	168	-59 (-26%)
9-12	398	470	565	556	575	+177 (45%)
10-12	109	36	23	24	23	-86 (-79%)

SOURCE: State Education Department

Questions about the structure of middle-level education programs cry out for answers. For instance, just what constitutes a middle school? What is the purpose and mission of middle-level education? What is needed locally, and at the state level, to build a middle education infrastructure that best fosters student learning?

And, more specifically, does a K-5 school structure provide fifth-graders with the same quality middle-level education program as a school organized around grades 5 through 8? Or, for example, do schools with a K-6 structure have the same resources, including lab space, as middle schools that educate students in the sixth through 12th grades?

In Phase I of its Action Plan, the State Education Department acknowledges the seriousness of the problem. "Right now, there is a significant disconnect in many middle-level schools between a school organization and structure that are best for young adolescents and the organization and structure that actually exist in a school. The organization and structure of many middle-grade schools are not conducive to good education. They often reflect adult needs rather than student needs, promote efficiency over effectiveness, perpetuate past practices and value appearance over impact." [7](#)

While there are no easy answers, this much is clear: No matter how a specific middle-level school is structured, every student has the right to an academically rigorous and developmentally appropriate education program, and to expect their school leaders to know that is a distinction with a difference. The State Education Department must ensure that all school districts design sound middle education programs that focus on the needs of children in grades 5 through 8 and their unique academic and developmental needs, not what is most convenient or least expensive.

The idea of balance for students in the middle grades must also be considered within their schools' instructional curriculum. To fully develop their potential, every student in the middle grades should be exposed to instruction in vitally important subjects such as art, music, technology and home and career skills. They should be able to develop self-confidence and pursue a healthy lifestyle through regular physical education. However, in too many parts of the state, special subjects are the first to feel the pain of the budget ax. In others, focus on the core subjects - and the requirement to provide Academic Intervention Services - come at the expense of these other, equally valuable disciplines that help middle-level students develop an appreciation for culture and become more well-rounded adults.

All students should have the opportunity to receive instruction, develop their skills and express their individuality through these vital disciplines.

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## **5. Freedom from bullying and bad behavior that disrupts learning.**

All students in the middle grades have the right to a safe and orderly school where they can study and learn without fear of bullying, intimidation or violence. From the moment they step onto school grounds, students have an absolute right to their physical safety. But, just as importantly, all students also have the right to a healthy and supportive learning climate that respects their rights as individuals - and celebrates their individual differences.

Unfortunately, bullying and disruptive behavior seem to be part of the landscape in too many middle schools. Syracuse teacher Paula Drake, who has taught in middle-level education for 31 years, said students victimized by repeated bullying see their self-esteem destroyed. Some drop out of school to escape the teasing, threats and fighting.

Middle-level students are exposed to more rigorous coursework that, in many cases, challenges their intellect and inspires them to pursue a wide range of rewarding intellectual pursuits. For other students, however, entry into middle school begins a downward trajectory. The transition from elementary school to a less familiar and oft-times larger middle-level setting can lead to a declining spiral of self-esteem, motivation and, ultimately, school performance. Some of these young adolescents begin to make poor choices, with unfortunately predictable results.



Paula Drake

Peer pressure to "fit in" can, for example, create a climate of desirable non-achievement in which it is considered "cool" to cut classes, disobey teachers, break school rules, fail to do homework and generally under-perform. This powerful peer influence must be overcome by a more concerted effort by schools to reinforce the importance of education. Schools should underscore this by recognizing that adolescents are motivated, in part, by acknowledgement of their achievements, recognition of their accomplishments and support from their parents and community. Adrian Gonzalez Jr., an eighth-grade English teacher in Central Islip, noted his school uses a "Catch a Kid" program to reward students who are observed exhibiting good behavior and working hard in class. "Over time, this recognition of students who do right - instead of a focus on those who do wrong - helps create an environment in which a culture of excellence is expected," Gonzalez said.

Just because bad behavior is rampant in some districts is no excuse for it to be accepted. Not any more. New York's recently enacted Project SAVE legislation gives districts a powerful tool to reduce violence and improve discipline - if they use the law correctly.

