

The Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project: The Experiences of Teachers

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The PRAIRIE Group of the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education in collaboration with the CPS Office of Math and Science and the CPS Office of Research, Evaluation and Assessment serves as an external evaluator for the *CPS Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project (C4MGP)*. This data brief is the third of three external evaluation data briefs for school year 2006-07. The earlier data briefs addressed (1) structural configuration of schools and the characteristics of leadership workshops for principals and Area teams and (2) provided descriptive vignettes of six schools participating in the project.

Briefly as discussed in the first data brief (March 8, 2007), we learned that the 24 schools participating in C4MGP during 2006-07 could be characterized in terms of four primary forms of departmentalization as shown in Table 1 below. Almost all of these schools have some form of departmentalization with variations in terms of how grade 6 classes were structured compared to grades 7 and 8, and variation in whether departmentalization took place within a single grade or across grade-levels.

Table 1: Middle Grade Configuration and Schedules

6 th grade	7 th grade	8 th grade	Number of schools (% of 24 schools)
Self-Contained	Self-Contained	Self-Contained	1 4.2%
Self-Contained	Within Grade	Within Grade	3
	Departmentalized	Departmentalized	12.5%
Within Grade	Within Grade	Within Grade	5
Departmentalized	Departmentalized	Departmentalized	20.8%
Self-Contained	Across Grade	Across Grade	7
	Departmentalized	Departmentalized	29.2%
Within Grade	Across Grade	Across Grade	3
Departmentalized	Departmentalized	Departmentalized	12.5%
Across Grade	Across Grade	Across Grade	5
Departmentalized	Departmentalized	Departmentalized	20.8%

As we described through case study vignettes in the second data brief (June 20, 2007), teachers within schools with some type of departmentalization have different opportunities (e.g., amount of time) to meet together to discuss middle grades students. Across the six schools profiled in our second data brief, at no two schools did teachers have exactly the same types of meeting structures or conversations.

Though we found that teachers met and collaborated in a variety of ways, when we looked more deeply and systematically into the meetings we observed and interviews we conducted, we

noticed a common overarching theme that sheds insight into how they worked with middle grade students and what supports they needed to improve their practice and their schools. In this data brief we examine the emergence of this theme. Across the board, when we asked teachers to describe their involvement with the C4MGP, very few had any idea what the C4MGP even was. Rather, instead of feeling impacted by a specific program which they had little to no knowledge of, their work and roles as middle grades teachers was deeply influenced and tightly interwoven by one common desire: to meet the socioemotional needs unique to their middle grades students and their low economic urban environments. Within that common theme, a variety of factors affected how teachers balanced that need while providing high-quality instructional practice.

This data brief focuses on the challenges and supports teachers met and received as they strived to create that balance between meeting the academic *and* socioemotional needs of their students. In this data brief, we provide additional analysis across the experiences of schools and teachers in order to offer insights and raise questions for the leaders of the C4MGP as they move into a second year of the program and continue to scale up to include additional schools.

Findings

This data brief draws on the full body of data collected during 2006-2007 for this project: interviews with C4MGP university-based math and science coaches and Area instructional team members; focus groups with Cluster 4 teachers during university math and science endorsement courses; and interviews of principals and observations of meetings of middle grades teachers from schools participating in C4MGP. Some additional data was also available and considered from prior year's evaluation of the CPS Chicago Math and Science Initiative.

Upon examining the emergent themes from this data, the following topics arose as strong influences on middle grades teachers trying to both meet the socioemotional needs of their students and provide high-quality instruction: departmentalization, building layouts, collaborative meetings, and the role of the coach. This report includes these emerging topics accompanied by examples of how they relate to the common theme—the emphasis on socioemotional issues

Our findings section is organized as follows: We first describe the nature of socioemotional issues we found across our data sources in more detail around which each topic is closely related. Then we introduce each topic and discuss the findings in relation to the common theme. We then offer reflection questions for program planners to consider in the 2007-2008 school year.

Meeting the Unique Socioemotional Needs of Middle Grades Students in Low-Economic Urban Areas

Although our evaluation did not formally look at the role of socioemotional issues in program planning, throughout the course of data collection, the program participants repeatedly talked about socioemotional issues (e.g., 80% of coaches, 80% of principals). Socioemotional issues refers to self-awareness and self-regulation in the social and emotional dimensions of life (Erikson, 1950; Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). For example, the goals of the Illinois Learning Standards for social/emotional learning are as follows: develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success, use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships, and demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts. Young adolescents, in particular, are charged with the task of developing a strong understanding of oneself (Bingham and Stryker, 1995). Socioemotional learning refers to “the processes through which children and adults develop fundamental emotional and social competencies to recognize and manage

emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively” (<http://www.casel.org/basics/definition.php>). We used thematic coding across all of our data to categorize socioemotional issues relevant to middle school students’ social and emotional lives. Socioemotional issues continually arose as a theme in the data and cut across multiple facets of the Middle Grades Project demonstrating the need to address the socioemotional needs particular of middle grades students in low economic urban environments.

