

Middle Start Comprehensive School Reform Hope Springs Middle School

Implementation of Middle Start Comprehensive School Reform began at Hope Springs¹ Middle School in the 1999-2000 academic year. Since then, Hope Springs has seen instructional and organizational improvements that have fostered the academic performance and healthy development of its students. Middle Start's success in Hope Springs is evidence of the design's effectiveness in rural environments.

School Demographics

- Rural school located within a 330 square mile school district.
- 236 students in grades 6-8.
- Ethnicity: 3% American Indian; 1% Hispanic/Latino; 3% African American; 93% Caucasian.
- Percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch: 65.
- Percentage of students in special education: 18.
- Main employers in the community: car parts manufacturing plant, state prison, and local casino.

Hope Springs is located in a working class community in northern Michigan and has over 230 students. The school began its implementation of reform efforts in partnership with Natalie Brown, a technical assistance coach from the Michigan Middle Start Partnership in fall 1999. Administrators, staff and the Middle Start coach note that a transformation has taken place within the school, which continues today.

School Improvement

Some main areas of Middle Start implementation in progress at Hope Springs include:

- The creation of closely-knit grade-level teaching teams.
- Expanding inclusion of special education students in teams.
- The integration of curriculum across academic disciplines;
- The implementation of engaging academic programs such as Connected Math;
- Engaging exploratory classes and student involvement in school management.

Within two short years, these changes have had an extremely positive effect on the academic performance and educational motivation of Hope Springs' students and the school is clearly on its way to success. Students' performance on recent Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests rose in comparison to 1999 (the year the school began implementing Middle Start).

- The increase in 7th grade Reading from 1999 to 2001 was **17.9%**. Specifically, 65% of the school's 7th graders attained the grade "Satisfactory" in the 2001 Reading test, as against 47.1% in 1999.

¹ Hope Springs Middle School is a pseudonym, as are the names of people and organizations mentioned in this portrait, with the exception of the Michigan Middle Start Partnership and Middle Start.

- The increase in 7th grade Math was **13.3%** from 1999 to 2000.² Specifically, 69.8% of Lake's 7th graders attained "Satisfactory" in the 2000 Mathematics test, as against 56.5% in 1999.

Interdisciplinary Teaming and Inclusion

The teaming of teachers by grade level is a vital component of a Middle Start school. Teaming provides opportunities for teachers to collaborate in the planning of curriculum and to help students gain a greater sense of the connections between academic disciplines. Due to its small size, Hope Springs, in collaboration with their Middle Start coach, Brown, developed one interdisciplinary team per grade level, with three teachers per team.

All teachers have daily individual and team planning time. During the team planning period, teachers use teaming strategies learned from their coach, and discuss student work, teaching techniques, and curricular rubrics. This has enabled teachers to expand their repertoire of pedagogical and organizational techniques and has eased the stress of teaching by turning challenges in the classroom into a collective responsibility.

Middle Start coaches uphold the goal of social equity and guide their schools in implementing teaming in ways that include students of all ability levels. Hope is working toward the goal of including all special education students in regular teams, and has already begun piloting inclusion programs in all grade levels. At present, two special education teachers rotate among the three grade-level teams to provide learning support for special education students in regular classes.

Middle Start also facilitates professional development in inclusionary practices, and connects the school with experts in this field who train teachers in cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, and brain research. Teachers in grade-level teams as well as exploratory classes have begun using these practices in their classrooms, and are emphasizing that students learn in different ways and have varied aptitudes. For example, a special education student in an art class gained the respect of other students for his exceptional drawing skills because the teacher emphasized the importance of excelling at art, and its relevance to learning other subjects. Hope Springs is thus also focusing its Middle Start implementation on creating inclusive classrooms that help every student learn at high levels.

Integrative Curriculum and Block Scheduling

Teacher teaming at Hope Springs has facilitated the development of an integrative curriculum. Integrative curriculum, which organizes several different disciplines around one central theme, can help students develop a deeper understanding of a topic, and introduce multiple ways of viewing the same topic. Integrative curriculum is also an effective means of creating connections between what is learned in the classroom with students' experiences outside of the classroom. Hope Springs has adapted an eighth-grade integrative curriculum, *Changes*, introduced to them by the Middle Start coach, and is currently implementing this curriculum with great success.

² The state of Michigan began a Writing test in the 7th grade in place of the Mathematics test. Students' results on the Mathematics MEAP are therefore unavailable for the 2001 school year.

