

Family Impact Seminar, 2010

The Middle Grades:  
Gateway to Dropout Prevention



- Carl Vinson Institute of Government • College of Family and Consumer Sciences • School of Social Work •
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# Acknowledgments

The Planning Committee for the 2010 Georgia Family Impact Seminar gratefully acknowledges the contributions and support of the following individuals:

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*This briefing booklet describes the impact of middle-grades education on dropout prevention and workforce development, including significant economic impacts at the local, state, and national levels. The federal policy context is described as well as promising programs and policies both in Georgia and nationally, and implications for policy are discussed.*

## Overview of the Issue\*

Historically, education for young adolescents (ages 9-14) has occupied a shadow-land in the world of Federal and state legislation and policy. Caught between early elementary and high school interventions, middle grades education (grades 4-8) has been overlooked by policies intended to establish strong foundations in language and mathematics in the early grades on the one hand and policies meant to improve high school graduation rates and career and college success on the other. However, recent research underscores the middle grades as a critical turning point for young adolescents and their prospects for high school graduation (e.g., Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver, 2007). Students gradually disengage from their schooling, typically making the decision to drop out long before high school when most dropout prevention efforts get underway (Reschly, 2009). **In short, the middle grades cannot be ignored in national and state efforts to reduce dropout rates and to improve high school graduation rates, college preparedness, and career readiness.** A recent report from ACT (2008) highlights this shadow-land status of the middle grades:

The results of our research show that the amount of progress students have made toward college and career readiness by eighth grade is crucial to their future success. Despite the fact that students may pass eighth grade exit tests, too many are arriving at high school so far behind academically that, under current conditions, they cannot become ready for college and career regardless of the rigor of the high school curriculum, the quality of high school instruction, or the amount of effort they put into their coursework (p. 9).

**High school dropout and completion rates have an undisputed and significant impact on the economy at the local, state, and national levels.** For example:

- Nearly **64,100 students** did not graduate from Georgia's high schools in 2009; the lost lifetime earnings for that class total more than **\$16.6 billion**.
- Georgia would **save more than \$746 million** in health care costs over the lifetime of each class of dropouts had they earned their diplomas.

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\* Much of the text for this brief draws upon Andrews, P. G., Debray-Pelot, E., & Denmark, V. (2009). Middle grades education: Finding success in the middle. In E. A. Houck (Ed.), *Georgia Education Policy Papers: A Collection of Policy Papers for the 2009 Legislative Session* (pp. 24-37, 117-119). Athens, GA: Education Policy & Evaluation Center, The University of Georgia.

- If Georgia's high schools graduated all of their students ready for college, the state would save almost \$75.5 million a year in community college remediation costs and lost earnings.
- Georgia's economy would see a combination of crime-related savings and **additional revenue of about \$276 million each year** if the male high school graduation rate increased by just 5% (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

Beyond the need to earn a living wage, Georgia's youth will enter a global economy and a global job market after high school (Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21st Century, 2005). Graduating high school does not guarantee a well-paying job but it does promote entrance into postsecondary programs, schools, and colleges, which increases opportunities in that global job market. According to Orfield (2004), "The good jobs that in generations past allowed unionized workers without an education to earn a family wage and achieve economic security are largely gone" (p. 1). And, as Wise (2009) indicates, across the country higher unemployment rates are directly correlated to lower levels of educational attainment.

The state of Georgia and the nation face an unprecedented reality that is particularly troubling in light of these economic implications: For the first time in our nation's history, today's students are less likely to graduate from high school than their parents (Habash, 2008). In fact, recent research found that three out of every ten students in the United States will not graduate high school (Swanson, 2008). **Georgia's high school dropout rate ranks it among the bottom five in the country along with Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, and South Carolina** (Balfanz, Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Fox, 2009). Given that high school dropouts are more likely to live in poverty, be dependent on welfare and other government assistance programs, have health problems while lacking insurance coverage, engage in criminal behavior, and experience unemployment or underemployment, the stakes are high for dropouts and society alike (Reschly, 2009).