Program participants talked about a range of socioemotional issues including motivational, mental health, behavioral, developmental, and relational needs. Confronting difficulties in meeting the socioemotional needs of middle grades students, teachers, principals, and coaches agreed that student behavior and classroom management presented challenges in providing high-quality instruction. For example, in one grade level meeting, teachers discussed the changes their students were experiencing and how their socioemotional needs affected classroom instruction:

Teacher A: It’s [the discipline issue is] really getting bad. It’s only March, and we’re wishing it was June 16 already. That’s a big problem. How do you handle these kids? Reasoning doesn’t work with them. Reasoning doesn’t work with their parents. What do you do? That’s real frustrating. So you feel like you can’t teach because you’re so busy handling all of the discipline issues.

Teacher B: I agree; they need counselors. This is a big transition stage.

Teacher A: Right

Teacher C: You know they’re physically overdeveloped and underdeveloped [emotionally]. It’s all physiological data, given that these kids are changing hugely in 7th and 8th grade. But yet you’re not giving them anyone to talk to except for that teacher with 30 kids. They cannot talk about those outside issues. Someone should, every once in a while, on those restructured days run programs to talk about conflict resolution and all that stuff that comes with aging. It shouldn’t be left up to the teachers who have [to get students ready] to pass ISAT scores because none of that stuff is on the test [and] that is what we’re going to get fired or hired for. So why are you going to waste your time with it [socioemotional needs of students] if that’s [ISAT is] what you’re getting judged on? That’s all they care about right now. You need to hire outside people for these students to talk to—more counselors, transition specialists, and community representatives.

In recognizing the socioemotional needs specific to middle grades students, these teachers’ dialogue demonstrates the importance of such issues and their effect on the classroom environment. Principals also perceived the importance of socioemotional needs of middle grades students. For example, one principal explained the distinctive challenges middle grades students face and the need for additional support:

Now that I am in the middle school program, I’m learning more about middle school children and the way they think and their emotions are different from primary students. We need, as a school, to come up with—based on the needs of our particular children—what can we do to enhance and to really learn about how our children think...and we have that opportunity with an advisory. I’m not as knowledgeable or experienced on middle school and advisory, but through the grant and through our professional development, I know that I have some sort of an idea. I do need assistance and would like to have a top notch kind of schedule that is really, really, going to help our children be well-rounded.

In addition to the socioemotional needs which are particular to middle grades students, teachers, coaches, and principals alike stated that personal family struggles in the context of urban poverty contributed to the socioemotional challenges of their students. For instance, one principal shared that families in the neighborhood experienced many mental health issues. Although the school provided families with support programs, most did not take advantage of them because of the “stigma attached to mental health issues.” Urban poverty also compounded these problems according to the participants. One principal reflected that she has never seen “such hopelessness, such dysfunction” before in her school as many families struggled with poverty in addition to the serious mental health issues.

As mentioned previously, the middle school years are often a difficult transition for many students. Teachers and principals talked about the need for full time counselors and social workers in their schools. For example, one principal felt that the multitude of social and emotional issues in her school prevented learning from happening and desired a full time social worker instead of just a part time social worker. Similarly, another principal explained, “a lot of our time and energy is spent helping our kids with social and emotional issues.” She, too, explained how her school needed a full time social worker and counselor.

Reflection Questions

1. Are you surprised by the high prevalence of socioemotional issues and the variation in type of socioemotional issues reported?
2. What are C4MGP program planners doing to help teachers and principals meet the socioemotional needs of students? What needs to be done as the program scales up in the 2007-2008 school year?
3. Given that socioemotional issues probably affect the entire district, what resources might be allocated to all of the schools to help them deal with these issues? For example, is it possible to provide every school with a full time social worker and/or counselor? What role should these positions play in addressing socioemotional issues? What percentage of schools in Cluster 4 have these positions? What have you learned from people currently in these positions?
4. How can professional development help teachers and principals deal with socioemotional issues?