Changes
Integrative Curriculum Course for the Eighth Grade

Math: Students learn the concepts of scale and proportion—mathematical problem solving—by studying architectural history. The Exploratory Art teacher, uses the student’s learned knowledge to help them create scale drawings and blueprints of their own “dream homes.”

Science: Students are introduced to chemical equations and environmental management. Students examine environmental change by creating small ecosystems and polluting a portion of them. The students observe the changes in their ecosystems once they are polluted, and how they differ from unpolluted ecosystems.

World Literacy Studies: Students read nationally-recognized books such as *The Giver* and discuss social, historical and political changes and ethical lessons represented in them, and connect their messages to their own experiences.

The *Changes* unit involves significant project-based learning. The material presented is drawn from the “real world,” to make visible the connection between what students learn in the classroom, and what exists beyond it. Built into the design of this unit, are elements to help improve students’ performance on the MEAP. For example, the *Changes* unit is begun by a yearly, full-day field trip to Dearborn, Michigan, where students visit the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village to learn about how innovation has led to several changes in American society. For many students, this field trip is more than an introduction to the idea of change—it is their first experience outside of the community that they live in.

To facilitate teaching an integrative curriculum using projects and learning activities, Hope Springs has worked with Brown, the Middle Start coach, to create a "block schedule" allowing for one or more 80-minute class periods per day. Eighth graders are engaged in the *Changes* curriculum, and the other two grade levels have a class titled World Literacy Studies, in which they learn language arts and social studies in an integrated manner. For instance, in previous years, students studied Australia in social studies and Australian literature in language arts, but are now learning about Australia through a multi-faceted World Literacy Studies class taught during a 80 minute block.

Math and science classes are similarly integrated and taught in an 80 minute block. A Hope Springs’ teacher praised block scheduling for the "increased flexibility" it has allowed him. He said: "In an 80-minute block, I am free to spend the entire period on an in-depth, elaborate science experiment that need not be aborted because the period ended." He also said that he can vary math and science segments as he sees necessary: if he sees that his students are very engaged in a lesson or need more time to understand it, he can opt to extend the time for that lesson and start his second class segment later

Connected Math

Connected Math, the only middle school academic program to receive the US Department of Education’s “Exemplary” rating, is a long-standing member of the Michigan Middle Start Partnership. Connected Math is a curriculum that emphasizes hands-on activities allowing students to relate new math concepts to their daily lives. Students enjoy activities and games

while learning to strategize, think ahead, and make predictions. Hope Springs began using Connected Math during the 2000-2001 academic year. While it is still too early to see how Connected Math will impact the school's test scores, math teachers report that there is no question that their students are much more interested in math.

Connected Math
“My Special Number” Project

At the beginning of the year, students pick a whole number between 10 and 100 that is significant to them, and explain its significance. It is this number that the students use as the basis for future calculations and manipulations as they learn new math concepts. For example, students may identify their number as prime or composite, or list the different factors that result as a product of their special number. At the end of the year, students will do a project with their special number, such as a poster, speech, or song, which displays the significance of their number, and the facts they have learned about their number over the course of the year.

A Sense of Belonging

Hope Springs' staff are well-versed in developmentally responsive strategies, as a result of their involvement in Middle Start. Apart from engaging students through integrative curriculum and block scheduling, teachers of exploratory classes play their part in developing learning environments in which students can work creatively with their peers. Exploratory classes at Hope Springs include art, career education, rhetoric, drama and band. In the exploratory classroom at Hope Springs, students are encouraged to work at their own: there is no reward for finishing first. The noise level may also be a bit higher than in other classes: in art, for example, students are allowed to sit with their friends, as long as they are on-task, and not distracting other students. In career education, students search the web for job databases, practice their interviewing skills, and create resumes. As a culminating activity each year, eighth graders organize a performance in which they act, sing, debate, and display other creations to their peers, teachers, families, and the larger community.

Middle Start encourages the involvement of students in the improvement of their school. At Hope Springs, students have many opportunities to share their ideas and interests with administrators and staff. For example, each week, the principal takes a group of 6 students to a nearby restaurant of their choice (often McDonald's) for a group lunch, during which she asks for their ideas and opinions on a number of school issues, as well as gets personally acquainted with each student. By the end of the year every student in the school has had an opportunity to have lunch with the principal. Students enjoy the opportunity to speak directly with the principal in a non-threatening atmosphere. The weekly lunch also helps students realize that each of them is valued, and has something important to contribute to the school.

Hope Springs is evolving into an academically rigorous and developmentally responsive school for all its students through its whole-hearted implementation of Middle Start.