This policy brief explores the potential for supporting middle grades education to positively impact high school graduation rates and workforce readiness. First, the Federal policy context of middle grades education is reviewed, including the Success in the Middle Act of 2009. Second, middle grades education in Georgia is placed in historical context and recent statewide positive programs and policies are examined. Finally, several promising policies and practices are described that may have potential for replication in Georgia. The brief concludes with implications for policy that more effectively supports middle grades education in Georgia as a gateway to dropout prevention.

## Federal Policy Context

In recent years, concerns related to preparation for college and/or career have provided an important impetus for attention to the middle grades in Federal policy decisions and many national and state organizations have issued reports with policy guidance connected to middle grades schools. A look at the Federal policy context illuminates the struggle to turn research and best practices in the middle grades into reality on a large scale.

**Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act** is the largest Federal program for funding schools that enroll students from low-income families. **Students in the middle and upper grades receive far fewer dollars than do those in the elementary grades, a fact that has held constant over the history of the program.** For example, between 1992 and 1997, students in grades 4-6 received 29% of Title I funds and students in grades 7-9 received only 16% (McPartland & Jordan, 1999); these proportions have not changed in the last decade (James McPartland, personal communication, November 17, 2009). Two assumptions underlie the heavy concentration of Federal dollars in high-poverty elementary schools: inoculation and triage. According to McPartland and Jordan (1999, p. 105) inoculation represents the belief that more money "will help produce competent readers by early (third) grade, in turn setting the foundation for students to suc-

cessfully move through good programs in the middle and high school grades without any further extra help.” On the other hand, triage means that Federal aid should be placed in elementary grades because once students enter high school there is little chance of closing academic gaps soon enough to achieve success.

Federal attention to the middle grades has been guided in recent years by several policy and research-related developments:

1. **The number of eighth grade students who scored “proficient” in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) decreased between 1998 and 2007.** The most recent NAEP data for Georgia shows that only 26% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders performed at or above the proficient level in reading, while only 27% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders were at or above the proficient level in mathematics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).
2. **The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)** has highlighted the disproportionate number of middle schools identified for improvement relative to elementary and high schools. Middle schools represented only 15% of the schools that received funds via Title I but accounted for 32% of those schools in corrective action or restructuring during 2005-2006 and 36% in 2004-2005 (Success in the Middle Act, 2009).
3. **Students in the middle grades (5-8) comprise 58% of the annual test-takers under NCLB but only 10% of the funds allocated through states are directed to support those students** (Success in the Middle Act, 2009).
4. **Recent research finds the middle grades are a critical turning point for young adolescents and their prospects for high school graduation.** Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver’s (2007) longitudinal study of almost 13,000 Philadelphia public school students found that attending school less than 80% of the time, receiving a poor final behavior grade in one class, failing math, or failing English/language arts were the four critical indicators of potential dropouts. Those sixth graders for whom one or more of the indicators applied had only a 29% chance of graduating.
5. **The Success in the Middle Act of 2009 represents policymakers’ recognition that the Federal government has a role to play in middle grades education.** The most recent version of this legislation creates a competitive grant program for states with three primary stated purposes:
  - To ensure that all students in the middle grades (grades 4-8) are taught in an academically rigorous curriculum with effective supports so that students complete the middle grades ready for success in high school and postsecondary endeavors;
  - To improve state and district policies and programs relating to the academic achievement of students in the middle grades;
  - To develop and implement effective models for struggling students in the middle grades.

These Federal policies highlight the increased recognition of the need for attention to middle grades education in order to support future academic success.

## **Middle Grades Education in Georgia**

The state of Georgia has taken several positive, proactive steps in support of middle grades education, including: providing incentive funding, establishing the Georgia Performance Standards, providing graduation coaches, encouraging interdisciplinary teaching teams, and developing nationally-regarded middle grades teacher preparation programs.