The comprehensive package of reforms, a foundation of NYSUT's legislative program for eight years, gives teachers - and schools - mechanisms for insisting on order and discipline in every classroom. A key element gives teachers the authority to remove chronically disruptive students from their classrooms, preferably into alternative settings. Drake says, however, that is not happening in Syracuse. "Teachers are not being supported in handling discipline. Kids are being dismissed from class," she said, "but they return in 20 minutes." Similar stories are told around the state, regardless of whether the schools are in rural, urban or suburban communities. "Teachers want clear rules, and clearly stated and consistently administered consequences for students who break rules," added Michael Snyder, an eighth-grade teacher in Schalmont in Schenectady County. "We do not always see that."

If middle-level schools are to successfully meet the Regents' ambitious reform agenda, every classroom must be a laboratory for learning. One or two students who goof off should not be allowed to poison the learning environment of the other 25 kids in the class who want to learn. Attaining high standards of achievement simply cannot occur without consistently high standards for student behavior.

If schools are to become safer and more orderly, everyone in the school community has a responsibility to support a positive learning environment. School administrators and parents have a special responsibility to support teachers' efforts to maintain a school environment that is conducive to learning. Students should have expanded use of "support teams" of guidance counselors, social workers, school nurses, psychologists and other experts, as well as representatives from community-based health and service agencies who are available to help adolescents who act out, disrupt class, feel ostracized or who are otherwise troubled.

Students also deserve additional programs that promote positive, healthy relationships between them and their parents, their teachers and their peers. Programs that teach character, tolerance, respect, responsibility, good judgment and peaceful resolution of conflicts should be used to help guide adolescents through this time of change.

## 6. Know that their hard work counts.

Students should know there are rewards - and real consequences - that are tied to their school performance. Students should know their hard work counts.

When students in the middle grades sit down to take a test or begin work on a school project, the first question they invariably ask their teacher is, "Does it count?" The act of "making it count," by itself, conveys a message that the test - and the students' performance - is serious business.

Generally speaking, there are two types of tests. There are the tests that teachers use to monitor students' progress in acquiring knowledge and understanding. And, there are the tests that teachers give to evaluate what a student has learned. The monitoring tests help teachers work with students as they learn. Students know these tests count when they see the progress they are making. Students know the evaluation tests count when they are held accountable for how they score.



Students should know the state tests given in eighth grade in math, English Language Arts, science, social studies and technology are evaluation tests and serve an important purpose. They count.

After all, these tests help schools and the state to measure how well students are doing and identify those students who need extra help. The results help to trigger additional academic intervention for those students who need it and serve as a state system of accountability. The state tests are an objective tool that measures the performance of eighth-graders against academic standards that spell out what they should understand and be able to accomplish.

While aware and concerned about the dangers of over-testing, NYSUT strongly supports the accountability that the eighth-grade tests bring. Parents, teachers, students - everybody - should know how their schools are doing, to note the progress forward and slips backward, and to be able to compare results with other similar school districts around the state. Students, their schools and school districts benefit when their performance is measured against state benchmarks. It's how you're doing measured against how you should be doing. All schools need an objective tool for identifying students who have fallen behind. Even in more affluent school districts, the state tests succeed in detecting those students who need additional academic support and who now are required to get it.

Just as importantly, the report cards and publicity around tests help students know that their education is important, not only to them but to the state, their administrators and teachers, their parents and taxpayers. "Kids need to see what happens in their school as being important and having meaning, and many don't," said Ron Vitali, a seventh-grade teacher in the Rochester suburb of Rush-Henrietta. "Kids need more of a message - and a better message - about what is important."

At the same time, eighth-grade students have a right not to be overburdened by state tests. The testing schedule should be fair and reasonable, and it should not interrupt the flow of instruction. Middle-level schools should drop local tests that duplicate state tests - an issue that is likely to become more pressing. The recently enacted Elementary Secondary Education Act requires new grade-by-grade testing that will be phased in starting in 2005-06.

State Education Commissioner Richard Mills recently took steps to bring some relief to test-stressed teachers and their students by changing the eighth-grade test schedule beginning in 2002-03. Some of the changes will prove beneficial. Eighth-grade students will now be tested at times of the year when the results can be used as either mid-terms or final exams, or put on their report cards.

The scheduling of the eighth-grade math test still must be changed. The math test should also be administered in January or June, with adequate time for teachers to score the tests. In math, as well, the results should be used as a mid-term or final exam, or put on students' report cards. Students taking the eighth-grade math test must know there are consequences. The results must count.

