



Middle School Reform Plan FAQ

The following questions were compiled from those asked at Dr. Starr's Middle School Reform meeting in February 2009. They are organized into categories for easy reference. Additional information is available at www.stamfordpublicschools.org

General

1. What will the Advisory period consist of?

All students will have a weekly Advisory period for approximately 25 minutes. Advisories are designed to foster intellectual growth and habits of commitment by developing closer relationships between staff and students, coordinate services, facilitate communication (student-teacher-parent), provide an adult contact, and most importantly, personalize each student's experience. A few potential topics include study skills, goal setting, and self esteem development.

2. Will all middle school students have weekly Advisory periods starting in 2009-2010, or just 6th graders?

All 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students will participate in Advisories starting in 2009-2010.

3. Have there been studies that examine the effect of parental engagement on student achievement?

Karen Mapp, the Director of Education Policy and Management at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is one of several prominent researchers in this area. She found that when parents and school staff work together to support learning, students earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in higher level programs, adapt well to school, have better social skills and behavior, and pursue higher education. Family involvement at home appears to have the greatest affect on student achievement. This finding holds true in families of all cultural backgrounds, educations, and income levels.

4. When is parental accountability going to be required in addition to accountability by students, teachers, and administrators?

Parental accountability is expected and encouraged. This spring, SPS will administer surveys to all families (along with secondary students, teachers, educational assistants and school administrators). The key perceptual data that are collected will help SPS determine how to help parents become more engaged in their child's school and academic work.

5. How will the Middle School Reform plan affect funding?

An important component of middle school reform is additional professional development for teachers. A significant portion of this professional development will be funded by the GE Developing Futures program and will be supplemented by state and federal grants.

6. Will the IB program be extended to the high schools?

Planning is underway for the possibility of a future high school IB program.

7. Will the new Middle School Reform plan be implemented in all middle schools at the same time?

The new plan will be implemented in 6th grade in September 2009 at Cloonan, Dolan, Rippowam, and Turn of River Middle Schools as well as at the Rogers International School. It will be phased in for 7th and 8th grades in those schools over the following two years. Scofield Magnet Middle School already incorporates the fundamental principles of the Middle School Reform Plan, including flexible grouping, Advisories, and enrichment periods.

8. How will the Middle School Reform plan affect Scofield Magnet Middle School and the Rogers International School?

Scofield's program complements the middle school reform efforts through its use of Advisory periods and heterogeneous grouping. The IB program at Rogers International School also incorporates the fundamental principles of the Middle School Reform plan.

9. What will the district do about the current middle school class sizes of up to 30 students?

The Middle School Reform effort is first and foremost about bolstering the entire middle school program through challenging academics,

professional development for teachers, and Advisories. Stamford's middle school class sizes in core subjects, at 23, compare favorably with other school districts in the region and across the state. Ultimately, class size is determined by available funding.

Curriculum

1. Will lessons be interdisciplinary?

Each content area will follow a standards-based curriculum and schools are encouraged to plan interdisciplinary units, where appropriate. .

2. Will there be a common curriculum?

There is a standards-based curriculum in math, language arts, social studies, and science. Additionally, there are district-wide common assessments in math, social studies, and science. Common assessments in language arts assessments are being developed.

3. Are hour-long classes too long to keep middle school students fully engaged?

Hour-long classes allow for sustained work in greater depth, a variety of activities, and more differentiated instruction. In the case of science labs, for example, 60 minute periods are a necessity. Additionally, the Connected Math program requires a minimum of 60 minutes in order to deliver the content.

4. How will world language fit into the new middle school model?

All middle schools will offer Spanish and/or French as they do currently. The middle school world language program will not change.

5. What is the goal of the new reading curriculum?

The language arts curriculum increases the volume, quality, and range of reading and writing for all students.

6. How are grammar and vocabulary taught?

Grammar and vocabulary are explicitly taught in the context of literature, lessons, and activities, rather than in isolation. This approach leads to a deeper understanding as well as improved student writing and academic work.