Georgia turned its attention to the middle grades in the early 1980s. Recommendations for improving middle grades education from the state's Education Review Commission (ERC) were folded into the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE) in 1985, establishing incentive funding to support a middle school program that "emphasized a collaborative approach to individual instruction" (Georgia Department of Education, 1996, p. 3). To receive the incentive funding, school systems have to meet several criteria established by QBE and the Georgia State Board of Education, including:

- an organizational pattern consisting of either grades six through eight or seven through eight;
- common planning time during the instructional day for each interdisciplinary team of academic teachers;
- exploratory courses in the areas of foreign languages, vocational education, and fine arts; and,
- 50% of the interdisciplinary teachers must hold the middle grades certification, grades four through eight (Georgia Department of Education, 1996).

In 1998, the Georgia Department of Education examined the effects of implementing middle grades reform. Researchers found that **students who attended schools that were implementing middle grades reform more fully had higher average gains on math and reading scores for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and were better supported in the transition to adolescence.** In fact, when middle grades teachers worked effectively on interdisciplinary teams, "a key part of the Georgia middle school concept," the math and reading gains were "significantly higher" (Georgia Department of Education, Research Evaluation, & Testing Division, 1998, p. i).

The new Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) have put the emphasis on concepts and understanding, not facts and memorization, and support the state's leap forward to a more sophisticated take on curriculum. Indeed, soon after their release, **the Georgia state standards were ranked fifth in the nation in a comprehensive review of all states' standards** (Finn, Petrilli, & Julian, 2006). The GPS also provide a powerful basis for the state's assessment system and an **opportunity for Georgia to be a leader in assessment and accountability.**

In 2006, more than \$15,000,000 was allocated in Georgia's budget to assign a graduation coach to every public high school in an effort to reduce significantly the state's 41% dropout rate. **In 2007, the Graduation Coach Program added funding for coaches in public middle schools** to identify and serve students at risk for dropping out, support successful transitions from elementary to middle school, and prepare students for successful transitions from middle to high school (Communities in Schools, 2008; Georgia Office of Student Achievement, 2008). Early research points to promising results for middle school graduation coaches and their graduation teams, establishing the kind of supports necessary to keep students on the path to graduation (Ziomek-Daigle & Andrews, 2009). However, because of budget shortfalls, funding for this program (\$49,225,901) has been moved to the QBE formula in fiscal year 2010, which gives schools the discretion as to how they want to use that money and some schools have elected to put it towards other needs (General Appropriations, HB 119, 2009; Georgia PTA Legislative Recap, 2009).

**Georgia's interdisciplinary teaching teams and common planning time in the middle grades have positioned the state's middle schools at the forefront of a renewed interest in integrating curriculum** (Andrews, 2008; Beane, 2005). These interdisciplinary connections also encourage service-learning, which creates direct links between academics and community issues. Georgia has supported service-learning, to create connections between life and learning, for several years with an active state-level "Learn and Serve" program that has engaged more than 17,000 Georgia students (Georgia Department of Education, 2008). With increased concern about America's position in a global economy, connecting academics to the real world through integrating curriculum and service-learning seems imperative.

Georgia brings another significant asset to any discussion of exemplary education for young adolescents: **specialized and highly regarded middle grades teacher preparation programs in public institutions of higher education across the state.** The University System of Georgia offers nationally accredited programs designed to prepare teachers for grades 4-8 in two content areas drawn from the four subjects in the “core” curriculum: language arts/reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. In addition to substantial coursework in content and extensive experiences in classrooms, middle grades teacher education programs also prepare pre-service teachers to connect knowledge of content, pedagogy, and young adolescents in order to enhance student learning (McEwin, Dickinson, & Hamilton, 2000).

Finally, Georgia has a head start in developing and implementing models to support struggling students in middle grades schools, one of the stated purposes of the Success in the Middle Act (2009). **The Georgia Lighthouse Schools to Watch program, sponsored by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, has designated fifteen middle schools across the state as Schools to Watch (STW).** A School to Watch uses research-based practices to support academic excellence, social equity, developmental responsiveness, and effective and efficient organizational structures (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, n.d.). These fifteen middle schools provide substantial opportunities to test and demonstrate effective models for supporting student learning.