### **Changes in Middle Level Testing Schedule**

- English Language Arts:  
Moved to Late January; preceding Regents exams
  
- Math:  
Late April or early May
  
- Science Performance Test:  
January
  
- Science Written Test:  
June; before the first Regents exam
  
- Social Studies:  
June; before the first Regents exam
  
- Technology Education:  
Optional, any time in June

SOURCE: New York Teacher

Students are also entitled to know that their coursework in technology education counts. However, Commissioner Mills, with no meaningful input from the field, told school districts in March they could make the state test in technology education optional. This is a mistake. We are in the age of technology. Making the test optional sends the wrong message. It devalues technology education - a required course that offers students a first taste of a subject that has already revolutionized the world in which we live. "If it's not tested, it's not valued," said Thomas Frawley, a member of the Fulton Teachers Association and president of the New York State Technology Education Association. Technology education must count.

## **7. Extra help when they need it.**

Not all students in the middle grades find achieving the new state standards a snap. Not by a long shot. As the most recent school report cards demonstrate, too many students in the middle grades are failing to achieve state standards in English Language Arts and math. In many schools, scores on the eighth-grade tests are absolutely unacceptable. In some cases, they are abysmal. And, while students who fall short of reaching a passing score on the state tests are predominantly found in the Big 5 and other under-funded districts, there is not a single district in the state that doesn't have a percentage of its students not meeting the more rigorous standards.

This undeniable truth means that in every school district, there are struggling students in the middle grades who have the right to receive effective extra help.

School districts are required to provide this extra help through a program known as Academic Intervention Services (AIS). Through their school district's AIS programs, students who are identified by the state tests receive additional academic support. The districts are responsible for diagnosing what kind of help the students need and for targeting instruction to help address the gaps in students' learning.

All too often, however, that is simply not happening. Rather than a cohesive, well-funded academic intervention system, many school districts have instead cobbled together a patchwork they call AIS. There is no coordinated program of tutoring, extra classes, learning labs and remedial services. This confusion, inconsistency and lack of coordination - as well as insufficient funding - have sapped the effectiveness of many AIS programs.

A NYSUT survey of 405 teachers of grades 5 through 8 demonstrates the breadth and depth of the problems with AIS across the state. For example, more than one-third of the middle-level teachers surveyed said their school districts are not identifying all those students who need additional support. Forty-four percent said students are not getting enough help to succeed on the eighth-grade English Language Arts test. Nearly half, or 49.4 percent, said their district's AIS support program for students who need help in math is inadequate. Nearly 9 in 10 said their district's AIS plan needs improvement.

On top of these concerns, about half the middle-level teachers surveyed also expressed concern they had not received professional development on how to determine which students need additional support, or on how to deliver specific instruction that overcomes students' specific learning deficiencies.

Students who fail to reach the state standards deserve to have their academic problems properly diagnosed by highly trained teachers who have received specific training, and know how to help them clear the obstacles blocking their way to success. Teachers must have a voice, through their collective bargaining agent, in the development of the district's AIS plan. Teachers must also have time during the school day to consult with parents, collaborate with other teachers, and otherwise prepare to provide effective AIS instruction.

Students have the right to an organized, cohesive and coordinated system of academic intervention that is properly funded by the state, so that their school districts can provide the right academic intervention - at the right time - to all those who need it. This extra help can take the form of individual and small group instruction during the regular school day, and in before- and after-school programs. Lee Cutler, who teaches seventh and eighth grade at the A. MacArthur Barr Middle School in Nanuet, said effective use of teachers' time is a critical issue in designing a quality AIS program. In his suburban Rockland County district, teachers still spend 45 minutes each day supervising lunch in the cafeteria - while AIS services are relegated to Saturday mornings. "Kids are so burnt out at the end of the day, they don't want to come after school or spend Saturday mornings with more classes," he said.



Lee Cutler

To increase the effectiveness of academic intervention programs, the State Education Department should identify model AIS programs which school districts are using to effectively help students in the middle grades improve their academic performance. These models should include ways that school districts are training teachers in how to identify students with learning needs and how to target instruction to address students' diagnosed learning gaps.

Academic intervention, when necessary, should take place no matter grade students are in. Students identified as needing additional help in fourth grade are re-tested in eighth grade. The effectiveness of the help they receive in the intervening middle grades can - and should - be evaluated. NYSUT calls on the State Education Department to conduct such an evaluation study and explore what it takes to help students learn to the new state standards.

With less than half of eighth-graders currently meeting state standards in math and English Language Arts, developing effective AIS programs is an essential step in closing the performance gap and helping all students to meet the tougher Regents' standards.

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## **8. Small classes where they can receive more individual attention.**

Students in the middle grades don't need voluminous research and the findings of a long-term study to know they learn better - and receive more individual attention - in smaller classes.