Teachers, principals and coaches all discussed the socioemotional needs of middle grades students. In the next section, we will discuss how these needs emerged in various aspects of the Middle Grades Project including: departmentalization, building layouts, collaborative meetings, and the role of the coach.

The following topics greatly influence how teachers meet the socio-emotional needs of their middle grades students while striving to provide high-quality instruction:

1. Departmentalization with teachers specializing in a specific subject matter

The socioemotional needs of middle grades students arose in multiple strands of the C4MGP including departmentalization. As described in the June data brief, teacher shortages, inadequate endorsement credentials and scheduling issues led to different forms of departmentalization in the

Cluster 4 schools. For example, in one school, all of the middle school teachers taught reading while separate, endorsed teachers taught social studies, science and math. The variation among the schools resulted in varying degrees of capacity for teachers to cultivate relationships with their students and thus better meet their socioemotional needs. For example, one principal discussed the benefits of self-contained classes compared to departmentalization:

When we returned to the self-contained model, our students were more on task, felt more connected, were able to bond better to their single teacher, and behavioral issues such as skipping class (and) tardiness were minimized....the security of the same group with the same teacher helped them do better, succeed more, interact, and engage socially.

In schools that were completely departmentalized, some teachers expressed having a “love/hate” relationship towards specializing in just one subject and teaching different groups of students throughout the day. Among the aspects they loved were the opportunity to specialize and focus their time and energy on a favorite subject they enjoyed teaching. However, they also expressed missing the opportunity to teach another subject or having a homeroom such that they would have the opportunity to create a special connection with one group of students. One principal explained

The teachers love it/hate it [specializing in one subject]. My math teacher loves it because she gets the math minutes she needs, but she wishes she could teach reading. She liked the connection that reading gave her to her homeroom where they don’t get that connection [anymore] because they don’t have that time. There are exactly seven periods in a day—they teach five departmental, they get a planning period and their lunch. And that’s it. There is no other time for that extra connection or extra anything with their kids so it kind of depends. Some of the teachers wish they could teach reading again. Some of the teachers love the fact that all they teach is their subject area, and they are done.

Reflection Questions

1. How might the Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project help schools to promote a greater sense of connection between students and teachers as schools move towards departmentalization and teachers and students must interact with more and different students and teachers, respectively?
2. What strategies can be promoted to help schools ensure that students don’t fall through the cracks, that tardiness and skipping are kept in check, and that a feeling of school-wide community exists?
3. Teachers need time, opportunities, and tools to meet their students’ socioemotional needs. How will C4MGP consider this issue in the next year of the program? How might advisories be structured to give this needed support?

2. Building structure and lay out in K-8 school

A variety of issues related to meeting socioemotional needs of students also emerged in the challenges of developing a middle grades model within a physical setup of K-8 school. First, in this structure, all of the students, regardless of age, are together in the same building. Bringing together multiple age groups had implications for student safety, especially for the primary-grade students. Also, at many schools, although middle school students switched classes, all students

kept their materials in their desks at all times. Second, primary and middle school students were often on the same floor, which created problems when students switched classes. Finally, as a consequence of being in the same building and on the same floor, it was sometimes difficult to meet the unique motivational needs of middle school students.

- **Building structure and implications for primary and middle school students being in the same school**

Principals and teachers recognized the challenges inherent to a K-8 school. In this multi-age environment, it was sometimes difficult keeping the younger students safe from the older students. For example, one middle school teacher talked about the challenges of having younger and older students in the same building because the younger students feared running into the older, more physically developed middle school students. He explained how having younger and older students in the same building created a “paradox” for keeping the K-8 school safe

Middle School Teacher: Paradox of having K-8... [The desire] is to separate the middle and lower grades and still keep a safe school and most of these buildings it's impossible to do that. They're not going to build new buildings so you become pessimistic towards it and just get mad at it.

A principal echoed the teacher's sentiments about the challenges of a K-8 building:

I think [the K-8 building] presents unique structural issues when you're doing a K-middle school model. You know, parents of little ones coming in and they see big ones doing things that make-up—you know, those kinds of things that in a middle school are really common things, or kids not walking in lines—they like to walk in groups—and you can spend a lot of time and energy trying to get them to walk in lines, but the lines dissolve and they become very groupish and other people not being as—or having to remind people that these are adolescents and these are the characteristics of adolescents and there's nothing wrong with it—you might not think it's right, but it's not—I think our being responsive to it is kind of a unique feature of being in a K-8 school and again, keeping people abreast that these are the things that happen to middle school kids, so it's not only with the team, but with everyone in the school community.