The state-level investment in middle schools over many years has helped to establish Georgia as a leader in middle grades education, which should well-position the state for future Federal incentive funding opportunities. However, with the high school dropout rate in the bottom five in the country and research indicating the critical link between middle grades education and high school completion, there is more work, clearly, to be done. Several policies and practices are described below that may hold promise for improving the state of Georgia education.

## Promising Policies and Practices

### Interventions to Support School Completion

The red flags that warn of pending dropouts are evident long before students enter high school. As Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) point out, “Many students who drop out of high school send strong distress signals for years” (p. 29). Numerous efforts at dropout prevention focus on the high school years, including re-engaging students who have already dropped out and using alternative (e.g., on-line) coursework to help students acquire graduation course credits. However, if the red flags are visible in the middle grades and students are making the decision to drop out before they ever cross the threshold of the high school, then focusing attention and resources on middle grades intervention efforts would be both effective and efficient.

Neild and his colleagues (2007) have identified four critical early warning signals that can be used as early as sixth grade to identify those most at risk of dropping out of school. The four indicators include:

- attending school less than 80% of the time;
- receiving a poor final behavior grade in one class;
- failing math; and/or,
- failing English/language arts.

Although a list of the warning signs can be helpful, educators face two significant challenges: (1) identifying students who are exhibiting these distress signals and (2) providing interventions that will keep identified students on the path to graduation.

With regard to the first challenge, the Southern Regional Education Board's initiative, *Making Middle Grades Work* (2009), has recently developed the **Middle Grades Intervention Alert Tool (MIAT)**. MIAT is a data tracking system designed to help administrators and teachers identify students who show evidence of one or more of the early warning signs for potential dropout. SREB offers MIAT without charge to all SREB member states with the hope that it will help schools and school systems identify the indicators that should be tracked based on the most recent research on early warning signs for dropping out. Schools and districts can either monitor those indicators that they already have data on within existing data systems or use MIAT to build a new system for following individual students' progress and noticing distress signals earlier rather than later (Yvonne Thayer and Barbara Moore, personal communication, November 20, 2009).

Recent research also addresses the second challenge of providing appropriate interventions. Balfanz et al. (2007) suggest "that student disengagement which leads to dropping out can be reduced by combining effective whole school reforms, early identification of students who need sustained intervention, and practical, personal, and research-based attendance, behavioral, and extra-help interventions" (p. 223). For example, using MIAT, administrators and teachers can generate reports each quarter to monitor student progress and target students who exhibit one or more warning signs. Educators can then investigate students' needs, strengths, and challenges to create appropriate interventions that will support each student's school completion.

Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) support a three-tiered school-based model for intervention:

- Tier 1: Effective whole-school preventative measures can retain 70-80% of middle grades students on track for graduation (e.g., attendance incentives, integrated curriculum, service learning).
- Tier 2: Targeted interventions focus on the 10-20% of students who need more support (e.g., focusing on students who are continually absent, family conferences).
- Tier 3: Intensive interventions for the 5-10% of those needing individualized support.

This model, however, depends on the availability of data to identify those students who need targeted or more intensive interventions.

The three-tiered model that Neild and his colleagues describe offers several parallels to another system of student supports already in place in middle grades schools: **Response to Intervention (RTI)**. Supported by the most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, RTI provides targeted services for struggling students. RTI models have several components in common:

- uses tiers of intervention;
- relies on research-based instruction and interventions;
- uses problem-solving to determine interventions; and,
- monitors students regularly to determine if they are progressing as they should academically and/or behaviorally (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009, ¶ 2).