In middle-level education, small classes are an essential ingredient for success. Adolescents are more likely to pay attention and participate in classroom discussions when class size is small. When they are engaged, students are also less likely to disrupt the learning environment.

Students have the right to have teachers who know more than just their names. Teachers should know students' individual strengths and weaknesses, understand their educational and family backgrounds, and have a strategy to help every child succeed. But that clearly is more difficult when a middle-level teacher has five classes of 28 to 30 students. Snyder, the English teacher in Schalmont, notes his average class size is now about 26, but some individual classes get as high as 30. "In the years when my class sizes were smaller, students did better. But to have smaller class



sizes, we need more money and more classrooms," he said.

The smaller-is-better theory is backed by more than common sense. Extensive research in Indiana, Texas, California and the renowned STAR experiment in Tennessee shows conclusively that class size makes a difference in student achievement. Tennessee's four-year STAR study, which began in 1985, found kids in smaller classes did better on skills and achievement tests. There was small but measurable improvement when class size shrank by only four. Researchers studying Tennessee's STAR program, and other studies into class size, have also found a correlation between students' achievement gains and the actual drop in class size. The effects of reduced class size are, quite logically, more pronounced when the drop is from 28 to 18, than when class size falls from 20 to 18.<sup>8</sup>

The effects of smaller classes are especially strong in inner-city schools with large minority enrollments. And the benefits of these smaller classes are long lasting. Researchers followed students enrolled in the original STAR through their entire school careers. A follow-up study released in 1999 showed students enrolled in smaller classes in their first few years of school performed significantly better in high school than students who attended larger classes in the early grades.<sup>9</sup>

Long term gains from reduced class size are especially great for minority students. A Princeton University researcher, in perhaps the most provocative finding evolving from Tennessee's class size experiment, reported that when students are taught in small classes, the achievement gap between white and black students narrows by 38 percent. Some, but not all, of the improvement is lost when students return to larger classes. The Princeton study also showed that smaller classes increase the likelihood that black students would take college entrance exams.

"Class size is the most important factor in helping at risk students," said Stacey Caruso Sharpe, an eighth-grade math teacher in Amsterdam. "The great irony is that in New York State, the students who need smaller classes the most are the ones least likely to get them."

When it comes to class size, New York has a long way to go to ensure that demography is not destiny. State Education Department data shows tremendous differences in average class size in the middle grades. In seventh-grade English, for example, class size for the 1999-00 school year averaged 28.2 in New York City, and 21.8 in districts outside of the Big 5. In grade 9 English, students outside the Big 5 enjoyed average class sizes of 21.5, compared to 28.5 in New York City.

School districts should also consider other ways to make middle-level education more personal for students. The idea that smaller schools - or "houses" - can improve middle education is gaining momentum and is worthy of further study.

Even in smaller schools, small classes are not a luxury. They are an essential element to a successful middle school experience.

## **9. A support system of guidance counselors, school psychologists, librarians, nurses, social workers and other professional and support staff.**

Every student in the middle grades should be well known by at least one adult in the school.

Students should be able to talk openly and honestly with an adult mentor who can help them learn from their experiences, solve problems, and understand their changing relationships with their family and peers. Every student should know there is an adult in the school who can marshal the district's and the community's resources to help them if they need it, and to assist them in developing a vision for the future.



In many cases, students will develop a special relationship with a nurturing teacher who serves as a mentor. "Teachers must be teachers, but today they are social workers, guidance counselors, priests, mothers, fathers and teachers," said one veteran teacher. Most successful middle schools provide much more. School counselors and other professionals are part of the fabric of every supportive middle-level school, interwoven in the daily learning process as part of special support teams that help students and advise other educators. Everyone works together to solve the dilemmas of adolescence.

If a student is experiencing a serious personal crisis, a support team of guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists, school nurses and others should be readily available.

Unfortunately, too many schools go no further than creating structures. They are the foundation of a house that is never built. Teachers report that, too often, their schools have so few guidance counselors and other key members of support teams, they are never connected to the process of improving teaching and learning so all students can meet higher standards.

In large cities, one guidance counselor may be asked to serve the needs of 500, 600 or more middle-level students - an impossible task. The UFT's Miller said some counselors in New York City are asked to be responsible for between 750 to 1,200 students. "The failure to provide adequate counseling services is a travesty for our schools," he said.

