

**AISD Middle Level Education Plan Initiative:
Recommendations for
Process and Policy Improvements**

Submitted by:
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and the
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) is currently engaged in a Middle Level Education Plan Initiative, intended to improve the district's middle schools. In January 2008, a district-appointed task force identified five primary objectives, which are being developed into action plans subject to board approval. Changes to schools under this initiative are expected to begin in the fall semester of 2008 and will continue to be phased in over a three-to-five year period.

Liveable City has joined with The Institute for Community, University and School Partnerships (ICUSP) from the University of Texas at Austin to review the process and objectives of this initiative and to make recommendations to AISD.

Liveable City and ICUSP have identified two general areas, each including specific recommendations, which we believe are crucial to the success of the current middle school initiative and to the long-term success of AISD students. These are:

(A) An improved process for communication and implementation of new plans

1. Regular communication with parents, faculty and staff is critical throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation periods of the Middle Level Education Plan.
2. Plans must incorporate sufficient flexibility for each school community to adapt plans to its unique school culture.
3. Administrators and campus leaders should be trained in basic communication and inclusive decision-making before presenting new plans to school communities.
4. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation should include clear timelines and mechanisms for feedback.
5. Before implementing new initiatives, the district should reevaluate existing practices and discard ineffective ones.

(B) Expansion of Middle School Plan objectives and performance measures

1. Expand the objectives of the current initiative beyond a primary emphasis on math and science to acknowledge the importance of all academic areas, including the arts, as vital elements of a well-rounded middle school education.
2. Expand measurements beyond state accountability ratings to provide additional methods to gauge progress in a variety of areas, including specified non-academic objectives. To measure long-range success, we also recommend tracking high school graduation and college acceptance outcomes for each student in the 6th, 7th and 8th grades beginning in the fall of 2008 through the high school graduating class of 2016.

Liveable City and ICUSP submit this report in the spirit of collaboration with AISD, with whom we share a strong interest in providing a challenging, enriching and productive middle school experience for all students.

INTRODUCTION

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) is currently engaged in a Middle Level Education Plan Initiative, a strategic planning process intended to improve the district's middle schools. Liveable City has joined with The Institute for Community, University and School Partnerships (ICUSP) from the University of Texas at Austin to review the process and objectives of this initiative and to make recommendations to AISD. Though members of Liveable City and ICUSP are actively involved in AISD's current Middle Level Education Plan Initiative, this report is intended to provide AISD with additional community feedback regarding the current process.

Creating successful middle schools is not an easy task. An excellent source for basic elements is *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, a position paper prepared by the National Middle School Association, which identifies fourteen interdependent characteristics of a successful middle school. Based on our involvement in the current Middle Level Education Plan, we believe that AISD will likely incorporate most of these critical characteristics in action plans that emerge from this process.

However, we would like to call the attention of AISD to two major areas, which we believe will be crucial to the successful implementation of any plans that emerge from the current initiative. Briefly stated, these are an improved process for communication and implementation of new plans and an expansion of the objectives and performance measures in the current initiative.

The partnership between Liveable City and ICUSP is based on a shared desire to ensure equitable and safe environments for middle school students where they can grow academically, socially, and emotionally. The recommendations provided in this document reflect a synthesis of current middle school research, discussions with community members, AISD reports, and our own experiences as parents and volunteers within AISD.

We submit these recommendations in the spirit of collaboration with AISD, with the goal of creating an enriching, challenging and productive middle school experience for all students.

PROCESS TO DATE

In January 2008, a district-appointed 28-person AISD Middle School Task Force created a mission statement and identified the following five primary objectives for the Middle Level Education Plan Initiative:

- *All middle schools will achieve Recognized or Exemplary ratings in the State accountability system in the next five years.*

- *All middle schools will reduce the academic achievement gaps in Math and Science by at least 50% within the next five years.*
- *All middle school students will develop and consistently demonstrate the confidence and character necessary to be respectful, responsible, contributing members of their community.*
- *All middle school students will actively participate in projects and activities that encourage them to constructively explore and discover their talents, interests, and aspirations and further education and/or careers.*
- *All middle school students will successfully transition to high school on time and prepared for success.*

Using these objectives as a basis, the Task Force developed eight basic strategies, each of which has now been assigned to a community Action Team to research, analyze, and develop into action plans, including a cost-benefit analysis for any recommended change. Proposed action plans will be returned to the Task Force by May for review and possible recommendation to the Board of Trustees.

