

## APS/ATF Middle School Task Force Recommendations

### BACKGROUND

During the 2022 negotiations APS and ATF agreed to form a middle school task force to analyze best practices for middle school education and address needs to better serve middle school students in our district.

The goals of the task force were to develop a guiding middle school philosophy and to create structures and schedules to support that philosophy.

Dr. Channell Segura, APS Chief of Schools, Gene Saavedra, Associate Superintendent for Zone 1, and Dr. Ellen Bernstein, ATF President, were joined by 5 middle school teachers and 6 middle school principals. Our work started in late September and concluded in early January, 2023.

### PROCESS

We started our work brainstorming, from our professional experience, the attributes of schooling we considered essential to the success of middle schoolers. The task force agreed that the biological aspect of puberty plays a significant role with this age group.

“During adolescence, students develop a sense of connection or detachment with school that continues in future years. The literature notes that middle school students experience accelerated growth, both physically and mentally, at a rate unparalleled by later development. Students at this age often struggle with the rapid changes they are experiencing and schools must provide the appropriate supports and stimulation to meet these unique needs.”

Wallace, J. J. “Effects of Interdisciplinary Teaching Team Configuration upon the Social Bonding of Middle School Students.” *Research in Middle Level Education Online*, 30:5, 2007. p. 2.  
[http://www.amle.org/portals/0/pdf/rmle/rmle\\_vol30\\_no5.pdf](http://www.amle.org/portals/0/pdf/rmle/rmle_vol30_no5.pdf)

Over the next few months, we developed a shared knowledge base by reading and discussing articles, reports, and research on early adolescent development, specific middle grade educational needs, and a variety of middle school schedules from our state and districts across the nation. We delved into materials ranging from the 1989 groundbreaking report from the Carnegie Corporation, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century. The Report of the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescent* to the October 2022 issue of *Kappan* (a professional magazine about K-12 education) entitled *The Middle Grades*.

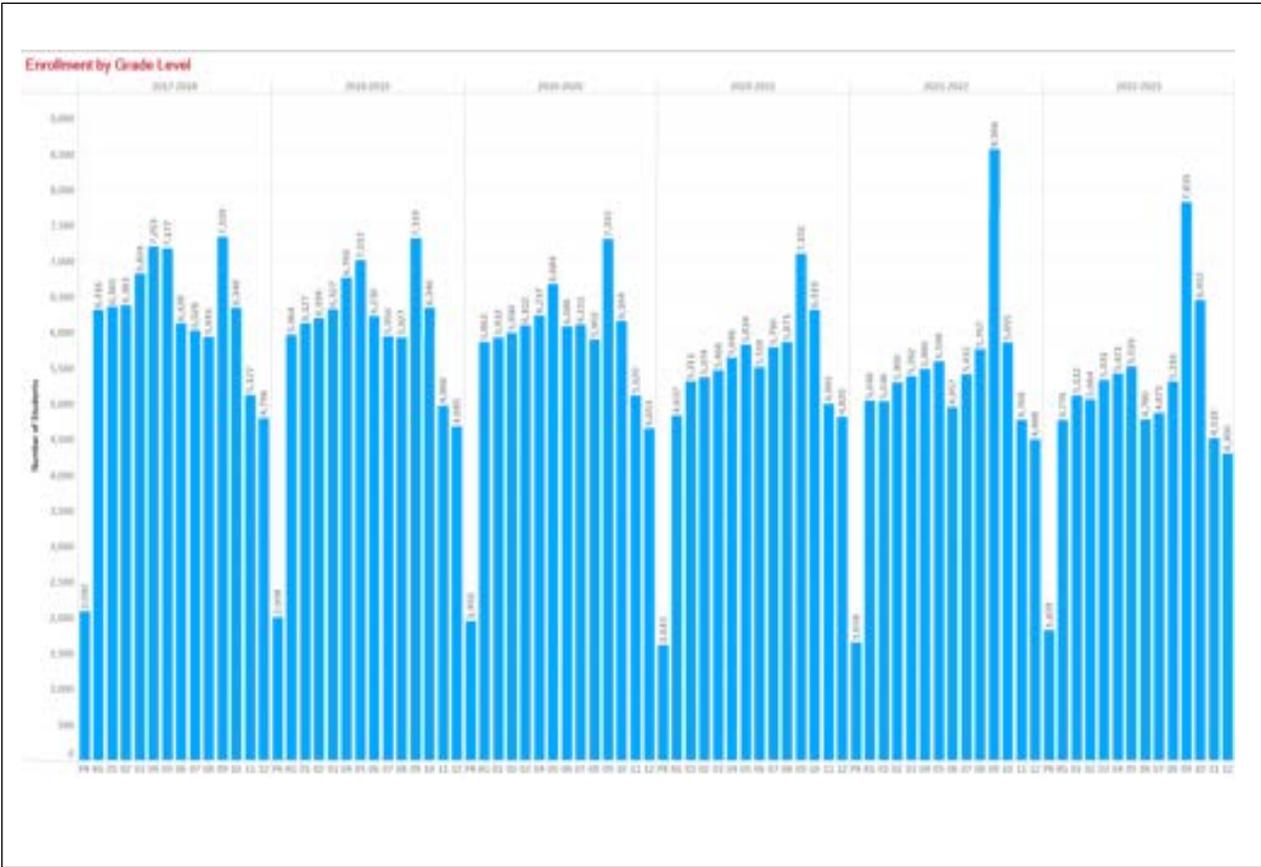
We found the information consistent over time regardless of the author(s), the conclusions unwavering and a match with each task force member’s professional experiences.