Teachers perceived that their schools also experienced difficulty in treating middle school students like young adults, especially with respect to the logistics around switching classes. Primary-grades students and middle-grades students had to keep their school supplies and books in their desks, which led to various problems in the middle grades where students were switching classes. This posed a number of problems in middle grades: students carrying much of their supplies with them all day long—full classrooms, and a book bag for each student; students leaving some supplies in their desks which provided an opportunity for others to invade the privacy of this space and/or steal or borrow items from the desk. For example, one teacher explained, “Our middle school students feel like they are treated like babies. We don't have lockers. The stuff is in the desks and with the switching, it's just such a hassle with things being taken and people writing on desks and all of the other little issues.”

- **Building structure and implications for primary and middle school students being on the same floor**

In addition to the being in the same building, primary and middle school students often occupied the same floor. Because middle grades classes in many schools met on different floors or opposite ends of the building, this often disrupted other students in the building who were not part of the middle grades and were not switching classes.

The building layout made it difficult to allow some social connections as middle grades students transitioned between classrooms when other students on the same floor might be disturbed. Although middle school students wanted to talk when they switched classes, some teachers perceived this talking as problematic especially in cases where both middle school students and primary students were on the same floor. Other teachers, in comparison, recognized the need for middle school students to have some time to socialize with their friends. For example, one teacher told us that, “We tell them to be silent when you are passing because there are other classes that they are teaching, and I think that is really hard for kids at that age because they need to have time to talk and just relax and whatever, and that is not happening, and I know the kids are rebelling about it that too.”

- **Building structure and its implications for providing an effective learning environment for primary *and* middle grade students**

As a consequence of being in a K-8 building, not all school structures provided opportunity to meet the motivational needs of middle grades students. For example, the building structure prevented schools from creating a real science lab in the schools with running water and where science materials could be kept and locked up when not in use. A teacher in a focus group said the following about the complications of not having a working science lab and, tangentially, how the unfulfilled promise of this lab affected students’ motivation:

I was told that we were going to have a special room for science just for a science lab and so I talked to my kids a lot about it. They were really excited about it, and then that room was taken away. They decided that they didn’t want to do that for 6th grade or 7th grade, so a lot of my kids felt kind of gyped...and literally up to winter break, I had kids asking repeatedly when they were going to get to go to science lab because it originally it had been when their behavior is under control we’ll go to the science lab, and then when that was taken away and we had to stay in the regular classroom, it felt kind of funny. Originally, we had it that just the teachers swapped and the kids stayed at their desks and there were no issues with stealing or with the room being left messy, and now we’re switching, which in some ways is easier because I can set up some of my materials, but in some ways it’s a concern for me because my door doesn’t lock so I have all of those materials in my room kind of sitting there the whole time...if something happens in the room when one of the other kids is gone, they always blame it on the other class, so those are some of the issues.

Reflection Questions

1. Given the challenges of the K-8 building, how can schools be restructured and organized to address these issues and provide support to the needs of both primary and middle grades students? For example, is it possible to reorganize schools such that the same grade levels are on the same floors?
2. What infrastructure support can the Middle Grades Project give to schools to combat these building issues and provide lockers, science lab facilities, tables in place of too small desks to ensure that the needs of middle school students are being met?

3. Collaborative Meeting Schedules

In our data regarding collaborative meetings three important themes arose: scheduling of collaborative meetings, the discussion during collaborative meetings and the sometimes irregularity of these meetings, all of which relate to the issue of teachers and schools meeting the socioemotional needs of their students.

- **Variation in Scheduling Collaborative Meetings**

In our discussions with teachers and coaches, they described a variety of ways in which faculty and staff conduct collaborative meetings during the work week: weekly grade level meetings, biweekly grade level meetings, meetings once a week in the mornings before school with ancillary staff, weekly departmental content teacher meetings, common planning/prep times, restructured school days allowing for regular Friday afternoon grade level meetings, regular meetings with coaches and specialists, and regular phone calls among the teachers after school.

- **Conversation in these Collaborative Meetings focused on Socioemotional Issues**

Because of the variety of ways and amount of time teachers and ancillary staff conducted collaborative meetings, the topics of conversation in the meetings also had a broad range. While some topics of conversation in these meetings included content/subject instruction, students' progress, administrative issues, and challenges regarding middle grades implementation and strategies to address these challenges, an equal—and in many cases—larger amount of time focused on students' behavior and their socioemotional needs, often leaving little time left over to discuss content/subject instruction. For example, at one school where weekly collaborative meetings lasted less than an hour and the student population was overwhelmed with unique socioemotional needs, it was not uncommon for the teachers to spend an entire meeting discussing only those needs. These issues ranged from how to provide their students with appropriate hygiene products and information and how to help them deal with the transition of having parents going into or coming out of prison.