The Middle Level Education Plan Initiative is taking place within a compressed timeframe, with action plans and cost-benefit analyses scheduled to be submitted to the Board of Trustees by early June. The first changes to schools under the initiative are expected to begin in the fall semester of 2008 and will continue to be phased in over a three-to-five year period. For more information on the initiative, see <http://www.austinisd.org/schools/ms/>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As previously noted, individual members of Liveable City and ICUSP are active participants in the Middle Level Education Plan Initiative, serving on the Task Force and two of the eight Action Teams. However, due to the compartmentalized functions of these bodies, there has not been an appropriate venue to discuss general concerns or to make recommendations regarding overall processes and policies related to the initiative. We believe the following recommendations will strengthen the Middle Level Education Plan and ensure greater success for AISD students.

Recommendations for Communication and Implementation of Plans

The best educational plans may founder without full buy-in at the campus level from faculty, administrators and parents. For new plans to succeed, each school community must clearly understand the goals, anticipated changes and timeframes involved and must be assured of the opportunity to provide meaningful feedback to the district as plans are implemented. Similarly, the district must recognize that each school community is unique and that a top-down, one-size-fits-all directive may not be appropriate for all eighteen

middle schools in the AISD system. To ensure a smooth and productive implementation period, we recommend the following procedures.

1. Regular communication with parents, faculty and staff is critical throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation periods of the Middle Level Education Plan.

All members of our school communities must be regularly informed that AISD is engaged in a Middle School planning process, that all meetings in this process are open to the public, and that recommendations emerging from this process may be implemented as soon as this fall. It is essential that the public understand that changes are anticipated, both to avoid surprises and to reassure people that any new proposals are the product of an open community process.

We recommend that AISD send regular updates to the media, community stakeholders, and to all elementary, middle and high school Campus Advisory Councils, with instructions for each CAC to share this information with its own school community pursuant to its bylaws. Updates should also be provided to middle school principals at their regular AISD meetings. We recognize that new information may not be available for each update, but it is important for administrators, faculty, staff and parents to be reminded that this effort is ongoing and that changes will be forthcoming.

AISD has seen how effective communication and partnership can be through the success of the St. John Community/School Alliance. We encourage the district to employ the fullest possible public outreach to ensure continued communication about the Middle Level Education Plan as it moves forward.

2. Plans must incorporate sufficient flexibility for each school community to adapt plans to its unique school culture.

Each school culture is unique. Plans that emerge from the current process must reflect that reality by including sufficient flexibility for individual schools to adapt them to the unique needs of their campus. (School differences should not, however, justify providing less access to educational opportunities, such as a variety of course choices, quality curriculum content and experienced teachers.) Plans must be detailed enough to provide a solid foundation for schools that may lack strong leadership, but should provide room for others to tailor plans as needed or to forge new paths to the same goals where appropriate. Any implementation or adaptation of plans at the campus level should involve the full community, including administrators, faculty, staff, parents, students and community partners.

3. Administrators and campus leaders should be trained in basic communication and inclusive decision-making before presenting new plans to their school communities.

As campus leaders, principals must be able to communicate any new goals and plans clearly and to assure all members of the community that there will be appropriate procedures in place to provide feedback as plans are implemented. If campus level adaptations are being considered, principals must be able to facilitate an inclusive process that provides a voice for all members of the school community. Ideally, this training should also be extended to the members of each school's Campus Advisory Council; as campus leaders, these individuals can provide crucial help in fully communicating plans to faculty, parents and community members.

Useful references for this purpose include Carl Glickman's [Renewing America's Schools: A Guide for School-Based Action](#) and the Comer School Development Program (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/OR/ConsumerGuides/comer.html>). We also recommend implementation of a whole-school Positive Behavior Support program at every campus as an effective method for school communities to learn to work together. Though targeted to behavior and discipline issues, this program requires a collaborative approach to campus problem-solving, which can be beneficial to the school as a whole on a variety of issues (<http://www.pbis.org/schoolwide.htm>). See also <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/positivebehavior/data/evaluation/template.pdf>

4. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation should include clear timelines and mechanisms for feedback.

