

## Middle School Reform: A Trajectory into the 21st Century

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In the past three and a half years, Stamford Public Schools has made great strides in improving our entire system, K-12, to ensure that each and every student is prepared for higher education and success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have developed and implemented new standards-based curriculum and programs, offered extensive professional development; added AP classes, increased funding for arts and music, improved communications, and started programs to develop the next generation of leaders. Our achievement in some grades and subject areas has begun to improve; our most recent 10<sup>th</sup> grade CAPT results show that we were the only urban district and the only district among those with similar demographics to ours to show gains on all four tested subjects (reading, math, writing and science), and our gains outpaced those of similar districts. I am quite proud of our teachers, staff and administrators, who have worked so hard to improve outcomes for our children.

Since I became Superintendent of Schools in 2005, the community has consistently asked for improvements in our middle schools. Parents of children of all academic abilities have vocalized the need for our middle school program to be more rigorous, more relevant, and more responsive to individual student strengths and challenges. As a result, last year we established a Middle School Reform Think Tank to create recommendations for the future of middle school education in SPS. This group, chaired by Deputy Superintendent Dr. Winnie Hamilton, was comprised of parents, teachers, students and administrators. The group read research, visited schools in SPS and beyond, and wrestled with the big questions of what SPS middle schools should look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The group's recommendations support one key idea: Our middle schools must challenge, engage and support each and every child to enter the 9<sup>th</sup> grade ready to pursue a rigorous high school course of studies and, ultimately, to graduate ready for college. For me, this goal is non-negotiable. I believe State standards of "proficiency" are too low – we must challenge our children to read and write more, apply mathematics to complex problems, understand the foundations of

scientific and historical thought and analysis, appreciate the fine and dramatic arts and music, and be physically and emotionally fit. Our children must be fully engaged in learning; not because they are told it's important, but because they value how learning enriches their lives. Middle school children are at a tenuous point in their social-emotional development. In the process of becoming adults they may define themselves in opposition to the adult world, which is part of their natural development. Yet even during this emotionally challenging phase of development, every child deserves the same solid educational foundation, plus the support they need to enhance their natural talents and achieve their personal academic goals. We as educators must ensure the boost for the child that struggles to reach the high standard, and the boost for the child whose learning style or natural intellect doesn't fit neatly into the traditional middle school mold.

A 21<sup>st</sup> Century curriculum that reflects high standards and appropriately challenges, engages and supports each and every child will require us to become more flexible in how we schedule children. Some of our students excel in one area and struggle in another. They should be in classes that are appropriately aligned to their needs – students ready to accelerate should be placed in courses that push them further, and maybe even have the opportunity to earn high school credit in middle school if they can complete the coursework. Students who are struggling should be placed in courses that guarantee their mastery of high standards. So, by the time all students leave 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they will be ready to pursue a high school course of study that will prepare them to be ready for college upon graduation. Starting in September 2009, we intend to provide our 6<sup>th</sup> grade children with flexible opportunities for course placement that meet their individual needs.

A new instructional program and flexible placement have caused us to confront the criteria we use to schedule students. The question is obvious – How do you accurately gauge a child's capacity, prior knowledge, interest and potential in a subject area? – yet the answer is incredibly complex. Suffice to say that our children are given short shrift when the answer is reduced

to standardized test scores. We are currently developing new, more comprehensive and flexible placement criteria for next year's 6<sup>th</sup> grade students that will enable us to appropriately place children in courses that are aligned to their strengths and needs.

The questions now are, How will we get there, Who will be involved, and What barriers stand in our way? At 7:00 p.m. on February 25<sup>th</sup> in the Turn of River Middle School auditorium, we will have a Community Conversation to discuss our plans to turn the Middle School Reform Think Tank recommendations into action. I will present our ideas and answer questions from participants. In May, I will host a Community Forum where participants can become familiar with the details of the rollout beginning in September 2009.

As our middle school reform work takes shape, the Stamford community can expect to see children of different backgrounds learning together, all children being pushed to achieve a high standard, all children excited about learning and all children reading more books, both popular and classic. You can expect that our current practices around ability grouping – or tracking – will evolve into something that better reflects the needs of our children and the realities of our community. To be perfectly clear, I do not intend to eliminate overnight, in one fell swoop, our current practices of ability grouping children. While our own student achievement data and the research are abundantly clear about the prospects for children who are placed – and remain – in low groups, making radical changes overnight does not serve our students. We will take more time to develop a school system where each and every child is held to the highest standard and has the support to get there. By 2012, our middle schools should look very different than they do today.

I invite you to attend our Community Conversation on February 25<sup>th</sup>, at 7:00 p.m. at TOR; it is an opportunity to learn, share and question. We will also post additional information at [stamfordpublicschools.org](http://stamfordpublicschools.org). I have no doubt that the Stamford community and schools have the strength and capacity to take our middle schools into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.