**THE NEED FOR CHANGE**

The emergence of the middle school model in the 1960s was based on the recognition that young adolescents are not simply older elementary school students nor younger high school students. There are dramatic changes that occur during this time of life requiring a radically different and unique approach to education. Adolescence is a “period of development more rapid than in any other phase of life except infancy” (*Turning Points*).

Although we still label our schools as middle schools, a specific mid-school philosophy has been lost. Largely because of the No Child Left Behind Act, middle schools have reverted to a junior high model that no longer takes into account the unique developmental needs of young adolescent learners.

As can be seen in the chart below depicting enrollment trends from 2017-2023, enrollment in APS has experienced more of a decline in middle school enrollment as compared to high school and elementary. These data are based on the 40<sup>th</sup> day of each school year. A larger version of this chart can be found at the end of the document.



The age of students attending middle school varies from 10-14. According to the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, suicide is the third-leading cause of death in children ages 10–14. Hormonal changes and mood swings are typical of this developmental stage. To some degree most students experience anxiety and low self-esteem. Mid-schoolers struggle with self-confidence and may develop negative behavioral issues and a poor attitude. During this life-stage, kids tend to take a lot of risks.

"Younger adolescents aged 12 or 13 tended to have lower perceptions of the risk of harm compared with older adolescents or adults. Thus, age-specific communications are imperative from a public health perspective to help people fully understand important harms associated with the use of specific substances."

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2021). *Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (HHS Publication No. PEP21-07-01-003, NSDUH Series H-56).

Students who drop out of high school usually start to pull away in middle school. Research indicates that there are several reasons for this such as bullying, feeling hopeless academically (often in math), suspension or expulsion, or social anxieties that become overwhelming.

"There were very distinct patterns we see with kids starting to pull away usually in middle school. The through line in many of their stories was some kind of academic challenge that undermined their faith in themselves as learners, that then led to helplessness and hopelessness about their ability to be a student."