Any new plans must incorporate a system of monitoring and evaluation that regularly answers these questions: Are all proposed actions steps being taken, and if not, why not? Are the desired results being obtained? Which elements of the plan do the users find effective? Which elements are ineffective? Do results justify the time and expense required? Has the campus identified any adaptations to the plan that make it more effective? How will ineffective elements be revised or eliminated?

Administrators, faculty, staff, students and parents must be part of any evaluation process from the start and must be assured that their experiences and feedback will be strongly considered. If evaluation is to be done on a district-wide basis, all procedures and timelines should be clearly explained so that everyone involved understands how to use the process effectively. If schools are to evaluate new plans on an individual basis, evaluation periods and procedures must, again, be clearly communicated. In either case, the district should offer a variety of ways for individuals to provide feedback, including, at a minimum, online surveys, paper surveys available at each campus and the opportunity to provide verbal feedback through Parent Support Specialists.

5. Reevaluate existing practices and discard ineffective ones before implementing new programs.

The Middle Level Education Plan parameters state:

“4. No new programs will be accepted unless they are consistent with plans for middle level education, benefits clearly exceed costs, and processes are completely clear.

“5. No programs will be retained unless they continue to make optimal contributions.”

We support these concepts; however, it is unclear whether they are intended to apply only to new programs drafted as part of this initiative or whether existing practices will also be reevaluated.

Before new plans are implemented, we believe that a thorough reevaluation of pre-existing programs is necessary in order to eliminate those practices that are ineffective, have a negative impact on students, or do not justify the time or expense necessary to continue them. Just as we would not paint over a rusty surface without first sanding it, we do not see the wisdom in slapping down a new coat of initiatives over layers of pre-existing ones without first ascertaining whether they are still sound.

At a minimum, we recommend that the district conduct an anonymous survey of teachers and administrators to identify existing practices that are deemed ineffective. These practices should be discontinued before teachers and administrators are asked to adopt new plans.

Recommendations for Expanding Middle School Plan Objectives and Performance Measures

Liveable City and ICUSP share a concern that the published objectives of the current Middle Level Education Plan are too narrowly focused to produce the vibrant, challenging, highly successful middle schools the AISD community desires. In particular, we are troubled that the language of the objectives singles out math and science for primary emphasis, to the exclusion of other core academic subjects such as reading, writing or social studies; nor do the objectives indicate the importance of participation and achievement in a rigorous fine arts curriculum. Additionally, we are concerned that the state accountability exams appear to be the only identified instrument for measuring success under these objectives.

1. Expand Objectives to Acknowledge the Importance of All Academic Areas and the Fine Arts.

While we fully support closing the test gaps in math and science, we believe the singular emphasis on these two subjects in the current objectives may foster the perception that AISD is not interested in providing the rich, well-rounded educational experience that

will most benefit our students and our community. We recognize that reading, writing and social studies are tacitly included in the objective that aspires to achieve Recognized or Exemplary ratings for all middle schools; however, we are concerned that the lack of a specific reference to these subjects appears to indicate that they are less valued.

A sound knowledge of reading, writing and social studies is valuable for its own sake, but also has a direct effect on student achievement in both math and science. Clear expository writing skills are critical for accurately recording laboratory experiments or for communicating complex computer software features to a new user. Excellent reading and analytical skills are needed to decipher or compose written algebra problems. An understanding of history and social studies is crucial for anyone who hopes to succeed in today's increasingly global economy.

We are also troubled by the omission in the objectives of any reference to the importance of a rigorous fine arts curriculum at the middle school level. The joy and confidence gained by students who participate in fine arts classes and the critical analytical skills developed in the rigorous study of these subjects should be vital elements in a full educational experience and in overall academic achievement.

The link between the arts and academic achievement has been well documented in a number of studies. Students of the arts continue to outperform their non-arts peers on the SAT, according to reports by the College Entrance Examination Board. In 2005, students who had taken courses in music performance scored 56 points higher on the verbal portion of the SAT test and 39 points higher on the math portion than students with no coursework in the arts. Similar gains were reported for students enrolled in studio art, film, drama, dance and other fine arts classes. Further, SAT scores increased for each additional year of study in the fine arts.

(<http://www.menc.org/information/advocate/sat.html>)

The link between arts and academic achievement is not limited to test scores. A University of California researcher analyzing data from a 10-year study involving over 25,000 secondary students found that students with consistent involvement in the arts performed at significantly higher levels on all academic measures than those who did not benefit from fine arts courses (www.aems-edu.org/researchBrochure.pdf). Arts education has also been shown to have a measurable impact on at-risk youth in deterring delinquent behavior and truancy problems while increasing overall academic achievements (*YouthARTS Development Project, 1996, U.S. Department of Justice, National Endowment for the Arts, and Americans for the Arts*).