Even in more affluent, suburban school districts, there are too few guidance counselors and others on professional support teams to meet student needs. Ron Vitali, the Rush-Henrietta English teacher, said there is one guidance counselor per 300 students. "The guidance counselors work 12 hours a day. There are too many kids and too many problems," he said. "When kids have a problem, they have to wait a day or two to see a counselor. How much sense does that make?"

It makes little sense. Students should know that their middle-level schools provide an effective and supportive structure to help them succeed.

All students in the middle grades should have ready access to a network of academic and personal support. Students need this extra support as they undergo the normal, though often turbulent developmental changes that directly and indirectly affect their ability to succeed on eighth-grade tests and be prepared to meet the Regents requirements in high school.

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## **10. Schools equipped for the 21st Century.**

Students of the 21st Century should attend middle-level schools with safe, modern classrooms; and have access to new generation computers; up-to-date textbooks; modern science labs and well-stocked libraries.

Who could disagree with that statement? Yet, for too many middle-level students, most of them attending poor urban schools, realizing that simple goal is a pipe dream.

What else can you call it when, right now, some middle school students in Syracuse are using a social studies textbook that lists Ronald Reagan as the current president?<sup>10</sup> Or when, because of severe overcrowding, some middle-level students in New York City are trying to rise up to meet higher academic standards in a converted closet.

Hundreds of school buildings in New York State, many in the Big 5, have conditions that either hinder learning or pose an unacceptable risk to students' safety. Crumbling, overcrowded school buildings - and classes held in converted closets or locker rooms - send the wrong message to students. Students rightly wonder that if their education is so important, why do adults leave them to learn in classrooms with leaky roofs and broken windows, while using textbooks that are 20 years old.

Recent state aid increases to school districts for textbook and computer purchases - and voter-approved bond issues aimed at modernizing school facilities - have helped considerably. Textbooks today are newer and in better physical condition than five years ago, when nearly a third of New York teachers reported using textbooks that were more than 10 years old.

Still, in far too many places, students deserve better.

Students of the technological age should have access to modern technology. The most recent State Education Department statistics show, however, while rural school districts average 24.6 new generation Pentium or Power PC computers per 100 students, and low-need districts provide 21.7 modern computers per 100 students, New York City schools have but 7.4. And, of those, fewer than three-quarters are considered "new generation." That makes it difficult, if not impossible, for students to learn the skills they need to compete in the global economy and use modern computer software to facilitate their learning.

Books are considerably less high-tech, less expensive and have been around a lot longer - ever since Johannes Gutenberg built the first printing press in 1436. Yet, many middle-level students do not have access to decent school libraries.

Why? Too many school districts do not look at their libraries as important investments that help nourish the minds of students. In a time of stretched resources, libraries are mistakenly discounted as a priority. Again, the shortages are most severe in New York City and other large, urban school districts. Where low-need school districts stock 21.9 library books per student, and rural districts average 21.1 library books per student, SED data shows students in New York City generally do without. In Fall 1999, New York City provided just 8.3 library books per student. Students should have access to highly trained librarians - and well-equipped, modern school libraries - that provide them with critical academic support, and teach them the research skills they will need for the rest of their lives.

Students also have a right to learn science in safe, modern labs. In April 2001, NYSUT sounded the alarm on the scarcity of resources and the inadequacy of science labs in New York's middle schools. Teachers reported that antiquated science labs, inadequate materials and supplies, and dangerously unsafe and unhealthy lab conditions, hindered their ability to prepare their students to succeed on the eighth-grade state science test. Just 24 percent of middle-level science teachers reported they had all the lab equipment they need. Alarming, 29 percent had none of it - even though students are required to learn how to use this equipment to meet the state standards. Sixty percent of middle school teachers said their science instruction is limited by a lack of safety equipment or lab facilities.

Students should know their school districts have made the purchase of critically needed science materials and lab safety equipment a priority. Students should see the State Education Department coordinating a comprehensive strategy to improve science instruction, modernize labs and lab safety equipment, and help them to meet the eighth-grade science requirements.

Science is the new currency of an increasingly competitive global economy. All students in the middle grades should be given an equal opportunity to be inspired by the wonders of science, have access to next-generation computers and new textbooks, and learn in safe, modern classrooms.

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## **Conclusion**

Reform will not come easily, simply or cheaply. But the first steps toward a better middle-level education system must come immediately. How middle-level education is defined - and delivered - must change if New York State is to help students to successfully bridge the gap between childhood and young adulthood, and give all children, no matter where they attend school, the chance to develop a foundation for the more rigorous Regents standards.

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