*Why We Drop Out: Understanding and Disrupting Student Pathways to Leaving School*, Deborah L. Feldman, Antony T. Smith, and Barbara L. Waxman, 2017

Middle school is a wonderful, crazy, and often confusing time. It is also the first time most kids encounter drugs and alcohol. Although a survey conducted by the National Institutes of Health reported significant decreases in alcohol, marijuana, and vaped nicotine use by many adolescents, according to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics drug use among 8<sup>th</sup> graders in New Mexico went up 61% between 2016-2020.

### **New Mexico**

Teenagers in New Mexico are 37.04% more likely to have used drugs in the last month than the average American teen.

- 19,000 or 11.42% of 12- to 17-year-olds report using drugs in the last month.
- Among them, 84.21% report using marijuana in the last month.

- 18.63% of all 12- to 17-year-olds report using marijuana in the last year.
- 0.60% report using cocaine in the last year.
- Up to 0.30% report using methamphetamines (data is limited).
- Up to 0.30% used heroin.
- 3.00% report misusing pain relievers.
- 8.41% of all 12- to 17-year-olds used alcohol in the last month.
- They're 8.07% less likely to use alcohol than the average American in their age group.
- 4.21% of all 12- to 17-year-olds met the criteria for IDUD [Illicit Drug Use Disorder] in the last year.
- 1.80% of all 12- to 17-year-olds met the criteria for AUD [Alcohol Use Disorder] in the last year.

National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics

(<https://drugabusestatistics.org/teen-drug-use/#new-mexico>)

The task force's overarching goal is to enhance the learning and achievement of early adolescents while recognizing the vulnerabilities of disconnecting from school and drug use.

The task force unanimously recommends that APS return to a thoughtful well-implemented middle school model of schooling. The middle school model of schooling allows for a smooth transition from elementary school to middle school. The model also takes into consideration the developmental needs of young adolescents. This model is known for the way core academic teachers create teams or family groups that share students.

The following recommendations are based on a commitment to providing a successful middle school model that supports students during a key transition time in their lives. We believe that our young adolescents deserve a middle school experience that is developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering and equitable, providing all students with an environment that can help them negotiate the impact of puberty on their intellectual, social, and emotional lives.

## **TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendation #1: Create interdisciplinary teams also known as families or small learning communities.**

- Teachers from core subject areas (math, science, language arts, social studies, and special education) instruct the same group of students throughout the school day. Elective teachers will not be attached to a specific family.
  - Implementation
    - To facilitate interdisciplinary planning, we recommend that teachers have dedicated regular planning and collaboration time, similar to our high

schools, and ongoing, high-quality, site-specific and district-directed professional development.

- High-quality professional development supports the creation of an innovative curriculum that affirms our students' communities, life experiences, and future aspirations.
- Furthermore, we recommend that a budget line item be added to each school's budget so that protected funds can be dedicated to staff-determined professional development.
- We recommend flexible scheduling centered around teacher teams to facilitate cross-curricular, student-centered learning and to ensure that students are active participants in the construction of their knowledge.
  - Flexible scheduling in small learning communities provides opportunities for experiential learning, fostering relationships, and community building.
  - Flexible scheduling supports
    - Publicly sharing projects.
    - Co-curricular and extracurricular activities that support physical movement like intramurals, and "Activity Days" once per month, or more, for clubs and interest-based mixed grade groups like Genius Hour in some of our elementary schools.
- We recommend the development, at a local or state level, of a micro-credential in middle school that would provide licensure flexibility and remove barriers to developing interdisciplinary teaching teams. Our goal is to eventually staff middle school with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents.