Although much of the work to identify students in need of special education services occurs in the early grades, middle grades teachers also face considerable pressure to monitor and document student progress in keeping with RTI and to offer effective interventions and supports for struggling students. These interventions and support for school completion must be embedded within the everyday life of the school in keeping with the first tier of intervention in both RTI and the Neild model. Essentially, all middle grades students need comprehensive learning supports including curricular connections with students' interests and goals, a positive climate of caring and support, and collaboration and connections to the larger community (Reschly, 2009).



Middle school graduation coaches in Georgia can coordinate the targeted interventions (Neild's Tier 2) for the 10-20% of students who need more support, e.g., focusing on students who are continually absent, tracking student progress data for those students exhibiting any of the early warning signs, and communicating with teachers and families about opportunities to provide additional assistance such as tutoring. As well, Georgia's middle school graduation coaches are providing the intensive interventions needed for the 5-10% of students most at risk of dropping out (Neild's Tier 3). In addition to the middle school graduation coach, a student's graduation team includes a community coach, a teacher, and a family member. This is a powerful approach given evidence that indicates that working in either home or school, rather than across the two, misses an opportunity to pair prevention and early intervention services with the two primary socializing agents of students—families and schools (Reschly, Coolong, Christenson, & Gutkin, 2007; Szapocznik & Prado, 2007).

## **Whole School Interventions: Middle Grades Curriculum and Preparing for the Global Age**

Considerable research documents the effectiveness of integrated curriculum in supporting student achievement and student engagement in school, both of which are critical to supporting school completion and preventing dropout (Barab & Roth, 2006; Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Dowden, 2007; Hartzler, 2000; Kuntz, 2005; Lipka, Lounsbury, Toepfer, Vars, Alessi, & Kridel, 1998; Pate, Homestead, & McGinnis, 1997; Reschly, 2009; Springer, 2006; Stratton, 2007; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Vars & Beane, 2000). Central to schooling for young adolescents, curriculum should be relevant, meaningful, engaging, and directly connected to students' lives and interests (Andrews, 2008; Beane, 2005; Beane & Brodhagen, 2001). Integrated curriculum crosses disciplinary boundaries, building content based on rigorous standards *and* the needs, interests, and concerns of students (Andrews, 2008; Beane, 1997, 2005; Virtue, Wilson, & Ingram, 2009).

In fact, integrated curriculum seems to hold the most promise in preparing middle grades students for the global age. In the report, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* (Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2005), the National Academies envision a dim future if the United States continues to fall behind other developed countries in preparing our citizens for global competition. Indeed, in his groundbreaking book, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century* (2005), Thomas Friedman describes the absolute necessity of innovation and invention in a global marketplace, featuring the integrated curriculum in the program of study for computer programming majors at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta.

A promising example of innovation in preparing middle grades students for a global age is the **Asia Society's International Studies Schools Network (ISSN)**. The ISSN works with public middle and secondary schools to develop college-ready, globally competent high school graduates. The Asia Society Partnership for Global Learning includes 18 schools in the ISSN located in urban and rural communities across the United States. Eighty-five percent of the students in ISSN schools are minorities and 74% are from low-income families (Asia Society, 2009, ¶ 1). ISSN schools provide a comprehensive support structure grounded in engaging curriculum, instruction, and assessment in a collaborative context that connects students and educators to one another and to the world.

In addition to the global focus that drives the curriculum and all academic activities, **students in ISSN schools benefit from instruction designed to meet their needs and assessments that are ongoing and focused on performance-based measures**. Educators rely on professional learning communities that get them out of their isolated classrooms, encouraging teachers to work together to support teaching, learning, and ongoing professional development. Other support activities include attention to family engagement and connections to local and global communities through service-learning.