7. Why is there no discussion of establishing a gifted and talented program?

There is no funding for a gifted and talented program. However, students will receive a daily one hour Enrichment Period, in which they can accelerate their learning (or receive academic support). Additionally, SPS and its community partners offer a wealth of enrichment opportunities to challenge middle school students and expose them to potential areas of interest. Some examples of those activities include History Day, First Lego League, Chess, MathCounts, SoundWaters, the annual All City Musical, school bands, CPEP, Girls Excel in Math and Science, and an array of after school clubs and athletics.

Student Placement

1. How will students be placed?

Students will be placed into flexible groups by using 4 placement instruments which will be considered individually. These include the grade 4 CMT in math, the grade 4 CMT in reading, the grade 5 Otis Lennon School Ability Test, and the grade 5 Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test. Grade 5 CMTs may be used to advance students to a higher group, if appropriate, when results become available in late summer. Flexible groups will allow students who are relatively stronger in one area than another to be placed accordingly.

2. Why is the 5th grade spending so much time on the CMTs when it is not a primary placement instrument for middle school?

The administration of CMTs is a State requirement under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. They were developed to assess student progress in readiness for the real world after high school (college, work, citizenship). Grades 3-8 spend time preparing for the CMTs because CMT results help gauge how well our students, schools, and district are achieving. The State releases CMT results in late summer. Grade 5 CMT results may be used to supplement the primary placement instrument, in order to advance students to a higher group in middle school if appropriate.

3. What will the new middle school plan do to the team/cog structure?

The new plan will eliminate the current inflexible cog structure. Rather than have students take their core classes (math, science, language arts,

and social studies) with the same group of classmates, students will be organized for instruction in a more flexible manner so that their academic skills, intellectual interests, and motivation for learning are enhanced. Additionally, all teachers will have time to discuss student work during common planning times and in regularly scheduled Professional Learning Communities.

4. How will students be academically challenged when there are only 2-3 ability groups instead of 4-5?

There are several ways in which students will be academically challenged. First, all students will have access to a rigorous, standards-based curriculum. Second, the curriculum in all content areas encourages flexible groups that take into account a range of knowledge, strengths, and perspectives. Third, teachers will continue to receive professional development that provides a variety of instructional strategies for this purpose. Finally, every student will receive a daily one hour Enrichment Period, in which they can accelerate their learning or receive academic support.

5. How quickly will students be able to move up or down levels?

Student progress will be monitored regularly and adjustments will be made as appropriate.

6. Will this new model be implemented in high school as well?

The high school model in SPS is already more flexible than the current middle school model. Students can choose from College Prep, Honors or AP courses, depending upon their interest and ability level in various subject areas.

7. How do you know the new middle school model will improve student achievement?

Schools that have implemented this model have improved student achievement. This has been documented in publications by the New England League of Middle Schools. <http://www.nelms.org/index.html>

Professional Development

1. How will you differentiate instruction for students, now that there will be fewer ability groups?

The curriculum in all content areas lends itself to flexible groups that take into account a range of knowledge, strengths, and perspectives. Additionally, teachers continue to receive professional development that provides a variety of instructional strategies for this purpose.

2. What will you do to increase the training of teachers so they can differentiate instruction and meet the social-emotional needs of students of varying ability levels?

Sixth grade administrators and teachers are receiving professional development in math, literacy, science, and instructional strategies starting in Spring 2009. This professional development will continue throughout the 2009-2010 school year and include 7th and 8th grade teachers and administrators.

Additionally, as of Spring 2009, SPS will provide teachers with Efficacy Training. The central objectives of Efficacy are to build belief that all children can "get smart;" and to build the capacity of adults to set the terms to help them do so. SPS is working with Efficacy Institute www.efficacy.org to provide professional development for staff in this area.

3. Have teachers been involved in creating the new middle school plan?

Yes. A group of teachers (along with parents, students, and administrators) took part in the Middle School Think Tank last year. The MSTT read research, visited schools in SPS and beyond, and spent much time and thought determining what Stamford's middle schools should look like in the 21st century. Their recommendations formed the basis of the Middle School Reform plan. Teachers are also participating (along with parents, administrators, and community members) in the Middle School Advisory Council, which is advising the district on placement instrument and criteria, instructional levels, scheduling, and related issues.