## **Recommendation #2: Supporting Service Staffing**

- Teachers, counselors, social workers, and support staff work together to provide students with lessons and experiences that help them navigate peer conflict, friendships, bullying, stress, and anxiety that help provide a strong foundation to move into high school and adulthood successfully.
  - Staffing for Support Services:
    - Counselors: 1 per 250 students (The minimum ratio as recommend by the American School Counselor Association)

- Restorative Practice Coordinator (see rec. #4 below)
- Social Workers: Every student should have access to social workers.
- Full Time Nurse/Nursing assistant
- Full Time Librarian
- Full Time Coordinator for Community Schools

### **Recommendation #3: Engaged Learning**

- Student-centered learning with an emphasis on cross-curricular, hands-on, project-based pedagogy will support a culturally and linguistically responsive environment for students.
  - High-quality instruction must be student centered: “The ability of the adolescent brain to realize its dynamic potential hinges on opportunities to experience ongoing enrichment; explore new pursuits; and engage in deeper, project-based learning” (Deutsch 2022).
- In *Best Schools*, (Chapter 5. Middle Schools: Social, Emotional, and Metacognitive Growth, ASCD), Thomas Armstrong notes that The National Middle School Association affirms that educational programs for young adolescents must be:
  - Developmentally responsive: using the distinctive nature of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school organization, policies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are made.
  - Challenging: ensuring that every student learns and every member of the learning community is held to high expectations.
  - Empowering: providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take responsibility for their lives, to address life’s challenges, to function successfully at all levels of society, and to be creators of knowledge.
  - Equitable: advocating for and ensuring every student’s right to learn and providing appropriately challenging and relevant learning opportunities for every student.
- Create culturally relevant, engaging, intersectional pedagogy to serve the needs of all students regardless of background or identity so that every student is supported for who they are and who they hope to become by honoring and celebrating their culture, race/ethnicity, and gender.
- Continuous, authentic, and appropriate assessment measures help provide students, teachers and family members with evidence about learning progress. Our middle schools should support mastery learning using rubrics and other tools. Middle schools are not reliant on Carnegie unit credits which supports educators to improve upon traditional grading practices.

#### **Recommendation #4: Honoring Student Voice and Social Emotional Learning**

- Middle school students should have a role in their school by maintaining discipline through student councils, participating in peer panels, shaping school assemblies or special events, and providing meaningful feedback about courses, the school environment, and other aspects of the school. They should have an opportunity to express their ideas and feelings in a democratic context in the classroom.
- Advisory time is essential. This is a time when students can rely on the same adult who gets to know students over the course of their time throughout their middle school years. Small group advisories are also a pivotal platform for cultivating nurturing relationships at school and ensuring every student is known well by at least one adult over time.
  - Further, a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention asserts that “children and adolescents who feel supported by important adults in their lives are likely to be more engaged in school and learning” (*School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009. p. 6).
- Restorative practices should become an essential companion to Social Emotional Learning in our middle schools. Restorative practices foster an equitable and positive school culture. Restorative practices focus on strengthening relationships and connections between individuals, both youth and adults, in a school community.
  - We recommend that every school is staffed with a trained restorative resource coordinator, marking a transition from a traditional dean of students. A trained implementation resource team should include the restorative practice coordinator who would work with teachers, family members, students, counselors, and administration.

Finally, after thoughtful exploration about one best schedule for APS middle schools, the task force concluded that there is no one recommended schedule. 6 periods, blocks, and flexible scheduling can all support an innovative learning focus.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Ellen Bernstein, ATF President

Andrea Carabajal, Taylor MS Principal

Laura Chiang, Kennedy MS Principal

Dan Gutierrez, eCademy Principal

Sarah Hager, ATF MS Vice-President, Art Teacher, Cleveland MS

Andy Legant, McKinley MS Principal

Margaret Lucero, Jimmy Carter MS Principal

Toni Seidler, ATF Fed Rep, Head Special Education Teacher, Garfield MS

Jamie Shelton, ATF Fed Rep, Language Arts Teacher, GI Sanchez k-8

Rachael Sonia, ATF Fed Rep, Social Studies & ELD Teacher, Garfield MS  
Gene Saavedra, Associate Superintendent, Zone 1  
Dr. Channell Segura, Chief of Schools, APS  
Joseph Viker, ATF Fed Rep, Special Education Teacher, John Adams MS

# Enrollment by Grade Level