The ISSN schools exemplify a whole-school/whole-child approach, and they have demonstrated remarkable success. According to the ISSN website, in an analysis of data from 2004-2008,

the Consortium for Policy Research in Education and Hypothesi, Inc compared results from the ISSN schools to non-ISSN schools with similar demographic profiles within the same school districts and found that “across grade levels and core subject areas of English, math, science, and social studies, ISSN schools showed greater academic achievement in 85% of all cases” (Asia Society, 2009, ¶ 14). Judith Conk, senior program consultant with the Asia Society’s Partnership for Global Learning, described the ISSN focus on the middle grades and highlighted the graduation and post-secondary outcomes for ISSN alumni in a recent session for members of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform:

In our ISSN schools, we are graduating 92% of our students within the time they are supposed to graduate. Of those 92%, 94% have gone on to post-secondary education. Those are pretty outstanding results, especially considering the fact that our schools are located in some of the toughest neighborhoods. We have an 87% graduation rate in one of our schools on the lower east side of New York in a district where that ISSN school is surrounded by schools with a 35% graduation rate (2009).

Currently, there is not an ISSN school located within the state of Georgia; however, the ISSN vision that all graduates will be ready for college, prepared for success in a global environment, and connected to the world is one that is translatable to educational goals in Georgia, generally.

## Conclusion

Middle grades schools in Georgia are uniquely positioned to take advantage of the growing national attention to the education of young adolescents, and state policymakers would do well to continue to direct energy and resources to the middle grades. As ACT (2008) argues, states and the nation cannot afford to wait until high school to address dropout prevention and college and career readiness. Since the early 1980s, Georgia has taken several proactive steps to support middle grades education, including: providing incentive funding, establishing the Georgia Performance Standards, providing graduation coaches, encouraging interdisciplinary teaching teams, and developing nationally regarded middle grades teacher preparation programs. However, with a Georgia dropout rate that remains in the bottom five in the nation, research that shows a direct link between middle grades education and high school completion, and the need for a workforce that is prepared to compete in a global economy that is reliant on innovation, communication, and connectivity (Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2005), the time is right for a targeted focus on these crucial years in students’ educational history.

Using the goals outlined in the Success in the Middle Act of 2009, following are several policy implications for supporting exemplary middle grades education in Georgia:

**Goal 1: Ensure that all students in the middle grades (grades 4-8) are taught in an academically rigorous curriculum with effective supports so that students complete the middle grades ready for success in high school and postsecondary endeavors.**

### *Implications for Policy*

Beyond the need to earn a living wage, Georgia’s youth will enter a global economy and a global job market after high school, and although graduating high school does not guarantee a well-paying job it does promote entrance into postsecondary programs, schools, and colleges, which increases opportunities in that global job market. Recent NAEP data for Georgia shows that only 26% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders performed at or above the proficient level in reading, while only 27% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders were at

or above the proficient level in mathematics. And, researchers have found that students who attended schools that were implementing middle grades reform more fully had higher average gains on math and reading scores for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and were better supported in the transition to adolescence. Some promising, innovative models that are preparing students to compete in a global age include:

- **Integrated curriculum.** Georgia’s interdisciplinary teaching teams and common planning time in the middle grades have positioned the state’s middle schools at the forefront of a renewed interest in integrating curriculum across content discipline boundaries. Georgia has supported service-learning, to create connections between life and learning, for several years with an active state-level “Learn and Serve” program that has engaged more than 17,000 Georgia students. More data are needed on these interdisciplinary programs to measure impact.
- **Lighthouse Schools to Watch.** Sponsored by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, fifteen middle schools across Georgia have been designated as Schools to Watch (STW). A School to Watch uses research-based practices to support academic excellence, social equity, developmental responsiveness, and effective and efficient organizational structures. These fifteen middle schools provide substantial opportunities to test and demonstrate effective models for supporting student learning.
- **International Studies Schools Network (ISSN).** The ISSN works with public middle and secondary schools to develop college-ready, globally competent high school graduates. Eighty-five percent of the students in ISSN schools are minorities and 74% are from low-income families. ISSN schools provide a comprehensive support structure grounded in engaging curriculum, instruction, and assessment in a collaborative context that connects students and educators to one another and to the world. While there currently is not an ISSN school located in the state of Georgia, the ISSN vision that all graduates will be ready for college, prepared for success in a global environment, and connected to the world is one that is translatable to educational goals in Georgia.