Students cannot succeed in school unless they stay there. For many, the classes that spark continued interest will be those that convey the magic of a great book or the thrill of personal expression through painting, playing an instrument or other creative means. We believe a well-rounded education is important for all students to succeed in school and in life. For these reasons, we strongly recommend that the objectives for the Middle Level Education Plan be expanded to specifically acknowledge the crucial body of knowledge

contained in literature, history, social studies and the arts and to ensure the availability of a high-quality fine arts curriculum for all middle school students.

2. Provide Varied Methods to Measure Achievement

Liveable City and ICUSP are also concerned that the only performance measures specified in the current Middle Level Education Plan objectives are the state accountability exams. While we recognize this is the most readily available tool, we believe that continuing to emphasize these exams to the exclusion of other forms of measurement contributes to the “business as usual” mentality that threatens to drive more families from public education.

On a purely practical note, the science and social studies TAKS exams are not given in either 6th or 7th grade. If TAKS is our only yardstick, the first chance to discover whether middle school students are making gains in these subjects will not occur until the student is in 8th grade and about to transition to high school. Similarly, writing is tested only in 7th grade, again making it difficult to assess what progress, if any, is being made during the middle school years (<http://www.atpe.org/Resources/TAKS/genInfo.asp>).

Middle school is already recognized as the level at which AISD loses the highest number of families, though some do return to the system for high school. If we are serious about improving our middle schools, we must identify more varied methods to measure progress in a broader range of areas. A single test on a single day is a crude measurement by any standard and may tell us little more than how the child was feeling that morning. As our schools increasingly emphasize this single measure, so do we increase the risk of losing a vital segment of our AISD community to private, charter or home school options.

[The American Educational Research Association \(AERA\)](http://www.aera.net/policyandprograms/?id=378), the nation’s largest professional organization devoted to the scientific study of education, has studied this issue extensively. In its 2000 position paper, the association concluded that: “Decisions that affect individual students’ life chances or educational opportunities should not be made on the basis of test scores alone. Other relevant information should be taken into account to enhance the overall validity of such decisions.”

(<http://www.aera.net/policyandprograms/?id=378>)

The state accountability exams do not measure such critical skills as creativity, analytical thinking, inventiveness or common sense, nor can they assess the other non-academic objectives specified in the current initiative, such as demonstrating confidence and character, being a responsible community member, exploring talents or interests, or transitioning successfully to high school. Effort must be put into developing measures that specifically evaluate each objective in the current initiative, as well as other crucial factors that determine school success: parent and community involvement, student satisfaction, teacher retention, a stable administration, or a strong sense of school pride and identity.

As working adults, most of us are measured on a continuum of our accomplishments over a period of time and for a range of duties. Measurements often include comments from supervisors or colleagues who are familiar with our work and can provide in-depth evaluations of our strengths, as well as areas needing improvement. We must devise additional methods to measure student achievement that reflect this same level of realism and thoroughness. Students must know their efforts will be documented and that they will be encouraged as they progress. Their hard-won gains should not be negated by the results of a single test.

For these reasons, we recommend that measurement of middle school progress include an array of assessment techniques in addition to state accountability exams, including regular teacher-created assessments, portfolio evaluations, and parent and student interviews. Additionally, to measure long-range success, we recommend tracking high school graduation and college acceptance outcomes for each student in the 6th, 7th and 8th grades beginning in the fall of 2008 through the high school graduating class of 2016.

CONCLUSION

Liveable City and ICUSP share AISD's goal of creating a challenging, enriching and productive middle school experience for every student. We believe the above recommendations will contribute to the successful implementation of plans emerging from the current initiative and to the long-term success of AISD's middle schools and the families they serve. We respectfully submit this report in the spirit of collaboration with AISD toward our mutual goal of ensuring an outstanding education for all Austin students.

Liveable City is a nonprofit organization working to create community consensus for policies that address the long-term social, environmental and economic needs of the people of Austin.

ICUSP is a university-based research and action center, combining social, cultural and educational theories with school and community partnerships to develop programs that increase student achievement as well as enhance college readiness.

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