- **Lack of Regular Collaborative Meetings or Lack of Time in Meetings to Address Issues**

In our discussions with teachers and coaches, we learned that some of the schools in Cluster 4 did not even have regular collaborative meetings. For example, a university coach said the following about one such school:

My sense is the communication [at the school] is terrible between teachers and administration. I would go so far as saying [that]. They have the sixth grade curriculum, and I had to go in and split it up between two teachers whereas the one didn't even realize they had the curriculum, but was supposed to teach 6th grade math. There is no dialogue whatsoever going on.

At another school, a teacher reported that the scheduled meetings routinely didn't happen or ended up being shorter than originally planned: "We have collaboration meetings once a week for about, technically, 40 minutes, but it ends up being half an hour once a week...or every other week." The same teacher reported feeling frustrated because he is the only person who teaches 6th grade science and, therefore, doesn't have anyone else in the school with whom he can discuss curriculum instruction, so he typically discusses the curriculum with the university coach who visits his school: "I don't have anyone else in my school that I can talk to about the program except my math and science coordinator...I can talk to a little bit...but usually I just talk to the person from Loyola." When teachers and schools lack regular collaborative meetings, it goes without saying that quality instruction and students' socioemotional needs are compromised.

Reflection Questions

1. Is there a district-recommended schedule or time frame for collaborative meetings? What can the C4MGP do to help ensure that teachers have and use the time for these meetings?
2. What suggestions can the C4MGP give to principals trying to help their teachers balance discussion of both curriculum and instruction and issues related to students' socioemotional needs?
3. Do university courses or other C4MGP professional development for teachers provide opportunities for teachers to address these issues within the broader CPS community?
4. How might university coaches, school level math/science specialists, or Area coaches work with principals to provide a structure for collaborative meetings to take place?

4. University Coaches

Recognizing the importance of socioemotional needs of middle grades students, University Coaches stated while charged to support content in classrooms they often found that they first needed to help teachers address management, behavioral, and social needs of students particular to this age group.

One way in which the influence of socioemotional issues arose was the high turnover of middle grades teachers within these Cluster 4 schools and, thus, the inability of some students in some of these schools to develop any kind of comfort with their teachers. As one University Coach stated, "It's the 8th grade class that she has, and they are the class that was closest to the original teacher who left so we cannot underestimate the personal connection between them and that teacher. They would have rolled with it [losing the classroom teacher] one time but not repeated times." The University Coach went on to say that the teacher in this classroom struggled with classroom management issues related to the tumultuous year of temporary teachers.

The socioemotional struggles of middle grades students all interfaced with classroom instruction. University Coaches questioned how much they could support instruction without also addressing the socioemotional needs of the students. For example, when asked how the University Coach addressed the socioemotional needs of students, she stated:

That is a question that I have had is how much of this classroom management piece do we do. Because I was in there in one day and afterward thought I probably should have used my time differently because there was literally chaos all around me and I picked a kid and said "how can I help?" And I went to kids and helped them that way... You can't support instruction if the class isn't sitting down. Our focus I believe is to help facilitate the engagement of the students in math. It's to change how they think about math and what they need to do in order to learn math—It's not according to the quasar rubric memorization or procedures without connections. You have to think "I am not going to give you the answer." And when you don't have the management piece in place how can you begin—and then you go to the straight rows and then you go with "let me tell you."

Another University Coach echoed a similar sentiment in stating that addressing classroom management issues and socio-emotional needs was extremely challenging. In describing one school, she stated

This school is the most challenging to work in. They are working on community support—it's really not there. The 8th grade is so bad right now in discipline that they will call a meeting that if you [the teacher] don't show up, the children are not allowed to participate in anything at the end of the year. A lot of stuff goes on there...it's a hard environment.

The challenging socioemotional needs of middle grades students affected the University Coaches' roles in supporting classroom instruction. University Coaches questioned how much time they should be spending on classroom management strategies which, subsequently, take time away from supporting content.

Reflection Questions

1. Does the role of the University Coach include both supporting classroom instruction in content and also addressing students' socioemotional issues via providing classroom management strategies, etc. to middle grades teachers?
2. What guidelines are the University Coaches following in terms of how they allocate their time? Should University Coaches receive more time to support classroom instruction and socioemotional issues and/or what other school level staff could support teachers with these issues?