Goal 2: Improve state and district policies and programs relating to the academic achievement of students in the middle grades.

### *Implications for Policy*

In some respects, Georgia has a head start on this goal, as the state turned its attention to the middle grades in the early 1980s, establishing incentive funding through the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE) in 1985. Additionally, the new Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) have put the emphasis on concepts and understanding, not facts and memorization; the Georgia standards have been ranked fifth in the nation in a comprehensive review of all states’ standards. The GPS also provide a powerful basis for the state’s assessment system and an opportunity for Georgia to be a leader in assessment and accountability. Other policies and models that may support academic achievement of students in the middle grades:

- **Middle School Graduation Coaches.** In 2007, the Graduation Coach Program added funding for coaches in public middle schools to identify and serve students at risk for dropping out, support successful transitions from elementary to middle school, and prepare students for successful transitions from middle to high school. While it is too early to gather conclusive data on the program, early research points to promising results for middle school graduation coaches and their graduation teams, establishing the kind of supports necessary to keep students on the path to graduation. However, because of budget shortfalls, funding for this program has been moved to the QBE formula in fiscal year 2010, which gives

schools the discretion as to how they want to use that money and some schools have elected to put it towards other needs.

- **Lighthouse Schools to Watch.** Sponsored by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, fifteen middle schools across Georgia have been designated as Schools to Watch (STW). A School to Watch uses research-based practices to support academic excellence, social equity, developmental responsiveness, and effective and efficient organizational structures. These fifteen middle schools provide substantial opportunities to test and demonstrate effective models for supporting student learning.

**Goal 3: Develop and implement effective models for struggling students in the middle grades.**

### *Implications for Policy*

Numerous efforts at dropout prevention focus on the high school years; however, the red flags that warn of pending dropouts are evident long before students enter high school. Four critical early warning signals have been identified that can be used as early as sixth grade to identify those most at risk of dropping out of school. The four indicators include:

- attending school less than 80% of the time;
- receiving a poor final behavior grade in one class;
- failing math; and/or,
- failing English/language arts.

In addition to paying close attention to these early warning signals, the following systems may provide support for students in the middle grades:

- **Middles Grades Intervention Alert Tool (MIAT).** MIAT is a data tracking system designed to help administrators and teachers identify students who show evidence of one or more of the early warning signs for potential dropout. SREB offers MIAT without charge to all SREB member states with the hope that it will help schools and school systems identify the indicators that should be tracked based on the most recent research on early warning signs for dropping out.
- **Three Tier Intervention Model.** With the appropriate data system, schools or districts can provide interventions in accordance with three “tiers” of need:

Tier 1: Effective whole-school preventative measures can retain 70-80% of middle grades students on track for graduation (e.g., attendance incentives, integrated curriculum, service learning).

Tier 2: Targeted interventions focus on the 10-20% of students who need more support (e.g., focusing on students who are continually absent, family conferences).

Tier 3: Intensive interventions for the 5-10% of those needing individualized support.

- **Response to Intervention (RTI).** A system of student supports that is already in place in middle grades schools; RTI provides services for students with disabilities. Educators provide instruction and interventions within the general education classroom setting, document and monitor student progress, and then modify and perhaps intensify the level of intervention according to student responses.
- **Middle School Graduation Coaches.** Middle school graduation coaches in Georgia can

coordinate the targeted interventions (Tier 2) for the 10-20% of students who need more support, e.g., focusing on students who are continually absent, tracking student progress data for those students exhibiting any of the early warning signs, and communicating with teachers and families about opportunities to provide additional assistance such as tutoring. As well, Georgia's middle school graduation coaches are providing the intensive interventions needed for the 5-10% of students most at risk of dropping out (Tier 3). In addition to the middle school graduation coach, a student's graduation team includes a community coach, a teacher, and a family member.

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## Georgia 2010 Family Impact Seminar Planning Committee

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